Margaret Aston


Margaret Aston’s book *Broken Idols of the English Reformation,* published posthumously in 2015, appeared almost twenty years after her 1988 study *England’s Iconoclasts. Vol. 1: Laws Against Images.* The present volume, a mighty tome of some 1000 pages, is very obviously volume 2, even though this is not apparent from the title. I read and reviewed this book as a Dutch art historian studying the broken idols of the Reformation in the northern Netherlands with an interest in seeing whether the goings-on in England were at all comparable to what was happening in the Netherlands at the same time, and whether the ways the images and objects were dealt with in the two countries and the reasons given for their destruction tallied or diverged.

The main aim of Aston’s book is to answer the question why so many religious images and objects (bells, organs, altar rails, church plate, plain crosses) as well as churches were broken and damaged in the course of the Reformation, the long English Reformation no less, which lasted from the late fourteenth until the middle of the seventeenth century, even though the iconoclasm perpetrated during this long period was intermittent and various in its manifestations. Initially, of course, the mandate to destroy ‘idols’ came from the Old Testament Decalogue and other Old Testament texts, and there was also a desire to emulate the early Christian Church that had allowed very little to no imagery in its sanctuaries. There were, however, differences of opinion in how far the destruction should be taken. Some opined that it was only the offending images that had to be despoiled, others believed all images should go for fear of them attracting idolatrous practices and there were also those who believed the churches themselves should be pulled down, as they had been tainted by the Catholic past. What is more, as time progressed the definition of what an ‘idol’ was and what ‘idolatrous practices’ were, changed, causing the destruction of ever more objects. Idolatry in the early sixteenth century was not how idolatry was understood by the middle of the seventeenth century.

While the mid-sixteenth-century Tudor reforms focussed on places of worship and obvious manifestations of idolatry, later reforms took on the image as such. In order to reform a religion and build up a new kind of worship it was deemed necessary to destroy everything so that memory would not linger on the old ways. It was not only images and books that were destroyed, bells and organs were likewise victims of iconoclasm: iconoclasm clearly affected eyes, ears, as well as memory. Medieval art that had survived the Tudors—stained glass windows and works like the Cheapside and Charing Crosses—were tar-
geted in the 1640s, even though by this time some of these ‘broken idols’ were valued by some as honourable monuments of England’s antiquity and others believed the remaining crosses and windows innocuous as the reform had been fulfilled. For extremists, however, anything pertaining to Catholicism was doomed and therefore every cross had to be brought down. Sometimes it only takes a few people to effect great changes.

Aston’s book is divided in three parts, even though it is not very clear what this division is based on. In the first part an overview is given of the iconoclasts’ motivation for the destruction, of the dispersal of objects and church materials into secular hands, and the actualities of breaking and destroying church images. The second part first deals with two case-studies: the cult of Thomas à Becket that Henry VIII wanted to eradicate and the cult of St. George that English monarchs very much wanted to preserve. Following this, the chapter proceeds with examining the fate of bells and organs. In the third part, three themes are discussed: stained glass, the cross, and the word versus the image.

The book gives an excellent overview of iconoclasm perpetrated between the 1520s and the middle of the seventeenth century. One can only agree with the publishers that this book is indeed “a major new contribution to our understanding of the English Reformation” and that it “analyses the causes and effects of iconoclasm and illuminates why certain types of images were particularly targeted” as well as setting “iconoclasm within a wider process of religious revolution designed to create new generations of believers and new ways of belief.” What is more, one cannot deny the scholarship or the tremendous amount of reading and archival work that went into this book, which is indeed a magisterial achievement. However, for all this, the book is not an easy or compelling read. Unlike the earlier 1988 volume, the book is set up along thematic lines and does not present the reader with a continuous narrative. Each chapter can be read individually and discusses a theme from the late medieval period through to the middle of the seventeenth century. Indeed, Aston herself stresses this in her introduction: “readers need not start at the beginning and proceed doggedly to the end.” However, to get the overall picture of any given period one does have to read ‘doggedly’ through the entire book. Moreover, the reader is expected to bring a great deal of prior knowledge to the book as some of the protagonists are hardly introduced. For a book that is just over a 1000 pages long, with relatively few images, this takes a hard toll on the reader, especially as the writing is characterized by an often encyclopaedic terseness.

Also, as an art historian, I believe the illustrations could have been improved upon. Quite often pictures that are discussed at length in the text are not illustrated while some of the pictures that are shown seem hardly relevant