REVIEW


At the very outset of her monograph, Eileen Dunlop candidly admits that Queen Margaret – more commonly known as ‘Saint Margaret’ – of Scotland has been the subject of numerous biographies over the nine centuries since her death. Despite the plethora of work that has been written on the queen who lived from approximately 1045 to 1093 and was canonized in 1250, Dunlop’s new biography has much to offer the reader. To begin, this biography is well suited to those who have always been intrigued by the life of Margaret, but, given the wealth of scholarship available about her today, were unsure as to where to begin with their own reading. Dunlop’s biography of Queen Margaret is a slim volume made up of 98 pages of text, divided into twelve chapters. The text is supplemented with a short bibliography, a list of online resources and articles and papers, and a short list of places which were important to Margaret during her life, or which have been established in her honour in the years following her death, for those who would like to take their study of her to a more personal level by visiting various areas of Scotland.

Dunlop has used many interesting sources in her discussion of Margaret’s life. She makes considerable use of the central medieval histories which mention Scotland in general and Margaret in particular; specifically the primary sources left behind by Ailred of Rievaulx, John of Fordun, Walter Bower, and William of Malmesbury, and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The primary source Dunlop relied on most extensively was the work of Turgot, a monk who lived during the same time of Margaret and was purported to be her confessor and confidante. He wrote his own biography of Margaret, but the most recent translations of this work date from the latter years of the nineteenth century.
Dunlop, therefore, goes back to the earliest sources in her monograph in order to get as true a picture of Margaret as is possible; the result is a considerable feat, when taking into account the millennium which separates Margaret and the modern reader.

Dunlop also uses the works of a variety of modern scholars which she uses to illustrate how the perceptions of Margaret have changed over the centuries. Unlike many past biographies, Dunlop has chosen to focus on Queen Margaret as a woman, rather than a saint, although the enduring incarnation of Margaret as a saint does figure prominently in the chapters ‘Images of Margaret’, ‘Legacy of Margaret’, ‘Margaret’s Church’, and ‘The Making of a Saint’. The end result of Dunlop’s effort is a work which seeks to introduce the reader to the woman behind the myth, rather than adopting the tired perspective of pious adoration so prevalent in other biographies. In addition, Dunlop is not shy about admitting to the paucity of information that exists concerning the life of Margaret; the exact date upon which she was born has been lost to history, and there is no concrete date given for her death. Indeed, little is even known of the approximately 40 years which made up her life, necessitating a careful interpretation of the primary sources mentioned above. Even then, information is sparse regarding, for example, how or where Margaret passed her childhood (although it is now commonly believed that she was born in either Kiev or Hungary, and spent many of her younger years in Hungary), or how she passed her time while wife of Malcolm III and Queen of Scotland.

Perhaps because of this lack of information about Margaret’s life, Dunlop’s biography occasionally lapses into extended descriptive passages of things or events which do not have to do specifically with the life of Margaret. While information regarding the political situation in Scotland and England leading up to Margaret’s term as Queen of Scotland (found in the chapters ‘Unruly Times’, ‘Hungarian Childhood’, and ‘English Influences’), or an explanation of the foundation and implementation of the Rule of St. Benedict, are elements which are interesting and – arguably – necessary to a biography of Margaret, these side subjects often appear to the reader as unnecessarily long tangents, which in the end serve to distract somewhat from the story of Margaret herself.
As mentioned, much of the other existing scholarship available regarding the life of Queen Margaret has focussed on her piety. She purportedly desired to live a religious life as a nun, rather than marry. It is unclear what made her change her mind and accept William’s offer of marriage, but Dunlop sums it up this way: ‘It is hard to imagine a more turbulent early life than Margaret’s, and easy to comprehend her attraction to the cloister, with it’s long silences and ordered ways. She may have married to oblige her family, or because her perception of God’s will for her had changed, or because union with Malcolm seemed her best chance of the security which she inwardly craved.’ Dunlop’s background as an author of historical and Scottish-themed novels for young people may explain her tendency to include sections such speculation written in similar language, yet romantic asides such as these do little to detract from her biography of Margaret which, in terms of its accessibility, readability, and potential to spark further interest in a fascinating subject, has much to offer the reader.

*Cathryn Spence
University of Guelph*