England's Forgotten Queen: THE FAKING OF LADY JANE GREY

The teenage Queen, Lady Jane Grey has been mythologised, even fetishised, as the innocent victim of adult ambition. The legend was encapsulated by the French Romantic artist Paul Delaroche in his 1833 historical portrait of Jane in white on the scaffold, an image with all the erotic overtones of a virgin sacrifice. But the legend also inspired a fraud: One that has fooled historians, art experts, and biographers, for over a hundred years.

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

A sixteenth century merchant gave us what was believed, until I discovered the truth, to be the only detailed, contemporary, description of Jane's appearance. In a letter, he wrote an eyewitness account of a smiling, red haired girl, being processed to the Tower as Queen, on July 10th 1553. He was close enough to see that she was so small she had to wear stacked shoes or 'chopines' to give her height. Jane was overthrown nine days later, and, eventually, executed in the Tower from where she had reigned. But while the tragedy of her brutal death, at only sixteen, is real, the letter is an invention that obscures the significance of her reign.

The faked letter first made its appearance in Richard Patrick Boyle Davey's 1909 biography 'The Nine Days Queen, Lady Jane Grey & her Times'. Davey's subject was already a popular one. The Victorians had lapped up the poignant tale of a child woman forced to be Queen, and despite this, later executed as a usurper. The letter, 'discovered' by Davey in the archives of Genoa, seemingly brought this tragic heroine to life. But in retrospect that should have sent alarm bells ringing, for the Jane the Victorians knew was already heavily fictionalised.

The historical Jane was a great grandchild of Henry VII. Highly intelligent and given a top flight Protestant education, she might have made a Queen consort to her fiercely Protestant cousin Edward VI, as her father hoped. But instead, on July 6th 1553, the dying Edward bequeathed her the throne, in place of his Catholic half sister, Mary Tudor. Thirteen days later Mary overthrew Jane, and she was duly tried for treason, found guilty and condemned.

Mary indicated she wished to pardon Jane. But Jane was executed, nevertheless, the following year. It was the aftermath to a rebellion in which she had played no part (although her father had). Why then did Mary sign Jane's death warrant? The reason was indicated the day before Jane's beheading. The Bishop of Winchester, Stephan Gardiner, reminded Mary it was leading Protestants who had opposed her rule in July 1553, and in the recent rebellion. Jane, who had condemned Catholicism as Queen, had continued to do so as a prisoner in the Tower. As such she posed a threat. It was for her religious stance that Jane would die, not solely for her father's actions, or her reign as a usurper.

Aware that the Protestant cause would be damaged by its link to treason, Jane reminded people from the scaffold that while in law she was a traitor, she had merely accepted the throne she was offered, and was innocent of having sought it. From this kernal of truth the later image of Jane was spun. Protestant propagandists developed her claims to innocence, ascribing the events of 1553 to the personal ambitions of Jane's father and father in law, rather than religion. Later, under Queen Elizabeth, treason came to be associated with Catholics, not Protestants, and the earlier history was forgotten.

The religious issue of 1553 concluded only in 1701, when it was made illegal for any Catholic to inherit the throne: a law that still stands. But Jane's story continued to develop. Her 'innocence' was associated increasingly with the passivity deemed appropriate in a young girl. The sexual dimension to this is evident in Edward's Young's 1714 poem, The Force of Religion, which invited men to gaze as voyeurs on the pure Jane in her 'private closet'. Jane's mother, Frances, meanwhile, was reinvented as powerful, lustful and bullying: a wicked Queen to Jane's Snow White.

By the nineteenth century Jane's fictionalised life was enormously popular. But there was something still missing from her story: a face. With no contemporary images or descriptions, the public had to be content with Jane as imagined by artists. The most striking work remains Paul Delaroche's portrait, The Execution of Lady Jane Grey, bequeathed to the nation by Lord Cheylesmore in 190. Jane, blindfold, and feeling for the block, represents an apotheosis of female helplessness. Richard Davey seems to have spotted a need for an account of Jane appearance that matches its power. He claimed to have found it in a letter in Genoa, composed by the merchant, 'Sir Baptist Spinola'.

The letter has been quoted in biographies ever since and used to argue the merits of 'lost' portraits of Jane. But I was concerned that Davey was the sole source for this letter. Researching my triple biography, The Sisters Who Would be Queen, I had discovered that Davey had invented evidence that Jane had a nanny and dresser with her in the Tower: characters inspired by earlier novels. I began a long search for the 'Spinola' letter, but never found it in Genoa or in any history predating 1909. And it became clear the letter is a fake that mixes details from contemporary sources, with fiction.

There was a contemporary merchant called Benedict Spinola and a soldier called Baptista Spinola. The description of Jane has echoes of the red-lipped girl in the Delaroche portrait, but resembles also a contemporary description of Mary Tudor, who was 'of low stature…very thin; and her hair reddish.' Jane's mother carries her train in the letter, as was observed in 1553. The platform shoes or 'chopines' were taken from the Victorian historian Agnes Strickland, quoting Isaac D'Israeli. I can find no earlier source. But they are suggestive of Jane's physical vulnerability: an element in the appeal of the abused child woman that remains so popular (we even find Jane being raped in novels).

The rest of Jane's dress, described by Spinola as a gown of green velvet worn with a white headdress, was in colours traditionally worn by a monarch on the eve of their coronation. But they are also the colours of the illustration, 'Lady Jane Grey in royal robes', published in Ardern Holt's 1882 'Fancy dresses described'. Significantly in Davey's 'The Tower of London', published in 1910, he describes Jane's dress as edged in ermine, as it was in Holt's illustration: a detail overlooked by 'Sir Baptist Spinola'.

Davey's lies and the repetition of old myths are damaging. Because Jane's reign was treated for so long as the product of the ambitions of a few men, or of Edward VI's naïve hopes, it is regarded as a brief hiatus, of no consequence. But it is key to understanding the development of our constitutional history. And we have overlooked something else. The Tudor unease with women who hold power has never really gone away. In legend Jane is the good girl: weak and feminine; Frances is a bad woman: powerful and mannish. This is the lesson of the myths - one that historians have too willingly accepted.

You can learn more about Lady Jane Grey in The Sisters Who Wold be Queen: the Tragedy of Mary, Katherine and Lady Jane Jane, or in my biography of the dynasty Tudor, The Family Story. You are also welcome to contact me via my website, facebook or twitter