

The Sisters Who Would Be Queen: Mary, Katherine, and Lady Jane Grey: A Tudor Tragedy

By Leanda de Lisle

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Mary, Katherine, and Jane Grey—sisters whose mere existence nearly toppled a kingdom and altered a nation’s destiny—are the captivating subjects of Leanda de Lisle’s new book. **The Sisters Who Would Be Queen** breathes fresh life into these three young women, who were victimized in the notoriously vicious Tudor power struggle and whose heirs would otherwise probably be ruling England today.

Born into aristocracy, the Grey sisters were the great-granddaughters of Henry VII, grandnieces to Henry VIII, legitimate successors to the English throne, and rivals to Henry VIII’s daughters, Mary and Elizabeth. Lady Jane, the eldest, was thrust center stage by greedy men and uncompromising religious politics when she briefly succeeded Henry’s son, the young Edward I. Dubbed “the Nine Days Queen” after her short, tragic reign from the Tower of London, Jane has over the centuries earned a special place in the affections of the English people as a “queen with a public heart.” But as de Lisle reveals, Jane was actually more rebel than victim, more leader than pawn, and Mary and Katherine Grey found that they would have to tread carefully in order to avoid sharing their elder sister’s violent fate.

Navigating the politics of the Tudor court after Jane’s death was a precarious challenge. Katherine Grey, who sought to live a stable life, earned the trust of Mary I, only to risk her future with a love marriage that threatened Queen Elizabeth’s throne. Mary Grey, considered too petite and plain to be significant, looked for her own escape from the burden of her royal blood—an impossible task after she followed her heart and also incurred the queen’s envy, fear, and wrath.

Exploding the many myths of Lady Jane Grey’s life, unearthing the details of Katherine’s and Mary’s dramatic stories, and casting new light on Elizabeth’s reign, Leanda de Lisle gives voice and resonance to the lives of the Greys and offers perspective on their place in history and on a time when a royal marriage could gain a woman a kingdom or cost her everything.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Although the Tudor era has inspired a flood of literature, de Lisle (*After Elizabeth*), in her second book, illuminates three remarkable characters of the time, the Grey sisters, who were named by both Henry VIII and his son, Edward, as heirs to the throne. But, says de Lisle, Dynastic politics, religious propaganda, and sexual prejudice have since buried [the sisters] in legend and obscurity. ' De Lisle demonstrates that while Jane, long viewed as helpless, was indeed young and pressed to accept the crown, she was exceptionally intelligent, educated and confident as England's first queen regnant and a passionate Protestant evangelical leader. Under Elizabeth I, Jane's sister Katherine married secretly without the queen's consent and was imprisoned because her pregnancy threatened Elizabeth with the possibility of a legitimate royal heir; after seven years in prison, Katherine died, likely of self-starvation. Mary also married without Elizabeth's consent and was imprisoned for seven years, but was eventually rehabilitated at court only to die of plague at age 33. De Lisle has produced an excellent, assiduously researched account of dynastic politics at its worst, focusing on three fascinating and often overlooked women. Photos.(Oct. 1)

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Review

[Audio Review] While multitudes of books and films focus on King Henry VIII, Queen Elizabeth I, and Mary Stuart, de Lisle's intelligent and well-researched biography of the three Tudor sisters demonstrates that not enough attention has been lavished on these fascinating women. Lush details on the youth, education, social life, and sad fates of Henry's grandnieces and heirs Mary, Katherine, and Jane bring to life a panoramic view of the time, not just the individuals. Wanda McCaddon skillfully weaves her way through the dense prose and mountains of information. Despite a tendency to trill with too much excitement, she renders the three sisters and their era with polish and panache. A Ballantine hardcover (Reviews, June 15). (Oct.) --Publisher's Weekly

[Audio Review] This collective biography explores the lives and fates of three sisters who were drawn into the turbulent politics of the Tudor dynasty. Wanda McCaddon enlivens this detailed account with her energetic narration, sounding as if she herself is intrigued by the descriptions of society in sixteenth-century England. Her brisk pace ensures that the story keeps moving, even as she outlines the particulars of various royal lineages and relationships. This factual narrative hardly calls for a dramatic reading, but McCaddon's tone still manages to convey a sense of regret that each woman had to come to such an unhappy end. Who knows what might have happened if one of them had succeeded as queen? A.E.B. © AudioFile 2010, Portland, Maine --AudioFile

About the Author

Leanda de Lisle is the author of *After Elizabeth*. She was educated at Somerville College, Oxford, where she earned a master of arts degree in modern history. A successful journalist and broadcaster, she has been a columnist for *The Spectator*, *The Guardian*, *Country Life*, and the *Daily Express*, as well as writing for *The Times*, the *Daily Mail*, the *New Statesman*, and *The Sunday Telegraph*. She lives in Leicestershire with her husband and three children.

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Johnny Abel:

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