

Introduction

‘It came wi’ a lass; it’ll gang wi’ a lass.’ Despite reigning as one of the longest-serving dynasties of any independent realm, in many ways the Stewarts, as successive rulers of Scotland between 1371 and 1603, still suffer from a second-class reputation even if one still tinged by romance.

Amongst Scottish historians for example, the urban legend persists that when being interviewed, Dr Stephen Boardman - author of *The Early Stewart Kings* (1996) - was asked what his revisionist work on the ‘weak and ineffectual’ first two Stewart monarchs, Robert II (1371-90) and Robert III (1390-1406), had revealed: that they were ‘weak and ineffectual’ kings he replied. He may thus have jested, but such irony speaks to the turbulent political context in which both these rulers - father and son, born as nobles - struggled to cope with the ambition of their own family and other aristocratic interests, as well as the wider expectations of their subjects. These were tensions which would echo through the next seven reigns.

For the two Roberts were followed by a succession of Jameses still too often compared in popular histories via their messy factional minorities and then their own character faults and mistakes (see ‘Strange Deaths’ below). There was the Anglified James I (1406-37), a captive of Lancastrian England for 18 years who returned to seemingly whip the realm into shape as a political and cultural force only to run to seed as a ‘short, fat and vindictive’ tyrant assassinated by conspiring noble subjects. Once an adult, James II (1437-6), he of the ‘firey face’, continued this work, murdering his greatest subject, the earl of Douglas, in Stirling Castle in 1452 (just after the anniversary of the slaughter of James I) as the low point of a rivalry which would not end with the Douglas family’s forfeiture in 1455. James III (1460-88) seemed to succeed in alienating almost everyone, narrowly surviving one

major rebellion in 1482 only to fail to learn any lessons and be killed in a second revolt led nominally by his eldest son in 1488. James IV (1488-1513) appeared to defy his genes: possessed of both a common touch and a powerful sense of his own royal status he inspired his subjects with his own person and a number of national projects yet throw it all away on the battlefield of Flodden. His one-year-old son, James V (1513-42), would mature into what appears at first glance to be a paler version of his flamboyant Renaissance father and perish aged only 30 after another war humiliation at English hands.

Then there was Mary (1542-67), who's troubled, mostly absent reign – coupled as it was to the identity crises of the Reformation and Anglo-versus-French interference in Scotland – arguably still awaits satisfying historical analysis in full. We fare better with James VI (1567-1625) who grew to be a self-declared 'universal' king employing 'breakable men' who ran the realm for him when he departed to take up the English throne in 1603 (only returning on a single, uncomfortable occasion).

Yet they all deserve closer attention and certainly better than their all-too common absence from that annoying high street bookshop section labelled 'Tudor and Stuart Britain'. The papers of this special issue seek to redress that balance in modest but important ways. There is a focus on the rich cultural, material and religious lives of the royal Stewarts, recently illuminated by a number of major heritage and historical projects. But there are also a number of thought-provoking alternative takes on this long-lived house, approaches which consider not only the Stewarts in their complex, contemporary context but how they have been consumed and recast since their loss of royal title in the late 17th century.