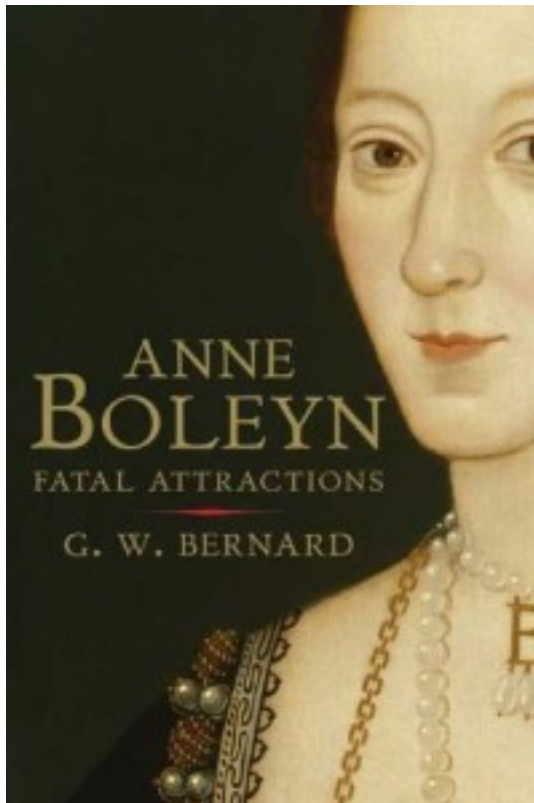


Fatal Mistakes

G.W. Bernard's Anne Boleyn book
By Philip Coppens



Patrick Skene Catling's review for *The Irish Times* summarizes G.W. Bernard's view of Anne Boleyn succinctly: "Boleyn is depicted here as an unfaithful, reactionary slut with nymphomaniacal tendencies. And Henry wasn't such a bad guy by 16th-century standards. He could have decreed that she should be burned to death, but he only had her head chopped off."

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Indeed, though Bernard raves against those who today seek in Anne a role model for women and pretends to hunger for the liberty novelists can take with the subject, in the end, Bernard gives the most controversial queen of history a tabloid treatment, which could be headlined as: "no evidence, but found guilty."

Though *Fatal Attractions* reads like a biography, Bernard's approach is to use Anne's life to show her character, to convince the reader that she is guilty of the crimes she was accused of,

and which resulted in her beheading. Eustace Chapuys, the Spanish Ambassador at her court, only ever referred to Anne Boleyn as the Whore or the Concubine. Chapuys chauvinistically sided with Catherine of Aragon, the woman Henry VIII was trying to substitute for Anne Boleyn. But his letters and notes continue to be the most widely used material to piece the Boleyn puzzle together. A professional historian like Bernard cannot get away without mentioning that Chapuys was unreliable and agenda-driven. Despite claiming to share these reservations, chapter 6, “Anne Against Catherine”, is entirely constructed along what Chapuys wrote, quoting him in every paragraph for the first five pages of the chapter!

Bernard’s obsession seems to be to untangle Anne Boleyn from Henry VIII, and concludes that Henry VIII was in charge of the annulment of his marriage with Catherine of Aragon, as well as the Reformation itself – thus going against the more common stance, which is that Anne Boleyn was a far more active player in these events, if not the director. For anyone except an academic, it is a moot debate, for in reality, Henry and Anne were a married couple, whereby most of their actions should be seen as coming from that unit. Specifically, it adds little to answer the main enigma: why Henry VIII had her executed after having gone through all the trouble of divorcing Catherine of Aragon and breaking with the Catholic Church.

Historians are unable to answer that question. Historically, charges were made against Boleyn of adultery if not incest. She was convicted, and beheaded. Today, the same historians argue that the evidence against Anne was invented. But Bernard does not believe so and the main argument in his book – which allowed Bernard’s book to grab many newspaper headlines and reviews – is that he believes she was guilty. “Believe” is the correct verb, even though from most reviews, it would seem as if Bernard has evidence or proof for this claim. He has, however, none.



G.W. Bernard



Eustace Chapuys

