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Mary Queen of Scots and the Casket Letters (review)

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her way, Dunn appears to be trying to create windows into men's, or women's, souls, a tempting preoccupation for any historical biographer. She is also entirely comfortable with speculative modern physiological and psychological assessments of her subjects' states of mind and body—for example arguing that Mary Stuart's shift of attitudes toward Elizabeth after her marriage to Darnley could have been the result of 'the potency of newly discovered sexual love' or 'the reckless energy of a manic-depressive mania'. Dunn also shows a tendency to overemphasize a point of analysis, as if fearful that her readers will fail to grasp the implications of her subjects' actions, or remember them in relation to later actions, as when she several times reiterates her observation that the Spanish either disliked or were confused by Elizabeth I in the early days of her rule.

The text itself is rich with comments culled from ambassadorial letters and memoirs, including the oft-told story of Melville's visit to Elizabeth I, at which time the English queen supposedly sought to dazzle him with her superior merits. The recounted speeches and conversations will surely give this book great appeal to readers, but could use a bit more cautionary flagging for scholarly purposes. For example, there is still a lively debate about how much of, or in what form, Elizabeth's 'Tilbury speech' was ever delivered by her, but Dunn simply repeats it, and in fact uses it as an example of Elizabeth's skill in oratory. Throughout the book, all of the more dramatic aspects are heightened—sexual awareness and tension, danger, stress, emotion, all ride at high levels, and people and situations are described in romanticized language. Mary I is a pitiful fanatic; the Earl of Leicester is described as 'lusty Lord Robert Dudley'; Mary Stuart falls into her half-brother's arms for comfort on his return to her court after the murder of David Rizzio, and her emotional outbursts are sometimes characterized as borderline madness. There is a constant undercurrent in the text of menace, sexuality, and anxiety highly reminiscent of the dark and dramatic tone taken by the writer and director for the Cate Blanchett film, *Elizabeth*.

As remarked at the beginning of this review, the mythic story will never die. Much of the 'history' of Elizabeth and Mary is replete with the small legends and stories that are beloved of non-specialists, and give greater human warmth to their subjects, whether or not we possess sufficient evidence to support their inclusion in historical scholarship. For the further interest of the general audience, this particular paperback edition features a special section at the back, with an author interview and biography, a summary of various reviews, and a brief examination of movies and plays dealing with Elizabeth and Mary's lives. Dunn's book is well-suited to a modern general reader who embraces the efforts of an author to give them supposed 'insight' into the mind of a character, and make an historically distant figure more human and approachable. At this Dunn is quite skilled, and this volume is likely to be greatly appreciated by people who seek human interest stories rather than those pursuing academic quests.

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Mary Queen of Scots and the Casket Letters.

By A.E. MacRobert. Pp. x, 235.

ISBN 1 86064 829 0.

London: I.B. Tauris Publishers. 2002. £29.50.

A.E. MacRobert's book represents the most recent instalment in the notoriously long-running debate about the Casket Letters and Sonnets, allegedly written by a murderous Mary Queen of Scots to her adulterous lover James

Hepburn, the Earl of Bothwell. Past historians like Walter Goodall (1754), William Tytler (1790), T.F. Henderson (1888, 1905), Andrew Lang (1901), H.F. Diggle (1960), and M.H. Armstrong Davison (1965) have subjected this set of dubious documents to close scrutiny in an effort to settle the question of Mary's guilt. In recent years, the debate has been treated briefly by Jenny Wormald (1988) and in more depth by Antonia Fraser (1969) and John Guy (2004), as part of their larger studies of Mary Queen of Scots. In one way or another, these three acknowledge the political uses to which the Casket Letters were put and the difficulty—even impossibility—of resolving the debate in the absence of the original documents. MacRobert nevertheless attempts a 'drastic re-evaluation' of the textual mystery by returning to the 'limited' though 'essential' contemporary sources. While MacRobert's assiduous attention to textual and practical details may be admirable, his book fails to offer any substantially new information and reaches the disappointing and unsurprising conclusion that the 'Casket Letters can no longer be considered as sound evidence' against the Queen.

He gives three reasons for writing a book on the Casket Letters. Spurred on by the question of their authenticity, he wants to reprint the full set of Letters. Second, he wishes that the Letters, as 'the core of the evidence against Mary', might not 'just be pushed to one side and ignored'—a concern hardly warranted given the endless speculation about their authenticity. Finally, in the absence of an 'agreed version or interpretation', MacRobert aims to present 'a balanced account' of the historical episode to which the Letters pertain. The first part of the book, 'The Crisis of 1567-68', attempts this by describing and speculating about the events surrounding Darnley's murder. Regrettably, MacRobert's historical account lacks clarity: his reluctance to endorse particular theories with any consistency makes the presentation of evidence difficult to follow. Although organised under specific headings such as 'The Use of Gunpowder' and 'Mary's Return to the Palace', the historical discussion seems unfocused, with multiple conclusions—sometimes within one paragraph—adding to the confusion. For example, MacRobert concludes his review of the circumstances of Darnley's death with the following statements:

Unless Darnley was strangled just as he left the house and his corpse was then taken into the garden, it should be realised that he might have escaped in the darkness. If the house was in fact surrounded by 30 to 50 men...his chance of escape to safety was slight. It is, however, possible that the number of conspirators was much smaller and that Darnley was unlucky to encounter any of them. On the other hand, perhaps his assassins knew exactly where he would go (p. 40).

Although here, as elsewhere, MacRobert successfully accounts for all possible scenarios, the result is a series of disjointed explanations, which neither concentrates on the essential questions nor fully pursues any one thread of argument.

The second part of the book, 'The Casket Letters', reviews the circumstances of their discovery and then analyses each document. The interpretation of the Letters seems sound, if derivative. Many of MacRobert's observations can be traced to the work of other historians and enthusiasts, not only those writing in earlier centuries but also those who revisited this debate in the 1960s. For example, MacRobert identifies 'the man' of Letter I as a possible reference to the infant James, a suggestion made by Armstrong Davison, who cites R.H. Mahon (1924). Similarly, in his analysis of Letter IV, he suggests that a 'turtle-dove' missing its mate recalls a poem written from Darnley to Mary, a possibility previously noted by Diggle. These specific instances may be observations

worth repeating, of course, but his reading of the Letters does not generally advance our understanding of these documents. This section of the book also includes brief discussions of the two marriage contracts and the Casket Sonnets. In the latter, he rightly notes a similarity in tone with Letters III, IV, V, and VI, but otherwise his abbreviated treatment of the poems consists wholly in pointing out lines that Mary could not possibly have written—because they do not fit her circumstances—and those that would be incriminating if authentic.

MacRobert provides a set of illustrations, some of which readers might have encountered before: portraits of the major figures, the sketch of the murder scene at Kirk o'Field, and, somewhat more curiously, photographs of Provand's Lordship in Glasgow, where Mary may have lodged in January 1567. Appendices helpfully reproduce the variant texts of the Casket Letters, Sonnets, and marriage contracts between Mary and Bothwell. The author includes a handwritten translation in English of Letter V, which recently came to light in the Public Record Office, though he does not comment on its discovery (SP 53/2/64). He does not seem to know, however, about a transcript in Scots of Letter III at the British Library (Add. MS 48027, fol. 276^{rv}), nor of a copy of the Casket Sonnets preserved among the Lennox papers at Cambridge University Library (Oo.7.47, fols. 46^r-49^r), both of which might have led to fuller commentary on these items. One technical matter is worrying: MacRobert does not follow conventions of quotation. Although he usually signals his source, inverted commas are used inconsistently if at all, making it difficult for the reader to judge where quoted material begins and ends, or even what material is paraphrased and what quoted directly.

MacRobert finally determines that 'It is too simplistic to hold that the Casket Letters were either completely authentic or entirely forged. There is, however, sufficient evidence to endorse the view that there was extensive manipulation and forgery'. With this in mind, he suggests 'new lines of enquiry' by calling for more investigation into Darnley's possible plots against Mary and further consideration of Bothwell's motives in keeping such a collection of documents in the first place. Here, the author raises legitimate concerns, and especially in the latter case he identifies a logical crux in the entire Casket Letter fiasco. MacRobert brings to his project a genuine spirit of curiosity, a desire for historical accuracy and an ability to imagine numerous conflicting scenarios. The greatest obstacle to his success is that he has entered a debate whose urgency has passed. Perhaps it is time to replace the traditional form and purpose of the Casket debate—can exegesis of these documents settle the question of Mary's character?—with larger explorations into the politics of rhetorical and textual strategy in the sixteenth century.

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Scots in Habsburg Service, 1618-1648.

By David Worthington. Pp. 330.

ISBN 90 04 13575 8.

Leiden: Brill. 2004. EUR 96.00.

It may be unfair to commence a review of David Worthington's book, a work scrupulously detailed and graphically revealing as only a few of the more recent titles in the scholarship of The Thirty Years' War have been, by referring to an equally meticulous study, edited by Steve Murdoch in 2001. For the latter's *Scotland and the Thirty Years' War, 1618-1648* received meagre applause, provoking the resistance of certain German historians by reassessing this peculiarly