

# Mary Queen of Scots and the Babington Plot

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## Mary Queen of Scots:

Mary Stewart was the great-granddaughter of Henry VII of England. Her grandmother, Margaret Tudor married James IV of Scotland. Mary became Queen of Scots when she was only 9 months old in 1543. In order to protect her from the “rough wooing” of Henry VIII for his son Edward, the Scots decided on a marriage to the French dauphin, Francis. Mary was sent to live in France when she was six years old and grew up in the opulent French court. Later when Mary ascended the French throne with her husband, Mary also claimed the English throne. She was supported by the English Catholic faction who did not accept King Henry VIII’s second marriage to Anne Boleyn. The Catholic faction considered Elizabeth I an illegitimate bastard and thereby incapable of inheriting the English throne.

Francis died not long after their marriage, and Mary returned to Scotland to reign as Queen. Her court in Scotland was a far cry from the elegant French court. Mary fell in love with her dashing cousin, Lord Darnley, and rushed into marriage. Darnley turned out to be both vain and cruel, and Mary was implicated in the plot to murder her inconvenient husband. Worse, Mary was later kidnapped by Darnley’s alleged murderer, the Earl of Bothwell. The Scots were further scandalized when Mary married the Earl of Bothwell.

After her disastrous marriages, Mary was forced to abdicate to her son, James VI (later James I of England). Mary was imprisoned at Loch Leven, but Mary managed to escape and raise a small army. The army was easily defeated by the Scots supporting James VI. Mary ran to England to accept refuge from her cousin, Elizabeth I. This turned out to be an ever more confining imprisonment.

Though Mary was implicated in a number of rebellion attempts to depose Elizabeth and reign in her stead, there was never direct evidence of her involvement in the conspiracies. Without direct evidence, Elizabeth refused to execute her cousin, a fellow queen.

## The Babington Plot:

In March of 1586, a plot was hatched to assassinate Queen Elizabeth, free Mary Queen of Scots from imprisonment, incite the Catholics to rebel and place Mary on the English throne. Anthony Babington and six co-conspirators devised scheme which became known as the Babington plot. The plotters decided they could not proceed until they had Mary’s approval and cooperation.

Fortuitously it seemed, a man named Gilbert Gifford literally showed up on Babington’s doorstep. Gifford was a repatriated Catholic who had been working as a messenger for

Mary. With the help of a local brewer, messages were concealed in a beer barrel to keep Mary's correspondence from her warden. Babington and Mary took care to encrypt their correspondence. Both felt comfortable enough with the security of their encryption, they both wrote very damning evidence they would have never written if the messages had been in the clear.

Unbeknownst to Mary and Babington, Gifford was actually a double agent for Sir Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth I's spymaster. Gifford took all correspondence to and from Mary to Walsingham to be copied and decrypted. Walsingham had several cryptanalysts in his employ, and decrypting the letters were relatively easy. After Mary had written her approval to Babington's scheme, Walsingham tasked one of his master forgers to include a postscript asking for the names of the other conspirators. Babington, still believing the communications were secure, happily supplied the information. Walsingham had enough information to try not only the conspirators, but also Mary Queen of Scots for treason. If she or Babington had used a more secure technique, the messages would have been mere gibberish.<sup>1</sup>

Mary was successfully tried and convicted by an English court for treason. Mary was beheaded on February 8, 1587. She is interred in Westminster Abbey/

A copy of the encrypted postscript can be seen at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/spies/ciphers/mary/ma1.htm> from the Public Records in London.

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<sup>1</sup> Singh, S., 1999.

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