Women on trial for… Crimes of their times

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CRIMES OF THEIR TIMES

Steph Bellwood

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For Leo

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Foreword

There are six stories in this book, all based on the lives of real women throughout British history who were accused of various crimes – and punished for them, too. Some survived – others didn't. In each case, the crime was typical of the time in which the woman lived. For example, it was quite possible to be convicted as a witch in the 1600s when people were far more superstitious than today. It was similarly likely to be suspected of spying during the First World War.

The different punishments were also very much of their time, often seeming to be both unfair and harsh. Can you

imagine being sent to Australia (a journey of several months) for petty theft? Or burned at the stake for trying to follow your own religion?

The women in these stories also lived in times when being female made life a lot harder than it did for men. Many women were barely educated and had very little money. They had extremely limited rights and very few chances to make their voices heard. So, they didn't stand a chance when it came to standing up against a cruel, powerful justice system; they were simply crushed under its weight. At least punishments have changed for the better over the 400 years these stories span. Twentieth century women were more likely to receive a prison sentence or a fine for their actions, compared with the hangman's noose or burning stake in

earlier times.

Some of these stories tell the tales of strong, principled women who stood up for what they believed, whether it was freedom of religion or the right to vote. Others tell the stories of women too poor or ignorant to avoid committing petty crimes, falling victim to ridiculous laws.

You might admire some of the women, for their courage and conviction. Others you might dislike for their wicked ways. Some you might feel were hard done by; others you may believe deserved their punishments. But all of them were real people, and all of them had fascinating lives to imagine and explore. What would you have done in their place?

Name:

Anne Askew

Accused of:
Heresy

Where and when:
Newgate, London 1546

Punishment:
Burning at the stake

Crime and punishment during **Anne's lifetime**

Anne lived in **Tudor times**, during the reign of King Henry VIII. Back then, laws were very strict, and the punishments for breaking them were extremely harsh. There was no police force; instead, a group of men at the King's court had supreme power and could dish out punishments of their choice to anyone who disobeyed them.

Torture was a popular way of punishing criminals or persuading them to confess. They might be whipped, branded (burned) with a hot iron, stretched on a frame called a **rack**, or locked into wooden devices called **stocks** and **pillories**. Thousands of people were executed, either by being hanged, crushed with rocks, beheaded with an axe or burned at a wooden post called a stake. Executions were usually done in public as a warning to others.



Pillories were used to humiliate offenders

One of the most serious Tudor crimes was heresy. This meant doubting some of the ideas of the traditional Catholic faith and choosing to adopt the new religious ideas of **Protestantism** over Catholicism. It was punishable by death, often by burning.

"Anne, how can you say such a dreadful thing?" Francis stood over his younger sister, bossily wagging his finger in what he hoped was a good imitation of his father.

Blazing with passion, Anne jumped to her feet and pointed back at him. "I'll say what I like, and I'll say it again," she cried. "Girls deserve to read the Bible just as much as boys. Even the poorest servant girl is just as precious in God's eyes as the richest, most spoilt boy in his silly furs and fancy robes."

Her eyes flashed as she looked pointedly at Francis' fine clothes, making him blush. Lounging in his armchair by the fire, her other brother, Edward, hid a smirk and bent his head over his book. He much admired his sister's razor-sharp tongue, but he didn't want it turned on *him*.

Francis battled on. "But you can't say such things," he protested, his words whining.

"Brother, dearest," laughed Anne. "You know full well you can't stop me. I shall say such things, and I will go on saying them until the day I die." And she stuck out her tongue at him in such a comical way that Francis couldn't stop himself from smiling.

Within minutes, the two of them were chasing each other around the room while Edward laughed and clapped. Anne was a firebrand, no doubt about it, but her sense of fun was just as strong as her anger.

Suddenly, the heavy door was flung open, and a deep voice thundered, "What in God's name are you doing?"

Anne and Francis froze before the terrible sight of their father looming in the doorway. There was an awful pause. "Well?" he growled. "Francis? I shall have

you flogged for such unmanly behaviour!"

"It was me, Father," Anne spoke up, pushing strands of fiery red hair out of her eyes. Her voice trembled, but she went on boldly. "If anyone is to be punished, it should be me."

"Indeed?" her father frowned. "Well, it may be the last childish game you ever play. I have come to speak with you. Follow me." And with that, he swept away down the dark, draughty corridor.

The children stood in stunned silence. It was extremely unusual for their father to visit them during the day, and unheard of that he should need to speak to his daughter, not one of his sons. Instinctively, Francis put a protective arm around Anne.

"What do you think he means, Annie?" he whispered fearfully. Anne squeezed his arm. "Don't worry," she murmured, and

hurried from the room, her face turning ever paler.

Anne stood in front of her father's bulky wooden desk, heart pounding but head held high. Her father, busy writing on **parchment** with a long **quill**, did not look up. Anne took a deep breath and waited. She knew she must not speak first, and that this was a test of her obedience. Well, she could wait. After some time, her father laid down the quill, looked sternly at her over his reading spectacles, and said abruptly, "You are fifteen years old now, Anne – old enough to be useful as a wife and a mother. You shall be married next month."

Anne bowed her head in silent submission but, inside, her blood was beginning to boil. She had dreamed of

studying, of becoming a philosopher or lecturer perhaps, though she knew full well such careers were almost unheard of for women. Still, she had always hoped there would be a chance. But now…

She raised her head again and saw that her father had gone back to writing. *Scritch, scratch*, went his quill. Anne clenched her fists and bit her lip to control her anger.

"May I ask… to whom I shall be married?" she managed to say in an almost-steady voice.

Her father didn't even look up. "Sir Thomas Kyme," he replied sharply.

This was too much for Anne. The volcano seething and bubbling inside her erupted violently, words spilling from her like red-hot lava.

"Thomas Kyme? The man my poor

dead sister was to marry?" she raged. "That old man? That miserable, humourless old fool? He couldn't have Martha, so he thinks he'll have me instead?"

Her father didn't look up from his writing.

"I won't do it," Anne cried, rushing towards the desk and grabbing it with both hands. "Do you hear me? I'd rather be dead like Martha. I won't do it!"

Suddenly her father pressed down on his quill so hard it snapped, then in a flash leaned forward and slapped Anne across the face. She gasped with pain and tried not to cry, but the hot, bitter tears streamed down her face. Her father folded his arms in satisfaction. "You are my daughter," he said, and his voice was sharp as flint. "You will do what I say."