

Elizabeth I and Mary Queen of Scots

Queen Elizabeth I of England and Mary, Queen of Scots were two of the greatest, most legendary rivals in recorded history—although they never even met. In one castle was Elizabeth, the childless queen: bawdy, brilliant, tactical and cynical. In the other, Mary: feminine, charming, romantic and reckless.

Elizabeth, daughter of King Henry VIII and his second wife, Anne Boleyn, was born on September 7, 1533, at Greenwich Palace. Her mother was beheaded when Elizabeth was three years old although it is unknown whether she was aware of her mother's execution in 1536, it appears the precocious, watchful girl was quick to notice the dramatic change in her station.

And so, the newly-styled Lady Elizabeth was declared illegitimate and coldly hidden out of her father's sight, with a small household and little income. Things got so bad that the year of her mother's death, Elizabeth's governess pleaded for money.

In 1533, another princess was born on December 8 at Linlithgow Palace in Scotland. The frail infant, named Mary Stuart, was the only surviving child of the equally weak King James V of Scotland and his formidable wife, Mary of Guise. The child (Henry VIII's great-niece) was Queen of Scotland nearly from birth, since her father died when she was only six days old.

The baby queen spent her first five years being moved from one place to another in Scotland to keep her safe from the warring clans of the highlands. In 1548, when Mary was sent to her mother's homeland of France to become the fiancée of the Dauphin, she was already a figure of romance and sympathy. For the next 13 years, the little Dauphiness- Queen would be worshipped by both the French royal family and her mother's powerful family.

Three years after Elizabeth became Queen, Mary returned to her Scottish kingdom, newly widowed after a short reign as Queen consort of France.

The coddled royal was neither prepared for the coarse Scots, nor the coldness of her cousin Elizabeth. As the "second person" in the line of succession, she expected Elizabeth to name her heir to the British throne. But Elizabeth refused.

Mary's second marriage was to, Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, a match that enraged Elizabeth I, who had not been asked permission for the marriage. After Darnley's assassination, Mary wed James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell, who may have been responsible for Darnley's murder. The public found the marriage shocking. Soon, Mary was forced to abdicate the Scottish throne in favour of her one-year-old son and imprisoned.

For Mary, her 19 years in captivity would be dull and repetitive, as she was shuffled from one minor English castle or manor to another. Due to her rank, Elizabeth demanded Mary be kept in relative luxury with a small retinue of loyal servants to keep her company. But her years of boredom gave Mary ample opportunity to write her cousin letters, hoping to convince Elizabeth that they could be partners instead of enemies.

However, when Mary's involvement in the Babington Plot to assassinate Elizabeth and take the English throne was discovered, Elizabeth signed Mary's death warrant with a flurry of other papers, and wished for her cousin's execution to take place without her knowledge.

It was nothing personal: in Elizabeth's mind her hard-won crown—and therefore the security and prosperity of England itself—was in jeopardy if Mary stayed alive. Mary, Queen of Scots was convicted of treason on October 25, 1586. She was executed by beheading on February 7, 1587 at Fotheringhay Castle, a week after Elizabeth signed the death warrant for the troublesome cousin she had never met.