

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-53310-2 - Lady Margaret Beaufort and Her Professors of Divinity at Cambridge
1502-1649

Patrick Collinson, Richard Rex and Graham Stanton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

Introduction

GRAHAM STANTON

The importance of John Fisher's contribution to the University of Cambridge can hardly be exaggerated.¹ One historian even claims that 'at no other time has the university owed so much, for so long, to one man'.² His library was said to be the finest in England. He was highly respected as a learned scholar who encouraged the reception of humanist scholarship. It was Fisher who persuaded Erasmus to come to Cambridge and teach theology and Greek from 1511. Among

¹ I am grateful to my colleagues Dr Richard Rex and Dr David Thompson for advice on a number of points; all errors of fact and of judgement are my own.

² H. C. Porter, *Reformation and Reaction in Tudor Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1958), p. 3. In 1502 Fisher was elected University Chancellor, and was re-elected annually until 1514; from 1505 to 1508 he was also President of Queens' College. See C. N. L. Brooke, 'John Fisher as University Chancellor', in B. Bradshaw and E. Duffy (eds.), *Humanism, Reform and the Reformation Career of Bishop John Fisher* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 47–66. For the history of the University, see the excellent bibliographies and helpful guidance in Elisabeth Leedham-Green, *A Concise History of the University of Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 247–57.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-53310-2 - Lady Margaret Beaufort and Her Professors of Divinity at Cambridge
1502-1649

Patrick Collinson, Richard Rex and Graham Stanton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

his many other considerable achievements was his successful encouragement of Lady Margaret Beaufort to establish a 'Professorship' in Divinity in 1502. He himself became the first holder of the post.

The lectures by Richard Rex and Patrick Collinson included here in expanded form were given on 1 March 2002 as the centrepiece in the Faculty of Divinity's celebrations to mark the 500th anniversary of the establishment of the Lady Margaret's Professorship in 1502. The special occasion was chaired by Sir Alec Broers, Vice-Chancellor of the University, who also presided at a gala dinner at St John's College the following evening. The College's fine portrait of Lady Margaret Beaufort looked out, as usual, over the dining hall. For this special occasion the dining hall was packed with present and former members of the Faculty of Divinity. What would Lady Margaret have made of the celebrations?

The distinguished historians Richard Rex and Patrick Collinson have no doubts about the importance of 1502. Their lectures tell the fascinating story of the establishment of the Professorship and the distinctive contributions of the early holders. But they do much more than that. They set the early history of the Professorship in its religious, political and social context. They both show not only how the early holders were caught up in the turmoils of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but the extent to which they contributed to the intellectual and theological ferment of their day.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-53310-2 - Lady Margaret Beaufort and Her Professors of Divinity at Cambridge
1502-1649

Patrick Collinson, Richard Rex and Graham Stanton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

3

Did Lady Margaret Beaufort intend her benefaction to lead to the renewal of the church or the University? Did she have in mind major changes in direction? Or were her initial hopes more limited? Those are difficult questions to answer. What is clear is that the establishment of the Professorship had consequences which neither Lady Margaret Beaufort nor John Fisher envisaged. But this is the fate of all major benefactors: if they are to make a lasting contribution to the institution they support, they must leave it free to develop as it will, for if their benefaction is tied up in knots, in due course it will wither away.

Richard Rex and Patrick Collinson tell the story from 1502 to 1649. The paragraphs which follow offer the merest sketch of 'before and after'. Perhaps the full story of the Lady Margaret's Professorship will be written one day. If so, it should be told with 'warts and all', for as we shall see, there have been some low points in the past 500 years, as well as times when the holders have made lasting contributions to theological scholarship, to the University, to the wider church, and to society.

In 1209 a group of scholars who had fled from Oxford in the wake of troubles there arrived in Cambridge. We do not know why they chose Cambridge as the site for the new scholarly community they established, but we do know why they left Oxford. With the consent of King John, the authorities in Oxford had acted in a heavy-handed manner in response to

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-53310-2 - Lady Margaret Beaufort and Her Professors of Divinity at Cambridge
1502-1649

Patrick Collinson, Richard Rex and Graham Stanton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

a mysterious death of a woman (perhaps a prostitute). The alleged murderer, who was a scholar, was not apprehended, but his associates were hanged in violation of the immunity expected. Some of the scholars who ran for their lives from Oxford to Cambridge were theologians.³ So in all probability theology was taught from the very beginning. Indeed it is possible that the great polymath Robert Grosseteste lectured on theological topics in Cambridge in the 1190s, though there is no evidence for organised teaching of theology in the twelfth century.⁴

In about 1225 the Franciscans established a house in Cambridge, followed by the Dominicans by 1238. Along with other religious orders, their numbers and influence grew steadily. By the late fourteenth century three-quarters of Cambridge theologians were members of religious orders and theology dominated the University as a whole.

The fifteenth century brought several changes. The numbers of theologians declined somewhat, partly as a result of a drop in the numbers of the friars.⁵ A negative reaction to Wycliffe's 'heresy' stifled creativity in theology for some time,

³ See D. R. Leader, *A History of the University of Cambridge*, vol. I (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 17 and 33, where full references to the primary sources and the secondary authorities are given.

⁴ Leedham-Green, *Concise History*, p. 4.

⁵ See M. K. Jones and M. G. Underwood, *The King's Mother: Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 203; Leedham-Green, *Concise History*, p. 19.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-53310-2 - Lady Margaret Beaufort and Her Professors of Divinity at Cambridge
1502-1649

Patrick Collinson, Richard Rex and Graham Stanton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

but recovery began around John Fisher's time at the very end of the century.⁶ The traditional pattern of 'regency lectures', whereby recent graduates carried out most of the teaching without receiving a regular salary, was in decline, partly as a result of the increasing availability of printed books.⁷ So it is not surprising that there were several stillborn attempts to establish salaried professors at Oxford. There is evidence that in Cambridge payment was made for some lectures, but 'they remained on an uncertain footing until an independent endowment could be found'.⁸

Towards the end of the fifteenth century Renaissance humanism began to change the intellectual climate, and by about 1500 the first stirrings were felt in Cambridge. But there was little impact on theology before Erasmus' arrival in 1511, and no sign of doctrinal upheavals until Luther's views began to make an impact in the 1520s.

Henry VIII's 1535 injunctions insisted that lectures should be on the Bible 'according to the true sense thereof and not after the manner of Scotus, etc.', and banned lecturing on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* which had long been the staple diet of theologians. Although this was a radical change, it is important to note that lectures on the Bible were not a new

⁶ I owe the points made in this paragraph to Dr Richard Rex. See his *The Lollards* (Basingstoke, 2002).

⁷ For full discussion, see Leader, *History*, pp. 242–63.

⁸ Leader, *History*, p. 252.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-53310-2 - Lady Margaret Beaufort and Her Professors of Divinity at Cambridge
1502-1649

Patrick Collinson, Richard Rex and Graham Stanton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

development, for the Bible was studied in Cambridge in the preceding centuries. 'What humanists like More and Erasmus said about the blindness towards scripture in the Universities was directed against the methods used by scholastic commentators, the importance of scholastic disputation, and the ignorance of the Greek and Hebrew originals.'⁹

So neither the establishment of the Lady Margaret's Professorship in 1502 nor the arrival of Erasmus as a distinguished teacher of theology and Greek in 1511 is a watershed. However, both events accelerated changes which were already afoot, and both had a very considerable aftermath.

In chapter 3 of this booklet Patrick Collinson ends his story with Richard Holdsworth, the moderate Calvinist who was Lady Margaret's Professor from 1643 to 1649, the year of the execution of King Charles I. It is difficult to pin down the religious views of Holdsworth's successor, Richard Love, Professor from 1649 to 1661, but his appointment did not mark a radical change. In 1642 he preached an influential sermon critical of Laudianism and called for a greater emphasis on preaching, but he also defended bishops. In short, he was 'an adept survivor of the religious-political purges during the revolutionary years'.¹⁰ At the restoration

⁹ Leader, *History*, pp. 183-4.

¹⁰ John Twigg, *The University of Cambridge and the English Revolution 1625-1688* (Woodbridge, 1990) p. 27; see also p. 117.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-53310-2 - Lady Margaret Beaufort and Her Professors of Divinity at Cambridge
1502-1649

Patrick Collinson, Richard Rex and Graham Stanton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

of the monarchy in 1660 Love insisted that his opposition to the revolutionary events of 1648–49 was well known; in order to continue to serve church and University, he had taken pains not to provoke the religious authorities to expel him.¹¹ Hence, as Master of Corpus and Lady Margaret's Professor, he was one of the few senior members of the University to retain his posts right through this turbulent period.

The restoration of the monarchy brought many radical changes of direction. Lady Margaret's Professors were not exempt. In 1660 Peter Gunning was appointed Master of Corpus and Lady Margaret's Professor by royal mandate. He had been a staunch royalist during the Interregnum, and had a reputation for militant opposition to nonconformity. However, his tenure of both posts was very brief: in 1661 'he was advanced to the more prestigious posts of Master of St John's and Regius Professor of Divinity'.¹² Gunning was clearly swimming with the tide!

In 1661 John Pearson was appointed to the Professorship, which he held until 1673. He was Gunning's close ally in the defence of episcopacy at the landmark Savoy Conference in 1661. He has been described as 'perhaps the most erudite

¹¹ Twigg, *Cambridge and the English Revolution*, p. 159.

¹² John Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of the Enlightenment: Science, Religion and Politics from the Restoration to the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 31.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-53310-2 - Lady Margaret Beaufort and Her Professors of Divinity at Cambridge
1502-1649

Patrick Collinson, Richard Rex and Graham Stanton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and profound divine of a learned and theological age'.¹³ His *Exposition of the Creed* (1659) became an influential, widely used textbook.

Pearson made a major contribution to scholarship with the publication of his *Vindiciae Epistolarum S. Ignatii* (1672). The letters of Ignatius, with their strong emphasis on episcopacy, were written *c.* 100 AD. Not surprisingly, they were a bone of contention in the seventeenth century: anti-episcopalians vigorously rejected their authenticity by claiming that the manuscripts had been interpolated or forged at a later period. Pearson's scholarly defence of the seven letters won the day, though the controversy was reopened in the nineteenth century. In 1885 another Lady Margaret's Professor, J. B. Lightfoot, mounted what is still the classic defence of the authenticity of the seven letters.

Cambridge was rather ambivalent about the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1689. Humphrey Gower, Professor from 1688 to 1711, is a good illustration. Although he himself accepted the new order, he used his influence to protect his colleagues at St John's (where he was Master) who refused to take oaths of loyalty to the new monarchy. This involved 'some deft legal manoeuvring'.¹⁴

The eighteenth century is a sorry story both for the University and for the Professorship. Although John Newcombe

¹³ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (Oxford, 3rd edn, 1997), p. 1245.

¹⁴ Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of the Enlightenment*, p. 73.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-53310-2 - Lady Margaret Beaufort and Her Professors of Divinity at Cambridge
1502-1649

Patrick Collinson, Richard Rex and Graham Stanton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

held the Chair from 1727 to 1765, the longest tenure to date, he remained silent after giving his inaugural lecture. His successor, Zachary Brooke (1765–87), followed suit: ‘in an obituary notice of him the professorship is described as a valuable sinecure which indeed it was’.¹⁵ In 1788 the University urged the electors to the Chair to appoint someone who would lecture regularly in accordance with the regulations. John Mainwaring, who held the Chair from 1788 to 1807, made a promising start, but as soon as the numbers attending dwindled, he too ceased to lecture.¹⁶

How did this parlous state of affairs come about? Originally all University lectures were given in Latin. Although by the beginning of the eighteenth century most professors in Cambridge had abandoned this custom, the Lady Margaret’s Professors were traditionalists. So it is not surprising that their lectures in Latin failed to attract an audience. And once this happened, they had a perfect excuse for not lecturing.

In 1809 Herbert Marsh (1757–1839) broke the spell of silence and lectured in English to large audiences of townsmen as well as gownsmen in the University Church. On his election to the see of Peterborough in 1819, however, he ceased to lecture, even though he retained his professorship until his death twenty years later.¹⁷

¹⁵ D. A. Winstanley, *Unreformed Cambridge: A Study of Certain Aspects of the University in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1935), p. 98.

¹⁶ Winstanley, *Unreformed Cambridge*, p. 99.

¹⁷ D. A. Winstanley, *Early Victorian Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1955), p. 175.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-53310-2 - Lady Margaret Beaufort and Her Professors of Divinity at Cambridge
1502-1649

Patrick Collinson, Richard Rex and Graham Stanton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

IO

GRAHAM STANTON

Marsh was an influential and controversial scholar and church leader. He was said by many to be the foremost bishop of his day, though this view was not unanimous. From Peterborough Marsh maintained a strong and reputedly aggressive influence in Cambridge. He refused to license clergy of Calvinist beliefs, and engaged in fierce controversy with Charles Simeon and the Evangelical leaders of his day. He was well known for his fierce opposition to the establishment of the Bible Society,¹⁸ to hymns in services, and to Catholic emancipation. He was the last Lady Margaret's Professor to hold the Chair and a bishopric simultaneously.

Marsh was an important pioneer in scholarly study of the Gospels. He was the first scholar to claim that a narrative source and a sayings source were two major independent sources used by the synoptic evangelists, thus anticipating the twin pillars of almost all modern study of the Gospels: the priority of Mark's Gospel and a collection of sayings of Jesus shared by Matthew and Luke known as Q.¹⁹ Marsh was strongly influenced by J. D. Michaelis, under whom he studied in Leipzig in 1785. He translated the fourth edition of Michaelis' pioneering *Introduction to the New Testament*, added many of his own notes, and at the end of volume III

¹⁸ See Winstanley, *Early Victorian Cambridge*, pp. 19–20.

¹⁹ For recent discussion of the significance of Marsh's work for scholarly study of the Gospels, see Stephen Hultgren, *Narrative Elements in the Double Tradition* (Berlin, 2002), pp. 4–9. See also W. R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis* (New York and London, 1964), pp. 11–15 and 61.