

4. Daughter, Wife, Heiress ... and independent woman? What shaped Elizabeth Aldburgh's thinking? c.1364 to c.1396

Because barons ... knights and squires and gentlemen travel and go off to the wars, their wives should be wise and sound administrators and manage their affairs well, because most of the time they stay at home without their husbands.

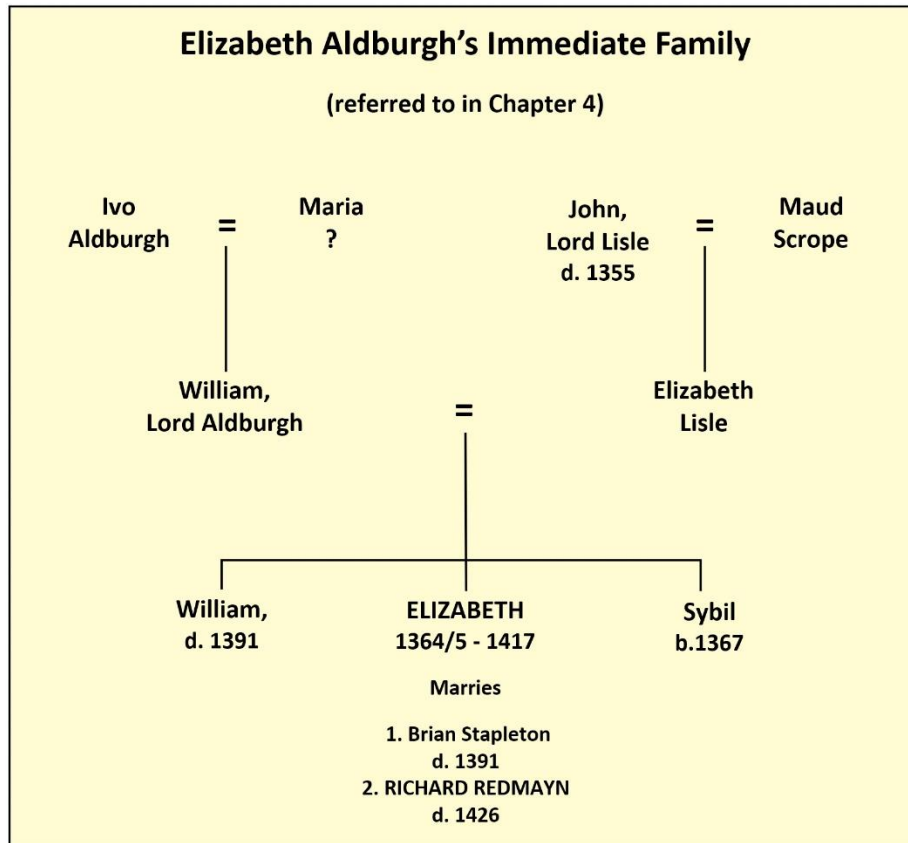
Christine de Pizan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies* c.1405

In this chapter about Elizabeth, I want to echo the questions I asked about Richard Redmayn – what were the early experiences, influences and ideals that shaped her thinking? Answering this for Elizabeth is, however, even more conjectural because there's far less information about her than about Richard. Elizabeth isn't mentioned in any surviving records until she's 28 in 1392 and even after that there are still only snippets of information about her. We know a good deal about the men in the Aldburgh family and in her first husband's family – the Stapletons – but that relative wealth of information creates the danger of falling head-first into the heffalump trap of thinking I'm telling Elizabeth's story but actually hiding her to the point of invisibility behind her men-folk.

I therefore began my first draft hesitantly until, reading a book that didn't apparently have anything to do with Elizabeth, I stumbled on a coincidence that saw me tear up my draft and start again. That coincidence links Elizabeth and Christine de Pizan, one of the most remarkable women of the Middle Ages – and I hope that this coincidence, Christine herself and her writing have enabled me to put Elizabeth at the forefront of this chapter.

Elizabeth was a very fortunate baby. She was born into a wealthy and influential noble family with strong links to the kings of both England and Scotland. [You can see a simplified family tree which identifies her immediate family and a summary of the ownership of Harewood castle overleaf.] Her mother, also Elizabeth, was a daughter of the Lisle family, who'd long ranked amongst the nobility, and her father, Sir William Aldburgh, joined the peerage when he was summoned to Parliament in 1371 as Baron de Aldburgh. Elizabeth was one of three children in the family who grew to adulthood (there may have been others who died young). The eldest was her brother, William, then came Elizabeth herself, born in 1363 or 1364 and then Sybil who was three years younger.

The precision of their birth dates may be surprising given how little we know about Elizabeth and Sybil but we know when they were born from records created when they inherited the Harewood lands in 1391 from their brother, William. When William died, a formal enquiry known as an Inquisition Post Mortem was carried out to provide proof that the heirs were of adult age. That inquest in 1392 declared that Sybil was 25 and Elizabeth was 28 – hence Elizabeth was born in 1363 or 1364.



Ownership of Harewood Estates and Castle
(referred to in Chapter 4)

Early 1300s	Harewood was one of the estates in the possession of Robert, Lord Lisle. It comprised lands and a timber castle.
1337	Harewood given by Robert Lisle to his son, John Lisle.
1355	John Lisle died. Harewood inherited by his son, Robert Lisle.
1364	Harewood bought from Robert Lisle by William Aldburgh for £1000. William was Robert's brother-in-law.
1366 onwards	Harewood Castle was built.
1388	William Aldburgh died. Harewood inherited by his son, also William.
1391	(Son) William died. Harewood inherited by his sisters, Elizabeth and Sybil Aldburgh.

That, very simply, is the family outline. Now for the task of trying to identify her experiences as a young adult – those we have some knowledge of anyway – and to do that, it's time to reveal that coincidental link between Elizabeth and Christine de Pizan.

The path to that coincidence began when I was reading Charlotte Cooper-Davis's book *Christine de Pizan: Life, Work, Legacy*, purely because I'd kept coming across Christine's name and wanted to know more, especially as she's often described as the first woman to earn her living and support her family through her writing. The first link I noticed between Christine and Elizabeth was that they were born within twelve months of each other in 1363-64 though that's not THE coincidence. It may have put me on the alert but I really wasn't expecting any more similarities, given the considerable differences between the two women's lives.

Elizabeth and Christine not only grew up in different countries but in very different family contexts. Christine was born in Italy, then moved to Paris as a girl when her father, a university teacher and intellectual, was appointed astrologer and adviser to the scholarly King Charles V. Highly educated herself, Christine was 15 when she married Etienne de Castel, one of the King's secretaries and a man whose own education meant that he and Christine were intellectually in tune. Christine later wrote that she could not have chosen a better husband than Etienne.

In contrast, Elizabeth's family members, however intelligent they were, owed their status and fame to military ideals. Her grandfather, John Lord Lisle (about whom I'll say more later) fought in the Battle of Crecy in 1346 alongside Edward III and was one of the original Knights of the Garter and, when Elizabeth married Brian Stapleton, she married into another famed military family. Brian's father, Sir Brian, and uncle, Sir Miles, also fought at Crecy and they too were Garter Knights. Sir Brian senior continued his outstanding career until he was past 70, engaging in diplomacy, holding military commands and maintaining his legendary reputation as a jousting knight.

So Elizabeth and Christine's families were very different but, as I read more, I began to realise that the human experiences of the two women were very similar. They were the same age and by 1390 they'd both been married for at least a decade. Christine had three children. Elizabeth had a son, born before 1384, and perhaps, though the evidence is uncertain, two daughters. However, what I discovered next was the detail that really leapt off the page at me.

In the autumn of 1390, Christine's husband Etienne died during an epidemic. Within six months, Elizabeth's husband Brian was also dead.

From that moment, Christine and Elizabeth were no longer just names on a page. I had an instant sense of the two young women as our fellow human-beings. Two women of the same age, two women with young families, both widowed at roughly the same time, both experiencing grief and bereavement and facing the same questions. How would they cope? What would they do?

Some years later, Christine captured her feelings in these lines:

Alone am I and alone I wish to be,

Alone my gentle love has left me;

Alone am I, without companion or master,

Alone am I, sorrowful and vexed;

Alone am I in anxious weariness;

Alone am I, more lost than any other;

Alone am I, left without a lover.

Was that how Elizabeth felt too? Some cat-sitting moments can be very sad indeed.

If Brian's death wasn't shock enough, Elizabeth suffered two more bereavements in 1391 when her brother William and his wife Margery died, both still in their thirties. Chronicles report a serious outbreak of plague in the north so they may have been victims of plague as they died in August and October, the high season for the plague known to us as the Black Death and to contemporaries as the pestilence. There was a particularly high death-rate in York, just 20 miles from Harewood.

The deaths of William and Margery made Elizabeth and Sybil the heirs to Harewood and therefore changed their lives significantly so I'm very tempted to skip straight on to discussing those changes – but if I do that I'm missing the opportunity to explore why the continuing outbreaks of plague were such a significant part of Elizabeth's experiences and must have shaped her thinking throughout her life (and indeed for Sybil, Richard Redmayn and all their contemporaries). To make only a passing reference to the Black Death would be like writing about my grandparents without discussing how my grandfather's four years on the Western Front had a profound impact on him, my grandmother and their children for the rest of their lives.

Some context on the Black Death to begin with – a combination of bubonic and pneumonic plague, it was unknown before rumours spread of a terrible disease moving across Asia and Europe. It arrived in England in the late summer of 1348, killing around half the population, perhaps as many as three million people, during the next two years. For landowning families like the Redmayns and Aldburghs – with their higher income, better nutrition and stone houses – the death-rate was around 1 in 4 but mortality reached 70% amongst poorer villagers and in towns, reflecting over-crowding and poverty amongst those struggling on the fringes of society. This scale of deaths is, to me, incomprehensible, even after our experiences of Covid-19. In Britain, Covid killed approximately 325 people per 100,000 of the population, the Black Death killed 50,000 people per 100,000 – a death toll 150 times greater than from Covid.

The practical and psychological effects of both the death toll and the experiences that survivors lived through must have been profound. Elizabeth was born after the outbreaks in 1348 and 1361 but still had to cope with frequent new outbreaks. She was just 4 when the pestilence returned in 1368-9, about 10 in 1374, 14 or 15 in 1378-9 and 27 in 1391 when her brother and sister-in-law died. There may well have been other outbreaks but it wasn't just the frequency that she had to deal with but the immensity of the death-rate in each outbreak.

Historians estimate the death-rates in 1361, 1368-9 and 1374-5 at between 10 and 15% of the population on each occasion. This was a much lower death-rate than in 1348-50 but still devastating. Each of these later outbreaks still had a death rate between 37 and 50 times greater than Covid and Elizabeth, her family, friends and everyone else had to cope with the mental impact of these terrifying experiences. This is not something we have much evidence of – certainly not about individual families – but, in the wake of Covid-19, we have some understanding of the mental exhaustion that must have accompanied repeated outbreaks, each one prompting the same wearying questions:

Are the reports of new cases likely to be true? How long will it be before it reaches us?

Can we do anything to reduce its impact? How bad will this outbreak be?

X is ill – is it the pestilence? Who will fall sick next?

Is it really fading out? Has it finally come to an end?

Each wave of plague must have had a significant impact on people's mental health. In the wake of the deaths of her husband, brother and sister-in-law, whether or not they died of the pestilence, Elizabeth may have experienced symptoms typical of many people experiencing disasters – a rush of adrenalin, then fatigue, anxiety about her own and others' health. What we call PTSD was also a possibility because each outbreak summoned up the sights, sounds, smells and fears of past experiences – the tolling of church bells, bodies being taken for burial, anxious faces discussing new cases – all triggering flashbacks and sleeplessness, just as my PTSD, the product of multiple extreme surgical experiences forty years ago, was re-awakened by images of patients in intensive care during the Covid pandemic.

Stress may also have been created by dealing with other people's reactions to the pestilence, reactions on a continuum from total despair to an apparently carefree ignoring of reality. Elizabeth and her sister, Sybil, would have been somewhere on that continuum, hopefully not too far apart, anxious about how to protect their children and vulnerable to the extremes of other people's responses. We don't know, of course, how Elizabeth was affected but it seems very likely that her multiple experiences of the pestilence lay deep in her memory and affected her thinking throughout her life, formative experiences that she could never put behind her.

At the same time, it's important to say that society was certainly not breaking down. There were many examples of people showing great resilience in dealing with the pestilence. To take just a few examples from society in general – people took care of the sick and dying and the orphaned

children, bodies were buried with respect in organised rows within mass graves, people prayed and went on pilgrimages (the logical response given their belief that God had sent the pestilence as punishment for sins), local administration and courts continued, new officials were appointed, records still kept. In York, Elizabeth would have seen the council striving to create a cleaner, healthier environment by, for example, clearing streets of dung and obstructions, building public toilets, paving streets with stone and cobbles, passing regulations to stop butchers' waste being hurled into the rivers.

These examples of personal and social resilience encourage me to think that Elizabeth was able to shoulder her new responsibilities after the deaths of her husband and brother – and it's those responsibilities I need to discuss next, along with the influences from her youth that prepared her for dealing with them.

Whatever levels of grief Elizabeth felt after the death of her husband Brian, she immediately faced significant responsibilities. His will has not survived but Elizabeth may have acted as her husband's executor, as did other women of her status. This included supervising the arrangements for his funeral, the distribution of alms to the poor, to churches and to other individuals, arranging the transporting of his body for burial and perhaps commissioning a monument to mark his burial place. She also had to ensure that the anniversaries of Sir Brian's death (perhaps a service or commemorative meal on the eight day after his burial but definitely his 'month's mind' and 'year's mind') were marked and needed to resolve her financial settlement as Brian's widow. Stapleton household officials and her energetic father-in-law may have taken over or been involved in some or all of these responsibilities but, even so, Elizabeth would still have been emotionally involved.

Elizabeth also had to deal with the long-term implications of the deaths of her husband and her brother. Their deaths changed her life significantly because she now became an independent and wealthy woman. As a widow, she held her jointure, the share of the Stapleton lands that her husband had left her for her lifetime, and from her brother she'd inherited half the Harewood estates, the other half going to her sister Sybil. In addition to holding this property in her own right, Elizabeth could make contracts in her own name and plead in the courts, run her estates and make her own choices about her future, including the deeply personal question of whether to marry again.

How might Elizabeth have reacted to her new, very different situation? Much depended on the influences and ideals that had shaped her thinking as she grew up, especially what she'd learned from her mother Elizabeth and grandmother Maud, whose situations had mirrored the quotation that opened this chapter from Christine de Pizan's *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*:

Because barons ... knights and squires and gentlemen travel and go off to the wars, their wives should be wise and sound administrators and manage their affairs well, because most of the time they stay at home without their husbands.

If Elizabeth's mother and grandmother lived up to Christine de Pizan's expectations then Elizabeth would have learned by example to follow in their footsteps as a 'wise and sound' administrator. She

likely also spent time in the Stapleton household prior to her marriage, getting to know the roles women played there. As historian Dr Rowena Archer explained:

[For women] Probably the most important single preparation for the future was the expertise acquired through parental example and by simply being, in early life, in the midst of routine estate management. The hurly-burly of such a life surely taught its own invaluable and enduring lessons [whose purpose was] Expanding and defending the mutual interests of the couple, contributing at every level to the preservation of the 'worship' [reputations] of their husbands and sons ... Virtually all women of property could expect to exercise a measure of administrative responsibility wherever and whenever the need arose ... A contemporary supposition [was] that no undertaking that might normally be deemed the responsibility of men should lie outside the purview of wives, sisters or mothers.

It's clear from this that Elizabeth's role in maintaining and enhancing her family's 'good worship', the high regard in which they were held by other gentry and noble families, was very significant.

What did estate management entail? These extracts from *The Treasure of the City of Ladies* introduce just some of the issues Elizabeth learned as a girl, put into practice as Brian Stapleton's wife and then again in her own right after she'd been widowed:

'[Wives] should have all the responsibility of the administration and know how to make use of their revenue ... Every lady of rank (if she is sensible) should know how much her income is and how much the revenue from her land is worth.'

'It is proper for a lady to be thoroughly knowledgeable about the laws, taxes and all things within the jurisdiction of the lordship so that no-one can deceive her. There is nothing dishonourable about making herself familiar with the accounts. She will see them often and wish to know how they are managed ... she will do well to be a very good manager of the estate and know all about the work on the land and at what time and in which season one ought to perform what operations.'

'The lady should get up early in the morning, for in an establishment where the lady usually lies in bed until late it is unlikely that the household will run smoothly.'

All this suggests that Elizabeth needed to engage closely with the day-to-day detail of running her household. Indeed, her life may well have revolved around something very familiar to most of us – lists! Lists of tasks and issues to be discussed with her household staff, lists of things to discuss with her husband, lists of issues to do with her children, probably even lists of lists! Elizabeth's lists may be another cat-sitting moment, especially as it's such everyday activities and universal emotions that bring us closest to people who lived in the past and so help us see them as our fellow human beings.

Contemporary expectations of women therefore meant that Elizabeth was well-placed to manage her household efficiently and independently – but it was hard work. To quote Rowena Archer again:

The challenge which life on a great estate presented is etched upon the evidence. It was tough. It was demanding. It was often lonely. Above all it was endless.

Heavily influenced though she would have been by her female relatives, Elizabeth did not grow up in a women-only vacuum. She would have inherited ideals from the men of her family, ideals that likely influenced her expectations of her husbands, Brian and Richard. The embodiment of these ideals was her grandfather, Sir John Lisle (later Lord Lisle) who I introduced briefly earlier. Lisle was a war hero who first joined Edward III's army with a retinue of six men-at-arms in 1336 when he was 18. (Men-at-arms is a frustratingly general term that includes knights, squires and lower ranks of soldiers who were equipped with good-quality weapons and armour.) John may have kitted out his retinue from income from the manor of Harewood that his father gave him that year. Over the next ten years John fought for the king in Scotland, Brittany and Gascony and by the time he landed in Normandy with the royal army in 1346, he was leading a much larger retinue of 6 knights, 11 esquires and 23 archers. Soldiers clearly had confidence in John Lisle as a leader.

The high point of John's career came that summer near a village called Crecy. Late on 20th August, as rain fell and the light faded, the French army, which had been shadowing the English for days, finally attacked but, in their eagerness, the onrushing French cavalry trampled their own crossbowmen and were then halted by the arrow-storm unleashed by the English archers. Crecy was the God-given victory Edward III had craved in order to vindicate his claim to the crown of France. Edward was hailed as England's greatest king and soldier since King Arthur, and his son, 16-year-old Edward, the Black Prince, became a national hero, as did all those who fought at Crecy, including John Lisle.

John's military skills were underlined when, in 1348, King Edward chose him as one of the founder members of the new military order, the Order of the Garter. There were just 26 Garter Knights, a close-knit, experienced group selected, in the words of historian Richard Barber, as the 'elite commanders of the future ... the men who were going to take forward King Edward's plans for the conquest of France.' John must have been proud to display the Garter insignia, a blue and yellow garter (its design based on a knight's belt) over his armour. Another emblem of John's high standing was a white hood and tunic, embroidered with dancing men in blue costumes and buttoned with large pearls, that he was given by the king at the great tournament at Eltham in 1347. Only five such hoods were made, one for the king, one for the king's great friend, Henry Duke of Lancaster, and three for Garter Knights, one of whom was John Lisle.

However, John Lisle did not have long to savour his fame. He was killed in 1355, at the age of 37, while attacking a town in Gascony. Next day the Black Prince ordered his whole army to pray for John Lisle while the King paid for a thousand masses to be said for John's soul and every Garter Knight paid for another hundred, a symbol of the brotherhood of the Garter Knights.

Elizabeth would have been aware of John Lisle's reputation as she grew up and perhaps saw John's Garter insignia and that hood given him by King Edward. She could hear the masses said for his soul by the six priests of the chantry chapel at Harewood established by John in 1351. There was also a stained glass window containing John's coat of arms in the chancel of the church at Harewood, a reminder of his family's ideals of royal service and military prowess.

Elizabeth's father, Sir William Aldburgh, was also rewarded for his service to Edward III by being summoned to parliament as Baron de Aldburgh but it was his service to a different king that had a lasting impact on Elizabeth and Sybil. That other king was Edward Balliol, King of Scotland, though he was king only for brief periods in the 1330s when Edward III's army was available to support his hold on his crown. Sir William's father had been given lands in Galloway by Balliol in return for his service and then William became Balliol's household esquire, adviser and friend. Balliol also gave William land in return for an annual payment of 'a rose in the season of roses, if asked for'. William's relationship with Balliol continued, even after Balliol resigned his rights to the Scottish crown to Edward III in 1356. Balliol (then in his 70s) retired to estates near Doncaster, just 35 miles from Harewood and William continued visit him there. (I can't quite reconcile myself to Doncaster as a playground for retired monarchs but that's what happened!)

The strength of this Balliol-Aldburgh link was very visible to Elizabeth at Harewood Castle. The coats of arms of both families were carved on the entrance tower of the castle, sewn on decorated tapestries and appeared on a book the family owned in 1391, nearly thirty years after Balliol's death. In 1393 Elizabeth and Sybil paid for daily masses to be said at Beauvale Priory for the souls of their father, mother and brother – and for Edward Balliol. Balliol, it seems, was almost one of the Aldburgh family.

Why was Balliol so important to the Aldburghs? The likely answer is that Balliol's wealth made a substantial contribution to the building of the Aldburghs' new home, Harewood castle. Balliol died (aged over 80) in 1364, the year that William Aldburgh and his wife Elizabeth Lisle paid £1000 to Elizabeth's brother for the Harewood estate. Shortly afterwards, William began building the castle but where did the money come from for this new castle? Balliol, who had no children, may well have left William enough money to make a major contribution to building the castle or to up-grading the original plans. If so, the prominence of the Balliol coat of arms at the castle makes complete sense.

In this chapter I've tried to explore the early experiences, influences and ideals that shaped Elizabeth's thinking. It seems highly likely that her upbringing left her well-placed to manage her household efficiently in her husbands' absences and as a widow and heiress. She may well have developed the capacity to take decisions independently and confidently.

Growing up surrounded by ideals of royal service and military prowess she was also fully aware of the rewards that came from close connections with the crown and leading noblemen – and so had much in common with Richard Redmayn. Their families' status and the projection of that status also mattered to both Elizabeth and Richard, reflected in the creation of both the grand new Harewood castle and the huge new deer park at Levens.

This chapter about Elizabeth and the previous chapter about Richard have begun to give me a sense of them as individual people. My aim for the next chapter is to explore their individuality, their characters and personalities further, beginning with that most human of questions – what did they look like?

How do I know?

Notes on my sources and reading for Chapter 4

In addition to the biographies listed for Chapter 2 and the Calendars of Patent and Close Rolls etc listed for Chapter 3 I found the following most helpful.

I was introduced to Christine de Pizan and her work by:

Charlotte Cooper-Davis, *Christine de Pizan, Life, Work, Legacy*, 2021

Charity C Willard, *Christine de Pizan, Her Life and Works*, 1984

From her writings I chiefly used:

Christine de Pizan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, Penguin edition, 1985

For historians' views on the nature of household management I used

Rowena Archer, 'How ladies ... who live on their manors ought to manage their households and estates': Women as Landholders and Administrators in the Later Middle Ages in P J P Goldberg (ed), *Woman is a Worthy Wight, Women in English Society c1200-1500*, 1992.

Jennifer C Ward, *English Noblewomen in the Later Middle Ages*, 1992

The details of the Inquisitions Post Mortem which followed the deaths of William and Margery Aldburgh in 1391 can be found in entries 1077 – 1079 at

<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/inquis-post-mortem/vol16/pp433-455>

There are many books on Edward III, the Hundred Years War and Crecy. My core reference for this chapter was the brilliant book in the Yale English Monarchs series:

W. M Ormrod, *Edward III*, 2013

and also

Richard Barber, *Edward III and the Triumph of England*, 2013.

For Edward Balliol and his connections with the Aldburghs I used:

The Dictionary of National Biography entry for Balliol

An unpublished thesis – Amanda Beam, *The Political Ambitions and influences of the Balliol Dynasty, c1210-1364*, (Stirling, 2005)

Ed Dennison and Shaun Richardson, *Harewood Castle: Archaeological and Architectural Survey and Recording*, 2012. Available online at:

<https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/library/browse/issue.xhtml?recordId=1118838&recordType=GreyLitSeries>

The will of Margery Aldburgh from 1391 which contains details of tapestries and books showing the arms of the two families. This will was published in *Testamenta Eboracensia part 1, Surtees Society, 1836, page 149*, available online at:

<https://archive.org/details/testamentaeborac01york/mode/2up>

For the Black Death my first port of call was

Christopher Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain 850-1520*, 2002

The discussion of the possible effects of the Black Death on mental health is based on the work of Professor Lucy Easthope of Durham University, an expert in disaster management:

Lucy Easthope, *When the Dust Settles: searching for Hope after Disaster*, 2022

Lucy Easthope et al, (eds), *When This Is Over: Reflections on an Unequal Pandemic*, 2023