

TIMESONLINE

From The Times

October 9, 2008

Exclusive interview with David Starkey

Giles Whittell meets the blunt TV historian who is bringing Henry VIII's reign to life

WAITING for David Starkey is a little scary. You know - because his reputation precedes him like a dense cloud of incense - that he is the rudest man in Britain and probably the richest historian ever, that he has a chauffeur-driven Daimler and a gammy foot and can be shockingly frank about his sex life.

You know from his publicist that the café at the top of Waterstone's Piccadilly won't be quite posh enough. So you arrange to meet at the Ritz, in the Rivoli Bar - which, by special arrangement, you will have entirely to yourselves.

At the Ritz the bit about the Daimler turns out to be true. But everything else is nonsense, or seems so at first. Starkey is punctual and courteous. He crosses the hotel's entrance marble in precise little steps and seems happy with the Rivoli. "Chair or banquette?" I venture, with the emphasis daringly on the bonk.

He chortles heartily, and we're off.

He has come to talk about what we are told is the culmination of his life's work, a new biography of Henry VIII whose publication coincides with a TV series (naturally), an exhibition at the British Library and the 500th anniversary of Henry's coronation. As far as can be judged from volume one this will be a succulent and significant opus, and on recent evidence thousands upon thousands of people will read it. Since his first biography, of Elizabeth I eight years ago, Starkey has written only bestsellers. But this is also the culmination of a 30-year battle with the snobs of the historical profession, a battle that only the fiercest purists would deny Starkey has won.

It began in the early Seventies in a conversation with Geoffrey Elton, his doctoral supervisor and the founding father of modern Tudor studies, a man whose intellect and seriousness Starkey never questions but whose effect on his field he considers devastating: "He turned it into a desert," Starkey says. "He just refused to have anybody there of merit." The young Starkey's doctoral thesis was a detailed study of Henry's inner household. The obvious question it posed, he says, was: "What is the individual round whom all this is taking place?" Hence Starkey's fateful remark: "I think the next step is a biography." Elton to Starkey: "You've got a brain. Do you want to waste it?"

At first Elton tolerated Starkey's obsession with Henry's court and the dazzling figure at its centre.

"And then, as he got older, his health began to go. He started to get very tetchy ... arrogant, and I suppose I did the unforgiveable, which was to criticise him humorously." In 1983, to celebrate Elton's knighthood and elevation to the Regius professorship of history at Cambridge, his American students published a collection of essays. One of them was a "dreary one on Thomas Cromwell with the unbelievably pompous title *Cromwell Redivivus*". In his review in the *London Review of Books*, Starkey pointed out that *redivivus* meant, among other things, "re-used building materials".

"Elton didn't like that at all," he says. It got ugly.

"Geoffrey got very cross with me. He wrote an absolutely shocking review of a collection of essays I edited in which he obviously went for me, but he went for very much younger people as well, which I think for somebody who is a knight and a Regius professor is scandalous bullying, and I said so." Elton had found an error in one of Starkey's footnotes.



"Unfortunately," Starkey says, "it was his eyesight that was at fault, not my footnotes. So one was able to skewer him by his own methods. It was horrible, and in retrospect I deeply regret it." Really? "Well, I regret that the thing happened at all."

Starkey is the original History Boy: precocious, pugnacious, madly competitive and thriving on pure intellectual combat. In a sense he is a conformist; in a more important sense he is a rebel, picking fights with whom-soever he pleases, taking no prisoners, exulting in victory, and presenting the whole performance in an embassage of camp exuberance.

He was born in Kendal in 1945, the son of a trade union district secretary. The 11-plus offered a route out of flat-capped tedium and he seized it, catapulted via the local grammar to the high table at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge. There, Elton first championed him, then scuppered his chances of tenure once they had fallen out.

He made his debut as a media gladiator in 1977 on Russell Harty's late-night Granada talk show, Behave Yourself. Off air, both behaved rather badly, trawling Manchester's gay clubs as Starkey had learnt to trawl London's since taking up a teaching post at the LSE in 1972. He graduated to historical documentaries, Radio 4's Moral Maze and whole TV series built around him. By the late 1990s he still wasn't a professor but had established a unique position as an independent, self-financing colossus of popular history, complete with Daimler.

But he still hadn't written "the BIG BOOK". So, emboldened by the success of his first biography, on Elizabeth, he revisited and updated his old research notes on the young Henry's court. This is where you realise that Starkey is actually a scholar underneath; where you glimpse, as a journalist might put it, his copper bottom.

Those notes took five years to compile. They are his own summary of the National Archives' 244 volumes of main state papers from Henry VIII's reign, each volume 600 to 800 pages long. The index alone stretches to 22 volumes. "I've read the lot," he says. And almost no one else has.

This mountain of parchment reveals two crucial aspects of Henry's youth: that he was brought up exclusively by his mother and sisters, and that they maintained a separate household from his older brother, Arthur. As a child he was exceptional in every way: christened on a stage bedecked with gold cloth, riding alone through London by the age of 3, heir to the English throne by 10 and king before turning 18.

Starkey loves knowing more about Henry than almost anyone alive.

Bizarrely, though, he says he hates the Tudors, and in particular "the aesthetic of Tudor England".

So why spend a career immersed in it? Because, he says, the Tudors gave rise to our versions of Greek myths. Interest in them extends far beyond the English-speaking world and they left behind just the right amount of material for satisfying scholarship.

For anyone who thought you couldn't have too much material, he cites Gladstone's endless diary entries on auto-flagellation to rid himself of unclean thoughts. Which brings me to the sex question. Since this is for the Books section I ask whether, looking back, his substantial libido might have been nurtured by the innate eroticism of libraries.

He seems baffled, but eventually, obligingly, recalls that a standard pick-up routine at the university library was to write a catalogue number on the loo wall, then leave a reader's slip in the book in question to firm up the assignation. "All very strange. But no, I don't think that was part of it at all." The conclusion is something of a let-down. For David Starkey, history beats even sex.

Henry: Virtuous Prince by David Starkey
HarperPress, £25 Buy the book

Contact our advertising team for advertising and sponsorship in Times Online, The Times and The Sunday Times, or place your advertisement.

Times Online Services: Dating | Jobs | Property Search | Used Cars | Holidays | Births, Marriages, Deaths | Subscriptions
News International associated websites: Globrix Property Search | Property Finder | Milkround

Copyright 2009 Times Newspapers Ltd.

This service is provided on Times Newspapers' standard Terms and Conditions. Please read our Privacy Policy. To inquire about a licence to reproduce material from Times Online, The Times or The Sunday Times, click here. This website is published by a member of the News International Group. News International Limited, 1 Virginia St, London E98 1XY, is the holding company for the News International group and is registered in England No 81701. VAT number GB 243 8054 69.



