

## IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF A QUEEN

Fotheringhay village hides its past well. It comprises a few dwellings, a charming hostelry and a historic church. The River Nene meanders through its fields on the way from the Grand Union Canal at Northampton to the North Sea. From time to time, a narrow boat passes this way and moors by the riverbank. The rural tranquillity, especially on a balmy summer day, is intoxicating.

The tranquillity conceals a history filled with treachery and bloodshed. Fotheringhay was once a place of some importance. It was here, on February 8th 1587, that Mary Queen of Scots, having been found guilty of complicity in a plot to depose Queen Elizabeth of England, was executed by royal command. All that remains of the great castle where she died are a few stones surrounded by an iron fence, yet today the site attracts visitors from all over the world.

Innocent or guilty, Mary kept her queenly calm to the block itself. She remained true to her Catholic faith despite entreaties by the Dean of Peterborough that she embrace the Protestant religion. Afterwards, her body was preserved at Fotheringhay for six months before being interred in a vault in Peterborough Cathedral. There it remained for twenty-five years until her son, James, who had united the crowns of England and Scotland, transferred it to a tomb in Westminster Abbey.



*Fotheringhay Church*

For a glimpse of Queen Mary's early life, we must travel three hundred miles north, from the Edge of the Fens to the Heart of Midlothian. Mary ruled Scotland for only six years as an adult, from 1561 until 1567, when she abdicated in favour of her son. However, though Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh was Mary's principal home during

this time, she was not born there, nor in the city's equally famous castle, but eighteen miles to the west.

Mary Stuart was born on December 8th 1542 in the Palace of Linlithgow. She was the only child of King James V of Scotland and Marie de Guise, the daughter of a noble French family. James extended and made considerable improvements to the palace of his ancestors, but he died only a few days after his daughter's birth.

Linlithgow today it is a small county town of twelve thousand inhabitants but in the mid sixteenth century it was, like Fotheringhay, a place of some importance. It lay on the Royal Road linking the castles of Edinburgh and Stirling. In the latter, the nine-month-old baby Mary had the crown of Scotland placed on her head; in the former, as wife of Lord Henry Darnley, she gave birth to the future King James I of Great Britain.

The Palace of Linlithgow still stands. No prince lives there now, but it is still used to stage historic pageants and as a setting for weddings. Even as a ruin, it is a magnificent piece of architecture. Close by and rising above it is the steeple of St Michael's Church, rebuilt in the fifteen hundreds a century after the fire that destroyed it and much of the town. Both palace and church are worth seeing for their own sakes. They occupy a prime position on a mound overlooking Linlithgow Loch to the north. Just like the village on the banks of the Nene, it is a picturesque spot.

During the first six years of her childhood, Queen Mary knew no fewer than four homes before being shipped to France and eventual marriage with its Dauphin. It was 1561 when she returned to Scotland, and her destiny. She was greeted by cheering Edinburgh crowds. However, her popularity was short-lived. The Scottish lords, Protestant and Catholic alike, vied with each other for her favour. The Calvinists muttered threateningly about her 'Papist' rituals, though it has to be said that Mary did not flaunt her religion in public. Nor did she attempt to undermine the 'Kirk'.

In the end, she was brought down not by religion but by love. Mary Stuart fell for and married the handsome but rakish Darnley, son of James V's half-sister. Their only child was born in Edinburgh Castle in 1566.

The room inside the castle's royal apartments where James VI took his first breath is still on the tourist trail today, as are the Crown and Regalia and the St Margaret Chapel, built in the early twelfth century and named after the Saxon princess who was the queen of Malcolm III, successor to Macbeth.

However, it was at Holyrood that one of the most dramatic moments in Mary's life took place - the murder of her favourite, David Rizzio, by Darnley's men. And it was in the nearby house of Kirk o' Field that Darnley himself met his fate on February 9<sup>th</sup> 1567, murdered, it is widely believed, by the Earl of Bothwell, whom Mary married in May of that same year. She wrote later that their engagement had been '*accompanied not the less with force*' but of course, there is no independent proof.



*Linlithgow Palace with St Michael's Church Steeple in Background*

Like most cities, Edinburgh is a mixture of the beautiful and the ugly, the historic and the modern. However, I suppose some of its attraction for me lies in personal association. In a sort of genetic memory, I picture my ancestors as they went about their lives and their business among the teeming thousands - rich and poor, honest and vile - that made Edinburgh what it is today.

One of my great-great-grandfathers, a master builder, walked the streets around Surgeon's Hall and the University canvassing for work and searching (successfully, I am happy to say) for a young wife. Another was a manufacturer of waterproof clothing for seamen in the port of Leith. A third ran a public house.

All the sights of Edinburgh are worth seeing, but the unmissable delight must surely be the view from the castle ramparts. Perched high on an extinct volcano, Edinburgh Castle stands sentinel over both the old town and the new city. On one side are the dark, narrow wynds where once crept the body-snatchers Burke and Hare, and the respectable but sinister Deacon Brodie, model for Stevenson's Dr Jekyll/Mr Hyde. On the other lie the broad streets, immaculate squares and grand buildings of the eighteenth century Georgian period. When looking down on Princes Street Gardens, it is difficult to imagine that in their place was once a stinking abomination known as the North Loch, depository for the city's refuse - animal, vegetable and mineral.

Within easy walking distance of the castle esplanade are St Giles Cathedral, the Writers' Museum and the famous Mary King's Close. The house of John Knox, Queen Mary's implacable religious enemy, is not far away. Holyrood, at the other end of the Royal Mile, is a bus or taxi ride for the less athletic.

The story of the so-called Babington Plot that sealed Mary's fate is well documented. It is probable she was a victim rather than a principal conspirator but, of course, this is something we shall never know for sure. Queen Elizabeth herself was reluctant to

condemn her cousin and several historians have suggested even that she was tricked into signing the death warrant. However, this may only be wishful thinking by writers repelled by the barbaric treatment by one queen of another.

As Sir Walter Scott put it, Mary '*was, in every sense, one of the most unhappy Princesses that ever lived, from the moment when she came into the world.*' She was forty-four when she died, and she had spent nearly twenty of those years in a prison of one sort or another. She had lived for another thirteen in France. She spent only twelve years in her native Scotland, Queen in name yet pawn in a deadly politico-religious chess game.

Whatever the truth about her trial and death, it was a tragic end to a tragic life.

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[This edited article will form part of a future publication about women in history.](#)

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