

Book Reviews

The Casket Letters. A Solution to the Mystery of Mary Queen of Scots and the Murder of Lord Darnley, by M. H. ARMSTRONG DAVISON, London, Vision Press, 1965, pp. viii, 352, 50s.

'The Casket Letters' is the description of eight letters and a series of poems written in French, alleged by James, Earl of Morton, to have been written by Mary Queen of Scots to the Earl of Bothwell, and to have been found in a silver enamelled box. Other contents were said to be an undated promise in French by Mary to marry Bothwell; and a marriage contract in Scots supposed to have been drafted by the Earl of Huntly and signed by Mary and Bothwell. It was dated from Seton nineteen days before Mary's abduction. There was also a bond to protect the signers of the Ainslie Tavern Bond. The original letters have disappeared and only copies are available.

These letters or some of them were produced by the Regent Murray at the York Commission to inquire into Queen Mary's alleged complicity in Darnley's murder. Queen Mary never saw the originals, but obtained copies; and denied strenuously that she had written them. Queen Elizabeth considered them spurious and terminated the Commission in 1569 saying that she saw no cause to conceive an ill opinion of her good sister of Scotland. Maitland of Lethington informed the Duke of Norfolk that many could imitate Queen Mary's writing.

All writers upon the subject agree upon one thing, that some parts of the letters were forged and that others were garbled. Some say the forgeries prove the iniquity of Mary's enemies but not her innocence. The letters, that is, the alleged copies, would not be accepted as evidence in any British Court of Law today. In modern times the subject has been examined by the following historians: T. F. Henderson¹, Andrew Lang² and R. H. Mahon.³

Dr. M. H. Armstrong Davison in this scholarly and detailed account of the whole subject and its bearing upon the life of Queen Mary offers a new hypothesis. He has devoted twenty-five years to the study of this unfortunate queen. Like all those who bring a judicial mind to the problem and weigh the evidence carefully, he is in favour of the Queen's innocence of Darnley's murder. Professor J. B. Black⁴ has observed that the Casket Letters are untrustworthy and set aside; and that the Buchanan myth and the 'legend of the good Lord James (the Earl of Murray)' must no longer distort the truth concerning a much maligned Queen.

The suggestion in this book is that some of the letters were written by a French mistress of Bothwell whom he brought from France and kept in seclusion at the Hermitage. This affords an explanation of some of the anomalies in the letters, for instance, diction and grammatical mistakes and expressions which are entirely unlike anything the Queen would have written. It is also quite possible, as Dr. Davison points out, that the wife of Maitland, who had been one of the Queen's Maries, copied her husband's forgeries in an imitation of Mary's handwriting. The book is illustrated, well produced and an important contribution to history.

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¹ T. F. HENDERSON, *The Casket Letters and Mary Queen of Scots*, Edinburgh, 1889.

² A. LANG, *The Mystery of Mary Stuart*, London, 1901.

³ R. H. MAHON, *The Indictment of Mary Queen of Scots*, Cambridge University Press, 1923; and *Mary Queen of Scots: A Study of the Lennox Narrative in the University Library at Cambridge*, Cambridge University Press, 1924.

⁴ J. B. BLACK, *The Reign of Elizabeth I*, 2nd ed., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1959.