



CHAPTER ONE

*Legend or History?*

1587–1987

Mary Queen of Scots was born in the palace of Linlithgow on 7 or 8 December 1542. It is perhaps appropriate that even the date of the birth of a personality who still eludes us despite the myriad of books written about her is uncertain. She herself claimed the 8th, the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, and in this, if in nothing else, that most powerful of Protestant reformers, John Knox, agreed with her, while one of her staunchest supporters, the Catholic John Leslie, bishop of Ross, believed it was the earlier date. It does not much matter. Far more important was the fact that this baby girl, born two weeks after the defeat of a Scottish army by the English at Solway Moss, and at a time when her remarkable father James V was lying burnt out at the age of thirty in his glorious hunting-lodge at Falkland, was to be within a week of her birth queen of the Scots. James's comment, when the news of her birth was brought to him, that 'it cam wi' a lass and it will gang wi' a lass' (a reference to the way in which the house of Stewart had come to the throne, through the marriage of Walter the Steward to Robert Bruce's daughter Marjorie) may be apocryphal and was, as it turned out, inaccurate; the 'lass' who was to bring Stewart rule to an end was not Queen Mary, but Queen Anne in 1714. But it may still be significant of at least part of contemporary reaction to Mary. For James's saying was first recorded by John Knox, in the version 'The devil go with it! It will end as it began: it came from a woman; and it will end in a woman'. This was in the mid 1560s, when Mary was still in power, so that it reads like Knox's wishful thinking rather than anything else; and it was then recast into the famous phrase by the Protestant chronicler Robert Lindsay of Pitscottie, writing in the 1570s, by which time the representative of the house of Stewart

was the child James VI, and the lass had long gone – into English captivity.

Thus the words supposedly uttered by a despairing king, just before he turned his face to the wall to die, are an immediate symbol of the reaction of very many of those on whom Mary Queen of Scots was to make an impact, in her lifetime and thereafter. And there was nothing apocryphal about what her undutiful son was to say, half a century later, in his book *Basilikon Doron*, when he wrote of how his grandfather had been punished by God for his immorality, for his infant sons had predeceased him, and he died 'leaving a double curse behind him to the land, both a Woman of sex, and a new borne babe of age to reign over them'. In the late 1520s and 1530s, Henry VIII had embarked on a spectacular, even murderous matrimonial career in an attempt to save his kingdom from the first part of that curse. For the Scots, Mary embodied both. From the very beginning of her own spectacular career, therefore, even before her own personality could make its distinctive mark, she was a person to create doubts, and even fear.

Four centuries later, doubts have not been dispelled. This is scarcely because she has been neglected. 'Daughter of debate' Elizabeth called her; and mother of a remarkably impassioned series of debates she subsequently became. Did she, or did she not, murder her second husband, Henry Stewart, lord Darnley? Was she the author of the Casket Letters, those letters which totally implicated her in the murder, or were they forgeries? Was she raped by James Hepburn, earl of Bothwell, and forced to marry him, or did she connive at her own abduction? It may seem a little curious that these are the problems which have exercised the minds of so many of the writers on Mary Queen of Scots above all else. They relate to a brief two-year crisis period in her forty-four year life; and although they are by no means irrelevant to her political role, the approach to them has had such a predominantly personal – one might almost say tabloid – quality that the historiographical Mary is immediately marked out from all other historical monarchs, Scottish or otherwise.

Yet these questions have sustained a massive publishing industry, briefly and for good political and confessional reasons in the late sixteenth century, and then almost without interruption from the mid eighteenth. As the subject of historical studies, and the heroine of romantic fiction, Mary Queen of Scots has a massive lead over all other earthly Maries, only the Virgin scoring more heavily – as even the most cursory glance at the British Library Catalogue of Printed Books makes clear. Thus in the 1962 Catalogue, the Virgin Mary has 150 pages devoted to her; Mary Queen of Scots 455 books; the English queen Mary Tudor – ‘Bloody Mary’ – 73. And that other central figure in a great murder mystery, Richard III, has the pathetic total of 38. Nevertheless, I. B. Cowan could publish a book in 1971 justifiably entitled *The Enigma of Mary Stuart*. For much of what has been written about her does not elucidate; rather, it creates a barrier between us and the historical ruler of mid sixteenth-century Scotland.

The prolific contemporary literature about Mary, which has been extensively and effectively reviewed by J. E. Phillips, *Images of a Queen*, was all understandable enough. For her earlier years, there are the famous Ronsard poems extolling her charm and beauty, along with those in similar vein by the man who was to become her most vicious detractor, the great Scottish scholar George Buchanan – exactly the kind of thing which would naturally be written about an attractive young queen. Her later career, from the time of her marriage to Darnley in the summer of 1565, inevitably gave rise to writing of a very different and much more partisan nature. The heights were to be reached with her execution in 1587, when accusers and defenders rushed into print, producing works with titles like ‘An excellent dyttye made as a generall rejoycinge for the cuttinge of the Scottishe queene’, or ‘Marie Stewarde late Quene of Scotland hath defiled her owne bodie with many adulteries . . .’, compared with ‘The Martyrdom of the Queen of Scotland . . .’ or ‘L’Histoire et Martyre de la Royne D’Escosse’. The attackers had far better titles than the supporters; but the scope for emotive, impassioned language was the same for both sides.

One of the most remarkable examples occurs in the set of poems known as *de Jezebelis*, collected and contributed to by an exiled Catholic Scots lawyer and philosopher, Adam Blackwood, one of Mary's earliest and most strenuous defenders. Jezebel, therefore, was Elizabeth of England, that she-wolf, monster of vice and cruelty, sprung of vicious and degenerate stock, for she was born of the incestuous relationship between Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, who was not only his wife but also his illegitimate daughter. But the Jezebel poems went far beyond vilification of Elizabeth. The majority were written to arouse French opinion, and to push the French king, Henri III, into revenge. One depicts Mary's first husband, Francis II, three times rushing to welcome her in heaven, and three times finding that he can only embrace a headless body, so that he curses his people; whereupon the poet exhorts them to forget their own troubles, and unite to destroy England and send its queen to a dreadful death. France failed to respond. But another European country, Spain, did seek to conquer England, in 1588; and it was encouraged by the dramatic 'Address to the Captains and Men on the Armada', which promised the sailors the aid of the saints of England, John Fisher, Thomas More and Edmund Campion, and above all 'The blessed and innocent Mary queen of Scotland, who, still fresh from her sacrifice, bears copious and abounding witness to the cruelty and impiety of this Elizabeth and directs her shafts against her.' And the future pope Urban VIII could write of Mary as the queen who died without honour due; yet the shadows of night were her funeral robes, the stars her tapers. It was all very stirring.

What is immediately notable, however, is that Mary's own subjects, the Scots – that is, those in Scotland left to deal with the crisis created by her deposition in 1567 and flight to England in 1568, rather than Catholic exiles like Blackwood and the bishop of Ross, on whom there were no restraints – had the good sense to keep as quiet as possible. Initially, of course, those who drove her out had to justify their actions to Elizabeth and prevent the English queen making any serious attempt to restore her sister of Scotland; and they used that scholar of European distinction,

George Buchanan, as their apologist, thus enabling the grave and learned humanist to display a remarkable talent for writing, as it were, copy for the *Sun* in the style of *The Times*, in his sensational *Ane detectioun of the doinges of Marie quene of Scottes*. But generally the arena for attack or defence was in England and Europe. Thus Mary had already passed into legend. But it was legend on a European scale. Her contemporaries were well aware – sometimes all too uncomfortably aware – that she was, in her life and in her death, a figure of European significance. No one in the sixteenth century made the mistake which was to become such a feature of later writings about her, of seeing her crimes or her innocence as a little domestic matter, locking her into a Scottish bedroom debate in which, as far as the outside world was concerned, only Elizabeth had an interest beyond the fleeting and casual.

The move from the international and political to the insular and personal was interrupted by something of a lull in the seventeenth century. The accession of Mary's Protestant son James VI to the English throne naturally cooled anti-Marian passion. James constructed magnificent tombs for the two protagonists, Mary and Elizabeth, in Westminster Abbey; and the more-or-less 'official' account by William Camden in his *Annals* (1615) emphasized Mary's evil fortunes rather than her evil character. Up in the north, there was the occasional extreme Protestant rumble about the evils of that character; but in general, the Britain of the seventeenth century was absorbed by more immediate concerns. Even the hysterical anti-Catholicism stirred up by Titus Oates, inventor of the so-called Popish Plot of 1681, produced only a minor squall. But almost immediately thereafter the basis for modern Mariography was created.

The end of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century saw the publication of Buchanan's works (just after one of them, his treatise on Scottish political theory, *De Iure Regni apud Scotos*, had enjoyed the distinction of being burned, with Hobbes' *Leviathan*, by the University of Oxford in 1683); to begin with, it was works particularly dealing with Mary, the *Detectioun* and the *History of Scotland*, which were published, and then in 1715 came

Thomas Ruddiman's *Opera Omnia Georgii Buchanani*. There was also the publication of various other sources relating to Mary, such as the *Collections relating to Mary Queen of Scots* by James Anderson (1727–8); and the first critical edition of John Knox's *History of the Reformation in Scotland* (1732). And then in the mid eighteenth century the storm broke, when in 1754 the antiquary and historian William Goodall published *An examination of the letters said to be written by Mary Queen of Scots to James earl of Bothwell; shewing by intrinsick and extrinsick evidence that they are forgeries*.

But the new interest had a significant twist. Violence, sexual scandal and murder had of course been seized on by Mary's sixteenth-century detractors as admirable means of blackening the character of a major political figure – particularly a female political figure. But what in the sixteenth century had been a highly convenient part of a wider whole, a matter of partisanship for immediate political and religious reasons, now took on an objective life of its own. The historical ruler, who might or might not have made disastrous political mistakes, gave way to the woman who might or might not have written the Casket Letters; and scholars plunged into the absorbing task of deciding whether letters whose originals had not been seen since 1584, and whose texts had been translated from French into Scots and then back into French, were forgeries or not.

Scholarly ink, mixed with scholarly gall, was poured forth upon this fascinating and wholly insoluble mystery. Goodall's own *parti pris* title showed clearly where he stood; and he inspired almost immediate counterblasts. Those great figures of the Enlightenment, William Robertson and David Hume, both argued for Mary's guilt of adultery (with Bothwell) and murder (of Darnley), on the grounds that the Casket Letters were genuine, in their histories of Scotland and England respectively which they published in 1759; and they in turn were attacked a year later by William Tytler, in his *Historical and Critical Enquiry into the evidence against Mary Queen of Scots*. The complaint of the contemporary historian David lord Hailes that 'the Marian controversy has already become too angry and too voluminous' was prophetic. The hurricane would

never blow itself out; and at its eye was a figure already taking on the lineaments of a familiar enough twentieth-century 'type', the male-dominated, passion-ridden female so well-known to the readers of the novels of Barbara Cartland.

Even in this era of psycho-history, it is impossible to think of any other historical character of note whose public persona has been so submerged, and private morality so relentlessly pursued with such ruthless subjectivity on the part of those who have written about her. Titles like *Mary Stuart, Queen and Woman* by June Meade (pseudonym, 1933), or *A Tribute to the Memory of Mary Queen of Scots: being an attempt to relate simply and truly the history of her life* by J. B. and E. M. Rose (1868), do not obviously suggest serious historical study, but are rather part of a long series of more popular works on Mary, in which Jean Plaidy and Madeleine Bingham are among the most recent exponents; and there is a certain charm about the publication, in 1793, of a work by one J. F. Gaum, *Marie Stuart und Marie Antoinette in der Unterwelt. Zwo Koniginnen uber ihre Schicksale in der Oberwelt. Eine Unterredung*. But it was surely more than a matter of stylistic fashion which prompted the Jesuit scholar Fr J. H. Pollen to preface his very useful collection of sources for the Babington Plot of 1586, designed to kill Elizabeth, published in 1922, with statements such as 'The interest attaching to Queen Mary's wonderful personality is so great, that when she is taken away, all else seems to fade into insignificance.'

The personal engagement encapsulated here is not, after all, wholly different from the introduction to that much more objective modern study, the justly acclaimed biography of Mary by Lady Antonia Fraser; for Lady Antonia describes how 'being possessed since childhood by a passion for the subject of Mary Queen of Scots, I wished to test for myself the truth or falsehood of the many legends which surround her'. The legends, of course, are primarily associated with the period from the Darnley marriage to the flight to England, 1565–8; and the next high point of drama came with her involvement in the Babington Plot and her execution in 1587. The balance of Lady Antonia's very long and

extremely well-researched book reflects this exactly; she devotes 75 pages to the period of Mary's personal rule from 1561–5, compared to 137 for the years 1565–8 and 81 for 1586–7. In the course of her book, she gives us by far the most detailed and interesting portrait of Mary ever written, free from the excesses of adulation or attack which characterize so much of the writing about her. But as she was writing a personal biography, she inevitably concentrated on Mary at a very personal level, so that her book is rather familiar ground well trod by its author than a foray into new territory.

Lady Antonia's biography is the most substantial example of what may be regarded as the new and sober school of historians of Mary Queen of Scots. Professors Gordon Donaldson and I. B. Cowan have both tried to assess her as a character of history rather than drama, going further than Lady Antonia in considering her political role. Yet the drama and the dramatic personality still insistently break through. The new school is drawn as irresistibly as its predecessors to the great central mystery about Mary, her involvement in the murder of Darnley. That debate – and therefore the debate over the Casket Letters – is still very much alive. The most recent sustained attempt to resolve it, made by a Newcastle doctor, M. H. Armstrong Davison, is also the most recent example of the inexplicable difficulty of avoiding the temptation to become an advocate for the prosecution or defence of Mary Queen of Scots. Dr Armstrong Davison, captivated by the legend like so many others, began on the prosecution side, convinced by what he called the 'orthodox belief that Mary was a wanton and a murderess'. Ten years of study persuaded him that she was no such thing. If he did not go quite so far as Eric Linklater in believing that what Mary was doing down at Kirk o' Field during the last days of Darnley's life in February 1567 was indulging a 'womanly zeal for nursing', he certainly had no doubt of her innocence.

Yet in this book is a sub-theme which immediately raises a highly promising – and unexplored – line of enquiry; for the author remembered that he was a doctor, and added an appendix on Mary's medical history. Like Lady Antonia, he therefore drew attention



to a very important fact about Mary. Wanton and murderess she may or may not have been. But hysteric she was, subject to the fatal political weakness of collapsing in time of trouble. The significance of this was not appreciated. So obsessed was he with Mary's charm and the Casket Letters, that it did not occur to him to ask the much more prosaic but crucially important question: what effect did it have on her kingdom, in this age of religious and political upheaval and trauma, to be saddled with a ruler who shut herself off from reality whenever reality became difficult?

There is one honourable exception to the problems of Marian historiography surveyed here. In 1983, Gordon Donaldson published his fascinating *All The Queen's Men*. This prosopographical study of Mary's supporters and opponents certainly 'broke the mould', and indicated a way forward. But there is a long way to go. Professor Cowan rightly commented that

the enigma (of innocent martyr or adulterous murderess, the dual legend created in the sixteenth century) will persist until histories of the Queen of Scots no longer command attention. Historians will never agree to her character, and in these circumstances, it is perhaps inevitable that the picture of a romantic but ill-fated queen painted by Schiller and Swinburne, amongst others, is the one most likely to engage popular sympathy.

No doubt. But there is an important implication here, which deserves to be explored. Until now, the question of Mary's personal behaviour has been all-important; what has mattered was to establish her guilt or innocence, as if that would be the end of the story. The Marian-centred approach has produced writing which ranges from the absurd and lurid to the scholarly and balanced – about Mary Queen of Scots. Though the last twenty years has seen a major step forward in our understanding of the Scottish Reformation and of Scottish society in the sixteenth century, there is still an extraordinary gulf between the personality and the reign of Mary Queen of Scots. Of course any early modern monarch's personality was of fundamental importance, in

Scotland or elsewhere, and to that extent seeking to understand Mary's personality is an entirely legitimate and necessary exercise. But Cowan's assertion shows all too clearly where the particular problem lies in the case of *this* ruler. Books about Mary the Woman – almost, one feels, Mary the little woman (if only metaphorically, given her physical size); books about her marriages, at the level of personal relationships; books about her Italian secretary Rizzio, Darnley and the Casket Letters; all these make her personality, whether good or evil, an end in itself. It is particularly ironic that a ruler in the age of Machiavelli should have caused such obsession with personal morality, or immorality – not least because her reign produced the first politician in the British Isles, her secretary William Maitland of Lethington, who was described as 'machiavellian'.

What far too few historians have done is to treat this monarch as other monarchs are treated, and to ask what effect her sex and her personal relationships and actions had on her subjects and kingdom. The business of the historian is not to love or to hate Mary Stuart, to judge her as a saint or a criminal, but to ask about the success or failure of her rule. For example: it can be said at once – and briefly – that the probability that she was massively involved in the murder of Darnley is very strong. If she was not, then she must have been almost the only member of Edinburgh political society who managed to know nothing about it – and that in itself would be a comment on her political awareness. If she was, then it is for her God to judge her personal action – and for the historian to wonder whether this was not one of the most sensible political decisions she ever made.

Although the most recent writings on Mary have taken us away from the image of pantomime villainess or fairy queen, created in the sixteenth century and revived with such enthusiasm in the eighteenth and thereafter, and provided us instead with a human being of more believable proportions, nevertheless Mary still remains an infinitely more shadowy figure as queen of Scotland than her Stewart predecessors and successors. We know that she came to grief. We do not yet really know why. But we can be

fairly confident, as a starting-point, that Rizzio, Darnley and Bothwell, chief actors in the drama of the last two years of her personal rule, are at best only a part of the explanation. In June 1561, just before the personal rule began, Elizabeth's ambassador Nicholas Throckmorton warned her that 'your realm is in no other case at this day, than all other realms of Christendom are', by which he meant torn by religious controversy and conflict; in the twentieth century, J. H. Elliott was to characterize this period as the decade of revolution, when Scotland was only one of eight countries including France, Spain, the Netherlands and England which experienced upheaval and revolt. That takes us very far away from the little local Scottish drama; and it is in this context that Mary's reign should be understood.

This book therefore is not just 'another on Mary Queen of Scots', in the sense of being another personal biography. Antonia Fraser's admirable book has entirely filled that need. It is about Mary as a mid sixteenth-century monarch. That must mean a new balance. In her forty-four year life, Mary ruled for only six, so that we are faced with another thirty-eight years when she had virtually no role in her kingdom, being a minor and absentee ruler for the first nineteen, and a deposed queen for the second. A study of Mary as queen rather than as a woman of great misfortune and ultimate tragedy necessitates discussion of what was happening when the central figure of the monarch was off-stage, and especially before her debut, when the scene of her rule was set; the problems which her absence created, and the way in which others struggled to resolve them are as relevant as the short period of her personal reign. Moreover, when turning to that short period, the spotlight cannot be focused exclusively on the drama of the last two years. It must be deployed also on the hitherto comparatively neglected first four years of the reign, that brief part of her life which is the only one which can be considered in any way typical for a reigning monarch. In this period alone – the period of normality – do we have the chance to assess her abilities, or lack of them, as queen. Above all, it is essential to regard her not as *sui generis*, but as one of a line of Scottish monarchs.



## MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS

This brings us to the question central to the understanding of Queen Mary: the nature of Scottish monarchy, and the factors which made the relationship between kings and their subjects successful or unsuccessful. It is a question not answered by the superficial assumptions about the impossible Scottish nobility found in so many of the books about Mary, in stage-plays such as Bolt's *Vivat Regina* and in the celluloid romanticizing of Hollywood and Hal Wallis. This book will not provide a definitive study of the reign of Mary Queen of Scots; such a study lies far in the future, if it can ever be achieved at all. It seeks only to open up the lines of enquiry sketched out here; and it does so in the hope that by bringing them into the debate, it may contribute towards a fuller and more objective assessment of Mary's reign – and Mary's misfortunes.

