



Kate Williams with Jenni Calder

JENNI CALDER: Hello everyone, my name is Jenni Calder and I'm delighted to welcome you and our author Kate Williams to this session of the Big Book Weekend. This is part of Burnham's Book Festival. Many of you are probably familiar with Kate Williams, you'll have seen her on TV or heard her on the radio or read one or more of her many books. She is a Professor of History at the University of Reading. But she is a professor with a difference, in that she's concerned with making the past, and the people of the past, accessible. Understanding the past is not just about knowing the facts, but engaging with real people in the context of the times in which they lived. And to do that takes not just a lot of skill, but empathy for place and period, as well as personalities. And Kate has a lot of empathy, I think, plus what I can only describe as a kind of generosity towards the past. Kate's written several biographies, all of women, and all of women having to find a place in a man's world. She also writes fiction, with four novels published to date. But today we're going to talk about her latest work of history, which is called *Rival Queens: The Betrayal of Mary, Queen of Scots*, and there it is. And this is a book which examines the parallel lives of Mary and Elizabeth I, who are cousins, queens of adjacent kingdoms, each in a position of power; but at the same time, both very vulnerable, each trying to navigate the intricacies of national and international power politics at the time. One has become an emblem of a flourishing age of England's past; the other symbol, not so much of Scotland, but of a kind of glamorous failure. So, welcome Kate Williams.

KATE WILLIAMS: Thank you so much.



JC: I want to start off first by asking you what drew you to Mary and Elizabeth and that particular period? Because it's going further back than your other books have gone.

KW: Welcome to my stage. This is my, er, my slightly different stage. I've tidied up my bookshelves, so I hope that they look slightly better than normal. I'm thrilled to be here with the Big Book Weekend and with Burnham Book Festival – such a shame that we couldn't get to Burnham, but we are doing it here by Zoom call, which is very thrilling. And yes, so this is my ninth book, *Rival Queens*. This is number nine. And I was so fascinated by Elizabeth and Mary, and I've always been interested in the question of women in power, but what really fascinated me, particularly about Mary, is that she's so often seen, just as you were saying, Jenny, as a sort of tragic failure; as this Queen who, you know, got everything wrong. But what's very interesting when you look at her life is how much – if you look at her in terms of queen-ship, which is my interest – how much of what she did was so similar to what Elizabeth did. So Elizabeth had a reputation for listening to her ministers, thinking about their advice. Mary did the same. Elizabeth fostered religious toleration. Mary, when she came to the throne in Scotland as an 18 year old, her Privy Council was more than equally split between Protestant and Catholic. And yet everything that Elizabeth did went right, but everything that Mary did went wrong. And I think what I was really fascinated with was how these two countries, Scotland and England, are so close, but so different. Mary, from the age of 18, from when she comes back from France to become Queen of Scotland, she is constantly, constantly surrounded; constantly threatened by men who want to take her power. They want to try and kidnap her. They want to try and abduct her, and that would be – it just wouldn't happen for Elizabeth. And you know, Elizabeth, too, is undermined by the men around. They don't invite her to meetings. They don't tell her what's going on – a situation that becomes very acute around Mary's execution. But it's Mary who has this... she suddenly is surrounded by all these men trying to grab her and trying to seize her and, you know, I actually think when



you look at Mary, I'm wondering what anyone could have done differently and done it better. Because a man would have had a whole different kettle of fish. But for a woman, I think she did the best she could. And what's, I think, very interesting is the fact that her half-brother – who we'll talk about, one of the story's baddies – wanted her to really be his puppet through which he could rule. But she wants to rule like Elizabeth, in her own right. And that I think, is what condemned her; what made her fall into this horrific set of consequences. And so it was an ultimate act of bravery, I think to claim that a woman could rule for herself and I think in that she was very successful in doing that, but of course, ultimately, the reign did not succeed.

JC: Can you tell us a bit about their upbringing? Because in many ways there were parallels, but in some ways their circumstances were actually very different as they were growing up, weren't they?

KW: So Elizabeth and Mary, they are cousins. They call each other, sometimes, 'sister' in their letters, and they are strictly speaking cousins because Mary's grandmother was Henry VIII's sister. And that's what makes her so significant. Because in pure blood terms, after Elizabeth, she is, in pure blood terms and will be seen as, the next in line. And yes, there are the Greys, there are other claimants, but it's Mary, Queen of Scots who's next. And that both makes her very powerful and it also makes her very dangerous. And that's what particularly makes her such an object of fear for Elizabeth's advisers, like Cecil. He's terrified of her because, of course, he's terrified that Elizabeth will die first, without an heir; Mary, Queen of Scots will become Queen of England as well, and then she will really take revenge on everyone who hasn't been nice to her, as you might expect. They have this completely different childhood. Elizabeth is born, not really what her father ultimately wanted, but she has a very powerful father. But, you know, she has a pretty traumatic childhood. Her mother had



her head chopped off. Her beloved stepmother, Jane Seymour, died in childbirth; a stepmother, Catherine Howard, of whom she was very fond, also had her head chopped off. And then after Henry VIII's death Elizabeth goes to live with Katherine Parr, Henry VIII's last wife, who remarried very quickly, but there's no two ways about it: Katherine Parr's husband, Seymour, he groomed Elizabeth and abused her. And as a consequence of this, tried to marry her. And really Elizabeth, after this, she ends up with her half-brother, the King – Edward VI, who almost tries to chop her head off. Then her sister, Mary I, almost tried to chop her head off. So she has this terrible childhood. But one thing that she has in this childhood is that she lives in England the whole time, and she's associated with England. And also, even though she lives in ultimate exile, because if she pops her head up someone might chop it off, these men surround her who are very devoted. She creates this devoted circle of men around her, like William Cecil, who will never desert her. And so when she comes to the throne, she has a network of trusted men. And Mary doesn't have that. Because what happens to Mary is – well, when she's born, I mean, she's born in 1542, and we know that the birth of a daughter is not a moment for unalloyed happiness in the Tudor, in the 16th Century, world. But I think Mary has it really most severe of all, because she's born and her father, James V, falls into such a depression after she's born that he dies six days later and makes her a queen at six days old. Now he's already a bit downhearted, because Henry VIII keeps winning against him, and he suffered a lot of wounds at these humiliating battles. But when he hears his child's a girl – they've had, he and his wife, two sons that have died – when he hears his child, a girl, he just said, 'That's it. My dynasty is going to end with a lass.' So he dies, Mary becomes six-day queen, and her mother, Mary of Guise, becomes the Regent for her. And I mean, something I probably should make clear to anyone who's watching the Big Book Weekend is that basically everyone in this whole story in Scotland is called James and Mary. Everyone. The whole lot of them. I might throw in the odd Robert, but it's mainly James and it's mainly Mary. So that's what everyone's called. And so



Mary's parents are called James and Mary. Her mother is Mary of Guise, who is from a very powerful French family who really are, I think, like the Kardashians, if the Kardashians had their heart set on political power – and who knows? Maybe they do. And so Mary of Guise becomes the Regent for Mary, Queen of Scots, and she's not very popular because the powerful aristocrats don't really like her. She's too Catholic. They want her off and, increasingly, who they want is one of James's illegitimate sons. He has quite a lot of illegitimate sons; he had lots of mistresses. Indeed, that was one reason why Mary of Guise wasn't too sure about marrying him. Because when Mary of Guise married James, she was a bit unsure about marrying him. I've got a picture of them there... there's a picture of them. There they are. There they are, look, there's Mary, Queen of Scots at the top, and there's James V. There's his wife, there's Mary of Guise, down there. And she wasn't very keen about marrying him, because one French princess had already died due to the freezing Scottish climate. So she heard it was a bad climate that killed off French people, and James had lots of mistresses. But she was told by her family she *had* to get married, and another suitor for her... so she had two suitors on the 16th century Tinder. One was James V, you know, bad climate, killed off French people; and the other one was Henry VIII, who was chopping off heads. And she was actually heard to say that she didn't have the right kind of neck to marry Henry VIII, which I thought was quite good. Well actually, when you look at it, when you look at her image, she's got quite a lot there, you know – could definitely be chopped off. She was quite a fascinating woman, but she's put in an impossible position. The Lords of Scotland don't want her; there are these increasingly powerful half-brothers of Mary, Queen of Scots – illegitimate children of the king who get more and more powerful; and Henry VIII is... First of all he says, 'Well, okay, let's just marry this young princess to my son, the future Edward VI, and then I'll control Scotland that way, through marriage'. And they say 'yes', but then they say 'no', and Henry VIII starts attacking Scotland. And so, you know, the subtitle of my book was '*The betrayal of Mary, Queen of Scots*', and I think there are lots of people who betray her. I mean,



she does have the worst husbands involved in royal history, and it's a competition – there are bad ones, but she's got the worst. But Mary of Guise, her mother, because Mary was threatened – Mary, Queen of Scots this is – was threatened. This baby girl was threatened by Henry VIII's armies, and everyone's trying to kidnap her, and Mary of Guise needed someone to help her fight back Henry VIII's armies. So what she did was she made this plan of marrying Mary, Queen of Scots to the future King of France, the Dauphin of France. And by sending Mary as a bride to France, in reply, in consequence, as a payback, she got all these French troops to fight back Henry VIII. So, on one hand, it was great. It protected Scotland. On the other hand, it meant that Mary was sent off to another court, to a foreign court. And that's what you did with a *princess*, like Catherine of Aragon. You sent them off to a foreign court. But Mary's not a princess. She's a *queen*, and so she's sent off at the age of five to live as the future wife of the King of France. She's protected and she has a rather lovely childhood. There's a menagerie, you know. It's nice. She's not having her head chopped off like poor old Elizabeth, but she is the pawn in the game of the geezers and constantly afraid of what's going to happen in a political sense. And she's sort of sold off and she had completely disassociated with her country. I should say, Mary, Queen of Scots goes over to France accompanied by her four ladies-in-waiting. And these four ladies-in-waiting are... What do you think they were called, Jenni?

JC: They were all called Mary.

KW: They're all called Mary! Mary, Mary, Mary and Mary. Mary Seaton, Mary Beaton, Mary Livingston and Mary Fleming. They were all called Mary, and she was also accompanied over there by her half-brother called...

JC: James.



KW: James. James who was the baddy of the half-brothers. Everyone's called James and Mary. I don't know how they told anyone apart, really. So life in the French court is externally very pampered, but she is a pawn in a political Game of Thrones, so she's always being watched. And then she marries the Dauphin when she's 15, in a great grand wedding. It's all terribly marvellous. And then the King of France dies in a jousting accident. Anyone who's watching the Big Book Festival and ends up in a time machine and goes back to the 16th Century, I wouldn't advise taking part in jousting, just watch. And so Mary then becomes the Queen of France with her husband. And it's this position – because she's Queen of France, but she's also Queen of Scotland, and he is seen as King of Scotland as well. But the Scots don't really like having this random French king so far away. And particularly those in Scotland who are Protestant don't want a Catholic king. So it gets very restive in Scotland. And then, when Mary's 18, her husband dies of a – it looks like he died of a brain infection. It comes on quite quickly, and he dies. She's his 18-year-old widow. No one wants her in the French court. I mean, she could remarry to one of his brothers, who are very young but she could be in waiting as Catherine of Aragon, to be their wife in the future. Catherine of Aragon was stuck at the court, but in the end was rescued by Henry VIII. So she could do that, but she has this mother-in-law, Catherine de Medici, who does not want her around. She absolutely does not want Mary around. And James Stewart, her half-brother, says, 'Mary, come and be with me in Scotland'. And very much he hopes, as I was saying, that she'll be his puppet so he can manoeuvre. So she sets off back to Scotland with loads of French stuff – tapestries, and jewellery, and all kinds of glamorous outfits – arrives in Scotland, and really people are thrilled to see her. She's beautiful. She's young. She's glamorous. She has all these wonderful French fashions. The men of the Scottish court are not sad to see her. She arrived with her four glamorous, ladies-in-waiting, Mary, Mary, Mary and Mary, these beautiful young women. It's been a rather lady-in-waiting-free court, shall we say. And, initially, she's incredibly popular. But already people are fighting to get her power, and the



way in which she thinks, aged 18... the way in which she thinks, 'I am going to secure myself. These men are going to stop trying to grab me'... She thinks the way to do that is a meeting with Elizabeth. And what she wants, above all, from her meeting with Elizabeth is to meet up in this big, huge occasion, and prove to the world that she is Elizabeth's friend, possible heir. This, she thinks, will stop the Scots aristocrats from trying to seize power from her. And they do talk about having a meeting. They do talk about it. It's got to be big; it's going to be two queens meeting together. It's going to be big and bling. I did actually write in here, I did say, 'Two queens can't meet up to drink tea together'. Yeah, there was no tea at that time. I've now written 'Two queens can't meet up to do embroidery together'. So, now you know what the truth is. I only just spotted it at the last minute. And so she wanted this huge meeting. But Elizabeth thought about it, and then changed her mind. And the meeting never happened. I do actually think that it is this great unrequited love story. There's a lot of unrequited love stories. There's a lot of bad husbands. There's a lot of bad lovers in this whole story. And if only Mary and Elizabeth could've just married each other and lived happily ever after, maybe that would've been the solution. Unorthodox, I grant.

JC: You suggest, Kate, that Scotland was a more dangerous place than England, that the nobility were more contentious and less controllable. Do you think Mary had any idea of what she was letting herself in for when she returned to Scotland?

KW: I think that the nobles had really, during the period of Mary of Guise, got to do a lot of what they wanted to do. And the difference was, in England, that Henry VIII had kept a pretty firm thumbscrew over his nobles, and that was continued by Edward VI, and to a degree by Mary I. So Elizabeth I really came into a situation in which the nobles of England, Protestant nobles in particular, were much more used to doing what the king wanted. I mean, there was rebellion, there was disagreement, but in



general they were much more quiescent. And the Scottish nobles, I think, because of the constant battle of power during the period of Mary of Guise, they were very much more, I think, determined on seizing Mary for their faction, and there's a fight over her. So Mary was in an impossible position, a completely impossible position. And she thought that meeting Elizabeth would be a solution, would quieten them down. And then what she came to think after *that* was the way to stop them trying to seize her and threatening her was to marry herself. So this was her next solution. But you know, it's hard when you're the queen. There's not a huge pool of possible candidates, especially when one's already dead, your ex-husband. So this is her solution, is to try and work out who to marry. So she writes to Elizabeth and she says – and it's all really friendly at this time – 'Who should I marry? Who do you think?' And Elizabeth writes back with an idea of who she might marry.

JC: Well, it all proved to be somewhat disastrous, doesn't it?

KW: Well, Elizabeth's suggestion is that Mary might marry Robert Dudley, who is of course, you know, really incredibly handsome. He's terribly, very handsome. He's super handsome, but he's got some downsides on the 16th Century dating app. He is a commoner. His father was a traitor, and lost his lands. The whole of Europe says he's Elizabeth's lover, and he was suspected of killing his wife after she was found at the bottom of the stairs suspiciously. I don't think he did it, but there was the taint of suspicion. So Mary was not happy about this and was really offended Elizabeth would suggest that she should marry her leftover lover, really. A commoner. And instead she really just lost all patience and married this chap instead. Here we are: Henry, Lord Darnley. Very handsome, terribly handsome. Had a claim to the throne, so really made Mary much more threatening to Elizabeth. She didn't like it, and burned at Mary's claim he had royal blood. And he really made a good play of saying, 'Oh Mary, you know, I love you for you. Not the power I could get.' But it wasn't the case. He



almost immediately started trying to seize power from her to be king. This offended all the lords around her including her half-brother. And then she gets pregnant. And this is a fascinating question – because when you're a king, you have a baby and all the bells ring! It's great, you have secured the line. But if you're a queen, and you are pregnant, and you might have a son, then you might actually be deposing yourself. Because a baby, even if it can't even sit up, it's still superior to you. So the minute Mary gets pregnant, everyone is saying 'wahey, fantastic!' but also 'we'll depose her. We'll depose her off as a Regent for that child'. And the plots around Mary get very intense, and most of all is the death of her secretary. She has this secretary – over-promoted, it has to be said – David Rizzio. He's Catholic. But he's a red herring. They come and they stab him and they kill him during a nice Saturday night she's having. And what they really want is to take her prisoner, which they do. I've got a great picture here of Mary's bedchamber, and it was just through there, in the little place. They actually got 10 people there including Rizzio, and then all the aristocrats burst in, including Darnley, and seized Rizzio and stabbed him. Mary was very distressed, she was six months pregnant. They waved a gun at her pregnant stomach. She thought they were coming for her. They imprisoned her, but then actually Darnley realised that maybe they were going to turn on him. He let her out and helped her out. And, you know, there's a truce. Then she gave birth to her child, who was called...

JC: James.

[laughter]

KW: How could they possibly think of these names? I just don't know. And I like this picture here of her with a baby James. I mean, he is extraordinary precocious, I think, for such a small baby. Appears standing up, holding on to things. Very precocious. I guess that had to be the case when you're possible King. And so everyone's very



thrilled about her baby and her ambassador tells Elizabeth pretty quickly that Mary's had a baby – and actually you see a real vulnerability from Elizabeth. She says, 'I'm of barren stock'. But this is where you start to see the plots about Mary hotting up. The lords decide they hate Darnley because he's too high-handed with them, they don't like him. So they basically say to Mary, 'we want to get rid of him'. She says no, but they won't listen. And what happens is we then have this huge explosion on 10 February 1567. A huge explosion rocks all of Edinburgh. And this is what it is: this is this amazing, in the National Archives, picture that the spies at the time – the English spies were on the case really quickly. The English spies were amazing and very, very ruthless. And they were on the case really quickly. And here's Darnley's house, blown up, just there. And there is Darnley and his servant in the orchard. So the house has blown up, but they weren't in it. They were here in the orchard, and it gets a bit *Cluedo*, really, because they've got with them a knife, a rope, a chair, and two dressing gowns. Kind of strange. And this is because, what we *think* happened, is that Darnley and his servant heard the baddies, the ruffians, coming to blow up the house and kill them; got out of the window with the help of the rope and the chair; took the dagger with them, and the dressing gowns; but were smothered in the orchard before they could get away. And this was a group crime. A lot of men were involved, which made it both a disaster, because an awful lot of people who lived around Darnley's house heard them. But also it meant that it was such a group activity, so many lords were involved, that where do you start with the prosecution? I mean, who did it? When it's all of them – and James Stuart, Mary's half-brother, there's lots of really fascinating evidence that he had a controlling hand – when it's all of them, where does she start? What Mary should have done is put a few servants on trial. That's what they actually do much later when she's off the throne. The servants go to the trial shouting, 'It wasn't me, it was you!' But she doesn't want to do that. And so she's in this impossible mire in which it seems like she's not prosecuting the death of her husband. Elizabeth writes to her saying, 'You've got to do this'. And Catherine de Medici writes to her and



says 'You've got to do this'. And Mary's in this lost mire. She think she's next to be killed. She's terrified. She doesn't know where to start. She knows that lots of lords have been involved, relations to her. How can she prosecute them? And we start to see anti-Mary posters, like this mermaid of her. It's not a good thing to be a mermaid in the 16th Century, it's a bad thing. They draw the Queen as a core design here. And things are, anyway, bad. Finally, she puts dreaded Lord Bothwell – he's also called James – she puts him on trial, and it's a show trial. But it kind of creates a security. It creates an uneasy peace after that, and really I think there's a level of uneasy peace, there; a level of security. And then Bothwell breaks it all apart, because Mary's going to see her son who lives in his nursery in the country. On the way back, Bothwell approaches her, tells her that there's rioting in Edinburgh and he'll protect her if she goes back to his castle. He's got many, many more men than she has. She goes back with him to the castle. And in the castle, he slams the door and there he attacks her. And the reason why he assaults her is because he wants her to marry him. He wants power. He wants to be king. And it's really fascinating. I find this really interesting, Jenni, that I was... there's a lot of... at the time everyone completely accepted this is what happened. And in fact, abduction often was seen as encasing the worst crime because people thought, well, the man is so much more powerful. That's of course what he's going to do. So everyone said – Mary said – it had happened. Bothwell said it had happened, and then the men around said it happened. But since, in the 19th Century, there became this romanticising of Mary's story. And I think, because of Victoria's reign, people couldn't really face the idea that someone could do such a horrific act to a queen, and so they romanticise it. 'He was a tall dark stranger whisking her off,' sort of thing. No, absolutely not. He just wants to force her to marry him. She thought she was pregnant, had no choice, and when she does marry him, it's the most disastrous wedding in history. There are lots of bad, bad weddings. I've written about a lot of them in my books, you know: drunken grooms falling into the grate, crying over their mistresses. This is worse. No one wants Mary to marry



Bothwell, and when they have their wedding banquet, everyone watches in horror. And it's the beginning of the end. After this her half-brother moves in to seize power, and finally fights her and Bothwell at the Battle of Carberry Hill under a banner of her son. And Mary is taken to Edinburgh, but there the ordinary people are so fascinated by her, so upset by her, so distressed if they let her out, that the lords realise that they're going to have to put her somewhere else. So they put her in Loch Leven Castle, where they think she can't escape. She there is forced to abdicate, and then later escapes. She escapes while they're all having a party, and it's great because she escapes and rides to a stronghold 60 miles away. She's so strong and powerful. And then she makes her fatal choice. She could have stayed in Scotland, tried to get the throne back. She might have done. Could have gone to France; claimed desperate exile. But instead she decides to go to England to throw herself on the mercy of Elizabeth I, and beg Elizabeth I to put her back on the throne. And that is a fateful decision.

JC: Bothwell was clearly an extremely nasty piece of work, even in the context where there was a lot of violence, a lot of greed and members of the royal family were considered – not just Elizabeth and Mary but others as well, I mean, the baby James – as kind of national property. They didn't really have any individual lives that were separate from this notion of their image and their iconic value. And that comes over very strongly in your book, I think, this notion of members of royalty belonging to the nation and not having their own lives.

KW: Thank you.

JC: Possibly that's still the case. That's perhaps discussion for another occasion. Your narration of those last years and months of confinement, is absolutely harrowing, even for someone who is familiar with the story. To read it in such detail, to read



about Mary's physical and emotional decline; and the collapse of her defence against all the forces marshalled against her and wanting to destroy her; and the sheer cold-blooded nature of the engineering of her execution. And yet, in spite of all this, she shows extraordinary courage, doesn't she?

KW: It is astonishing. I agree. And you're so right that she was treated as national property, that she was not, you know, she wasn't a woman or their relation. She was someone who meant power and could be seized. And you completely see that with James. She is forced to abdicate and he becomes the king, and he, as a baby, is constantly pushed around. And actually, I do think that's what makes him so... we criticise him a lot as a king for being so obsessed with his favourites, and he was. But I think that's one reason why he was so obsessed with favourites: because he couldn't trust anyone, because he was constantly having kidnap attempts himself. Not as bad as she was because, of course, he was a man, it was different. But he was constantly being threatened and treated as national property. So he, too, tried to escape. And she was definitely treated as national property owner, and I think, yes, it's a very fascinating question how much we continue to do that. And so she's in prison in England for 20 years, and it's so sad to see the decline. She was initially this powerful, fit woman who rides 60 miles and is 5'11". She's very strong and tough, and she really wastes away. She can't have exercise. She's exhausted. She can't write to her son. She can't even send him presents, she's not allowed to contact him. She lives under this increasingly stringent house arrest in England, and the conspiracy theories are all around her and finally, she does give into one. She resists them for many years, and finally gives into one because, I think, she sees no other hope. She agrees to this conspiracy theory to depose Elizabeth and put her on the throne. And it coincided with the Catholic rising up of the nobility and Philip of Spain invading. And that's what it is those men have been looking for, and they've indeed use a double agent to try and get these letters out of her that decode. So they take her in, they arrest her. And



then Elizabeth has this impossible position. Elizabeth doesn't actually want to sign the death warrant. She hopes that Mary might die of natural causes, or someone else might kill her for her, in an act of gallantry. Because Elizabeth doesn't want to execute Mary. She thinks that it will look bad; that Europe might try and punish her; and that it might look wrong to execute a cousin, a fellow queen. And in fact that is quite interesting. In the Victorian times, when Queen Victoria is a child, they're looking for a model for queen-ship for her, and Elizabeth I is discounted not only because she didn't have children – of course, what a disaster, a woman who doesn't have children – but also because she's seen as unfeminine for having executed her cousin. She can execute as many men as she wants, you know. Earl of Essex goes into her bedroom; chopped his head off. But a woman is seen as unfeminine. So Elizabeth is right in that respect. And I think above all what Elizabeth is deeply concerned with is, if you execute a queen whose power – no matter how much you might disagree with that queen – comes from the divine, then what are you saying about queen-ship? And I think that many of Elizabeth's advisers, who were pushing for more constitutional democracy, that's another aspect they had behind their desire to get rid of Mary. Not only did they hate her and see her as a huge threat which, until that plot, she wasn't, but also they wanted queens, less of this divine right and more of this 'we're giving you a job'. And Elizabeth signs Mary's execution warrant. Then she's succeeded by Mary's son, James I. And it's his son, Charles I, who *is* executed. And the justification is, 'You weren't doing the job right'. And Charles says, 'But I'm the divine right king', and Parliament says, 'but you were rubbish at the job'. So that whole principle of executing a queen, Elizabeth is very, very concerned about. And I think rightly so, if she believes, as she does, divine right monarchy. So Elizabeth doesn't want to execute her, but she finally is pushed into signing the execution warrant. And they take it from her and then they say, Cecil says, 'Let's just get on with it. Let's just enact it'. And it's pretty clear that she didn't know what was going on. I think that she thought Mary would be on Death Row, as it were, for quite a long time, and she could change her



mind back and forth. And hopefully Mary, who was very weak, would die of natural causes and get her off the hook. And so, as a consequence, Mary's execution is really very rushed. And because Elizabeth doesn't know, it's really very undignified. It's very cruelly set up. She's told at the last minute that she'll be executed next morning. She has only few hours to sort out her estates, her belongings, write her letters. She can't sleep. And then she's told, when she actually goes down to be executed, that her ladies can't go up with her; that the executioner will undress her, which is a shocking statement for any woman, let alone the queen. And it's protested that aristocrats are watching, so you know, I don't think that's quite right. That means that she's given ladies to go and assist her, but they really are trying to show in every way that she does not deserve dignity. She does not deserve respect. So it's really quite heartbreaking in the end. But as you say, she has this incredible courage. She wearing a bodice which is red, a petticoat which is red, the colours of Catholic martyrdom. She will not listen to the Protestant Bishop who's preaching at her. And she goes to the block with this ultimate bravery and this absolute determination that she is a martyr to the cause. And she deserves to be remembered in a dignified way, not a failed queen but a martyr to both her country and to the religion that she hoped to... So she goes to the block as a martyr both to Scotland and also to the Catholic religion that she hoped to continue in a world of religious toleration. But that simply wasn't the case.

JC: But it's really interesting, isn't it, that? Because in the continuum of royal history you don't necessarily think of the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots as being the moment when the attitude to the monarch changed in that, possibly, Charles I would *not* have lost his head, if Mary hadn't gone before, as it were.

KW: Yes, I think it does definitely create a precedent of saying, 'You are not doing your job well enough. You are not doing the job of queen-ship very much'. She was beheaded for treason as opposed to that, but the justification was very much around



the fact that well, 'We can. We can kill a monarch'. And she very much saw the danger, and she kept saying, 'You can't put me on trial. I'm a monarch. And you can't execute me. I'm a queen.' But it continued. And I think it does create this precedent and I think, definitely, Cecil and those around Elizabeth, who loved Elizabeth but still didn't want her to have too much power, really were pro this disempowering of the monarchy. And it's really so fascinating that James I is both obsessed with favourites – it's really his way of creating security when surrounded by enemies – and also obsessed with divine right. James I is obsessed with divine right.

KW: Yes.

JC: And then it's his son. When you go to the Banqueting House in London and they have amazing ceiling painted by Reuben, every painting is about the wonder of James I's divine right. And Charles I had to walk under all of this when he was about to be executed, seeing his father's revelation of divine right. So it's a fascinating turning point that hadn't occurred to me, really, until I started studying something more in detail: how much of an impact the trial of a fallen queen has on the British monarchy. The execution, of course, is heartbreaking. Mary's belongings are burned – we don't want any martyrs – her heart is taken out and put under a mound, so you'll never get at it. And yet she did have a little friend up with her. When they stripped her body, they found her dog was clinging to her skirt. You've got a dog, haven't you Jenny?

JC: She's just been barking.

KW: Exactly. That's it. She was worried about you. She was worried about you. I'm sure no one will ever execute you Jenni, but if someone was to do so, she'd go with you, wouldn't she?



JC: Not if somebody offered her a steak!

KW: Well, I sometimes ask, and I would ask at the Big Book Weekend, if people have got a dog, if they think their dog would go with them. And if anyone's got a cat, do they think their cat would go to the block with them. And genuinely when I ask that question at festivals, most people think that their cats probably wouldn't go with them. They probably might go and hang out with the executioner if the executioner had food. But your dog might go. But I do think it's very moving at the end that she has a friend with her. And what's so fascinating is that Elizabeth wins. Mary is the loser. Elizabeth goes on to continue being Queen. She dies in her bed. And yet it's Mary's son, who becomes James I. It's Mary's blood that is in all of our monarchs, including our current, Elizabeth II. Mary's son becomes James I, and although he doesn't talk much about his mother – I think he realises it wouldn't be politic in England – in 1612 (he comes to the throne in 1602), he disinters Mary from where she was in Peterborough Cathedral, and he puts her in Westminster Abbey where he thinks she belongs. And she's very much nearer to Elizabeth in death than she ever was in life.

JC: Yes, it's a fascinating sort of afterword, isn't it? Something that emerges very strongly throughout the book is how important the relationship was between both nations, between both England and Scotland and the rest of Europe. England and Scotland never thought of themselves as being separate from the rest of Europe. And in our current situation, that came across very forcefully, I thought, in your book.

KW: Oh well, yes. I think that they are constantly thinking about what Europe will do next. And England is fascinated by Europe and afraid of Europe, because England is this tiny tiny, Church of England enclave, and all of Catholic Europe want to squash it. And in France, one reason why the King of France wanted Mary, Queen of Scots to



marry his son was that he'd like to really squash Henry VIII, so he'd have a sandwich. Scotland on top, and France there, and then Henry in the middle as this squashed sandwich. Because they are seen as this threat, and it is constantly a question for Mary and her advisers, with Elizabeth and her advisors: What's Europe going to do? Will Europe come in? Elizabeth is very nervous that if she executes Mary, Queen of Scots, Philip of Spain will come and he'll avenge Mary, Queen of Scots and he'll fight for her. But obviously what happens is quite different, in the sense that the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots is, to Philip, not something to be avenged, but a green light, because he thinks, 'Ah, if I'd invaded before then Mary, Queen of Scots would have to be queen, but now I can invade and I can be king. I'm bringing the Armada in.' So Mary, Queen of Scots' execution actually enables the Armada as well. It's a very significant execution, with a lot of ramifications. But yes, they are completely obsessed with Europe the whole time, what Europe will do, particularly with France and Spain and what they will do. And Bothwell has perhaps the worst European end, because Bothwell is captured and taken off to Denmark, where he's taken, really, as a threat to Elizabeth I. If they let him out, then he might be able to exonerate Mary from any suggestions that she was involved in the death of Darnley. So he's kept in solitary confinement, standing up, by the Danish authorities. A miserable life he has at the end. So Denmark uses Bothwell as part of this complicated power play with England and Scotland and France and Spain. And he becomes a prisoner for it. So you're absolutely right. Europe is such a vital part of what they're always thinking about, even though Henry broke from Rome, he hasn't broken from Europe and how much it impacts on his policy.

JC: Yeah, he couldn't really, and Elizabeth and Mary couldn't either. It's all tangled together, isn't it, and in terms of marriage and connections and so on. It's fascinating territory to explore. And I have to say I really enjoyed your book.



KW: Thank you.

JC: I think we are going to have to draw things to an end. I haven't been keeping a very careful watch on the time. But thank you so much.

KW: Thank you so much.

JC: It's been great to listen to you. And I do recommend *Rival Queens* to everyone. It's a great story and it's a very compelling and a very moving story. So, thank you again, and thank you, all of those who may be watching.

KW: Thank you, thank you for watching! Thank you Big Book Weekend!