

Truth and Fiction

The whiff of scandal still swirls about the name of Mary Eleanor Bowes: even people who've only heard of her as an ancestor of the Queen Mother often feel that they know there's something notorious about her.

For those interested in getting as close as we can to the 'facts' about Eleanor, the primary sources are available. (There are links to the online versions in the Bibliography on my website.) If we would rather the facts were presented for us, there are the three biographies, as well as her entries in Wikipedia, The Dictionary of National Biography and other supposedly objective accounts.

The trouble is, we always have to remember that even in the primary evidence, the writer has an agenda. In the case of Mary Eleanor, her letters and particularly her Confessions cannot be taken as 'fact': the former because she will always have been affected by mood, circumstance, who she's writing to, what she wants them to think, what she's chosen to leave out; and the latter because they were written under duress and partially, if not wholly dictated by Stoney Bowes.

The recent BBC production of *Wolf Hall* drew attention to the differences between 'fact' and fiction, as this letter from the Guardian makes clear:

'Mark Rylance's depiction of Thomas Cromwell as a soulful, family-centred, introspective, silently suffering spectator is totally removed from the ferocious tiger who set up a proto-Nazi regime in England. He created a cult of leader worship, tortured the innocent young men round Anne Boleyn to get false accusations, leading to her death, set up a black propaganda campaign to undermine the monasteries, led a vile process against the religious who tried to cling to their ancient faith, subjected the simple Carthusians to an agonising death, destroyed the noblest Englishman (Thomas More) because he would not conform to Cromwell's Führerprinzip.

'He had absorbed the brutal cynicism of Machiavelli during his twelve years in Italy and applied this realpolitik in London. Miss Mantel is not the first bluestocking to fall for a nasty, cruel man of power: her portrait of Cromwell needs to be balanced against the facts of history.'

Emo Williams

Shere, Surrey

The Guardian, 23rd January 2015

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/23/wolf-hall-good-bad-codpieces>

In all of this lies the fascination of history and human stories.

'My own method is to wrap the fiction around the documented record, to let imagination lead us by touch into the rooms where history can't shine a light.'

Hilary Mantel on writing her Thomas Cromwell novels.

The Guardian Review. 17th January 2015