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THE ST. ROBERT SOUTHWELL, S.J. LECTURE SERIES

A LECTURE BY

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“MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS: SINNER AND SAINT”

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The British Library catalogue lists 73 titles under ‘Mary Tudor’, 150 relating to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and wait for it, 455 titles under ‘Mary Queen of Scots’. So what more can one say, or should say, on this all too well-trodden subject? Let’s see.

That defining figure of the sixteenth century, Erasmus of Rotterdam, composed a collection of essays based on classical proverbs, or ‘Adages’, including a piece called ‘Kings and fools are born, not made’, a crushing verdict on the institution of monarchy. Erasmus, repeating conventional wisdom, wrote that ‘it is the particular distinction of kings . . . to surpass others in wisdom, prudence, and watchfulness’. Really? He went on to ask, ‘You merely have to turn over the chronicles of the ancients and the moderns, and you will find that in several centuries there have barely been
one or two princes who did not by sheer stupidity bring disaster to human affairs.’ Look at what people say about these prize specimens: ‘‘He is tall, and stands head and shoulders above the rest’’; that’s splendid, if one wants to reach something down from a high place.’ Erasmus was not a republican. He believed in enlightened monarchy, and the key to make the institution work was education. But, says Erasmus, look at what actually happens. The future ruler is surrounded from birth by self-serving flatterers. ‘He is taught that whatever he wants he can have.’

Erasmus assumed that the prince, good or bad, would be male. But what if the ruler were to be female? Then, according to conventional wisdom, all the evil qualities which were planted in young male princes through an inappropriate upbringing would be there at birth in the female of the species. The Scottish reformer John Knox famously wrote a diatribe, The first blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women ['monstrous regiment', a resounding phrase, translates as 'unnatural government']. For the nature of womankind was 'weak, frail, impatient, feeble and foolish’. Knox expressed in public only what other more discreet men believed in private.

But, such was the sheer irrationality of rule by right of inheritance, female government was almost the norm in mid-sixteenth century Europe. In England, the two surviving children of Henry VIII, Mary and Elizabeth, reigned in their turns for fifty years. In France, the widow of King Henry II, Catherine de Medici, called the shots though the reigns of her sons. And Mary Stewart, the subject of this lecture, was a queen in one sense or another in three kingdoms, Scotland, France and England: queen of Scotland in her own right when only a few days old; a plausible claimant to be queen of England, since Henry VIII’s sister was her grandmother; and first queen consort and then queen dowager of France. Genetics made Mary Stewart dynastically the master card of European politics, or perhaps the rogue card. Mary’s personal rule in Scotland was preceded by the regency of her French mother, Mary of Guise. The monstrous regiment had taken over.

As soon as Mary Stewart, a very young and merry widow, returned from France to Scotland, Know found himself confronting in the flesh the anomaly against which he had fulminated in print. He told the queen: ‘If the realm finds no inconvenience from the regiment of a woman [I] shall be
as well content to live under your Grace as Paul was to live under Nero.’
With compliments like that, who needs insults? Some bystanders were
surprised that Knox had the courage to say such things. ‘Why should the
pleasing face of a gentlewoman affright me?’

‘The pleasing face of a gentlewoman.’ Yes, indeed. There was more
to this than dynastic politics. There was also sex. Mary Stewart had a
pleasing face, and a bewitching personality. And she was sexy, with her
French manners and that pretty Scots accent. Very few men were capable of
withstanding her charms. All women in the sixteenth century trod a moral
tightrope: on the one side chastity: on the other, the shame of sexual
misconduct. The records of the English church courts are packed with
evidence given in what were called defamation suits, brought on behalf of
women who needed to defend their moral reputations against being publicly
denounced as whores. To find out more about this subject you have no need
to travel to the English archives. Just read Othello, where not only
Desdemona, called by her husband ‘a subtle whore’, but all three women in
the play, Emilia and Bianca as well, are sinking in the quagmire of male
suspicion.

‘Burn the whore!’ the respectable or would-be respectable women of
Edinburgh hooted when Mary Queen of Scots was brought back to her
capital virtually a prisoner after her disastrous third marriage. Queens were
not immune from the vicious double standard which held which held women
perpetually on trial. What we may call the tabloid tendency in sixteenth-
century culture made sure that their crimes and misdemeanors, genuine or
imagined, made the front page. When Scotland rose up in outrage against
Mary, it was not her politics or her religion which was the issue. It was her
morals. The pamphlet press was full of nothing but lust, adultery, abnormal
sexual practices, promiscuity. And when it was found necessary to
demonise Mary in England, the organ stops pulled out were all labelled
Moral Turpitude. There were many precedents in history, and especially in
sacred, biblical history, for typecasting naughty royal ladies. The Old
Testament character of Jezebel was the one most often invoked; but also the
even more evil queen Athalia, whom an English author identified with Mary
Stewart’s mother-in-law, Catherine de Medici, ‘the Italian Athaliah’. Both
Mary and her cousin Elizabeth of England, especially after Mary’s
execution, were identified with Jezebel. In 1572, the English bishops called
to mind `two wicked queens, Jezebel and Athalia, both inferior in mischief to this late queen’, meaning Mary Queen of Scots.

Before there was really much need for it, John Knox, in a series of audiences with Mary, played the Jezebel card for all that it was worth, reducing the poor queen, who was not yet out of her teens, to tears. In Knox’s eyes, Mary was damned even before she set foot in her kingdom. Poor Mary: she complained in vain of Knox’s `rigorous manner of speaking’: `ye are ower sair for me.’ When on one occasion she walked out on him, Knox was left with her ladies in waiting, `there sitting in all their gorgeous apparel’. Knox told them, `merrily’: `Fair Ladies, how pleasing were this life of yours if it should ever abide; and then in the end that we might pass to Heaven with this gay gear. But fie upon that knave Death, that will come whether we will nor not; and when he hath laid on his arrest, then foul worms will be busy with this flesh, be it never so fair and so tender . . . By such means procured he the company of women; and so passed the time.’ The ladies of the Court knew all about Knox and would no doubt have been disappointed if he had talked about the weather.

The reason for Knox’s misogynistic hostility was religion. Scotland had just experienced the first revolution in its modern history: the Protestant Reformation, victorious over Catholicism, the queen regnant, the French. Although the foundations, let alone the superstructure, of a new Scottish Kirk, were shaky, Scotland had now embraced the Reformed religion. And Mary was a Catholic. As she told Knox: `I will defend the Kirk of Rome, for I think it is the true Kirk of God.’ Mary and her court went to Mass, instead of sitting obediently under the sermons of Knox and the other preachers. How far her Catholicism was more than habitual and, so to say, skin-deep, is a question we shall have to address a little later.

Poor Mary! But also, poor Knox. In order to validate the Reformation, he badly needed a Scottish Bloody Mary. He also needed a glorious company of Protestant martyrs, such as the 300 whose ashes were the seed of the Protestant ascendancy in England. But Scotland had not made many Protestant martyrs. And as for Mary Stewart, she accepted the curious status quo resulting from an incomplete Scottish Reformation, which privileged the new religion while keeping intact much of the fabric of the old Church. Mary Tudor had totally reversed the English Reformation. Mary Stewart attempted no such thing in Scotland. A brief period when she sided
with a Catholic faction has even been called ‘Queen Mary’s Catholic Interlude’—and it lasted all of five weeks.

Mary, still feeling her way, responded to Knox with tolerant courtesy. Everyone who ever had anything to do with the lady testified to her charm, her warm vivacious personality, qualities rather more evident than actual physical beauty. In conversation with Queen Elizabeth, the Scottish ambassador Sir James Melville was asked which of the two queens was the ‘fairest’. Poor Melville. ‘I said she was the fairest Queen in England, and ours the fairest Queen in Scotland.’ But Elizabeth was not content with that. Mirror, mirror on the wall! Who was the fairest? ‘I said that the Queen of England was whiter [Snow White?], but our Queen very lovesome.’ Poor Knox called Mary ‘our Jezebel Mistress’, but this characterization depended upon constructing a mythical Mary, a pasteboard whore of Babylon.

Mary’s secretary, William Maitland of Lethington, saw a different Mary, ‘a wisdom far exceeding her age.’ How good was Mary at being queen of Scotland, before everything became, as we say, pear-shaped? It is always a worry when historians of equal learning disagree. The late Gordon Donaldson, who was the leading Scottish historian of his day, gives the Mary of those years a good press. He calls her ‘the politic ruler’. Scottish politics was all about a contest for power between great families. And that was the nature of French politics too, the world in which Mary had grown up. Donaldson says: ‘Her residence in France was no bad apprenticeship.’ The result was that she brought about an unprecedented unity among the Scottish magnates. As for her religious policy, having her cake and eating it, this was wise, even brilliant.

But what about the verdict of Jenny Wormald? Wormald’s biography is subtitled A Study in Failure. Mary was ‘a monarch of little wit and no judgment’. The French apprenticeship? The ‘dreamlike quality’ of her life in what Wormald calls ‘a cocoon of adulation’ isolated her from political reality. ‘It is hard to think of another adult ruler who showed such
indifference to domestic political matters as she did.’ She rarely attended meetings of her Privy Council. Her religious policy? Not tolerant, merely indifferent. ‘Mary as ruler achieved nothing.’

Rarely has a book by such an eminent historian been so sourly reviewed as by Professor Michael Lynch of the University of Edinburgh. The Privy Council? Mary virtually invented it. And Wormald chose to ignore Mary’s role as an itinerant monarch, forever traveling around her little but large kingdom. Between August 1562 and September 1563 she was on the move for two thirds of the time and covered 1200 miles. Mary, unusually for a woman six feet tall, cut a majestic figure. Wherever she went there was hunting, and hawking, even golf. In 1562 and 1564 she was in the north-east, in Aberdeen and Inverness. The summer of 1563 was spent in the west, in Argyll and Ayrshire, and in the autumn of 1565 she was in the south-west. Much has always been made of the famous English progresses of Elizabeth I. But in a kingdom so radically decentralized and still feudal as Scotland, these journeys of Mary Stewart counted for much more. And unlike Elizabeth, Mary more than once accompanied her troops into battle. The nearest that Elizabeth got to that was her pantomime performance at Tilbury in the Armada year, 1588.

I am not going to use this lecture to enter into the entangled politics of families and clans which is the history of early modern Scotland. You would soon be as lost as I am in this maze, for I am a historian of England, not of Scotland. But take it as read that the essence of successful government in Scotland was making friends and influencing people, but also not being afraid to make enemies, and Mary was actually very good at this. For example, she used her expedition to the north to destroy the ‘cock of the north’, the earl of Huntly, the head of the Gordons and, as it happens, the leading Catholic nobleman in Scotland. There were battles, and Mary in the field, and summary executions, including the hanging of Huntly’s son and heir in her presence. Huntly died of a stroke on the battlefield, sitting on his horse. His corpse was embalmed and a few months later was stood up in its coffin in front of Parliament and found guilty of treason: one of the more gruesome features of Scottish legal culture. If anyone lived in a cocoon it was Elizabeth of England, not Mary of Scotland.

Anyone choosing to compare Elizabeth of England and Mary of Scotland according to the criteria by which monarchs were normally judged,
and female monarchs in particular, must have thought that Mary Stewart in the early 1560s came out smelling of roses, Elizabeth not. Mary was queen dowager of France and unchallenged queen of her Scottish kingdom. Elizabeth, the daughter of the disgraced Anne Boleyn, had been declared a bastard, a verdict the English Parliament had never reversed, and her right to sit on the English throne was disputed. She was known to be infatuated with Robert Dudley, son and grandson of attainted and executed traitors, and himself a married man. In 1560 Dudley’s wife died in mysterious circumstances. There was understandable suspicion that this death had been arranged to enable Elizabeth and Dudley to marry; although it was the death that made such a marriage impossible. At this point the odious double standard was all against Elizabeth Tudor. It didn’t improve Elizabeth’s imaged when she suggested that Mary, who certainly needed a new husband, should marry her secondhand boyfriend, Dudley.

However, there is no disagreement among biographers and historians that within a few years things went disastrously wrong for Mary Stewart. It was as if she was determined to add a new chapter to the sorry tale of hereditary monarchy which Erasmus of Rotterdam had already told. Turn the pages of history, Erasmus wrote, `and you will find that . . . there have been barely one of two princes who did not by sheer stupidity bring disaster to human affairs.’ Was Mary stupid? She needed to make a new marriage. But who was her husband to be? To marry a foreign prince, as Mary Tudor had married the king of Spain, and there were plenty of candidates, might destroy Scottish independence. To marry within the Scottish nobility would risk capsizing the ship of state. And on top of all that there was the question of religion.

Elizabeth understood this Catch 22 situation, which is why she chose to remain a virgin queen. She was not slow in advising her Scottish cousin on what she should not do with her life, warning her that if she were to marry Don Carlos of Spain, which was what Mary most wanted, there would be trouble. England’s interests were at stake, since Mary was arguably the most plausible candidate to succeed Elizabeth in England, should the queen of England die without children of her own.
And then, out of the blue, Mary married a tall young Anglo-Scottish nobleman, Henry Stewart, Lord Darnley, an English resident, not to say exile, whom Elizabeth had allowed, for reasons that remain mysterious and much discussed, to return to Scotland, rejoining his father, the earl of Lennox, who had married the daughter of Henry VIII’s sister. The Darnley match was not necessarily stupid. It was a shrewd move if Mary wanted to become queen of England. For Darnley was descended on his father’s side from Scottish kings, and on his mother’s from a Tudor. Since he had been brought up as an Englishman, Darnley as Mary’s husband would cancel out one of the impediments to her claim to the English succession: the fact that she was a foreigner. And marriage to Darnley promised to free Mary from subservience to English politics.

But if Mary was not stupid, Darnley was; and not only stupid. He was all the things which Erasmus had feared young princes were liable to become. He was a spoiled brat with a rather frail hold on reality. Soon after the wedding, the English ambassador reported that he was behaving as if he was ‘monarch of the world’, rather than the man who, the day before yesterday, had been known as the Lord Darnley. Mary was perhaps stupid to fall for such a creature. He was a pretty young man, and an inch or two taller than she was, which counted in his favour. At this moment it is hard to find much wrong with the argument of John Knox’s book.

The Darnley marriage, and Darnley’s proclamation as king of Scotland, triggered a series of seismic shocks which in 1567 became a major earthquake, a British, not just a Scottish crisis which would take forty-five years to resolve. For starters, it blew apart English policy towards Scotland and Anglo-Scottish special relationship, ‘the amity’ which had replaced the ‘auld alliance’ between Scotland and France. And to say that Scottish politics were destabilised would be an understatement. Mary’s half-brother, James Stewart earl of Moray, one of the many bastards begotten of her father James V, a Protestant and the lynchpin of the Anglo-Scottish amity, was soon in rebellion. At first Mary and Darnley were triumphant over Moray, whose revolt was another stupid mistake.

But the playboy Darnley, with whom Mary was no longer in love, proved to be the loosest of loose cannons. The first shock came with the murder, in the very presence of the already pregnant Mary, of David Riccio, an Italian originally recruited to sing the bass part in a barbershop quartet,
but who became her French secretary. It happened three days before Parliament was due to denounce Moray and his accomplices as traitors, which may tell us most of what we need to know. This was a crime in which Darnley was deeply complicit, having succumbed to the rumour that the child his wife was carrying was Riccio’s. It may even have been intended as an attack on Mary herself, with the intention that she would miscarry, and that Darnley should become sole ruler of Scotland. Mary thought so. Why else was Riccio murdered in her very presence? She now found herself a prisoner in her own palace. Although the future James VI and I was safely born in Edinburgh Castle on 19 June 1566, so settling the problem of succession so far as Scotland was concerned, any intimacy between his parents was now purely for public consumption.

And then came the second assassination: the murder of Darnley himself in events and circumstances beyond the imagination even of an Agatha Christie, the atrocity of the Edinburgh house called Kirk o’Field, Scotland’s own little nine eleven. Mary’s comment in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy is worth quoting: ‘The matter is horrible, and so strange as we believe the like was never heard of in any country.’

John Guy has remarked that after four hundred years of debate ‘no one has given a wholly satisfactory explanation of what happened on that night, or why.’ But there are plenty of more or less unsatisfactory explanations. The murder arose from a conspiracy involving many people, or perhaps from two or three uncoordinated conspiracies. Some, like Moray, were not directly involved but knew about the plot in advance. And Mary may have known about it too, although not all historians think so. The massive overkill of an explosion which demolished a solid stone-built house suggests that Mary herself may have been an intended victim. But it was not the explosion which killed Darnley. He was strangled in his nightgown outside the ruins of the house.

And now, in the aftermath of Darnley’s death, Mary made the first of two disastrous mistakes. She allowed herself to be abducted, and, it appears, raped by the man who intended to be her husband’s murderer even if he wasn’t, James Hepburn, earl of Bothwell. Once again there is no certainty about these events. But what is certain is that Mary proceeded to marry Bothwell, who already had a wife, speedily divorced, and in a Protestant
ceremony, although on the very day of her marriage she wrote to the Pope professing herself to be his ‘most devoted daughter’. (Pius V replied that he would not have anything more to do with Mary ‘unless in times to come he shall see some better sign of her life and religion than he has witnessed in the past.’) The best that can be said on her behalf is that Mary desperately needed a strong man on whom she could rely, and believed that Bothwell, unlike Darnley, was a man’s man and best suited to play the role of protector of the realm. But it is also the case that she fell for him, as she had fallen for Darnley. She was not good with men.

There followed not only outrage at this scandal, in Scotland and far beyond, but the beginnings of civil war. Mary lost the first battle before it was fought, was separated from Bothwell, never to see him again, and was soon a prisoner in a bleak island castle on Lochleven, at the mercy of a clique calling itself the Confederate Lords. There she miscarried of twins fathered by Bothwell and was forced to abdicate. In effect she was deposed. A year after Darnley’s death she was openly charged with his murder. By then her infant son had been proclaimed king and crowned, and Moray had returned to Scotland as regent. Then came the escape from Lochleven, the rallying of Mary’s supporters, the raising of an army, and its defeat at the battle of Langside. If only she had waited a little longer. At this point came Mary’s second catastrophic mistake: her flight into England, in the mistaken belief that her cousin Elizabeth would restore her to her throne.

Why did she do that? For all the turbulence of Scottish politics, her deposition was without precedent. She still had many supporters, including the great chief of the highlands, Colin Campbell, earl of Argyll, the most powerful Protestant in Scotland. Argyll commanded the largest independent military force in the British Isles. George Gordon, the fifth earl of Huntly, for all that Mary had killed his father, would have supported her in the north-east. Mary should have stayed, and fought her corner. She had no need to ride 92 miles across country, sleeping on the ground and eating cold porridge and sour milk, and then to cross the Solway Firth in a fishing boat. Everyone advised her to do no such thing. Donaldson remarks that her cause in Scotland which might have prevailed in her presence was lost in her absence. If she had ridden north, to the Scottish Highlands, she might have become the Bonny Prince Charlie who won, rather than lost. But it was not to be. Henceforth Mary was to live in a world of dreams rather than of reality.
Elizabeth, who disapproved of what the Scottish lords had done, wanted Mary restored, and in a stream of fervent letters Mary begged her for help, protesting her innocence. But it was politically and militarily impossible, and Moray’s Protestant regime, the king’s party, was committed to the English alliance. Yet Mary’s presence in England, and especially in the still largely Catholic north of England, was a threat to the Elizabethan regime, and specifically to Elizabeth’s prime minister, William Cecil. So began what I have called the Elizabethan Exclusion Crisis, and it lasted for nearly twenty years. To conserve the Protestant ascendancy in England, it was necessary to exclude Mary. But if Elizabeth had died at any time in those nineteen years, and there needn’t have been an assassin’s bullet, a fish bone stuck in the throat could have done it, it would have been hard to resist the right of Mary Stewart to succeed. But Mary would have been resisted, the Exclusion Crisis would have come to a head, and there would probably have been an English civil war, seventy years before there was one.

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Mary’s English story begins with what was ostensibly a ‘conference’ to determine the rights and wrongs of what had happened in Scotland: something like a royal commission, or a congressional hearing, with evidence submitted by commissioners for Mary and for the regent Moray. But in reality these proceedings amounted to the first trial of Mary Queen of Scots. The evidence before the court included a dossier compiled by the Scottish intellectual and royal tutor George Buchanan, the kind of dossier which in England since 2003 we have learned to call `dodgy’: `An information . . . whereby it evidently appears that Mary, now Dowager Queen of Scots, not only was privy of the horrible and unworthy murder perpetrated on the person of the King of good memory, but also was the very instrument, chief organ an cause of that unnatural cruelty.’

Backing up the dossier was a collection of documents: eight love letters, some verses and two marriage contracts, supposedly found in a little silver casket: the Casket Letters. Gordon Donaldson wrote: ‘It may be doubted if the time and energy devoted, over the generations, to the study of the Casket Letters has been entirely justified.’ Yet the letters are historically important. If they were indeed Mary’s letters to Bothwell, then she was an adulteress and implicated in her husband’s death. There is no other evidence
against her, and without the letters the charge of adultery is as the very least unproven (a verdict possible in Scottish law). The current verdict is that in a manner of speaking the letters were genuine, very little of the material actually forged, but that they could not all have been written by the same person to the same person, or at the dates they were alleged to have been written; and that they are full of clever interpolations from other correspondence; Donaldson says not so much forged as `manipulated’.

Mary’s trial, the so-called `conference’ was inconclusive, and it was soon overtaken by events which constituted the greatest crisis of Elizabeth’s reign. Soon after the suspension of the tribunal, England’s premier nobleman, the duke of Norfolk, recently widowed, hatched a plan to marry Mary. Did he really plan to topple Cecil, and put Mary (and himself) into the line of succession, even on the throne? Who can say? But Norfolk’s Protestantism was skin-deep and most of his family, the Howards, were Catholics. Mary played her part in this conspiracy, sending Norfolk love letters. But Mary and Norfolk were no more than pen friends. Many, from various motives, could see that there were advantages in the match. But nobody thought to tell Elizabeth, which meant that Norfolk had dug his own grave. And then the north of England exploded in rebellion, which wherever it succeeded restored the Catholic Mass. Mary had nothing to do with it, but she was inevitably a catalyst. The rebellion was easily crushed. But another plot was brewing, spun by an Italian banker and self-appointed special agent, Roberto Ridolfi, a plan to involved Spain in a rising of English Catholics, something likely to happen only in Ridolfi’s imagination. Perhaps Mary shared these flimsy dreams. And by now the Pope had intervened, exercising for the last time in history the presumed papal power to depose a reigning sovereign. The papal bull was badly timed and ineffective, only succeeding in putting English Catholics in mortal danger.

But it did seem that the Catholic world was closing in on Protestant England, and that those who believed in an international Catholic conspiracy were being proved right. Cecil now wrote a most Machiavellian letter to Mary’s jailor, the earl of Shrewsbury. Elizabeth, Cecil wrote, thought it perfectly understandable that Mary in her dealings with Norfolk and with Ridolfi was trying to escape out of the realm. But what she couldn’t tolerate was `her labours and devices to stir up a new rebellion in this realm, and to have the king of Spain to assist it.’ All this was meant to draw Mary into confessing more than Cecil actually knew. It was standard police practice.
And now it was decided to put Buchanan’s dodgy dossier and the Casket Letters into the public domain. Towards the end of 1571, the bookstalls around St Paul’s Cathedral in London were selling to a voracious public *A detection of the doings of Mary Queen of Scots, touching the murder of her husband, and her conspiracy, adultery, and pretended marriage with the earl of Bothwell*. Mary in her claim to the succession had had many supporters, of both religions. Melville had assured her that she had more friends in England than in Scotland. ‘All England did much reverence her.’ But now no longer. The pump was primed for the Parliament which met a few months later, and which Cecil and other councillors intended should sanction the execution of both Mary and Norfolk. The mood was one of anger, and of fear. One M.P. spoke of Mary as ‘the monstrous and huge dragon, and mass of the earth’. Cecil even organized a solemn declaration from the bishops which referred to Mary as ‘the late queen of Scots’, thus justifying her deposition and which threatened Elizabeth with the same fate should she fail in her duty to execute Mary. No more threatening message was ever conveyed to Queen Elizabeth. Mary Queen of Scots, the daughter of debate, was threatening to divide the monarch from her subjects, and to make a difference between what lawyers called the queen’s two bodies, her public office and her private person.

While Elizabeth consented to the execution of Norfolk, she continued to stand between Parliament and Mary. At first it seemed that she would allow a parliamentary bill disabling Mary from the succession, an act rather than an axe. This drove M.P.s to despair. For what would such an act be worth, in the event of the queen’s death? The bill in effect accepted that Mary had a right of which she could be deprived, which Parliament denied. ‘This disabling shall be an enabling.’ And then, in the end, Elizabeth vetoed even that, leaving the Mary Queen of Scots crisis to fester for another fifteen years.

Meanwhile the monstrous and huge dragon was enjoying the hospitality, if that is the right word, of the richest man in England, George Talbot, earl of Shrewsbury, and of his utterly formidable wife the Countess Elizabeth, known to history as Bess of Hardwick. Most of the time this was in Sheffield, where, surprising as it may seem to those who know that post-
industrial city in South Yorkshire, a kind of English Pittsburgh, Mary spent more years than anywhere else, whether in France, Scotland or England. Sometimes she would be taken to Bess’s house at Chatsworth—a more modest structure than the huge mass of post-eighteenth-century Chatsworth, still the home of Bess’s descendants, the Cavendishes, dukes of Devonshire. When security was at a low level Mary was even allowed summer jaunts to the spa of Buxton, riding over the Derbyshire hills and scattering largesse among the crowds who turned out to see her. There she took the waters, bathed, and socialized with the high society of Elizabethan England, including Dudley, now earl of Leicester. Leicester, in common with other Elizabethans, found it possible to keep politics apart from his enjoyment of Mary’s agreeable company. This was a problem for Cecil too. Sometimes he was charged with being Mary’s ‘most dangerous enemy’ (and he was), at other times ‘a secret well willer to her and her title’. ‘No man can make both these true together.’ It is clear that both men knew, in the back of their minds, that next week Mary might be their queen and royal mistress. The two queens might have met at Buxton, but never did. Indeed the most probable reason why Elizabeth never visited the northern parts of her kingdom was that politics meant that she could neither meet Mary not be seen to avoid meeting her.

And so life went on, year after year, with the Shrewburys: fifteen and a half years. Shrewsbury may have been the richest man in England, but I feel sorry for him. He was suffering two life sentences: one, his role as Mary’s host, guardian, and jailor, which kept him away from the Elizabethan Court; two, his marriage to Bess. He also suffered from severe arthritis, in legs and hands, which means that he has left behind the worst, most indecipherable handwriting of the age, I suppose his third life sentence. His mode of address to his wife, in letters preserved in Washington D.C., regressed from ‘my own sweet heart’, ‘my dear’, to ‘wife’, denounced to others as ‘my wicked and malicious wife’, ‘so bad and wicked a woman’, even ‘my professed enemy’.

But at first this curious ménage à trois settled down comfortably enough. Mary sat under a cloth of estate, which means that under the Shrewburys’ roof she was treated as a queen. She had a substantial income as queen dowager of France, and since she refused to pay for her own housekeeping, there was plenty of money for diplomacy, a subject still
crying out for serious study; and for the many luxuries to which she was accustomed. She had arrived in England with nothing, not even a change of clothes, but she soon assembled a sizeable household of her own. Thirty carts were needed for her possessions when she moved from place to place. She dined, in state, at her own table, off silver and crystal. Even in the last years, when she was housed in more modest circumstances, ‘the queen’s people’ numbered 51 persons and cost thousands of pounds a year to feed. Forty gallons of olive oil were required to dress the salads. On a shopping expedition to France, Shrewsbury’s man purchased great quantities of white wine (which Mary used for washing as well as for drinking), and forty-eight dozen live quails at six shillings the dozen.

Mary also imported some of the most elaborate furniture of the age, in the French style. Much of this, including a massive table with legs in the form of dolphins, is still concentrated in one room of Hardwick Hall, the great prodigy house which Bess built after her divorce from Shrewsbury. It is clear that Bess had been careful to hang on to these and many other pretty things when she left her husband’s roof, for in 1601 they were all in the same room where they are still to be seen to this day. This is one reason why centuries later tourists, inspired by the novels of Walter Scott, made a pilgrimage to Hardwick to tread in the footsteps of Mary Queen of Scots, even though the house was not built until ten years after her death. The French pattern books which were the basis for many aspects of interior design ensured that throughout the north Midlands the taste of France in the 1560s would impose itself on, for example, moulded plaster ceilings until at least the 1650s, one of the stranger consequences of sixteenth-century Anglo-Scottish politics.

Mary had always loved animals, and she kept a small menagerie of dogs, cats and exotic birds. She told her agent in Paris: ‘I shall take great pleasure in rearing them in cages, which I do to all sorts of little birds . . . This will be a pastime for a prisoner.’

A major frustration for this naturally athletic and still young woman was the restrictions on an outdoor life and exercise, especially at times of high political tension, such as the autumn months of 1572, after the St Bartholomew massacres in France. In September of that year, Shrewsbury wrote that he had Mary ‘sure within these four walls’, and that she was
`much offended' at not being allowed outside. A year later Shrewbury's son assured his father that the Scottish queen was watched night and day by 'good numbers' of armed men. After all, this woman had escaped once before. Although this strict regime was later relaxed, Mary put on weight, developed a double chin, and aged prematurely. By the early 1580s she was physically a total wreck.

Mary's main activity, partly enforced by these conditions, partly because she loved it, was embroidery. To a visitor in 1569 she explained that 'all the day she wrought with her needle'. The results, in prodigious quantities, are still to be seen, both at Harwick and at Oxburgh Hall in Norfolk. The smaller pieces, or samplers, include an American Bird (a toucan), and a Catte, both copied from Conrad Gesner's *Historia Animalium*. Many professional embroiders were employed, which was one cause of the bitter estrangement of George Talbot from his redoubtable wife. Shrewsbury denounced these women as 'such a sort of varlets about her as never resteth carrying tales.'

Bess of Harwick sat sewing with Mary, and of course between the two of them there was some carrying of tales, especially as this relationship deteriorated. With the Shrewsbury marriage on the rocks, Bess accused her husband of having an affair with the Queen of Scots. Mary retaliated by writing to her cousin Queen Elizabeth, but perhaps not posting, one of the most scandalous letters ever written in the sixteenth century. I think I must tell you, she said, what I have heard from the lips of the countess of Shrewsbury, although of course I don't believe a word of it. She said that 'someone whom she described as one to whom you had given your hand in matrimony . . . had often slept with you and with all the freedom and intimacy to be expected between man and wife.' (That would be Leicester.) Bess had gone on to say that Elizabeth was not like other women and that it was a waste of time for foreign suitors to propose marriage. 'For, she said, you would never forego your freedom to make love and have your way with a succession of new paramours.' I supposed that if you shut up a queen an earl and a countess in a windy castle in South Yorkshire this is to be expected. It was a kind of Big Brother House.
Did all that embroidery and looking after little caged birds leave any
time for plotting? Of course it did. Donaldson says that it was another
‘hobby and pastime’, and Mary, living in cloud cuckoo land, was not deaf to
offers to advance her cause. She wrote letters in all directions in a tireless
effort to secure her freedom, and she actively encouraged diplomacy which
was designed to take her back to Scotland to rule in harness with her son.
But so far as treasonable conspiracies were concerned, Mary was reactive
rather than proactive. After Ridolfi, none of the plots which invoked her
name was a threat to anyone, except to Mary herself. They have been called
‘conspiracies of small men in small numbers’.

And so to 1586, by which time Mary had been removed from the
relatively benign hospitality of the Shrewburys first to Tutbury Castle, a
dark, damp prison which she hated, and then to Chartley Hall, a more
congenial house belonging to the Devereuxs, earls of Essex. She now had a
new, socially inferior and very uncongenial keeper, Sir Amyas Paulet, who
plucked down Mary’s cloth of estate and treated her with undisguised
contempt and loathing. It was at Charley that Mary received
communications from the kind of all-at-sea young man who would have
been a recruit for Al Qaida in another age: Anthony Babington, one of a
small number of desperate but romantically inspired Catholic conspirators.
There was so much double agency operating here that it can be said that the
Babington Plot was actually devised by Elizabeth’s secretary of state Sir
Francis Walsingham. Mary certainly wrote incriminating letters to
Babington, and on the basis of one letter in particular, which was doctored
by Walsingham to leave her guilt in no doubt, she was brought to her second
English trial, where she was found guilty as charged, a verdict reinforced by
a Parliament called for the purpose, since everyone knew that Elizabeth
would avoid carrying out the sentence if she possibly could.

But what should be done with her? The indignation of the Protestant
establishment had fermented until it reached a level associated with certain
brands of Scotch whisky: not a drop sold till it’s seven years old. And it
was now eighteen years old. Paulet, Mary’s keeper, wrote: ‘Others shall
excuse their foolish pity as they may’. ‘Foolish pity’ was a reference to the
Geneva Bible. Commenting on the story of King Asa, who had failed to kill
his idolatrous mother, Paulet would have learned: ‘he gave place to foolish
pity’: and that cross-referenced to Deuteronomy chapter 13, which warned against being moved by pity for one’s own flesh and blood. Soon Elizabeth would suggest that Paulet should quietly put Mary to sleep. A pillow? Poison? The whole Protestant nation had already committed itself to a Bond of Association, a kind of lynch law against Mary. But Paulet rejected the suggestion, ostensibly on grounds of conscience, but also because he must have known that he would become the fall guy, were he to kill Mary without legal warrant.

The parliamentary debates of 1586 were those of 1572 in spades. Elizabeth’s favourite, Sir Christopher Hatton, had this to say of the Queen of Scots, `so called’: `The manner of the Queen of Scots’ life and her practices from the beginning most filthy and detestable; if you look well into them you shall well find that her ambitious mind, grounded in papistry, hath still thirsted after this crown of England, and our overthrow.’

February 1587: a tragicomical quadrille. Elizabeth signs Mary’s death warrant, apparently in a state of absence of mind, while chatting with her secretary, William Davison, about the weather and the merits of a daily walk in the park. Davison conveys the warrant to the lord chancellor, which Elizabeth later insists was not her intention. Burghley convenes a scarcely constitutional meeting of the Privy Council in his own chambers in the royal palace, the warrant is dispatched to Fotheringhay, and Mary is beheaded. Elizabeth either expressed, or counterfeits, extreme anger and grief.

By now we are dealing with two quite fictitious Maries, each bearing little relation to reality. The grand guignol of Mary’s decapitation might have been intentionally devised as the frontispiece for the afterlife, the posthumous history of Mary Queen of Scots. It was not a public execution, but nor was it a hole in the corner assassination. The great hall of Fotheringhay was rather a theatre, and its theatrical potential was soon exploited by a minor industry devoted to constructing Mary Stewart as a martyr for the Catholic faith. All executions, especially those in which religion was a factor, were inherently theatrical. The theatrical potential was
there to be exploited both by the power in whose name death was administered, or inversely, by the victims, or the coreligionists. Thanks to the art of martyrrology, brought to perfection in Elizabethan England by John Foxe in his ‘Book of Martyrs’, it is the inversion, the triumph of the martyrs, which has stayed the course.

Seven months after Mary’s execution, a brilliant Catholic martyrrologist, Richard Verstegan (who was English—his real name was Rowlands), published in Antwerp *Theatrum crudelitatum haereticorum nostri temporis*, a kind of richly illustrated coffee table book which, according to the expert on these matters, supplied ‘the most gruesome and explicit images of martyrdom which had emerged thus far in the Reformation.’ The execution of Mary forms the climax to the album, and Verstegan must have prepared the picture of the event and accompanying text within days of the news of it reaching the outside world. Burghley was warned that all the other stories in Verstegan’s *Theatrum* were but an induction to this depiction of the death of the Scottish queen, which was intended to incite all of Christendom to vengeance. The Spanish Armada was a year away. Verstegan’s pictures were on public exhibition in Paris, and his book was a best-seller, translated into many languages. The picture of Mary’s execution, published separately as a broadsheet, would have been found pasted on living room walls, from Parish to Prague. Adam Blackwood, a Scot resident in France, contributed to the growing hagiographical record with his tearstained account of Mary’s execution, *Martyre de Marie Stvart*, printed in Paris. Blackwood went to town with his demonisation of Elizabeth of England: ‘this faithlesse woman’, ‘this cruell woman’, ‘her impietie, ambition, crueltie, leacherie, hypocrisie, dissimulation, treacherie, anger, hatred, malice irreconcinable’ (do you want me to go on?). In an ironical sonnet ‘Les virtues de Iesable Angloise’, Blackwood said that her virtue was to spit against the heavens, conspire against God.

These were home thoughts from abroad, the voices of Catholics, foreigners and exiles. But when twenty years on, Mary’s son James VI and I erected a magnificent tomb for his mother in Westminster Abbey, her reputation for royal sanctity was incised in marble for all posterity to read, in the resting place of kings and the great and good of England’s past. The epitaphs were composed by Henry Howard, the brother of that duke of Norfolk whom Mary might just have married and whom Elizabeth had
decapitated. The Howards had been consistently loyal to Mary, and their signature is apparent throughout William Camden’s nearly definitive history of the reign of Elizabeth. Thanks partly to Camden’s collaborator, Robert Cotton, a client of the Howards, Mary Stewart was given a better obituary than Elizabeth, and this would be perpetuated in some of the historiography of the next two hundred years. As for Howard’s epitaph, it came dangerously close to blasphemy. (In translation): ‘let this precedent of the violent murder of the anointed one [‘christae’] pass away;/ And may the instigator and perpetrator come hastily to punishment.’ Ironical too. ‘Let it be forbidden to slay monarchs, so that in future this land of Britain may never flow with royal blood.’ The execution of Mary’s grandson, Charles I, was only forty years away.

Soon, miraculous cures were being claimed by those who came as pilgrims to venerate Mary’s tomb. So why was she never to this day canonised? In England there was a long tradition of canonising deposed and murdered kings. But those days were over. And so far as I know, no process for canonisation was ever instigated outside England, in Catholic Europe. Knowing what we know about Mary’s past, that may be understandable. But it is still a little puzzling that nobody thought of exploiting the obvious identification of this Mary with that other converted sinner, Mary Magdalene.

So we are left, especially in this environment of Fordham, with the question: how good a Catholic was Mary Queen of Scots? Yes, I know. Once a Catholic, always a Catholic. Mary said, as she returned to Scotland in 1561: ‘The religion that I profess I take to be the most acceptable to God, and, indeed, neither do I know, nor desire to know, any other.’ But Mary’s Catholicism had been conventional, neither militant nor heroic. She could have sent Scottish representatives to the Council of Trent, but didn’t. In her English captivity, she regularly attended Protestant, Prayer Book services. Her son later testified that ‘in all her letters (whereof I received many) she never made mention of religion, nor laboured to persuade me in it.’ To draw a contemporary analogy, we might say that Mary was a good Muslim, but not a radical Islamicist.

But if Mary in her religious person never changed, the world changed around her. You might say that the Counter-Reformation, which was no
more than a cloud the size of a man’s hand when she was a young queen, caught up with her. And not just with Mary. Her maternal French family, the Guises, equally went through a process of what one might call radicalization, from attitudes called in French politique, to a more fervent and militant commitment to the Catholic cause. Her favorite uncle, Charles de Guise, Cardinal of Lorraine, underwent a sea change, from the Catholicism of Paul III, with his Farnese palace and bastards, to the fierce Catholicism of Paul IV and his successors. The cardinal, who was denounced by Paul IV as a heretic, had condoned the religious compromise over which his niece presided in Scotland. But by the 1580s, those compromising days were long gone, especially in France. In England too the Jesuits and other missionary priests were mounting their own kind of crusade, and for their purposes Mary became an iconic emblem.

Mary herself knew that her future, beyond the scaffold and the grave, depended upon her personal identification with an uncompromising Catholicism. She prepared for her own posterity as a martyr in the famous portrait which became an icon of the developing Counter-Reformation: based on a miniature by Nicholas Hilliard (the art of another, more tolerant world), but now full-length, Mary’s unusual height accentuated, wearing a black velvet dress, a great gold rosary hanging from her belt—an object of devotion across Catholic Europe, and an image which Mary deliberately acted out on the Fotheringhay scaffold.

The most sensitive of Mary’s modern biographers, Antonia Fraser, herself a Catholic, has described how this woman ‘who had once believed implicitly but unreflectively in the truths of the Catholic religion, and had allowed action not thought to rule her life, now found herself involuntarily forced back on the resources of meditation. She had undergone a profound change of attitude to her faith, and indeed to life itself. Her whole character deepened’, her later utterances revealing ‘an infinitely nobler and deeper spirit . . . a serenity and internal repose quite out of keeping with her previous behavior.’

The final verdict? It is impossible to improve on what that great historian F. W. Maitland wrote, a century ago. The story of Mary Stewart was more than glorious tragedy, although it was all of that. ‘The fate of the Protestant Reformation was being decided, and the creed of unborn millions
in undiscovered lands was being determined.’ You Americans, that was your future too. The future of the British Isles was also determined, when Mary’s son united the crowns of Scotland and England and laid the foundations for what we call Great Britain. Erasmus was not wrong about hereditary monarchy. But it was not his intention to trivialize it and neither should we do that.

FOR FURTHER READING

Patrick Collinson, *The English Captivity of Mary Queen of Scots* (Sheffield: Sheffield History Pamphlets, 1987). ISBN 0 9512863 0 7

AND


------ *Mary Queen of Scots* (1974).

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