

# Jeanne D'Albret

(1528 – 1572)

Jeanne d'Albret was the most illustrious woman of her time, and perhaps one of the most illustrious women in all history. She was the only daughter of Margaret of Valois, Queen of Navarre (and sister of King Francois 1<sup>st</sup>), whose genius Jeanne inherited, and whom she surpassed in her gifts of governing, and in her more consistent attachment to the Reformation. Her first husband Germany's Duke of Cleves, to whom she was forced to wed at the age of 12 in 1541, no more consummated the marriage than placing his foot in her bed.

Her fine intellect, elevated soul, and deep piety were unequally yoked with Anthony de Bourbon, her second husband in 1549, a man of humane dispositions, but of low tastes, indolent habits, and of paltry character. His marriage with Jeanne d'Albret brought him the title of King of Navarre; but his wife was a woman of too much sense, and cherished too enlightened a regard for the welfare of her subjects, to give him more than the title. She took care not to entrust him with the reins of government. "Unstable as water," he spent his life in traveling between the two camps, the Protestant and the Popish, unable long to adhere to either, and heartily despised by both. The Romanists, knowing the vulgar ambition that actuated him, promised him a territory which he might govern in his own right, and he kept pursuing this imaginary princedom. It was a mere lure to draw him over to their side; and his life ended without his ever attaining the power he was as eager to grasp as he was unable to wield. He died fighting in the ranks of the Romanists before the walls of Rouen; and, true to his character for inconsistency to the last, he is said to have requested in his dying moments to be re-admitted into the Protestant Church.

Jeanne d'Albret had a finer genius and a stronger character than her mother, and she displayed the graces of a more consistent piety. The study of the Bible drew her thoughts in her early years to the Reformation, and her convictions ripening into a full belief of its truth, although untoward circumstances made her long conceal them, she at last, in 1560, made open profession of Protestantism. At that time not only did the Protestant cause underlie the anathemas of Popes, but the Parliament of Paris had put it beyond the pale of law, and having set a price upon the heads of its adherents, it left them to be hunted down like wild beasts. Jeanne d'Albret, having made her choice, was as resolute as her husband, Anthony de Bourbon, was vacillating. Emulating the noble steadfastness of Gaspard Coligny, she never repented of her resolution. Whether victory shone or defeat lowered on the Reformed cause, Jeanne d'Albret was ever by its side. When overtaken by disaster, she was ever the first to rally its dispirited adherents, and to bring them succor. Her husband forsook her; her son was taken from her; nothing daunted, she withdrew to her own principality of Bearn, and there devised, with equal wisdom and spirit, measures for the Reformation of her own subjects, at the same time that she was aiding, by her counsels and her resources, the Protestants in all parts of France.

Her little kingdom lay on the slope of the Pyrenees, looking toward France, which it touched on its northern frontier. In former times it was divided into Lower Navarre, of which we have spoken above, and Upper Navarre, which lay on the southern slope of the Pyrenees, and was contiguous with Old Castile. Though but a small territory, its position gave Navarre great Seated on the Pyrenees, it held in the one hand the keys of France, and in the other those of Spain. It was an object of jealousy to the sovereigns of both countries. It was coveted especially by the Kings of Spain, and in the days of Jeanne's grandfather Upper Navarre was torn from its rightful sovereigns by Ferdinand,



King of Arragon, whose usurpation was confirmed by Pope Julius II, so her dominions were restricted to that portion of the ancient Navarre which lay on the French side of the Pyrenees.

In 1560, we have said, Jeanne d'Albret made open profession of the Protestant faith. In 1563 came her famous edict, dated from her castle at Pau, abolishing the Popish service throughout Bearn, and introducing the Protestant worship. The majority of her subjects were already prepared for this change, and the priests, though powerful, did not venture openly to oppose the public sentiment. A second royal edict confiscated a great part of the temporalities of the Church, but without adding them to the crown. They were divided into three parts. One-third was devoted to the education of the youth, another third to the relief of the poor, and the remaining third to the support of the Protestant worship. The private opinion of the Roman Catholic was respected, and only the public celebration of this worship forbidden. All trials and punishment for differences of religious opinions were abolished. Where the majority of the inhabitants were Protestant, the cathedrals were made over to them for their use, the images, crucifixes, and relics being removed. Where the inhabitants were equally divided, or nearly so, the two faiths were permitted the alternate use of the churches. The monasteries were converted into schools, thus anticipating by three centuries a measure long afterwards adopted by the Italian and other Continental Governments.

Colleges were founded for the higher education. Jeanne caused the Bible to be translated into the Basque dialects of her dominions. She sent to Geneva for ministers, and recalled the native evangelists who had been driven out of Navarre, in order to the more perfect instruction of her subjects in the doctrines of the Word of God. Thus did she labor for the Reformation of her kingdom. The courage she displayed may be judged of, when we say that the Pope was all the while thundering his excommunications against her; and that the powerful Kings of Spain and France, affronted by the erection of an heretical establishment on the frontiers of their dominions, were threatening to overrun her territory, imprison her person in the dungeons of the Inquisition, and raze her kingdom from the map of Europe.

In 1553, her son Henry was born. (Her first child died as an infant in 1551). Destined to be the future Henri IV of France, Henry of Navarre was initially raised as a Protestant, though he would prove, like his father, prone to change professions under duress or temptation. Following the failure of the Colloquy in Poissy to secure a place for the Huguenot, and massacre at Vassy when a Protestant gathering in a barn was attacked and over sixty killed and a hundred wounded including many women and children by the Duke of Guise, her turncoat husband imprisoned her and took her son at the age of eight to be indoctrinated in Catholicism. She was forced into leaving Paris,

and there were plots to kidnap her. In the following war, Antoine died of wounds at Rouen in 1563. Her son remained a prisoner.

In the midst of these distractions the Queen of Navarre gave herself to the study of the principles of jurisprudence. Comparing together the most famous codes of ancient and modern times, she produced, after the labor of seven years, a body of laws for the government of her kingdom, which was far in advance of her times. She entertained the most enlightened views on matters then little cared for by kings or parliaments. By her wise legislation she encouraged husbandry, improved the arts, fostered intelligence, and in a short time the beautiful order and amazing prosperity of her principality attracted universal admiration, and formed a striking contrast to the disorder, the violence, and misery that overspread the lands around it. In her dominions not a child was permitted to grow up uneducated, nor could a beggar be seen. The flourishing condition of Bearn showed what the mightier realms of Spain and France would have become, had their peoples been so wise as to welcome the Reformation. The code of the wise queen continued in operation in the territories of the House of D'Albret down to almost our own times.



## Jeanne d'Albret

### A Chronology

In 1565, she returned to the Court, and though reunited with her son, she saw her kingdom plunged into rebellion and war. The Huguenots consolidated their forces in the Port of La Rochelle in the North, where Henry and Jeanne proceeded to join them in 1568. She spent three momentous years assisting in the struggle for French Protestantism. But a disaster at the battle of Jarnac saw Conde captured and shot. The war petered out with exhaustion on both sides. Then in 1572, Catherine de Medici proposed a marriage of her daughter Marguerite of Valois (Margot) to Henry of Navarre. Though she opposed the idea, Huguenot leaders favored it and Jeanne d'Albret and her nineteen year old son went to Paris to prepare for the wedding, which would prove to be a trap resulting in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Jeanne did not live to see it; contracting a fever in Paris, (though some suspect poisoning) she died just two months before the wedding.

Henry would survive the Massacre by converting to Catholicism. Later he would escape in 1576 to again embrace Protestantism. He became the Bourbon heir to the throne with the death of the last Valois son of Henri 2 and Catherine de Medici in 1584. But after many struggles and wars, Henry would again convert to Catholicism in order to unite his kingdom in 1594, saying "Paris is worth a mass". His exploits with the ladies were legendary, he had the beautiful Gabrielle d'Estrees as a mistress, but his marriage to Margot being dissolved after a long separation, he married Marie de Medici in 1600. The Edict of Nantes, proclaimed in 1598 would establish religious toleration for a hundred years.

Henry IV would be assassinated in 1610, leaving France in the hands of Marie and an eight year old Louis XIII, and setting the stage for the intrigues of Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin, and the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 by Louis XIV would lead to the exodus of more than 300,000 from France to England, French Canada, The Carolinas and Virginia and South Africa. taking with them a substantial portion of the artisans and educated classes.

---

From *History of Protestantism, Volume 2, Book 17*, by J.A. Wiley with additional information from Roland Bainton's *Women of the Reformation in France and England*.

- 1528 Jeanne's birth, Jan. 17
- 1541 Marriage to duke of Cleves, June 4
- 1547 Death of Francis I, March 31
- 1548 Marriage to Antoine, Oct. 20
- 1549 Death of Marguerite, Dec. 21 (Mother)
- 1551 Birth of Henry (Died as infant)
- 1553 Birth of Henry (Later king Henry IV)
- 1555 Death of Henri d'Albret (father)
- 1557 Antoine encourages Huguenots
- 1558 Jeanne at Paris
- 1559 Birth of Catherine, Feb. 7
  - Return to south
  - Death of Henry II, July 10
- 1560 Conspiracy of Amboise suppressed
  - Death of Francis II, Dec. 5
  - Jeanne announces her conversion, Dec. 20
- 1561 Edict on equality of confessions
  - Jeanne goes to Paris
  - Colloquy of Poissy, Sept.-Oct.
- 1562 Edict of January
  - Massacre of Vassy, March 1
  - Jeanne leaves Paris, March 6;
  - Antoine's defection, March 22
  - Jeanne in the south
  - Battle of Dreux, Conde captured, Dec. 19
- 1563 Duke of Guise assassinated, Feb. 18
  - Interchange with Cardinal d'Armagnac, Aug.
  - Excommunication by the pope, Sept. 28
- 1564 Edict on religious liberty
- 1565/6 At Court, Dec.-Mar.
- 1566 Edict restricting Catholicism; Rebellions
- 1567 Jeanne at Pau, Jan. 4
- 1568 Jeanne at Nerac, Aug. 8
  - Arrival at La Rochelle, Sept. 28
- 1569 Battle of Jarnac, Conde killed, March 13
- 1571 Jeanne in the south
  - Reform established, Nov.
- 1572 In Paris for the wedding, May 16
  - Death, June 9 Age 44