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Mary Stuart



Synopsis

Mary Stuart Queen of Scots, Queen of France and a claimant to the throne of England, was condemned for treason and executed at the age of forty-four. A potential threat to the stability of the English Crown, she was held captive for twenty years by her cousin Elizabeth I, Queen of England. From the moment of her birth until her execution, her life was spent embroiled in the power struggles that shook the foundations of Renaissance Europe. It has taken the free spirit and the immense talent of Stefan Zweig to justly reconstruct events in the life of a woman who was so cruelly united with destiny. With all the rigor of a scientist and the passion of an artist, Zweig has skillfully reconstituted the character of Mary Stuart and the turmoil that was her fate.

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Customer Reviews

There are certain parts of this translation which are so moving, so powerful that the reader must pause to savor them. Those are the times when one most relishes the wonderful English language. However, other parts, the deep psychological analyses, though compellingly convincing and fresh, seem overlong, even repetitive. Still, the following quotation is just one example of the remarkable insights that Zweig brings to the often told story of Mary's tragic life: "She knew that by inheritance

she had been called to the position of ruler, that her beauty and breeding and culture made her worthy to occupy any throne in Europe; and just as other women of her tender years are wont to dream of immeasurable love, so did she dream but one dreamâ " the dream of immeasurable power." Zweig says that Mary, practically born a queen, and, for a short period, a Queen of France, never saw herself as confined to the poor soil of Scotland but as destined to reign over England in Elizabeth's place. In the meantime, she tried to create a bit of France in Holyrood Palace together with her four Mary's, the young women who had accompanied her to France and back again to Scotland...to this "austere and tragical country". Tragical because it was in the grip of John Knox, a fanatic, a megalomaniac who used religion to glorify himself and to oppress everyone else. Tragical, too, because it's nearest neighbor was the England of a Queen whose throne Mary also claimed. That claim and Mary's personal attraction drew innumerable men into her schemes. Again to quote this marvelous writer: "No luck ever blessed him who hated Mary Stuart, and those who loved her were consigned to an even more terrible end.

We will never know the full story of Mary Queen of Scots and even today the facts of her life are in contention. While Zweig's biography is interesting, his analysis is at times flawed and refutable. The problem is that this book was written in the 1930's and attitudes about women have thankfully evolved since then. He proposes that the contentious relationship between Mary and Elizabeth was mostly due to the fact that they were women and were ruled by their emotions. He even states at one point that if Mary and Elizabeth were men their problem would have been easily rectified because they just would have gone to war. Although Mary made no bones about the fact that she felt she was the rightful heir to the English throne, she constantly reassured Elizabeth that what she actually wanted from her was a declaration that she was to succeed Elizabeth upon her death. Elizabeth on the other hand always was insecure about the validity of her claim to being the rightful heir and felt great unease at the very existence of Mary. She was of the opinion, and probably rightfully so, that putting Mary's request in writing would be tantamount to signing her own death warrant. Mary's claim was based not on emotion but law and Elizabeth's reaction was not without grounds especially in 16th century Europe. Both opinions were well reasoned given the facts of the situation and neither queen felt the need to relinquish her position. A pivotal part of Mary's life and subsequent execution is her alleged involvement in her second husband's--Lord Darnley-- murder. Zweig attaches great importance to Mary's lack of reaction to his death. Depending on which historian you read Mary is anything from an innocent dupe to a cold blooded murderer (Antonia Fraser makes a good case in her book for her innocence).

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