

MARY, QUEEN OF SCOTS: MARRIAGES, MURDERS AND MYSTERIES

A record audience of almost 100 greatly enjoyed the talk offered by Neil Hannah at the recent U3A meeting. Neil's scholarship, research and enthusiastic delivery - without a note in sight - kept everyone enthralled. Neil effectively outlined the dramatic life of Mary Stuart, born in 1542 and dying in 1587. Her father, the Scottish King James V, died tragically so that at a mere 6 days Mary was officially Queen of Scotland. With her grandfather the former Henry VII of England and her mother Mary of Guise, one of the royal families of France, Mary Stuart was had significant claims to three thrones.

The Franco-Scottish bond was strengthened when Mary was just 5 years old by her being betrothed to Francis, heir to the throne of France, and going to live there. In 1558, the marriage took place, following the agreement that her claims to the crowns of both England and Scotland would pass to the French monarch if she died without having children. (She did not know that her husband was incapable of fathering children at that stage). A tragic accident led to the French king Henry II's death in 1559 and resulting in Francis II and Mary becoming King and Queen of France.



Mary Stuart's mother died in 1560, soon followed by the death of Francis II, leaving his young widow Mary to return to Scotland and hope to find a new husband. With the aim of keeping some control over Mary, Elizabeth even suggested her cousin might marry her own favourite, Robert Dudley. Instead, Mary chose a second cousin, Lord Darnley. This marriage posed her as a greater threat to Elizabeth since their descendants would have a very strong claim to the throne.

A new player then emerged: a secretary, Rizzio, of whom Darnley became jealous, leading to his murder by a gang including Darnley, in 1566. Soon after this, Mary's son was born, followed by her becoming very ill. Relations between Darnley and Mary became strained and soon after, in 1567, Darnley was killed at Kirk o' Field in a very odd explosion. A suspect was Bothwell although he was acquitted of the murder and soon after married Mary.

At this stage, Mary was opposed by a significant group of Scottish peers who ensured Mary was imprisoned in Lochleven Castle and forced to abdicate in favour of her son, James. Mary managed to escape to Workington in 1568 and was soon moved to Carlisle Castle for her own safety. Elizabeth's aim was to contain rather than kill Mary so she was kept in captivity in various places. A series of documents was found, the Casket Letters, but Elizabeth felt their authenticity was uncertain. Eventually, however, evidence pointed to Mary's complicity in the Babington Plot in 1586 so she was tried for treason and found guilty. With many qualms, Elizabeth signed her cousin's death warrant and she was executed in 1587.

It is hard to over-state the significance of Mary Stuart, not just in Scottish history but also for the whole history of Britain. Every British monarch since the reign of her son, James I

of England and James VI of Scotland, traces their claim through Mary, Queen of Scots. After this full and interesting talk, a range of questions followed, some focusing on the vital issue of sources on this controversial topic with writers often pursuing a particular stance on Mary Stuart. Neil proved to be a passionate but balanced speaker who justly received enthusiastic applause.