



# **Crown of Thistles: The Fatal Inheritance of Mary Queen of Scots**

*Linda Porter*

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The struggle between the fecund Stewarts and the barren Tudors is generally seen only in terms of the relationship between Elizabeth I and her cousin, Mary Queen of Scots. But very little has been said about the background to their intense rivalry.

Here, Linda Porter examines the ancient and intractable power struggle between England and Scotland, a struggle intensified during the reigns of Elizabeth and Mary's grandfathers. Henry VII aimed to provide stability when he married his daughter, Margaret, to James IV of Scotland in 1503. But he must also have known that Margaret's descendants might seek to rule the entire island.

*Crown of Thistles* is the story of a divided family, of flamboyant kings and queens, cultured courts and tribal hatreds, blood feuds, rape and sexual licence on a breath-taking scale, and violent deaths. It also brings alive a neglected aspect of British history – the blood-spattered steps of two small countries on the fringes of Europe towards an awkward unity that would ultimately forge a great nation.

Beginning with the unlikely and dramatic victories of two usurping kings, one a rank outsider and the other a fourteen-year-old boy who rebelled against his own father, the book sheds new light on Henry VIII, his daughter, Elizabeth, and on his great-niece, Mary Queen of Scots, still seductive more than 400 years after her death.

## Crown of Thistles: The Fatal Inheritance of Mary Queen of Scots Details

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**Linda Porter**

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# From Reader Review Crown of Thistles: The Fatal Inheritance of Mary Queen of Scots for online ebook

## Ros Ds says

A well written book, but it does not focus at all on Mary Stuart. It is more about her ancestors and in some part might be a bit boring.

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## C.S. Burrough says

If, like myself, you feel to have exhausted all biographical coverage of those two British queens in one isle, Mary of Scots and Elizabeth I, *Crown of Thistles* is the ultimate addendum. Exploring the background to, rather than the substance of, this fatal sisterly relationship, Linda Porter brings a freshly insightful perspective to a much told tale, forever mesmerising in its many complexities and uncertainties.

There is no cut and dried version of much of this legend whose allure lies in its very reshaping, according to the teller and their biases. The missing elements will probably remain so *ad infinitum*. These are: the defining rationale behind much of the Queen of Scots' perplexing decision making (and her level of complicity in her second husband Darnley's murder); the extent of Elizabeth's knowledge, jealousy, rivalry and regal or familial integrity behind so many of her actions or inactions; and the related hushed discussions and covert activities behind so many closed doors across Britain between 19 August 1561 - when Mary returned home to Scotland, a stranger and teenaged queen dowager of France - and 8 February 1587, when her head was clumsily removed by an incompetent executioner at Fotheringay Castle, Northamptonshire.

That final bloody act was cited by Catholics everywhere as religious persecution, as they rallied into action the Spanish Armada the following year. If successful, that crusade against the most dangerous enemy of their faith would have seen Protestant England invaded and Elizabeth become not the Great but the Ousted. History could and would have been very different.

Porter, like her predecessors, aims to interpret this history's more blurry aspects through rational reasoning and critical discussion which, as with all versions, makes for some stimulating speculation, in parts convincing and in parts not so. Yet regardless of our leaning, towards Mary being victim or villainess, we remain compelled to read every last word there is, so as to somehow draw or reinforce our own conclusions. Such are our reasons for restlessly revisiting this messily unresolved epic, time after time. We strain to see through the misty patches of this tantalising legend, such is its unending allure. With certain hard facts forever slipping elusively through our fingers, we remain irreversibly entranced.

Possibly no data here is newly published, just this author's formation of facts, her presentation of contributing factors in the half-century or so lead up to Christendom's first and most shocking royal judicial execution ('Regicide!' roared the Catholic church from one end of Europe to the other). This famously protracted episode's culmination made a female Catholic martyr of Mary at the hands of her excommunicated Protestant female 'heretic' cousin, Elizabeth. All at a time when women were already thought unfit to rule due to their lack of levelheadedness. No wonder this has become the stuff of romantic fiction, high drama, ballet and opera.

Because of Mary's natural place in the succession and her son's successful claim of it, here, too, was the

shaping towards a royal dynasty we know today, with its peculiar links to Norman antiquity. Mary Stuart is, after all, the historical monarchical link between medieval British monarchy and its current ruling house. It is, significantly, she, a Scottish Stuart, from whom today's English royals descend, the Tudors having reached extinction with the demise of Mary's great 'barren' rival queen, cousin and executioner, Elizabeth I.

Fans thirsting for those irresistible, heart wrenching fine details of Mary's interminable state confinement under Elizabeth will be sorely disappointed and may as well save their eyes and reading lamps the labour. None of that is here. At what point Mary's goals and priorities switched from regaining her own throne to being drawn towards conspiring to usurp Elizabeth's ... what fired Elizabeth at every delicate turn, how she truly coped with 'that' allegedly botched signing of Mary's death warrant ... barely a fleeting moment of this gripping drama is to be found within these pages. The substance of this book is, instead, the distant background to all of that.

Porter cannot be fairly faulted for her reliance on conjecture, which is the case with all her predecessors and contemporaries. This is an uncertain story on so many levels. What Porter argues 'might have' steered choices, what 'perhaps' shaped certain events, even what 'must have' unfolded in private is the inevitable explanatory trajectory, without which there would simply be no accessible angle on much of the material. Every such historian falls back on this device of logical yet subjective reasoning in the absence of sufficient documentation to get an absolute picture of certain story points.

I disliked the many long and convoluted sentences that extend into half pages and longer. This refusal to break down the case into reasonably digestible chunks, for even the archest of scholarly bookworms, in parts alienates. Easily overcome once the patient eye adjusts, it nonetheless ought to have been addressed, at least editorially, if not by way of composition. That is my only criticism. I don't mean it needed 'dumbing down', just neatening and sharpening. It appears, however, gloriously free of typographical errors, an increasingly rare bonus.

That said, no passage or chapter left me disengaged or tempted to flick through to the next. Every smallest historical detail was acutely relevant to me. I particularly appreciated the Stewart and Lancastrian/Tudor family trees preceding the Prologue and the fifteen page *Dramatis Personae* following the Epilogue – features common to such histories but still vital quick reference points for even the most knowledgeable reader.

Though I have read more hotly emotive accounts and drier, less engaging ones, Porter's balance was, I felt, fine enough. I learned more and gained greater insight than had I not read it. The narrative style is possibly less engaging than in her earlier two books, which I thoroughly enjoyed (*Mary Tudor: The First Queen* and *Katherine the Queen: The Remarkable Life of Katherine Parr*) but this is counterbalanced by the riveting essential content itself. This story will always endure, regardless its teller, but by concentrating its particular background into one work, the author saves Mary of Scots fanatics much gruelling research.

Highly recommended.

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### **Jerry Ozaniec says**

Excellent exposition of a subject others have written much about but never (to my knowledge) in parallel such as this treatment of both the Tudors & Stewarts. My only criticism would be that there was too little examination as to why there was such vehement opposition to Mary's marriage to Darnley.

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## **Donald Rice says**

This history states many things I have never heard about the subjects in the title. The revelations are most interesting !

Many of the quotes are in old English and the sentence structure is quite odd to read in the 21st century. Yet, this adds quite a lot to the story.

I loved the story of Margaret Tudor.

The genealogical charts need to be more complete as to dates and names.

Queen Mary of the Scots, and her story is lacking a lot. Much has been dumped into the epilogue.

In the text, little is stated about Mary's trial, the Armada, and her relationship with Phillip II of Spain.

John Knox is presented as the heavy in the story of the Catholic queen, his story needs to be more balanced.

Perhaps the author needs to write a new volume to finish the stories she has started.

Objectivity is needed in telling both the Stuart's and the Tutors stories.

I enjoyed the book a lot.

Donald D. Rice, Ed.D.

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## **Elizabeth says**

more about Mary's ancestors and the generations that led to her reign than about Mary herself, a very good

history of the Stewart and Tudor dynasties and their relationships.

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## **Helen Carolan says**

I have to admit this was a totally fascinating read, especially the first three parts. While Mary queen of Scots is dealt with it's the history of both her grandfather James the fourth and her father James 5th which are really compelling. Both are now little more than a foot-note in history, James 4th being remembered as the man who took a pasting at Flodden and James 5th famous for allegedly saying the dynasty began with a woman and would end with a woman. But as Ms Porter shows there was much more to these men especially James 5th who turned out to be a strong and stable ruler. A wonderful read.

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## **Nicole~ says**

**Crown of Thistles: The Fatal Inheritance of Mary Queen of Scots** may be more of a comparative-historical study of Scotland's and England's monarchs laid out side-by-side, than a fully mapped out biography of Mary Stewart, opening with sensational conquests and the supplanting of two kings: on one hand, by the victorious creator of the Tudor dynasty, Henry VII and the other, a 15 year-old boy who became James IV after revolting against his father.

Unlike many popular historians who have portrayed the histories of Scotland and England singularly, Porter draws striking comparisons between the rival territories- the two opposing Kingdoms in interminable contention - as Scotland prepared a siege on England, while England herself faced rebellion within her own border to the south-west.

Porter diligently shows the intertwined existences of these countries and their monarchal adversaries : their political conflicts, reformation, and familial relationships as they occurred alongside each other, as one country struggled for domination over the other.

Porter observantly notes Margaret Tudor's plight in seeing both her sons taken away from her much like her uncles Edward V and his brother Richard were lost to her maternal grandmother, Elizabeth Woodville. Margaret Tudor and her granddaughter Mary Stewart also presented uncanny similarities in their disagreeable positions with government; their choices of loves and dubious, unwise marital decisions (Margaret to the scoundrel Earl Angus, Mary to the murderous Darnley); their removed relationships with their own offspring; both their forced flights from Scotland into the protection of England.

Finally, the author insightfully suggests that Mary Queen of Scots's imprisonment by her cousin Queen Elizabeth I might have reminded her of "the unhappy precedent of James I of Scotland who had been a prisoner in England for 18 years at the start of the 15th century."

From Henry Tudor's first inception of a magnificent alliance, through tumultuous periods of hatred, backstabbing and bloodshed, Porter livens the histories of these two border rivals to their eventual melding into one great nation under King James VI and I.

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## **Cinda says**

A political thriller that made me forget I was on the stationary bike. Which is high praise. Having just visited Scotland this summer and seen many of the places mentioned in this biography, it was particularly compelling.

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## **Kay Wahrsager says**

Very generic and relies heavily on other sources

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## **Louise says**

The book gives an overview of the coming of Mary Queen of Scots, her troubled reign and its immediate aftermath. Aside from a long introduction about the rise of Henry VII, Tudor history is minimized. I was glad for the focus on Scotland there is not a lot available in other sources for the general reader. The subtitle is a better description of the content than the title.

The Scottish story begins with the rebellion against James III. His teen aged son, who may have been prodded by his mother, became James IV. There is a description of his successful reign, his marriage to Margaret Tudor and the Battle of Flodden where he died.

James V became king as a toddler. Porter shows how his widowed mother, Margaret Tudor made bad choices and his regency slipped through her fingers. James V cemented French protection (from England) through marriage and with Mary Guise begat Mary Stewart. The description of widowhoods of Margaret Tudor and Mary Guise shows their contrast in style and what it meant for them and the heirs they produced. Margaret's first of her two disastrous marriages in widowhood contributed to Mary's "fatal inheritance".

Mary Stewart arrived in Scotland recently orphaned and widowed. Today we would say she had PTSD even before her troubles begin. The book covers her tumultuous reign up to her flight to England where it abruptly ends. The coming of James VI to the English throne as James I is about two or three paragraphs in the Epilogue.

In some places Porter notes differing opinions of historians and when mainstream consensus has changed over the years. At other times events that I believe to be in dispute are given as fact. For instance, the presentation of Lord Darnley to Mary, the possible match of Leicester and Lord Bothwell raping Mary. Is Porter giving a current consensus on these or has what is said now been established as fact?

There are some black and white plates which are mostly portraits. At the end there are short profiles of the key people.

This not a book for first time Tudor/Stewart readers. To read this book, you need some background.

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## Orsolya says

Although related by blood and residing in bordering countries; the Tudors and Stuarts (Stewarts) were far from chummy. This dramatic relationship best-suited for a soap opera is retold by Linda Porter in, “Tudors Versus Stuarts: The Fatal Inheritance of Mary, Queen of Scots”.

Having previously read two books by Porter; there are certain characteristics of the author’s writing which I was on the lookout for. As per usual, “Tudors Versus Stuarts” has a slow start which feels too much like establishing background information. This is understandable in beginning a scholarly text but Porter maintains this for approximately 100 pages. Often times, it is like reading an extended foreward.

Furthermore, Porter’s premise for “Tudors Versus Stuarts” is too explain the interactions, emotions, and psychological effects of the countries and monarchies on one another but this is lost in the shuffle. Instead, Porter simply retells the history of both countries during a set time frame and swaps back-and-forth explaining what occurred at the same time. This doesn’t adhere to her thesis, though. Common to Porter, her writing often strays on tangents creating a choppy, disjointed piece.

Although Porter does begin to find her stride and has strong moments (such as the discussion of Perkin Warbeck); she puts on emphasis on non-important areas while fluffing up minor notes, being the opposite of what the reader expects. “Tudors Versus Stuarts” is best described as being “off key”.

In Porter’s other works, she had the habit of making highly speculative or opinionated statements. This is also the case with “Tudors Versus Stuarts”. The text is filled with “Might have”, “Perhaps”, and “Must have” phrases and several admissions of, “We don’t know what happened but...” Several times, Porter concludes that, “There are no records of what was discussed but surely it was...” No Porter, you don’t “surely know” what was discussed with no records! Examples of juvenile comments include saying such as, “Later in life she [Margaret Tudor] simply looks fat” (p 143) and Margaret resenting the “crusty old earl” (p 148). These have no place in an academic piece.

Although there *are* admittedly some moments that Porter tries to debunk some myths (not well, as her text isn’t really annotated and she quickly moves past her attempts at debunking); on the whole “Tudors Versus Stuarts” is a recap instead of learning anything new. Again, the aim and angle of the book is unique but Porter falls short in execution.

Porter insists on sprinkling the text with mentions of Shakespeare (why are so many recent history authors begetting Shakespeare as a historian?!) and quoting poems/literature. Perhaps this is done to lighten the load but it merely works to downgrade the emphasis of “Tudors Versus Stuarts”.

The second half of “Tudors Versus Stuarts” focuses largely on Scotland. Although this is still simply a retelling and does not meet the thesis; it is a strong source for those interested in an overview of Scottish politics in the 16th century.

“Tudors Versus Stuarts” rushes at the conclusion and ends rather abruptly. Porter’s biases are clear and although she attempts to add importance to the clashing between the Tudors and Stuarts (ending with King James I of England); she failed to do anything other than present a dual biography.



Porter follows the text with an epilogue, list of key figures, notes, and bibliography while the text contains a section of black and white photo plates. It should be noted that I have read many of the secondary sources Porter used which is why the book didn't offer me new information but this may not be the case with all readers.

Overall, Porter's piece has a strong motive and thesis but it was not carried out to a proven point. "Tudors versus Stewarts **is** readable (meaning: not boring) and one will learn of many Scottish and English events but I was merely expecting more. The book is not bad and suggested for those interested in the history but it won't blow you away.

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## **James says**

I've always been fascinated by British royalty, especially the Queens. So much intensity and drama. This was a great book. At times a little too narrative and expository, but that's called for in this type of re-telling. Little details stand out. A trove of info for those with keen interest.

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## **Lezley says**

This book filled a void in my readings of British history. The examination of both the Tudors and the Stewarts co-existing certainly clarified what was happening in both in England and Scotland in the 1500s. The author was sympathetic to Mary's plight and I wish she could have been a little more sympathetic to Richard III. Maps would have been helpful and I did appreciate the short biographies at the end of the book. All the Scottish Earls can become quite confusing. I highly recommend this book and will follow "Tudors Versus Stewarts " with more books written by Linda Porter.

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## **Leanda Lisle says**

The heir to two kingdoms, Mary, Queen of Scots was to be a victim of terrible violence in both. Brutally deposed from her throne in Scotland, Mary fled to England only to be imprisoned and eventually beheaded by her cousin, Elizabeth I. Yet as Linda Porter describes, this was only the last chapter in the long, bloody family rivalry that was Mary's fatal inheritance.

The first of the three generations whose story Porter tells is that of Mary's Stuart grandfather, James IV of

Scots, and his bride, Margaret Tudor, elder sister of Henry VIII of England. Their marriage, in 1502, opened the possibility that one day the Stuarts would inherit the English throne – a possibility bitterly resented and feared by Henry VIII, who was yet to have a male heir.

James IV of Scots is one of our most romantic but least known monarchs, and Porter does him justice with a dryly-witty portrait. A good-looking king, ‘as handsome in complexion as a man may be’, he was a lover of women (one of whom had the unfortunate name of Jane Bare-Arse) as well the arts, of hunting and jousting. His marriage was as popular in Scotland as he was, and in 1512 his Tudor wife bore James a healthy son, the living embodiment of the marriage union between the Scottish thistle and the English rose.

It was the following year, in August 1513, that the rivalry between the brothers-in-law came to a head. James, infuriated by Henry VIII’s claims that he was the rightful overlord of Scotland invaded England at the head a huge army. Henry VIII was abroad fighting a war in France, leaving a seventy year old home-front commander to confront James and the Scots at Flodden, in Northumberland.

On 9 September we will see the 500th anniversary of the battle, and a slaughter that Porter’s moving account compares to the horrors of the Somme. The Scots proved to be less well prepared than they had thought. Four thousand Englishmen were killed and ten thousand Scots - amongst them James IV, shot by an arrow through his face.

The king’s infant son, James V, was crowned aged seventeen months. But Mary, Queen of Scots would wear her crown of thistles at an even younger age, as history repeated itself for the next generation. James V also met his nemesis in Henry VIII, dying of cholera aged thirty, following another battle defeat at English hands. Mary, his only child, became Queen of Scots when she was just six days old.

Mary was, of course, too young to actually rule Scotland and as a girl it was not expected that she would ever do so. She left Scotland aged five, destined to be married to the French Dauphin, and eventually be a Queen of France. But her sickly French husband died not long after his accession as king, and in 1561 she returned to her homeland a beautiful widow of eighteen, ready to govern Scotland and to plot her accession of the English throne.

Henry VIII was long dead, and with his daughter, Elizabeth I, a childless spinster, Mary was the senior heir in blood to the English throne. To make her claim more popular in England Mary married an English born cousin, who, like Mary, had Stuart and Tudor royal ancestry. But by the time their son was born, the marriage had turned sour. Less than eight months later her English husband was murdered.

Although the men who killed her husband were never found Mary was accused of plotting Darnley’s murder with the man who she married shortly afterwards, the ambitious Earl of Bothwell. Porter argues that, in fact, Bothwell had raped Mary to force a marriage on her. But whatever the truth, Mary now faced a rebellion that led to her deposition as Queen. *Crown of Thistles* concludes with Mary poised to flee Scotland for England, where her place of refuge will first become her prison and then her grave.

In giving us the history of family rivalry to Mary’s reign and fall, Linda Porter has found a fresh approach to her biography, and told it with grace and humanity. It is a story of cultured courts and violent deaths, of ambitious kings and tragic queens: executed on Elizabeth’s orders in 1587, Mary’s family’s past had indeed proved a fatal inheritance.

An edited version of this review appeared in the Mail on Sunday in 2013

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## Hilmi Isa says

Sejarah British merupakan 'obsesi' saya yang baharu, selepas sejarah mengenai Perang Dunia Kedua. Minat ini mula timbul apabila saya membaca *1000 Years of Annoying the French* yang sebenarnya sebuah buku satira sejarah hubungan antara British dan Perancis. Namun di dalamnya terdapat beberapa kisah sejarah yang amat menarik minat saya. Terutamanya yang berkaitan dengan sejarah England dan Scotland, dua antara empat kerajaan/wilayah yang membentuk British atau turut dikenali sebagai United Kingdom kini.

Buku ini, secara amnya, adalah buku biografi mengenai Permaisuri Scotland, *Mary Stewart* (1542 - 1587). Permaisuri Mary merupakan antara tokoh diraja yang terkenal di British, terutamanya di Scotland, pada ketika era *Renaissance* dan *Reformation*, pada abad ke-16. Beliau terkenal kerana Mary merupakan pemerintah perempuan berstatus permaisuri pertama dan terakhir di Scotland. Kemangkatan Mary yang tragik di England turut menyumbang kepada kemasyhuran beliau di dalam kisah sejarah British.

Walaupun demikian, penulis buku ini, *Linda Porter*, membawa pembacanya untuk meneliti sejarah *Dinasti Tudor* dan *Dinasti Stewart*, yang masing-masing merupakan dinasti pemerintah untuk England dan Scotland. Fokus diberikan bermula dari era pemerintahan *Henry VII* (yang turut merupakan raja pertama dinasti Tudor di England) dengan *James IV* (yang naik takhta di Scotland melalui pemberontakan terhadap ayahandanya sendiri, *James III*). Perkara ini penting dilakukan kerana Mary merupakan keturunan kepada kedua-dua raja yang berlainan dinasti ini. *Henry VII* merupakan moyang dan *James IV* merupakan datuk kepada Mary. Boleh dikatakan Mary bukan sahaja layak memerintah Scotland, tetapi juga England. Namun demikian, suasana politik dan sosial Eropah yang ketika itu bergolak dengan konflik mazhab antara Katolik dan Protestan, menghalang Mary daripada mencapainya, yang juga merupakan cita-citanya untuk menyatukan kedua-dua kerajaan. Skandal politik, seks, dan rasuah serta perebutan kuasa turut menjadi faktor penghalang.

Saya berpendapat bahawa Porter berjaya menyampaikan penceritaannya dengan baik dan berkesan. Walaupun mungkin ada pembaca yang buat pertama kalinya mengenali sejarah Mary melalui buku ini, seseorang pembaca itu dapat memahami apa yang cuba disampaikan oleh penulis tanpa menghadapi banyak kesukaran. Buku ini juga sesuai dibaca sebagai 'pengenalan' mengenai Mary sebelum membaca buku-buku yang lebih khusus mengenai tokoh wanita yang masih lagi 'memikat' walaupun lebih 400 tahun selepas kematiannya.

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