



*The Tragic Daughters of
Charles I: Mary, Elizabeth and
Henrietta Anne*

Sarah-Beth Watkins

Winchester: Chronos Books, 2019

Review by: Andrea Zuvich



The Tragic Daughters of Charles I: Mary, Elizabeth and Henrietta Anne. By Sarah-Beth Watkins. Winchester: Chronos Books, 2019. ISBN 978-1-78904-113-2. 165 pp. £12.99.

Far more has been written about the sons of Charles I and his Queen, Henrietta Maria, than about the daughters born of the couple—perhaps understandably, since two of their sons (Charles II and James II & VII) became kings. But with such works as *Lady Katherine Knollys: The Unacknowledged Daughter of King Henry VIII*, *The Tudor Brandons*, *Catherine of Braganza*, *Margaret Tudor, Queen of Scots*, and *Anne of Cleves* already under her belt, author Sarah-Beth Watkins seeks to address this neglect by shedding light on the lives of three of their daughters—Elizabeth, Mary, and Henrietta Anne—in her new book, *The Tragic Daughters of Charles I*. Covering three biographical subjects in one work is no mean feat and would be daunting for many a historian, but Watkins pulls it off with aplomb.

Beginning with Charles I's execution in 1649, Watkins provides some background on the political context of the volatile 1640s, before proceeding to tell the moving stories of these sisters. Of the three less time is devoted to Elizabeth Stuart (1635-1650), since she died at so young an age. This sensitive and frail Stuart princess's short life included house arrest and a poignant last meeting with her father, Charles I, the day before his execution. Her own death only a few months later, following probable tuberculosis combined with a fever, sealed her fate in the annals of young, tragic royalty (47).

Following Elizabeth's biography is that of Mary, Princess Royal and Princess of Orange (1631-1660). Mary married Prince Willem II of Orange in May of 1641, when she was nine and he was fifteen. Three years later, Willem broke into his twelve-year-old wife's bedchamber and consummated the marriage (17). It would be three more years until Mary conceived and miscarried their first child, but she later gave birth to a son, William, in 1650—a week after her husband had died from smallpox. This posthumous child, of course, became William III of England following the controversial so-called 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688-1689.

It is unlikely that Mary ever anticipated her son would have such a major role in the history not only of the Dutch Republic, but also of the British Isles and all of Europe. She did not even get to choose his name: her preference—Charles—was overruled by her formidable mother-in-law, Amalia van Solms (48). Mary's fortunes seemed set to improve when her brother, Charles II, returned to England to reclaim his throne in 1660, but in December of that same year she succumbed to the same disease that had not only killed her husband, but had also claimed her younger brother Henry three months earlier (79).

The third tragic princess Watkins covers is Henrietta Anne (1644-1670), who was born in Exeter during the midst of the British Civil Wars, and whose life provides the bulk of the book. Watkins presents a girl who had to flee England for France, where she then lived in relative poverty until she eventually began to gain popularity and prestige, hand-in-hand with her brother's rise. Her union with her cousin, Philippe, Duc d'Orléans (74), whom she married in 1661, and who was more interested in his male favourites, proved very unhappy (82–83).

Henrietta was affectionately known as Minette by her brother Charles II, and their correspondence shines an intimate light upon the close relationship between these siblings. Henrietta Anne was instrumental in the secret Treaty of Dover between Charles and her brother-in-law, Louis XIV of France (131–132). But upon returning to France following this success, she had a drink of chicory water and, soon after cried out in pain, declaring that she had been poisoned. After an agonising ordeal, Henrietta Anne died aged only twenty-six (140). Rumours abounded that either her hateful husband or one of his lover's henchmen had poisoned her (141).

At just 153 pages (or 165 including references), *The Tragic Daughters of Charles I* is a concise analysis. Some might feel the overall work is rather hampered by its short length and perceive limitations in the depth to which these figures can be examined as a result. However, the extracts and quotes Watkins has selected from primary sources such as letters are an excellent addition and the author has made good use of available material. In terms of images, the cover features a wonderful portrait of Mary, Princess Royal and Princess of Orange, but the only interior images are of men: Charles I, Oliver Cromwell, George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, and Louis XIV of France. In a triple-biography of women, readers might well be surprised and a little disappointed by this (presumably editorial) decision. The book also suffers from a want of an Index. Nonetheless, *The Tragic Daughters of Charles I* is a well-written, succinct, and balanced work. The book provides an informative overview of the lives of these three often-overlooked princesses, whilst retaining an accessible style, which will no doubt be welcome for readers of the Stuart period, new and old alike.

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