



ELIZABETH AND MARY

COUSINS, RIVALS, QUEENS

JANE DUNN

A KNOFF  BOOK

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In memory of a much loved father

DAVID ROLF THESEN

1923–2002

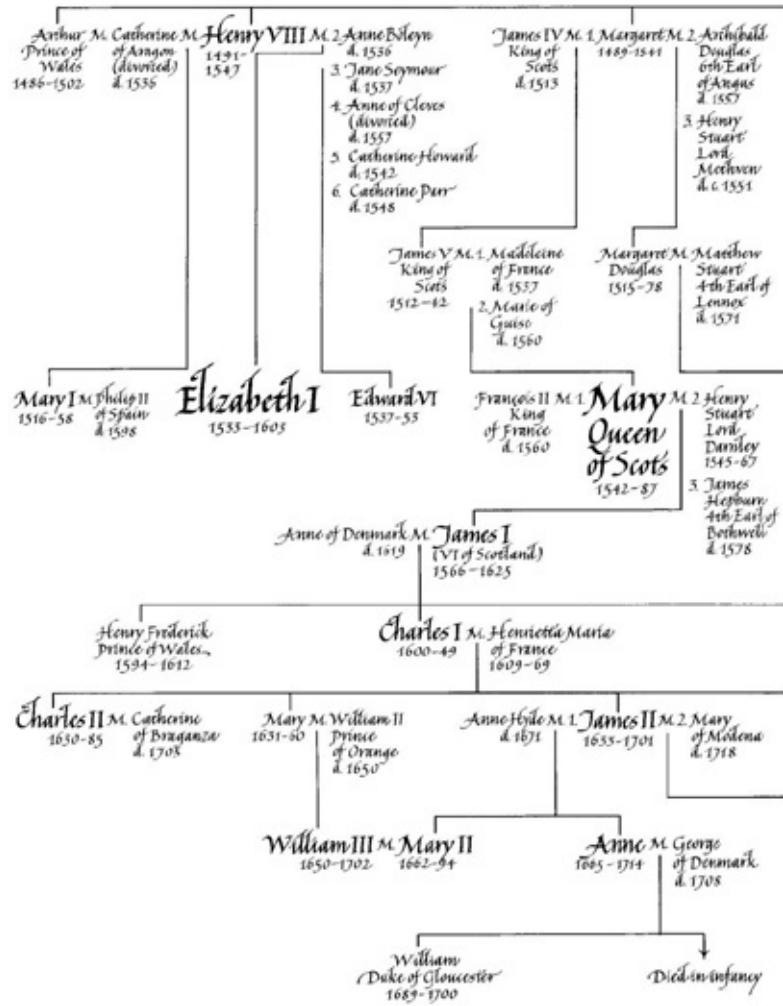
“out of the strong came forth sweetness”

Author's Note

I have retained early modern English in quotations where they occur thus in the source. On occasion I have clarified words or phrases and put them in square brackets. Otherwise, most quotations are in modern English, which is how they occur in the source.

Catholic countries changed from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian in October 1582, when they lost ten days. This meant the English calendar continued ten days behind. The period of history that this book encompasses is mostly pre-1582 and consequently all dates correspond with the Julian calendar.

The Tudors and Stuarts



Chronology

1457	28 JAN	Henry VII born
1485	15 DEC	Catherine of Aragon born
1486	19 SEPT	Arthur, Prince of Wales, born
1489	29 NOV	Margaret Tudor born (grandmother of Mary Queen of Scots)
1491	28 JUNE	Henry VIII born
1501	14 NOV	Catherine of Aragon marries Arthur, Prince of Wales
1501		Possible year of Anne Boleyn's birth
1502	2 APRIL	Arthur, Prince of Wales, dies (aged 15)
1509	22 APRIL	Henry VII dies (aged 52); Henry VIII ascends to the throne (aged 17)
	11 JUNE	Catherine of Aragon marries Henry VIII
1512	10 APRIL	James V of Scotland born
1515	20 NOV	Mary of Guise born
1516	18 FEB	Mary I born
1520	13 SEPT	William Cecil, Lord Burghley, born
1532	1 SEPT	Anne Boleyn becomes Countess of Pembroke
1533	25 JAN	Anne Boleyn marries Henry VIII
	23 MAY	Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, pronounced marriage between Catherine of Aragon and Henry VIII invalid
	28 MAY	Cranmer pronounced Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn married
	1 JUNE	Anne Boleyn crowned
	11 JULY	Henry VIII excommunicated
	7 SEPT	Elizabeth I born; possible date of birth of Robert Dudley
	10 SEPT	Elizabeth baptised at Greenwich
1534	20 APR	Elizabeth Barton, "Maid of Kent," executed
1535	22 JUNE	Bishop John Fisher executed
	6 JULY	Sir Thomas More executed
1536	7 JAN	Catherine of Aragon dies (aged 50)

	29 JAN	Anne Boleyn miscarries a son
	17 MAY	George Boleyn, Anne's brother, executed
	19 MAY	Anne Boleyn executed (Elizabeth aged 2 years 8 months)
	20 MAY	Henry VIII betrothed to Jane Seymour
	30 MAY	Henry VIII marries Jane Seymour
	1 JULY	Mary Tudor and Elizabeth declared illegitimate
1537	5 JULY	Queen Madeleine, wife of James V of Scotland, dies
	12 OCT	Edward VI born
	24 OCT	Jane Seymour dies (aged 28)
1538	9 MAY	James V of Scotland marries Mary of Guise
1540	22 MAY	James, Prince of Scotland, born
	28 JULY	Thomas Cromwell executed
1541	APR	Robert, Duke of Albany, James V and Mary of Guise's 2nd son born
	29 APR–MAY	Both Scottish princes, Robert and James, die within days of each other
1542	24 NOV	Scottish forces routed by English at Solway Moss
	8 DEC	Mary Queen of Scots born
	13 DEC	James V dies (aged 30) and Mary becomes Queen of Scotland (aged 5 days)
1543	JUNE	Mary Tudor and Elizabeth reinstated in the succession
	JULY	Treaties of Greenwich; allowing for marriage of Mary to Prince Edward, Henry VIII's heir
	12 JULY	Catherine Parr marries Henry VIII
	9 SEPT	Mary Queen of Scots crowned at Stirling Castle
1544	19 JAN	François II of France born
	14 SEPT	Henry VIII's forces capture Boulogne
1545	7 DEC	Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, born
1547	28 JAN	Henry VIII dies (aged 55); Edward VI ascends to throne (aged 9)
	20 FEB	Edward VI crowned, Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, Lord Protector
	3 MAR	François I dies (aged 52); Henri II succeeds to French throne; Thomas Seymour and Catherine Parr betrothed
	10 SEPT	English rout of the Scots at Pinkie Cleugh
1548	7 JULY	Marriage contract between Mary Queen of Scots and the Dauphin François
	29 JULY	Mary Queen of Scots sails to France
	5 SEPT	Catherine Parr dies (aged 36)
1549	16 JAN	Arrest ordered of Sir Thomas Seymour, Lord Sudley
	20 MAR	Sir Thomas Seymour executed
1550		Mary of Guise visits her daughter Mary Queen of Scots
	4 JUNE	Lord Robert Dudley marries Amy Robsart

1551	2 MAY	William Camden born (died 1623)
1552	22 JAN	Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, executed; John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, new Protector
1553	21 MAY	Lady Jane Grey marries Guildford Dudley
	6 JULY	Edward VI dies (aged 15), succeeded by Mary I
	10 JULY	Lady Jane Grey proclaimed Queen of England
	20 JULY	Mary Tudor proclaimed Queen of England
	3 AUG	Mary I and Elizabeth enter London
	21 AUG	John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, beheaded
	30 OCT	Mary I crowned
1554	FEB	Wyatt Rebellion
	12 FEB	Lady Jane Grey executed (aged 16)
	18 MAR	Elizabeth in Tower
	11 APR	Sir Thomas Wyatt executed
	19 MAY	Elizabeth released from Tower and goes to Woodstock
	25 JULY	Mary I marries Philip II of Spain
	16 OCT	Bishops Ridley and Latimer burnt at stake at Oxford
	30 NOV	Philip Sidney born
1555	18 OCT	Elizabeth goes to Hatfield
	25 OCT	Holy Roman Emperor Charles V hands on his imperial position to brother Ferdinand, and sovereignty of the Low Countries to son Philip II
1556	21 MAR	Archbishop Thomas Cranmer burnt at stake
1557	7 JULY	Mary I declared war on France to support Philip II
1558	5 JAN	Calais lost to the French
	24 APR	Mary Queen of Scots marries François, Dauphin of France
	21 SEPT	Charles V dies
	17 NOV	Mary I dies (aged 42); Elizabeth I succeeds to the throne; Henri II declares Mary Queen of Scots Queen of England and Ireland
1559	15 JAN	Elizabeth I crowned Queen of England and Ireland
	2 APRIL	Treaty of Cateau-Cambresis between England and France
	2 MAY	John Knox returns to Scotland
	8 MAY	Elizabeth's Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity passed, implementing the Elizabethan religious settlement
	10 MAY	Scottish Lords of Congregation rebel against Mary of Guise's regency
	20 JUNE	Henri II seriously injured in jousting tournament
	22 JUNE	Elizabeth's prayer book issued
	10 JULY	Henri II dies; François II becomes King of France and Mary his queen
	18 SEPT	François II crowned; he and Mary claim they are King and Queen of England and Ireland too

	21 OCT	Mary of Guise deposed for allowing French to fortify Leith
	18 DEC	Elizabeth sends aid to Scottish rebel lords
1560	27 FEB	Treaty of Berwick
	MAR	Tumult of Amboise, failed coup d'état against Guise domination and French persecution of Protestants
	11 JUN	Mary of Guise dies (aged 44)
	6 JUL	Treaty of Edinburgh between Scotland and England, Mary's claims on English throne nullified, but Mary refuses to sign treaty
	11 AUG	Scottish Parliament establishes the reformed Protestant religion in Scotland
	8 SEPT	Lady Dudley (Amy Robsart), Lord Robert's wife, found dead
	5 DEC	François II dies (aged 15); Mary becomes Dowager Queen of France; Charles IX King of France, Catherine de Medici as Regent
1561	22 JAN	Francis Bacon born
	14 AUG	Mary leaves France
	19 AUG	Mary Queen of Scots returns to Scotland (aged 18)
1562	1 MAR	Massacre of Protestants at Vassy, instigated by Duc de Guise, beginning of French wars of religion
	26 MAY	Shane O'Neill leads a rebellion in Ireland
	OCT	Elizabeth seriously ill with smallpox
	28 OCT	Mary victorious over Earl of Huntly and his men at Corrichie
1563	22 FEB	Pierre de Chastelard executed
	24 FEB	François, Duc de Guise, assassinated (aged 44)
	JUNE	Mary's first parliament
	27 JUL	Havre surrendered to French
1564	6 FEB	Christopher Marlowe born
	23 APRIL	Reputed birthday of William Shakespeare
	25 JULY	Maximilian I succeeds as Holy Roman Emperor, as King of Austria, Bohemia and Hungary on death of Ferdinand I. Rest of Hapsburg dominions to Archduke Charles
	29 SEPT	Lord Robert Dudley created Earl of Leicester
1565	FEB	Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley enters Scotland
	29 JULY	Mary Queen of Scots marries Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley (she is 22, he 19)
	AUG–OCT	The "Chaseabout Raid" when Mary suppresses Moray's rebellion
1566	1 JAN	Mary's pregnancy announced
	9 MAR	David Rizzio murdered

	19 JUN	James, Mary's son, born (James VI and I, 1566–1625)
	NOV	Mary at Craigmillar Castle where she discusses the Darnley problem
	10 NOV	Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, born
	17 DEC	Prince James of Scotland baptised at Stirling Castle
1567	10 FEB	Darnley murdered at Kirk o' Field, just outside Edinburgh (aged 21)
	19 APRIL	Ainslie Bond signed by Scottish nobles accepting Bothwell's suit of Mary
	24 APR	Mary "abducted" by James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell
	7 MAY	Lord and Lady Bothwell granted a divorce
	15 MAY	Mary marries Bothwell as her third husband
	15 JUNE	Mary surrenders to Confederate Lords at Carberry; Bothwell escapes
	17 JUNE	Mary imprisoned in Lochleven Castle
	24 JULY	Mary forced to abdicate, James is declared King of Scotland (aged 13 months)
	29 JULY	James VI crowned at Stirling, James Stewart, Earl of Moray becomes Regent
1568	17 JAN	Lady Catherine Grey (Lady Catherine Seymour), Countess of Hertford, dies (aged 29)
	2 MAY	Mary escapes from Lochleven
	13 MAY	Mary and supporters defeated at Langside
	18 MAY	Mary lands in Cumbria and conducted to Sheffield Castle
	23 MAY	Prince William of Orange defeats Spanish at the start of revolt in Low Countries
	15 JULY	Mary moved to Bolton Castle
	OCT	York conference to investigate Mary's part in Darnley's murder
	25 NOV	Inquiry moves to Westminster
1569	26 JAN	Mary moved into custody of Earl of Shrewsbury at Tutbury Castle
	APRIL	Elizabeth decides Mary must be returned to Scotland
	JULY	Moray declines to have Mary back
	10 OCT	Duke of Norfolk arrested
	14 NOV	Northern earls take possession of Durham Cathedral in Northern Rebellion
	22 NOV	Mary moved south to Coventry
	16 DEC	Northern earls flee to Scotland
1570	21 JAN	James Stewart, Earl of Moray and Regent, assassinated
	25 FEB	Elizabeth excommunicated by Pope Pius V
	AUG	Norfolk released from Tower

1571	FEB	William Cecil created Baron Burghley
	APRIL	Ridolphi plot revealed
	SEPT	Darnley's father, Earl of Lennox and Regent of Scotland, assassinated
1572	JAN	Duke of Norfolk's trial
	2 JUNE	Duke of Norfolk executed
	24 AUG	St. Bartholomew's Massacre
1574	30 MAY	Charles IX dies, succeeded by Henri III
1577	13 DEC	Francis Drake leaves Plymouth to attempt circumnavigation of the globe
1578	14 APRIL	Earl of Bothwell dies in Danish prison
1579	JAN	Jehan de Simier arrives in London to conduct courtship between Elizabeth and his master François Duc d'Alençon
1580	26 SEPT	Francis Drake enters Plymouth having completed his circumnavigation
1581	4 APRIL	Sir Francis Drake knighted
	6 JUNE	Execution of Regent Morton
	1 DEC	English Jesuit Edmund Campion executed
1582	5 OCT	Gregorian calendar adopted by Catholic countries, when 5 Oct becomes 15
1583	NOV	Throckmorton plot revealed
1584	10 JULY	William, Prince of Orange, assassinated
	OCT	Bond of Association
	NOV	Act of Association
1585	APRIL	Sir Amyas Paulet becomes Mary's jailer
	8 DEC	Leicester sails for Low Countries as Elizabeth's Lieutenant General
1586	24 JAN	Leicester accepts title of Governor of the Provinces
	JULY	Babington plot
	1 JULY	Treaty of Berwick between Elizabeth I and James VI of Scotland
	14 AUG	Sir Anthony Babington arrested
	20 SEPT	Babington executed
	25 SEPT	Mary brought to Fotheringhay Castle
	15-16 OCT	Trial of Mary Queen of Scots
	25 OCT	Mary pronounced guilty of conspiring to murder Elizabeth I in Star Chamber at Westminster
1587	1 FEB	Elizabeth signs Mary's death warrant
	8 FEB	Mary executed at Fotheringhay Castle (aged 44)
1588	end JUL-	
	8 AUG	Defeat of Spanish Armada
1603	24 MAR	Death of Elizabeth I

Preface

Four hundred years ago, on 24 March 1603, Elizabeth I died. She was in her seventieth year. Having been propped for days on cushions on the floor in her chamber, she had been persuaded to take to her bed at last. To her Archbishop of Canterbury, silencing his praise, she said, “My lord, the crown which I have borne so long has given enough of vanity in my time.” These words struck to the heart of the tragedy that had befallen Elizabeth and Mary Queen of Scots. This same crown had been the focus of Mary’s ambition too; her claim to Elizabeth’s throne was the obsession of her adult life from which so many disasters flowed.

Elizabeth realised that her crown and all the powerful interests that surrounded it were what drew her and Mary together, and yet fatally divided them. Despite possessing the throne of England, with all the pride of a daughter of King Henry, she was haunted by a deep-rooted insecurity as to her own legitimacy. When pressed by Parliament to sign Mary’s death warrant, Elizabeth railed in anguish against the crown that had made this unnatural decision hers alone. Instead she wished that Mary and she “were but as two milkmaids with pails upon our arms,” and she regretted “that there were no more dependency upon us but mine own life were only in danger and not the whole estate of [her people’s] religion and well-doings.” It was their royal rather than their human status that had brought the queens to such straits that one had to die.

Sixteen years before Elizabeth’s own natural death in old age, Mary was beheaded at the age of forty-four. From that one act of regicide, a queen killing a fellow queen, a mythology of justification, romance, accusation and blame has been spun that retains its force to the present day. Of all the monarchs of these islands it is Elizabeth I and Mary Queen of Scots who most stir the imagination. They divided powerful opinion in their lifetimes and were the focus of passionate debate in the centuries that followed their deaths. Murderess, “whore,” daughter of the devil were epithets flung at both queens by their detractors, while their supporters claimed Elizabeth as hero and saviour, Mary a martyr and saint. It was the relationship between them that heightened these extremes of partisan feeling. Even in death, through history and myth, they continued locked together in complex rivalry, somehow embodying the ancestral character and mutual suspicion of their respective kingdoms.

In this new millennium, people identify with each queen still, arguing their merits and failures, and thinking they see some likeness in themselves. Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen, arguably the greatest monarch we have ever had, is certainly the one who most attracts superlatives. Unfashionable in her belief in self-discipline and sacrifice, she is irresistible as a reminder of England’s past glory and pre-eminence in the world: a phenomenon of her own making, without precedent or successor. And Mary, a queen celebrity, femme fatale and flawed heroine, valuing pleasure over duty and adventure most of all. She even cast her kingdom away for illicit love—what more modern sacrifice could there be? Finally, the brilliant coup de théâtre of her death opened a path back to redemption.

And I myself am far from immune from this fascination. When I opened the volumes of State Papers covering their reigns I was amazed by the vivid immediacy of the voices. Both queens, the

ambassadors and ministers, all speak to us through the centuries with more forthright, revealing and affecting language than one would ever expect from official documents today. From letters, speeches, prayers, poems, diplomatic despatches and ministers' reports, the queens' voices would explain themselves. By placing them centre stage and writing of their relationship with each other and the world, there was more space to explore their characters through their own words and those of their contemporaries.

Consequently, this is not a dual biography of these queens. Instead it is a kind of hybrid, about historical figures but not a history charting every aspect and incident of their lives. Chronological, but not strictly so, it follows the dynamic interaction which shifted as each queen took the initiative by turns, one never entirely dominant, each highly aware of the other. The balance of power was never clear cut: Elizabeth appeared to hold all the best cards, but Mary played those she had to disconcerting effect.

There are many fine biographies already of these most written-about queens: for Elizabeth, the classic J. E. Neale, and more recently Anne Somerset's elegant, authoritative work, Alison Weir's popular trilogy, and David Starkey's vivid portrayal of the Princess's youth; for Mary, nothing has superseded in more than thirty years Lady Antonia Fraser's impressive and sympathetic *Life*, although Jenny Wormald's study of Mary as a monarch is marvellous. But the wealth of primary sources is so great that the scope for bringing new illumination to the story is almost boundless.

Elizabeth and Mary is about the relationship between the queens, one that seemed, during their lifetimes, to evolve a life of its own, and in the end hold both captive to it and each other. It was the most compelling relationship of their lives, affecting their political policy and personal attitude. Unlike Elizabeth with Burghley and Leicester, or Mary with Moray, Darnley and Bothwell, this was a relationship neither had chosen, nor could escape, even in death. Elizabeth realised with some despair how their fates were intertwined: when she was ostensibly Mary's jailer she declared, "I am not free but a captive."

The indissoluble bond between them was forged by two opposing forces; their shared inheritance and rivalry for Elizabeth's crown set against their natural solidarity as regnant queens in an overwhelmingly masculine world. They had a fascination and sympathy for each other; they were cousins in an age when family mattered and when, for much of their lives, both lacked closer kin. Mary chose to emphasise her familial relationship with Elizabeth, her letters often supplicating daughterly, even lover-like. "How much better," she wrote to Elizabeth, "were it that we being two Queens so near of kin, neighbours and living in one isle, should be friends and live together like sisters, than by strange means divide ourselves to the hurt of both." And Elizabeth responded to their emotional pleas with a tone that was bossy, condescending and, for a while, elder-sisterly in her exasperated care. And yet they never met.

This is the great dramatic centre of their story. In the absence of reality, a rival grows in stature in the imagination, becoming something superhuman, but also less than human and therefore easier to kill. Their failure to meet also became an expression of frustrated desire and control. Mary never gave up pleading for personal contact, certain that her charm would alter her case with her cousin. Initially willing, Elizabeth then grew increasingly distant and aloof, fearful of what she believed was Mary's almost magical power to enchant, already exaggerated in her imagination and fuelled with the story

of others. Elizabeth was perplexed: "There is something sublime in the words and bearing of the Queen of Scots that constrains even her enemies to speak well of her."

Part of the drama of their lives is this great opposition between their natures, their earlier experiences and the kinds of ruler they wished to be. All her life, Elizabeth had steeled herself to prove to the world she had the heart and mind of a man, so aware was she of the accepted inferiority of being merely female. She often boasted that in this masculinity her strength resided, yet she had all the passions of a woman, and expressed these most notably in her love for her favourites and her tenderness for her people. Mary was seen as recklessly emotional and liable to nervous collapse, and yet she showed a more ruthless resolve to see her sister queen murdered than Elizabeth could summon up for the judicial execution of Mary herself. So unlike in temperament, these queens nevertheless were well matched in the vigour of their ambitions and their obstinacy of purpose. The weapons they used were different, but each had just as great a capacity for harm.

In considering Elizabeth's and Mary's lives in relation to each other illuminating symmetries occur. They both had remarkable mothers who, for different reasons, were lost to them. Anne Boleyn was a clever woman, radical in her Protestant sympathies, courageous and spirited, but a stranger to her daughter through death, and erased through the dangers inherent even in her memory. Mary of Guise, a redoubtable queen and role model for Mary, but largely absent and unknown, due to the dynastic ambitions that made both mother and daughter exiles in each other's land.

Each queen was involved in scandal over a favourite possibly implicated in murder, but they dealt with the crisis they faced in completely different ways: Elizabeth's action safeguarded her throne and gave her the moral foundation from which to impose her future authority; Mary's decision lost her not only the throne but her freedom, and eventually her life. In the early years of Elizabeth's reign it was the English Queen who was consistently compared by foreign ambassadors, to her detriment, with her cousin, the Queen of Scotland. Elizabeth was the intractable monarch, the wanton Queen, while Mary lived a model life as Dauphine, then Queen, then Dowager Queen of the great kingdom of France. Her return to Scotland marked the beginning of the adventures that would reverse these comparisons in epic fashion.

From that moment the tension in their relationship mounted. There was a struggle for supremacy and a desire in each to claim the moral high ground. Mary's marriage and the birth of her son confirmed her conformity with expectations of what it was to be a good queen, while Elizabeth continued to prevaricate and evade her duty to provide for the succession. Then with Mary's rumoured involvement in the murder of her husband and marriage to the likely murderer, heedless of Elizabeth's trenchant advice, she set the English and continental courts agog. There followed civil war in Scotland and humiliation for Mary, then imprisonment, fear for her life, miscarriage, forced abdication, night-time escape and precipitate flight to England. A plaintive existence as a genteel prisoner for seventeen years was enlivened with various plots to attain her freedom, and even her eventual elevation to the throne of England.

Even in death Mary sought to wrong-foot Elizabeth. Found guilty of incitement to kill her cousin she went to her execution nobly insisting she was sacrificed for her faith alone. By dying heroically as a Catholic martyr, she rescued her reputation from the wreckage of her life. Elizabeth, as an old queen dying after more than four decades of transforming rule, was aware instead of the galloping hooves

the messenger's horse riding north. The next incumbent of her jealously guarded throne would be Mary's son, James, King of Scotland and now King of England too. This would mark Mary's final triumph, the succession of the Tudors by the Stuarts. But there was triumph for Elizabeth too, for Mary's son ruled their newly united kingdoms as a Protestant state.

The story of Elizabeth and Mary's relationship is punctuated with reversals of fortune: murder, mysteries, sexual intrigue, reckless behaviour, avowals of affection, heated battles and cold war. Fear, heartbreak and tragedy were its underlying strain. Yet surging through natural barriers of prejudice and masculine perspective and vested interest, these two queens emerge evergreen in their importance and fascination: Elizabeth, regardless of her weaknesses, confounding every prejudice against women in power; and Mary, despite her strengths, fulfilling in the end every foreboding, but with astounding boldness and abandon. They are welcome exceptions in the vast congregation of men who jostle for space in their domination of history.

That these two remarkable queens should have been contemporaries, neighbours in one small island, is gift enough for any writer. That they should be united by blood but inextricably enmeshed in a deadly rivalry for the same kingdom, the same throne, gives the story of their relationship the brooding force of Greek tragedy.

I come to this book as a biographer, not a historian, believing that character largely drives events and explains motivation, and connects us to each other through the centuries. These queens lived lives vastly different from our own, but they behaved and felt in a way fundamentally familiar to us now. The outbursts of defiance, the flagging spirit, the pride in achievement and longing for love, all this expressed in their own clear voices, as are the less familiar qualities of kingly pride, autocratic power and bloody revenge.

As a biographer one lives for years exploring the world and the mind of a stranger. For me, in this case, it was two strangers. Yet in those years these strangers gain a certain sense of intimacy and they live a foothold in one's own. In living so closely with these queens, inevitably my ideas and prejudices have changed. I became more aware of the profound loneliness of their role; the fear, the danger and responsibility were daunting, yet they accepted this and even revelled in it. The physical suffering and discomfort of their everyday lives was overlaid with such magnificent show and animated with an enormous zest and appetite for life itself. Above all, it is their characters that have gripped me, with their different energies and ambitions, their distinctive voices and the complexity of their human responses and feeling.

Mary was clearly a passionate and impetuous woman, but with a personal charm so disconcerting that even Elizabeth feared to meet her. She emerges a more intelligent and subtle thinker than I had initially thought her to be, and with a courage and energy in action that was breathtaking; her ruthlessness and desire for revenge more Medicean than Stuart in its lack of compromise or pity. Elizabeth, so obviously crafty, clever, and in imperial command of herself and others, also surprised me with how tentative she could be, how affectionate, tender, and full of humour and charm. I hope that in these pages will be found some sense of that vitality; that through their own words, and through the exploration of their relationship, we can look anew at these remarkable women and redoubtable queens.

CHAPTER ONE

The Fateful Step

“I am already bound unto an husband,
which is the kingdom of England” . . .
Stretching out her hand she showed them the ring.

QUEEN ELIZABETH’S FIRST SPEECH BEFORE PARLIAMENT,
10 FEBRUARY 1559

These were dangerous times. The second quarter of the sixteenth century had made Elizabeth Tudor and her generation of coming men watchful, insecure, fearful for their lives. Nothing could be taken for granted. Health and happiness were fleeting, reversals of fortune came with devastating speed. This was the generation raised in the last days of King Henry and come of age in a time of religious and political flux. The religious radicalism of Edward VI’s reign had been quickly followed by reactionary extremism and bloodshed in Queen Mary’s. During the political tumult of these years there was no better time for ambitious men to seize position, wealth and honours. No longer was power the exclusive prerogative of old aristocratic blood. When a Thomas Wolsey, son of a butcher, or a Thomas Cromwell, son of a blacksmith, could rise in Henry’s reign to be the mightiest subject in the land, then what bar to ambition during the minority of Edward, the turmoil of Mary, and the unpromising advent of Elizabeth? But vaulting ambition and exorbitant rewards brought their own peril. The natural hierarchy of things mattered to the sixteenth-century mind. Men elevated beyond their due estate, women raised as rulers over men were unnatural events and boded ill. Those with the greatest aspirations could not expect to die peaceful in their beds.

God remained at the centre of this febrile and unpredictable world. His will was discerned in every random act. Death was everywhere. It came as sudden sweating sickness and struck down communities of healthy adults. It came as fire to purify heretic beliefs. It came through poison or the deadly thrust of steel to dispose of inconvenient obstacles in the machinery of power. The supernatural had a physical presence, and spirits and magic were natural companions to everyday life. They were part of the grand cosmic scheme which constituted God’s hierarchical universe. Analogies, interconnectedness, fixity were deeply impressive to the Elizabethan mind, mutability and disorder a sign of man out of harmony with God’s plan. Superstition and religion were ways to make sense of suffering, attempts at warding off the apparently random blows of fate. Yet the insecurity of life itself made the living intense, the wits sharper, the senses more acute. For sixteenth-century men and women there was a life after death, for the godly well-mapped and glorious, but life on earth was a precious and precarious thing to be seized and drained to the dregs.

At a time of augury and superstition, there was nothing to foretell the events of 1558: no sighting of whales in the Channel; no preternaturally high tide, nor monstrous births nor the mysterious lingering trajectory of a comet across the northern sky. Even Nostradamus, whose prophecies were

consulted by those in a fever of uncertainty, appeared unaware of its significance. The year opened without cosmic fanfare. Yet this was to become one of the momentous dates in every British schoolchild's history rote. Along with the battle of Hastings of 1066 and the great fire of London in 1666, 1558 was one of the markers of a seismic shift in English experience, to be chanted in schoolrooms through subsequent centuries. It was a year of grand transfers of power, as one reign came to an end and a new era began. It was a time of inexorable religious schism, when universal monopolistic Catholicism was permanently supplanted by the state religion, Protestantism.

Scotland's most recent history had been less convulsive. By the beginning of 1558 it was balanced in a certain equilibrium. A significant number of lords had proceeded informally down the road of religious reformation and the opposing factions had forged an uneasy coexistence. Clan loyalties and rivalries would always be the defining identity which cut across ideology, matters of faith or political allegiance. Rather than a religious cause, any growing unrest and sense of danger came more from Scottish resentment against the increasing presence of the French, garrisoned in various towns and awarded lucrative offices over the heads of the native Scots. As a child ten years previously, Mary, Queen of Scots had escaped the clutches of the English and sailed for France. Her French mother, Marie of Guise was courageous and just as regent but inevitably favoured her own country with which Scotland was in alliance. This cosy relationship was about to be challenged when, in 1559, the Reformation turned militant and anti-French, and John Knox, the inspired Calvinist preacher, returned home after twelve years' exile to become its hectoring mouthpiece.

At the beginning of 1558, however, both Elizabeth and Mary were poised on the margin between apprenticeship and their public lives as female monarchs. By the end of that year both had embraced their fate. The defining moment for Mary came with a kiss—in effect a marriage. For Elizabeth it came with a death—and an exclusive contract with her people.

It was apparent that a woman in possession of a throne must marry, and do so without delay. As biblical and classical texts, in which the educated sixteenth-century mind was imbued, stressed the natural order of the male's dominion over the female. A female monarch was a rare and unnatural phenomenon which could only be regularised by speedy union with a prince who would rule over her in private and guide her in her public, God-given, role as queen. Only by restoring man's necessary dominion could the proper balance of the world be maintained.

Although her cousin Elizabeth was revolutionary in her lifelong resistance to this obligation, Mary Stuart was more conformable and fulfilled this expectation of her status and sex—not once but three times. In early 1558 she was fifteen and had been a queen since she was six days old. She had never known any other state. First as a queen of Scotland, the land of her birth and a country she did not know: secondly as queen of France, the country of her heart. Having lived from the age of five at the centre of the powerful French court, Mary had grown into a charming and accomplished French princess, destined to become the wife of the dauphin of France. Her spectacular dynastic marriage reinforcing the “auld alliance” between Scotland and France, was set for the spring. Mary would marry her prince on 24 April 1558. François, the beloved companion of her childhood and King Henry II's eldest son, was just fourteen years old.

In England, Elizabeth Tudor was twenty-four years old and living quietly in the country at Hatfield, some thirty miles north of London. Expectant, and fearful of losing the one thing she desired, she was

fearful too of its fulfilment. She had already been bastardised, disinherited, often in danger and always waiting, never certain of the prize. Elizabeth had seen her two siblings (and a cousin, fleetingly) succeed to the throne before her. If any had had children then her position on the sidelines of power would have become permanent. But Edward VI died in 1553 unmarried and childless aged sixteen. He was followed not by either of his elder half-sisters but by their hapless teenage cousin, Lady Jane Grey. Sacrificed to further the ambitions of her father-in-law, the Duke of Northumberland, she was queen in name only and then barely for nine days. Immediately imprisoned she was executed several months later. Now in 1558, Henry VIII's eldest child, Mary I, herself appeared to be ailing.

Elizabeth had survived much danger. She knew well how closely scrutinised her actions were and how much she was the focus of others' desire for power. The previous two decades had seen so many ambitions crumble to dust, so many noblemen and women imprisoned and beheaded, accused of heresy or treason, tortured, tried and burnt, or if a traitor, hung, drawn and quartered, in the terrible ways of judicial death.

At the beginning of 1558, Elizabeth and her supporters knew that some great change was in motion. But change brought disruption too and increased danger. Her half-sister Mary Tudor had been queen for nearly five years. Suspicious, suffering, devoutly Catholic and zealous to maintain the supremacy of the old faith, her reign had grown increasingly unhappy. Mary's worst mistake had been her insistence on marrying Philip II of Spain, for the English hated foreigners meddling in their affairs and they hated the Spanish most of all.

The fanatical purges of heresy by her decree, and the torture and burnings of hundreds of martyrs would earn Mary the epithet "Bloody Mary" from generations to come. The country grew ever more tired and repelled by the bloodshed. The dreadful spectacles had become counter-productive, alienating her subjects' affections for their queen and strengthening the reformers' support. In reaction to the mood of the country, the burnings in Smithfield were halted in June 1558. But nature seemed to be against Mary too, for the harvests also failed two years in succession. In 1556 people were scrabbling like pigs for acorns and dying of starvation. The following year they were ravaged by disease as various epidemics swept through the land. Famine and pestilence—people wondered, was this God's retribution for the sins of Mary's reign?

By the beginning of 1558, Mary was herself sick and in despair. Still longing for a child and her once more in desperation she had made herself believe she was pregnant again. But Philip had not bothered to hide his antipathy to his queen and anyway had been absent from her for too long. Her delusion and humiliation was evident even to her courtiers. Elizabeth, who had waited so long in an uneasy limbo, under constant suspicion, her sister refusing to name her as her heir, would have lost everything if this miraculous pregnancy turned out to bear fruit. No one could know, however, that the symptoms which Mary interpreted as the beginning of new life and hope were instead harbingers of death.

The Queen's spirit that cold January had already been broken over the loss of Calais. The last trophy left to the English from their ancient wars with France, this two-century-old possession had been lost in the very first days of the year. Since the previous June, Mary had supported her husband by embroiling her country in an expensive, unpopular and now ultimately humiliating war with France. The loss to their old enemy of Calais, remnant of Plantagenet prowess, was more a symbol

than strategic catastrophe, and it cut her to the heart.

This latest humiliation of English pride had been inflicted by François, Duc de Guise, nicknamed Balafre, “scarface,” after a wound inflicted by the English at the siege of Boulogne fourteen years earlier. A lance had smashed through his face from cheek to cheek but he had overcome all odds and recovered his life, his sight, and even the desire to fight again. He was a brilliant soldier, and the eldest and most powerful of Mary Queen of Scots’ six overweening Guise uncles. The ambition of these brothers knew no bounds. They claimed direct descendency from Charlemagne. Catholic conviction and imperial ambitions commingled in their blood. Their brotherhood made them daunting: they thought and hunted as a pack, their watchwords being “one for all” and “family before everything.”

Taking advantage of their monarch’s gratitude for the success of the Calais campaign and riding on a wave of popular euphoria, the Duc de Guise and his brother the Cardinal of Lorraine agitated for the marriage of their niece to the youthful heir to the French throne. The fortunes of the girl queen and the triumphant family of her mother, Mary of Guise, were fatally intertwined. At this time, the Guises seemed to be so much in the ascendant that many of their fellow nobles resented and envied their power, fearing that it was they who in effect ruled France.

Elizabeth and Mary Queen of Scots had always been aware of each other, of their kinship and relations to the English crown. As cousins, they were both descended from Henry VII, Elizabeth as his granddaughter, Mary as his great-granddaughter. European royalty was a small, elite and intermarried band. As the subject of the English succession loomed again, Elizabeth was acutely conscious of the strength of the Queen of Scots’ claim to the English throne. Certainly she knew that if her sister Mary I’s repeal of Henry VIII’s Act of Supremacy was allowed to stand then her own parents’ marriage would remain invalid and she could be marginalised and disinherited as a bastard. To most Catholics Henry’s marriage to Anne Boleyn had always been invalid and Mary Queen of Scots was legally and morally next in line to the English throne. If Mary united the thrones of Scotland, France and England then this would ensure that England remained a part of Catholic Christendom.

However, if the Acts of Mary Tudor’s reign should be reversed, then Elizabeth’s legitimacy would be confirmed and she, as Henry VIII’s legitimate daughter, had not only the natural but the more direct claim. She also had popular, emotional appeal. Her tall, regal figure and her reddish gold colouring reminded the people, grown nostalgic and selective in their memory of “Good King Harry,” of his father when young. Her surprisingly dark eyes, an inheritance of the best feature of her mother Anne Boleyn, were not enough to blur the bold impression that the best of her father lived on in her.

In fact, despite the stain on her mother’s name, it was to Elizabeth’s credit that she was not the daughter of a foreign princess, that unadulterated English blood ran in her veins and that she had been born in Greenwich Palace, at the centre of English royal power. In early peace negotiations with France, Elizabeth had Cecil point out she was “descended by father and mother of mere English blood and not of Spain, as her sister was.” This meant she was “a free prince and owner of her crown and people.”¹ She was an Englishwoman, and she knew this counted for much in this island nation of hers. “Was I not born in the realm? Were my parents born in any foreign country? Is there any cause that should alienate myself from being careful over this country? Is not my kingdom here?”²

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, a Venetian ambassador noted the insularity and self-satisfaction of the English even then:

*the English are great lovers of themselves, and of everything belonging to them; they think that there are no other men than themselves, and no other world but England; and whenever they see a handsome foreigner, they say that "he looks like an Englishman," and that "it is a great pity that he should not be an Englishman."*³

In early 1558 this pride seemed rather misplaced. As the French celebrated their victory over the English at Calais, it was clear that the greater power was with them, and Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland and soon to become Dauphine and eventually Queen of France, basked in this radiance. Meanwhile England was impoverished and demoralised by unpopular government and wasteful war, and the Lady Elizabeth, hopeful successor to the throne, remained sequestered in the country. Both she and the English people seemed overcast by a cloud of stasis and failure, fearful of the past and uncertain of the future. An historian and near contemporary expressed it thus:

*For every man's mind was then travailed with a strange confusion of conceits, all things being immoderately either dreaded or desired. Every report was greedily both inquired and received, all truths suspected, diverse tales believed, many improbable conjectures hatched and nourished. Invasion of strangers, civil dissension, the doubtful disposition of the succeeding Prince, were cast every man's conceit as present perils.*⁴

The triumphalism of France and the pre-eminence of the Guises were publicly enacted in the spectacular wedding celebrations of the youthful Mary Stuart and François de Valois. Both Catherine de Medici, the Dauphin's mother, and Diane de Poitiers, Henri II's omnipotent mistress, argued that the marriage need not be hastened, that these children should be given more time. There may have been some concern at their youth and the dauphin's sickliness, but both women were more exercised by the growing influence of the Guises whose power as a result of this union threatened to become insurmountable.

Objections were put aside, however, and the day was set for Sunday 24 April 1558. It had been two centuries since a dauphin had been married in Paris, and the streets around the cathedral of Nôtre-Dame were thronged with an excited and expectant crowd. A large stage had been erected so that as many of the public would see the proceedings as possible. Blue silk embroidered with the arms of the Queen of Scotland and gold fleur-de-lis arched above the scaffolded platform to suggest a star-studded sky. The magnificent gothic cathedral dwarfed the fluttering silk and national flags, its magisterial presence adding spiritual gravitas to the carnival spectacle. The people's hero, the Duc de Guise, was master of ceremonies. He played to the crowds and waved the bejewelled noblemen aside so that the common people might better see. It was Guise policy always to court the Paris mob even at the expense of their popularity with their fellow noblemen.

And what the mob craned to see was the arrival of the wedding procession with Mary Stuart as its cynosure. Leading the assembly was the ubiquitous Duc de Guise closely followed by a band of Scottish musicians dressed in red and yellow, the colours of their queen. Then came a vast body of gentlemen of the household of the French King followed by the royal princes, the bishops, archbishops, and cardinals, as brilliantly plumed as parrots. The sumptuous clothes and jewels were a spectacle

themselves. The diminutive figure of the Dauphin then arrived, looking younger than his fourteen years, stunted in growth and with the frailty and pallor of a lifelong invalid.

Of greatest interest was his young bride, a queen in her own right. The French had taken her to the hearts ever since she had been sent as a child to their shores for safekeeping from the English. She arrived that Sunday morning escorted by the King himself and another of her uncles, the Cardinal of Lorraine. Mary had grown up with an unwavering sense of destiny and a natural flair for the theatrical; she knew what was expected of her and to what she had been born. But she had not learnt from her uncle a respect for the power of the people. As a prospective queen of France, she did not need to. The French monarchy was so rich and self-confident that it sought to remove itself still further from its subjects and advertise to all, particularly its competitor monarchs abroad, the extent of unassailable wealth and the power of the crown.

Although only fifteen, the young Queen of Scots was already tall and graceful; she and her uncle towered over the Dauphin and were all taller and more impressive than even the King and Queen themselves. Mary's much vaunted beauty was not just a construct of the conventional hyperbole of court poets and commentators, but a beauty that had as much to do with her vitality and vivacity as the symmetry of her features. She had a fine complexion, chestnut brown hair and intelligent, lively eyes beneath prominent lids and fine arched brows. She had a strong active body and was good at sports, loving to ride hard and to hunt the wild animals with which the royal forests surrounding the château of her youth were stocked.

Dressed in white for her wedding, Mary confounded the usual tradition of cloth of gold; white was more usually the colour of mourning. She trailed a pearl-encrusted cloak and a train of grey velvet. Neither did her jewels disappoint, for on her head was a specially commissioned crown studded with gemstones (the canny Scots had refused to let their crown jewels leave Scotland) and round her throat was a grand diamond necklace. This diamond was most probably the "Great Harry" which she had inherited from her grandmother, Margaret Tudor, to whom it had been given by her own father, Henry VII of England. The importance of her Tudor inheritance was embodied in this priceless jewel.

Magnificence was the order of the day. Sublimely present, but far removed, Mary made her marriage vows elevated in front of the crowds pressing towards the great doors of Nôtre-Dame. As a symbol of imperial munificence, inviting too perhaps a reciprocal generosity from heaven, the heralds took handfuls of gold and silver coins and threw them amongst the people crying, "Largesse! . . . largesse!" So desperate was the rush that many were trampled, some fainted and others scrambled and fought savagely for a salvaged ducat or sou. Fearing a riot, the largesse was prematurely dammed and the heralds' moneybags stowed away. The young Queen Mary of Scotland and her even younger husband, now known as the King of Scotland, were shown again to the surging crowd.

It was the first time Mary was to experience the hysteria of a crowd whose energies were focussed wholly on herself. Although this time they were benign and wished her well, there was always something potentially terrifying in the sheer force and power of the mob, crying out, shoving each other, sweating, straining to touch her hand or grasp a passing fragment of her robe, to catch her eye and elicit some recognition or blessing.

But the grandeur of French ceremony was aimed at distancing royalty, projecting them to god-like

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