MARGARET ASTON

Margaret Evelyn Aston

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Elected Fellow of the British Academy 1994

by

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The Hon. Margaret Aston was an historian who studied English religious life between the late Middle Ages and the Civil War. She was born into families of great distinction, dedicated to high public service and the arts. Her first study was of the career of Archbishop Arundel, and from it grew an abiding interest in heterodoxy and popular belief. In a series of articles, she reconstructed the mental and social worlds of the Lollards. She was fascinated by the relationship between the image and the word, and by art and its power and spiritual dangers; this became the principal focus of her work. Her *summa* was her great diptych, conceived in 1971, which occupied the rest of her scholarly life: *England's Iconoclasts I: Laws against Images* (1988) and *Broken Idols of the English Reformation* (2016). These are works of great depth and range, which transformed the understanding of the long Reformation in England. An independent scholar for most of her career, she was involved in many scholarly collaborations.

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MARGARET ASTON

Margaret Evelyn Bridges—always known as Martha to her family and friends—was born at Campden Hill Square, Kensington, London. The fact that she was born into families of great distinction, dedicated to high public service and the arts, marked her life. She was the youngest of four children of Edward Ettingdene Bridges, later first Baron Bridges (1892–1969) and his wife Katherine Dianthe (Kitty) (1896–1986), daughter of Thomas Cecil Farrer, second Baron Farrer of Abinger (1859–1940), and the musician, Evelyn Mary, née Spring-Rice (1862–1898). Her paternal grandfather, Robert Seymour Bridges (1844–1930), was poet laureate from 1913 to 1930; her grandmother Monica (Mary) (1863–1949) was the daughter of Alfred Waterhouse, the leading architect of the Gothic revival. Dame Frances Margaret Farrer (1895–1977), her maternal aunt, was a civil servant and general secretary of the National Federation of Women's Institutes.[1] Both her father and mother had Quaker antecedents.

Edward Bridges was one of the greatest civil servants of the twentieth century. Secretary to the War Cabinet (1938–1945), he was described by Winston Churchill as 'an extremely competent and tireless worker, but … also a man of exceptional force, ability and personal charm, without a trace of jealousy in his nature'. Selfless, irenic and tireless at this period of exceptional crisis, Bridges managed to prevent the likely friction between civil and military staffs.[2] In 1945 he continued as Secretary to the Cabinet but was also Permanent Secretary to the Treasury and head of the Civil Service until his retirement in 1956. An historian, Bridges was elected a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford.[3] To her father and mother, and to her father's memory, Margaret dedicated two of her books. His strict morality guided his own conduct and set a daunting standard for those close to him to follow. Margaret's fierce intelligence and toughness were his. Her schoolfriend, M. E. Batstone, judged that she 'inherited her father's strength and integrity, and her mother's tenderness and love of beauty'.

Margaret's childhood was spent with her siblings Shirley, Thomas and Robert in the family home, Goodmans Furze in Surrey, purchased by her father in 1934. High up on the North Downs at the back of Box Hill, the house has an 'idyllic location',

[1] F. Heal, 'Aston [née Bridges; second married name Buxton], Margaret Evelyn (1932–2014)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, https://doi.org/10.1093/odnb/9780198614128.013.108153 (accessed 9 September 2019); R. A. Chapman, 'Bridges, Edward Ettingdene, first Baron Bridges (1892–1969)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/32063 (accessed 9 September 2019); C. Phillips, 'Bridges, Robert Seymour (1844–1930)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/32066 (accessed 9 September 2019); J. Summers, 'Farrer, Dame Frances Margaret (1895–1977)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/107094 (accessed 9 September 2019).

[2] W. S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 2: *Their Finest Hour* (London, 1949), pp. 17–18.

[3] Chapman, 'Edward Ettingdene Bridges, first Baron Bridges (1892–1969)'.

with commanding views over Headley Heath.[4] Her mother was the centre of the close-knit family, for their father was often away in London, where the War Cabinet Office was manned day and night. Whether a sense of the sublimity of church architecture was stirred in the future historian in Headley's parish church of St Mary may be doubted, for its nineteenth-century nave and chancel have been described as 'appalling'.[5]

Margaret went away to boarding school, to Downe House near Newbury. The school had been founded in 1907 by Olive Willis on clear principles. Pupils were allowed more leisure and were less regimented than in most girls' schools, enjoying freedom from all-encompassing rules.[6] Creativity was encouraged and there was a strong musical tradition; Dame Myra Hess gave wartime concerts there.[7] Margaret, like her father, began to play the clarinet. Invited to write a pastiche of Chaucer—to invent an extra pilgrim for the *Canterbury Tales*—she presciently chose a poor scholar, 'with his boke'. At Downe House Margaret was influenced by the brilliant new history teacher, Isabel Bewick, and became Head Girl.

In 1951 Margaret won a scholarship to read history at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, one of six scholars in a bumper year for historians. These were heroic years for women's education at Oxford, for after decades of open or covert opposition the women's colleges became fully self-governing in the early 1950s. To be in a woman's college at this time was to experience the successful assertion of women's claims to an equal education, though how far this impinged on undergraduate awareness is uncertain.[8] Margaret's memories of the College were of its post-war atmosphere, of the bone-chilling cold and of its irksome restrictions after her liberal school.[9] Her history tutors were Anne Whiteman and Naomi Hurnard; the Principal was the historian Dame Lucy Sutherland. 'Miss Whiteman', returned to Oxford after wartime service in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, was the very best kind of tutor—wise, warm, witty and 'profoundly humane', dedicated to the study of history and to the guidance of her students.[10] It was Hurnard who particularly impressed Margaret's year, but it took some time for Margaret to impress her. Study of Latin began badly, with γβ for a first

[4] Sale details, Knight Frank.

[5] I. Nairn and N. Pevsner, revised by B. Cherry, *The Buildings of England: Surrey*, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 312.

[6] A. Ridler, *Olive Willis and Downe House: an Adventure in Education* (London, 1967); M. Midgley, *The Owl of Minerva: A Memoir* (London, 2005), p. 58.

[7] *Downe House Scrap-Book, 1907–1957*, p. 66.

[8] A. Whiteman, 'Lucy Stuart Sutherland, 1903–1980', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 69 (1983), pp. 611–30.

[9] Lady Margaret Hall, 2015.083.

[10] B. Worden, 'Anne Whiteman', https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/anne-whiteman (accessed 9 September 2019).

term's work marred by wild guesses. By the final year, Sutherland was writing that 'Miss Bridges grasps abstract arguments with ease, and applies them with courage and incisiveness', and May McKisack recognised that 'her grasp of texts … is something quite out of the ordinary'.[11]

With a First-Class degree awarded in the Modern History Schools of 1954, Margaret began graduate work under the forbidding supervision of K. B. McFarlane of Magdalen College, the renowned, though then resolutely little published, historian of the late medieval English nobility—of the world of magnate affinities, service and patronage, of 'good lordship' and of the Lollard knights: 'His intellectual integrity and historical craftmanship inspired the generation whose research he supervised.'[12] The stern standards of archival scholarship that he imparted were evident in Margaret's 1962 DPhil thesis, 'The career of Thomas Arundel until his exile in 1397'. At a meeting of the Stubbs Society (scene of student romance as well as of ardent historical discussion), Margaret had met Trevor Aston (1925–1985), the medieval economic historian, and immediately upon graduating, on 7 August 1954, she married him.[13] The marriage did not last, ending in separation after four years and divorce in 1969, but she would publish some of her most influential articles in the journal *Past and Present*, which Aston edited, and she dedicated a book to his memory. In Oxford, Margaret began tutorial teaching and was Lecturer at St Anne's College between 1956 and 1959.

In 1960–1 Margaret, who was venturesome, eager to improve her languages and to travel, held the Theodor Heuss Scholarship in West Germany. Returning, she was elected to the Jenner Research Fellowship at Newnham College, Cambridge, which she held from 1961 to 1966. She acknowledged with gratitude the grant of freedom 'as Virginia Woolf defined it to the college Arts Society in 1928—"five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door"'.[14] At Newnham she became 'absolute' friends with Barbara Everett, Fellow in English. Margaret, sophisticated and artistic, redecorated her college rooms with a dark purple ceiling, terracotta-coloured wallpaper and black carpet—distant from the demure aesthetic of a women's college of the 1960s—incensing the Domestic Bursary. Barbara Everett remembers Margaret the risk-taker, rowing in thunderstorms. At this point, her career took a significant turn: she applied for, but missed, the permanent University post in Cambridge that might have been hers. Instead of becoming a tutor at a women's college—for men's colleges would not

[11] LMH, ACA/1/22.

[12] K. Leyser, 'Memoir', in G. L. Harriss (ed.), *K. B. McFarlane: Letters to Friends, 1940–1966* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 9–37; G. L. Harriss, 'McFarlane, (Kenneth) Bruce (1903–1966)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/41133 (accessed 9 September 2009).

[13] R. Evans, 'Aston, Trevor Henry (1925–1985)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/41133 (accessed 9 September 2009).

[14] M. Aston, 'Foreword' to *The Fifteenth Century: the Prospect of Europe* (London, 1968).

admit women until more than a decade later—or a University lecturer, bound to the academic round of terms, essay-marking and examining, and to administration, which she might, after all, have hated, she set off for America. In 1967 she became Resident Fellow at the Folger Shakespeare Library and taught at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, between 1966 and 1969. In Washington, she met Elizabeth Eisenstein, historian of the printing revolution, who became a life-long friend. She also held a Research Fellowship at the Henry Huntington Library in San Marino, California.

From this extensive period of research, a series of books and articles began to appear. The book of her Oxford dissertation—*Thomas Arundel: a Study of Church Life in the Reign of Richard II*—was published in 1967 (Oxford). This is a scholarly study of Arundel's career, principally as Bishop of Ely, but the added chapter on Arundel and heresy presaged her lasting interest in unorthodoxy and the late medieval heresy of Lollardy. Her first, and perhaps most influential article, 'Lollardy and sedition, 1381–1431', concerning the heresy's double challenge to church and state, had been published in 1960.[15] After the more limited prospect of Richard II's reign, she widened her perspective to consider Christendom. *The Fifteenth Century: the Prospect of Europe* (London, 1968) was written for the general reader. In this collection of impressionistic essays, the accounts of popular movements and popular piety are the most convincing, for this was the direction in which her research now turned. An imaginatively illustrated history, it revealed her abiding interest in art and its power. She chose as epigraph—and for her epigraphs were always important—Alberti's reflection: 'I look upon a picture with no less pleasure … than I read a good history … The historian paints with words, and the painter with his pencil' (*De Re Aedificatoria*).

In Washington, Margaret was introduced to the diplomat Paul William Jex Buxton (1925–2009) by a fellow pupil of McFarlane, Michael Wheeler-Booth. In September 1971 they married. They moved to Rome, where they lived in Trastevere. The marriage, which Margaret described as one of 'pure contentment', brought three step-children, Charles, Tobias and Mary, and the joy of their own two daughters, Sophie, an artist, and Hero.[16] It was while she was living in Rome in 1971 that Margaret conceived her *summa*, the great diptych, *England's Iconoclasts: I: Laws against Images* (Oxford, 1988) and *Broken Idols of the English Reformation* (Oxford, 2016), which would occupy the rest of her scholarly life. To her husband, who always greatly admired and supported her work, she dedicated it, in the decent obscurity of an ancient language:

[15] M. Aston, 'Lollardy and sedition 1381–1431', *Past and Present*, 17 (1960), 1–44.
[16] M. E. Batstone, *Cloisters*, Downe House school magazine; M. Sheppard, *The Independent*, 14 December 2014.

PAULO
ADIUTORI ALACRI
<DIFFICILIORI LECTORI>
MARITO CARO

While her husband was at the Northern Ireland Office between 1974 and 1985, the family lived in a series of houses in County Down. In 1984 Margaret became an Honorary Research Fellow of Queen's University, Belfast, where John Bossy, fellow historian of the social history of religion, became her friend. With small children, it was, she said, hard to hold a continuous thought, but she was an 'unfathomably gentle and patient' mother; Sophie could not 'remember her getting angry with me or Hero even once'. Neither family life nor her husband's position as Under-Secretary for Northern Ireland, 1981–1985, at the height of the Troubles, were always conducive to the calmer life of scholarship. In the preface to *England's Iconoclasts*, Margaret referred passingly to 'one unexpected and forcible clearance of my desk beside Belfast Lough'. Their house was blown up by the IRA. With early warning, the family escaped injury. Margaret's scattered papers were saved after a providentially dry night. It is hardly without significance that the great historian of the veneration of images and of their destruction should have lived both in Trastevere, the heart of Rome, and in Northern Ireland.

Six of her most important papers on Lollardy, written between 1960 and 1982, were reprinted, together with two new essays, in *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London, 1984). Here she considered Lollardy from its beginnings to its afterlife in the writings of late sixteenth-century Reformation propagandists, spanning the Reformation divide, and found the Lollards moving from their academic roots to a popular theology and personal faith founded in the reading of scripture and vernacular literature. Her research cast bright light on the lives and beliefs of the men and women of the movement, reconstructing their mental and social world. Were there Lollard women priests? Was literacy necessary for biblical understanding? It was the initial study of the Lollard assault on images, their fears that the gilded saints would seduce the faithful believer and inspire idolatry, that would lead to Margaret's enduring study of the power of images and their danger. In 1993, encouraged by Martin Sheppard, publisher at the Hambledon Press and her friend, she published a further collection of essays in *Faith and Fire: Popular and Unpopular Religion, 1350–1600* (London, 1993). This richly illustrated volume demonstrated, again, the depth and originality of her research and its latitude, for the essays ranged from the Lollard arguments for church disendowment to the learning of the Northern Renaissance, from Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages* to iconoclasm in Rickmansworth. The spirit of destruction and the rites of violence by which radical

iconoclasts sent images to the amending flame had become a central focus of her work.

In the same year, *The King's Bedpost: Reformation and Iconography in a Tudor Group Portrait* (Cambridge, 1993) appeared. Investigating the esoteric painting of *King Edward VI and the Pope*, the work constructs a complex story of iconoclasm, artistic exchange and political tragedy, and makes a mysterious image speak again. Here Margaret discovered that this was not, as was once thought, a contemporary depiction, but a history painting made in the reign of Elizabeth, looking back on earlier reforms and perhaps painted as a warning to potential idolaters: to the Queen herself or to the Duke of Norfolk to deter him from marrying Mary, Queen of Scots. Immersed in sixteenth-century print culture, Margaret discovered that the unknown painter had used prints by the Dutch artist Martin van Heemskerck as a source and she revealed, more generally, the close ties between England and the Low Countries in the visual arts. In *Panorama of the Renaissance* (London, 1996) she devised a way of portraying central themes through art and created a visual feast of more than a thousand illustrations.

Many of the papers published in *Faith and Fire* were written by invitation. For this most private private scholar the ideal of the community of scholars was real. Commending Margaret's scholarly generosity, Colin Richmond wrote that this 'was based on an attitude to scholarship that deems it, first and foremost, one of communal endeavour. The doing of history is a social enterprise.'[17] She willingly accepted requests to lecture and was endlessly involved in scholarly collaborations, writing papers for edited volumes which were gilded by her contributions. In 1997 she edited, with Colin Richmond, *Lollardy and the Gentry in the Later Middle Ages* (Stroud), the proceedings of a conference they had organised at Newnham College two years earlier. And for Richmond, in friendship, she and Rosemary Horrox not only edited but privately published a collection of essays based around particular documents: *Much Heaving and Shoving: Late-Medieval Gentry and their Concerns* (Chipping, 2005). In 1996 she became a member of the advisory committee of the John Foxe Project at the University of Sheffield. For 2000–1 she served as President of the Ecclesiastical History Society, choosing as the theme for the annual conference 'The Church and the Book'. All the while, she continued to review. If not, for most of her life, a teacher, she was intensely interested in other scholars and their work, and she wrote references for many who remain grateful for her help in advancing their careers. The testament of her inspiration to other scholars, and of their affection as well as admiration for her, was the conference held in her honour in March 2008. The papers read there were published

[17] C. Richmond, 'Margaret Aston: an appreciation', in L. Clark, M. Jurkowski and C. Richmond (eds.), *Image, Text and Church, 1380–1600: Essays for Margaret Aston* (Toronto, 2009), p. 7.

as a Festschrift: *Image, Text and Church, 1380–1600: Essays for Margaret Aston* (Toronto, 2009), which contains a full list of her publications to that date (pp. 257–68).

Returning from Ireland to live in England, the family had settled in Chipping Ongar, Essex, in the Buxton family home, Castle House. In the inner bailey of the Norman motte and bailey castle, next to the castle mound, William Morice, a fervent evangelical, began to build Castle House in the 1540s. Margaret—writing as Margaret Buxton—told the story.[18] This was a family enclave, with step-children, and Sophie and her partner Rob, and their three children, Reuben, Phoebe and Hester, Margaret's grandchildren, living adjacent. Hero died in 2002. In the attic, next to Hero's bedroom—imaginatively painted with birds and flowers by Sophie—was Margaret's study, crammed with tottering piles of books and papers, with archaeological levels of notes and with uninterrupted views of the Essex countryside from her window. Out of this seeming chaos, with extraordinary discipline, stoicism and dauntless determination, through four decades, she wrote the history of England's broken idols. At Margaret's feet were a succession of Cavalier King Charles spaniels—Moth, Thisbe, and lastly, Peaseblossom—eager to sit on a lap or game for a walk, perfect companions for a scholar. If, for all the deep pleasures of family life, there were longueurs in life in an Essex village, or sometimes a sense of isolation, there were always visits to libraries and lectures to give.

Iconomachy and iconoclasm are world historical phenomena, as the destruction of the Buddhas at Bamyan in Afghanistan as idols by the Taliban in 2001 and the assault on the Temple of Bel at Palmyra by ISIS prove. Margaret Aston's profound achievement was to understand, describe and explain the great reversal in England over the course of its long Reformation, as image-worshippers were transformed into image-haters or image-breakers. Her two volumes considered the vast, superhuman destruction of venerated images, disrupting a millennium of worship, and the price of this revolution—the suffering and bewilderment of the deprived, the loss of loved objects of beauty, the wrecking of history and community. The epigraph taken from Ernst Gombrich—'Our attitude towards the image is inextricably bound up with our whole idea about the universe'[19]—signals the amplitude of her enterprise, which was hardly imagined until she undertook it. The sympathies of a historian so attuned to the beauties of art could not lie with the radical iconoclasts—'It takes great spirit to destroy great things. But I do not think that the iconoclasts were great-hearted' (*England's Iconoclasts*, p. 19)—but it was her purpose to understand and explain the 'death-dealing' (as Luther put it) animus, and through two volumes and nearly 1,500 pages she did, maintaining a remarkable objectivity.

[18] M. Buxton, 'Chipping Ongar and the Morices', in M. Leach (ed.), *Aspects of Ongar* (Ongar, 1999), pp. 34–49.
[19] E. H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images* (London, 1972), p. 125.

She described a battle between word and image, as faith became a matter for ears rather than for eyes, and the process of oblivion whereby the holy could no longer be served by art. As physical idols were cast down in parish churches, the radicals assailed the images remaining in the mind's eye of the believer. For them, to imagine God, the Ancient of Days, as an old man with a beard, or Christ suffering on the cross, was a primal sin; this was to erect idols in the mind, and the memory of such 'feigned' images must be excised. Idolatry began within, embedded in man's fallen being. Less absolute than Calvin, Luther questioned an extremity—comfortless and censorious—which seemed to be at war with what it was to be human. Now even the raptures of romantic love became suspect, for to 'worship' the beloved derogated from the worship due to God alone. 'To love, as Ben Jonson loved Shakespeare "this side idolatry", was to dare devotion on the knife-edge between the most sacred and most sinful' (*England's Iconoclasts*, p. 467). In the heady days of the Civil War, zealots were convinced that both idolaters and adulterers deserved the death penalty. *England's Iconoclasts* traced the gigantic shift in religious consciousness that involved changes in both divine and secular laws, including the elevation of the Decalogue's prohibition of images into a separate commandment. The depth and range of Margaret's research was prodigious, spanning centuries, from the pronouncements of the Church Fathers, to the iconoclastic dispute that divided the Eastern Church in the eighth and ninth centuries, to the Lollard opposition to images, the shifting official policies of the Tudor monarchs and the busy iconoclasts of the Civil War. All this research was conducted in libraries—often distant from her Chipping Ongar fastness—rather than online.

Not everyone who promises a second volume fulfils the pledge, but Margaret kept faith with the great project which she had conceived in 1971. *Broken Idols of the Reformation* was published posthumously in 2016 (Cambridge), a thousand pages brought through the press by her daughter Sophie, who had known the work all her life, and her great-niece Venetia Bridges. This is an examination of the practice and experience of iconoclasm through the long centuries of the English Reformation, and its consequences for English culture. For most people, it was only when they went to church that they saw sculpture, painting, stained glass or heard contrapuntal music, but the reformers condemned all this as idolatry, and parishioners might become exiled in their own churches. Even a sound might be idolised, so church bells were silenced and the Angelus no longer rang out. There was midnight and midday destruction, legal and illegal—individual, vigilante acts of destruction, and official ones. Images might be smashed or burnt or turned into 'idol' toys for children. Some were hidden away 'against another day' when they could return, and illustrations of images that survive from the thousands upon thousands that were lost, poignant remnants of a lost world, illumine the text. The tetragrammaton might replace the hoary vision of God the Father, but iconoclasts could never prevent the Holy Ghost flying as a dove

in the imaging mind. Crosses were most ubiquitous and dangerous of all—in churches, in homes, by the wayside, in the memory, made as gestures in the air, sketched with thumb on a baby's forehead—and must be 'down a'. But there were crosses everywhere in God's creation. As John Donne asked:

> Who can deny mee power, and liberty
> To stretch mine armes, and mine own Crosse to be?
> Swimme, and at every stroake, thou art thy Crosse
> …
> Looke up, thou seest birds rais'd on crossed wings:[20]

But a nation that vanquished idolatry in the church might still practise it in the state. No historian of the Reformation can think of it in the same way after this magisterial work.

All Margaret's immense learning was born lightly. She wrote with a quiet power, in elegant and lucid prose, expressing complex ideas simply. Her style, the image of character, was never polemical; rather, she wrote as if stitching a tapestry. Theory had its part—Neoplatonic art theory and the psychology of Jung, for images served a psychological need. Themes and characters recurred. Apt metaphors, vivid images and vignettes, and telling quotations were characteristic of her writing, and the epigraphs particularly revealed her eclectic reading. Her shelves at Castle House were full of modern poetry, and it was in her heart and head. She might as easily quote modern poets, or Corneille, Dante, Hardy or Marie Lloyd, the music hall legend—'I am one of the ruins that Cromwell knocked about a bit'—as Reformation ideologues. This monumental work could only have been written by a historian not only of the deepest learning but also of the widest human sympathy.

For this most modest scholar there were due honours: Fellowship of the Society of Antiquaries of London (1987) and of the British Academy (1994), an honorary doctorate of the University of York (2001) and in 2013 a CBE 'for services to historical scholarship'. But her principal distinction was of character. Her friends eulogised her in superlatives, remembering her 'noble, caring heart', as 'noble in her courtesy … gracious and generous in her relations with others', her 'human magnificence', her 'nobility of mind', her kindness. To know her even a little was to recognise these qualities. She was a life-enhancing spirit. I remember her eager quickness and delight as she and I drove—with my spaniels perched precariously, illegally on her lap—to see the Creed windows at the Cheyne family church of Drayton Beauchamp. She died on 22 November 2014, while walking by the castle mound at Chipping Ongar.

[20] H. Gardner (ed.), *John Donne: the Divine Poems* (Oxford, 1952), p. 26.

Note on the author: Dr Susan Brigden is Supernumerary Fellow at Lincoln College, Oxford; she was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2014.