

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a novel about women who were extraordinarily famous or notorious in their own time, but none of whom has a published biography. All three are almost ignored by history – partly because of the prejudice of history which tells of victories and forgets the defeated, and partly because history only tells us of women who were well-recorded in their own lifetime – and that's very few women. So few in fact that I wrote a history titled *Normal Women: 900 Years of Making History* as my contribution to filling the still-yawning void that is women's history.

Jacqueline of Hainault's story is little told because she is not one of the 'winners' that write the history. She was one of the many unsuccessful resistance leaders against the spread of Burgundy, and she was a wife left by her husband for a prettier, younger rival. She was the only heir of her father and mother who jointly owned Hainault, Holland and Zeeland. These lands, now northern France and the Netherlands, were taken away from her by her husband John, and claimed by both her uncle on her father's side and her uncle on her mother's side and his son Philip of Burgundy in a sort of pincer movement of patriarchy designed to squeeze a young woman of her rights.

Jacqueline's plan was to hire the most successful general and army in Europe, Henry V – victor of Agincourt – to win back her inheritance, and on his death, she found another soldier with an army: the king's brother and fellow soldier Humphrey Duke of Gloucester. She married him to secure his help and the backing of the English parliament for another foreign venture, and the two of them – with Eleanor as a maid-of-honour in tow – invaded her country and marched from the English fort of Calais to Mons.

There is so little information about this extraordinary army led by a woman, an English duchess by marriage, to recapture her own country, that I went to Calais myself to retrace her footsteps.

Her palace at Le Quesnoy is almost derelict though planning proposals are in place to turn it into a hotel. But the cellars underneath it are intact, and the Cercle Historique Quercitain were so kind to take me into all that is left of Jacqueline's fairy-tale childhood home. With the permission of Mayor Marie-Sophie Lesne, they took me down the five levels of the cellars – each one as big as a great hall – where in Jacqueline's time the palace stored enough food to hold out for a six-month siege. The lowest level is a freshwater well, and the level above that was the ice cellar – the ice was shovelled down the stone chute in winter from the nearby lake and used to keep food fresh and the drinks cool in the following summer.

The Cercle Historique Quercitain have made a scale model of Le Quesnoy in Jacqueline's time, but there is little about Jacqueline herself in the histories of the town, nor in her capital city of Mons. In Hainault history she is popularly known as the 'Countess of Four Husbands', and I hope this novel, based partly on her story, inspires historians, especially those of Hainault, to discover more about her.

Margery Jourdemayne is obscured by another sort of difficulty – that of describing her trade as wise-woman or witch. We, who live in scientific times, do not believe in effective witchcraft, so we do not believe that witches are doing what their accusers say of them. We read all witch trials as an injustice because we know that witches cannot fly to meetings with Satan, nor kill their victims by staring. Even when we have a confession, we never take it seriously, we try to explain it all away and in doing so, the women are silenced and ignored again.

The brief histories of Margery Jourdemayne never describe in detail what she did, because of the historians' unspoken belief that, in reality, she did . . . nothing. Historians 'know' in their own modern minds that whatever she made or supplied, all the spells and potions were ineffective. There is simply no point in describing them in any detail. They are imaginary – and history does not deal with imaginary events. Adding to these difficulties of writing Margery Jourdemayne's history is the fact that, as a working woman, her life was only recorded when she was accused. The only record we have

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of her is her accusation, trial and sentence: not a history of her life as a woman of the fifteenth century.

My heroine, Eleanor Cobham, is also surprisingly absent from the biographies of heroines; she too suffers from history's inability to study magic, and lack of interest in women's day-to-day lives. I fell in love with the glimpse of Eleanor I read in Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, where it is said of her:

*Thus droops this lofty pine and hangs his sprays;
Thus Eleanor's pride dies in her youngest days.*

The scant histories about Eleanor have generally followed the trope of female vanity and over-reaching, and no one so far has researched her childhood or extraordinary rise through the court to become a duchess. Her date of birth is not recorded – we only know the birth order of the Cobham family, their names and marriages, but little more. As lady-in-waiting to a foreign countess, she shares Jacqueline's obscurity.

Her first appearance in an official document is when she is named by the women's petition as Humphrey Duke of Gloucester's mistress, and after their unrecorded marriage we mostly see her in reports about him. The longest and most detailed account we have of her is at the witchcraft and treason trials, which some historians believe were show trials staged by her husband's enemies as an attack on him – so everything we read about her may be invented, or may be describing her as a proxy for insulting him. It is ironic that her punishment was obscurity – sent away from court to one remote castle after another, until her death – and that history has not challenged this. Eleanor disappears from a great place and a great scandal into the silence of a history which does not record imprisoned and silenced women.

When I knew I wanted to explore Eleanor in fiction I asked my friend and colleague David Baldwin if he would consider her for a biography which we might publish simultaneously. He was keen on the project and his biography of Eleanor was mostly written by the

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time he died: a great loss for his family and friends, and for many readers who admired his steady scholarship and original thinking. I inherited the half-finished manuscript and this fictional account is partly based on it – I am so grateful to him.

One of the earliest stories I came across about Eleanor was the legend that her spirit, as a black dog, haunted Peel Tower on the Isle of Man. I visited the island and was struck – as any visitor must be – by the extraordinary climate, terrain and atmosphere. I am grateful to local guide Timothy Dale and historians for giving me a better understanding of the folklore and magical beliefs of this unique island culture. The visit suggested wild stories about Eleanor's escapes and the many legends including the black dog – Moddey Dhoo – of Peel Castle. Moddey Dhoo doesn't belong in this story – he was first sighted long after Eleanor had left the island during the English Civil War, when the castle was a garrison. He was said to sit before the fire in the guardroom and walk down the gallery. One foolish man, boasting he was not afraid of a ghostly dog, went after the dog and came back gibbering with fear and died.

I took the spirit of the tale and wove the black dog through Eleanor's story, where it seemed to me to hint at a darkness and a wildness that the bare facts of her life conceal. The 'real' Eleanor is as elusive as the Fey – the historical record gives us glimpses of her actions but nothing about her motives or her feelings. This makes her a nightmare for an historian but a joy for a novelist, and the two years I have spent on this book have been one of my most haunted periods of research, on one of my most fictional novels.

Eleanor's love affair with Owen Tudor in this novel was inspired by the extraordinary persecution that Owen suffers from Duke Humphrey of Gloucester. Owen was, indeed, only saved by the intervention of the young king. I thought I would make the reason for this persecution a frustrated love affair between Eleanor and Owen, inspired by Owen's historical secret love affair with Queen Catherine. Their love and secret marriage founded the Tudor line. One of their boys – Edmund – goes on to marry Margaret Beaufort,

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and his son is Henry Tudor, who invades England and becomes Henry VII with the unswerving support of his uncle Jasper (the other brother). So this book is also about the founding of the Tudors, who create their name – now probably the most famous name in English history – though they were originally named ap Maredudd.

And this book is, as all my books are, about the indomitable spirit of women. The petition of the women of London in support of Jacqueline is possibly the earliest petition by women – unless we are so lucky to find an earlier one! As such, it is a benchmark for women's history, of women working collectively across class lines, united in their support of another woman with no direct benefit to themselves. They are working in a sisterhood, in defence of another woman and her rights.

A work of fiction can fill in the gaps of the historical record, and it is the job of a historical novel to tell a story that weaves around the historical facts as fixed points. It is the job of a novel to explore the fictional character's emotions, growth and change, and that has been particularly interesting in the case of Eleanor who – in my account – goes from being a self-seeking ingenue to a fully involved witch and necromancer, without becoming a cliché of female malice (or so I hope!). I imagine each reader will judge Eleanor according to their own standards, but I rather like a woman who can look into her own darkness and be neither afraid nor apologetic.

This has been a fascinating book to research. I have included a short list of the most useful books, but there are hundreds of general histories of the time and a surprising number of histories of alchemy and magic. The spell I quote is an original one from the fifteenth-century spell books.

I owe deep thanks firstly to my friend and colleague, the late historian David Baldwin, to Mayor of Le Quesnoy, Marie-Sophie Lesne, to President of the Cercle Historique Quercitain, Grégory Chermeux, to historian and translator Jannick Malaquin, to local guide Timothy Dale, and to the many historians whose work I have consulted to find what there is of these stories.