

A Short Biography of Lady Jane Grey

By Baron Sir Paul de Marseilles

Lady Jane Gray, also known as the “Nine Day Queen”, was born in Leicestershire, England in October of 1537. She was the oldest daughter of Henry Grey, the Duke of Suffolk, and Lady Frances Brandon. She had a light build and fair skin with sandy colored hair. She was well educated and fluent in multiple languages including French, Spanish, English and Latin. She was famous in intellectual circles for her scholarship and learning. Unfortunately, she ultimately became the victim of the political schemes of her father-in-law and her parents.

King Henry VIII died on January 28, 1547 when Jane was only 10. His will left three legal heirs to the throne of England. The first in line to inherit the throne was Edward VI, his son by Jane Seymour. The second was Mary Tudor, his daughter by Catherine of Aragon, and the third in line was Elizabeth, his daughter by Ann Boleyn. Henry’s will also provided the Crown was to go to the heirs of Edward, Mary, and Elizabeth, or, if none survived, to the line of Mary, his favorite sister. Lady Jane Gray was one of Mary’s granddaughters and thus the cousin to Henry’s primary heirs. Whoever was to succeed King Henry was going to have their hands full.

Henry VIII’s death left political and religious unrest in England. There were religious conflicts between Protestants and Catholics. Rampant inflation followed a series of unsuccessful military conflicts abroad. Edward Seymour, the Earl of Hertford and one of Henry’s brothers-in-law (through Henry’s marriage with Jane Seymour), was appointed to run the government and to see to Edward’s interests until he became an adult. In this capacity, he served as the Protector of the Realm and Governor of the King’s Person. He was also awarded additional titles including the Duke of Somerset. Unfortunately, Seymour was arrogant and greedy and soon lost favor with the young King. Due to a series of bad decisions on his part as well as intrigues which had left severe questions concerning his judgment, Seymour lost the confidence of the nobles and his rivals were able to oust him from his position in 1550.

Edward Seymour was replaced by one of his rivals, John Dudley, the Earl of Warwick. John Dudley was an ambitious and hardworking with a distinguished military career. He was also unscrupulous and extremely charming when it suited his purposes and he soon won the young King’s confidence. He became the Protector of England in all but name as well as the Duke of Northumberland in 1551. Jane’s father, Henry Grey, and his wife were equally ambitious and wanted to climb in social status. They hoped to marry Jane to Edward VI but the union was never to be formalized.

Young Prince Edward VI was dying of tuberculosis in the early months of 1553 when Jane was 15. John Dudley, the Duke of Northumberland, knew he would lose power, and possibly his life, if Mary Tudor inherited the throne. Edward VI had been raised as a Protestant. Northumberland had been a strong proponent of a Protestant state. Mary Tudor, the next in line for the throne, had been raised as an unrepentant Catholic. She was also a religious zealot. Lady Jane was raised as a very religious Protestant. Northumberland had a plan and Jane’s parents had a daughter. If he could convince the young King to remove both Mary and Elizabeth from the line of succession, he would put Jane Gray next in the line for the throne of England. If he could arrange a marriage between Jane and his son, Lord Builford Dudley, he could continue to control the government of England and Henry Grey and Lady Frances Brandon would be the parents of the new Queen of England. Jane’s parents were persuaded to participate in this scheme by the prospect of wealth and power. Jane wanted nothing to do with the marriage but was forced into it by her parents. Builford Dudley and Jane Gray were married on May 25, 1553. Northumberland was later able to convince Edward to sign an amendment to his father’s will which disinherited both Mary and Elizabeth.

Edward VI died on July 6, 1553. Northumberland kept Edward’s death secret for several days in

order to further his scheme. He had to accomplish two tasks. First, he needed to have Jane proclaimed Queen. Second, he had to secure both Mary and Elizabeth.

Northumberland proclaimed Jane as Queen on July 9, 1553, three days after Edward's death. Jane publically stated that she had no right to the crown and that Mary was the rightful Queen. This act enraged her parents who insisted that she obey their wishes. She finally agreed to their demands. On July 10, 1553, Jane was publicly proclaimed Queen. However, she refused to try on the Crown and once again stated she had no right to it. She also refused to have her husband crowned King thus thwarting Northumberland's plans. These acts further enraged both her family and her in laws but there was still hope for the plan. Jane stayed at the Tower of London in preparation for her coronation from July 10-19, 1553. Jane could be, in time, persuaded by her parents to be a dutiful daughter. All Northumberland had to do was secure Mary and Elizabeth to buy more time.

The second part of Northumberland's plan was no more successful than the first. Elizabeth developed a sudden illness which kept her in bed and she was able to convince a doctor to certify that she was ill. Mary Tudor was warned of a possible trap and managed to elude Northumberland's grasp. Mary was not amused with Northumberland's scheme and her growing army caused his supporters to abandon him. Northumberland was eventually arrested for treason on July 20, 1553 and was executed the following month.

Jane learned of Mary's victory when her father tore down the banner that hung behind her throne and told her that she was no longer Queen. Jane simply asked if she could return home. Instead of supporting his own daughter, Lord Henry Gray promptly fled with his wife leaving Jane and her servants behind in the Tower of London. He then publicly proclaimed Mary Tudor the lawful Queen and then cowardly went into hiding leaving his daughter to her fate. Jane's coronation suite became a prison, and Mary Tudor was eventually crowned in Westminster Abbey.

Lord Henry and his wife's treachery did not end at their first attempt at treason. They did little to aid Jane during her imprisonment. Instead, Lady Frances Grey sought a pardon for her husband. Lord Henry Grey received his pardon but never sought clemency for his daughter. Lady Frances never attempted to see or speak with her daughter following her arrest. Jane alone wrote letters to Mary Tudor begging forgiveness for her part in the treason. Mary Tudor knew that Jane had no choice in the scheme and was simply a pawn that had been used by others. Jane was tried for high treason on November 14, 1553. She was found guilty and sentenced to be executed. Mary Tudor might have pardoned Jane but for the subsequent actions of Jane's father. Lord Henry promptly involved himself with another rebellion against Mary Tudor knowing full well that his daughter was still a prisoner in the Tower of London. The plot failed and his actions sealed both of their fates. Jane had to be executed or she would remain a focal point for future rebellions. Mary Tudor finally gave in to the pressure asserted by her ministers and advisors and ordered Jane's execution.

Lady Jane and her husband were executed on February 12, 1554. She was 16. Her father was executed shortly thereafter. Jane was buried at St Peter ad Vincula between Anne Boleyn and Katherine Howard. Her death further fueled the religious factionalism in England. Mary Tudor reigned for another five years and earned the nickname "Bloody Mary" for her willingness to burn Protestants at the stake. Mary's successor for the throne of England was Jane's cousin. She would become one of the most well-known and powerful Queens of England. Her name was Elizabeth I.

Sources: Mike Ashley, *A Brief History of British Kings and Queens* (Carroll & Graf, 2002); Lacy Baldwin Smith, *The Elizabethan World* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966); Alison Weir, *The Children of Henry VIII* (Ballantine Books, 1996) Alison Weir, *The Life of Elizabeth I* (Ballantine Books, 1998); www.tudorherstory.tripod.com/janegray.html.