
Rosalind K. Marshall’s new work, *Mary Queen of Scots: Truth or Lies*, is a light, enjoyable read that attempts to debunk many of the popular myths about the life of the tragic queen. Marshall takes a new stylistic approach in her current contribution to the voluminous literature on the Scottish queen. Marshall is well known for writing on Scottish history and has published well-over a dozen books on the subject, including a longer monograph on Mary, one on Mary’s mother, one on John Knox, and a book on Mary’s servants. Her latest work is a short overview of many of the juicy controversies that abound in Mary’s life.

*Truth or Lies* consists of ten chapters, each addressing a separate question in the life of Mary, from her childhood and whether the queen was more French or Scottish, to the time of her execution and the reaction of her son James VI to her death. In the first section of the book, she argues that Mary did remain a Scot who constantly maintained connection to Scotland throughout her childhood in France. She also looks into Mary’s claim on the English crown and her dealings with John Knox. The center of the book, chapters four through eight, concerns the true drama of Mary’s reign. How quickly did she fall in love with Darnley? Did she sleep with David Rizzio? Was she involved in Darnley’s murder? How did she end up married to Bothwell? And did she ever meet Elizabeth? She answers these well, in general, using the best recent knowledge of Mary. Marshall’s own depiction of the Scottish queen, though, shines through these chapters, along with the final two. She is very sympathetic in her
representation of Mary, Queen of Scots. She emphasizes how Mary had a hard childhood, but despite that, she never neglected the rule of her kingdom, and that it was largely circumstance that ended the career of this well-educated, courageous, perseverant, resourceful woman who had great social skills. Marshall’s image of the Scottish queen rises strongly through her words as she describes the queen as “far from being some poor, downtrodden victim. She was a larger-than-life personality in every way, not only physically, but also in the strength of her emotions” (p. 119).

Marshall makes a few small errors in the book; for instance, she says on page seventeen that Catholics all saw Mary Tudor as Henry’s only legitimate heir in 1547. In actuality, as Henry married Jane Seymour after Catherine of Aragon’s death (and Anne Boleyn’s execution), no one could debate the legitimacy of his male heir, Edward. She also does not take into consideration more recent studies of the period in some cases, for instance, when she claims Darnley refused to attend his son’s baptism, when the sources really suggest that Mary forbade him from the attendance. Despite these and other similar small inaccuracies, the work itself gives a good overview of the period and answers many questions on Mary’s rule for uninitiated scholars of the Scottish queen.

Marshall’s book is meant for an audience of people with a passing interest in Mary, Queen of Scots. The problem is that these people will likely not be familiar with the myths that she works so hard to debunk. Scholars and those with a passion for Mary would know that most of the myths that she proposes are leftover from an earlier century and have already been solved, or are ones that cannot be solved with the sources currently available. Anyone who has studied the queen knows that she and Elizabeth never truly met, but at the same time, no one can know for sure whether Bothwell abducted Mary or if the Casket Letters were accurate. Despite that, Marshall does a strong job of analyzing the historiographical understandings of these events.
Her own research, though, stopped in 2006, and as a result, she did not incorporate some of the newer works on Mary, which would have added to her study. Marshall’s work, though, contributes to the current literature on Mary, Queen of Scots by giving a short, informative series of essays on the queen that only could have been written by someone with her level of general expertise. High school or younger college-aged students and a general reading public will find this book a great introduction to the drama of the life of Mary, Queen of Scots.

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