

Mary Tudor 1553-1558 (Mary I or Bloody Mary)

Does Mary Deserve the Title 'Bloody Mary'?

She has earned the nickname 'Bloody Mary'. Whether she deserves this is debatable. Is there evidence or mitigating circumstances which could lessen the charges leveled against her?

1. From the start of her reign Mary was ill and often lonely. She had had a difficult life. This combination made her very vulnerable.
2. She appears to have dislike brutality. She pardoned 400 rebels after Wyatt's Rebellion.
3. It has been suggested that Mary had written evidence of Elizabeth's involvement in Wyatt's rebellion, but that Mary destroyed this evidence, thus sparing her half-sister from execution. There was no love lost between the two sisters in the early days, but if this story is true it shows a very different side to Mary's nature.
4. She allowed over 800 Protestant to emigrate to Europe.
5. She was surrounded by Catholics like Pole, Bonner and Gardiner, who themselves had suffered under the Henry VIII and Edward VI. Did they want to get back at Protestants? The persecutions didn't start until 1555, when Pole arrived.
6. Cardinal Pole believed that the only way a Protestant could be saved was for them to be burnt at the stake. Again he appears to have influenced Mary.
7. If Mary was so barbaric why did the bulk of persecutions not start until 1555? Surely someone with so much apparent resentment and hate would have acted earlier?
8. In 1555, Mary thought that she was pregnant. This turned out to be false hope as it turned out to be a symptom of her illness, dropsy. At the same time, Philip returned to Spain to rule his empire. Mary was desperately unhappy. At this stage her attitude to Protestants appears to have change. Is it possible that Cardinal Pole persuaded Mary that her childless marriage was a punishment from God for allowing the Protestant heresy in England to go unpunished. She wouldn't have been the first Tudor monarch to worry about God's attitude towards a particular matter!
9. Many of the accounts of the persecutions make it clear that the burnings took longer than expected. There is evidence to suggest that the faggots used were often damp and therefore burned slower. Also, the gunpowder placed around their necks was often damp and therefore death was delayed. A cynic might say this was deliberate.
10. John Foxe in his 'Book of English Martyrs' claims that nearly 300 were burnt at the stake. Further investigation reveals that he occasionally counts the same person twice. Was this a mistake or deliberate? After all Foxe was a Protestant sympathizer and his book was excellent propaganda. It is thought that many of the martyrs who Foxe recorded were in fact Lollards who had been arrested, tried and sentenced to death during the reign of Edward VI. The backlog of executions had carried on into Mary Tudor's reign.

11. Was Mary aware of the extent of the persecutions? Clearly, she would have known about the high profile personalities such as Cranmer, but what about the other less important people? Was Mary kept in the dark by her ministers?
12. At this time religious tolerance was not something that was common practice for any religious belief. Most religions believed that it was their duty to save souls by burning rather than allow someone to carry on committing heresy.
13. Times were violent. In Henry VIII's reign hundreds had found themselves on the block, many of them without fair trials or on trumped up charges. Modern estimates put the number of executions as high as 72,000. To Mary's credit the Protestants were given a reasonably fair trial, offered the opportunity to recant their faith, (turn or burn) and in many cases avoided the stake. Cranmer was one exception, and ironically it was Cranmer who had persuaded Henry VIII not to execute Mary Tudor when she had at first refused to sign the Act of Supremacy.
14. Only about 300 were burnt in England during her reign. In Holland over 1000 were being burnt every year. Were Charles V or Philip labelled 'Bloody'?
15. There were now many wealthy landowners who has benefited greatly from the dissolutions of the monasteries. They did not want the return of Catholicism as it would possibly mean the restoration of the monasteries. This would in turn mean that the landowners might lose their lands back to the Church. This smacks of personal motivation rather than religious.
16. For the great majority it was the marriage to Philip that turned people against Mary. Indeed it has been argued that Mary and her ministers would have got away with the persecutions and The Counter Reformation in England had the marriage not gone ahead.

Like so many characters in history who have been portrayed in a bad light, William II, Richard III, among them, when one looks closely at Mary Tudor's case there is certainly enough evidence to cast doubt on her acquired reputation. As with William II and Richard III's successors, Mary's also benefited from her bad press, and this clearly made it difficult for Catholicism to return to England with any significance. If she was aware of the extent of persecutions and they were motivated by her own feelings towards the Protestants, then the reputation would be apt. Yes, she did suffer badly as a child and clearly and rightly felt enormous animosity towards the Protestants and in particular certain individuals. However, if she was aware, it would be difficult to see the sheer extent of the persecutions as justifiable particularly when one looks at the cross section of people burnt at the stake. In five years, Mary and her ministers had managed to turn Protestantism from being associated with church robbery, destruction and anarchy to being linked to virtue, honesty and loyal English resistance to a half foreign monarchy.