The Most Evil Women In History – Bloody Mary Tudor (part1/3)

Bloody Mary 1516 -1558

Mary Tudor was the most hated Queen in British history. During her five-year reign, she threw all England into chaos. Mary beheaded traitors, murdered heretics and had pregnant women burnt to death in the name of her religious fanaticism. The entire nation lived in fear of her.

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"There were nearly 300 burnt in about three and half years in Mary's reign, which was actually more than the Spanish Inquisition and the French Chambre Ardente put together in the same period."

Thousands fled into hiding and the streets of English cities were polluted with the putrid smell of burning flesh. She created such terror that she is known as 'Bloody Mary'.

Mary Tudor was born in Greenwich in 1516. She was the only surviving child of King Henry the Eighth and his first wife, Catherine of Aragon.

"The reaction to Mary's birth is one of happiness but very muted happiness, really. People were not cheered up by the fact that the child that was born and lived was a daughter."

Henry wanted a son to succeed him and Mary's arrival was seen as a second-rate birth. After several miscarriages and five dead children, Mary's mother, Catherine of Aragon went through the menopause. Henry knew that she could never provide him with the male heir he so desperately wanted.

"Henry realised that there would be no son and began asking, "Well, why?" And his answer was, "Well, God doesn't want me to have a son because my marriage is wrong. My marriage doesn't exist."

England was a Catholic country but the Pope would not allow Henry to annul his marriage. Henry broke from Rome and declared himself the supreme head of the new Church of England. In January 1533, after learning that one of his courtiers, Anne Boleyn was pregnant, Henry secretly married her to avoid the risk of having a bastard son. But Anne gave birth to a girl, Mary's stepsister Elizabeth.

Four months later, his Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, declared Henry's marriage to Catherine null and absolutely void, and pronounced his marriage to Anne good and lawful. Mary was 17 years old.

"Therefore, Mary was illegitimate. Suddenly, this child who has been treated like the most special girl around is told that she has to say, from now, she is a bastard."

Like her mother, Mary refused to accept this decree. The bond between mother and daughter became stronger. They were totally dedicated to the traditional form of Catholicism that Henry had abolished.

"Right in the centre of Mary's life was a drama. It's called the Mass. It's a drama of light and colour, and Latin and music and at the heart of it, you make God on a table out of bread and wine. And for Mary, that was absolutely central."

When Catherine's health began to deteriorate, Mary was banished from her room. Catherine died in 1536 without ever seeing her daughter again. Mary finally signed her father's act of succession in the same year but she didn't hide her hatred of Anne Boleyn.

"I think Mary is pushed aside by Anne Boleyn, There's no doubt about that. She would have regarded, as her mother regarded, Anne Boleyn as what the Spanish ambassador always calls Anne Boleyn, which is 'The Whore'."

"She is very obstinate, very difficult. I mean, that comes out very clearly with her conflict with her father and in her relationship with Anne Boleyn. What you see is what you get and pretty rough it is too when she is in that mood."

Now in her early 20s, the constant psychological strain began to takes its toll on Mary's health.

"It is a period of enormous stress for her. I mean, she has menstrual problems anyway, almost from the word 'go' and they get very much worse."

Her disfavour with her father led Mary to live in fear of her life.

"There were rumours in 1534 and 1535 of Mary's execution. The rumours are circulating amongst the ambassadors and amongst Mary's support network at court. Certainly Mary has a profound fear of being poisoned and this fear never really leaves her."

Mary's fragile physical and mental state took a further blow when Henry finally had a final child with his fourth wife, Jane Seymour in 1537.

"Henry the Eighth at last has his longed looked-for male heir and there is tremendous rejoicing at court, and there is tremendous rejoicing all over England as well. Hogsheads of wine were broken open at market crosses and in parish churches. People celebrated, people set off fireworks and bonfires."

With his male heir in place, Henry the Eighth decided to rewrite the succession.

"Obviously, the person who would succeed would be his son but what would happen after that? Well, he did have were these two bastard daughters, Mary and Elizabeth. And so, Henry decided he'd get the succession tidied up in that order: Edward first, then Mary, then Elizabeth."

Henry the Eighth died in 1547 when Mary was 34. Her brother Edward became King at the age of 9 under the protection of Protestant advisors.

"He is a young, healthy, vigorous Prince. But he is also a convinced Protestant. He is a serious Evangelical. He is far, far more Protestant than Henry the Eighth has ever been."

"I think Mary is drastically shocked by the direction that Edwardian religious policy takes. Churches are being whitewashed; statues and stained glass windows were being taken out. Protestant doctrines being officially preached in the Church and the Mass is replaced with a service in English, and it's that that sparks Mary's really conspicuous disobedience to the government of her young brother."

"During Edward's reign, I think she must have felt that this was it. There was no future and there would be no chance that her beloved world, her religion, anything would survive that entire Protestant revolution which Edward was carrying out."

The years of stress and illness had turned Mary into a pale, bitter woman. Her faith became her obsession. On several occasions, Edward sent deputations to persuade Mary to accept his new religion. Sticking to her religious principles, she refused to bow to her younger brother's demands.

"The Mass, Sacrament of the Altar, is central to her personal faith and it's Edward's council, it's the heretics who tried to get rid of that. That is why she hates heretics."

Her stand was supported by the Spanish monarchy, who were burning Protestants at the stake for rejecting Catholicism. But in England, these heretics were in power. There seemed no chance of returning to the Catholic faith while her brother was on the throne. Edward suddenly became ill in 1553 and the royal succession was again thrown into chaos.

"As Edward the Sixth, he is lying dying. He is fully aware that he is facing a crisis. It looks strongly as if the only option for the succession is for Mary to come to the throne. Mary, as we know, has battled against Edward to retain the Mass in her own household. So this pious little Protestant evangelical King is faced with all his work being undone – the temple being rant asunder, Catholicism returning to England – and so he inaugurates a plot."

Edward's advisors proposed Mary's Protestant cousin, Lady Jane Grey as heir to the throne. Supported by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, Lady Jane ruled for only nine days before Mary, who had won the support of London, took the throne. She was not going to let her one and only chance to rule pass her by.

"So what made people want Mary and not Queen Jane? Well, it was actually blood."

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"They wanted Henry the Eighth's blood and that was Mary's slogan: "I am Henry the Eighth's daughter. Jane isn't." The interesting thing is that Mary did not mention religion. She didn't say a thing about religion, and that was quite deliberate and quite clever because she was being supported now by Protestants as well as Catholics. Both sides rallied to that sort of Stalin-like memory of Henry, the power of the old King, and that' what got her to London in under a fortnight.

In July 1553, Mary Tudor was 37 years old when she was crowned Queen of all England at Westminster Abbey. She was determined to restore the Catholic allegiance and to punish those who had made her last 25 years a misery. The same year, she cemented her ties to Catholic Europe in a marriage of alliance with King Philip the Second of Spain.

"Phillip must have been a little crestfallen, should we say, at the thought of marrying Mary. She was older, she was notoriously not much fun." "She marries at age 37. She was an old maid by that time and I think that screwed her up quite considerably as well."

For the Protestant nobility, it was hard to accept a female Catholic Queen but impossible to accept a foreign Catholic king. Within months of taking the throne, a large-scale Protestant rebellion was crushed by Mary. She decided to show her enemies how swift her Catholic justice would be.

"So there are hangings. A number of the rebel leaders is dispatched. The Duke of Suffolk is executed. Poor little Jane Grey, the nine-days Queen, is now executed as well. There is a fear at one stage that Princess Elizabeth herself may be facing execution. Certainly this is a rumour being reported by the ambassadors at that time, and a number of the rebels from Kent are sent back to their Shires and hanged in their own home parishes in order to discourage future rebellion."

Now she was Queen, Mary would return her country to the Catholic fold by all means necessary. Protestant England was about to experience the revenge of Mary Tudor. After years of confusion, paranoia and turmoil, the Catholic Queen Mary Tudor was in the position to avenge her Protestant tormentors. In her eyes, the crimes against her had been committed in the name of the Church of England. She would purge the nation of its Satanic presence.

"The first thing that Mary has to do in association with her privy council and her principle advisors is to recreate the medieval laws that mean that you can be burned at the stake for heresy."

"Mary would have defined heresy as the Church would have defined it. And that doesn't just mean being wrong. It means persisting in being wrong and if they go on saying what they have said before, that the Mass is a blasphemy, that the Pope is the anti-Christ, then you have to burn them."

The horrific ritual of burning at the stake proved a useful tool for Mary and her government.

"They want other people to watch and think heresy is an illness within the body politic and it needs to be purged, it needs to be burnt out and destroyed."

Mary was determined that the burnings were carried out to produce maximum effect.

"Touching punishment of heretics. Methink it ought to be done without rashness, that it maybe evident to all this realm how *I* minister true justice."

Mary's plan to cleanse England of the Protestant curse turned into a frenzy of killing. Hundreds were burnt to death. First the bishops, then Protestant preachers and even their families. Burnings took place in town squares all over the country. Those classed as heretics were killed without mercy.

"A horrible case in the Channel Islands where a pregnant woman was put onto the fire and her baby was born in the fire, and it was thrown back."

"I think many ordinary Catholics in the reign of Mary viewed the burnings of Protestants with horror. Although Catholic families may not like the prayer of the English, they may not like the fact that during the reign of Edward the Sixth, their churches had been cleansed of all the Catholic liturgical kit that they were so attached to, this does not mean that Catholic families want to see their neighbours burned at the stake. Make no mistake about it. The burning of somebody at the stake is a very nasty business. It takes a long time to die. Where you have mass burnings, where you have a number of Protestants being burnt at the same time, the smell of human burning fat would have been overpowering."

"The persecution is a duty, a religious duty, because in order to save the souls of her subjects, she has got to eradicate the virus of heresy. She's a fanatic."

While Mary's religious persecutions proved unpopular with her subjects, her marriage with Philip was a sham.

"Did he ever loved her in the conventional romantic sense? I think it's very doubtful but he did always regard her as his aunt, *mi tia madura*."

Mary was 11 years older than her husband. She failed to bear him a child, something she refused to accept.

"We know that she has two phantom pregnancies. Exactly what causes them, we don't know and one assumes there must be some balance between something physical – maybe some kind of tumour, who knows – and something psychological and it is plain she is desperate to have a child and to continue the Tudor line, and to continue her Catholic religious settlement by having children of her own rather than things passing on to Elizabeth.

"It was obvious to everybody except Mary herself that she was never going to have a child. But a barren wife is no use to him at all."

"In the end, Philip went back to Spain. He had a lot else to do than be in England. So he left the Queen nursing her delusions of pregnancy and in the last year, her health was going. It became clear she was dying."

With her health failing, Mary was determined to exact merciless revenge on those who had wronged her in the past.

"It's clear that the break-up of her parents' marriage was enormously important to her and the key to that is seeing her relentlessly...she pursued the man whom she blamed for that break-up, Thomas Cranmer who became the Archbishop of Canterbury precisely in order to break up her parents' marriage. Cranmer was a criminal in Mary's eyes. He had committed a series of crimes. The first was to end her mother's marriage. The second was to be part of the break with Rome. The third was then to change the Church to Protestantism, and the fourth was to support Lady Jane Grey. And she pursued him literally to death, not even to the grave because there was nothing left of him once he burnt at the stake at Oxford."

After his arrest, Cranmer was imprisoned in the Tower before being subjected into a series of show trials. The trials lasted for more than two years. Mary was publicly humiliating the figurehead of the Protestant heretic faith. He recanted his religion six times.

"Cranmer I think recanted because he was in a state of terrible mental confusion. He really thought he was a traitor. He really thought by him supporting Jane, he had betrayed God's anointed Mary. And with that in mind, I think you have to realise that he is a man who is in prison, who has lost his friends, who is surrounded by very sophisticated Catholics telling him that he is a heretic, he is full of guilt and loneliness and in all that, it overwhelmed him."

Despite his recantations, he was still sentenced to death. He was 67 years old. Before he died, he was publicly shamed as a Protestant heretic. He had denied the authority of the one true Catholic Church and the Pope. He was burned at the stake in Oxford, in May 1556.

"Mary would simply not let him off the hook. He had done everything that the Church demanded."

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"He had said that he was a heretic. He had said that he was sorry for being a heretic and he still died. Even at the time, people thought this was bad form. Catholics were embarrassed about it and the government's explanations which they put out as propaganda were not very convincing."

"There were nearly 300 burned in about three and half years in Mary's reign, which was actually more than the Spanish Inquisition and the French Chambre Ardente put together in the same period."

Mary's policy had a catastrophic effect. The nation united against her.

"Now, this is a very unequal policy I think because it falls particularly on those who can't get away into exile. So, we find that the poor are suffering, popular preachers, even the blind, women, pregnant women, are all burned at the stake."

"Protestantism suddenly becomes a credible religious movement, and the rank and file Protestants who had been looking at what was going to happen, they say, "This is real conviction. You don't die unless you are really convinced." You certainly don't go dying in that kind of way, horrible death. And therefore you begin to get other people prepared to go down the same road. And as soon as that begins to happen, the government is trapped."

After five years of tyranny, Bloody Mary had become a hated monarch.

"Mary is unpopular because of her marriage, because of the religious persecution. Most important of all, her regime loses its credibility when she fails to have a child. It is clearly going to come to an end when she dies."

The ill health that had troubled her from childhood finally caught up with Mary. As she lay dying, her country was falling apart. A flu epidemic swept through the cities and England's last foothold in Europe, the Fort of Calais, was lost to the French.

"Now, those events are read in a providential way by Protestant critics, that these disasters show that God is condemning Mary for her policies."

"And Mary herself, although she didn't accept that of course, was worried that she must have done something to upset God. I think she felt she had been a failure."

Mary Tudor, Queen Mary the First, died in 1558 at the age of 43.

"She would have died a bitterly disappointed woman. No heir, her husband had gone. The Catholic faith was at an end. Protestantism would come back now."

Within months of Mary's death, her sister, Queen Elizabeth the First had united the nation under a Protestant regime. The Church of England remains dominant to this day.