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Introduction

Anne Cooke was the second daughter of Anthony and Anne Cooke. Born in 1528, in the reign of Henry VIII, she was brought up in a well-established gentry family that embraced both the new learning of Renaissance humanism and a new form of religion, ultimately to be known as Protestantism. The Cookes had close connections to the royal family and the intellectual elite at court. Living through the political upheavals and religious reverses of four Tudor reigns, Anne would play a role in events of national significance and serve in the Privy Chambers of both Tudor queens regnant, Mary I and Elizabeth I. A published translator by the age of twenty and ardent supporter of religious reform, who promoted the cause of dissident Puritans in her later years, she saw the end of the Tudor dynasty, dying in her early eighties seven years after James I acceded to the throne of England. She married lawyer and statesman Nicholas Bacon and raised two clever and difficult sons, Anthony and Francis.

History, wrote Hilary Mantel, is ‘the record of what’s left on the record ... what’s left in the sieve when the centuries have run through it – a few stones, scraps of writing, scraps of cloth.’¹ We make what we can from the fragments that survive.

The fragments of Anne’s life left for historians to piece together include her published translations of Italian and Latin texts, and around a hundred letters by chance preserved with her son Anthony’s correspondence in the Lambeth Palace archive. Her face looks out from a handful of portraits. We know where she lived. We can trace her networks of family and fellow religious reformers and contextualise her life in the wider history of the time. This book is my attempt to draw these threads together and put on the record the life of a remarkable woman.

When another young woman was presented to James I, with the information that she knew Latin, Greek and Hebrew, he laughed, ‘Ay, but can she spin?’ Yet before he came to the throne, England had been ruled for almost half a century by a woman whose preoccupations were not household, husband and family, but knowledge and power. No learned woman would have been treated so dismissively at Elizabeth I’s court. Elizabeth was not alone in being a formidably well-educated woman for her time. Other young women of the mid-sixteenth century were taught the classics and humanities, among them the queen’s half-sister Mary, her stepmother

Catherine Parr, Lady Jane Grey, the women of the Devereux and Sidney families, and the five Cooke sisters including Anne. The influence of such educated, often politically astute women in the early modern period has been little acknowledged in the past, but for some women – as well as the two queens – life during the reigns of Mary and Elizabeth held more than marriage, household duties and decorative accomplishments.

Four centuries after her death at the Bacon family estate of Gorhambury in Hertfordshire, we can still hear Lady Anne Bacon's distinctive voice through the translations she undertook and the letters that survive from a decade of her widowhood. Thanks to the painstaking work of Dr Gemma Allen in transcribing and editing the letters, and Dr Patricia Demers in editing Anne Bacon's most important works of translation, these sources are now accessible in scholarly editions.² Quotations used here are rendered into modern spelling.

Anne Bacon's imprint upon the history of her time was notable, and together with her sisters she has been visible at the margins of historical accounts of the period, but until feminist historians began to open new lines of investigation into the lives and experiences of early modern women, her life was largely absent from the mainstream narrative of Tudor England.³ This book describes some of the opportunities, achievements and restrictions of Anne Cooke Bacon's life, and the part she played in key events of the reigns of Mary I and Elizabeth I.