

THE CASKET LETTERS

A E MacRobert



In May 1568 Mary Queen of Scots was riding in fear for her life to the wilds of Galloway. She crossed the Solway confident that she would receive the help which her cousin Queen Elizabeth had promised her, but instead found herself a prisoner. In the subsequent months a series of conferences was held in England to determine whether she was guilty of being involved in the murder of her husband Lord Darnley. The main evidence lay in the Casket Letters. In recent decades studies of the letters and their background have shown that the traditional version, based on Mary's guilt, must be revised. The following account outlines a realistic revision.

The Casket Letters consisted of eight letters allegedly written to the Earl of Bothwell by Mary, 12 sonnets also allegedly composed by Mary for Bothwell, and two marriage contracts between them. It was claimed that the Casket Letters proved that Mary was in love with Bothwell and they had conspired to murder Darnley so that they could marry. For centuries they have disparaged Mary's reputation and distorted the history of those times.

The Casket Letters cannot be assessed without understanding their background. What was the personality of the young Queen and what problems faced her? It is important to remember that since childhood she had known she was Queen of Scots. For a short time she had been Queen of France, and she was still the Dowager Queen of France.

**Mary, Queen of Scots, circa 1560
After François Clouet**

Reproduced by kind permission of the trustees of The Wallace Collection, London

In addition she had a very strong claim to be next in succession to the English Crown, and many regarded her as the rightful Queen of England. She was well aware of her royal status, and there is no reason to believe that she ever forgot it. Mary was not a blue-stocking but she was intelligent and well-educated, gracious and courageous, but at times with justification she had a sharp tongue. She cannot be dismissed as a flighty and foolish young woman. It is also impossible to find any acceptable evidence to question her sexual morality. The behaviour of a young Queen was bound to be under close scrutiny, and any improper behaviour would have been noticed and relayed to foreign courts. Allegations of improper conduct with her secretary Riccio were unfounded and scurrilous. Likewise the insinuations that she and Bothwell were lovers were based on the sneers of her opponents. There were, however, some flaws in her personality which hindered her role as a 16th century monarch. She was too trusting and a series of men took advantage of the political trust she placed in them. She was also too ready to forgive those who had rebelled against her and insufficiently ruthless in imposing her own authority.

On her return to Scotland she was faced with two main problems. She was a devout Catholic, but Protestant nobles had just gained political and religious control of Scotland. The Protestants assumed that she would try to restore the Catholic religion. Apart from their religious fears, the Protestant nobles were apprehensive that Mary on or before her 25th birthday in December 1567 would issue an Act of Revocation. It was customary for Scottish monarchs at that age to revoke grants of land awarded during the earlier years of their reign. That would affect former church lands now held by nobles, and she had to be curbed before that date. The Queen meanwhile held to her own faith but made no attempt to start a religious war. The other problem was to find a suitable husband. Such a person would have to possess royal blood. Mary chose Darnley who was in both the Stewart

and Tudor lines of succession and was also a Catholic. This was a major blunder. Soon after the marriage she discovered his many faults.

Fears that Mary's marriage to a Catholic would encourage her to suppress the Protestants led to a revolt in 1565. The leader was her half-brother the Earl of Moray who had hitherto guided her government. Moray was able, ambitious and unscrupulous. The rebellion was soon dispersed and Moray fled to England. In 1566 there was another attempt to oust Mary from power.



solve the problem. There is no proof that Mary gave even a signal that Darnley should be murdered. That would have been most inopportune as there was to be a great state occasion later in December for the baptism of Prince James. Furthermore at this time Mary, with some justification, was optimistic that Elizabeth would recognise her as her successor. Any suggestion of involvement in a murder would have ruined her prospects.

At the end of December Darnley went to Glasgow and he was ill there for some weeks. In January 1567 Mary

The Protestant nobles persuaded Darnley to join them by making him jealous of Riccio. This led to the murder of Riccio in circumstances which threatened Mary's life, but she overcame her opponents by persuading Darnley to desert them. By that time there were few nobles whom Mary could trust. One of her most loyal supporters was Bothwell, and she increasingly relied on him.

Darnley brooded over Mary's refusal to give him more authority and he plotted against her, contacting foreign powers. He virtually withdrew from the court, and his attitude to Mary became sour. At the same time the nobles, whom he had deserted, were hostile to him. Mary's anxiety over his plotting led to a meeting with her leading nobles early in December 1566 at Craigmillar Castle near Edinburgh to discuss possible steps to

A 16th century casket of similar size to the casket seized in June 1567

visited him and stayed for about five days before taking him to Edinburgh to recuperate. Darnley decided to stay at the Old Provost's Lodging just inside the town wall and near the Church of St Mary-in-the-Fields, called Kirk o'Field. The house was in a quadrangle of buildings, and both it and the adjacent house belonged to Robert Balfour, a brother of the devious Sir James Balfour. Mary stayed in the house on two nights early in February. The relations between her and Darnley had apparently improved. On the evening of 9 February the Queen and some of the leading nobles again visited Darnley. Towards midnight she returned to the Palace to attend a masque. It is not clear if she intended to return to Kirk o'Field.

A little after 2 am the Old Provost's Lodging was blown up. The scantily-clad bodies of Damley and one of his servants were found nearby. Their bodies were unmarked by the explosion. Some noise had alerted them and they had been strangled while escaping. It is not known who had placed the gunpowder in the vaults of the house but the Balfours were probably involved. It is also not known whether the plot was aimed at Damley or Mary or both.

Possibly there was more than one conspiracy afoot that night. It is improbable that Bothwell was involved. If he were already aiming to marry Mary, he would not have risked her life by placing gunpowder in the house. One of his servants may have discovered the gunpowder and warned him. After escorting Mary back to the Palace he may have returned to investigate. There is, however, evidence that a large number of conspirators surrounded the house presumably to prevent Damley escaping. It is also possible that Damley was involved in some mischief. Several articles were found near his body: a dagger, a chair, a dressing-gown and another garment or quilt. It is highly improbable that he and his servant encumbered themselves while escaping. It is much more likely that the articles had been put there in advance for him.

The Queen was shaken by the event and believed that the plot was aimed at herself. More emphasis should be given to a mysterious warning given in January by the Spanish Ambassador in Paris to the exiled Archbishop of Glasgow that Mary should take heed to herself. The Ambassador did not give any details nor disclose the source of his information. The Archbishop wrote to Mary but his letter apparently did not reach her until after the explosion. The death of Mary would have left the infant Prince as monarch. Whoever subsequently controlled his upbringing would also have secured



Coin struck to commemorate Mary's marriage to Darnley

On 19 April Bothwell held a supper party, probably in his apartments at the Palace. This was attended by eight earls and 11 barons who signed a document recommending that Mary should marry him. On 24 April with a large escort he waylaid the Queen on her return from Stirling to Edinburgh and took her to his castle at Dunbar. After being kept there for some days the Queen had no alternative except to marry him with little delay. After the marriage on 15 May she was desperately unhappy. Bothwell's opponents soon gathered their forces, and Bothwell and Mary withdrew from Edinburgh and went to Borthwick Castle (south-east of Edinburgh). In June Bothwell fled into exile, and Mary agreed to entrust herself to the rebels.

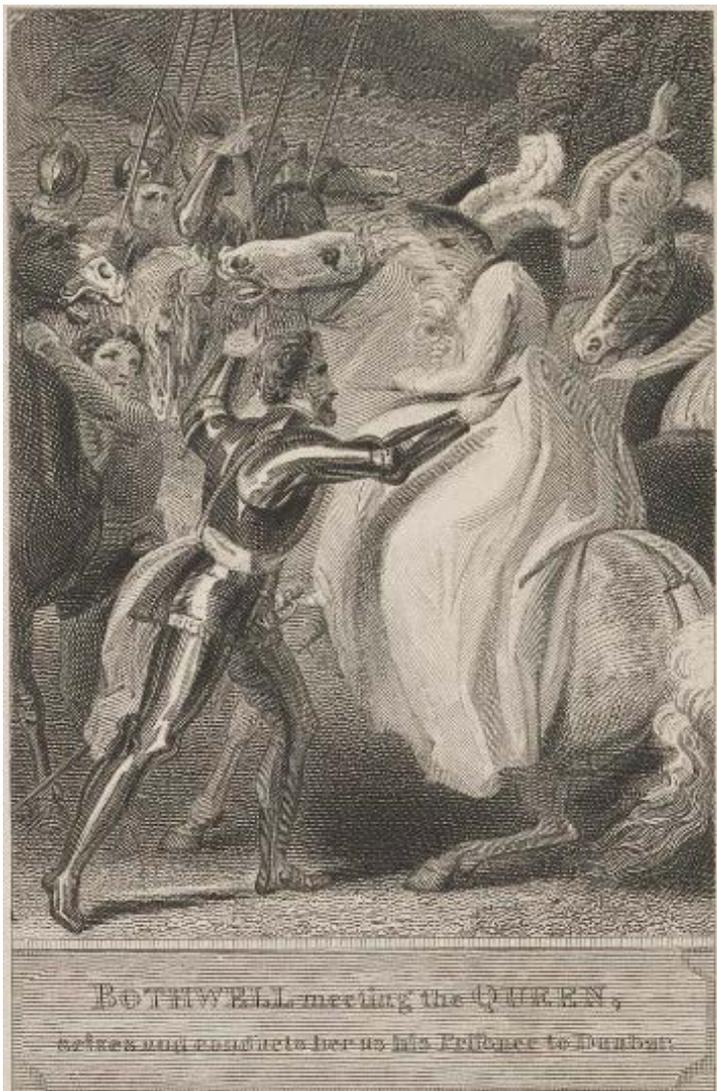
control of Scotland. Either the French or the English government may have been involved. It is probable that this was a third plot devised by Moray and his supporters to get rid of Mary. Subsequently the Queen's councillors, several of whom may have been in the plot, failed to investigate the murder thoroughly.

Mary's opponents were quick to smear her and Bothwell, but no proper evidence was produced against them.

The case against Mary has rested on four pillars: the circumstantial evidence, the depositions of



Mary Queen of Scots and her second husband, Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley; by Robert Dunkarton, published by Samuel Woodburn, after Renold or Renier Elstracke, published 1816
The National Portrait Gallery, London.



Bothwell Meeting the Queen (James Hepburn, 4th Earl of Bothwell; Mary, Queen of Scots) by Robert Hartley Cromek, after Thomas Stothard, 1798
The National Portrait Gallery, London.

of a set of the letters in a Scots translation to London in June 1568 for the consideration of English judges. It is not known which letters were sent, nor by which persons in England the letters were seen apart from Elizabeth's Secretary, Sir William Cecil, nor what happened to the copies. The purpose was to enquire if the case against Mary would be proved, provided the originals agreed with the copies. This suggests that changes could be made to make them more convincing. There is no record of a written reply by Cecil to this astonishing enquiry.

The first of three conferences in England was held at York in October 1568. Commissioners appointed by Elizabeth, Mary and her Scottish foes were present. It is not clear whether all the eight letters were produced, and it is curious that Elizabeth's commissioners sent extracts to London in the Scots translation and not in the original French. In November a second conference began at Westminster. In December Mary's commissioners withdrew, and took no further part in the proceedings in protest against Elizabeth's refusal to

Bothwell's servants, the writings of George Buchanan, and the Casket Letters. The circumstantial evidence can be interpreted in various ways; the depositions smack of manipulation and contain hardly anything to incriminate Mary; and Buchanan's allegations tend to be crude, unrealistic and unfounded. That leaves the Casket Letters.

A casket allegedly containing the letters was seized from one of Bothwell's servants in June 1567 by his foes. The Earl of Morton opened it the next day in the presence of other nobles. The precise contents are not known, but news soon spread that letters incriminating Mary had been found. The Casket Letters were not immediately published. This suggests that Mary's opponents lacked confidence that the contents would be accepted as genuine or sufficiently

Mary's opponents were quick to smear her and Bothwell, but no proper evidence was produced against them.

damning. Even when, in December 1567, the letters were mentioned in an Act presented to the Scottish Parliament, it is not clear which letters, if any, were produced nor to what extent they were examined. It seems, moreover, that there was no specific mention of the sonnets and the marriage contracts until October 1568, and also that the precise number of the letters was not revealed until December 1568. This gave Mary's opponents a very long time to forge or edit the letters. Doubts over their integrity are increased by the despatch

allow Mary to be present. They were consequently unable to challenge all the documents which Moray and his associates produced. These included all the Casket Letters, a Book of Articles probably written by George Buchanan, and depositions from some of Bothwell's followers. A few days later another conference, also without the presence of Mary's commissioners, began at Hampton Court during which the original French versions were compared with other authentic letters written by Mary. The English commissioners,

James Hepburn, 4th Earl of Bothwell.

Artist unknown.

The Scottish National Portrait Gallery

however, lacked the skill of modern experts who could have determined conclusively whether the letters and sonnets were genuine or careful forgeries. In January 1569 Elizabeth allowed Moray and his associates to return north to rule Scotland, while she detained Mary as a prisoner in England, pending Mary's reply to the charges. Mary, however, would not accept that Elizabeth had any right of jurisdiction over her.

Moray and his commissioners took the originals and the casket back to Scotland. From 1572 the Earl of Morton, as Regent, retained custody of them. After his death in 1581 it seems that the letters were held by the Earl of Gowrie. The letters and the casket disappeared after Gowrie was executed in 1584, and they have never been found. A full examination of their authenticity or otherwise is therefore impossible. Historians have to rely on a mixture of the surviving copies made of some of the Casket Letters and what was included in the contemporary published versions which began to appear in 1571-72. A further complication is that there are differences between the Scots and English copies.

The eight letters can be divided into three groups. Letters I and II are called the Short and Long Glasgow Letters respectively. Letters III, IV and V can be summarised as mournful, reproachful and submissive in tone and are very similar to the mood of the sonnets. Letters VI, VII and VIII are called the Stirling Letters and it was claimed that Mary wrote them from Stirling, prior to her abduction.

In recent decades it has been asserted that some of the letters were written by an unidentified French lady who believed that she was married to Bothwell. (She should not be confused with Bothwell's previous 'wife', Anna Thronsen). It has been assumed that Bothwell brought her to Scotland and kept her in seclusion. She was bitterly jealous of the sister of the Earl of Huntly, Lady Jean Gordon, whom



Bothwell married in February 1566. (That marriage was annulled on 7 May 1567). She was probably the mother of William Hepburn, Bothwell's illegitimate son. The evidence for the existence of this lady is very slight, but she emerges from the Casket Letters as a distinct person.

Letter I is the only letter which carries a date and a place of writing: at the foot it is marked 'From Glasgow this Saturday in the morning'. This implied that Mary wrote it during her visit to Darnley. There are inconsistencies in the letter, and its content is obscure. It is possible that Mary wrote much of it, but there is virtually nothing in it which could incriminate her. The content does not prove that it was definitely written during her visit to Glasgow. Alternative dates have been suggested. It might have been written early in December 1566 when Mary was at Craigmillar and Bothwell was at Stirling making arrangements for the Prince's baptism. One flaw is that if Darnley was 'the man in a merry mood', such a comment would have

been unbelievable at that time. The other date could have been in January 1567 when the Queen was in Stirling and apparently Bothwell was contacting Morton on his return from exile. The reference to 'the man' might have been a fond maternal name for the Prince. Either of these dates is more plausible than that shown on the letter.

Letter II is the longest, the most controversial, and potentially the most incriminating. Almost every sentence in it has to be scrutinised most carefully. It is also the most disjointed, and suggestions have been made to alter the sequence. There is no doubt that Mary wrote most of the initial part which relates to her attempt to unravel some of Darnley's plotting against her. It reveals her concern and her determination to bring Darnley back under her control. These are the only passages in all the letters which can clearly be attributed to her, but they do not incriminate her with plotting to murder Darnley. There are several other passages which seem to have been inserted, and they are written in the style of the French lady.

The evolution of this letter may have taken a long time. In August 1567 the Spanish Ambassador in London wrote to Philip II reporting that Moray had related to him details of a letter written by Mary. The letter incriminated Mary deeply in a plot to murder Damley. The details, however, differ on points of major substance from Letter II. The existence of early versions of Letter II is reinforced by the description, probably late in May 1568, by Damley's father, the Earl of Lennox, of a letter sent by Mary from Glasgow to Bothwell. Again the content varies from the final version of Letter II. If either of these versions with their murderous implications had been genuine, it would have been produced as evidence against Mary.

Letter III was supposed to show Mary's affection for Bothwell. The content cannot be linked to any plot against Damley. It is also incredible that the Queen would have described as 'her only wealth' an ornament which the writer was sending to Bothwell. The tone of the letter is

another servant for her! It is incredible that any discerning person has attributed this letter to the Queen.

The three Stirling Letters are intended to show Mary's anxiety over the arrangements for her abduction. Only two of these letters were shown to the English Commissioners at York, and it is not known which were disclosed. Letter VI suggests the authorship of the French lady, as it refers to the Earl of Huntly as being false. There is no reason to suppose that the Queen was suspicious of him. There are also other queries against accepting the details of this letter in the context of the abduction. Letter VII is a complete contrast in style to Letters VI and VIII. It is written in a much calmer mood. If written by the Queen, it is astonishing that the letter showed that she was not expecting an early marriage to Bothwell. The only rational explanation of the abduction would have been a possible pregnancy and a very early marriage to conceal her predicament, but there is no proof of a pregnancy before the abduction.

is undated) clearly stated that it had been written after Damley's death, but that did not deter Moray and his associates from declaring in December 1568 to the English commissioners that it had been written by Mary before Damley's death. The second was dated 5 April. It referred to the intended divorce between Bothwell and Lady Jean. It is not known why the second contract was needed. Possibly these contracts reflect the pressure which Bothwell was putting on Mary at Dunbar. If Mary had signed them previously, there would certainly have been no need for an abduction.

There have been various conflicting views on the style and authorship of the sonnets. They must, however, be studied on the basis of their historical content. There are jealous references to Bothwell's wife, Lady Jean Gordon, and even a jibe about her discarded lover. The sonnets must be dated to 1566 or early 1567. Their whole tone is also similar to the letters attributed to the French lady. Some lines cannot

In recent decades it has been asserted that some of the letters were written by an unidentified French lady who believed that she was married to Bothwell.

mournful. There are references to her cruel lot, his little remembrance and broken promises. It is inconceivable that Bothwell would have treated the Queen in such a way before she was married to him, but very credible that he treated the French lady in such a way. It was claimed that Letter IV was written by the Queen when Darnley was at Kirk o'Field and that it referred to a quarrel between him and Mary's half-brother, Lord Robert. The assertion was that Mary incited them to quarrel in the hope that a duel would lead to Darnley's death. Such an interpretation would require imagination. The authorship of Letter IV should be attributed to the French lady with forged additions. There is some evidence that these might be the work of Lethington, Mary's Secretary. Letter V is obviously from the French lady. The author asked Bothwell to find

As in Letter IV there is internal evidence that Lethington may have forged this letter. Letter VIII is a marked contrast to Letter VI as the author now expected that Huntly would play the part of an honest man. It is unlikely that the French lady wrote the bulk of this letter, and it also contains discrepancies which reduce its acceptance as genuine. It has been suggested that it was written by Mary when she was at Borthwick in June 1567 and Bothwell was away recruiting his supporters, but the references to various nobles cannot be related to the situation at Borthwick. When considering the Stirling Letters it should be appreciated that the rebel lords claimed for many weeks that Bothwell had taken the Queen as a captive to Dunbar.

The copies of the two Marriage Contracts showed Mary's signature on them but it cannot be certain that she herself signed them. The first (which

possibly have been written by the Queen. There is nothing relating to the murder of Damley. It is very unlikely that any of Mary's enemies would have deliberately written so many sonnets just to incriminate her.

There are many difficulties in accepting that the Casket Letters proved Mary's guilt. Attention should, in future, be focused on their other aspects. The genuine parts of Letter II show Mary's deep concern over Damley's plotting. The letters also reveal the unscrupulous conduct of Moray and his associates including Morton and Lethington; the lack of scrutiny by the English commissioners, and the willingness of Elizabeth and Sir William Cecil to accept the letters at their face value. The Casket Letters should also be studied to learn more about Bothwell. They highlight his deplorable treatment of the French lady, Lady Jean and the Queen. It must be asked why he kept the correspondence from the French lady and whether he

revealed her existence to Mary. It should also be asked why he apparently kept together letters from the Queen and the French lady in a casket which might have been stolen.

Across the centuries there has been the failure of many historians and others to analyse the letters carefully, although nearly all the evidence to reject them has been available since their publication. In the past century, however, there have been important studies especially by R H Mahon, Armstrong Davison, Antonia Fraser and Gordon Donaldson, clarifying certain points. There has nevertheless been a reluctance to discard the traditional version. The propaganda against Mary has been very difficult to eradicate. The legacy of Moray, Lethington and Buchanan has been remarkably successful.

The rejection of the Casket Letters as acceptable evidence against Mary means that the history of the years 1566-68 has to be drastically revised. Her complicity in the murder of Damley has to be rejected. There is no longer any reputable evidence that she was in love with Bothwell. Her participation in the planning of her abduction falls apart. She was forced into marriage by Bothwell.

The dramatic events are in line with earlier attempts by Moray and his supporters to oust her.

In future the traditional account of these events should be replaced by placing greater emphasis on Mary's own version. This is contained mainly in her letter of 20 January 1567 to the Archbishop of Glasgow stating her concern about Damley's plans; her Instructions in May 1567, in which she was scathing about Bothwell's conduct towards her, for the Bishop of Dunblane to present to the French court; the Instructions given to her commissioners at York repudiating the letters; and in the conversations with her secretary, Claude Nau, who was in her service between 1575 and 1586. Although Mary never issued a detailed rebuttal of the letters, she vehemently denied the imputations that they were genuine and that she had been involved in any way in the murder of Damley. She also asserted that there were several men and women in Scotland who could counterfeit her handwriting.

There is still uncertainty over some aspects of these events, especially those at Kirk o'Field, but many of the myths and errors which have persisted must be cleared away. A sound and substantial measure of historical revision can now be substituted for them.

FURTHER READING

I B Cowan, *The Enigma of Mary Stuart* (Victor Gollancz Ltd, London, 1971).

M H Armstrong Davison, *The Casket Letters* (Vision Press Ltd, London, 1965).

G Donaldson, *The First Trial of Mary Queen of Scots* (B T Batsford Ltd, London, 1969).

A Fraser, *Mary Queen of Scots* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd, London, 1969).

The Tyrannous Reign of Mary Stewart, ed W A Gatherer (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1958) – part of Buchanan's History.

A E MacRobert, *Mary Queen of Scots and the Casket Letters* (I B Tauris & Co Ltd, London and New York, 2002). This book includes copies of all the Casket Letters.

R H Mahon, *The Tragedy of Kirk o'Field* (Cambridge University Press, 1930).

A E MacRobert was Senior Education Officer in the Dunbarton Division of Strathclyde before he retired. He has subsequently specialized in analysing contemporary documents relating to Mary Queen of Scots.

