



## MARY AND ELIZABETH..... WHAT IF THEY HAD ACTUALLY MET?

Not for the first time in fictional accounts of Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth I of England, the regal cousins meet in person in Josie Rourke's 2018 movie, *Mary Queen of Scots*, starring Saoirse Ronan as Mary and Margot Robbie as Elizabeth. Historians immediately pounced on this piece of artistic licence while mulling again over one of British history's big questions: what if the queens had actually met?

How would the course of our history have changed? Would their mutual suspicion of each other, cultivated through letters posted as missiles over so many years, have been assuaged by a physical presence?

Early histories of these famous 16th century queens, written by men, played on weaknesses and flaws in their characters, some of which were admitted in their lifetimes by Mary and Elizabeth themselves - but was that forced on them by the male audience? Instead, we must now look back on them as strong, ambitious and capable 'Chief Executive Officers' of their respective queendoms.

If character is forged by upbringing, then both queens could draw on the experience of dramas and traumas in childhood.

**Elizabeth Tudor** was aged just two when her mother, Anne Boleyn, was executed on the order of her father, King Henry VIII. There might even be some doubt over whether Henry was her father; after all, Anne was beheaded for adultery....In either case, the young girl was declared illegitimate and removed from the line of succession. In her 20s, she was imprisoned by her half-sister, 'Bloody' Mary, and had to endure the reigns of half-brother, Edward, and half-sister, Mary, before becoming queen in 1558 at the age of 25.

Meanwhile, in Scotland, **Mary Stewart** had been born in 1542 and pronounced queen within six days of the death of her young father, James V. She was officially crowned at Stirling Castle on 9th September, 1543, but within weeks, Henry VIII's English army was in Scotland, hunting down the infant queen to force her betrothal to Henry's son, Edward. Secreted to France at the age of seven - her mother, Marie de Guise, was a French noblewoman - Mary was brought up in the royal court alongside Francis, the boy Dauphin (heir to the French throne), like sister and brother, only to become his wife, and Queen of France, at the age of 16.

She then endured the deaths, in quick succession, of her father-in-law, the King of France; of her husband, now King; and of her mother, acting as her unofficial regent in Scotland.

Still a teenager, Mary returned in 1561 to a Scotland now firmly of the Protestant faith to be confronted angrily by the leader of the Reformation, John Knox. Refusing to give up her Catholic faith, Mary, would eventually be forced by the Protestant lords to abdicate her throne and flee Scotland. First, she would fall in love and marry a Stuart cousin, the dastardly Lord Darnley, doomed to assassination - plotted by Mary? - but not before he left Mary with a child, James, born in 1566.

By now, **Elizabeth** had cemented her position on the English throne, restored the Protestant faith and was overseeing the building of England's navy as the world's finest. She admitted to having 'the body of a weak, feeble woman' but equally claimed to have 'the heart and stomach of a king'. Certainly, she saw no need to choose a man to marry, an act which would threaten her dominance as queen; instead, she allowed her virginity to be celebrated (even in the American colonies).

Elizabeth's virginity obviously raised the issue of succession to the English throne which could be contested legitimately by the Scottish queen:

Mary's grandfather, James IV, had married into the English royal family, choosing Margaret Tudor (a sister of the future Henry VIII) to be his bride in 1505

- Margaret was also Elizabeth's aunt; after her husband's untimely death at the Battle of Flodden, she remarried twice and one descendant would be none other than the infamous Lord Darnley
- With Elizabeth steadfastly refusing to marry - and no other Tudor offspring in the wings - it became clear that the legitimate successor to the English throne had to be the descendants of Margaret Tudor, either her granddaughter Mary or her offspring, James VI

The question of succession to a virgin queen meant that Elizabeth - and her advisors - held back from protecting the beleaguered Queen of Scots, even when she was imprisoned at Loch Leven and forced to abdicate. Even worse, Mary's cousin followed advice to have her placed under house arrest when she fled to England. Intrigues over Mary's intentions would continue for another 18 years before Elizabeth, probably reluctantly, signed her cousin's death warrant.

By 1587, Mary was 45 and Elizabeth was the grand old age, for the time, of 54, so both were well beyond childbearing age. Elizabeth had written her: *"I treat you as my daughter, and assure you that if I had one, I could wish for her nothing better than I desire for you."* Nevertheless, Mary was executed by beheading on 8 February 1587, having never met Elizabeth in person.



As a stateswoman, Elizabeth now had other things on her mind than the so-called Babington Plot to replace her with Mary (and Catholicism). In 1587, the English empire was building up nicely and the naval war with Spain was under way, leading within a year to the defeat of the Spanish Armada. In Scotland, meanwhile, James VI had recently established himself as a strong and persuasive king and he had also, the year before his mother's execution, signed the Treaty of Berwick with Elizabeth to guarantee his succession

to the English throne - notably, making no effort to rescue his mother from her plight. The creation of Great Britain was on the horizon....

So as we gaze on these sculptures on the campus at Stirling, with the Castle framed in the background, we can ponder on what might have been the outcome of a physical meeting between Britain's queens of the 16th century. The sculptures are certainly strong, bold and individual, appropriately reminding us of the strength and humanity of their subjects, however distance apart in space and time.

The views from the sculptures toward Stirling Castle are also evocative. As we have seen, it was in that Castle that the infant Mary was crowned and spent time as a royal infant. But even more significantly, it was there that her son, James, was brought up and educated to be a suitable Protestant King of Scotland and, eventually, of England and the British Empire.

### ROYAL FAMILY TREE

#### **SCOTLAND**

James IV m. Margaret Tudor, English Princess

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James V m. Marie de Guise, French noble

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**Mary, Queen of Scots** (r. 1542 - abdication 1567 - execution 1587)

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James VI - *King of Scots and inherits throne of England after Elizabeth (1603)*

#### **ENGLAND**

Henry VII - first of Tudor monarchs

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Henry VIII (r. 1509 - 1547) - sister Margaret m. James IV of Scotland

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**Elizabeth I** (r. 1558 - 1603) - *no issue: throne passes to James VI of Scotland and James I of Great Britain*