

# John Knox and the Queens of Britain



It's 1561, and two of Scotland's most famous expatriates have recently come home: Mary Stuart, the Catholic Queen of Scots, and John Knox, the great protestant reformer.

More than religion separates the two. Three years before, in 1558, Knox published a controversial polemic attacking Mary Stuart and the other ruling queens of Britain: *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*. Mary's mother, Mary of Guise, Queen Regent of Scotland, had labeled an earlier piece of writing by Knox a "pasquil"—an abusive lampoon—and revived a heresy trial against him. Even the Protestant-leaning Elizabeth Tudor, Queen of England, took offense at *The First Blast*, which lamented that the future of the Protestant faith lay in the hands of a female monarchy hostile to its precepts. In 1559, Queen Elizabeth repeatedly refused Knox passage to Scotland through England.

In 1561, when Queen Mary learns of a sermon Knox delivered at St. Giles Cathedral protesting a mass she led, she summons "the Trumpet of the Reformation" to Holyrood Palace and accuses him of promoting rebellion, sedition, and slaughter; publishing a book attacking her and her mother's authority; and practicing necromancy—her own first blast of sorts. Her defense of monarchical succession is similar to one advanced by none other than John Calvin, who thought it unlawful to disturb governments with long-standing practices of inheritance.

Knox's response to the queen relies on a then-radical concept: the principle of limited and constitutional monarchy. Comparing the relationship of a subject and prince to that of a child and father, he contends that unlawful monarchs can, and should, be resisted by force. The dispute culminates in a trial before the Privy Council where Queen Mary charges Knox with treason, an abuse of power in the view of many. The charge is eventually dismissed, and the trial ends in embarrassment for the queen.

Knox goes on to play a key role solidifying Scotland as a Protestant, and Presbyterian, nation. As for his original plan to publish a second and third "blast" against the female monarchy, it would seem that the great reformer learned an important lesson. Neither ever sounded.

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Above: Interview of John Knox with Mary, Queen of Scots, engraved by John Sartain from a painting by E. Leutze, 1848.