

Transcript – Deborah Harkness interview 29/12/20

Sarah: Welcome Deborah Harkness, lovely to see you, thank you so much for agreeing to the interview with us at Syon House. I'm Sarah Ponder, one of the historic guides here at Syon and we're very excited about the new season of ADOW which was absolutely huge on Sky. And the books as well, especially Shadow of Night which features our very own Wizard Earl, 9th Earl of Northumberland Henry Percy and the School of Night. As you can see the Long Gallery behind me, they would have come here and talked about magick and alchemy and allsorts so it's fantastic to see them come to life in popular fiction and have them immortalised on TV. We're really excited to see it. So we left Season 1 and the first book where Matthew and Diana time travel to 1590 Elizabethan England. Syon House's link with the school of the night starts a little bit later when Henry Percy acquires the house in 1597, so a few years later but he's very well ensconced with his coterie of 'mathmagicians'

Deb: I like that! I'm going to steal that.

Sarah: Absolutely! Henry is a real hero of mine, recently finished my History degree and wrote my dissertation on him and the patronage he offered. Lockdown learning, a renaissance earl's academy in the tower, the super group of tutors he had for his son Algernon when he was imprisoned there after 1605. Having the school of the night at Syon is a real coup for us and we're hoping to see more of them during the series. So what I'd like to ask is why the school of the night and why specifically Henry.

Deb: Alright, good questions, all. Thank you so much for inviting me to this virtual audience at Syon House. I feel very much like I've been invited into sacred ground. For historians, Syon House really is sacred ground. It was definitely a very important space for intellectual, free thinking and development which was not always really supported in a university setting in the late 16th and 17th c. So the curriculum had been established in the middle ages, it was very traditional. Mathematics and sciences, the quadrivium was still undervalued in comparison to the trivium that had changed a little with renaissance humanism. But if you were a free thinker, pushing the intellectual envelope, you needed to find an alternative place to have those discussions. And so some of the places that we think provided that were workshops around the city, as I argue in my book the Jewel House. Houses like Syon House where a patron would gather, the precursor of an 18th c salon together, or inns of court, the law schools which were much less regulated and full of ambitious young men with time and money on their hands. So those are the sort of places where often the most interesting things happened. Correct me if I'm wrong, there was a fire at Syon House?

Sarah: Not that I know of, it used to be an abbey, Syon Abbey from the 1420s. It was an abbey up until the dissolution of the monasteries,

Deb: That's it, right

Sarah: Where the lovely Henry VIII decided to get rid of it and he came to a sticky end at Syon, I don't know if you've heard the legend about Henry's body when it was on the way to Windsor to be buried. The procession went along the road past Syon and a crack developed in the lead coffin. So they stopped at Syon House, well it was Syon Abbey at the time, the remains of the cloisters and the crypt. His coffin stayed there overnight; ready to be fixed in the morning. His body was two weeks

dead by that time, and filled up with gases and exploded and leaked out through the crack onto the floor. I hope you've had your breakfast!

Deb: Yup!

Sarah: When they came to fix the coffin the next morning they had to shoo away dogs which were licking it up. Absolutely awful.

Deb: I haven't heard that story but I have heard similar stories, so that's very much in keeping with what they called Coffin Licker. When the body would decompose inside and the liquid would seep out. Anyone of faint stomach, the 16th C is not your period! But I have to go back to your question 'why the school of night'? I got so distracted by Syon House. It's very similar to you; I did my Master's Thesis on the School of the night.

Sarah: Oh Wow!

Deb: so I was at that point a straight up Tudor historian, and got my master's in Tudor history but I was interested in science and intellectual exchange and how we get that, considering there are so many silences surrounding it. If this were a different time, if we sat down to have a chat about Henry Percy, I might not have taken notes, you might not have taken notes, it might have been the kind of conversation that changed our intellectual outlook but there would have been no record of it.

So I've always been interested in that intellectual community and so I looked at the literature produced by the school of the night to try to figure out how they felt about Elizabeth and her power in the last two and a half decades of her reign. I was really interested in how these younger men who were pushing the intellectual envelope dealt with an aging monarch. How did they take those ideas, and the combination of astrological, alchemical, poetic etc.

George Chapman who was a member of the School of Night wrote this amazing very disturbing poem called the shadow of night. People always say to me, 'how do you come up with these great titles', I steal them from 16th C people, almost inevitably! That's how I became aware of the group, my thesis was mostly on George Chapman, but that's how I became interested in Mathew Roydon, this mysterious figure, who becomes Matthew de Clermont in my novels. This is one of the great joys about writing fiction. As an historian, I can only argue what I have direct evidence for - direct persuasive evidence. As a novelist I can tell you what I really think based on 'circumstantial' evidence which would never hold up to a historian.

So when people ask what my best work of history is, I honestly would say Shadow of Night, because I can tell you what I really think, not what I can prove.

Sarah: and that's I suppose our interpretation of history, not just the written evidence because things are relationships and so much more complex than just a written record. And it's looking at them as humans and their emotions and the kind of conversations they would have. Even with diaries, you don't write every single thing down so the dialogue, the conversations they would have really comes to life in historical fiction. Because there is that point that you have to show they are human and not just basing it on written evidence.

Deb: And that's why Henry Percy is such a challenge. We know mostly about him from 1600 on. But if you think about how much you change over a decade then we can't really take the Henry we know as a father and a prisoner and move him back to 1590. You have to reverse engineer it a bit. Henry has always fascinated me because he was head and shoulders the highest ranking of the group, but Raleigh and Marlowe had all the star power. Hard to say, either Harriot or Marlowe had the best intellect, and we know so little about Roydon but that he was a well-regarded poet. But Percy is a real enigma. So as I started doing research into him, it became clear that the man had a bonkers family. His family is full of the most formidable characters, the grandmother really 'ate nails for breakfast' and that's why she shows up in the books with all her instructions around Christmas. Because the one thing I could understand about him was that he had a very strong grandmother in his life. And also, what absolutely intrigued me were the references here and there to his hearing loss.

Sarah: Yes and when I was reading (in *Shadow of Night*) the description of Diana when she first meets him, he's a 'gentle giant' and that's the kind of sense I got of him from research. There are not many biographers, as you found yourself. Gordon Batho, Gerard Brenan in the 1920s, but it's really sad because he's an amazing character. I like to think of him as a keystone in that age of scientific and geographic discovery. You've got Raleigh and Harriot who are close with him. Harriot in 1585 is off to Roanoke, and also Raleigh later on, and the scientific revolution at the same time. He's got a finger in every pie; he's a patron not only to these mathmagicians but to all these new ideas coming out at the same time and he's at the crux of and he's funding it. I find it really amazing I know in *Shadow of Night* that it refers to Matthew Roydon's wealth accumulated over the centuries and Henry being indebted to him and vice versa. But I find Henry Percy really someone who changed the face of the world, globally, from the people in that small group of renaissance men AND women – the queen herself, with John Dee in her ear all the time. It really was an exciting time and he's at the centre of it, he's bankrolling it in a way. If it wasn't for him...? I mean there are other patrons, Shakespeare's patron and other artists' patrons, but this was very different, he treated them really as equals.

Deb: Well, I think the difference is, is that he was patron-practitioner, and he's a little bit like Rudolf II in that way. He's not just interested in it, he's actually doing it and I think that gives you a very different kind of patronage power. What intrigued me was that he was so often stumbling into plots. And weirdly for a man of his status he seemed to be on the side lines. So I took that little biographical nugget of having hearing loss as a child and I tried to imagine what that would have been like in a culture where gossip and rumour and innuendo and inflection could literally get you killed. So in my story, I always am playing 'well what if that was true'. People would not have spoken much about a physical impairment in that period, so I take very seriously the mentions of it because it's not something that would have been said lightly. I kept thinking, this would explain so much about his career, the limits of his career, maybe why he takes a back seat to other individuals, why he ends up implicated in these plots, because I can't imagine, if he was in any way shape or form having to read lips, to understand conversation, How do you function at the court of Elizabeth I. I don't get it. I think it's a miracle he did as well as he did. So part of what of I wanted to do was to think sometimes people think of the past as everybody was whole, and perfect and heterosexual and white, and that's NOT the past.

Henry Percy has something really important to say about disability and how we think of it and where we find it in the past and how it might be covered up. So sitting, looking at that beautiful room (long gallery) and you imagine someone who might find it difficult in a crowded court setting and you can see why Syon house would have been so important to him, because he could draw in those scholars and academics and intellectuals that he really wanted to have a face to face conversation with. So it was patronage but also a way for him to participate on a slightly more equal footing, on home ground, an environment he had control over. So for Syon house to emerge with this shimmering glow over it as a place of intellectual exploration makes absolutely perfect sense. If Henry Percy really had hearing loss, then suddenly what was supposed to have happened at Syon makes so much more plausible sense and makes his position and role in it all the more important, I think which is great

Sarah: it's that as you said, being at court, a gentle giant, being shy, having that disability, it's all built on these face-to-face relationships that he has and his strength of character comes over and we see how he reaches these heights and well respected point in his career at court, because he has the ear of influential people as well.

Deb: and they were people who were his true friends, they didn't see hearing loss as a sign of intellectual impediment. We have a very troubling history as a species about seeing people who are differently abled.

Sarah: Even left handedness!

Deb: right, even so recently as the queen's father who had a stammer and people thought it meant he was mentally impaired, so can you imagine in the 16th Century for a child who couldn't understand, who might be 'shy', these are signs that his mind perhaps was not up to it, but his mind was perfectly fine. So to have that tight circle of friends who knew what his mental abilities were and did not mistake a hearing loss or impairment with anything intellectual, what a gift that must have been to them and to him.

Sarah: from the research I did for my dissertation on his upbringing, the Percy family goes back centuries, coming over with William the Conqueror. I always think, with the Game of Thrones thing – that the Percys are the Starks, because they are in the north, guarding against the wildlings, who may be the scots, and the wall – Hadrian's Wall, they're the Kings in the North and have been that throughout. And then there's all the plots, involving father, grandfathers and uncles, where the family went from being IN royal favour and then OUT of favour, I think that may have shaped his views of being outcast and not always being popular, but also his humanist learnings at the time, looking at the potential of man himself rather than being gifted it, it's building on your own ability which was very much a humanist learning and really shaped him and also his family past of being up and down on that wheel of fortune.

Deb: I definitely think like many of the Great Families, the war of the roses and Henry VIII were not necessarily hospitable to the enduring power of the great families. The Tudor dynasty is nothing if not insecure. The Plantagenets were not nearly as insecure as the Tudors were, for good reason. Henry VIII really is the upstart! The Percys have got a way better pedigree than Henry does and that doesn't sit well with Henry. The fragility they felt, I mean we look back and we know eventually everything was fine for the Tudors, but they didn't know that at the time, so people like the Percys

are hugely threatening for them. So the Dudleys, the Percys, the Greys, the Suffolk family, everybody thinks 'well if it worked for the Tudors, why shouldn't we get it'

Sarah: yes, 'we should get a look in'.

Deb: and you imagine what if that gentle giant Henry Percy if he had been able to 'swim with sharks' and had the star power and ambitions of Raleigh, with the Percy blood, we could be talking about a very different history of Britain.

Sarah: yes, absolutely

Deb: Really, it's not too much to say that, he comes from a majorly important family. And a family that, you know, there's no sense in late medieval and early modern England that 'a rising tide lifts all boats.' Instead, the philosophy is basically 'whoever dies with the most, wins', it's definitely more of an accumulative philosophy. Alnwick, Syon House, these are all symbols of success, physical symbols to remind people of the power of the Percys and it's why something like Algernon's education is so important to continue that legacy.

Sarah: that's right

Deb: So for me, whenever a book is adapted (for TV), people have to go by the wayside, they can't possibly include everyone that I include in the book because of the budget, so when they said to me 'the school of night is really quite large, who can we do without?' So the first thing I said was well you have to have Henry Percy!

Sarah: That's fantastic, I'm so glad you stuck up for him!

Deb: So poor George Chapman and Thomas Harriot hit the cutting room floor.

Sarah: I must say I was gutted about Thomas Harriot.

Deb: right, so that's five really extremely expensive actors surrounding Mathew Goode and that's a hard thing to achieve, but I said well you have to have Raleigh and Marlowe and you have to have Percy. And I'm so glad that I said that because we were able to get an absolutely amazing actor Adam Sklar who himself has hearing loss, to play Harry Percy.

Sarah: oh Wow, that's fantastic

Deb: it was such an education, because the person who played Raleigh, (III) worked out a communication system on set that was about gestures and signals and cues, and I though I'm actually watching how the school of night thrived and survived.

Sarah: that gives me shivers!

Deb: So you've got a lot to look forward to in Adam Sklar's representation of Henry Percy, he's going to do the Percys proud.

Sarah: I'm so pleased, it's wonderful to be able to see him come to life, to me he's a really important person in history that is really underrated, and not known, he's amazing and what you said about

the disability and diversity and understanding that, people don't know that he invited Pocahontas to come and live at Syon for 6 months!

Deb: Right!

Sarah: he's such an amazing man and I'm absolutely blown away that he features so heavily in Shadow of night and that he's going to be immortalised on TV. I always say that historic fiction is the gateway drug to academia.

Deb: Absolutely!

Sarah: I'm so thankful that you've included him and made him such an important part of your stories. So thank you so much Deborah for that.

Deb: Thank you Sarah, and I'm going to have to pop off to another call, but thank you so much for inviting me to join you at Syon House and I hope one day to do so in person but it is really a treat to think of Henry Percy walking those floors and halls and it's such a special treasure that we have it and that it can be visited and I just hope everyone within the sound of my voice takes advantage of the opportunity to get to know about this amazing historical figure. Henry Percy, the Earl of Northumberland, the Wizard Earl, the Mathmagican!

Sarah: Yes, our lovely Wizard Earl, the Mathmagican, yep you can have that! Fabulous, thank you so much and good luck with this series and I'm looking forward to it in January.

Deb: take care and we'll all be watching.