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The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn

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Peter Marshall (b. 1964)

The reader coming to this volume expecting a major new biography of Henry VIII's second and most interesting queen is likely to be disappointed. Though there is no hint of this on the book's dust jacket or copyright page, or even, it must be said, in the author's own Preface, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn* is actually a second edition of Eric Ives's magisterial *Anne Boleyn*, issued by the same publisher on the 450th anniversary of Anne's execution in 1986. This is not to say that a second edition is either unjustified or unwelcome (though an academic reader inevitably regrets the conversion of footnotes to endnotes). Scholarly interest in 'Anne of the Thousand Days' has kept up apace over the past two decades. Important contributions include Retha Warnicke's controversial *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn*, George Bernard's provocative reassessment of 'Anne Boleyn's religion' in *Historical Journal*, a lively debate between Bernard and Ives over the motives and mechanics of Anne Boleyn's fall in the *English Historical Review*, 1991?2 (subsequently added to by Greg Walker in *Historical Journal*, 2002), as well as effective synoptic studies of Henry's wives by Antonia Fraser and, more recently, by David Starkey.⁽¹⁾ Ives takes full account of this and other recent scholarship, though it becomes evident that it has not impelled him to make much in the way of retraction or modification to the broad picture he painted in 1986. In particular, he stands by his emphasis on the importance of faction as the motor of Henrician politics. Yet neither, fortunately, is this revised life of Anne a sustained exercise in self-justification. Historiographical controversies are treated very lightly in the text (there are no index entries, for example, to either Warnicke or Bernard ? Ives's most vocal

critics), and with a minimum of fuss in the notes. The tone throughout is in general measured and fair-minded. Nonetheless, it is worth tracking some of the changes Ives has made to his presentation of Anne's life and death with a view to ascertaining how close a book widely hailed as a magisterial account has come to meriting consideration as a definitive one.

The volume under consideration is longer, though not substantially longer, than its predecessor (it has acquired, *inter alia*, an additional eight plates, bringing the total to a generous 64). While the structure of the biography (in four parts, tracing Anne's background and courtship; installation as Henry's consort; reign as queen; overthrow and execution) is essentially as before, there is a noticeable sequence of minor repackagings. A new chapter 6 offers an expanded account of Henry's courtship, and the original chapter on 'the turning point' of 1532 is split into two to sharpen the focus on 'Wedding nerves' of various kinds. Other structural changes seem designed to make yet more explicit a major theme of the treatment – Anne's agency and political significance in her own right. (In the Preface, Ives effuses that 'Anne deserves to be a feminist icon, a woman in a society which was, above all else, male-dominated, who broke through the glass ceiling by sheer character and initiative' (p. xv).) Thus the original part 3, 'A royal marriage', becomes 'Anne the Queen', while a 1986 chapter on 'Art, image and taste' becomes two distinct discussions of 'Image' and 'Art and taste'. The latter of these draws heavily on a source not available in the 1980s, David Starkey's edition of *The Inventory of Henry VIII*, to reveal the impressive quantities of gold and silver plate and other artistic valuables associated with Anne's queenship.⁽²⁾ Ives also makes effective use of recent art-historical scholarship by Susan Foister and others to link the occasion commemorated by Holbein's double portrait *The Ambassadors* with preparations for Anne's coronation, and a possible private message for her from the French envoy George de Selve, bishop of Latour.⁽³⁾ Iconographic references to Anne's new status, and to her reformist sympathies, are also identified in the painting itself. Whereas the 1986 composite chapter concluded (p. 301) that Anne Boleyn must be allowed 'a small place in the cultural story of sixteenth-century England', Ives here (p. 245) more confidently assigns her 'a respectable and perhaps distinctive place'. The claim is underlined by an entirely new chapter on 'Life at Court', which draws on Simon Thurley's work on Henrician royal palaces, as well as on the evidence of the inventories to create an effective evocation of the material culture surrounding Anne's life as queen.⁽⁴⁾ The single 1986 chapter on Anne Boleyn's religious attitudes and significance is here split into two, with a second focused on 'Personal religion'. These broadly restate the position which Ives, following the pioneering work of Maria Dowling, staked out in the earlier book, namely that in a period of religious flux and confessional indeterminacy, Anne is most usefully described as an 'evangelical' in religion.⁽⁵⁾ Interestingly, Ives goes further than Dowling in stressing Anne's principled determination to keep at arm's length the purveyors of radical views on the eucharist. This conforms with the recent intuition of another Birmingham historian, Alec Ryrie, that orthodoxy about the real presence was entirely characteristic of Henrician evangelicalism in its first phase.⁽⁶⁾ Curiously, Ives makes no direct engagement in these chapters with George Bernard's ingenious thesis that Anne's religious outlook was essentially conventional and traditionalist, but having entered the lists over this issue in *Historical Journal* (1994), he may have seen no need to refight the battle.⁽⁷⁾ In fact, throughout the first three sections of the book, Ives is concerned mainly to fill out his earlier picture, and to fine tune particular points of chronology or detail. Thus he accepts, for example, Tom Freeman's argument that Anne was able to promote to Henry works both by William Tyndale and Simon Fish, something of which he had earlier been sceptical.⁽⁸⁾ But at the same time he courteously but firmly restates his position on such issues as a likely date of *c.*1501 for Anne's birth (making her, *pace* Warnicke, a mature woman at the time of her blossoming relationship with Henry), or on a 1526 dating for the beginnings of Henry's pursuit of her, against Starkey's attempt to push it back a year and therefore make Anne more of a catalyst in the decision to initiate the divorce.

There is much more substantial rewriting, and a noticeably more combative tone in part 4, 'A marriage destroyed'. Ives has no truck with the theory around which Retha Warnicke built her 1989 study, namely that a deformed foetus resulting from Anne's miscarriage in January 1536 was the root cause of Anne's downfall, the sixteenth-century belief that infant deformity reflected the sins of the parents requiring accusations of multiple adulteries to protect Henry from any possible suspicion. This, remarks Ives, 'would not merit a moment's consideration apart from a mountain of fantasy that has been built upon it' (p. 297).

Why, he asks reasonably enough, was the putative deformity canvassed in later recusant circles apparently never mentioned before, during or after Anne's trial? Ives is equally dismissive of Warnicke's claims that Henry seriously believed himself to be the victim of witchcraft, or that George Boleyn's homosexuality was a factor in his fate ('a fiction for which there is not a scintilla of evidence' (p. 332)). Nor does Ives endorse the theory that Henry was already tiring of Anne at the time she failed to give birth to a live son. Rather, he detects the repetition of a pattern from the Aragon match: the psychological blow of failing to receive a male heir convincing him that God did not accept his marriage. Ultimately, however, in Ives's reading it is not Henry himself but Thomas Cromwell who is most clearly instrumental in the dramatic fall of the queen: the 'factional' interpretation of these events is emphatically restated. The narrative here is dense and complex, though Ives does as good a job as one could wish of guiding the reader through the evidential thickets. The argument takes account of important new evidence coming to light since the 1980s. In particular, Ives is able to work into his interpretative framework the sermon known to have been preached on Passion Sunday 1536 by Anne's almoner, John Skip. This constituted a thinly veiled attack on Cromwell's policy towards the smaller monasteries, implicitly comparing Henry to the Old Testament King Ahasuerus, Cromwell to his wicked adviser Haman, and Anne to his godly Queen Esther. In 1986, Ives regarded disagreements over the wisdom of a *rapprochement* with the emperor as the main issue dividing the erstwhile allies; he now identifies Anne's opposition to the secularisation of the proceeds of the dissolution as the key factor, while 'Cromwell's estrangement from Anne Boleyn was exacerbated by problems in foreign policy' (p. 312). A more intense scrutiny of the timing and manner of the action against Anne and her five alleged 'lovers' also allows Ives to be more emphatic than he had earlier permitted himself to be on the question of Anne's innocence, directly responding to Bernard's claim that the queen and at least some of her co-defendants were in fact guilty of the charges brought against them. In 1986, the accusations in the indictment seemed implausible; Ives now asserts that 'even after nearly 500 years, three-quarters of these specific allegations can be disproved' (p. 344). There is also the question of the 'dog that did not bark', the inherent unlikelihood of the queen having been able to commit any adulteries at all without the collusion of at least several of her ladies in waiting, something which was never alleged at the time. Ives concedes that Anne's behaviour with male courtiers was unguarded, sailing close to, and at times beyond, the conventional limits of courtly and chivalric play. But he rejects too Greg Walker's argument that this in itself was enough to bring down Henry's murderous wrath. At the start of 1536, Henry still had very considerable diplomatic and dynastic investment in the Boleyn marriage, and it took a conspiracy to bring matters to a head.

After all of this, the reader attempting to follow the extraordinary happenings of spring 1536 without the microscopic knowledge of the sources enjoyed by Ives and his various critics is likely still to be left with a sense of wonderment. The staggering audacity of Cromwell's plan, the almost unbelievably egregious self-serving self-delusion practised by the king, the moral complacency of an entire political system, can all be hard to take in. It is not meant as a disparagement to say that Ives has given us the least unlikely account of these events. He has also given us a fully rounded and persuasive account of Anne's life as a whole, and its significance for understanding the politics and political culture of the early Tudor decades. At the conclusion of his chapter on 'Sources', Ives ruefully notes that 'the sources for the life of Anne Boleyn stop short of that level of inner documentation which biography ideally requires' (p. 61). If this is so, it must surely be true, *mutatis mutandis*, for any man or woman of the sixteenth century. Yet Ives demonstrates triumphantly the potential of the biographical approach in a pre-modern setting. He evinces a deep empathy for his subject without ever becoming an apologist for her, and, particularly in the final sections, he provides a narrative which is genuinely moving without ever becoming mawkish. No biography is ever truly definitive, and future scholarship will no doubt require a different reading of Anne Boleyn's life and death. But, half a generation on from its first appearance, Ives has given his version a new lease of life, and it seems unlikely to be supplanted any time soon.

Notes

1. R. Warnicke, *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn* (Cambridge, 1989); G. Bernard, 'Anne Boleyn's religion?', *Historical Journal*, 36.1 (1993), 1-20; G. Bernard, 'The fall of Anne Boleyn?', *English Historical Review*, 106.420 (1991), 584-610; E. Ives, 'The fall of Anne Boleyn reconsidered?', *English Historical Review*

- , 107.424 (1992), 651-64; G. Bernard, 'The fall of Anne Boleyn: a rejoinder?', *English Historical Review*, 107.424 (1992), 665-74; G. Walker, 'Rethinking the fall of Anne Boleyn?', *Historical Journal*, 45.1 (2002), 1-29; A. Fraser, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (1993); D. Starkey, *Six Wives: the Queens of Henry VIII* (2003).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *The Inventory of Henry VIII: Society of Antiquaries MS 129 and British Library MS Harley 1419*, ed. D. Starkey, and transcribed by P. Ward (1998).[Back to \(2\)](#)
 3. S. Foister, A. Roy and M. Wyld, *Holbein's Ambassadors* (1997).[Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. S. Thurley, *The Royal Palaces of England* (New Haven, 1993).[Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. M. Dowling, 'Anne Boleyn and Reform', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 35 (1984), 30-46.[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. A. Rylie, *The Gospel and Henry VIII. Evangelicals in the Early Reformation* (Cambridge, 2003).[Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. E. Ives, 'Anne Boleyn and the early Reformation in England: the contemporary evidence', *Historical Journal*, 37.2 (1994), 389-408.[Back to \(7\)](#)
 8. T. S. Freeman, 'Research, Rumour and Propaganda: Anne Boleyn in Foxe's "Book of Martyrs"', *Historical Journal*, 38 (1995).[Back to \(8\)](#)

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