

Linda Porter. *The First Queen of England: The Myth of "Bloody Mary"*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008. 464 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-312-36837-1.



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Linda Porter finds neither the image of the ultra-Catholic Bloody Mary nor the sullen, male-dominated figurehead as an accurate portrayal of Mary Tudor, despite their prevalence in modern biographies of the queen. In her book she calls for a reconsideration of the misunderstood and often-times maligned queen of England, and Porter depicts Mary as a brave and obstinate monarch who overcame significant pitfalls during her lifetime. Though numerous scholars, including Carolly Erickson and more recently Judith M. Richards, have produced relatively positive depictions of Mary since the groundbreaking work of Hilda Prescott, perhaps no author is as favorable to the queen as Porter.[1] The author examines where she feels previous depictions of Mary have been flawed and improves upon these works, while also providing a lucid picture of mid-sixteenth-century English society. Such a text is long overdue, and Porter must be commended for her effort.

Porter devotes more than half of her work to Mary's pre-queenship years and calls her educa-

tion "at the cutting edge of Renaissance thought" (p. 27), drawing from varied sources to clarify her musical, dance, and linguistic skills. Though she mentions no specific authors, Porter disagrees with writers who cite *The Education of a Christian Woman*, written by Mary's Spanish humanist tutor Juan Luis Vives, in order to argue that Mary was instructed from a young age that women could not lead on their own. Porter argues that Katherine of Aragon did not commission the work specifically as a guide for her daughter's tutors to instruct young Mary, and while other authors have avowed that the text was indeed written for this purpose,[2] Porter is correct in asserting that Mary did not follow all of Vives' advice. Though she again fails to mention any specific names, the author also finds it troubling that previous historians of Mary Tudor have viewed her Spanish heritage as a liability, when, in fact, dynastic marriages such as that of her parents Katherine and King Henry VIII were preferred in Europe, and their offspring would have been viewed favorably as well.

Mary's abandonment and mistreatment by her family for their own benefit is a recurrent theme throughout the text, and Porter deftly shows that Mary's father used her as a diplomatic tool from her infancy, while he also ignored her almost entirely during his own numerous wife hunts. Mary fiercely resisted Henry's attempts to disinherit and illegitimize her following his second marriage, and Porter argues that such an attitude reveals the young princess's defiant character. King Edward VI likewise amended his will specifically to exclude his older half-sisters from the succession and thus reduce the chances of a Catholic counterreformation in England. For the majority of Mary's marriage to Philip II of Spain, argues Porter, her husband seemed aloof towards his lovelorn wife. Though he professed his love initially, he spent negligible time with his bride, took mistresses at the Flemish court, and merely used her for political reasons like Henry. Porter shows that even her mother, who was quite protective of Mary, placed her own needs before those of her daughter by refusing to accept the pope's offer to join a nunnery, which would have kept Mary positioned as the presumptive heir.

Even though Mary lacked familial support at her brother's death, Porter shows that she acted gallantly to achieve her rightful succession away from Lady Jane Grey. Hearing of Edward's death, Mary evaded capture and likely her own demise by moving from Hunsdon to Kenninghall to Framlingham, where she united her supporters to take the throne. According to Porter, Mary quickly became a skilled ruler and showed considerable political acumen by successfully navigating a religiously divided council and realm. This stance contrasts sharply with that of many recent Marian biographers,[3] but Porter provides only scant evidence to back her assertions. She also dismisses the depiction of Queen Mary as a mere puppet of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V who could not work adroitly with her council, and refutes the belief that Mary's Privy Council was too large and unruly to govern effectively, arguing instead that

a group of twenty councilors separated themselves from the others and completed much of the governmental functioning. Despite great factionalism and the fact that these men were working under a queen in the highly patriarchal English society for the first time, the author posits that the council functioned quite well. This *esprit de corps* allowed the queen to revamp the customs and excise, restore England's debased currency, and repay the substantial debts of Henry and Edward, yet the author laments that Mary has received little credit for stabilizing the English economy.

Porter also elucidates the rich court culture of Marian England, which included theatrical and musical performances by composer Thomas Tallis and poet/playwright John Heywood. Indeed, the author believes that Mary set the stage for the golden age of English culture, as well as the age of exploration, which are both attributed to her half-sister Elizabeth Tudor. This new interest in discovery also boosted the production of maps, including the oft-overlooked Queen Mary Atlas, which Porter deems "the most beautiful piece of work to survive from Mary's reign" (p. 372). The author validates its beauty by reproducing a section of the atlas in her text. In addition to commissioning this masterpiece, Mary also spent lavishly on members of her household and was very loyal to them. Porter contends that Mary herself similarly purchased extravagant clothes and jewelry, and became somewhat of a fashion trendsetter, which opposes the often morose depiction of the queen. The author concludes that Mary was not without vices, however, and calls her "an inveterate gambler," whose "passion for cards and dice never faded" (p. 34).

Porter argues that Mary's religious views were still developing at her ascension, and rather than focusing on English Protestants, the queen intended to reform the English Catholic church by seeking unmarried, literate clergymen who could strengthen the faith of their parishioners through sermon. She also improved Oxford and Cam-

bridge, while eliminating oppositional clerics and academics from these and other universities. Furthermore, Porter shows that Mary was not the uncompromisingly zealous Catholic sometimes depicted in Marian biographies. She rebuked Pope Paul IV, who hoped to try the English papal legate Reginald Pole for heresy, to the point that Porter contends, “it seemed that the woman who had so desired to heal the breach with Rome might be moving towards her own schism” (p. 390), though the author fails to connect this incident with the special nature of Mary’s relationship to Pole, whose mother she had loved and mourned. By bringing England back to the Catholic fold and by wedding a foreign Catholic, Porter argues that Mary earned the ire of her subjects. English xenophobia and anti-Catholicism culminated in Thomas Wyatt’s rebellion, and the author contends that Mary alone remained calm in suppressing the uprising. Even though Mary executed roughly one hundred conspirators for their role in the plot, she attempted to provide atonement by granting Wyatt’s wife and children an annuity of two hundred marks. The author makes it clear that Mary was harsh to those who questioned her authority, but could be equally magnanimous when others called for vengeance.

Despite being the most discussed aspect of Mary’s reign, Porter feels that the Marian persecutions are continually misconceived, and she does an admirable job clarifying the executions that generated the queen’s “Bloody” moniker. She feels that the executions did not result from Mary’s vexation over marrying an unloving husband and having a putative pregnancy, but rather contends that they were simply the queen’s unambiguous message to religious dissenters. The executions served as a public ritual to gain compliance from her subjects, which, according to the chronicle of sixteenth-century London cloth merchant Henry Machyn, she deftly accomplished. Porter also gives the burnings a much more localized tone, wherein neighbors accused one another of heresies and executed the guilty, similar to the witch

hunts of the time period. Had it not been for John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, Porter argues, the executions would have likely been forgotten to history, and she holds Foxe primarily accountable for perpetuating the Bloody Mary legend. Despite her best efforts, however, the author does not free Mary from guilt for burning over three hundred religious dissenters. She simply blames Mary’s hatred of the elderly Thomas Cranmer on her failure to spare him, even after he signed a recantation, and she also fails to account for opposing arguments, such as the suggestion that Mary propelled the killings forward when others professed distaste.^[4] Even with the local nature that Porter ascribes to the burnings, she does not mention that Mary could have stopped them had she so desired.

While the positive attributes Porter ascribes to Mary are mostly accurate, the author may overstate the deviousness of the queen’s primary antagonists. She refers to Anne Boleyn as a “natural manipulator” (p. 52), and alleges that her elder sister Mary Boleyn “had a reputation, on both sides of the Channel, for sleeping with anyone” (p. 49). Porter also asserts that Lady Jane Grey was not “an unwilling victim, an unhappy child-bride and a reluctant queen,” (p. 198) as Protestant sympathizers have portrayed her, but rather a bull-headed and prudish young woman thrust into a favorable position. Not only is this characterization of Jane somewhat problematic, but the author also lacks sources and footnotes few documents in this section. Several unreferenced direct quotations are scattered throughout the text as well, which makes it somewhat difficult to locate the source of the author’s data.

Porter’s depiction of Elizabeth also contains some dubious allegations that may need revision. She states that Elizabeth was “happy to damage her sister’s reputation before she was actually dead” (p. 406) and claims that she withheld two thousand well-armed supporters during Mary’s attempt to secure the throne, but she fails to rein-

force her claim with any documentation. Porter also alludes to circumstantial evidence proving that Elizabeth knew of the conspirators' intentions during the Dudley conspiracy but again offers no proof. Porter's belief that Mary remained loyal to her half-sister throughout her lifetime can also be refuted, since she gave Jane Grey's mother preference over Elizabeth at court and denied her request for a personal interview in 1554. Mary also imprisoned Elizabeth in the Tower, and it was only after Philip's intervention that the princess was released.[5] Such questionable assertions amidst sparse documentation detract from Porter's argument.

Notwithstanding insufficient sources, the primary documents that Porter does utilize are quite valuable. These include a proclamation declaring Mary's ascendancy, which has been possessed by the Bedingfeld family for over 450 years and had heretofore been ignored by Marian biographers, as well as the often insightful correspondences of Eustace Chapuys, who was Charles V's ambassador resident in London during Henry's reign. The work also contains more than twenty illustrations, most of which are sixteenth-century portraits of influential individuals from Mary's life. Porter's fluent writing style makes the text highly readable as well, and she sheds light not only upon Mary's reign, but also upon the Henrician Settlement, the Edwardian Reformation, and other key events from English Renaissance history.

Scholars have long based their evaluations of Mary Tudor's reign on the deaths attributed to her, but she was just a woman of her time, who, like the majority of Europeans, did not respect those holding different religious ideas. Her well-known husband, father, and half-sister eliminated religious dissenters as well and none hold such demonic labels, but Porter may go a bit too far in her attempts to free Mary from complicity in the executions and blame the queen's rivals. Maybe, as the author fears, the image of Mary as a murderer will continue to dominate current percep-

tions of the queen. Or possibly, reconsiderations of her life, such as that by Porter, will dispel the myth of Bloody Mary to reveal the determined and defiant personality of the first queen regnant of England.

Notes

[1]. Carolly Erickson, *Bloody Mary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978); Judith M. Richards, *Mary Tudor*, Routledge Historical Biographies (New York: Routledge, 2008); and H. F. M. Prescott, *Mary Tudor* (New York: Macmillan, 1953).

[2]. See Timothy G. Elston, "Transformation or Continuity? Sixteenth-Century Education and the Legacy of Catherine of Aragon, Mary I, and Juan Luis Vives," in *"High and Mighty Queens" of Early Modern England: Realities and Representations*, ed. Carole Levin, Jo Eldridge Carney, and Debra Barrett-Graves (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 11-26; Judith M. Richards, "Mary Tudor: Renaissance Queen of England" in *ibid.*, 27-43.

[3]. See Susan Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds: The Rule of the Tudors 1485-1603* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 199-200; John Guy, *Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 226-232; and David Loades, *Mary Tudor: A Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 320-321.

[4]. See David Loades, "The English Church during the Reign of Mary" in *Reforming Catholicism in the England of Mary Tudor: The Achievement of Friar Bartolomé Carranza*, ed. John Edwards and Ronald Truman (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 33-48.

[5]. For information regarding Mary Tudor and mercy see Sarah Duncan, "'Most godly heart fraught with al mercie': Queen's Mercy during the Reigns of Mary I and Elizabeth I" in *Queens & Power in Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. Carole Levin and Robert Bucholz (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 31-50, forthcoming.

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