

William Brewster and the Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots

William Brewster was one of the original members of the religious Separatist congregation at Scrooby that became the nucleus of the Pilgrim church. The group met at his house, Scrooby Manor House.

When the Separatists first attempted to emigrate to Holland in 1607, Brewster and several others were jailed for a short time. He was released and successfully emigrated in 1608. After his arrival in the Netherlands, Brewster served as Elder of the Pilgrim Separatist congregation.

When Brewster and other members of the Pilgrim community emigrated to America in 1620 on the Mayflower, their pastor John Robinson remained behind in Leiden. In the absence of an ordained minister, Brewster was the much-loved and respected religious leader of Plymouth Colony.

Brewster's wife Mary was also a Mayflower passenger. William and Mary Brewster had 6 children: Jonathan, Patience, Fear, Love, an unnamed child who died young and Wrestling.

Love and Wrestling Brewster arrived in Plymouth with their parents on the Mayflower. Jonathan Brewster followed over on the Fortune in 1621, and the Brewster girls, Fear and Patience, joined the family in Plymouth in 1623, arriving on the ship Anne. (Pilgrim Hall Museum)

A lot is written about Brewster's life as a Pilgrim; not much is discussed about the couple of decades prior to him going to Netherlands. Some of the following are his words; it looks at his association with the people directly involved with the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots.

Brewster Becomes Secretary to William Davison, England's Secretary of State

Brewster entered Peterhouse (the oldest of the Cambridge colleges) in December 1580, aged about 14; the last reference to him in the College's records occurs in December 1581. Brewster later declared that he acquired his first Separatist ideas at Peterhouse; he was the only university-educated member of the colony. (Peterhouse)

At that time, Cambridge was in an uproar over the dispute between the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity Thomas Cartwright, who advocated reforms in the church, and the future bishop John Whitgift, who defended the establishment and used his position as master of Trinity College to have Cartwright deprived of his position and forced from Cambridge.

Brewster would also have met John Penry, who entered Peterhouse on the same day as did Brewster and who later would be drawn and quartered in 1593 for his Separatist religious activities and criticisms of the established church. (American National Biography)

After studies at the university (in 1584 when Brewster was about 18), Brewster notes, "I had studied law, had come home with my degree, and was waiting for some opening for the practice of my profession, when a chance, nay a providential, meeting with that high minded and incorruptible man, the noblest statesman of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, William Davison, changed the entire current of my life."

Brewster became a member of the household of William Davison, then important in administrative and diplomatic life at the court of Elizabeth I, and, became one of his trusted retainers, while his father back home maintained a position as the postmaster of Scrooby, Nottinghamshire.

Brewster describes what's next, "Until I knew Davison I had never thought of life outside of England, of mingling with the great men of my time, - the men who make history , - still less of taking a hand at making it myself."

"I had the privilege of being schooled in diplomacy at a very exciting and important time, when great issues were at stake, not only between the Netherlands and England, but involving all Europe as well. We met great men of Holland, of France, and of Spain."

"It was a game of skillful fencing between us, for the battles in the council chamber were even more important than those in the field. I could not have had a better teacher than Davison."



Elizabeth

"The Queen (Elizabeth I) retained Davison at her court as Secretary of the Privy Council, a great advance in his fortunes. He was constantly in attendance on the Queen, conducting her official correspondence."

A conversation exchange between Brewster and his son Love (found in a book about his daughter, Patience), helps explain ...

(Love) "You mean you conducted it, father; for if Mr. Davison was the Queen's secretary, you were his, so you really wrote the Queen's letters for her, did you not?"

(Brewster) "Only the manual part, my son. It was Davison who had the task of making the whims of that selfish and double-faced woman comport with honor and sound policy."

(Love) "And you were at court all this time, father, and knew the great people, and dressed bravely, did you not?"

(Brewster) "I never cared for finery, but my master insisted that it was for his credit that I should go handsomely attired. Because I had no trinkets of my own, he made me wear his seal ring and a magnificent gold chain which the Government of the Netherlands had given him in acknowledgment of his services."

"I have heard my mother say," said Love, "how handsome you looked when she first saw you as you were walking at Mr. Davison's side by the Long Water at Hampton Court, with that chain flowing over your short velvet cloak."

Elizabeth I – Mary Stuart Conflict

Through Davison, Brewster was involved with the conflict between Elizabeth I and her cousin Mary, Queen of Scots.

Mary and Elizabeth were first cousins once removed through King Henry VII of England. Two of Henry VII's eight children were Henry VIII Tudor and Margaret Tudor.

Margaret went to Scotland and married James IV; their son, James V, had Mary with his second wife, Mary of Guise. Six days after Mary was born, James V died, rendering Mary the Queen of Scotland.

Now, on to Elizabeth's side of the family. Henry VIII succeeded his father, Henry VII, on the throne.

Famously, Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church in Rome so he could marry Anne Boleyn after his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, did not produce a male heir (they had a daughter, Mary, together). Henry VIII married Anne in a secret ceremony (then he went on to get married four more times).

Anne Boleyn didn't produce a male heir, either: Elizabeth was the only child of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn.

Henry VIII later had Anne beheaded. Henry VIII finally had his much-desired male heir, Edward, with his third wife, Jane Seymour. (Nicolaou)



Mary Stuart (Mary, Queen of Scots)

In 1558, Elizabeth became Queen of England and Ireland - though it was a dramatic path to the throne.

Elizabeth's half-brother, Edward I, was crowned King in 1547 when he was 9 years old. Edward, always a sickly boy, died at age 15. According to the preexisting succession plan, the throne was to go to Edward's Protestant cousin Lady Jane Gray.

Nine days after Jane took the throne, Elizabeth's half-sister, Mary Tudor, had her executed and took the throne herself in what historian Anna Whitelock describes as "an extraordinary coup d'etat."

Mary Tudor enacted a violent campaign to turn England back into a Catholic country, earning herself the nickname Bloody Mary.

Finally, after Mary's death in 1558 at age 42, the throne went to Elizabeth, who was Protestant. But even that was contested. Catholics believed Elizabeth the product of an unlawful marriage, and, thus, was not a legitimate heir to the throne. (Nicolaou)

Queen Elizabeth I had a rival, (Mary, Queen of Scots) and managed to pull Brewster's boss Davison into her plans to have her rival executed.

In 1567, Mary Stuart was deposed from the throne of Scotland. She fled to England in 1568, expecting her cousin Elizabeth to provide protection. Instead, Elizabeth put her under house arrest. (Nicolaou)

In England, Mary became a political pawn in the hands of Queen Elizabeth I and was imprisoned for 19 years in various castles in England.

Mary was found to be plotting against Elizabeth; letters in code, from her to others, were found and she was deemed guilty of treason. (Castelow)

Babington Plot

Encouraged by her supporters abroad (Gifford, Paget, Mendoza, Morgan and Ballard), Anthony Babington wrote a long letter to Mary, Queen of Scots on July 6, 1586.

This letter revealed the details of what has become known as the Babington Plot. Babington asked for Mary's approval and advice to ensure 'the dispatch of the usurping Competitor' - the assassination of Elizabeth I.

Mary's reply on July 17 sealed her fate. It fell into the hands of Thomas Phelippes, who copied the letter, added the gallows sign, and forged a short postscript asking Babington for the names of those involved.

Within days Babington and his colleagues were arrested and taken to the Tower of London. Mary's secretaries were interrogated and her belongings were seized and searched. Seven of the conspirators were dragged to St. Giles' Fields and brutally executed on September 20, 1586.

Mary was taken to Fotheringay Castle and put on trial.

The Trial

On October 14, 1586, the trial of Mary, Queen of Scots, began at Fotheringay Castle in Northamptonshire.



Portrait of young gentleman said to be Anthony Babington

Mary, Queen of Scots had, at first, refused to appear before Elizabeth I's commission, but had been told by William Cecil that the trial would take place with or without her.

She appeared in front of the commission at 9 am, dressed in a black velvet gown and a white cambric cap and veil.

Mary then protested against the commission, arguing that the court was not legitimate and arguing against the fact that she was not allowed legal defense and was not able to call any witnesses.

Mary was also not permitted to examine any of the documents being used against her.

Her protests were in vain and the prosecution went ahead and opened the trial with an account of the Babington Plot, arguing that Mary knew of the plot, had given it her approval, agreed with it and had promised to help. (Tudor Society)

Throughout the proceedings Mary protested her innocence and denied all knowledge of the plot, but the letters were produced as evidence of her guilt. (NationalArchives-gov-UK)

"Mary: I knew not Babington. I never received any letters from him, nor wrote any to him. I never plotted the destruction of the Queen. If you want to prove it, then produce my letters signed with my own hand.

Counsel: But we have evidence of letters between you and Babington.

Mary: If so, why do you not produce them? I have the right to demand to see the originals and copies side by side. It is quite possible that my ciphers have been tampered with by my enemies. I cannot reply to this accusation without full knowledge. Until then, I must content myself with affirming solemnly that I am not guilty of the crimes imputed to me..."

Unfortunately for Mary, Elizabeth's spymaster, Sir Francis Walsingham, had collected a great deal of evidence:

When the prosecution produced all of this evidence, Mary burst into tears but still denied her involvement, claiming that the documents were counterfeit.

Walsingham proclaimed his innocence, stating that the documents were real. A distraught Mary proclaimed that "I would never make shipwreck of my soul by conspiring the destruction of my dearest sister."

The court was then adjourned for lunch.

After lunch, the secretaries' confessions were read out, much to Mary's shock and horror. Mary argued that her letters must have been tampered with after she had seen them, and then argued:

"The majesty and safety of all princes falleth to the ground if they depend upon the writings and testimony of their secretaries... I am not to be convicted except by mine own word or writing."

The trial continued the next day with the prosecution accusing Mary of consenting to Elizabeth's assassination in her reply to Babington.

Mary tried to argue that although she had written "then shall it be time to set the gentlemen to work taking order upon the accomplishing of their design", she had not specified what the "work" was.

However, as the prosecution pointed out, Mary had also appealed for foreign help and although she argued that an act of war, even if it resulted in Elizabeth's death, was legitimate if it allowed her, a queen, to be free at last, the commission saw her actions as an act of treason.

As the trial closed, Mary demanded that she should be heard in front of Parliament or the Queen, but she was fighting a losing battle.

On the 29th October, Parliament met to discuss Mary, Queen of Scots, the Babington Plot and her role in Lord Darnley's murder, and it was decided that they should petition Elizabeth to execute Mary. This put Elizabeth in a difficult position as she did not want to be accused of regicide. (Tudor Society)

Guilty - Execution

On December 4, Mary was publicly proclaimed guilty and finally, on February 1, 1587, Elizabeth called her secretary, William Davison, asking him to bring Mary's execution warrant to her to sign.

Elizabeth signed it but told Davison to ask Walsingham to write to Sir Amyas Paulet, in his own name, asking him to kill Mary.

This would enable Elizabeth to be rid of her nemesis without taking any responsibility for it, instead Paulet would be acting privately under the Bond of Association.

Paulet was understandably horrified, protesting that "God forbid that I should make so foul a shipwreck of my conscience."



Mary, Queen of Scots

Meanwhile, Sir William Cecil called a secret meeting of Elizabeth's Privy Council which agreed to send the signed warrant to Fotheringhay. Cecil appointed the Earls of Shrewsbury and Kent to direct the execution and the council agreed to keep Elizabeth in the dark until the deed was done.

On February 8, 1587, Mary, Queen of Scots was executed after being found guilty of conspiring in the Babington Plot to have her cousin queen, Elizabeth I, murdered. (Koeppen)

Led to the scaffold, Mary refused to accept the services of a Protestant minister. She shed her black cloak to reveal a red dress – the color of martyrdom.

The executioner took three blows to sever her head, the first hitting her in the back of the skull. When he held the severed head up, it fell to the floor and he was left holding a wig. (Mears)

Execution Aftermath

Some say Queen Elizabeth used Davison as a scapegoat, so she could claim innocence in the execution.

When Elizabeth heard of the execution she flew into a rage, seeking to execute Davison without trial for delivering the warrant. (Mears)

Queen Elizabeth I blamed Davison and had him stripped of his title and imprisoned to take the responsibility off of herself. (McCollom)

Although Elizabeth was furious with her Council, so much so that Cecil fled to his home and Davison was thrown into the Tower of London, John Guy points out that whatever happened to Mary, whether she was assassinated or executed, Elizabeth could deny any responsibility:

"She had carefully contrived things so that she would win whatever happened. If Mary was killed under the Bond of Association, Elizabeth could disclaim responsibility. If Cecil covertly sealed the warrant and sent it to Fotheringhay behind her back, she could claim she had been the victim of a court conspiracy." (Tudor Society)

Before her Majesty had resolved on allowing the Queen of Scots to fall by the axe of the executioner, it is almost certain that it was deliberated in her cabinet, whether it was not preferable that she should perish by the hand of an assassin.

Elizabeth's wishes were decidedly for the latter course, because it would remove the odium of Mary's death from herself, and have enabled her to sacrifice those who employed him, as a confirmation of her total ignorance of the transaction.

This was supported by the Earl of Leicester, who proposed to poison her, and it is said that he privately sent a divine to Sir Francis Walsingham to persuade him of the legality of the act.

Davison, to his eternal honour, opposed himself with uniform firmness to these propositions and it is more than probable that his arguments caused the forms of law and justice to be followed, in concluding this tragical affair. (Nicolas)

Davison claimed that under Burghley's instructions he had gone to Elizabeth to obtain the royal signature for Mary's death warrant. On February 1st, Davison said Elizabeth called for him and instructed him to have the death warrant sealed.

However, Elizabeth claimed she had told Davison to keep the signed warrant secret and to keep it with him until further notice.

Davison argued that Elizabeth discussed assassination as an alternative to executing Mary. But when she drafted a letter to Sir Amyas Poulet, Mary's keeper during her imprisonment, regarding assassination of Mary, she received a discouraging response.

Davison addressed this issue with Burghley, who then addressed the Council. It was Burghley who said that the Queen "had done everything she could do" but she had said to Davison, "she wanted to hear no more of it until it was done." (Koeppen)

In 1589 Davison was released from the Tower. Essex promised to recommend him for official service, and in April 1590 even wrote to James VI, in order to enlist his influence on Davison's side.

Here he failed, but on Walsingham's death in 1590, many persons urged Elizabeth to bestow the vacant secretaryship on Davison.

Burghley, however, obtained the office for his son Robert.

On December 7, 1590 Davison petitioned the queen to rehabilitate him, but she declined to receive the letter. (Dictionary of National Biography, 1888)

Elizabeth pardoned and released Davison, but never gave him back his title. (McCollom)

Finding all avenues to office thus closed against him, Davison retired to a house at Stepney, reduced by the payment of his fine to great poverty.

He succeeded to the offices of custos brevium in the king's bench and clerk of the treasury and warrants, to which the reversion had been granted him in 1579, and on July 25, 1607 James I generously agreed to grant these offices on his death to George Byng of Wrotham, Kent, and Henry Byng of Gray's Inn, on trust, the profits to be applied to the payment of his debts and the support of his children.

Davison died about December 21, 1608, and was buried at Stepney on the 24th. (Dictionary of National Biography, 1888)

Brewster's Support for Davison

Throughout this time, William Brewster, the future Pilgrim and spiritual leader of the Mayflower and Plymouth colony, was working as a "discrete and faithful" assistant of William Davison.

(Brewster) "Davison was made one of the members of the commission for the trial of Mary, Queen of Scots, and Elizabeth basely endeavored to transfer to him the odium which she incurred for ordering the execution of her rival, degrading him from office for faithfully carrying out her orders, under the pretense that he had gone beyond them, and causing him to be imprisoned in the Tower."

(Brewster) "I used every honorable means for his release. He had one other true friend, the hot-headed but warm-hearted Earl of Essex, who dared to remonstrate with the Queen, and after two years the Earl obtained his release. Essex attempted still more."

"The office of Secretary of State had become vacant, and he urged the Queen to bestow it upon Davison. But the Lord High Treasurer, the great William Cecil, Lord Burleigh, wished it for his son Robert, and after five years of indecision Elizabeth conferred the office upon that young man."

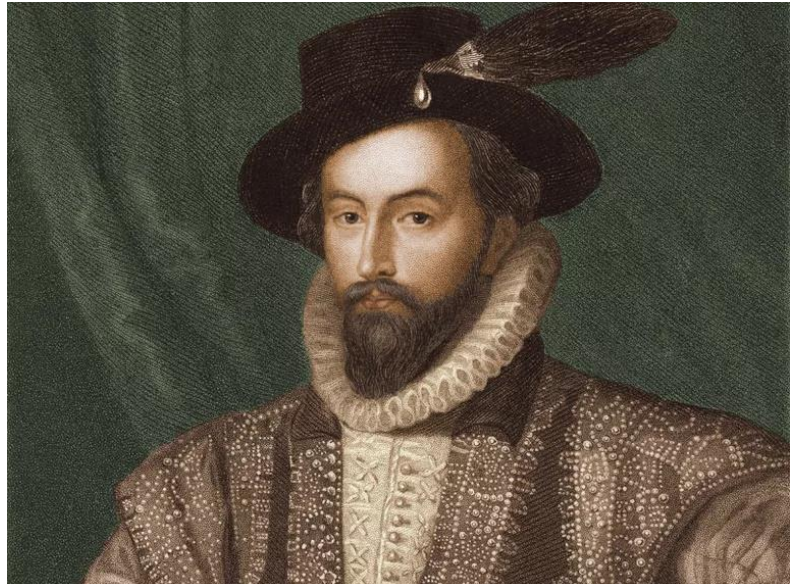
"If he had more closely resembled the great statesman his father, none could have reproached the Queen, but Robert Cecil has only cunning where William had wisdom; and whereas the great Lord Burleigh recognized honesty as the best policy, the little lord is for policy whether honesty be a part of it or no."

"So there was my dear master cast off after all his great services, and left with broken for tunes in his declining years! He very bravely set to practicing law in London".

Of this incident, in a conversation with Brewster's daughter, Patience, Sir Walter Raleigh stated of Brewster, "I knew him well. He had the parts of a statesman, and many of Davison's master strokes were doubtless conceived by him."

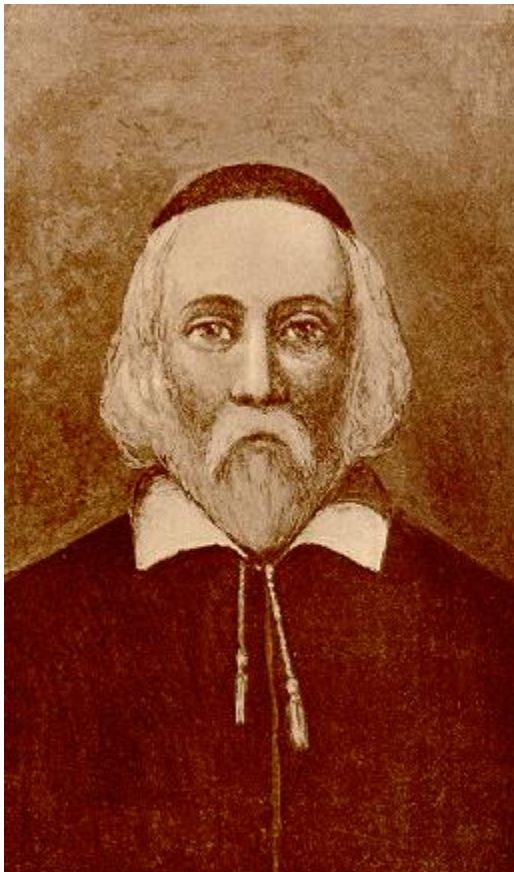
"But he never learned finesse, that part of statecraft which demands double-dealing, and he could never abide cruelty."

"He had no sympathy for the cause which Mary Stuart represented, but he would have saved her from death had it been in his power."



Sir Walter Raleigh

"Our good Queen Elizabeth of sainted memory was a woman after all, and at times unreasonable; but Davison held his head proudly, for he knew he was in the right, and thy father couched Davison's bold words in most courteous language."



William Brewster

"By the rood, it was the hand of steel in a velvet glove! But our virgin Queen would not brook being withstood, and Davison fell from favor."

"Thy father stood by his patron when he was in disgrace, and lost every opportunity for his own advancement in moving heaven and earth in behalf of Davison." (Champney)

After Davison was removed by Queen Elizabeth I, Brewster managed to get his father's postmaster duties based at Scrooby Manor.

(Brewster) "I came back to this dear old home, to take up my father's duties, to comfort my mother in her widowhood, which came soon after, and to find in my wife and my children such solace and happiness as court life cannot bestow." (Champney)

Then, on September 6, 1620 (OS, September 16 NS), Brewster and 101 other passengers, sailed for America on the Mayflower.

They sighted Cape Cod on November 9 (November 19), 1620. Brewster was the Elder and spiritual lead of the Pilgrims and the Plymouth colony.



A lot of the information here is from Dictionary of National Biography, 1888; Patience a Daughter of the Mayflower, Champney, 1899; Trial of Mary, Queen of Scots, TudorSociety-com; Here's How Queen Elizabeth I & Mary Queen Of Scots Were Related, Nicolaou; Babington Plot, NationalArchives-gov-UK; Biography of Mary Queen of Scots, Castelow; The True Executor of the Execution of Mary Queen of Scots, Koeppen; Mary Queen of Scots, Mears; Holding It All Together-Call Me A Pilgrim, McCollom; Pilgrim Hall Museum; American National Biography

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young