



KATHLEEN MAJOR

*Bassano & Vandyk*

## Kathleen Major 1906–2000

KATHLEEN MAJOR was born on 10 April 1906 at 54 Penn Road, Holloway, a short distance north of the Caledonian Market. Her father, George Major, a potato merchant in partnership with brothers, had married her mother, Gertrude Alice Blow, in April 1902. George's father Robert had been a master mariner in the East India trade. It was perhaps Robert's retirement to Yorkshire which led George to make the acquaintance of the Blows whose home was at Goole in the West Riding. George Major does not seem to have had any formal religious attachment, but the Blows were Congregationalist, and it was at their Congregationalist Christ Church in Goole that Kathleen was baptised on 20 June 1906, to be followed six years later by her sister (and only sibling) Eileen, born in February 1912. When Kathleen went up to Oxford in 1925 she was registered as Church of England.

The potato and vegetable business prospered and before the end of the First World War George Major had bought the agricultural estate of Whaplode Manor near Holbeach, in the Holland division of Lincolnshire. Abbott's Manor in Holbeach became the family home. His daughters were educated at private schools, regarding which Kathleen was oddly reticent. Her last school, Wilton House in Reading, must have done a good job, because in 1925 she won a commoner's place to read history at St Hilda's College, Oxford. Had the Majors remained in London we might doubt whether their elder daughter would have become a noted medievalist. At Whaplode, however, her home was close to a remarkable cluster of large parish churches dating variously from the twelfth to the

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fifteenth century—Whaplode itself, Holbeach, Gedney, Long Sutton and others—while the flat countryside bore ample evidence, in its dykes and commons, fens and drains, of a long-drawn-out and essentially medieval enterprise whereby potentially rich land was recovered from the sea.

At St Hilda's an outstanding tutor Agnes Sandys (Mrs Leys) steered KM firmly towards the middle ages and a love of documents; her special subject was medieval boroughs, the sources for which brought the student face to face with the interpretation of highly technical Latin records. In 1928 she took a Second Class in Modern History and embarked on study for the B.Litt., having been introduced by Mrs Leys to F. M. (afterwards Sir Maurice) Powicke, newly appointed to the Regius Chair. Powicke was wrapped up in a study of the intellectual and spiritual development of Stephen Langton; he suggested to the young KM that she should collect and edit the *acta* of Langton as archbishop of Canterbury (1207–24). The formal result was a volume published by the Canterbury and York Society in 1950; the longer-term result for the editor herself was the acquisition of an unrivalled knowledge of the cathedral and diocesan archives of England and Wales. KM became aware that at many cathedrals rich stores of archival material lay unsorted, uncatalogued and in some cases seriously neglected. This was a lesson she never forgot; it underlay the fervour with which in later years she campaigned for adequate archive administration and protection, not only for ecclesiastical but also for secular records.

After graduating, KM became librarian at St Hilda's, and she began the serious study of diplomatic with Vivian Galbraith, who had been made Reader in Diplomatic in 1928 after some years as a keeper in the Public Record Office. While searching for Langton *acta* at Lincoln in 1930 KM met the astonishingly learned and energetic scholar Canon C. W. Foster, chief founder (in 1910) of the Lincoln Record Society and of the Lincoln Diocesan Record Office. Canon Foster, busy rural parson as he was, had dedicated his life to the cause of preserving and publishing the medieval records of Lincoln Cathedral and diocese. She fell under Foster's spell and in 1935 he secured her appointment as chief officer of the Lincoln Diocesan Record Office (which after the Second World War became the Lincolnshire Archives Office). On this matter Foster sought the help of his old friend Professor F. M. (afterwards Sir Frank) Stenton at Reading, who had been one of Kathleen's B.Litt. examiners. 'It seems to me (Stenton wrote) that [she] has every qualification for the post' and he advised that she should start at £300 p.a. Stenton added: 'Miss Major is a piece of sheer good luck.' Only a few days before his sudden death in

October, Foster wrote to George Major 'we consider that we are very fortunate in securing Kathleen for the work at Lincoln, and her appointment is specially gratifying to myself'. Already in 1932 and 1933 KM had published, in the *Associated Architectural and Archaeological Societies' Reports and Papers*, vol. 41, 'Some early documents relating to Holbeach' and 'An unknown house of Crutched Friars at Whaplode'. In these short papers we can still be astonished at the confidence with which the recent BA and B.Litt. edits the texts of original charters and cartulary copies of papal bulls, perhaps spurred on a little by the knowledge that the documents she was making public dealt with lands around her home. Many years later, in a booklet published at her own expense *The D'Oyrys of South Lincolnshire, Norfolk, and Holderness 1130–1275* (Lincoln, 1984), KM went over much of the same ground in an extended study of a family originating in the department of Marne, whose descendants ramified widely across Norfolk and south east Yorkshire, although their first settlements north of the Channel were in the territory around Holbeach.

KM's self-confidence and self-assurance must, of course, have been enormously enhanced by the love and support she received from her parents. Her father, in this respect ahead of his time, believed that women should enjoy as much independence as men. He had a fine house built at 21 Queensway, Lincoln, which he made over to Kathleen and which became her home from 1937 until her death 63 years later. She liked expensive clothes, good plain food, comfortable hotels when travelling, and from an early period in her life owned and drove a motor car. A revealing letter written to her parents from 21 Queensway on 16 November 1941 shows a mixture of confidence, ambition, and diffidence as she is clearly preparing herself for a serious career as historian. She has been in Bromley, London, and Oxford, and she has been consulting, or at least speaking with, Rose Graham, Dorothy (Whitelock?),<sup>1</sup> Agnes Leys, the Powickes, Robin Humphreys (the distinguished Latin American historian whose parental home was in Queensway, Lincoln, just opposite Kathleen's house), Arnold Toynbee—these both were keen to recruit KM for Chatham House—and finally the Stentons. She has made up her mind to stick to medieval history: 'So that I feel my course is all set for work for twenty years ahead. It is so exciting to have so much to do and to find that the eminent think me equal to the task, though I am not so sure of that

<sup>1</sup> In an important lecture on diocesan records given at Lincoln in July 1941 (*Lincolnshire Architectural and Archaeological Society Reports and Papers*, ii, pt. 2, p.129) KM thanks Dorothy Whitelock for helpful criticism.

myself, but it is nice to be told so, and I can't tell you how grateful I am to you for making it possible. All these excitements are very exhilarating, but I am quite humble really.'

KM's appointment at Lincoln in no sense severed her links with St Hilda's or with Oxford. She was an elected member of the college council from 1935 to 1940. In 1945 she was appointed university lecturer in diplomatic (within three years to be Reader) and elected to a college Research Fellowship (eventually a Professorial Fellowship). Only a year before her appointment Vivian Galbraith had left the chair of history in the university of Edinburgh to become director of the Institute of Historical Research, and only two years later Galbraith succeeded Powicke in the Regius Chair at Oxford. It was important for KM's tenure of her Readership that one of the foremost medieval historians actively teaching in the university was someone who had the greatest respect for her scholarship and judgement. She and Galbraith held complementary classes for postgraduate medievalists, the one on diplomatic (immensely thorough and wide-ranging), the other on the sources for English history from the eleventh to the fifteenth century. (My own MS notes of KM's lectures run to 124 quarto pages, from 15 October 1948 to 10 June 1949.)

The corollary of KM's Readership was supervision of postgraduates embarking on research, normally aiming at the degree of B.Litt. In this work the standard she set was strikingly higher than what was then, and long remained, the Oxford norm. She saw her pupils regularly once a fortnight, allowed ample time for a thorough discussion of their work, and insisted on the production of written drafts or summaries to ensure that the student remained on course and did not drift.

Some months before his death in October 1935 Canon Foster invited KM to collaborate in the editing of volume IV of *Registrum Antiquissimum of the Cathedral Church of Lincoln*, intending that she should complete the task if he did not survive. The volume duly appeared in 1937, dedicated to Foster's memory and containing an eloquent appreciation by F. M. Stenton. For KM it was the beginning of a commitment which lasted thirty-six years, and entailed the meticulous editing of most of volume IV and eight further volumes, six of texts and two of facsimiles. The total number of documents printed is 2,980 serially numbered, over 3,000 if supplementary material is included. By any standards *Registrum Antiquissimum* must be accounted one of the great enterprises of English historical editing of the twentieth century. Volumes 1 to 5 appeared within a decade, despite the outbreak of war in September 1939 and KM's responsibilities in overseeing the microfilming of the pre-1812 registers

of 299 Lincolnshire parishes. The war and the move to Oxford led to a ten-year gap between volume V and volume VI. Volume VII appeared in 1953 and VIII five years later (the last to be printed at the *Hereford Times*). There was then another ten-year gap, to be explained in the following pages, before volume IX (the first of four to be printed in Gateshead at the Northumberland Press), followed in only five years by the final volume and the facsimiles. This would have been an astonishing achievement even if KM had been a solitary scholar dedicating all her waking hours to one *magnum opus*; but, as will be seen, she bore a wide range of educational and scholarly responsibilities and, until 1971, took her share of family responsibilities as well, in seeing that her mother was looked after and able to lead as comfortable a life as age and disabilities allowed.

From the 1930s onward the archivist and the historian in KM were balanced equally. This is clear both from her work and from her correspondence. As David Vaisey acknowledged in an address to the Society of Archivists published in the society's *Journal* (vol. 22, no. 2, October 2001, p. 231), KM's career marked a critical stage in the process by which adequate local record offices and diocesan record offices were established across England. Just as she was consulted by graduates who aspired to enrol for the archives course at the Bodleian Library, so also her advice was sought by many cathedral authorities (e.g. Chichester, Ely) and local authorities anxious not only to preserve their records but also to make them accessible to a public increasingly eager to consult them. KM's advice, always practical, was given unstintingly. On the historical side, KM's voluminous correspondence with Sir Charles Clay, Lewis Loyd, the Stentons, and Christopher Cheney (to name but few) brings out the historian, especially the family historian and local historian, in her intellectual make-up.

In 1955 KM—invariably Miss Major both at home in Lincoln and at Oxford—was appointed Principal of St Hilda's. She succeeded Julia de Lacy Mann, who had run the college virtually single handed for 27 years. KM 'moved quickly to modernise the college, establishing a proper college office and an administrative system that really worked'. Her experience as a governor of Lincoln College of Education proved especially valuable since in 1955 St Hilda's had become a self-governing institution. The position of bursar was critical, for Miss Mann (though an economist) had no head for figures. KM encountered difficulties which could not be overcome at once. As she noted somewhat acidly, 'the arrangements in 1951 gave [the bursar] an assistant who not only had no positive qualifications for bursarial work but the positive disqualification of no

simple arithmetical ability and an unwillingness to handle money' [KM papers]. She was determined to meet the challenge of expansion and the need to provide more undergraduate places. In her time as principal, St Hilda's acquired the Milham Ford building, thus uniting the two separate parts of the college's grounds, and through the munificence of the Wolfson Foundation added the Wolfson Building, largely the work of Sir Albert Richardson, as a residential block. This meant that for the first time St Hilda's could accommodate all its undergraduates, a situation which did not last. A further addition shortly before KM took charge had been a handsome principal's lodging, also designed by Richardson.

During her principalship KM fought more than one crucial battle to save St Hilda's from disaster. The Oxford city planning authorities put forward a scheme for a 'relief road' through Christ Church meadows, or alternatively proposed a dual carriageway road down the edge of Christ Church playing fields, passing within 35 feet from the Wolfson Building. The words KM spoke at one of the public enquiries deserve to be quoted in full:

Thus we have been able to create, not only for Oxford but for the whole nation, an asset which can and ought to be preserved. If this road is built there will be lost to future generations of women undergraduates something of rare value which they might so easily have enjoyed. We feel it our duty to demand that this sacrifice shall not be imposed on them unless it is proved beyond doubt that it must be made for the preservation of Oxford as a whole. The ruin of this college, for the sake of enabling some motorists to make a slightly more convenient journey, would stand as a monument to the false values of our age.

The relief road was abandoned, which must be reckoned not the least among the debts which the city and university of Oxford owe to the redoubtable Miss Major.

It was inevitable that KM's principalship should have involved a measure of collision between a generation of young women, intelligent, self-confident, and conscious of the sexual revolution which came with the contraceptive pill and a fundamental shift in social attitudes, and a dignified but shy scholar brought up on strict principles and possessing what must already have seemed a rather old-fashioned outlook. (There is no doubt that in a number of respects KM *was* old-fashioned. It is, for example, inconceivable that she would ever have used the expression 'OK'). To many undergraduates she seemed rather formidable, even daunting. Some, whose conduct proved to be incompatible with college life, were required to leave, but to them KM was invariably helpful, even sympathetic. To anyone within the college who might be in need of help, financially or

otherwise, she was a ready, generous, and anonymous benefactor, as she has been publicly to the college as a whole.

KM was elected principal of St Hilda's by a senior common room which included a number of fellows whose eminence in scholarship was equal to her own, e.g. Dorothy Whitelock, Beryl Smalley, Menna Prestwich, and Helen Gardner. The consternation of some of these fellows when the new principal showed that she had very clear ideas about what the college needed and single-mindedness in carrying out her policies may perhaps be compared to the dismay of Sir John Falstaff and his cronies when Prince Hal became King Hal. There is no doubt that KM suffered some persistent opposition and criticism; her approach could seem authoritarian, even autocratic. Nevertheless, Beryl Smalley, by then Vice-principal, could write in the college report for 1964–5 'Miss Kathleen Major retired at the end of July after ten years of office which have been constructive in every sense of the word.'

It has been said by a subsequent principal that KM's achievement at St Hilda's 'was to turn a small, inward-looking college, run from the outside, into a genuinely self-governing, self-confident organisation'. She was largely instrumental in bringing about the enlargement essential if St Hilda's was to play a proper part, as it clearly has, in the expansion of university education for women.

It should be borne in mind, when we consider the calls upon KM's time and the pressure of work to which she subjected herself, that until their mother's death in 1971 she kept to an agreement with her sister Eileen, who lived with Mrs Major in Nottingham, that in vacations Kathleen would undertake the responsibility of looking after the old lady, who could be very demanding. This meant that, even when her mother could stay in the principal's lodging, KM had few if any real holidays and that many opportunities for travel which she would have greatly enjoyed were denied her.

The affection KM felt for her mother, however, is not in any doubt. In October 1960 she was a guest of honour at the dinner celebrating the 250th anniversary of the Spalding Gentlemen's Society. She drove there from Oxford on the day of the dinner, stayed the night and drove back the next day, a Sunday. She still had the energy to write her mother a long letter telling her all about the dinner and naming everyone present who had asked after Mrs Major—and what their families were doing. The very next day she was to face an exhausting session with city planners over the Wolfson Building and the letter concludes, not surprisingly, 'Must go to bed, much love, Kathleen.'



At the end of KM's ten year principalship it was a lucky encounter on the Paddington–Oxford train in 1966 that led to the next stage in her academic career. Professor Sir Fred (afterwards Lord) Dainton, Vice Chancellor of Nottingham University, finding himself sharing the journey with KM, took the opportunity to invite her to become a part-time professor in the history department for the next five years. Professor J. C. (afterwards Sir James) Holt, who had attended KM's diplomatic class in the late 1940s, was about to leave Nottingham for a chair at Reading, and Professor Donald Bullough had not yet been appointed to succeed him. The university had already awarded KM the honorary degree of D.Litt. in 1961. Her Nottingham professorship, a 'special chair' in medieval history, gave KM a wholly fitting and congenial closing phase to her formal academic career. She enjoyed teaching again and supervised several post-graduates working for a doctorate, the last of whom was Professor David Smith, for long director of the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research at York. She served on the council of the Royal Historical Society, of which she was made an honorary Vice-President in 1981, and she was also Vice-President of the Canterbury and York Society and a member of the British Academy's committee for the publication of English episcopal *acta* (1973–89). In 1977 she was elected a Fellow of the British Academy.

To mark her retirement at Nottingham in 1971 some fifteen friends and former pupils collaborated to present her with a *Festschrift*, edited by D. A. Bullough and R. L. Storey, *The Study of Medieval Records* (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1971). At the end of this volume a list compiled by Dr Arthur Owen gives the particulars of some 33 articles and booklets published by KM between 1932 and 1971, as well as of eight editions of texts and two of facsimiles. To this list at least six further items may be added (see below, p. 329). It is a formidable achievement for someone so deeply immersed in administrative work and in teaching.

Kathleen Major was notably generous with her time and her erudition. Dr Alison McHardy recalls that in 1967 her supervisor Dr Roger Highfield introduced her to KM with a letter of recommendation, whereupon a life-long friendship ensued. 'She would invite me to dinner. It was plain . . . but very good quality. I remember lovely steaks, which an impoverished research student could not afford, and excellent sherry beforehand. After dinner she would say: "Now, is there anything you would like to ask me?" And so I got a free research supervision from the person who knew the Lincoln diocesan archives better than anyone else.' Nor was it only professional historians who could count on her help. A wide range of local history societies, tourist bureaux, branches of the Women's Institute, local

government offices, and other worthy bodies benefited from her advice. From the 1960s the Friends of Lincoln Cathedral published a series of pamphlets, of which the first eight were edited by KM, who was herself author of *Minster Yard*, no. 7 of the second series (1974). Eighteen years later she published at her own expense an 81-page booklet on Lincoln Minster for the use of ‘guides and others concerned in the service of the Cathedral’. She gave a copy to each guide. Her devotion to the cathedral and its long history did not entail automatic admiration for the learning, dedication, or wisdom of its clerical dignitaries. Many of her surviving letters bear witness to her exasperation in the face of senior ecclesiastical ignorance and obtuseness. KM’s heroes were Canon Foster and Canon Srawley—for her they represented Anglican erudition at its best:

Good Dons perpetual that remain  
A landmark, walling in the plain—  
The horizon of my memories—  
Like large and comfortable trees.

No-one who knew Kathleen Major could suppose for a moment that in retirement, given reasonable health, she would not pursue her own studies with pertinacity or help others to pursue theirs. As *Registrum Antiquissimum* proceeded to its final three volumes the editor’s attention was inevitably directed to the many hundreds of urban properties, scattered across the city of Lincoln’s twenty-nine parishes, from which rents were paid or land and buildings conveyed to the Common Fund and to chantries administered by the chapter. Thus KM became an enthusiastic urban archaeologist. She had long been a friend of Sir Francis (Frank) Hill, the author of a highly successful history of *Medieval Lincoln* (Cambridge, 1948, repr. 1965), and he (who served for some years as mayor of the city) encouraged a co-operative campaign to identify and record the old houses and other buildings before they were swallowed up by modern development. The result was a substantial co-operative enterprise, *The Survey of Ancient Houses in Lincoln*, which was recorded in four volumes, *Priorygate to Pottergate* (1984), *Houses to the south and west of the Minster* (1987), *Houses in Eastgate, Priorygate and James Street* (1990) and *Houses in the Bail: Steep Hill, Castle Hill and Bailgate* (1996), by Stanley Jones, Kathleen Major, Joan Varley, and Christopher Johnson. KM provided the preface to each volume, and in the last she wrote ‘I will close by recording how very enjoyable and interesting the collection of material has been over this period.’ She was already 78 when the first volume appeared and 90 when the enterprise was completed—a remarkable

testimony to her indefatigable energy and devotion to Lincoln and its history.

Until the last few years of her life KM delighted in excursions to some historic church or castle or country town, invariably accompanied by a substantial picnic or visit to a good restaurant. Her knowledge of that older rural England which still survived in her younger days was extensive and reliable. With that knowledge went her delight in such details as that Sir Frank Stenton's father was admitted solicitor in 1837 and owned strips in the open fields of Eakrigg, or that her friend Joan Wake, immensely and fruitfully learned with regard to the early records of Northamptonshire, 'had no more education in her childhood than the governess in the school-room at Courteenhall'. KM could be stoical in the face of illness, luckily uncommon until her last years, and of personal setbacks. In October 1985, for example, she could write 'The burglars took my remaining silver (most went last year) and all my jewellery which was not much and mostly of no great value other than sentimental. But the thieves had house-breaking implements and had gone all over the house. Mercifully they had not thrown my file cases and card indexes about, only the papers in my desk.'

To many who knew her well, KM will be remembered as kindly, hospitable and generous. They will readily concur with the tribute paid by Anne Whiteman in her preface to the *Festschrift* presented to KM in 1971: 'All who have worked with her, as pupils or colleagues, have learnt to respect the extent and depth of her knowledge, her sound judgment, and her unshakeable scholarly integrity.'

Kathleen Major died at Lincoln on 19 December, 2000. At the funeral service in the Minster, presided over by the bishop, an address was given by the Vice-Chancellor and Librarian of the cathedral, Dr Nicholas Bennett. In it he outlined the 'three causes, above all others, of which she was a tireless advocate', namely the cause of women's education, the study of medieval records and the history of the cathedral and diocese of Lincoln. At the very well attended memorial service held at Oxford on 17 March 2001, in the university church of St Mary the Virgin, Mrs Mary Moore, herself a former principal of St Hilda's, spoke of KM's outstanding contribution to the life and work of her college, her achievement as archivist and historian, and of how 'her friendship always embraced the whole family; the fortunes of her friends' children, and *their* children and grandchildren were always of interest'.

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*Note.* Dr Nicholas Bennett kindly allowed me access to the personal papers of Kathleen Major at Lincoln, of which he had made a preliminary arrangement. Professor David Smith at York and Mrs Jeannette Davies of Andrew and Co., solicitors, Lincoln, have readily answered many questions. Mrs Mary Moore provided much valuable information and gave me the text of her address at the memorial service on 17 March 2001. In the memoir, unattributed passages within quotation marks are taken from this address. Miss Maria Croghan, librarian of St Hilda's College, Oxford, helped greatly with material relating to Kathleen Major's college career and with personal correspondence files. Others whom I wish to thank for assistance and information readily given are Molly Barratt, Julia Barrow, Mary Bennett, Elizabeth Boardman, Hilda Brown, Pierre Chaplais, Eleanor Davis, Barbara Emerson, Susan Hall, Barbara Harvey, Caroline Hill, Alison McHardy, Arthur Owen, the late Dorothy Owen, Margaret Rayner, and Jane Sayers.

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