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Review [untitled]

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REVIEWS

Antonia Fraser, **Mary Queen of Scots**, London; Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1969. \$16.95. Panther Books (paper) 1970, pp. 652, (excluding Appendix, Notes, Bibliography), \$2.50.

This work is a reevaluation. It successfully presents the historical panorama behind Mary Stuart while engaging in a thorough examination of Mary in the foreground.

Mary's queenly preparation in France for her Scottish inheritance, of course, implied the future use of Mary in French foreign policy. It also involved the inculcation in her by her Guise relatives of comparatively civilised expectations as her due and command. Violent and calculating as those times were, the barbarity and treachery which Mary frequently witnessed in Scotland would have demolished the energy and perseverance of any strong ruler.

Fraser calls out our sympathies for this queen who was mistrusted in Scotland because of her Catholic faith and her French gentility. For the sullen, Scottish nobility, Catholic or reformed, there was precious little tribal belief in Mary as the manifestation of monarchic mystique and less respect for her as a human being. And it was not only with the brutality of a

Bothwell that Mary had to contend but also with the long, long subtlety of a Guise cardinal, a Walsingham, a Cecil.

Few lives so much deserve to be called dramatic, yet to rediscover Mary Queen of Scots is to find oneself taut and almost incredulous. In this Scottish royal life, above all others, the Greek tragic mood prevails as individual flaws combine with developing external trends about which the individual has little knowledge or control. The whole inexorable unfolding of events after Mary's defeat at Langside proceeds at Tutbury and Fotheringhay like unhurried torture. It is well known that the romantic and the cruel are often paired but, in the case of Mary, prolonged depression and suffering make glib use of the term "romantic" obscene.

Once an adequate rationale has been invented we know that there must be death by the axe. Over and over again this final scene evokes pity and horror. That Mary herself contributed to these feelings by carefully staging a triumphant death is handled in a workmanlike way by Antonia Fraser. Married as she is into one of the most prominent Catholic families in Britain, it is well to observe that Fraser indicates the heavy Catholic martyrological values of the execution without sentimentality. The execution is then presented as a calculated act of posthumous moral and even political victory. Biology did grant Mary victory to the extent that every British monarch has been directly descended from her and has been crowned monarch of a united kingdom.

Lady Fraser brings intuitive insight and humble self projection to this period without losing historical balance. She gives us imaginative vitality and the historical edifice at once. Who can resist a book beginning as this one begins? Who can be unmoved by Fraser's account of one of the many tearing separations in Mary's life as she leaves France for Scotland? Still, is there something too contrived about the design and the engrossing style? Each chapter is well paced and of a judged length for most attention spans. The writing flows lucidly; the speculative aspect is deft and controlled.

The combination of these elements helps to create a bestseller. Although there may exist, in some readers, suspicion about a highbrow formula being cannily applied for the sake of highbrow entertainment it is difficult in this case to condemn the recipe. After all, the authoress has informed us reliably of matters of great historical and human consequence. According to her own terms of reference, Antonia Fraser has realised her aims soundly and with felicity.

Perhaps *Mary Queen of Scots* is not enough a work of academic scholarship for some, but as a work of imaginative scholarship, as a portrait of

an age and stylistically, this is an enthralling book. I recommend it unreservedly to the whole reading public whatever height it thinks its brow may be.

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