
This is a comprehensive study of twelve crucial years not only in the career of Mary of Guise, the French queen of James V, but also in the history of Scotland. Those were the years that witnessed the swansong of the “Auld Alliance”, an alliance that was forged by Scotland and France out of mutual need for protection against English aggression and that survived for over 250 years. In the attempt to preserve it, Guise’s role was a vital one. Widowed at the age of 27, Guise stayed in Scotland for eighteen turbulent years, to contend with English invasions, with lawlessness in the Borders and the Highlands, and with growing religious conflict within the realm. Much of the book’s value comes from Ritchie’s close analysis of events. She introduces the reader to Guise’s years in France but the focus of the book is on her ascent to power in Scotland and on her astute handling of political affairs thereafter.

At the heart of any study of Guise’s life lies, inevitably, the question: why did she stay on? Ritchie contends that “Dynasticism, not Catholicism, was the primary motive behind her policy in Scotland.” (p.248). This is a startling contention, and even more so is her claim that Guise “was raised, and later operated, in a world where dynasticism took precedence over personal and religious convictions” (p.245). In sixteenth-century Europe, religion, as much as dynasty, played a powerful role in the lives of men and women. That Guise should have fought with such courage to maintain the Franco-Scottish alliance and the thrones of Scotland and France for her daughter is not surprising. Rather, it is to be expected. But it is dangerous, perhaps, to dismiss motives other than personal glory. She was almost certainly conscious of her duty to the French kings, for François I had raised her status to that of a Daughter of France, and conscious also of her duty to the Catholic Church in which she was raised and which she never abjured. In the end, the portrait that emerges is not so much that of a woman driven by dynastic ambition as one subject to French foreign policy.
The most arresting and valuable part of Ritchie’s work is her discussion of French involvement in Scottish affairs. Here she throws a bright light on Henri II’s dream of a Franco-British Empire and the new importance that Scotland acquired on the European stage. Under the terms of the Treaty of Haddington in 1548, France sent men, munitions and money to help the Scots oust the English; in return, the five-year-old Queen of Scots was betrothed to the Dauphin and sent to France. The two nations were now more closely intertwined than they had ever been before. Ritchie contends that Henri II now became the ‘Protector’ of Scotland, Scotland became a ‘protectorate’ of France, and French power was fully established when Guise was officially appointed Regent in 1554. This is a provocative thesis, surely, for the French presence was strongly resisted by many of the Scots lords and was never officially established. Yet, when Henri declared Scotland to be a “Kingdom which is under my protection and which I consider mine,” (p.31) and “I have pacified the Kingdom of Scotland which I hold and possess with the same power and authority as I have in France . . .” (p.68) one sees how the relationship between the two nations had shifted, at least in Henri’s mind. French power in Scotland was consolidated, Ritchie contends, with the marriage in 1558 of Mary Stewart and the Dauphin. In the absence of a Tudor heir, the young Queen of Scots now provided Henri with the key to an empire that embraced Scotland, England, Ireland and France. The marriage between Mary Tudor and Philip of Spain further complicated matters, for it brought the Valois-Hapsburg conflict right to the Anglo-Scottish border. Guise’s domestic policies were now affected by European affairs. When war broke out between Henri II and Philip of Spain, for example, Guise was forced to abandon her efforts to establish order within her realm; instead, she had to turn her attention to fortifying the Borders and, reluctantly, to planning an invasion of England.

The book is not without flaw. It is derived from Dr. Ritchie’s doctoral dissertation and the academic stamp is still visible. In the perceived need to show how her work differs from previous studies she has been exceedingly dismissive of
other historians. It is a pity that these early chapters were not
removed, for they create an unfortunate tone and can be of
little interest to a wider readership. Some careless errors could
have been avoided. Ritchie cites Gladys Dickinson’s “Instruc-
tions to the French Ambassador, 30 March 1550” several
times in Chapter 2 but incorrectly attributes the material to
M. Wood. Confusion occurs also in her discussion of the House
of Longueville, where Guise’s first husband, Louis d’Orléans,
is named François on page 135 note 46. Finally, on the death
of Guise’s son in 1551 a long dispute ensued over the division
of the Longueville estate. The woman involved in the lawsuits
was not Françoise d’Alençon, duchess of Vendôme, as claimed,
for she had died in 1550, nor had she ever been the wife of
Louis d’Orléans’ father.

This book is a valuable contribution to an important
period in Scotland’s history. Ritchie’s interpretations are some-
times provocative but she is to be commended for turning the
searchlight on the relationship between Scotland and France
in the dying years of the alliance, as well as on Scotland’s role
in a wider world. Above all, she brings attention to a remark-
able Frenchwoman, Mary of Guise-Lorraine. It is gratifying to
see the recent interest in this intelligent and valiant woman
for, in addition to Ritchie’s study, an abridged edition of
Whether the Auld Alliance would have survived had Guise
lived is the intriguing question that Ritchie leaves us with
when she concludes: “Only with her death in June 1560
would its collapse be complete.”

Joan Noble
Independent scholar