

**BRIDGET HILL,
HISTORIAN AND FEMINIST**

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with additional note (2019)**

By Penelope J Corfield

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Bridget Hill, the historian of eighteenth-century women, was a remarkable person of great vivacity and dynamism. She published her first book at the age of 62, her last at the age of 79. She was a participant among the remarkable group of historians and others who constituted Britain's left-wing intelligentsia, centred around the British Communist Party (before 1956) and after that sustained by a network of friendships.

And, above all, Bridget Hill was part of a remarkable partnership between herself and the eminent Marxist historian Christopher Hill. Theirs was one of the great marriages, to which there was no impediment – a true union of hearts and minds, bodies and intellects, and of deeply kindred spirits.



Bridget and Christopher Hill in the early 1970s,
admirably displaying their shared camaraderie and impish humour:
© Hill family photograph

At first, it was she who helped Christopher to organise his life so that he, after a slow start, could, plentifully, write books. His *Society and Puritanism* (1964) was justly dedicated ‘To Bridget, but for whom ...’. Later, he returned the compliment and encouraged her.

She began by publishing edited texts, before getting into her stride with significant contributions in *Women, Work, and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (1989), *The Republican Virago: The Life and Times of Catherine Macaulay, Historian* (1992); *Servants: English Domesticity in the Eighteenth Century* (1996); and *Women Alone: Spinners in England, 1660-1850* (2001). In addition, she wrote reviews and articles, and was considering, shortly before her death, the possibility of collecting her essays into a book.

The common theme throughout her work was a commitment to understanding the lives and struggles of ordinary women. Her Marxism, which was in no sense doctrinaire, took the form of sympathy for the underdog and a staunch belief that industrial capitalism had made things much worse. [She and I repeatedly debated that point. Sometimes she accepted that some elements in life might have improved marginally; but she was adamant that the core structures of society were irredeemably worsened by industrialisation. PJC: 2019] She also revelled in independent women, like Catherine Macaulay, on whom she had first written an article, co-authored with Christopher Hill, in 1967.

With her bright eyes, springing gait, and open, hospitable manner, Bridget Hill radiated an intense engagement with life. She was an eager conversationalist, shrewd, witty knowledgeable. At the same time, she was a deeply private person, who kept her innermost feelings strictly to herself. She never spoke of sad things in her life, such as her unhappiness when her relationship with her first husband, the academic chemist Stephen Mason (1923–2007), ended in 1953, leading to divorce; or her anguish when, in August 1957, her first daughter Kate – a bonny child – was killed in a minor car

accident, aged only 11 months; or, in recent years, her sorrow and anxiety at Christopher Hill's deteriorating health.

Her motto was 'No fuss'. In accordance with that it was entirely characteristic that she told absolutely no-one about her breast cancer; its first successful treatment, and its much later recurrence. Only at the very end, when she collapsed with her short final illness, was it apparent that things were seriously wrong. Before that, she was as active as ever and, at her 80th birthday party in April 2002, she was radiant and full of plans.

Bridget Irene Sutton, as she began life, had a very happy childhood in west London. She was close to her two older sisters and, especially, to her younger brother Peter. Their father, Harry Sutton, was a leading Baptist minister. He was a high-minded liberal, who lived simply, though not austere. The family's Nonconformist ethos had a great influence upon all the children, and it was, incidentally, very similar to that of the Hill family, who were active Methodists, also committed to good works and 'No fuss'. Indeed, the relationship of numerous British radical intellectuals with a tradition of secularised Dissent is one that would repay fuller consideration. [A real research and publication opportunity here: PJC 2019]

Bridget Sutton was educated at Godolphin & Latymer School in Hammersmith, west London, and read Economic History at the London School of Economics, during the Second World War years when the School was evacuated to Cambridge.

She first met Christopher Hill at some unrecorded date in the later 1940s, when he came to talk at a Workers Educational Association class in London, which she had organised. She remembered being impressed with his attractive mixture of informality and erudition.

Later they met again, as neighbours in Oxford and then, both bruised after the breakdown of their first marriages, began a cautious courtship. Eventually Bridget, distressed at the uncertainty, moved back to London. Other admirers

were in the offing. Suddenly, Christopher Hill, still in Oxford, saw the light. He telephoned unexpectedly and asked Bridget to meet him at Paddington Station. She did; and they never looked back. They married quietly, early in 1956; and, after Kate's death, quickly had two more children, Andrew born in 1958, and Dinah in 1960. After that, family letters were signed from A, B, C, D.

Throughout everything, Bridget Hill was always busy. She taught in adult education and from 1972 to 1985 was enthusiastically absorbed as a tutor for the Open University. From 1960 to 1968, she was also part-time Treasurer of St Hilda's College, Oxford, becoming a Fellow of the College in 1961.

Moreover, when Christopher Hill was Master of Balliol (1965-78), Bridget provided him with invaluable support. Being the partner of a head of an Oxbridge College is not always an easy role. Bridget Hill understood that perfectly and never put a foot wrong.

As a historian, Hill worked with the abundant printed records rather than with archive material; and throughout her work, she successfully conveyed the fascination of studying the lives of women in the past – a fascination which always stayed with her. Long after she had retired from Oxford to live at Sibford Ferris, near Banbury, she returned regularly to work in the Bodleian Library's Upper reading Rom. It was her home from home.

Bridget Hill was cremated, after a quiet ceremony, attended by only the very closest family. The absence of fuss was just right. And in Autumn 2002 a big gathering is being planned for her friends to attend, in joyous celebration of her life. That will be very right too. [It was: PJC 2019]

Additional note (2019): Bridget Hill notably had an artist's eye for colour, shape and design. She relaxed by gardening, and by painting in oils and watercolour. I have today on my study wall an original Bridget Hill landscape, which used to hang in her living-room. The painting glows with bright colours and harmony and her vivid perception of England in very early springtime. It's

monumental, not at all ‘pretty-pretty’. It always makes me smile with warm affection and happy memories of many brisk Hill family walks through the Oxfordshire countryside.

BRIDGET IRENE HILL, NÉE SUTTON:

Historian and feminist; born London 15 April 1922; Treasurer St Hilda’s College, Oxford, 1960-68; Fellow 1961-68; Tutor for the Open University 1972-85; first marriage 1947 with Stephen Mason (dissolved 1954); second marriage 1956 with Christopher Hill (one son Andrew Oliver, one daughter Dinah; and one daughter Kate, deceased); died in Adderbury, Oxfordshire, 20 July 2002.