
Rosalind Marshall’s *Mary Queen of Scots, ‘In my end is my beginning’* accompanies an exhibition in the National Museum of Scotland, (28th June – 17th November 2013) of roughly two hundred objects associated with the famous Queen. It was the most comprehensive exhibition on Mary Queen of Scots to date, and brought together all forms of visual and written culture, including jewelry, textiles, furniture, paintings, drawings, maps, and documents. Marshall’s book describes and forms a companion to the exhibition by providing pictures of the objects and contextualizing them within the life of Mary Queen of Scots, from her childhood and early life through to her death.

The first chapter deals with Mary’s youth, the least well-known and understood part of her life. Marshall begins with Mary’s parents - James V and Mary of Guise - and devotes much attention to the close relationship between Mary of Guise and her daughter. Evidence of this relationship is an image of the first letter Mary sent to her mother from France (c. 1550), where she lived from the age of five (p. 10). The political events of Mary’s early years are illustrated with a few evocative objects, which give a wonderful glimpse into her youth – such as a portrait of Dauphin Francis in which he looks improbably hearty (p. 9), and some of the few surviving jewels that she possessed, which suggests she was a woman of great wealth (p. 20).

The second chapter discusses Mary’s marriage to Lord Darnley, and begins with the machinations of both Elizabeth I and Margaret Douglas – Darnley’s mother – that brought it about. Marshall links the on-going struggle for power between Mary and Darnley to an image of a coin that depicts Darnley as king (p. 29). Marshall also covers the events leading up to Darnley’s murder, and incorporates various images of the murder scene, including the drawing sent to Elizabeth I by William Cecil directly after the events as evidence of how Darnley’s death led, in part, to her
eventual execution (pp. 40-41). Marshall points out that, although the question of Mary’s knowledge has always hung over this murder, “not one piece of uncontaminated evidence has ever been found to suggest that Mary knew of the plot” (p. 42).

The final chapter describes Mary’s life from her marriage to Bothwell to her execution. Marshall deals briefly with the issue of Bothwell’s alleged rape of Mary, by suggesting that “Scotland’s Machiavelli” (p. 21) – William Maitland—persuaded Mary that the Bothwell marriage would be deemed acceptable, “if it seemed that it had been forced upon her” (p. 47). Through a series of objects, including one of the large vengeance paintings commissioned by Darnley’s mother (p. 50), and the documents in the Lennox casket (p. 54), Marshall shows how this “disastrous marriage” resulted in Mary’s eventual demise. The final object in the exhibition is, of course, the death warrant signed by Elizabeth I (p. 58), and the book ends with a full catalogue, including pictures and thorough descriptions of each of the items discussed.

This book is an invaluable and fascinating resource to anyone studying Mary Queen of Scots, or Scottish queens more generally. It is wonderful to see so many of the objects associated with Mary, and Marshall’s book ties them firmly into Mary’s life in a way that is edifying and valuable to the casual museum visitor and scholar alike.

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