

**George Bernard**, *Anne Boleyn: Fatal Attractions* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), ISBN: 978-0300162455.

Anne Boleyn has long been considered one of the most fascinating characters to have lived during a period of history which boasts more than its fair share of extraordinary figures. In the six years since the last scholarly biography of Anne Boleyn, many aspects of early sixteenth-century political history have been reassessed, rendering Bernard's biography both timely and necessary. Bernard is well-qualified to write such a book, and has been a key participant in vigorous debate over many aspects of Boleyn's life for the past twenty years. This book represents his definitive laying of cards on the table.

The book covers the many controversial aspects of Boleyn's life in broadly chronological order, covering amongst other things her childhood (pp. 4-10), the beginning of her affair with Henry VIII (pp. 3-36), their divorce (pp. 37-71), Boleyn's religion (pp. 92-124), and her fall (pp. 135-92). Bernard's unfailing source-led approach is his book's great strength. In each chapter he strips away layers of historical debate in order to question the assumptions held by scholars and followers alike. Readers are drawn back to the original source material as seen through Bernard's eye, and such common assumptions as Boleyn's allegedly pro-active role in the king's Great Matter and her purported Lutheran tendencies are reviewed, reassessed, and in most cases, reduced. Without doubt, the last four chapters covering Boleyn's dramatic arrest and execution in May 1536 will stimulate most interest. Bernard has long championed the view that Boleyn's fall was not the result of a factional coup, nor was it caused by Henry tiring of her, nor even her failure to produce a son; rather it came as the result of her probable guilt on several of the five charges of adultery brought against her.

Bernard's command of the evidence is masterly and his argument eminently plausible. The reader is taken through the likely sequence of events, for which the author relies heavily on contemporary and in many cases eyewitness reports, particularly a poem written by Lancelot de Carles, aide to the then French ambassador, Jean de Dinteville (pp. 152-60). Bernard then considers in turn each man accused of committing adultery with Boleyn and using primary evidence, demonstrates why they do not fit convincingly into the popular interpretation of Boleyn's fall (as a political coup masterminded by Thomas Cromwell). None had suffered Cromwell's displeasure and none were significant enough to warrant execution as a means to remove them from office. Neither were they victims of a coherent 'faction' intent on Boleyn's removal, since Bernard amply shows that for us to divide courtly society into such factions is both overly simplistic and anachronistic, a view which chimes with recent work on factionalism during the sixteenth century by scholars such as Simon Adams (2002), Paul Hammer (1995), and Greg Walker (1996). For each man accused, the author questions the long-held assumption of their innocence and, by association, of Boleyn's (pp. 161-82). Though necessarily hampered by the fact that there are no surviving trial records, nor evidence collected in support of the charges, Bernard does an admirable job with the sources that have survived. He concludes that though adultery with her brother George and William Brereton is highly unlikely, the accusations against Francis Weston, Mark Smeaton and Henry Norris are more difficult to dismiss and may in fact have been true. Bernard's own opinion is that Weston was possible, Smeaton probable, and Norris almost certain; and that Boleyn was simply unlucky that these adulteries came to light (p. 192).

Though this book is a gripping read, meticulously researched and invaluable to future scholarship, its very nature somehow leaves an aftertaste of disappointment. In stripping bare so many elements of Boleyn's life as we know it, Bernard concludes that we know less than we think we do and that, by implication, the reality of Anne Boleyn is less exciting than has hitherto been the case. He argues that she did not, in fact, deliberately ensnare Henry VIII but actually refused to sleep with him until he agreed to marry her; she did not mastermind the royal divorce; she did not inspire the break with Rome, and did not play a central role in religion or politics (p. 193). This may not endear the book or its author to Boleyn's many adoring fans. Furthermore, there are some elements of Bernard's analysis which remain sufficiently inconsistent as to plant a seed of doubt regarding the accuracy of his conclusions. There is one traditional aspect of Boleyn to which Bernard adheres, and that is her fiery character, her 'vigorous spirit', so different from the rest of Henry's queens (p. 70). He describes their marriage as 'sunshine and showers' and on several occasions details how Anne, being angry, had not troubled to hide her displeasure and had deliberately antagonised the king (pp. 70-8). Yet he also takes pains to reveal her apparently minimal involvement in policy of any sort and her lack of attempt to influence the king or any of his ministers. For a woman of such mettle and of outspoken nature to sit quietly and allow things to happen around her when they so directly concerned her immediate future, seems unlikely, and suggests that Boleyn's true role in the politics of the sixteenth century remains open to interpretation. This notwithstanding, a book of this nature is absolutely necessary if scholars are to pick up the ball and continue to study Boleyn and others like her with fresh eyes. In seeking to reveal the 'real' Anne Boleyn by rigorously testing existing interpretation against source material, Bernard's biography has, deliberately or otherwise, extended the mystery surrounding this woman and her fate. *Anne Boleyn: Fatal Attractions* might be said to raise

more questions than it answers; but this, more than anything, is what creates a new way forward.

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