



## An interview with Alison Weir

This interview with Alison Weir (AW) was carried out by Wall to Wall Television (WW) for the Channel 4 programme *Gunpowder, Treason and Plot*. Alison Weir is the best-selling author of *Britain's Royal Families* (1989), *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (1991), *The Princes in the Tower* (1992), *The Wars of the Roses* (1994), *The Children of Henry VIII* (1996), *The Life of Elizabeth I* (1998), *Eleanor of Aquitaine* (1999) and *Henry VIII: The king and his court* (2001).

### The Catholics under Elizabeth I

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**WW:** What was life as a Catholic like under Elizabeth I?

**AW:** It was very difficult indeed because, in 1559, Parliament brought in the Anglican Settlement, which made the Church of England the established Church, the Protestant Church.

From then on, the saying of Mass was made a felony and Catholic priests could be imprisoned for doing so. Now, Catholics had a duty to attend Mass once a week and they couldn't do this in England; if they did, they had to do so in secret.

And they also had to attend, by law, Church of England services once a week and receive the Protestant communion twice a year.

Now, as a result of this, many of them went to church and were called 'church papists' by their disapproving neighbours. But if they didn't go to church, they were fined very heavily.

**WW:** Why were the Catholics perceived to be a threat?

**AW:** Catholics were perceived to be a threat because the Catholic Church was headed by the pope and the pope was regarded rather more as a foreign ruler than as a religious leader.

And one has to consider the history of England. Henry

VIII had brought about the Reformation, with himself as head of the Catholic Church, and the pope – or the Bishop of Rome, as he was then called – was literally booted out. Then, under Edward [VI], there was a shift to Protestantism and a very radical Protestant Settlement came in, but that lasted only six years.

Under Mary there was a Counter-Reformation under which England returned to the allegiance of Rome and the queen burned 300 Protestant martyrs. There was such revulsion against this in England that Elizabeth's succession in 1558 was greeted with great rejoicing. Her accession day was celebrated for up to 200 years after that, which demonstrates the depth of feeling that people had at that time, because they felt that Catholicism represented an unacceptable threat to the English way of life.

### The perceived threat of Catholicism

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**WW:** Did the authorities have good reason to believe that Catholicism was a threat?

**AW:** Yes, the authorities saw Catholicism as a threat because of what had happened in Mary's reign, when the powers of the Inquisition had been invoked in England and people were made to suffer for their faith.

And Mary was married to Philip of Spain who was the champion of the Catholic faith in Europe in the 16th cen-

tury, the chief champion at this time. Philip was seen to have sanctioned and even encouraged these executions, when, in fact, he'd actually tried to stop them, because he felt it was a very, very bad PR exercise for his own cause.

**WW:** Why did the government fear Jesuit priests?

**AW:** The government feared Jesuit priests because, in 1570, the pope published a bull excommunicating Elizabeth I. That bull released all her subjects from their allegiance to her and encouraged them to depose her. She was seen as a heretic and a bastard and the epitome of all wickedness.

Now most of Elizabeth's subjects were loyal to her. Most were Protestants, but a number were Catholic, and many of them were totally loyal to the queen. They were placed in a very difficult position. If they held public office, they had to swear the Oath of Supremacy – they had to swear to be loyal to the queen, but they also had to abjure any loyalty to any foreign prince. So a Catholic who owed religious and spiritual allegiance to the pope could not really take that oath. They were literally drawn in two. But many of them actually did swear the oath. Now as a result of the bull, the English government and the queen felt very much under threat from foreign powers, who were very keen to re-establish Catholicism in England and were led by Philip of Spain. There was also a lot of plotting on behalf of Mary Queen of Scots, who was a prisoner in England at that time and whom many felt to be the rightful queen. So the English government were beleaguered on all sides.

And from 1574, it's a known fact that trained priests from the Catholic seminaries abroad – notably the one in Douai, which was under the patronage of Philip of Spain himself – were being sent into England to subvert and undermine the work of the English government and the Protestant Settlement.

Now many of these priests who came in were genuine priests, concerned for the spiritual welfare of Catholics in England, but the majority were actually agents working on behalf of foreign princes abroad. If they were caught, they were subject to the most extreme tortures.

The reason for the English government feeling under threat is because of the personal threat to the queen. Two English noblemen – we don't know who they were – asked the pope if, theoretically, it would be a sin to assassinate Elizabeth. And the pope said, 'No, it would not be a sin. You would be commended for it. ' He more or less gave it his sanction. And his successor, the next pope, actively encouraged the assassination of Elizabeth.

So as these threats became ever more real and ever more urgent from the mid- 1570s onwards, we're getting talk of the 'enterprise of England'. It's Philip of Spain building his armada to send it against England. There's a Spanish army just across the Channel in the Netherlands that could pounce at any time on England.

England is under siege at this time and the queen is having to steer a very careful course.

As the Catholic threat from abroad intensified, life became very difficult indeed for Catholics in England. They weren't allowed to celebrate the sacraments, they couldn't baptise their children anywhere but in a Protestant church, they couldn't marry anywhere but in Protestant church. When they died, they couldn't receive the last rites, or extreme unction. And any children they had would have to be educated by Protestant teachers, because Catholics were not allowed to practise as teachers, nor were they allowed to be employed as servants.

Any services that were held had to be held in secret. You can find evidence of these secret services in many old houses today – you'll see priest holes in all sorts of unusual places. One of the master contrivers of priest holes was a man called Nicholas Owen – several of his examples survive.

The government became more and more neurotic and obsessed about this threat and quite rightly so. At one stage, they were even debating in Parliament whether or not children at the age of seven should be taken away from their Catholic parents so that they could be brought up as Protestants. Fortunately, the government did not proceed with this legislation. However, it is a fact that Catholics whose children had reached the age of 16, at which age they'd be liable to pay the fines for not attending Protestant churches, would send them away to other areas, where other families could perhaps help with the burden.

## How the Catholics coped

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**WW:** Do you think it was fair that ordinary, run-of-the-mill Catholics should have been held under this suspicion of treachery.

**AW:** It was a very unfair system. At one stage in the 1580s, to be Catholic was equal to being a traitor. The whole issue was completely out of proportion.

At that time, there were people working in England to subvert the government, but of course, the ordinary Catholics suffered for them.

**WW:** How did they manage with all these restrictions?

**AW:** This is the remarkable thing, that they did manage. I mean, they were a minority.

In many cases, they just defied the law and paid the fines. Some of them were absolutely crippled by these fines, because they increased as the reign progressed.

They continued to hold their services in private. These services would be held by itinerant priests who would travel from house to house in disguise. Often they would go to the larger houses in an area, gentry houses, and local Catholics would be told by word of mouth that a

service was to take place. They could go to the house and receive the consolation of their faith.

To be a Catholic priest at that time was to be suspected of treason. Many priests were taken and tortured, and about 200 of them, I think, were put to death for their faith. And not all of them were working against the state.

**WW:** How do you think Catholics coped with divided loyalties between their faith and their loyalty to the crown?

**AW:** Well, the evidence suggests that most of them took a rather pragmatic view. English nationalism was a very strong force at this time, and their chief loyalty was to their sovereign, to Elizabeth. She was very popular. And many of them groaned under the burden of the constraints on them and the tax and the fines. But I think they did cope very well.

## Enter James I

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**WW:** So Elizabeth dies and James come to the throne. What was his background?

**AW:** James received a strict Calvinistic upbringing in Scotland. In 1560, the Scottish Church was reformed in very severe Protestant style. In fact, it was the severest religious regime in Europe. It was based on the principles of the Swiss reformer, John Calvin, one of whose disciples was John Knox, the minister of Edinburgh.

James's mother, Mary Queen of Scots, had been a Catholic. She didn't have a very comfortable time in Scotland from that point of view. She was also accused of complicity in the murder of her second husband, Lord Darnley – that's James's father – and was deposed later that year.

That was 1567. James was then 13 months old and was given into the care of tutors, whose chief concern was to blacken his mother's reputation and bring him up as a strict Protestant.

Now, as with all teenagers, when James came of age, he rebelled against this and set out to rehabilitate his mother's memory. So I think there may have been some Catholics who, when he eventually came to the English throne in 1603, thought he might tread a rather more conciliatory path. They were to be, I'm afraid, disabused of their expectations.

**WW:** When James came to the throne in England, what did they think of him?

**AW:** When James came down from Scotland, the English got rather a shock. They'd been used to the rather staid court of Queen Elizabeth and the dignity of that monarch. And here comes this undersized, ungainly Scotsman who slobbers over his food and isn't very clean – his clothes are stained and dirty – and who's got a predilection for male favourites, although he does have a rather happy marriage with his wife Anne of Denmark and is a good father to their children.

So they were rather dumbstruck when their new king comes down from Scotland and they see him getting rather frazzled as he sees all his new subjects coming to gape at him. He's so frazzled, in fact, he says, 'I will take down my breeches and they can see my arse!' They weren't used to kings speaking in such terms!

**WW:** Did he have experience of plots and conspiracies?

**AW:** Oh, yes, he did. James had a background of intrigue and suspicion during his formative years. His childhood and youth were peppered with plots – at one point, he was actually captured by plotters and held prisoner for a year.

So he grew up to be suspicious of everybody, as most monarchs did at that time, because courts were hotbeds of intrigue and many people were jostling for power.

## Robert Cecil

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**WW:** Talking of plots and intrigues, tell me about Robert Cecil. What was he like?

**AW:** Robert Cecil replaced his father, Lord Burghley, as Queen Elizabeth's chief minister. He was a brilliant man, but not physically prepossessing – and this is in an age when physical deformity was believed to indicate the inner character of a person. Cecil was dropped by a nursemaid as a child and, as a result, grew up wizened and stunted. He was very sensitive about this.

He was a man of great cultural refinement, a man of great personal charm, incredibly astute, and an amazingly hard worker, very, very energetic – he was said to have been seen always walking round with his arms full of papers. Queen Elizabeth trusted him implicitly, but she really upset him because she called him her 'pygmy' or her 'elf'. He said he didn't really mind, because it came from the queen herself, but it really upset him, that kind of remark.

So he was a brilliant councillor, who worked ably for the benefit of the state. He wasn't quite as scrupulous as his father had been, but few ministers were in that day and age.

**WW:** He's often seen as the spymaster general. Is that an image that's true of him?

**AW:** Yes, Cecil could be described as a spymaster general. He'd inherited the tradition from his father and from Sir Francis Walsingham, Queen Elizabeth's secretary of state. He had to maintain a network of spies, given the political and religious situation in England at that time. So, yes, I think that's an accurate description.

## The Gunpowder plotters

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**WW:** Let's talk about the Plot. Tell me about Robert Catesby.

**AW:** Robert Catesby was a gentleman of Warwickshire. He was in the sixth generation, descended from the William Catesby who had been a minister to Richard III and had perished at the time of Richard's death at Bosworth.

Now he, Robert Catesby, was a Catholic and he was a very charismatic man, who exerted a lot of personal charm over those with whom he came into contact. He was committed to eradicating the persecution that Catholics were suffering at that time, and he was very much an idealist and perhaps, in some ways, not very much of a realist. He was the man who was the brains behind the Gunpowder Plot.

**WW:** Tell me about Guy Fawkes.

**AW:** Guy Fawkes was a Catholic from Yorkshire – he was born in York. His relatives on his mother's side were the chief influence in his life – they were Catholics – and he became very much the equivalent of a hard-line Catholic terrorist. He served in the armies of Philip of Spain as a mercenary, and became very xenophobic at this time against any outside Protestant influences. He was chosen not for this alone, but also because he would not have been known in London.

He was not a gentleman. He was obviously an educated person, a person of great fervour, almost a fanatic, but he would not have been known in London. London was a very small place in those days, and anybody who was anybody became rapidly well known. So Guy Fawkes was an ideal choice.

## 17th-century London

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**WW:** What was London like in the 17th century?

**AW:** In the early 17th century, London was a very crowded city, still largely contained within the confines of its original medieval walls, but sprawling out into what would become the suburbs.

London itself, before the Great Fire, was a city composed of tiny, winding streets with overhanging houses. There was a great risk of fire from such houses, and it was James I who actually made it illegal for people to build their houses with overhanging first storeys.

**WW:** Today it seems surprising that Fawkes and Percy could rent a house in the heart of Westminster ...

**AW:** It would not be surprising for somebody like Fawkes and Percy to rent houses in the Palace of Westminster, because what was left of the medieval palace – most of which had been destroyed by fire in 1512 – was actually a conglomeration of many little buildings. There were shops; there were old courtier lodgings that people could rent. It wasn't used as a royal palace; it was used for Parliament. Westminster Hall was used for state trials, and there was a jewel tower where valuables were kept, but it wasn't used as a palace. All these old buildings that had been part of the medieval palace were rented out for profit.

**WW:** When the Plot started and they started to bring the gunpowder in, they brought it across the river. Can you talk a bit about the river?

**AW:** It's strange to us today to realise that they brought all this gunpowder across to the cellar by river, across the Thames. We have to remember, though, that London was full of very crowded streets and it was virtually impossible to manoeuvre carts through them. The river was London's chief thoroughfare and would have been crowded with boats of all kinds, there were many ferries crossing the river, so one more is not going to be very remarkable.

## The Monteaagle letter

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**WW:** The Monteaagle letter – what's the official story?

**AW:** The official story is that, one evening, a week or so before the plot, Lord Monteaagle received a badly written letter warning him: 'Don't go to Parliament. Something nasty's going to happen if you go there.'

Now the received wisdom is that this was from one of the plotters who got cold feet. There were many theories as to who it could have been. One theory is that it was Lord Monteaagle's own sister, or his brother-in-law Francis Tresham. But if that had been the case, I think that they would have told Monteaagle by mouth, rather than send him an anonymous letter. It doesn't add up.

What it seems to be most likely is that the letter was actually written by Lord Monteaagle himself. He probably was involved at some stage with the plotters and decided he didn't want to go any further, and he needed to exonerate himself. And the best way of doing this was to pretend to receive a letter, warning him of what was going to happen.

There's some theory that the government itself, that Cecil himself, knew all about this, and that it was really a plot to catch out the existing plotters ...

**WW:** Do you see the hand of Cecil was behind this?

**AW:** Personally, no. I think it was Lord Monteaagle, but that's just my opinion!

## The discovery of the plot

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**WW:** Tell me about the events of 4 November, the hours leading up to the plot's discovery ...

**AW:** The government, of course, was just biding its time and waiting, as Cecil said, for the plot to 'ripen'.

The gunpowder had been stored in this cellar underneath the Parliament house. It was under lots of firewood. The king was being kept informed of what was going on. The government mounted a search party at some stage during the evening, and they did a rather perfunctory search, but this wasn't enough for the king.

He said, 'No, somebody's got to go back and see exactly what's happening, if there's anybody down there.' They went back and they found this man down there and that was Guy Fawkes, about to light the fuse.

**WW:** After Guy Fawkes was discovered, he was taken before James. What happened at their meeting?

**AW:** Well, the fact that there was a meeting at all is remarkable, because it was virtually unheard of for a monarch to interview anyone suspected of treason. The first thing monarchs did was distance themselves completely. But, no, here's James, who's pretty paranoid by this time, and he wants to interview Guy Fawkes himself. And Guy Fawkes is extremely brave. This is where I think the degree of fanaticism comes in, because he maintains he's done nothing wrong and turns round to James and says, 'Dangerous diseases need desperate remedies.' And he maintains that what he has done throughout has been in the interests of the true faith.

**WW:** What did it mean to kill a king?

**AW:** It meant a lot more in those days than it does now, because over the centuries we have lost much of the awe and reverence in which monarchy was once held.

You have to understand that people regarded monarchs in the 16th and 17th centuries as beings apart, invested at their coronation with powers that enabled them to understand state affairs in a way that no ordinary mortal could. It was even believed that there was a place in heaven set aside for crowned monarchs, where they didn't have to mix with the hoi polloi who'd gone to the hereafter.

Towards the end of the 16th century, with the progress of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, there comes a shift in attitudes, a shift in priorities. While kingship is still held in reverence, religious ideologies are gaining in importance, and therefore people are having to make conscious choices between going with an ideology or going with loyalty to the king.

So this is the situation that enabled something like the Gunpowder Plot to flourish, because while the king was held in awe and reverence, many Catholics would not have believed that he was the one sent by God to rule.

## Torture

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**WW:** Tell me about James sanctioning torture.

**AW:** Torture was officially illegal in England, but it had been used since the middle of the 15th century when political prisoners needed to be questioned and information needed to be got out of them. Various sovereigns had sanctioned the use of torture right the way through the Tudor period, and it was sanctioned in many cases for Catholic priests.

So it was not unusual that the plotters in the Gunpowder Plot should be tortured. We know that Guy Fawkes was

tortured because, when he appeared in public afterwards, he was seen to be a broken man in every respect.

James's letter of authority said that the 'gentler' tortures were to be employed first, and then, if necessary, the interrogators were to proceed to the more forceful tortures. Now the 'gentler' tortures meant that the prisoner would be suspended by manacles through the arms on a wall and a wooden block would be placed under the feet, so the feet could just touch. But at some stage, that block would be removed and the prisoner would be left dangling in the air. This could be excruciatingly painful, and there are instances of prisoners whose hands were permanently maimed as a result. But people didn't always crumble immediately under these.

But when it came to the rack, which was the more forceful torture, there were few prisoners who had the courage to even go on the rack. The mere sight of it was enough to make them confess, or make something up, which some of them certainly did.

The rack itself dislocated limbs and caused permanent disability. There are only one or two instances of people who actually held out against being racked, and Guy Fawkes was not one of them. He talked; he crumbled.

We don't know for certain that he was racked, but the fact that he was a fanatic makes me feel that they would have to have used such measures to get him to talk.

## The trial and executions

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**WW:** Tell me about the big trial of the conspirators.

**AW:** Treason trials in the early 17th century were show trials; they were foregone conclusions.

The real interrogation had taken place beforehand in the presence of the Privy Council, but it was by no means certain that the person hauled before it was going to be deemed guilty. If a good case was made against them before the Privy Council, it had to be a very good case. They would then be sent for trial. The whole point of the trial was so that the treason could be made public and people could see how dreadful it was and the circumstances of it. Then the person would be condemned to death.

Now this happened with the plotters in the Gunpowder Plot. They were all brought to trial. Those who were not gently born, like Sir Everard Digby, were tried first, and then the sentence of death was pronounced.

The sentence of death was to be hanged, drawn and quartered. That was the prescribed penalty of the law for treason and had been since the 13th century.

**WW:** What did hanging, drawing and quartering actually mean?

**AW:** It meant being tied to a hurdle and drawn by horses through the streets of London to the place of execution. The reason you were meant to be horizontal to the ground was that you weren't supposed to pollute the air that normal people were breathing – you were supposed to be kept at a low level.

The punishment would then involve being hanged by the neck until you were not quite dead, and then being cut down. Then you could be castrated or you could be disembowelled, or your heart torn out. All these things symbolised that you would not live to procreate heirs who were going to be traitors. The heart was where your inner self, your character, was thought to repose. That's why it was cut out.

And then the head was cut off and the body was divided into quarters and the quarters and the head would be displayed on spikes over gates on London Bridge as an edifying example to those who might also think of committing treason.

**WW:** When the plotters went to their trial, would they have known this?

**AW:** Oh, they would have known – yes, most people knew. There was a great interest in public executions in those days. Broadsides were sold giving all the gory details, and everybody wanted to know the details and crowds attended them.

They would have known. It was very well known what the penalty for treason was, and so they knew what was in store for them.

The king actually watched the trial from a concealed spot. He was actually concerned because they [the plotters] were smoking and he thought that showed contempt. He hated smoking anyway, James; he had just published a treatise against it. But he thought that smoking showed contempt for the process of the law and that they didn't really care what happened to them.

## The conspirators' motivations

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**WW:** Regarding the plot itself, one wonders how realistic the conspirators actually were.

**AW:** Using gunpowder to get rid of your enemies in this period in history is a notoriously unreliable method. But then think of what happened to Lord Darnley – the king's own father – in 1567, whose house was blown up when he was staying in it (although there is a rumour that he didn't actually die in the explosion). His fate may well have contributed to James's paranoia.

However, you cannot ever guarantee that gunpowder is going to behave in the way you think it will. So to use this as a method of trying to get rid of the king and his heirs and the whole of Parliament isn't a very realistic method of assassination!

**WW:** Were the plotters freedom fighters or were they terrorists?

**AW:** I don't think you can answer that question without having regard to how people felt about religion at this period in history.

I think that the plotters' convictions were so secure, so sure. They had the kind of faith for which people would allow themselves to be burned at the stake. They felt so sincere in their convictions that they must be seen as freedom fighters rather than as terrorists. I can understand their desperation in not being allowed to practise their religion and their desire to do something that they saw as noble, that would achieve something for their fellow Catholics in England. But I think they were totally unrealistic in their expectations.

Even had this plot succeeded, there would have been a reaction against it. Catholics were very much a minority group in England at that time, and I don't think what was planned to have happened afterwards would have succeeded. What I do think would have happened was perhaps a civil war coming quite a bit earlier.