



# Mary Queen of Scots and the Murder of Lord Darnley

*Alison Weir*

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On the night of 10 February 1567 an explosion devastated the Edinburgh residence of Henry Stewart, Lord Darnley, second husband of Mary, Queen of Scots. The noise was heard as far away as Holyrood Palace, where Queen Mary was attending a wedding masque. Those arriving at the scene of devastation found, in the garden, the naked corpses of Darnley and his valet. Neither had died in the explosion, but both bodies bore marks of strangulation.

It was clear that they had been murdered and the house destroyed in an attempt to obliterate the evidence. Darnley was not a popular king-consort, but he was regarded by many as having a valid claim to the English throne. For this reason Elizabeth I had opposed his family's longstanding wish to marry him to Mary Stuart, who herself claimed to be the rightful queen of England.

Alison Weir's investigation of Darnley's murder is set against one of the most dramatic periods in British history. Her conclusions shed a brilliant new light on the actions and motives of the conspirators and, in particular, the extent of Mary's own involvement.

## **Mary Queen of Scots and the Murder of Lord Darnley Details**

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# From Reader Review Mary Queen of Scots and the Murder of Lord Darnley for online ebook

## Melissa says

Having finished Jenny Wormald's analysis of Mary's personal rule, I jumped right into Alison Weir's exhaustive analysis of the murder of Lord Darnley, one of the only Weir biographies I hadn't yet read. And it's pretty safe to conclude that Weir has turned over all the stones currently available to turn over and we can conclude that a) Mary did not collude in the murder of her worthless husband, though if the pox had carried him off she would have been happy about it and b) that she made some really terrible choices, starting with marrying Darnley in the first place, that just laid her open for others to take advantage of her misfortune such that she never regained her footing.

(Although you would think that Darnley's murderers could have come up with a more subtle plan than "blow up the house and if that fails smother him." The guy was known to party a little too hard - couldn't he have fallen out a window of Edinburgh Castle or drowned in the Loch or Firth or something?)

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## Heidi says

This book is partly a biography of Mary Queen of Scots, and partly an indepth examination of the source material surrounding the explosive murder of her second husband, Lord Darnley, with some conclusions over who was involved.

I have been slowly ploughing through this over-long book. Although the title focusses on the murder of Lord Darnley, the early chapters are more of a biography as they go in great depth through Mary's early life and the actual murder comes quite late on in the book. Then there is a rather elaborate and lengthy examination of the source material surrounding the events, with the same conclusion ("Mary is innocent") being made over and over again.

The book is complicated further by the reams of reams of different names of Lords etc, who all seem to have names beginning either with M or B (Mar, Maitland, Moray, Morton, Bothwell, Buchanan etc). Although this is obviously not Weir's fault, and some attempt has been made to rectify this through an introductory section on each of the key figures, this doesn't really help when you are reading through the mire, as you have to keep flicking backwards and forwards to work out which person is now being considered.

However, the book wasn't all bad. As someone who has studied this period of history before, it was refreshing to realise, for example, that Elizabeth I wasn't always hostile towards Mary, indeed she seems to have been positively encouraging in the early years of her reign. There were some other little gems and snippets, and the chapter surrounding the murder itself was very thrilling and exciting.

This might be a book to dip into, rather than read cover to cover, as a lot of the material seems to be covered repeatedly so that it did become a bit too much for me, but I managed to persevere to the bitter end.

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## Chris says

I've been re-reading this over the last month.

Weir does a good analysis of the whole murder of Darnley, and while she believes Mary to be innocent, she doesn't show the Scots Queen as truly a white sheep. The last 100 hundred pages, however, are a little slow.

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## Amanda says

Like a couple of other readers, I could not finish this book. I retreated at the half way mark. It is without doubt a well researched book, but I had a lot of trouble keeping up with the Scottish nobles, getting confused about the Huntley's, Hamilton's, Maitland's, Melville's, Moray's, and then they were all related by marriage at some point it seemed! I think that personally, I might be better served by reading historical fiction about Mary, as the personalities are better shown by dialogue and might assist in understanding the motives of these characters in getting involved in the political machinations that unfolded. I do appreciate the research undertaken to write this book, and may revisit it at a later date.

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## Gary says

This book is essentially an exploration and 'whodunnit' of the murder of Mary, Queen of Scot's second husband, Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, rather than a biography of Mary herself.

Mary was certainly an interesting and tragic figure.

The book itself is essentially a very interesting expose, and Weir certainly has researched her work and presented her conclusions as to the evidence painstakingly well.

The first three chapters of this work are concerned with Mary's early life, her growing up in the French court where she was sent to be educated.

Weir touches on the moral laxity of the French court, which she actually goes as far as to refer to as a "moral cesspit: in which Mary was "exposed from an early age to it's promiscuity and corruption".

Interestingly there are two paintings that show the teen aged Mary, later to be Queen of France, in the nude.

In 1558 the 16 year old Mary was married to the Dauphin who succeeded his father as Francis II the following year.

When Francis died in 1560, his mother, the vindictive Catherine de Medici, made it clear that Mary was no longer welcome at the French court, so she returned to her native Scotland, where John Knox was playing a dominant role. The Reformation was in full swing but Mary made no attempt to interfere with the new religion, merely insisting that she was to be free to worship as a Catholic.

At this stage she had the peoples support.

Renowned for her beauty, she was charming, intelligent and talented but she was surrounded by vicious and scheming lords, hungry for power, and got caught up in their intrigues and plots. She never had a trustworthy and wise counsellor, like her cousin Elizabeth, to whom she could turn for advice.

After a number of princes were considered for her, she eventually agreed to marry her cousin Lord Darnley, the nearest heir after her to the thrones of Scotland and England. Beneath his courtly veneer, Darnley was spoiled, wilful, petulant, immature, spiteful, arrogant and uncouth. He seems to have had bisexual tendencies, and Weir premises that he had a homosexual relationship with the Italian courtier and Mary's secretary, David Rizzio.

Weir provides evidence that he suffered from syphilis. Furthermore there is evidence that Mary's bouts of ill health were the result of attempted poisoning. Darnley was a key player, perhaps manipulated by a cabal of lords, in the assassination of Rizzio. Of course the main of the book involves Darnley's murder and who was responsible. I do believe that Mary was innocent and that her relationship with Bothwell does not in any way implicate her in Darnley's assassination. It is records of meetings with other lords that seem to incriminate Bothwell. Nonetheless Darnley had deeply unpopular figure and was miraculously rehabilitated after his death, only his youth and his cruel end remembered. His own crimes and cruelty were forgotten. Ironically, he a Catholic who had plotted the overthrow of the Protestant establishment became a figurehead after his death in the propaganda campaign by Protestant Lords against Mary and Bothwell. Many later came to see how badly Mary had been calumniated. While Weir's detailed proof that the casket letters were forged, can be tedious to read, it is a vital part of Weir's detective work in proving Mary's innocence.

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## **C.S. Burrough says**

Alison Weir surpassed herself penning this tome, the first in my opinion to rival Antonia Fraser's 1969 *Mary Queen of Scots*. Via Mary Stuart runs the continuous line of succession, from Plantagenets & Tudors, down to England's current royals.

Mary has always polarised debate, first when alive and then, through the centuries, from the grave. Regardless which account we accept, she cannot be seen as entirely blameless for her unfortunate life. It's also beyond question that too much blinkered blame has gone her way, backwards in time.

Her murdered second husband Henry, Lord Darnley, was a hideous character who arguably deserved his comeuppance. If Mary was privy to his murder plot we can hardly blame her. It's an equally short sighted assumption that anyone put in Mary's position would not have conspired towards her liberty when so unjustly imprisoned for so long by Queen Elizabeth I. She was viciously provoked, set up and entrapped into her 'treason' against Elizabeth.

Mary Stuart, great-niece of England's King Henry VIII, was 6 days old when her father, King James V of Scotland, died and she acceded to his throne. Uniting France and Scotland against conflict with Henry VIII's England, France's King Henry II negotiated little Mary's marriage to his three-year-old son, the Dauphin Francis. Five-year-old Mary was shipped to France and spent thirteen years at the French royal court.

Despite that regal upbringing largely moulding her character, Mary's detractors criticise her limited grasp of her native Scottish subjects who were then, largely, backwater bog and highland dwellers. Yet this eventually anointed queen of France had not seen Scotland since being spirited away as an infant.

Widowed at eighteen, Mary was no longer wanted in the French court by her mother-in-law, France's new

regent, Catherine de Medici. Though she could have retired there in splendour, remarrying any prince in Christendom, Mary instead returned to her homeland to start anew.

In vain she reached out to her surly Scottish subjects who, after ceremonial formalities, snubbed her as a high-flying foreigner. They eyed her with suspicion from the minute she disembarked in her mourning garb, a grown woman and stranger. They considered this newly arrived Catholic head of state, in their Protestant land, anomalous. This sentiment was fuelled by Protestant reformist preacher John Knox, who vehemently campaigned against Mary.

Worse still, she was female.

Across the border, her less beautiful but more wily cousin, Elizabeth, remained contentiously unwed. Resentful of Mary's youth and fecundity, the childless Elizabeth also felt threatened by Mary's strong claim to England's shaky throne.

After two more short and unpopular marriages, Mary was overthrown and imprisoned in Scotland. Eventually escaping, she shaved her head for disguise, donned peasant's clothing and fled, by fishing boat, to England. Hoping for Elizabeth's support, Mary was instead imprisoned and held captive for eighteen-and-a-half years.

After despairingly plotting towards her liberty (making herself complicit in linked plots for Elizabeth's assassination), Mary was entrapped and executed. This unprecedented regicide officially triggered the Spanish Armada. Catholic Philip of Spain had been waiting for an excuse to take England and curb the spread of Protestantism in Europe. As was her final wish, Mary became a Catholic martyr.

Mary's apologists argue she was a kind, intelligent woman, a romantic icon of her day. She was indeed the subject of sonnet and pros, by Ronsard no less. Her beauty and personal charm are legendary.

Neither her cruellest detractors nor most ardent apologists are fully right or wrong. The truth, as always, lies somewhere in the middle. This is where Alison Weir's insightful, brilliantly researched and presented account places it.

The reader is left with a balanced understanding of events while empathising with, and recognising the obvious mistakes of, a desperate woman. I loved this book and reread it to reabsorb the literary quality and exquisite detail.

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## **Avis Black says**

The first half of the book works reasonably well up until Darnley is killed, but then the narrative begins to drag as the author becomes mired in massive amounts of detail.

The main problem is that Weir wants to explore every theory to its complete and utter end (even the Darnley-killed-himself theory, which she should have dismissed immediately as claptrap) and she quotes at boring length from letters of the time, (in which it is revealed that nobody could write worth a damn) while fussing over every tiny point.

Some of this should have been summarized, and Weir should have focused on the weak points of some of the chroniclers and explained their biases and not tried to argue every freaking point with them because it makes the book rather awful. It's a shame, because the first part is pretty good.

And do I think Mary did it? Yes. It seems plain she hinted strongly that she wanted her nobles to fix the Darnley problem permanently, but in a manner that would not stain her honor, which is a way of saying she didn't want the finger of blame pointing back at her. She deliberately chose to stay ignorant of the details, but it seems plain to me that she knew it was going to happen, and her behavior during Darnley's last day looks like she was helping to set him up for the murder.

It's worth nothing that the amount of people who fussed and complained about Darnley's death is pretty amazing considering what a worthless pain in the neck when he was when alive, and he managed to be the same after he was gone. Weir makes the point that she thinks Darnley had syphilis, and the medical evidence tends to support her. This does a lot to explain why Mary considered their marriage to be over, since Darnley wanted to resume sexual relations even when he knew he was diseased. He also quarrelled with her constantly about everything and kept nagging her to give him more power, and cheated on her right and left, as well as insulting and being an arrogant ass to everyone at court.

Mary did not want to divorce Darnley because the only grounds she could have used were consanguinity, namely declaring the marriage illegitimate from the start because both Darnley and herself were too closely related by blood. But if her marriage had never been legitimate, this meant her son James might have been declared illegitimate as well, and she did not want to throw away her son's chance of inheriting the Scottish and ultimately the English throne.

After looking over Mary's dilemma, Darnley's death was inevitable.

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## **Su says**

Alison Weir is one of those authors that I think I should love, but I don't.

I have read quite a bit about Mary Stuart, and wanted to read Ms. Weir's book to further my understanding of the Queen. The murder of Darnley is fascinating history, unfortunately this book is not. I found the book to be plodding and dry. I felt there was too much distance between the author and the subjects, as if Ms. Weir was going down a list and now it was time to write about Mary of Scotland. Ms. Weir unnecessarily complicates the persons and the place of the Scottish lords, and seemed lost herself in trying to give an overview of the players.

For lovers of Scottish and English royal history, I recommend the author John Guy.

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## **Orsolya says**

This is not only one of my favorite Alison Weir historical works but also one of my favorite books, in general. All 688 pages of it (I read the hardcover). The overwhelming (but in a positive way) level of research, organization, sleuth-like discoveries, and yet cake batter smoothness of this book results in the perfect combination of informational read and entertainment.

Certainly a page turner, the only thing that kept me taking breaks while reading is that I didn't want to finish it! I've always been a supporter of the brave and yet ambitious Mary Stuart. Another female who has historically received insults and negative connotations towards her person, I see past the bad reputation and support her triumph over trife.

Mary Queen of Scots and the Murder of Lord Darnley gives an overview of the little girl who became queen merely days after her birth with the tragic death of her father King James. Weir then dives head first into Detective Weir mode and like a modern-day criminal investigation, she reviews historical documents, letters (the now-hotly debated vailidity of the Casket Letters), personal quotes, actions, etc; to try to map out the events leading up to and during the murder of Darnley. There were several groups of ambitious individuals who would have liked to gain from Darnley's death and Weir investigates each thread. Fast-paced and informational, you will feel the adrenlin of "Who did it?!".

Don't be initimated by its length, this is one history book combining factual research, drama, and a game of CLUE in the most exciting way possible. Even Darnley would be reading this novel in his grave to get some answers.

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## GoldGato says

Normally, I love Alison Weir's books. The reader can always count on extensive research and astute reasoning, but this one was a slog. We're talking about one of the most perplexing historical figures of all time in Mary, Queen of Scots and yet, it just dragged on. And on and on.

She was the *bosom serpent*. The 16th Century Princess Diana of her day. Emotional, needy, irrational, and limelight-loving, she just couldn't handle the heat. Her first husband was the King of France and her second was found dead after his abode blew apart in the middle of the night (though he himself was not blown apart). Who actually killed Lord Darnley? History always seemed to be written by the powerful Tudors, so Mary probably received too much blame, but she didn't appear to be the brightest stalk in the field.

Granted, there is excitement in the beginning, as we learn of her early life and the constant non-stop intrigues of the always-false Scot Lords. Then it all bogs down, as Weir tries to convince us of Mary's non-compliance. Yes, I get that Buchanan and Knox and Morton and Moray were her enemies and lied. I just didn't need several hundred pages of the he said/she said paragraphing.

In fact, the most exciting character in the book is Lord Bothwell, who was Mary's, and Scotland's, one loyal subject...until he raped her and married her...and then died stark, raving mad in a horrible Swedish dungeon. Poor Mary.

Book Season = Winter (Snow. Scotland. Enough said)

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## Louise says

Alison Weir thoroughly presents and critiques what is known about this complex and murky affair. Most of the book is readable, some of it is a page turner, and on some technical parts (who was at a meeting; legal precedents; translation issues) it can be a slog. Written in 2003, I believe it remains the definitive work on



Lord Darnley's murder.

Weir covers the main elements of the story with more clarity than I have seen anywhere, specifically:

- How Mary came to marry Darnley (inclusive of Elizabeth's mixed signals and the possibility of Leicester as a husband)
- the Rizzio murder and after it Mary's attempt to portray a "good family" up to the birth of James.
- witnesses on the night of the Kirk o'Field explosion
- the cover ups and the power grabs that followed the murder
- how Bothwell took and used Mary and the civil war that followed.
- The trial in England and Elizabeth's evolving motives
- A thorough dissection of the Casket Letters – particularly how some dates can't be possible and how the words are not Mary's manner of writing.

Rather than write a review, I'll make some observations:

- Mary had to living in a constant state of PTSD. She lost her father in her first week on earth and was shipped off to France to marry the Dauphin at age 5. By age 18 she was a widowed queen of France and the orphaned Queen of Scotland and more or less sent back to rule a land she knew little about and hardly spoke its language. Her second husband, for whom she fought a civil war, was (most likely) alcoholic and syphilitic, sleeping with men and women and had tried to kill her – or maybe just get her to abort their child by having her lute player stabbed 50+ times while she watched at gunpoint. This is just the start.
- Both Mary and Darnley were 6 feet tall. There has to be something to this, perhaps in Mary's falling in love, and the people's awe of their towering royal couple.
- Mary's imprisonment saved her life.
- The nobles can quickly raise armies with thousands of soldiers at what seems to be a day or two notice... How is this done?
- Mary spent very little time with her baby James, and until captivity, seems not to miss him.
- What should be expected of an 18 year old monarch, raised to dance, smile and embroider?
- For centuries people believed in the divine right of kings. Mary wasn't the first to let her sense of entitlement to ruin her life.

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## Jeffrey Keeten says

"En Ma Fingit Mon Commencement

In my end is my Beginning

Mary had this saying embroidered on her cloth of estate while in prison in England.

Mary was 6 days old when her father died and she was crowned Queen of the Scots. At age 15 she married Francis, dauphin of France, and he ascended the throne a year later. Just when events seemed to be going in Mary's favor Francis died after only 18 months as King. Mary was not that welcome in France due to fears she would make a play for the throne. She returned to Scotland to assume her birthright as Queen.

Mary was the ultimate bachelorette. She launched a assiduous search across all of Europe searching for a suitable candidate. She tried several alliances, all of which fell through for various reasons. In the end she was left with Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, and as discombobulated as she felt her life was before, it was about to take a severe turn for the worse. Darnley on the surface seemed the perfect catch. He was tall, handsome, debonair, young man of culture and good breeding. A man not that far removed from having his own claim for the throne.

He pressed Mary hard from the beginning to grant him crown matrimonial that would allow him to ascend to the throne of Scotland in the event of Mary's death without issue. Mary was already starting to see cracks in the veneer of her relationship with Darnley. He was not well liked. He was vindictive, arrogant, vain, violent, and immature and all of those unlikable qualities were magnified by a drinking problem. Mary, though fairly innocent politically, understood the danger of granting Darnley what he wanted and kept coming up with reasons to delay. Rumors were soon circulating that Darnley was not only being unfaithful (lock up your wives, daughters, sisters, grandmothers and great grandmothers when Darnley was in the neighborhood), but also plotting treason. After their son James was born Mary did try to repair her relationship with Darnley. She wanted Elizabeth, Queen of England, to recognize her as her heir. To reduce the controversy already swirling around her reign she decided that she needed to make things work with Darnley.

All that fornicating had taken it's toll on Darnley and he was suffering from the late stages of syphilis. Darnley's skull resides at the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons (why??) and the bone of the skull is actually pitted from the disease. When Mary does finally meet up with him again after a long separation his face is disfigured and his health is deteriorating. The first thing Darnley wants to do is hop in the sack, but Mary of course finds his condition repugnant, and probably knows enough about the contagion to know that she would be putting her future health in jeopardy. She leaves him resting at Kirk O'Field with his attendants to attend a dance at Holyrood. At 2AM the house at Kirk O'Field is blown to smithereens, *not one stone left on top of another*. Bodies are pulled from the wreckage, but the King is not among them. Only after searching farther a field do they find him in a garden nearby.

*"They found the bodies of the twenty-year-old-King and his valet, Taylor, lying sixty to eighty steps from the house. Both were nearly naked, being clad in short nightshirts, and neither body had a mark on it. Darnley was stretched out on his back, under a pear tree, with one hand draped modestly on his genitals, while Taylor lay a yard or two away, curled up, with his night shirt rucked up around his waist and his head resting face down on his crossed arms; he had on a nightbonnet and one slipper. There were no burns, no marks of strangulation or violence on the bodies. Near to the bodies lay a chair, a length of rope, a dagger Darnley's furred nightgown.*

A spy, put in place by the great spymaster Robert Cecil of England, made a drawing of the event for his master. The drawing still exists.

And one of the grand historical mysteries of all time begins. **Who killed Darnley?** Why wasn't he blown up in the house? He may have heard the movement of barrels of gunpowder being moved into the floor below him. He may have smelt the burning of the fuse used to light the gunpowder. The chair and the rope could have been tools used to help him and his valet escape the house probably through a window. Once he left the house he must have been discovered by the conspirators and suffocated in such a way as not to leave any marks. The lords of the land quickly begin to jockey for position. They accuse each other of involvement in this murder most foul.

James Hepburn Bothwell, an ambitious man, who is close to Mary is the most likely candidate to have played a hand in Darnley's death.

He makes a play for power by kidnapping Mary and raping her, putting her in jeopardy of having a pregnancy that would forever mar her reputation. (She does later miscarry twins.) She in desperation agrees to marry him. He is already married which for a man as ambitious as Bothwell is barely a hurdle. He offers his wife the choice of divorce or poison. Agreeing to marry Bothwell turns out to be one of the many disastrous decisions that leads to Mary's demise. A supportive Elizabeth turns away from her. The Scottish people are in an uproar, accusing her of involvement in Darnley's death. The lords choose sides and a civil war insures. Bothwell escapes to Norway. Mary is locked up in a castle and the lords begin to put pressure on her to abdicate in favor of her son. The Casket letters surface, letters supposedly written by Mary that are later determined to be forgeries. None of the letters had signatures, dates or addresses. Some of her own letters were mixed with the forgeries to try to lend credence to the whole. The evidence against Mary was always sketchy at best.

Mary escapes...to England. Why, why England Mary? She still coveted the English crown. Elizabeth at first treats her with deference, but as accusations continue to surface Elizabeth becomes more and more uneasy about her association with her cousin Mary. James Stewart, Earl of Moray, bastard brother of Mary, lacking half the genetic code he needed to be King, is named regent and baby James is crowned King. His head so small the crown had to be held over his head. Trials are conducted, servants are hanged and quartered. The real criminals continue to vie for position.

We all know what eventually happens to Mary. Alison Weir says: *"In the circumstances, she must, with justice, be regarded as one of the most wronged women in history."* I agree few things went right for Mary, Queen of Scots, but she also made several terrible mistakes. She did not vet Darnley. She needed a strong man to help her control the conniving, scheming, eager lords of her realm. Darnley was nothing more than a boy and too dedicated to his personal pleasures. She herself needed to be more purposeful in her decisions. The traitors that conspired with Darnley to oust her from power needed to be dealt with more firmly. She should never have agreed to marry Bothwell. The Protestant marriage conflicted with her Catholicism and lost her support from all quarters. When she had the chance to leave Scotland she needed to go anywhere, but England.

As it turns out I believe most of the top royalty of Scotland was involved in the killing of Darnley through participation, knowledge of the event, or part of the cover up afterwards. I do believe that Mary was innocent. With her goal to be Queen of England she needed Darnley to have a chance at accomplishing that

aspiration. Killing him, as satisfactory as that would be, would keep her from what she wanted most. The conspirators never escape the specter of Darnley's death either. Bothwell dies in prison in Norway. Moray is assassinated. Others are poisoned, hanged, stabbed, and bludgeoned. Payment for the murder of Darnley continued to be exacted for twenty years after his death.

Alison Weir books are compelling and meticulously researched. Her writing style and presentation make history not only accessible, but enjoyable. Weir's rendition of the evidence is balanced and even though it is hard for us not to have sympathy for Mary given that she is so fatefully conspired against from the beginning, the victim of royal paranoia, and deceived by those that she needed to trust, Weir makes a case that part of Mary's downfall can be attributed to her own lofty ambitions.

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### **Katie says**

SALACIOUSLY DELICIOUS. The events of this book ridiculous, even more so because they are true. Scheming bastards, treasonous plotting, multiple murders, kidnapping, espionage, and on and on. Mary Queen of Scots was a complicated woman in a complicated time, though by the end I mostly felt bad for her. Weir paints a realistic picture of a rather naive woman in over her head and surrounded by powerful and unscrupulous men plotting against her. This book is a wonderful follow-up read to Weir's biography of Elizabeth I, who makes a fascinating contrast with the ill-fated and far less politically savvy Queen of Scots. One thing I really loved about this book was how Weir systematically goes through the tangled mess of primary sources to get to the truth, discussing their biases and how they contradict one another. This is a hefty book and not exactly an easy read, but I was engrossed.

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### **Caroline says**

The murder of Lord Darnley at Kirk o'Field is one of the most celebrated mysteries in Scottish history, and with Alison Weir being one of the most well-known historians writing today, I was looking forward to reading this.

I've always approached Weir's books with a hefty dose of caution - she's never been shy of 'nailing her colours to the mast' when it comes to her subjects so I was prepared for a certain amount of bias. After all, all history is to a certain extent conjecture; we can never truly know what happened, only assemble a plausible story based on the evidence available to us. Weir certainly relies very heavily on primary sources, which is to be applauded, although I did find endlessly reading large chunks of arcanelly-written letters and documents very quickly became tedious.

Without being more familiar with this era in history, I can hardly claim to be aware of sources ignored or refuted unfairly, facts presented in a specific light - but it doesn't require any level of familiarity to be aware that right from the beginning Weir is presenting the whys and wherefores of this whodunnit with the aim of exonerating Mary, and this necessarily requires a certain amount of accepting as fact something which just cannot be known - such as Archibad Douglas' role in the murder of Darnley. Weir repeatedly presents him as the man who actually did the deed, as those who plotted, planned, schemed, were present etc. But this simply cannot be taken as fact, there are so many conflicting reports and tales, and it is impossible at this remove to ever know exactly what happened as fact, just as it impossible to definitively convict or exonerate Mary.

Page after page of speculation presented as fact proved wearing, and I found this book a slog. It was a relief to finish it, although I can't honestly say I feel any more enlightened about Mary, Darnley, the murder or this period in Scottish history. Events were so complicated and convoluted that I very quickly became confused and remained that way for most of the book. My one consolation is that events must have been equally as confusing for those participating in them, but that doesn't make for easy reading centuries on!

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## **Kim says**

This was a good book. I am a big fan of Alison Weir. This was about an episode in history that I was not very familiar with, and I learned that you have to be a brutal person to survive as a queen. I liked the book very much and plan to re-read it sometime in the future.

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## **Steven Peterson says**

At the close of the book, author Alison Weir puts the matter in straightforward terms (Page 577): “Her [Mary’s:] tragedy was that she was in many respects innately unsuited for the role to which she had been born. Compared with her cousin Elizabeth, she was a political; innocent, and as such she was thrust into a situation in which a seasoned, hard-headed male ruler might have floundered.” And, indeed, the juxtaposition between Elizabeth and Mary is warranted.

This book, ostensibly, focuses on who murdered Mary’s second husband, Lord Darnley. He was not a very likeable or admirable person, and many would profit by his death. But to get to the murder of Darnley and its aftermath, the book begins at the start of the story, Mary’s early life and her move to serve as Queen of Scots.

Word of warning: Keep pages 670-673 dog-eared. There are two charts, outlining the relationships among key players in the history of Mary—from Kings of England Henry VII and Henry VIII, the Scots House of Stewart, the Lennoxes and Hamiltons. Many of the major figures in this work are included in the genealogies.

Mary was married to the Dauphin of France when young; he dies relatively soon after becoming King. In her life, given her family background, she had a claim as Queen of France, Queen of Scots, and Queen of England. Unfortunately, she kept pressing (and scheming) to become Queen of England. In the end, her royal cousin’s patience ended and Mary’s life ended, too.

The work described Mary’s life upon her return to Scotland (since she had been in France for so long, French was her natural language). Given her royal blood, there were many ideas as to whom she should marry. One key advisor, Maitland, wanted closer relations with England and, hence, preferred someone who could make that happen. Others preferred foreign mates. In the end, she chose Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, of the Lennox family. Indeed, he was related to Mary. However, it rapidly became obvious that Darnley was not very admirable. He was dissolute and a constant worry to Mary. They separated on a number of occasions. She was concerned that, even though he was the father to her child (who became King James I after Elizabeth’s death), he also threatened her reign.

The book well described the dizzying array of shifting coalitions. People went from champions of Mary to

scheming to kill one of her advisors to scheming to kill Darnley to scheming to overthrow her and, to complicate matters, scheming to return her to the throne. Needless to say, someone as unprepared for ruling as Mary was often out of her depth.

The author does a nice job of identifying the circumstances of Darnley's death. Some have claimed that Mary was involved. Others have specified other suspects. Weir's case is pretty convincing to me (don't expect a spoiler in this review!). After Darnley's death, Mary made another terrible choice of a spouse and was ultimately dethroned. The book then chronicles her flight from the rebels and her virtual imprisonment for two decades in England.

There were some positive hallmarks of her reign. For the time she (a Catholic) was remarkably tolerant. But in an era of religious intolerance, she was looked askance at by both Protestants and Catholics.

All in all, a very well detailed and generally well written biography of Mary Queen of Scots and her star-crossed relationship with Darnley. If interested in the history and players of this era, this is a good resource.

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## **Errobins says**

This book started out strong. I usually enjoy Alison Weir's biographies, and the earlier portions of the book that deal with Mary's early life were enjoyable and punctuated with wit and humor. It was when the matter of Lord Darnley's murder was broached that this book fell apart. In short, the organization was a mess!

Having read Weir's biography on Elizabeth I in which she tackles the suspicious death of Leicester's wife, Amy, I know Weir can do better.

She gives only a very cursory overview of the source material in the introduction, so brief that it really does not properly illuminate the reader on matters that they need to know about. She really needed to have an early chapter about the source material, but it seems she decided to present it as it was found chronologically after Mary was arrested, even though she refutes their contents as they pertain to Darnley's murder. For instance, starting around page 195 Weir starts disproving the Casket Letters, but she does not explain what the Casket Letters were, how they were found, how many there were, etc, until about page 466! She dives into finding contradictions between how Darnley died and then two chapters later finally gives a timeline for how he died. She needed to establish what the indisputable facts were first before diving into the letters and witness testimony and disproving them.

It was so disjointed and hard to follow that I nearly gave up towards the middle (and reading through reviews, noticed that was a common trend). It picked up a bit when she dealt with the events after Darnley's murder, but then dragged on towards the end.

The only other biography on Mary Queen of Scots I have read has been Antonia Fraser's, who had a much more sympathetic view towards Mary. Yet both Fraser and Weir determined her to be innocent of any complacency in Darnley's murder. Without viewing the documents first hand I have to trust that people who write history are accurate in what they present. Overall I feel, based on the portrayals of both Fraser and Weir, that Mary was so inept that if she had played a role in Darnley's downfall there would have been a smoking gun, though from reading Weir's accounts I can't rule out that Mary potentially had knowledge that there was a plot to kill him but did not intervene. Yet the way that the evidence was presented in this book

was so disorganized it made me wonder if the reason it was was to hide the fact that Weir's premise, that Mary was innocent, was not as sound as the author would like it to be. Of course, it could be that Weir has been writing biographies for so long she was not accustomed to writing an effect forensic work, but once again, she did a good job with Leicester's wife, so why not here?

Unless you are a diehard historian I would skip this book. It started out promising, but when it got to the meat of the matter, Darnley's murder, the evidence was presented so poorly that it's difficult to draw any conclusion from it.

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## **Kalliope says**

Had I known the degree of excruciating research that must have stood at the base of this book and the arduous account it produced, I don't think I would have purchased this book.

But chance guides ones life, including that delicious part of it – our books and our reading. I used to live in a place where bookstores rarely offered the books one sought; instead they presented surprises. Visiting these shops was twice as fun. I always came out with treasured and unexpected purchases. This was one of them.

It has sat however, for several years in my bookshelves, but as I am in dire need of book space I am pulling out and giving priority to the bulkier ones. Once read, I will give them away. So, I finally took this big tome out.

I must confess that I have been about to abandon the read more than once, for I found the extremely detailed account in excess to what I wanted to learn. Neurotic that I am, however, I persevered, and am glad because I could then come to admire Alison Weir's extraordinary feat.

First, there is the extraordinary research she has conducted on what must be one of the most intractable episodes in Western renaissance history, the assassination of Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, second husband of Mary Stuart. Weir has done so in great order, presenting us the succession of events literally on a day-by-day basis, questioning, at every node of a decision tree, the alternatives, the sources, the interpretations, etc. I don't understand how she did not lose her wits.

And the second reason to hold Weir in high esteem is that she undertook the investigation believing one thing but as she advance in examining and questioning the evidence she changed her mind. This open mindedness and flexibility in her reasoning are highly commendable.

If she had first thought that Mary was guilty of the assassination of her husband, she ended up absolving her. This book is thus her exculpation.

It would have suited my interest better a biography that had dealt with Mary's complete life, rather than concentrate so much on this ghastly episode; and also one that presented a broader look at Mary's world.

Nonetheless, Weir does succeed in portraying a convincing Mary.

My idea of her now is of a too idealistic and foolish woman, inept at politics and for whom becoming Queen was a fatal tragedy. And it felt disheartening to see her embroiling herself more and more into a trap that grew as a spider web, trapping her further and further...

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## **Belle says**

Thorough. That is the one-Word praise for this work.

The longer praise is that Allison Weir provides an abundance of research packed into 577 pages of captivating history. I'll admit there were moments where the the compiled research was so plentiful that it bordered on redundant, and in those moments I shamefully shelved the book for longer periods of time than I should have — but my love for all things Mary Stuart brought me back to this book till I had read every single page.

FINAL CHAPTER SPOILERS: The best part of this book for me came in statements made in her closing paragraphs. "Even after extensive research, I believed, as I began to write this book, that Mary was guilty. But... it became increasingly obvious that such a conclusion was not possible." And the final sentence brings it home: "In the circumstances, she (Mary) must, with justice, be regarded as one of the most wronged women in history."

I enjoyed reading a book written by someone who initially researched the Queen of Scots in belief of her guilt - only to write a book which so marvelously shows more proof of her innocence. She is unapologetic in her findings, while maintaining that others may hold opposing views - while presenting her own research and "evidence" in compelling ways. Once I made it past the halfway mark, I easily read through the final 270'ish remaining pages within a few days.

It was worth every second! She set out to lay the matter of Darnley's death before the reader and argue with surviving and/or contemporary evidence the true plotters and doers of the deed. It's my opinion that she did a marvelous job of it!

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## **Pete daPixie says**

I have encountered yet another historical work that bears accurately the maxim that truth is indeed stranger than fiction. I'm sure that the master of Scottish historical fiction, Sir Walter Scott would struggle to concoct a more dastardly series of plots that Alison Weir sets to untangle in her 2003 publication, 'Mary, Queen of Scots-and the Murder of Lord Darnley'. In fact it is a piece of Scott's verse which springs to mind, that sums up this book precisely. "Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practise to deceive!"

After a span of four hundred and fifty years, this epic conspiracy theory can be laid to rest as a conspiracy fact. I finished this read on November the fifth, a day celebrated in England after Guy Fawkes's Gunpowder Plot. But here is Scotland's original, perhaps even the inspiration for Catesby's treason. With Peter Falk like



tenacity, Weir has hounded down the truth, exposed the guilty parties and to quote the books review from the Observer, this is 'a monumental piece of historical detective work.'

Of course, history shows that as a captive Queen, frustrated and foolish, Mary lost her head at Fotheringay after dabbling in the Ridolfi, Throckmorton and Babington plots. However before the years of incarceration in England, Mary Queen of Scots became entangled in Scottish plots resulting in the Rizzio murder, the Darnley murder, the Bothwell marriage and finally her forced abdication.

Historians down the centuries have swallowed the bait, hook, line and sinker. Such is the complexity woven into the thread of sixteenth century power politics, the reader has to keep the eye on the ball. I've had to re-read many pages to keep my nose on the trail, and there are over five hundred pages here, but what a worth while read.

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