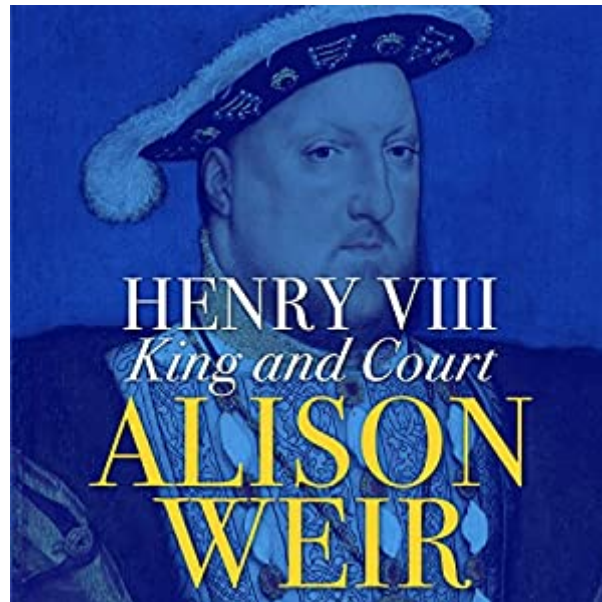




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Henry VIII: King And Court



Synopsis

This magnificent biography of Henry VIII is set against the cultural, social and political background of his court - the most spectacular court ever seen in England - and the splendour of his many sumptuous palaces. An entertaining narrative packed with colourful description and a wealth of anecdotal evidence but also a comprehensive analytical study of the development of both monarch and court during a crucial period in English history. As well as challenging some recent theories, it offers controversial new conclusions based on contemporary evidence that has until now been overlooked. This is a triumph of historical writing which will appeal equally to the general listener and the serious historian.

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Customer Reviews

This book is intense. I normally finish a book the day I start it. With Alison Weir's books--and I'm a big fan--that usually expands to a week, because they are so packed with information. This book took me nearly 3 months to read, which is a crazy amount of time for me to spend with a book, but every page covers so many different events and people in such depth and with such vivid description that one needs that extra time to just make it all make sense. I wish I'd started the book by taking notes--it's nearly necessary, just to keep the Tudor court's "cast of characters" straight in one's head. I wouldn't mean anyone to infer that I think anything I said above to be a drawback--quite the opposite. Weir immerses you in the court of the Henry VIII and really makes it come alive for the reader. All of the information she gives serves that noble end, and it's worth every

moment spent studying the densely arrayed pages.

Weir's account of Henry VIII's court is detailed to the point of correctness but not overstepping into tedium. I have read *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: A Life*, and *The Princes in the Tower* but *The King and his Court* is my favorite thus far. I enjoy Weir's descriptions because she doesn't present herself as a pompous historian. She makes sense of the intricacies of the court that are otherwise extremely confusing. So many books about Henry VIII are regarding politics and the Great Matter but this book gives insight to a personal side of Henry and what it was like to actually live at his court. Weir describes the roles of each order and their significance, something that other writers either overlook or choose not to take the time to explain. When watching a film about the Tudors, everything is always opulent and correct; one never considers any senses but sight. Weir describes the mourning of Queen Jane: "Queen Jane's body was dressed in gold tissue and laid out in the presence chamber, with a crown on her head and rings on her fingers". This is a typical representation of what a viewer would see in a film. What that audience would not be privy to is how the mourners kept "perpetual vigil on their knees beside the bier" and how the body "remained in the presence chamber for a week before it was embalmed." Regardless of how many pomanders graced the noses of the nobles, it would be impossible to mask the stench of death after a week in a room with a corpse. Weir doesn't say tell the audience that the corpse stinks; she isn't Philippa Gregory. She gives the audience the facts and allows them to draw their own inferences. In my opinion, this ability to create a historical scene without interjecting overly descriptive language is Weir's gift.

Great read for those looking to delve into the little nooks and crannies of Tudor life. This book more than satisfies in that regard, for those who are curious about the details of daily life, usually left out of more "serious" works. With regard to the poor reviews, this book was never intended to be a scholarly analysis of Henry's politics, and therefore some have denigrated the work as "history lite". So be it. This may not be the only book about Henry you should read, but it might be the most enjoyable.

Before I began this review I want to comment on the interview with the author in the back section. As a student and teacher of history I think it is obvious that there seems to be people in the history profession whose sole mission in life is to make history a boring topic. They take the fascinating and make it dull. Weir describes her passion as coming not from her classes but from a novel on

Katherine of Aragon. She found her classes on the Industrial revolution dominated by nothing more acts and factories. In response Weir spent most of her time studying history on her own in the library. Tragically, she was not allowed to attend the classes that she wanted because her earlier scores on the GCE exam. Weir's success makes her personal story a strong argument against both jargon-filled history writing and standardized testing. When people tell the story of Henry VIII they quickly switch the subject of the story from the King to the six wives. It is an easy trap to fall into for the storyteller gets to tell six stories for the price of one. Weir avoids this trap easily because she already wrote a book about the six wives of the famous king, and therefore had already scratched that itch. This book, as the title suggests, is about King Henry VIII and men who worked for him. The wives are at best supportive characters, with exception maybe to Anne Boleyn, they are trotted out only when they are relevant to what is going on. This book keeps the light on the rich characters of Margaret Beaufort, Cardinal Wolsey, Thomas More, and Thomas Cromwell. The main focus, of course, is King Henry VIII and Weir's successful in her goal to portray Henry, as he really was not how he is generally perceived. King Henry VIII has been perceived as many things. He has been seen as bloodthirsty tyrant, a misogynistic manic, and a silly puppet that was controlled by the people around him. Weir portrays Henry as a man very much in control of things in his court, often playing factions against one another. Men who served the King and gained his confidence could gain great power, but they could fall just as far. Henry could be reasonable but in times of pressure or sickness his judgment could be swift and costly. A few times he would execute a person and later come to regret it. "Few could resist Henry's charisma. 'The King has a way of making every man feel that he is enjoying his special favor,' wrote Thomas More. Erasmus called Henry 'the man most full of heart.' He would often put his arm around a man's shoulder to put him at ease, although he 'could not abide to have any man stare in his face when he talked with them.' There are many examples of the kindness to others, as will be seen. Yet the King also had a spectacular and unpredictable temper and in a rage could be terrifying indeed. He was also very jealous of his honour, both as king and as a knight, and had the tenderest yet most flexible of consciences. His contemporaries thought him extraordinarily virtuous, a lover of goodness, truth, and justice--just as he was always to see himself." (p.6) In his life, Henry's primary rival, like all Kings of England, was the King of France. The first of these Henry had to deal with was King Louis XII. The elderly Louis XII had married Henry's sister Mary, but he died shortly after. Then a much younger king, like Henry, came to the throne. King Francis I, who would be King Henry's main competitor for both standing in Europe and in history*, came to the throne. Their relationship could be described as very odd. "He ignored the advice of his lords, who thought he was putting himself at risk of some kind of

treachery, and very early on Sunday 17 June, accompanied by only two gentlemen, went to Guisnes, where his brother monarch was sleeping. Henry woke to see the King of France standing over him, offering to serve as his valet and help him dress." (p. 224) Henry responded rather well to that incident, had it been myself I think I would have freaked out. Nevertheless, the two kings were competitors in almost every sense whether it be as kings or sportsmen. Henry VIII's reign was of both achievement and revolutionary change. Henry's regime would not only break away from the religious influence of Rome but it was full propaganda campaign to increase the monarchy's power and tap into one of earliest forms of nationalism. During his reign his distrust of the nobility made him promote men to, and in, his inner circle on achievement as opposed to birth. His Privy Council was made up of the most talented individuals of the age. However, it was the establishment of the Church of England that would be his most lasting legacy." The symbolism of empire was again brought into play. A new coinage was issued bearing the image of the King as Roman Emperor, and a third Great Seal in the Renaissance style was made, featuring the King on an antique throne and bearing the title of Supreme Head; this image was designed by Lucas Horenbout, whose portraits of the King it greatly resembles. An imperial crown was added to the royal arms to signify that Henry recognized no higher power than his own save God. There was a deliberate revival of the cult of King Arthur, from whom the Tudors claimed to be descended, and who is said to have owned a seal proclaiming him 'Arthur, Emperor of Britain and Gaul.' Henry VIII, it was claimed, was merely reviving his ancestor's title and dignity. It was also asserted that England's sovereignty had for a thousand years been mistakenly subinfeudated to Rome by the King's predecessors: now he had redeemed it. No English king before Henry VIII had ever been so concerned to magnify and disseminate his public image. Under Cromwell's auspices, there was a flood of tracts and pamphlets proclaiming Henry's heroic virtues and moral superiority. Preachers, artists, craftsmen, writers, poets, playwrights, and historians such as Polydore Vergil were called upon to use their talents to advertise and glorify the New Monarchy. Propagandists such as Gardiner portrayed Henry VIII as semidivine, calling him 'the image of God upon the Earth' who 'excelled in God's sight among all other human creatures.' A correspondent of Sir Anthony Browne declared that the King's subjects 'had not to do with a man but with a more excellent and divine estate,' in whose presence one could not stand without trembling. The effect of all this was to turn Henry into an imperious and dangerous autocrat who became mesmerized by his own legend." (p.349) Of course the wives have to be mentioned. Because the most pressing issue to Henry was the Great Matter, Henry's relentless pursuit for an heir. When I was young, my mother once told me that Henry VIII was a crazy man who would kill his wife if she dare gave birth to a girl, and that is very silly because it was his fault if

they were girls. Henry did not hate women he had a pretty good relationship with most women he knew. Henry's obsession is understandable. His father had ended a civil war almost fifty years prior. Henry had no brothers and no woman had ever ruled in their own right, although their sons and grandsons could claim through them. Henry needed a son and it would be best for him to have two. He even thought of having his illegitimate son Henry Fitzroy, the Duke of Richmond, proclaimed the heir by Parliament, but he died before it could be done. In the pursuit of a son, he would break from Rome to divorce his first wife, and execute his second. His third wife Jane Seymour would provide him the son that he always wanted. In pursuit of a second son he would marry three more times and another wife would face execution. The wife that lived the longest, not Catherine Parr who was just his last, Anne of Cleves' marriage to Henry did her a lot of good. "Anne made the most of her independence, looking more 'joyous' than ever and putting on a new gown every day, 'each more wonderful than the last'. In the years to come, she would establish a considerable reputation of a good hostess, and entertained many courtiers at Richmond. Rarely had a royal divorce had such a happy outcome." (p.428) Although Henry was not a tyrant, as was Richard II, nor a puppet ruler. However he did have massive flaws. Henry would do revolutionary things but his method with dealing with opposition was the chopping block. He would allow himself to be persuaded to turn on dear friends, colleagues, and spouses. He would execute people and then later regret it. Henry allowed his greatest servant Thomas Cromwell to be killed, earlier he had allowed Thomas More to die for the sole crime of not acknowledging he, the King, as Head of the Church of England. (Ironically, Cromwell was one of the people who engineered More's fall. What goes around comes around!) On a technical note I would like to say that I really like Weir's capitalization. I know that seems silly to obsess about, but I really prefer King of England to king of England; Duke of Richmond to duke of Richmond, and Prince of Wales to prince of Wales. This is a great book about King Henry VIII, after you read it you feel like you know whom King Henry VIII was as a person. Weir writes history in a way that allows the interesting to remain interesting.* Although it could be argued that they are both outshone by Emperor Charles V.

May very well be the best book I've ever read, and I read a lot, like most of you. This book takes you on a trip, back to the time of Henry VIII, in quite vivid detail regarding royal life, the palaces, manors, hunting lodges. What the royal court did and how they did it. A richly woven tapestry every bit as enchanting and colorful as the numerous tapestries found hanging on the walls of the various Tudor palaces and manor houses. Not to be missed! Extremely highly recommended.

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