

Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman, eds. *Mary Tudor: Old and New Perspectives*.

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. xiv + 346 pp. \$31.95. ISBN: 978-0-230-00463-4.

No monarch has been as vilified as Mary Tudor. Her lack of popularity is evident in the convention by which she is often referred to, as she is here, as Mary Tudor, and not Mary I, lest we confuse England's first-ever queen regnant with her Scottish cousin. But it is also true that few monarchs have been the subject of such intense revisionist activity over the last few years. This collection of eleven interdisciplinary essays, by a range of established and younger scholars is, by the editors' own description, "unashamedly revisionist." Susan Doran and Thomas Freeman are an effective editorial duo, and this is their third co-edited volume. Their first, *The Myth of Elizabeth* (2003), looked at the ways in which history can slide towards mythmaking in their reassessment of Elizabeth's glittering reputation. *Mary Tudor: Old and New Perspectives* has been long-awaited, and here they have a different myth to unpick. Doran and Freeman and eight other scholars sift through the mesh of dismal verdicts of Mary — her hysteria, her stupidity, her cruelty, her childlessness, and loveless marriage — and re-evaluate the evidence in order to present a more intelligent, politically astute, subtle and successful ruler. This volume rescues Mary from a particularly entrenched history.

The volume is divided neatly into two parts: the first considers the old perspectives on Mary, those versions crafted by writers, historians, and dramatists from John Foxe to A. F. Pollard. Susan Doran's opening essay on how Elizabethan Protestants cast Mary is matched by Victor Houlston's on the mourning of Mary by Elizabethan Catholics. Mary's reign has always been considered, as Paulina Kewes writes, through "the prism of persecution," and Thomas Freeman's essay, "Inventing Bloody Mary," looks at how the burnings of at least 300 martyrs in Mary's reign were seized upon by late seventeenth-century polemicists who sought to associate her reign, and Catholicism, with cruelty and tyranny. Freeman's second essay for the volume, "Burning Zeal," then reexamines the regime's policy of

burning heretics from a sixteenth-century perspective: it may not have been wise and it is a stain on English Catholicism, but at the time it was “the only viable option,” he argues. This volume is also about putting issues, such as the burnings, in perspective. For Paulina Kewes, it was the problem of the Exclusion Crisis of 1553 rather than the problem of the burnings that mattered for the Elizabethans, and it is nice to see an essay, by Tessa Grant, on how — and why — Mary was portrayed in plays early in James’s reign.

While the first part of this volume is mostly historiographical, the second part of the volume turns to the new perspectives now being offered by historians working on Mary, some of whom, like Judith Richards and the late William Wizenan, have presented their work in recent books. Judith Richards’s biography of Mary I was published at the same time as two other successful and revisionist biographies of Mary, by Anna Whitelock and Linda Porter. Aysha Pollnitz’s excellent contribution to this volume argues persuasively for Mary’s humanism, and looks at her intellectual development through her relationship with Katherine Parr and involvement with the translation of Erasmus’s *Paraphrases*. Judith Richards’s concluding essay suggests that Mary’s ill-health — so often discussed as evidence of her political ineffectiveness — was possibly feigned “for reasons of political expedience.” Richards writes that the reassessment of England’s first queen is still a “work in progress,” but that, nevertheless, Mary is now emerging as “more rational, less bloody, less reactionary, less tyrannical” than ever before. Even a recent episode of BBC’s *Horrible Histories* chose to acknowledge Mary as a victim of anti-Catholic history-making. Their Mary was still mad and hysterical, flailing her arms, and wailing to the tune of Kate Bush’s “Wuthering Heights,” but she did at least protest that “History only remembers / I was a catastrophe.”

As volumes such as this and the recent biographies of Mary confirm, Mary I deserves the careful and enquiring attention she is now being given, and Tudor history is better for it. Pronouncements such as A. F. Pollard’s that “Sterility was the conclusive note” of Mary’s reign, echoed by A. G. Dickens’s conclusion that her reign “must be judged a huge failure” and David Loades’s description of Mary as “pathetic” demand scrutiny. The precedents Mary set as a female ruler need to be recognized, and the successes and failures of her reign set against the early years of Elizabeth’s. When Elizabeth passed the Act of Uniformity in 1559, it only passed by a majority of three. Protestantism was not inevitable. But how far does, or can, our revisionism go? Mary’s reign was, in the end, simply too short, and this limits our ability to fully reassess her reign and its legacy. It is the contention of the editors of this volume that if Mary hadn’t died in 1558, England would “almost certainly” be Catholic. In their counterfactual introduction, Doran and Freeman claim that, given a few more years, Elizabeth’s claim to the throne would have been substantially weakened and the restoration of Catholicism more complete. The course of British history then, according to this volume, rests on “the microbes that took Mary Tudor’s life.”

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