Mary, Queen of Scots and the Livingstons of Callendar

Ian Scott

On four days in October 1963, over seventeen hundred miscellaneous items were sold at a public auction in Callendar House. Old master paintings and oriental rugs, silverware, porcelain and pewter, furniture of all shapes, sizes and periods and a host of smaller objects accumulated during nearly two centuries of Forbes ownership went under the hammer. On day four, one lot went cheaply and largely unremarked. It was a collection of several dozen engravings, prints and drawings linked in some way to the life and times of Mary Queen of Scots. Based on famous paintings and sculptures, the collection included many portraits of the Queen from childhood to middle age, as well as those most closely associated with her life – her half brother James Stewart, Earl of Moray, her husbands Francis, Darnley and Bothwell, her old adversary John Knox and her cousin Elizabeth of England. Many were in heavy gilt frames with a crown at the top and an explanatory legend below. The collection fetched a few pounds only and the same year the house passed into the ownership of Falkirk Town Council and lay empty for almost thirty years.

The Mary Queen of Scots collection was a last tangible link with Callendar House's most famous visitor and as such was proudly displayed to Victorian and Edwardian visitors who were shown 'Queen Mary's room' in the north west corner of the present mansion – the oldest part of the building (Gillespie R, 1868, p165; Newcastle Antiquaries, 1902 p215) As late as 1927 a Callendar House visitor's guide describes the major attraction:

> *Of all the rooms in the house, the sentiment and interest of visitors inevitably turn to a few rooms …. for these rooms are associated with the memory of Mary, Queen of Scots and we can almost imagine that we sense her presence as we stand in them. Two of them open into each other and above the doorway is an inscription which says – "Queen Mary of Scots and her ladies occupied these rooms and those above them, August 12th, 1562; July 1st, 1565; January 13th, 1567, January 24th, 1567; and January 29th, 1567" The arras is specially designed to concentrate the sentiment, with the Scottish lion, the thistle and the initial letter M. The illuminating pendants are in the form of a Scottish crown surmounted by a thistle decoration, and the beds and furniture are Jacobean. One of the rooms faces north and the other south, the latter having a recess in the turret in which are collected a number of objects of dressing room requirements of the most beautiful character. It is uncertain which of the two rooms was actually used by the Queen. That on the south has a painting of the Queen over the fireplace, a copy of one by Zuccharo, with an inscription beneath it in*

> *old French, which runs" Ayez memoire de l'ame et de l'honneur de celle qui a este votre royne." The rooms above to which the inscription refers are not visible from the north, but appear as dormers on the south front.*

The fascination is understandable. No figure in Scottish history has attracted such attention, and over the centuries literally hundreds of books have examined almost every conceivable aspect of Mary's life and times. The one area which has received less than its fair share of attention is the crucial relationship between the Queen and the handful of special families – those Antonia Fraser has called 'the magic inner circle of families' – which supported and sustained her before, during and long after the end of her short and turbulent personal rule. Among the members of this circle the Livingstons stand out for their unswerving loyalty and devotion through extraordinary times and a full understanding of the Queen and her life is not really possible without an analysis of this most special of relationships. This article is an attempt to redress the balance.

From the moment in 1436 when Alexander Livingston of Callendar secured possession of the young King James II and became in due course *magnus camerarius* or Great Chamberlain of Scotland, the Livingstons of Callendar made a spectacular rise to the centre of power in Scottish affairs (McGladdery, p16). With the Douglases, Crichtons, Erskines, Gordons and Hamiltons, the Livingstons made up that formidable band of aristocratic families who retained their grip on power by a willingness to engage in violent conflict with, or firm support for, each other or the Stewart Kings by turns. (Wormald, p39).

Alexander, the fifth Lord Livingston was very close to King James V and accompanied him to France in 1537 to celebrate his brief marriage to the Princess Magdalene. When the King died in 1542 – a broken hearted man whose armies had been roundly defeated by the English at Solway Moss – the care of his infant daughter, Mary, then a few months old, was entrusted to eight nobles, one of whom was Sir Alexander Livingston. (Livingston, E. p34) King Henry VIII of England, like his predecessors before him, feared the constant threat from his northern neighbour and now hoped to win the Scottish crown for his infant son, Edward by arranging a marriage between him and the baby Queen of Scots. The Earl of Arran, acting a Regent of Scotland, favoured such an arrangement and signed the Greenwich Treaty consenting to the marriage. But a powerful group of Scottish nobles and churchmen led by the Earl of Moray and Cardinal Beaton and including Lord Alexander Livingston were bitterly opposed and on 4th September 1543 at Callendar House the parties were reconciled and joined in a rejection of Henry's proposal. (McLuckie, part iii, p12) From then on Livingston along with Lord Erskine was entrusted with the care of the young Queen lest she fall into the hands of the enemy. Thus the Privy Council Register of 5th June 1546 records that both were exempted from military service because:

> *the Lordis Erskine and Levingstoun Lordis chosin to be of Secret Counsel …. of the keeping of our Soverane Ladis person*

(Livingston, E. p35)

Apart from the honour and the power which flowed from this charge, we are told that the guardians also received £80 per month from November 1565 until February 1548! In London, King Henry was of course far from happy with the outcome and his armies invaded Scotland seeking revenge for the insult given. At Pinkie on 10 September 1547, thousands of Scots fell in battle, among them Lord Livingston's son and heir John, Master of Livingston who had led a party of vassals from Falkirk in his father's name (ibid p35). The threat to the Queen was increased and after a period at the priory of Inchmahome she sailed for France in August 1548 to begin a thirteen year period away from her homeland. Lord Livingston travelled with her and as companions Mary had with her four daughters of noble families – Mary Fleming, Mary Seton, Mary Beaton and Mary Livingston of Callendar, daughter of her guardian. These four Maries were about the same age as the Queen and were to remain with her for much of her troubled life.

Mary, Queen of Scots

Like the historians, the writers of ballads, never over concerned about accuracy, have served the Livingston memory badly for only Seton and Beaton made it into the famous song. Who the 'Mary Carmichael' or the 'Mary Hamilton' of the song's title were, no one is certain but the various theories are examined in the Appendix to this article.

The Livingston Grave Slab

Lord Alexander, whom we are told was extremely sick on the long sail to France (Fraser, A. p37) was by this time a widower for the second time. He married a young French woman during his time with the young Queen and died in France sometime around 1550 (Livingston, E. p38). His part in this story is commemorated by a grave slab from the old Livingston aisle in Falkirk Old Parish Church which bears an incomplete and damaged inscription:

ALE(xander) ADOLESCENTIAM PROVECTAM AE
TATEMINAVLA REGUM GALLIAE …….

which seems to confirm his role as the protector of the young Queen in France. The slab also bears the Livingston coat of arms along with the device of his second wife, Lady Agnes Douglas (Lawson, p27). On his death, the title of Lord Callendar passed to his second son, Lord William who remained in Scotland and was to play a significant part in bringing Mary Queen of Scots back to her Kingdom in 1561.

The Queen's thirteen year sojourn in France was a period of great moment for both France and Scotland, Stewart and Livingston alike. Mary married Dauphin Francis, who became King in 1560 but died after just a few months on the throne. Mary's mother, Mary of Guise came to Scotland to act as Regent in her daughter's name but was unable to resist the advance of the religious Reformation among the Scots nobility. The new Lord of Callendar was an enthusiastic supporter of the change, becoming one of the Lords of the Congregation, effectively the regents of the Kingdom but his new found Protestantism did not diminish one whit his devotion to the young Catholic Queen. Indeed he was one of a group of nobles who journeyed to France in 1561 dressed in *'dule weid'* to invite Mary, then still in mourning for her husband, to return to Scotland, which she did the following August (Livingston, E. p38).

There followed the best known and most often recounted period in the life of the Queen – seven tumultuous years of personal rule in which she married twice, gave birth to a son and heir, suffered imprisonment, endured defeat on the battlefield and fled to what was to be a long English exile ended only by her execution in 1587. Throughout this period the Livingstons of Callendar were among her closest personal friends and allies. Lord William's wife Agnes was the Queen's cousin and sister of Mary Fleming, one of the four Maries and from the Queen's arrival in Scotland in 1561 it was clear that Callendar House, situated as it is on the road from the Royal Palaces in Edinburgh and Linlithgow to the Castle of Stirling, would be a fairly regular port of call.

But it was the court of Holyrood and not Callander House that witnessed the magnificently celebrated marriage of Mary Livingston to John, son of Robert Semphill on Shrove Tuesday, 6th March 1565, an event which caused such a stir among contemporaries. Mary was the first of the four to take a husband and the Queen seemed determined to make it a very special affair. She showered the couple with gifts like the crown lands of Auchtermuchty and the island of Little Cumbrae, a wedding dress for the bride and a number of other presents including *'ane bed of scarlet velvet bordered with broderie of blak velvot'* (Inventaries p31). John Knox, ever ready to damn the fripperies of the Queen and her catholic ladies of the court, wrote in his History that

"It was weill knawin that schame haistit marriage betwixt John Semphill, callit the Danser, and Marie Levingstoune, surnameit the Lustie" (Knox, J. p301).

One writer has argued that Knox picked up this slur from a scurrilous ballad circulating in Edinburgh's low society though such verses, if they ever existed, have not survived (Anderson, J. viii, p6). Others affirm that Mary Livingston's nickname of 'lusty' came from the enthusiasm with which she entered into the dance rather than any particular moral weakness on her part! (Fraser, A. p188) The evidence certainly does not support Knox. Not one other contemporary report of the event and there were many ambassadorial accounts sent to Europe's rulers, contains a hint of any

scandal but instead concentrate on the good fortune of 'this happy Englishman that shall marry Mary Liveston and the implication that, having started to marry off her four maries, the Queen herself would soon do likewise (Livingston, E. p40).

A few months after the Livingston wedding, on 1st July 1565, the Queen was in Callendar House for the baptism of one of Lord Livingston's seven children which followed the protestant form which Mary found abhorrent. Nonetheless she stayed to hear the sermon preached, we are told, by Knox himself because, as she told her host, she wished "to show him the favour that she had not done to any other before" (Livingston, E. p4). Her determination to be present can be gauged by the risks she faced to reach Falkirk from Perth for by this time her engagement to her Catholic cousin Henry Stewart, Lord Darnley, had incensed a section of the nobility who sought to waylay the Queen and, presumably, force her to change her mind (Fleming, J.S. p299). One colourful account is worth quoting in full, though it may tell us more about the romantic inclinations of the author Chalmers than of the event itself!

> *On the 30th June, 1565, Mary slept at Perth and here she received intelligence that the conspirators had resolved to intercept her on the following day, as she rode towards Callendar, where she had promised to assist at the baptism of Lord Livingstone's son. (sic) Murray watched her at Lochleven: Rothes with a body of armed men, was posted at the Parrot Well and Arran lay at Kinneil House, in case she might pass in that direction. She made a spirited resolution and, having previously ordered the Earl of Athol and Lord Ruthven to attend her, she rode off at five in the morning of 1st July, attended by three ladies and three hundred horsemen. They swept past Lochleven ere Murray was aware, crossed the Forth at Queensferry and, at ten on a clear summer morn, the barbican gates of Callendar were thrown wide to admit the gallant array of the fair Queen of Scotland. A cluster of ladies surrounded Mary and a long hedge of the glittering spears and nodding plumes of the three hundred helmed horsemen, defiled beneath the arch into the flowery haughs of Callendar.*
> (quoted by McLuckie, J.R., Part 3, p13)

She remained in Falkirk for several days on this occasion, avoiding the clutches of her pursuers for the time being. Within a month she had married Darnley and thus began the downward acceleration of her fortunes which ended with her estrangement, abdication and exile. On the 9th March 1566 Lord Livingston was one of the Lords in attendance of the Queen at Holyrood House when her Italian secretary and confidante, David Riccio, was brutally murdered by associates of Darnley; indeed there is some suggestion that his own life was threatened and with Huntly, Bothwell, Fleming and others he was forced to flee from the Palace to a place of refuge (Livingston, E. p42). Three months later, as the Queen prepared to give birth to the future James VI in Edinburgh Castle, Mary Livingston helped her draw up a list of her possessions which has survived in *"Les Inventaires de la Royne Descosse Douairiere de France"*. It includes numerous references to the Livingston family with details of gifts to Lady Agnes, wife of Lord William and to his sisters Mary and Magdalen, who was herself one of the Queen's maids of honour after her sister's marriage and who is always referred to as '*Leviston la jeusne'* – the younger,

Magdalen Livingston

to distinguish her from her sister *'Leviston lesnee'*. On the occasion already mentioned, Magdalen was to have received: *'Une aultre montre garny de dourze rubiz et deux grandes saffiz avec une perle pandant au bout'.* (Another watch decorated with twelve rubies and two big sapphires with a pendant pearl at the end). When the same lady married Arthur Erskine of Blackgrange, himself a favourite royal equerry, she was presented with, among other things: *'Une vasquine de toile d'or cramosysye brodee d'une petite frange d'or'* (Inventaires, p69)

In January 1566, Lord and Lady Livingston were invited to the baptism of the baby Prince at Stirling's Kirk of the Holy Rude and to the celebratory pageant (Fleming, J.S. p299) – some accounts suggest that Lord William took part in the Catholic service, acting as *'servar'*, while others place him with the other protestant Lords outside the door of the Kirk (Livingston, E. p43). During that same month, January 1567, Mary stayed three separate nights at Callendar House – the 13th when passing from Stirling to Edinburgh with her infant son, the 24th when *en route* to visit the smallpox ridden Darnley in Glasgow and on the 27th when both she and her husband rested for a night during their return journey to Edinburgh (ibid p.43). Two weeks later, the weak and increasingly unstable Darnley, more or less estranged from the Queen since the murder of Riccio, was himself brutally murdered in the Kirk o'Field near Edinburgh. Though James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell, was thought by many to be the principal instigator of the crime, other close associates of the Queen, including Lord William, were thought by some to have been closely involved (Calderwood, D. quoted by Lee p403).

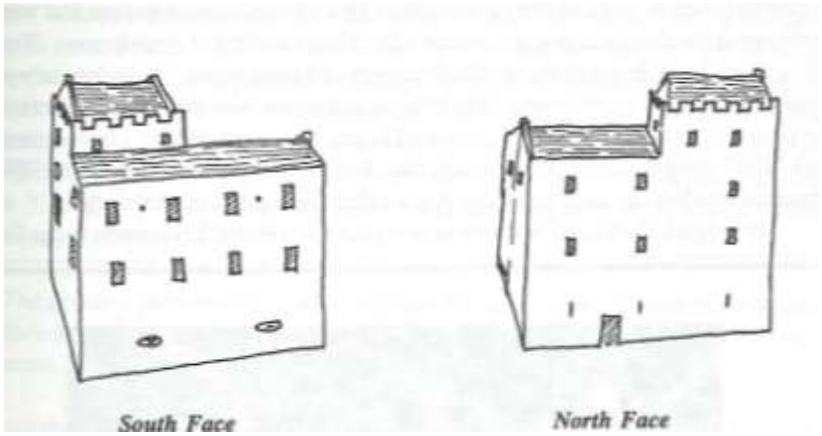
Several years later, a number of letters said to have been written by Mary to Bothwell during Darnley's illness, were brought forward by the Queen's Scottish enemies as proof of her complicity in the death of Darnley. These eight Casket Letters are among the most celebrated missives in the history of the written word and have b y themselves generated thousands of words of argument and analysis. Whether we accept the generally received view that they were probably forgeries (Fraser, A. p 385-408) or agree that they may well be genuine (Wormald, j. p 175-178) is not important here. The fact that Lord William Livingston is presented in one of the letters as being very close to the Queen and was party to her most personal secrets underlines the importance of his role at this time, whether placed there by an informed forger or by the Queen herself. The actual reference is both interesting and amusing and has Lord Livingston.

> *joking with the Queen one night at supper during her stay in Glasgow, on her supposed guilty intimacy with Bothwell, even proposing to Lady Reres, in the Queen's hearing, to drink his health; and that after supper, whilst Mary leant on him for support as she stood warming herself before the fire, he is represented as conversing with her in the*

most familiar manner about her paramour and that on the Queen asking him who the person he is alluding to, Livingston answers by nudging her Majesty in the ribs!
(Livingston, E. p43)

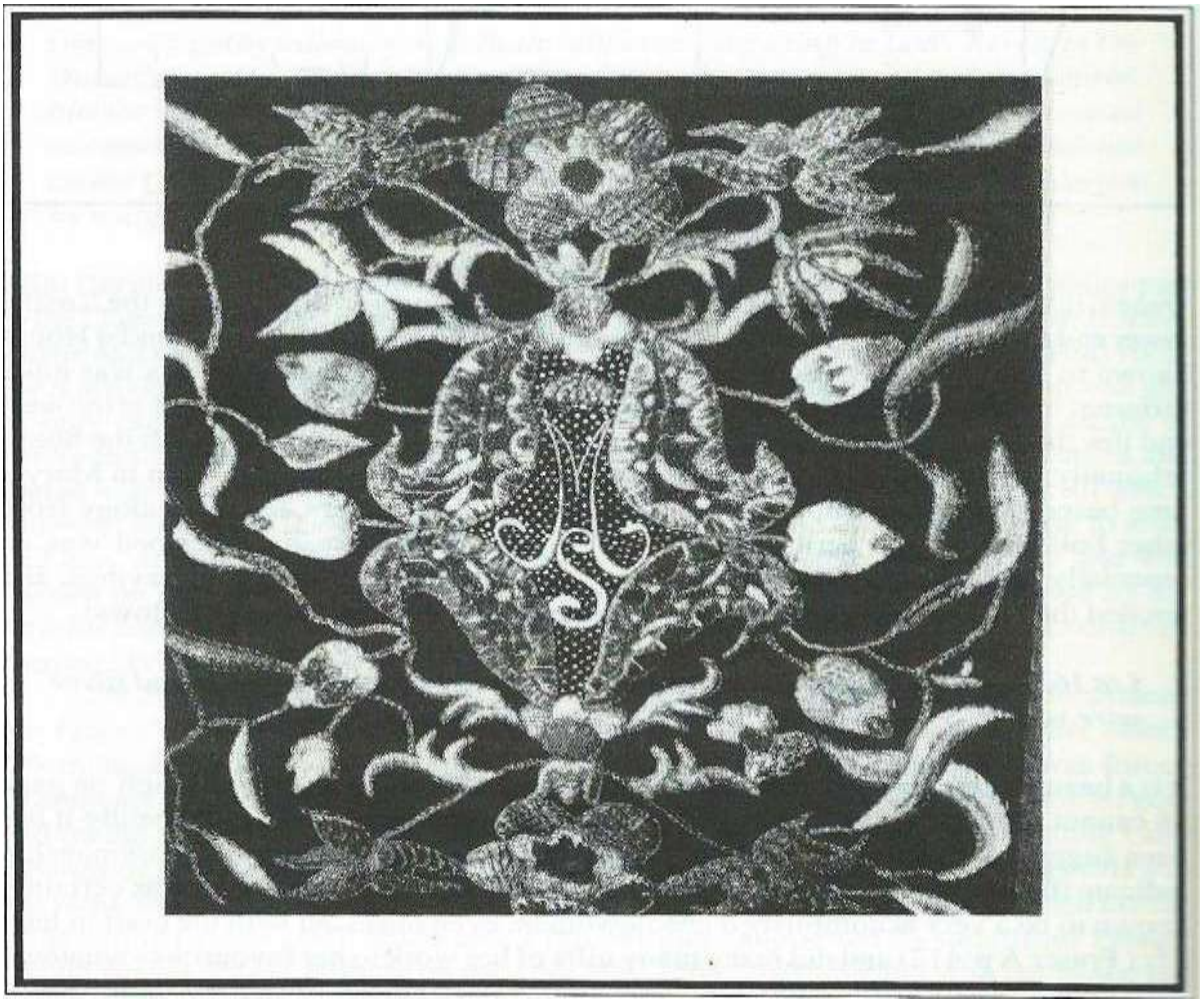
With Darnley gone, Bothwell now moved to the centre of the stage to play a major part in the Queen's final six months of power. On 24th April, he carried her off to Dunbar Castle and she agreed to marry him. On 15th May at four in the morn (Livingston, E. ing in Holyrood, the marriage was celebrated following protestant forms and Lord Livingston was one of only eight noblemen present (Livingston, E. p44) His presence here seems to contradict the view that Mary's liaison with Bothwell had led to an estrangement and that as a consequence he did not take part in the so called battle of Carberry Hill which followed soon after. (Lee, S. p403) The Lords who opposed the marriage took to arms and they defeated Mary's adherents, with hardly a shot fired. Mary, we are told, was hurried on foot through the streets of Edinburgh in her nightgown, supported by her faithful companions, Mary Livingston and Mary Seton. She was sent to Lochleven Castle (Livingston, E. p44).

On 29th June in Dumbarton, Lord Livingston and other nobles denounced the Queen's imprisonment and called on all people to take up arms on her behalf (Fleming, J.S. p299). But the support proved insufficient and the Queen was forced to abdicate the throne in favour of her infant son. The Earl of Moray became Regent and on the 10th September he met a deputation of Mary's adherents, including Lord Livingston, to discuss her release. Again they were un successful in their appeals and she remained confined until her escape in May the following year. The 'Marian Lords' rallied to her cause once again and Lord William, supported by men from Falkirk, fought beside her at Langside on the 13th May 1568. He remained with her as she left the country for exile in England shortly after her defeat and was joined by Lady Livingston shortly afterwards (Livingston, E. p45). In Scotland the enemies of the Queen, in the name of King James VI, ordered Lord Livingston to deliver up the 'castle, tower and fortalice of the Calendar' (Fleming, J.S. p299). Of course the Callendar House known to Mary, Queen of Scots and witness to many of these great events was quite different from the building we know today. But behind the Victorian façade at the west end lies the plain 'castle', not much bigger than the square tower with which the house originally began life. The drawing shows the house as it might have been in Mary's time, based on information available from the present structure and by analogy from other buildings of the period. In one of the apartments already described was an especially fascinating article which was sold at the same time as the engravings and fetched the princely sum of £13! It was described in the Catalogue as follows:



An Impression of Callendar House around 1560 (Geoff Bailey)

Lot 1632 *Old velvet panel embroidered flowers in coloured threads and silver wire with M S and jewelled crown …….. in carved oak fumed stand.*



The Callendar House Embroidery

It is a beautiful example of needlework which the black and white photograph cannot reproduce. It is now in private hands in Bridge of Weir and recently it has been suggested that it may be of 16th Century origin and the style and workmanship indicate that it might even be from the hand of the Queen herself. She was certainly known to be a very accomplished needlewoman, even obsessed with the craft in later life (Fraser, A. p412) and did make many gifts of her work to her favourites – whatever the outcome of a forthcoming examination by experts, it remains a beautiful thing in itself and a tangible reminder of the link between the House and its most famous visitor. Certainly worth the £13 investment!

Of course the dedication of the Livingstons to the Queen's cause did not end with her departure to confinement in a succession of English castles and great houses. Both Sir William and his wife spent much of their energy and time, especially in the early years, either by her side or on missions, both official and secret, aimed at securing her release and return to power. It is a period covered in great detail by Edwin Livingston in his book "The Livingstons of Callendar and their

principal Cadets" published in 1920 and interested readers are referred there for a fuller treatment of the story.

In August 1568 Lord William sent his servant George Livingston to the Earl of Sussex with a written explanation of the motives which had led the Lords of the Queens party to resort to arms in her defence (Lee, S. p404) and two months later he was one of seven commissioners appointed by Mary to present her case at a number of hearings in York and London. They were unsuccessful in securing her release and restoration to the throne and in February 1569 he is once again with the Queen, this time in Tutbury Castle in Staffordshire, where she had been moved after spells in Carlisle and Bolton. Here Nicholas White visited the Queen and later reported to Queen Elizabeth's Secretary:

> *The greatest personadge in house abowte hir is the Lord of Levenston and the lady his wife, which is a fayre gentilwoman; and it was told me both Protestants.*
> (Livingston, E. p46)

June of the following year brought Lord Livingston back to Scotland on a mission from Mary:

> *We have directed our trustie cousinge, my Lord Levingstoun, to you of our nobility and obedient subiectes, sufficientlie instructed, whom we pray you credit*.
> (ibid. p47)

In an effort to revive her fading fortunes, Mary sent three Commissioners to meet Elizabeth in London in November 1570 – the Bishops of Ross and Galloway and Lord William Livingston – but the outcome was the same. In the meantime Lady Livingston, despite poor health, had acted as a secret courier carrying letters to Mary's adherents in Scotland. Around 1572, while her husband was in France on urgent business for the Queen, she returned to Falkirk where she was allowed to use her Callendar House home, on condition that it should not be used as a refuge for 'rebels and declared traitors'. Her brothers-in-law Thomas Livingstone of Haining and Sir Alexander Bruce of Airth acted as sureties to the sum of £10,000 Scots. Despite this undertaking, the secret work continued and the Lady Agnes soon found herself confined in Dalkeith Castle where we are told that:

> *"although things were so evident that she could not deny them, she would confess nothing except by tears and silence"*
> (ibid p50)

The final collapse of Mary's cause in Scotland came with the capitulation of the garrison of Edinburgh Castle in May 1573 and only after this was Lord Livingston, now back from his French mission, allowed to return from London to his home (ibid p52). In June he accepted the inevitable and acknowledged James VI as King. He lived to see his son Alexander, Master of Livingston become a close confidante of the young King. His involvement with James and the infamous Esme Stuart, Duke of Lennox is another story of great importance in the subsequent history of Falkirk but it is a story for another occasion (Bingham, Cp 173-174)

Lord William and his wife also lived to see the death of their Queen in February 1587 though they were not present with her at the end. He died towards the end of 1592 and she probably survived him for only a short time. They may be represented by one of the two pairs of effigies in Falkirk Old Parish Church which lay for many years in the south aisle of the church (McLuckie, J.R. Part iii, p2)

The Livingston Effigies - Falkirk Old Parish Church

Recent Photograph and Fleming's 1902 Drawing

Historians seeking to explain the tumultuous events of Mary's brief personal rule have rightly concentrated on the inevitable clash between a devoutly Catholic Queen and her newly converted and sometimes fanatically Protestant Lords. Yet throughout her reign many of her most devoted supporters were Protestants who found no apparent difficulty in serving her cause despite the consequences which followed for many. Lord William Livingston's religious conviction does not seem to have been in doubt during Mary's period in Scotland and indeed it is said that in February 1566 he refused, along with other Lords, to attend Mass with the Queen and Darnley, receiving some 'evil words' from the latter as reward (Fraser, A. p245) Later there was a suspicion, possibly encouraged by the King's party, that Livingston had reverted to Catholicism and Calderwood in his History quotes Robert Bruce of Kinnaird, Larbert, the great Protestant Minister, as saying in 1589 that certain sums of money sent from Spain were 'in the principal house of my Lord Livingston, a very Catholic Lord'. A search failed to discover the hoard and soon after Lord William was appointed a member of a Commission for enforcing the laws against Jesuit priests (Lee, S. p404)

The balance of the evidence supports the standard view of Livingston as a Stewart loyalist, a confirmed Protestant supporting a Queen who did not seem intent on forcing her religion on her subjects but rather appeared comfortable with the idea that she could continue her own form of worship in private and they theirs. It was a remarkably modern approach to kingship and one completely foreign to 16th Century Europe. It was also, as Jenny Wormald contends, the essence of Mary's failure as a ruler, for in her time the task of a King or Queen was to enforce their wishes on subjects no matter how powerful or determined they might prove to be (Wormald, J.). Failure or not, the religious tolerance exemplified by the Queen and her Livingston adherents during these brief years seemed to signal new possibilities for the future governance of the realm. It was an idea before its time and that time would not come in Scotland for nearly three hundred years, long after the institution of monarchy had ceased to play a significant part in the political, religious or social life of the nation.

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Appendix : The Story of Mary Hamilton

Scotland has a very rich ballad tradition – perhaps the finest in Europe – yet most of the songs which have survived are known to only a handful of enthusiasts. Mary Hamilton is an exception – most Scots are familiar with its very singable air and with at least one verse,

"Yestreen the Queen had four Maries
Tonight she'll hae but three.
There was Marie Seton and Marie Beaton,
And Marie Carmichael and me".

Like so many of the ballads, the origins of this one are obscure. It seems to refer to the court of Mary, Queen of Scots yet Mary Hamilton and Mary Carmichael are not recorded as part of the Scottish scene in the mid 16th Century. Livingston in his book on the family of Callendar quotes the author of a popular life of Mary Queen of Scots, as saying that the ballad was founded on the execution of a French servant maid of the Queen's in December 1563, for having "destroyed a new born infant". Other sources have suggested that the Queen's apothecary was the father of the child and later versions imply that the King (Darnley) may have been involved, though the dates are obviously not correct. The current view is that these elements have become entwined with the story of a Miss Hamilton who was an attendant on the Russian Empress during the reign of Peter the Great and suffered the same fate as her namesake in the ballad. Twenty-eight versions of the song were written down in the 19th Century and the composite version produced by Sir Walter Scott is probably the most celebrated. It has 25 verses and deserves to be much better known.