

The Tudor dwarf princess

At the Prime Minister's country residence at Chequers, scribbles on the walls of the 12-foot prison room bear testimony to the dreary misery of the woman Elizabeth I had kept there: an heir to the throne, a potential English queen, now buried in obscurity.

If Lady Mary Grey is recalled today, it is as a historical footnote. She was the dwarf who married a giant, the curious youngest sister of the famous nine days queen Lady Jane Grey. But Mary was a more significant figure than her stature in the literature suggests. And my discovery of lost manuscripts has helped me lay to rest a Tudor mystery.

I am the historian Leanda de Lisle, uncovering the Tudors and Stuarts behind the myths

For centuries, no one has known what Queen Elizabeth did with poor Mary Grey's body, but the lost manuscripts have revealed where this remarkable woman was laid to rest.

When Elizabeth became Queen in 1558, Mary Grey followed her sister Katherine, the second of three Grey girls, in line to the throne. This is not, of course, how history remembers it. Mary, Queen of Scots is the cousin we recall as Elizabeth's heir. But Henry VIII had excluded the Stuart line of his elder sister Margaret from the succession and in their stead placed the heirs of his younger sister, Mary Tudor, Duchess of Suffolk — grandmother of the Greys.

If Henry's will, backed by statute, had not existed, Mary, Queen of Scots would have had the superior right to Elizabeth. As the illegitimate daughter of Henry's annulled marriage to Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth had no claim under the tradition of primogeniture. To accept Elizabeth's right is to accept Katherine and Mary's rights in line of succession. But contrary to the myth of Elizabeth as the great goddess of

English Protestant nationalism, as a young Queen she preferred the claim of the Catholic, foreign, Queen of Scots to that of the Protestant, English, Grey girls.

The Stuart claim represented divine right over the power of parliament, and Elizabeth also perceived the Greys as posing a greater threat to herself. In particular, she feared that if Katherine or Mary Grey married and had sons while she did not, her own Protestant supporters would overthrow her in their favour. Indeed, they had form in this regard. Five years earlier, in 1553, King Henry's son, the Protestant Edward VI, had cut his half-sisters, Mary and Elizabeth, out of his will, and bequeathed his throne to Mary's eldest sister, Lady Jane Grey. Other Protestants had backed his decision, principally because Mary Tudor was a Catholic, but also because the Tudor sisters were unmarried, while Jane had a husband. Jane was overthrown by Mary Tudor, nine days after she was proclaimed queen publicly in London, and the following year she was executed. But Elizabeth was determined to ensure the remaining Greys never married. And in this she proved entirely unsuccessful.

Pretty, blonde Katherine married secretly in 1560 Edward Seymour, Earl of Hertford, son of the late Protector Somerset, and a descendent of Edward III. This perfectly matched royal couple proceeded to have sex wherever they could, several times a night, 'sometimes on the one side of the bed, sometimes on the other'. Elizabeth learnt what had happened only when Katherine was eight months pregnant.

Preventing Katherine from continuing to sleep with her husband and producing sons proved impossible even when she was confined in the Tower — where sympathetic warders allowed some corridor creeping. But Elizabeth had her two children bastardised, and from 1563 Katherine was sent to remote country house prisons, never to see her husband again.

Enter the 19-year-old Lady Mary Grey. Described by the Spanish ambassador as 'crook-backed and very ugly', Mary was so small it has been conjectured she was a dwarf. It is more likely she suffered scoliosis, inherited through her Plantagenet blood. In 1565 she was in love with Thomas Keyes, the gigantic sergeant porter in

charge of palace security. In marrying a commoner, as she did in a candlelit room at Whitehall palace, she effectively (if not legally) ruled herself out of the succession. She may have hoped that the Queen would therefore forgive her actions. But when the news emerged in August such hopes proved misplaced.

‘Here is an unhappy chance and monstrous,’ declared Mary’s kinsman, William Cecil, of the union between the ‘least of all the court’ and its ‘biggest gentleman’. It was fully expected the couple would be, ‘punished, as it may give such terror to all her Majesty’s subjects’. First, however, they were interrogated by the Privy Council. The records of their interviews are still extant. This is Mary: asked when the marriage took place, she answers,

‘The day of the marriage of Mr Knollys [this was queen elizaneth’s cousin and she and most of the court had attended the wedding]– I was married about nine o’clock at night by candle-light.’ Mary continues.

‘Where?’

‘In the Sergeant-Porter’s chamber’

‘Who was present?’

‘The Sergeant’s brother, the Sergeant’s son, a gentlewoman, Mrs Goldwell, and the priest, appalled in a short gown.’

‘What was he like?’

‘He was old and fat and of low stature’

‘Did the Sergeant-Porter give you anything?’

‘Yes, a ring’

Various other love tokens that Keyes had given Mary in the course of their courtship were also mentioned: two little rings, a further ring with four rubies, a diamond with a chain, a little hanging bottle of mother of pearl.

Elizabeth ordered that the Sergeant Porter remain in the Fleet prison, while Mary was sent to a series of country house prisons.

The first was Chequers, where she was kept in a room on the north-east corner with two windows to gaze out of at the sky. Graffiti of a winged creature marks the walls, where her letters, begging Elizabeth for freedom, are framed.

The gigantic Keyes was even worse off, living in agony in a cramped cell until he was released, a broken man, in 1570. He asked to retire with Mary to Kent, but this was refused. He died the following year. Mary took the news 'grievously'. She was painted that autumn defiantly showing off the wedding ring that had cost her her freedom, and with carnations and gillyflowers in her hair for love, fidelity and memory. But while Katherine had died in despair in 1568, Mary survived to be freed in 1573.

Mary Grey left her last gaoler with little more than 'her books and rubbish' (as he reported). But eventually she set up her own small household in Aldersgate. She even appeared at court, where she must have been in danger of resembling a bumblebee in her brilliant yellow kirtle and black gowns. Mary, Queen of Scots, meanwhile, had been imprisoned in England since shortly after Katherine's death. She now posed the principle danger to Elizabeth. But following her execution in 1587 Elizabeth protected the interests of her son, James VI of Scotland. These efforts helped ensure his accession in 1603. The legal bars were lifted retrospectively in 1604.

The last of the Grey sisters, now conveniently forgotten, was, by then, long dead. We don't know what Mary died of on 20 April 1578, only that she requested that the Queen have her buried where she thought 'most fit'. No one knew where that was until I discovered her funeral details had been miscatalogued at the College of Arms as those of an insignificant daughter of the Earl of Kent.

The manuscripts reveal that the funeral took place on 14 May, with Mary's body brought in procession to Westminster Abbey. The heralds had done great banners of arms and a dozen poor women, dressed in black, led the procession. There were four

pallbearers for the tiny coffin on its chariot, and behind it the mourners. The names of those who attended the funeral are a roll call of figures from the lives of the sisters. There is Mistress Tilney — Elizabeth Tilney had escorted the teenage Jane Grey to the scaffold. There is Sir Owen Hopton, Katherine's last gaoler, with whom she left her dying pleas to Elizabeth to be merciful to her children. There is also the friend who had eavesdropped on Mary's wedding through a door, too frightened to attend the forbidden marriage.

Mary Grey was buried in the tomb of her mother Frances, Duchess of Suffolk, at Westminster Abbey, without her own name inscribed on it. But there she lies still, surrounded by the kings from whom she was descended and the queens whose rivals the sisters once were.

You can learn more about Mary, Katherine and Lady Jane Grey in *The Sisters Who Would be Queen*, and in Leanda's biography of the dynasty Tudor, *The Family Story*. You are also welcome to contact her via my website, facebook or twitter