

History Girls: Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Historiography and the Case of Mary, Queen of Scots.

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Abstract

This essay argues that the compelling figure of Mary, Queen of Scots represented in conventional schoolroom textbooks inspired Jane Austen, Queen Victoria and Marjory Fleming to write counter-narratives about her life. These examples of private writing both absorb and resist the ideologies of nation, gender and causation that official histories promote.

Articles

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Lynne Vallone

In 1828, fifteen-year-old Anne Chalmers accompanied her sisters to a phrenologist and had her head examined. The diagnosis that the lively and good-natured eldest daughter of Reverend Dr. Thomas Chalmers (well known as a leader in the establishment of the Free Church of Scotland) received, however, was unwelcome: in a letter to a friend the teen related that she had been told that "I have too much romance & that there must be nothing but reality! reality! reality! for us. No fiction but all truth. I don't relish that much, because the chief pleasure in life is living in an ideal world & giving yourself up to your imagination" (51). Contemplating writing a novel, another young Scot, Jane Baillie Welsh (1801–66), playfully confided to a relative in early 1822, four years before her marriage to Thomas Carlyle, her belief that imagining and manipulating characters would give her more satisfaction than "real life" could provide: "I will be happier contemplating my '*beau idéal*' than a *real, substantial*, eating, drinking, sleeping, *honest* husband" (43).

The natural tendency of the young to fantasize and romanticize makes unsurprising Anne's preference for the ideal over the real, and Jane's desire to spend time with a fictional rather than an actual spouse. Yet their education would have supported the phrenologist's assessment: for middle- and upper-class girls of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain and America, dominant educational policies and practices emphasized the restriction of fancy in favor of a steady diet of facts, the acquisition of desirable "feminine" accomplishments (such as needlework, drawing, musical training, and foreign languages), as well as the development of religious devotion and regular habits of mind. In addition, the study of history—emphasizing dates and principal events, biographical sketches, and moral and patriotic interpretations, in particular—played a significant role in the curriculum for most



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