

# **A Talk with Julia Fox about JANE BOLEYN: *The True Story of the Infamous Lady Rochford***

## ***What initially drew you to Jane Boleyn as the subject of a biography?***

It was a sheer fluke that I stumbled on to Jane Boleyn. Originally I intended to write about Anne Boleyn, possibly linking her with Catherine Howard since Henry VIII executed both of them. Then I realized that Jane was not only at their side throughout their triumphs and disasters but was a totally neglected figure in her own right. Once I started to research Jane, I became really excited to see what an amazing life she had led.

## ***Jane's historical reputation is a dark one, to put it mildly. Many historians believe she perjured herself in order to help send her husband, George, and his sister, Queen Anne, to their deaths on charges of treason and incest, and later assisted Queen Catherine in conducting an adulterous affair. Has Jane gotten a bum rap from history, and if so, why? Did you set out consciously to rehabilitate her?***

When I decided to concentrate on Jane, I was pretty sure that there was no real evidence to support the myths about her. It all seemed to hinge on motivation. I couldn't see why she'd give false testimony against her own husband or why she'd encourage Catherine Howard's sexual misdemeanor. If she testified against George and Anne, she knew she'd lose financially, and if she'd pushed Catherine Howard into an affair she'd have known she risked her own head too. It didn't make sense, and so I wanted to delve more deeply and see just what proof could be found that this woman really deserved her infamous reputation. What I found showed that yes, she did get a bum deal from history. Once Anne Boleyn's daughter, Elizabeth I, was queen, an explanation was needed for why Henry VIII had sent Anne to her death for treason and incest. Just as Elizabeth's mother, herself a Protestant icon by then, must have been innocent of the charges, the queen's father, it was thought, would not have ordered Anne's execution unless he had believed her guilty. Conveniently ignoring Henry's passion for Jane Seymour, it was easy to suggest that the king had been told lies. And the person who had told the lies, it was alleged, was Jane. Executed for alleged treason, and with no one to speak for her, she was the perfect scapegoat. Yet I found that if you looked at it with a fresh and unprejudiced eye, the evidence didn't stack up against Jane. You could even track how the myths developed. Once I knew that, I wanted to tell her story and stick up for her—it was about time that someone did.

## ***How did you go about uncovering new and overlooked material pertaining to Jane's role in the intrigues of Henry's court?***

I began by going over the much-known material with a fresh eye. It's surprising what you can discover if you look at things from a different perspective. Then I moved on to researching some of the people around Jane, like her birth family and the Boleyn relatives. All of this helped put Jane into a wider context. And then I had a great stroke of luck—a chance reference in the archives led me on to discover a totally unknown and ignored copy of Jane's marriage settlement. Once I'd put the information I gleaned from that together with details from the Act of Parliament she obtained later on, I knew just what a task it had been for her to get a decent settlement after George's execution. It's always been said that she was rewarded for perjuring herself at his trial. By finding all about her financial situation, I knew that just wasn't the case. She wasn't rewarded at all. Once I'd taken that fully on board, it helped provide the evidence I needed to start derailing the myths. And then I followed a sixteenth-century paper trail. Like Watergate, you follow the money.

## ***Why do you think that readers remain so fascinated by the figure of Henry VIII and the Tudor period in English history?***

Henry is a larger-than-life figure. What with his sheer physical bulk, his wives, and his excesses, he can't help but insinuate himself into the imagination. And his children are just as colorful: the young boy-king who dies before his sixteenth birthday, the much-wronged daughter, the Catholic fanatic who allows the burnings of over 300 Protestants before she dies knowing that her life's work will be undone when her half-sister, Anne Boleyn's child, takes the throne as Elizabeth I. Throw in the defeat of the Spanish Armada and the plays of Shakespeare and how can anyone fail to be fascinated?

## ***I think it's fair to say that most people's ideas of Henry VIII and the Tudor era have been shaped by popular entertainments. Are there any books or movies that stand out for you as providing a particularly accurate picture of the time?***

I think the point is that one thing tends to lead to another. As a child, I remember long summer holidays in the garden devouring historical novels by Jean Plaidy. They gave me a life-long love of

the period. I then moved on to standard biographies such as Neale's *Queen Elizabeth I* and Prescott's *Mary Tudor*. And then you're well and truly hooked. As for films, *Anne of the Thousand Days* still thrills me, Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, about Thomas More, is a sheer delight. And then, who could forget Charles Laughton's amazing Henry VIII with a deliciously funny Elsa Lanchester as Anne of Cleves? Although Laughton's portrayal of Henry was extreme, some of the lines in that film were taken from original sources.

***What did it mean for a woman like Jane to marry into a powerful and ambitious family like the Boleyns?***

You have to remember that Jane, who was quite a catch in her own right, had no idea when she married George that his sister would ever become a crowned queen. She envisaged a life rather like that of her own mother, running the household, going to court sometimes, bringing up children. That just didn't happen. The Boleyns were a family on the make, and were likely to get more favors from the king, but what happened must have come as just as much of a surprise to her as it did to them. And she fitted in. It was a wife's duty to support her husband, and she did that, but she also came to revel in court life at the center of the action.

***At one point in the book, you use the word "addiction" to describe Jane's penchant for court life, which although exciting and glamorous was also highly dangerous. What do you think accounts for her addiction? Why didn't she simply retire to a life of comfort and privilege in the country following her husband's death? Why return to the vipers' nest of the court?***

Following George's death, she had only £50 a year to live on; that would not have given her anything like what she had been used to. She had no country estate, and she would have been dependent on her father's generosity. The court offered a career. When she became more prosperous, though, she did have a genuine choice. Yet you have to remember that she had been at court for most of her life; she knew it, and she probably thought she understood how it worked, having survived the fall of Anne and George. She certainly didn't think that the time would come when she would become a victim herself. The court offered excitement, gossip, entertainment: it was life on the cutting edge. Retirement to a tranquil estate in the middle of the English countryside could hardly compete with all of that.

***Why didn't Jane remarry after George's execution? Although the wife of a convicted traitor, she was forgiven by the king. And with no children, this well-off widow must have made a tempting prize for ambitious young noblemen.***

I've wondered why she didn't marry again. Immediately after George's execution, she didn't have much to offer a second husband. Love matches did take place occasionally, but most people married for practical reasons like uniting families or for land or money. She had no land and little money, and she was tainted with the Boleyn stigma. Once she received her jointure settlement, she was a much more attractive proposition, but perhaps she didn't want to risk marriage again. She might have succumbed later, but she was executed only three years afterward.

***Can you talk a little bit about the importance of religion in Jane's life and in the life of the court generally at this time?***

Religion underpinned everything. You have to remember the fragility of life in the sixteenth century. Plague could strike at any moment, famine was always just around the corner, infant mortality was high, there were no antibiotics or anesthetics so a simple cut could become infected and kill you, and common complaints like appendicitis could not be dealt with. Religion gave life meaning and purpose. It mattered. But Jane lived at a time of religious change and upheaval, when established practices were questioned and ideas challenged, so there was a sense of excitement and discovery which, depending on your point of view, could either threaten your faith or enlighten it. Jane was caught up in the religious debates because Anne and George Boleyn were so involved with the new concepts.

***Your husband is also a historian of the Tudor period. How involved are the two of you in each other's ongoing projects? Is there ever any friendly rivalry between you?***

We're very much involved with each other's projects. We read history, we think history, and we talk history (sometimes in the middle of the night!). We make suggestions about each other's work, and we read each other's work. We do have interests outside of history, of course, but it is certainly a major factor in our lives. As to rivalry, well, this is my first book, so I hope it does well. A couple of years ago, my husband's biography of Mary, Queen of Scots won the Whitbread (now Costa) Biography Prize and the Marsh Prize in the UK, and he was a finalist in the National Book Critics' Circle Awards in the U.S. I certainly have a challenge on my hands, but it would be great if I could do the same!

***Reading about the young Henry and the man he became is like reading about two entirely different people. Why did the king's personality change so markedly as he grew older?***

I think Henry was just too beautiful when he was young. He became used to adulation and came to think it his due. As he aged, the idealism of youth faded as he was forced to face up to life's disappointments, primarily to his failure to have a male heir for such a long time. Remember that he first married in 1509, and his only legitimate son wasn't born until 1537. He surely waited a long time! And he also faced health problems. His ulcerated legs must have been excruciatingly painful; simply moving his huge frame must have been a nightmare for him.

***One thing that surprised me about Henry was his ability to get away with acting like an absolute monarch when in fact, or at least in theory, his powers were constrained by law and custom. Why was Henry able to exercise his will without significant pushback from Parliament and the nobility?***

Sheer physical presence has a part to play. At six feet two inches tall, the king towered over his contemporaries. It was said that the mere sight of Holbein's depiction of him terrified courtiers years after his death! And then who was there to actually stand against him? Parliament's role was not clearly defined; its members were an aid to government, but they did not form the government. Most members simply wanted to run their businesses or country estates while doing their duty to the country; they didn't want to be career politicians. Henry saw them as being there to grant him taxes and to pass whatever laws he wanted. And he could use fear to make sure they did just that: once he went striding into the Parliament Chamber and demanded that anyone who didn't agree with him should stand up and be counted there and then. Needless to say, the law he wanted was passed! As for the nobles, few wanted to risk open opposition or rebellion when the chances of success were so slim and, anyway, the king could be very, very generous. He could offer gifts, lands, titles and honors; equally, he could sign death warrants. He was not above leaving prisoners to rot in prison without trial and literally starve to death, as he did with some of the Carthusians. The most serious rebellion Henry faced was the Pilgrimage of Grace, which broke out as he was busily closing the monasteries, and he dealt with that brutally, hanging the leaders in chains.

***Do you have other histories in the works? Are you going to continue writing about the Tudor period?***

I shall part with Jane with reluctance; she has been part of our lives for over three years. I would like to write again, and the Tudor period will always be my first love, but I want to choose a subject with considerable care since he, she, or it has to fill Jane's shoes for me. And that won't be easy.