



*Anne of Cleves:
Henry's VIII Unwanted Wife*

Sarah-Beth Watkins

Winchester: Chronos Books, 2018

Review by: Valerie Schutte



Anne of Cleves: Henry VIII's Unwanted Wife. By Sarah-Beth Watkins. Winchester: Chronos Books, 2018. ISBN 978-1-78535-904-0. 161 pp. £10.99.

In a wave of popular biographies of medieval and early modern European queens, Sarah-Beth Watkins offers a new biography of Henry VIII of England's fourth wife, Anne of Cleves. Watkins is a freelance writer, who writes history books as well as magazine articles and website entries. As such, she has a very fluid writing style and her biography of Anne is very accessible and easy to read.

Her biography of Anne consists of an introduction; ten chapters; three appendices that offer Anne's marriage treaty, Anne's will, and a printed book dedication to her by Thomas Becon; a reference section; and a select bibliography. Watkins sets out to tell Anne's "story" because she has not fared well in previous treatments of the last two centuries, although she only cites sources from 1844-1905 (3). Watkins saves mentioning more recent academic treatments of Anne, because like most commercial biographies, she leans on them heavily within her own chapters, such as those by David Starkey, Retha Warnicke, and even Alison Weir. It is clear that she has done very little original research and mainly borrows from previous studies of Anne. As she does not engage with historiography, it is difficult to know where she stands on, or how she seems so accepting of, some issues contrary to popular belief without defending them, such as Anne's Catholicism.

As to be expected, Anne has no real part of Watkins' story; she is simply a pawn in a man's game. The first time she has her own voice, and only briefly, is when she is reported as giving thanks for the marriage treaty between her and Henry. Watkins recounts all of the well-known facts of Anne's life, before, during, and after her marriage to Henry, and does make great attempts to discuss political events and how Anne fit into those events, such as her marriage being one of convenience because of Henry's desire to ally himself with the Schmalkaldic League. However, with its brevity, there are events that could benefit from much greater detail, such as only two lines that mention how an imposter pretending to be Anne appeared at the court of her nephew, John Frederick, in Coburg, and was entertained for eighteen months until it was realized that she was mad.

As for Anne's time as queen, Watkins glosses over Anne's actions as queen, noting that she attempted to learn English, listened to music (something she was not encouraged to do in Cleves), practiced embroidery, and played card and dice games with her ladies. At another point, Watkins briefly mentions that Christina of Denmark's sister, Dorothea, wrote to Anne asking her to influence Henry to help with the release of her father, which is a small, but important anecdote of Anne's role as intercessor. None of these

instances are fleshed out and should be used in future works on Anne to really tease out her role and impact as Queen of England, even if only brief, and her much longer and non-traditional role of the King's Sister.

Problematically, Watkins quotes directly from calendars, mostly the *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*. Additionally, in her endnotes, she never lists a page number or entry number for any source. There are also some errors in her endnotes, such as her mistakenly calling Elizabeth Norton "Norrington" on occasion, inconsistencies with note formatting, and some notes that only have an author's name but no book or article title. While Watkins does include several images, another pitfall of the commercial biography is that they are not credited, and likely for ease of cost, many are not contemporary with Anne, but are more modern renderings or copies of more well-known works.

Watkin's biography is very readable and compact, but like any commercial biography, it does not draw any conclusions, make any arguments, or push scholarship forth on Anne in any way. What is well-done, however, is that with so little analysis and so few sources actually of Anne's point of view instead of a third party (usually Cromwell) about Anne, is that Watkins does not fall into the trap of some popular biographers who decide to add in how their subject "feels" or offer what they imagine he or she was thinking. Watkins does ask rhetorical questions, such as wondering how naïve Anne truly was about matters sexual, but she never posits to answer such a question. Watkins interestingly questions what Anne knew of Henry's dissatisfaction with the marriage, but refreshingly does not put words into Anne's mouth or view Anne's lack of recorded response as stupidity or naivety, something even her academic biographers have done. So, while Watkins's biography of Anne may not fill the gaps that still currently exist in scholarly works about Anne, it is still a very fulfilling popular biography that should satisfy its readers.

VALERIE SCHUTTE

Pittsburgh, PA