Life & Times

Film review

Mary Queen of Scots: in my end is my beginning

For someone who died 432 years ago, Mary Queen of Scots still has remarkable presence, not only in the large number of precise locations where she is known to have been but also in her letters and poems and the many books, plays, and film versions of her life.

In the 2018 film *Mary Queen of Scots*, the Scottish locations are often inaccurate but they are magnificent on a big screen with Max Richter's sumptuous musical score. With Oscar nominations for costume, make-up, and hairstyle, the film looks and sounds great.

It is a complicated story for filmmakers to tell,¹ but it is told well up to the point of Mary's abdication, with many telling small features, such as the Queen talking in French to her four gentlewomen, the Four Marys, and Elizabeth I caking her face with white make-up to hide smallpox scars. In general, the film is sympathetic to both Mary and Elizabeth, who dealt the best they could with male power and interest. Mary chose husbands from outside and then inside her country; Elizabeth did neither, wisely it seems.

Saoirse Ronan, the American-Irish actress standing in for Scarlett Johansson, looks the part as Mary, who was only 18 on arriving back in Scotland from France and 26 when she fled to England.

Vanessa Redgrave in the 1971 film was almost twice Mary's age but the only actress to match Mary in height. On learning that Mary was nearly 6 feet tall, towering above her companions, the real Elizabeth, who was 5 foot 4, commented, *'Then your Queen is too tall, for I am just the proper height.'*²

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

The 2018 film probably works best for those who know the story and is good at

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conveying Mary's approach to queenship and succession. In these respects, rather than her personal relationships, she was an old head on teenage shoulders, having already experienced an arranged court marriage (to the French Dauphin in Notre Dame Cathedral on 24 April 1558), 17 months as queen consort of France, the deaths of her mother and husband, and the sudden lack of a role at the French court.

Diplomacy with England, putting down rebellion in the North, the verbal spats with John Knox, the murders of her secretary Rizzio and her second husband Lord Darnley (who was taller at 6 foot 2), followed by her disastrous marriage to the Earl of Bothwell (described as 'short and muscular') all keep the plot turning. Then things get complicated, not only for Mary who flees the country but also for the filmmakers who fast-forward past Bothwell's desertion, Mary's imprisonment in and escape from Loch Leven Castle, and then defeat at the Battle of Langside. The Casket Letters and the Babington Plot get no attention, nor the intriguing fact that, if twins were identifiable when Mary miscarried on 23 July 1567, she must have already been pregnant when she married Bothwell on 15 May. Perhaps that's why she married in such haste.

Mary and Elizabeth never met in real life but have often met in dramatisations of their lives. As in Donizetti's opera *Maria Stuarda*, the fictionalised meeting is a thrilling moment, imagining and capturing a recurring question in the story of Mary Queen of Scots, *'What might have been?'*

The film then cuts to Mary's greatest moment, her well-documented execution at Fotheringhay on 8 February 1587.³ Removing her robe to reveal undergarments of crimson, the colour of Catholic martyrdom, she was in charge not of the occasion but of its

historical significance.

Elizabeth left no heir. Mary's son (James VI and I), grandson (Charles I), great-grandsons (Charles II and James III), and great-great-granddaughters (Mary II and Anne) all sat on Elizabeth's throne as rulers of the United Kingdom. Mary's father James V had predicted of the Stuart dynasty: *'It cam wi' a lass and it will gang wi' a lass!'* but he was thinking of his infant daughter, not Queen Anne 172 years later. Even now, the current monarch Queen Elizabeth (second of England, first of Scotland) is a direct descendant of Mary Queen of Scots, not Elizabeth I.

Mary was buried first at Peterborough Cathedral. Henry VIII's first wife Catherine of Aragon also lies there. In creating the Church of England and decapitating a queen the Tudor dynasty knew no bounds in getting rid of inconvenient women. However, the Stuarts had the last laugh.

James VI and I had little contact with his mother in life but removed his mother's coffin from Peterborough and had it reburied in Westminster Abbey. Here she lies under a spectacular tomb and white marble effigy in the south aisle of the Lady Chapel, travelling to eternity in splendid isolation, while Elizabeth in the north aisle under a smaller and less expensive effigy travels second class, sharing the compartment below with her half-sister Mary Tudor.

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Last Moments for Mary Queen of Scots.

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