

CONTENTS

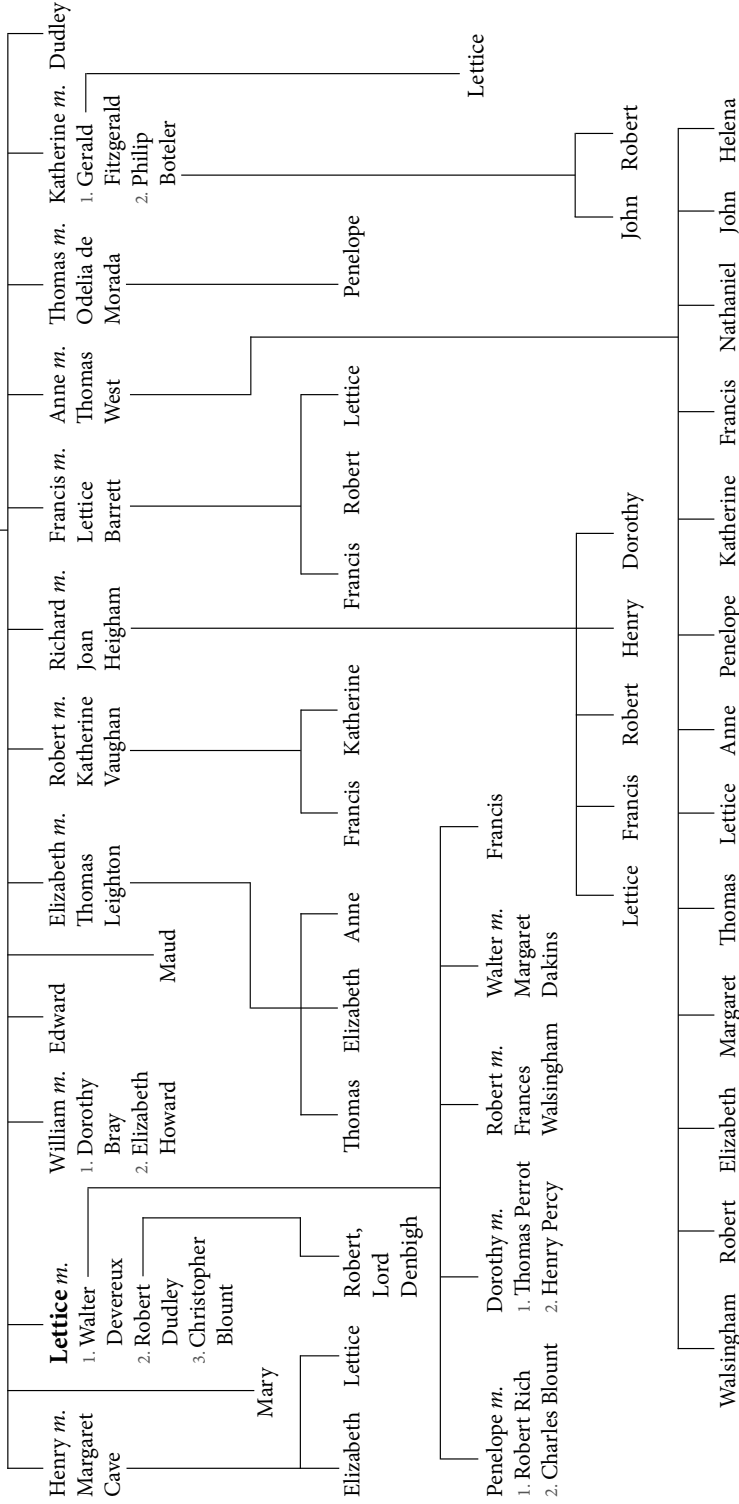


<i>List of Illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Genealogical Tables</i>	xi
<i>Dramatis Personae</i>	xiv
<i>Timeline</i>	xxii
<i>Author's Note</i>	xxiv
Introduction	xxv
Prologue	xxxii
1 Hiding Royal Blood	1
2 Darling to the Maiden Queen	19
3 Captive to the Charms of Lettice Knollys	38
4 The Goodliest Male Personage in England	57
5 Flirting with the Viscountess	78
6 Death with his Dart hath us Bereft	91
7 Faithful, Faultless, Yet Someway Unfortunate, Yet Must Suffer	107
8 His Paramour, or his Wife	119
9 Great Enmity	137
10 Up and Down the Country	153
11 A Marriage in Secret	165
12 One Queen in England	173
13 A She-Wolf	186

14	My Sorrowful Wife	200
15	Our Mistress's Extreme Rage	214
16	A Continual Fever	228
17	My Best Friend	246
18	Disgraced Persons	265
19	Some Wonted Unkind Words	277
20	The Arch-Traitor Essex	293
21	Mildly Like a Lamb	311
22	The Wars with Thunder, and the Court with Stars	324
	<i>Epilogue</i>	334
	<i>Appendix 1: Epitaph to Lettice, Countess of Leicester</i>	337
	<i>Appendix 2: Following in Lettice's Footsteps – Places to Visit</i>	339
	<i>Notes and References</i>	341
	<i>Bibliography</i>	379
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	389
	<i>Index</i>	391

THE KNOLLYS FAMILY

Francis Knollys *m.* Katherine Carey



INTRODUCTION



OF THE MANY intriguing women who are scattered throughout the Tudor period, all with their own unique tale to tell, why Lettice Knollys? The simple answer is ‘why not?’ She was a striking and spirited Early Modern woman, whose long life interplayed with the great dramas of the age, and her full story has been overlooked for too long. Though there have been short pieces about her, and she has featured in books about her kinswoman Elizabeth I, and her second husband, Robert Dudley, Lettice has never been the subject of a full-scale biography. Yet hers was a life that was as turbulent and intriguing as it was long. It is its length that makes it all the more remarkable, for she lived to the extraordinary age of ninety-one – a staggering rarity in an age when the average life span was around forty.

In his *Romance of the Peerage*, the Victorian writer George L. Craik stated that ‘the very name of Lettice Knollys will probably be new’, but he duly acknowledged that ‘she was one of Queen Elizabeth’s relations’.¹ She was nearer, in fact, than many people realized, but Lettice’s claim to fame and right to a dedicated biography goes much further than that.

For many years Lettice was close to her kinswoman Elizabeth I, but she spent the larger part of the Queen’s reign living in disgrace. The reason for this was that she became the Queen’s rival, and it was a circumstance that Elizabeth would never forgive. Lettice was not, however, a political rival in the same way as Mary, Queen of Scots, or Lady Katherine Grey, who, like Lettice, were also Elizabeth’s kinswomen; indeed, the rivalry between Lettice and Elizabeth was of a far more personal nature, unmuddied by politics, and one that was completely unique. It struck to the very heart of Elizabeth and wounded her deeply. For a woman so powerful, who could mete out the most severe punishments on her

political enemies, the fact that she could not destroy Lettice must have been all the more bitter.

Over the centuries Lettice's reputation has become blackened, thanks largely to material that was written and published during her own lifetime. In 1584, a scandalous anonymous tract known as *Leicester's Commonwealth* appeared in England. Its full title was *The Copy of a Letter Written by a Master of Art of Cambridge*, and the piece, which was aimed at Lettice's husband the Earl of Leicester, was incredibly hostile – not least because the authors had an axe to grind. Written by Catholics who were pleading for religious toleration – and whose beliefs were completely at odds with Leicester's own Protestant views – it is hardly surprising that they viewed him with such animosity.

Both Leicester and the Queen tried desperately to suppress its circulation, but with little effect, and in any case, the damage had been done. The authors were clearly well informed on gossip that was circulating at the time, and as such were able to put their own spin on it. The work had a profound effect on shaping later writers' views on the Earl, and his reputation. Walter Scott's famous 1821 novel, *Kenilworth*, paints him as an ambitious individual who is desperate to win the Queen's favour – to such an extent that his steward arranges the murder of Leicester's first wife, Amy Robsart. In turn, *Leicester's Commonwealth* was also derogatory about Lettice, and it is this that has contributed to her image as both an overtly sexual seductress and, more shockingly, a murderess. Most of the claims made by the authors of the *Commonwealth* can be discredited, but this did not stop others from jumping to similar conclusions. The chronicler William Camden, for example, drew much of the material for his *Historie of the Most Renowned and Victorious Princess Elizabeth*, better known as the *Annales*, from *Leicester's Commonwealth*, and he too presented a negative view of Lettice, one that has had great influence and endurance through the centuries. It was at the suggestion of the Queen's advisor, Lord Burghley, in 1597 that Camden began to think of compiling a history of Elizabeth's reign, but he did not start writing

INTRODUCTION

it until 1607 – four years after the Queen’s death. Though he gleaned some of the information for his narrative from people who were close to the Queen and her courtiers, Camden’s work was intended to highlight Elizabeth’s achievements. It was consequently highly critical of anything and anyone at odds with this. The trend of casting Lettice in a bad light has largely continued to the present day. Robert Lacey, the biographer of Lettice’s son the Earl of Essex, related that she was ‘Wilful and impetuous, she insisted always on having her own way, dominating her son Robert in his youth and then dogging his footsteps at Court.’² This image has also been highlighted in popular culture. In the 1971 *Elizabeth R* television series, in which Angela Thorne adopted the role of Lettice, she is portrayed as a highly spirited woman who, following her fall from grace, was eager to antagonize Elizabeth I, played by Glenda Jackson. She is outspoken, haughty, arrogant and unrepentant. Although at various points in her life Lettice did display some of these traits, it is by no means the whole story.

What makes Lettice all the more remarkable is her longevity: her life spanned the reigns of seven monarchs (including Lady Jane Grey), and two dynasties; she was born during the kingship of Henry VIII and witnessed the Tudor monarchy in all its glory, before its ultimate demise following the death of Elizabeth I in 1603. In its place the Scottish Stuart dynasty established itself firmly on the English throne, uniting the kingdoms of England and Scotland for the first time. Lettice lived through all of this and more, for hers was a period during which the country underwent significant change, ravaged by war, political upheaval and religious turmoil. Many of these changes and the events they brought with them impacted upon Lettice and her family, who also faced their own challenges. Although Lettice herself was not always actively involved in, or a witness to, all of the tumultuous happenings, those closest to her often were. Husbands, children, kin; Lettice’s family were always at the very centre of events, watching and participating as the plots, politics and wars of the era unfolded. As such, Lettice experienced the theatre of her day in a very different way; her life offers us an extraordinarily