Lionel Charles Robbins, later Baron Robbins of Clare Market, was a central figure in the economics of the twentieth century, influencing its development profoundly through his own writings and the work by others that he inspired.

He was born on 22 November 1898 on a farm in Middlesex. His father was a successful market gardener and a remarkable man with victorian ideals, well read in the classics, who for years was President of the National Farmers’ Union. His mother was partly of Huguenot origin, intelligent and beautiful. She died of cancer when Robbins was eleven years old. Her death, and that of a sister, led him to question the tenets of orthodox Christianity, particularly in the strict Baptist form it assumed in his parents’ household. Throughout his life he was ‘quite unable to believe . . . in the Deity of orthodox Christianity [for if] his knowledge and foresight were infinite, it followed inexorably that the evil and suffering of the world were of his deliberate manufacture . . .’ (Autobiography, pp. 26–2, with some wording transposed). His father, while failing to transmit his religious beliefs to his son, did succeed in stimulating an enduring and passionate interest in literature which became the foundation of an extraordinary erudition.

After a period of service as a Lieutenant in the First World War in which he was wounded, Robbins found himself attracted to Guild socialism. His first gainful employment was in an office seeking nationalisation of the alcoholic beverages industry, but after a year of association with the socialists he was disenchanted with the movement; he had become convinced that a system of markets would serve both economic efficiency and personal liberty better than collective ownership and centralised direction. After that he assiduously avoided direct association with any political party and, accordingly,
he spent his time in the House of Lords on the cross-benches.

Robbins studied at the LSE from 1920 to 1923, when Graham Wallas, Hugh Dalton, A. C. Bowley, Edwin Cannan and Harold Lasky were members of the distinguished staff. Soon after graduation he married Iris Gardner, 'a sensitive, spirited and intelligent companion'. She came from an accomplished family, her father having been a famous liberal journalist and editor. Her brother was the artist Clive Gardner, who was already Lionel Robbins's close friend. She remained his deeply valued companion for the remainder of his life.

After graduation Robbins accepted a position as temporary tutor at New College, Oxford in 1924, where he returned as a fellow and lecturer in 1927–9 after serving as lecturer at the LSE in the interim. Finally, in 1929, he became Professor of Economics at the LSE, a position he retained until his ostensible retirement thirty-three years later.

The LSE in the 1930s was a centre of intellectual ferment in economics in which Robbins was deeply involved. His seminar became the focus of the movement to extend English economics beyond the confines of the Marshallian tradition. The writings of Wicksell, the Austrians, Walras and Pareto were studied and fitted into the English tradition, as seen in the work of Hicks and Allen, Hayek, Kaldor and Lerner among others. The Robbins seminar thus introduced a broadening of outlook that helped it to serve as a source of profound new ideas and powerful new approaches.

All this was interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War when Robbins entered the government service, eventually becoming the Director of the Economic Section of the cabinet offices. After the war, along with Keynes, he was a leading member of the British delegations to Bretton Woods and the Hot Springs conference at which post-war monetary and trade policy were laid out so effectively.

After his return to the LSE, having in the meantime become more sympathetic to Keynesian ideas than he had been during the 1930s, Robbins resumed his role as intellectual focus for the economists. His justly famed seminar served as a birthplace for many new ideas and as a training ground for a number of economists who subsequently achieved pre-eminence.

Lionel Robbins retired in 1961 as Professor at LSE (though he continued to lecture at the school for two decades thereafter). His contributions to English life and culture continued unabated for many years. He became Lord Robbins of Clare Market in a life peerage created in 1959. On retirement from the LSE he took on the