

## MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS

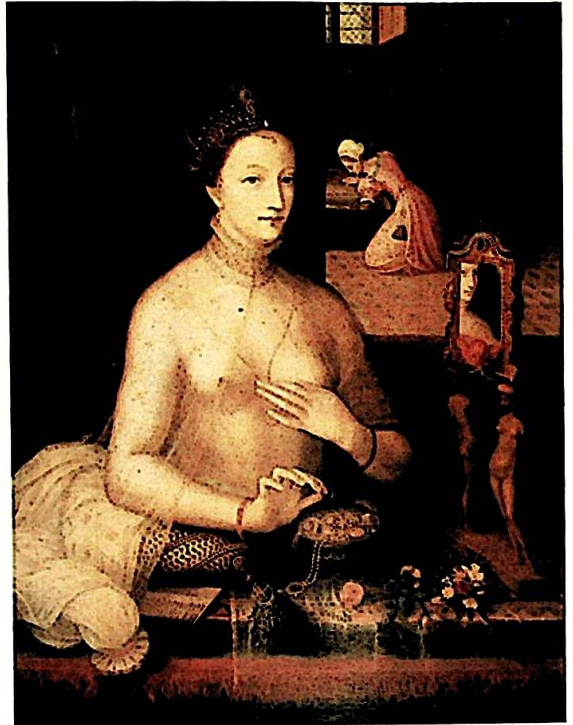
Antonia Fraser

Many of the surviving jewels linked with the name of Scotland's tragic Queen are associated with the last scene in the drama of her struggle with Elizabeth I. Mementoes were distributed on the scaffold as the Queen minded the solemn words of the Earl of Kent: 'Madam, settle Christ Jesus in your heart and leave those trumperies.' Her execution took place on 8 February, 1587.

The traveller was now ready for her last journey on earth. The Queen did not try to sleep for what was left of the night before her execution. She had spent the evening in the careful distribution of small mementoes amongst her retinue, family miniatures for Elizabeth Curle and James Melville, rings and silver boxes for Bourgoing, her physician, and in writing letters to her confessor and to her brother-in-law, King Henry of France. Her women gathered round her already wearing their black garments of mourning, and Mary asked Jane Kennedy to read aloud to her. Throughout the night the sound of hammering came from the great hall where the scaffold was being erected. The boots of the soldiers could be heard ceaselessly tramping up and down outside the Queen's room, for they had been ordered to watch with special vigilance in these final hours, lest their victim escape her captors at last.

The day dawned fine and sunny; it was one of those unexpected early February days when it suddenly seems possible that the spring will come. The sheriff of Nottingham entered the room and found Mary kneeling quietly in prayer at her altar above which hung a crucifix. It was this crucifix which her groom Hannibal Stuart bore before her as she was escorted to the great hall. The last moment of agony came when her servants were held back from following her and the Queen was told that she was to die quite alone, by the orders of Elizabeth. Melville fell weeping to his knees, but the Queen dashed away her own tears and said gently: 'You ought to rejoice and not to weep for that the end of Mary Stuart's troubles is now done. Thou knowest, Melville, that this world is but vanity and full of troubles and sorrows.' In spite of Mary's pleading Kent at first stood firm, objecting that those accompanying her might attempt to dip their napkins in her blood for relics, and only repeated argument won for her the comfort of being attended by six of her retinue.

The Queen now entered the great hall in silence. She wore a long white lace veil which flowed down her back to the ground like a bride's, and a white stiffened and peaked headress, that was also edged with lace, below



'Woman at her Toilette'(Mary Queen of Scots), 1550-1570 by kind permission of the Worcester Art Museum, USA.

which gleamed her auburn hair. Her satin dress was all in black, embroidered with black velvet, and set with black acorn buttons of jet trimmed with pearl; but through the slashed sleeves could be seen inner sleeves of purple, and although her shoes of Spanish leather were black, her stockings were clocked and edged with silver, her garters were of green silk, and her petticoat was of crimson velvet. She held a crucifix and a prayer book in her hand, and two rosaries hung from her waist; round her neck was a pomander chain and an *Agnus Dei*.

In the centre of the hall was set a wooden stage, all hung with black and about twelve feet square. Beside the two stools for the Earls of Shrewsbury and Kent was placed the black-draped block and a little cushioned stool on which it was intended that the Queen should sit while she was disrobed. The great axe was already lying there — 'like those with which they cut wood' — said Burgoing later. Once led up the steps to the stage, the Queen listened patiently while the commission for her





Pendant set with a cameo of Mary Queen of Scots, 16th century by kind permission of The Lady Anne Bentinck.

execution was read aloud. Her expression never changed. She prayed for the afflicted English Catholic Church, for her son and for Elizabeth, and for the saints to intercede for her; kissing the crucifix she held, she ended: 'Even as thy arms, O Jesus, were spread upon the cross, so receive me into Thy arms of mercy, and forgive me all my sins'.

Then the executioners having, as was customary, asked her to forgive them for bringing about her death, assisted the Queen to undress, helped by Jane Kennedy and Elizabeth Curle. She undressed so quickly that it seemed as if she was in haste to be gone out of this world. Stripped of her black, she stood in her dark red petticoat and red satin bodice trimmed with lace and cut low at the back: one of her women handed her a pair of red sleeves, and it was thus wearing all red, the colour of blood, and the liturgical colour of martyrdom in the Catholic Church, that the Queen of Scots died. The executioners stretched forth their hands for the Queen's ornaments, which were their perquisites, but when they touched the long golden rosary, Jane Kennedy protested that it was intended for Mary's friend Anne Dacres wife of Philip, Earl of Arundel, to whom it was subsequently delivered.

The time had come for Jane Kennedy to bind the Queen's eyes with the white cloth embroidered with gold which Mary had chosen for the purpose the night



Pendant set with a cameo of Mary Queen of Scots, 16th century by kind permission of the National Museums of Scotland.

before. The Queen, without the faintest sign of fear, laid her head down upon the block, and, his assistant having steadied the body with his hand, the executioner, Bull, dealt the three blows of the axe needed to sever the head completely. The executioners stripped the body of its remaining adornments before handing it over to the embalmers. The blood-stained block was burned; every particle of clothing or object of devotion which might be associated with the Queen of Scots was burned, scoured or washed, so that not a trace of her blood might remain to create a holy relic that might inspire devotion in years to come. The remaining rosary which the Queen had worn, and which Jane Kennedy had not managed to rescue, was burned. Even the executioners were not allowed to enjoy the perquisites for which they had fought since they were confiscated and replaced with money. These rigorous precautions on the part of the English government, carried out savagely, cast a doubtful light on the many so-called relics of Mary Stuart which are said to date from her execution.

Shrewsbury's eldest son Lord Talbot was at last allowed to gallop forth from the castle to break the news to Elizabeth in London. When she was told of what had taken place the previous morning, she received the news first with great indignation and then with terrible distress. She turned like an angry snake on her secretary, Davidson and had him thrown into prison for daring to

use the warrant for the execution which she herself had signed. Unlike its Queen, London itself suffered from no such doubts: the bells were rung and fires were lighted in the streets and there was such merrymaking and banqueting to celebrate the death of her whom they had been trained to regard as a public enemy.

Other sad tasks remained; Jane Kennedy delivered Mary's diamond ring to Thomas Morgan 'for faithful service'- many of her supporters would willingly have denied it to him for his supposed treachery. The Penicuik jewels, now in the Royal Museum of Scotland, were Gillis Mowbray's relics of her Royal mistress. At the Requiem Mass in Paris on March 12 the Archbishop of Bourges recalled in poignant language the day forty years before when Mary had been married to the Dauphin: 'Many of us saw in the place where we are now

assembled to deplore her, this Queen on the day of her bridal, arrayed in her regal trappings, so covered in jewels that the sun himself shone not more brightly, so beautiful, so charming withal as never woman was . . . This place, where she was surrounded with splendour, is now hung with black for her. Instead of nuptial torches we have funeral tapers; in the place of songs of joy, we have sighs and groans; for clarions and hautboys, the tolling of the sad and dismal bell. Oh God, what a change! On vanity of human greatness, shall we never be convinced of your deceitfulness.'

Lady Antonia Fraser is the author of 'Mary Queen of Scots', new edition, 1989, Mandarin, £5.99 (paper back).