

Retha M. Warnicke. *Mary Queen of Scots*.

Routledge Historical Biographies. New York: Routledge, 2006. xii + 304 pp. + 9 b/w plates. index. illus. tbls. chron. bibl. \$19.70. ISBN: 0-415-29183-6.

In this highly detailed biography of Scotland's only queen regnant, Retha Warnicke examines the life of Mary Stewart through the lens of a cultural historian rather than a political historian. Consequently, Warnicke has attempted to distance her own work from that of earlier biographers such as Antonia Fraser, Jenny Wormald, and John Guy.

After the introduction, Warnicke divides her book into nine chapters dealing with various periods of Mary's life. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the years of her

childhood, French upbringing, marriage, and youthful widowhood, 1542–61. Throughout these chapters, Warnicke demonstrates the depth of Mary's education and indoctrination by her French relatives into French court life and the French cultural expectations placed upon a queen. Warnicke does a good job of explaining the details and customs of the French court, no doubt building upon her extensive knowledge from her research on Anne Boleyn. However, strikingly missing from this discussion are the cultural expectations of her Scottish subjects. Warnicke explains it away by stating that the court was used to French customs because of the regency of Mary of Guise, Mary's mother. Yet, owing to Mary's vast difficulties in maintaining control as discussed in the next few chapters, one might consider that some of her problems were due to her being too French, not just too Catholic, and that her upbringing was actually a major hindrance to her understanding of her own people.

Chapters 4–6 examine the years 1561–67, when Mary left the comfort and relative safety of France to take up her duties as the Queen Regnant of Scotland, and struggled to keep her independence in the face of religious and political opposition. Major topics of discussion in this section include Mary's decision to marry Henry Stewart, Lord Darnley, her disputed role in his death, and her abduction and subsequent marriage to James Bothwell, Duke of Orkney. Here, Warnicke's strength as a cultural historian comes forth as she reveals possible reasons for Mary's behavior during her abduction and marriage to Bothwell. Warnicke concludes that Mary had a very high sense of self and honor, and what seems like bizarre behavior to a modern scholar may have been normal conduct from a woman in the middle of the sixteenth century.

Finally, chapters 7–10 deal with her struggles while a prisoner in England from 1567–87. Here, Warnicke examines the Casket Letters, Mary's continual illnesses, and the various plots to overthrow Elizabeth that conspirators planned in Mary's name, including the Babington Plot, which ultimately cost Mary her life. Warnicke painstakingly shows that the Casket Letters, used to discredit Mary and implicate her in the death of Darnley, were forgeries, though this is not necessarily new information. One aspect of this section that is worthy of greater study is the role physical ailments play in the motives of politically important people. Warnicke goes to great lengths to demonstrate the degree to which Mary's thinking was clouded by 1587, possibly due to her long battle with porphyria, thus making her willing to participate in the Babington Plot.

If there is any criticism regarding this work, it is the lack of discussion concerning Mary's success or failure as a monarch. As Warnicke demonstrates, whether Catholic or Protestant, the vast majority of her subjects supported her in her early years, primarily because she pursued a policy of balance between the factions. Yet, when Mary's world fell apart, Warnicke fails to analyze why. She seems to ignore the more obvious fact that Mary was just not up to the task of being a queen regnant. From the outset, her French relatives and in-laws trained her to be dominated by men, and she was educated in the usual humanistic fashion of children during the sixteenth century. Yes, her basic education was the same as

that of Francis II, but that does not mean she was taught to rule. The result for Mary: she was far better suited for the role of the educated wife of a nobleman or king, than for the role of a reigning queen.

In general, this biography is well-balanced, with Warnicke avoiding the pitfall of becoming too much the defender or prosecutor of Mary Stewart. Retha Warnicke's *Mary Queen of Scots* is a good, but difficult, biography for the average reader. This book is recommended for advanced undergraduate and graduate level students and academic libraries.

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