

How 'Bloody Mary' Tried but Failed to Return England to the Roman Fold

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Portrait of Mary I, Queen of England (1516–1558). Public Domain



By Gerry Bowler

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Commentary

Mary Tudor was born in 1516, the only child of Henry VIII and Katherine of Aragon to survive. She was considered a princess and heir to the throne until her father divorced her mother (essentially for failure to provide a male heir) and married Anne Boleyn. Mary was stripped of her title, deemed legally a bastard, and was forced to wait upon her half-sister Elizabeth, the child of the Boleyn marriage, and her half-brother Edward, the product of her father's third marriage.



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Mary clung bravely to her Roman Catholic faith throughout her father's renunciation of the pope and her brother's Protestant era. She refused to marry a Protestant, and her father and brother denied her permission to become the bride of a foreign Catholic prince, so she remained single.

When Edward died in 1553, Mary survived a palace coup that put Lady Jane Grey on the throne for nine days and was proclaimed Queen of England. She was now 37, desperate for marriage and an heir. In 1554, Mary persuaded Parliament to allow her to marry Prince Philip of Spain, but the notion of a foreign Catholic prince produced a series of short-lived rebellions. Her bridegroom, 11 years younger than she, was more enamoured of the throne than of his bride who was besotted with him.

Mary was determined to return England to the Roman fold but had to wait on Parliamentary approval, which she obtained late in 1554. Monasteries were reopened, the episcopal bench was supplied with new Catholic leadership, and the old heresy laws were once more in force.

Mary's government also embarked on the extermination of the Protestant religious leadership of the country; those who did not flee to Europe were arrested and burnt at the stake. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, and bishops Latimer, Ridley, and Hooper all went to the fire, but so did over 280 ordinary English men and women: bricklayers, weavers, farmers, maids, and widows. This

policy, which was disliked by her husband's Spanish advisers, earned her the nickname "Bloody Mary."



Titian's portrait of Prince Philip of Spain, dressed in a lavishly decorated set of armour. Public Domain

Despite two episodes in which she appeared to be pregnant, Mary remained childless. Philip stayed out of the country as much as he could except when he needed English support for a European war. She grew increasingly ill, perhaps from uterine cancer. Her last moments were described by one of her ladies-in-waiting:

“She comforted those of them that grieved about her; she told them what good dreams she had, seeing many little children like angels play before her, singing pleasing notes, giving her more than earthly comfort; and thus persuaded all, ever to have the holy fear of God before their eyes, which would free them from all evil, and be a curb to all temptation. She asked them to think that whatsoever came to

them was by God's permission; and ever to have confidence that He would in mercy turn all to the best.”

Mary died on Nov. 17, 1558. She begged her half-sister Elizabeth (with whom she was never on good terms) to bury her next to her mother, to keep the country in the Catholic faith, to pay her debts, and provide marriage portions for her maids. Elizabeth, who was not at all a nice person, honoured none of her wishes.

Mary's reign was too short to successfully bring about the permanent return to Roman Catholicism that she sought. During Elizabeth's long tenure (1558–1603), the Protestant Church of England became embedded in the national culture, partly through long usage, partly through the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer in English, and partly because Catholicism became associated with foreigners and rebellion.

A rising by Catholic noblemen in the north of the country in 1569 won the approval of Pope Pius V, who declared Elizabeth excommunicated and deposed. Numerous Catholic plotters sought to assassinate Elizabeth and replace her with Mary Queen of Scots. Philip of Spain launched great armadas against England, while exiled English Jesuit theorists argued that it was a pious religious act to slay a heretic ruler. The Gunpowder Plot in 1605—a plan to murder the English royal family, ruling class, and church leadership—served to confirm the equation between Catholicism and treachery. It was not until 1829 that British Catholics were accorded the political rights that their compatriots enjoyed.

Through one of the little ironies in which history abounds, the bodies of Elizabeth and Mary lie in the same tomb in London's Westminster Abbey. An inscription on the monument reads: "Partners in throne and grave, here we sleep Elizabeth and Mary, sisters in the hope of the Resurrection."

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