
If all of the efforts which have been expended by historians and others on investigating and writing about the life of Mary Stewart, queen of Scots from 1542 until 1567, had instead been devoted to the study of other aspects of sixteenth-century Scottish historical research, we would have a considerably more developed understanding of the period than we currently possess. Does the world need yet another biography of Mary, queen of Scots? Whether it does or not, Mary sells books more than any other figure in the entire history of this small country, so publishers happily produce yet more books on her.

Retha Warnicke makes a good stab at injecting something fresh and new into the genre of Marian biography and is to be commended for emphasising the significance of gender and recurrent illness in governing Mary’s fate and in attempting to draw on other disciplines in these contexts. It is a very readable book, infused with imaginative use of contemporary detail, albeit a little too emotionally expressed in places for an academic audience. The subjects of biographies are so often heroes or villains and Mary is certainly no villain in this account. Those who have portrayed her as a failure, comparing her unfavourably with Elizabeth Tudor for example, will remain unconvinced by this latest case for the defence. Indeed, even those who take a more neutral stance may well feel that the author contrives to excuse, or explain away, almost every accusation that might be levelled against Mary: she had no part in Darnley’s murder; she was entirely blameless in the process which led her to Marry Bothwell; and her only goal in all her plotting during her English captivity was to secure her release and restoration, it was her English co-conspirators who wanted to substitute her for Elizabeth, while she was framed by an agent of Walsingham who joined the Babington plot and inserted incriminating phrases into her cipher letters.

Much of the book is taken up with the familiar narrative of the course of her life from infant monarch in Scotland, through her removal to France, her life and marriage there, her return to Scotland, her brief period as a queen regnant, her deposition and flight to England, her years of captivity, the various plots, the trial and execution. Thus there
is little about the book which is new, particularly after the publication of John Guy's recent detailed, if romanticised, account. There are occasional engagements with the historiography but these are frustratingly few and far between, the narrative taking precedence almost all the time. One result of this is that there is no sustained discussion of domestic policy in a chapter entitled ‘Ruling Scotland’, which intriguingly ends in 1566. The issue of whether Mary made a good fist of governing Scotland is therefore not really addressed. Closer attention to Scottish geographical details and the spelling of place names might also have been welcome. The numerous grating errors of this sort also indicate that the text was not read by anyone who was reasonably well-informed about Scotland before it was published (see, for example, numerous instances of St Andrew’s for St Andrews, ‘ha’ for haar on p. 66 and ‘capital hill’ for castle hill on p. 70).

Yet it must be acknowledged that many of the issues which Warnicke raises were worth raising, whether one accepts her interpretations of them or not. She tackles the old chestnut of Mary’s attendance at privy council meetings, making a good case for Mary’s conduct in this regard. It was not until the 1590s, more than five years into his personal reign, that James VI bettered his mother’s attendance record. Her record was also considerably better than the two English queens regnant of the sixteenth century, while diplomatic sources record numerous attendances which are not noted in the official register of the privy council.

In discussing the significance of Mary as a woman in a man’s world, the incident that Warnicke devotes most attention to relates to her alleged abduction and rape by James Hepburn, earl of Bothwell. Warnicke argues that Mary, while single, was particularly prone to such an attack, although some comparative examples of other sixteenth-century women would have been welcome. She builds a reasonable case that Mary really was abducted and raped by Bothwell and was compelled to marry him out of a feeling of obligation after he had had sex with her. This sense of moral obligation was so strong that, in spite of being deeply depressed by her situation, once they were married, she felt duty bound to stand by him. The evidence for her unhappiness at having to marry Bothwell is plausible, although the case must remain unproven as almost all of the evidence is indirect or circumstantial. Another prominent theme is Mary’s health, which forms a key element of the discussion of the misery of her captivity, as well as some of the problems of her personal reign. Pushed from pillar to post and never really able to settle in one place, Mary’s years of English imprisonment were made significantly