

Shortly after seeing the Maynardville production of **Macbeth** earlier in the year, I came across Dorothy Dunnett's **King Hereafter** on the library shelf. I have long been a fan of her swashbuckling, sweeping historical sagas. She has produced two superbly researched series, each series consisting of six volumes, each volume a hefty tome filled with colour, adventure and Machiavellian intrigue. The first, with its hero, Crawford of Lymond, is set in sixteenth century Europe, and moves across the then-known world, from Scotland to Constantinople and Trebizond, and even Russia. The second series focuses on Flanders, but the hero, Niccolo,

ranges across the world as it was known to Europeans of the time - his adventures take him to Scotland, Venice, Cyprus, Timbuctoo and Iceland. It is no coincidence that the titles in the *Lymond* series are all chess terms: both of Dunnett's heroes are superb

plotters, masters of intrigue who plan their moves as though they were playing chess, all the time several jumps ahead of their (often formidable) opponents.

King Hereafter is not part of a series - it stands alone: a sympathetic and well-researched fictional account of the life of Macbeth. Not having seen it before, I pounced on it, and was soon engrossed. I soon realised that Shakespeare had done this King of Scotland (or Alba, as it was known then) a grave disservice. Please don't misunderstand me - I am not knocking Shakespeare here. I think his play is a compelling and chilling study of evil and the corrupting power of ambition, presented in powerfully moving language. I just wish he had not given poor Macbeth such a bad press.

Shakespeare based his tale on the **Chronicles** of the historian, Holinshed. While I have not read Holinshed, I understand that Shakespeare took very little from him except the names and some very basic elements of the plot. Even these he did not get quite right. For instance, Duncan, far from being the venerable old man portrayed by Shakespeare, was actually only 33 at the time of his death - just two years older than Macbeth. In the play, one gets the impression that the events described took place over a very short space of time - perhaps a few months at most. In fact, Macbeth ruled Scotland for almost seventeen years. From the little we know of him, he does not seem to have been a bad king at all - far from the blood-thirsty, murdering archvillain of the play. Nor was his wife, Groa, the fiend Shakespeare made her out to be, but a beautiful, sensible, capable woman - a supportive wife who coped efficiently with the affairs of his kingdom during his absences.

Thorfinn, Earl of Orkney, who later became Macbeth, King of Alba, lived from 1009 to 1057. His father was Earl Sigurd of Orkney, and his mother was Bethoc, daughter of King Malcolm II of Alba. Bethoc had three husbands: the first, Crinan, was the father of Duncan, born in 1007, and his grandfather Malcolm's chosen heir. Divorce does not seem to have been a problem in those days, as Bethoc married Sigurd while Crinan was still alive (he died in 1045). On the death of Sigurd, in 1014, she married Lord Findlaech of Moray, who became Thorfinn's stepfather. From his father he inherited the Earldom of Orkney, and later became the Mormaer of Moray. As Malcolm's second grandson, he had a legitimate claim to throne of Alba, reinforced by his marriage to Groa, granddaughter of King Kenneth III, who had been deposed and killed by Malcolm. According to Dunnett's account, however, Thorfinn had no desire to claim the throne, being content with what he already had. It was Duncan's insecurity, and his jealousy and dislike of his half-brother

which caused him to make war on Thorfinn, and forced Thorfinn, finally, to fight and kill him. In the novel, the 31-year-old Thorfinn, who then took the name Macbeth (son of Beth), was a just and wise ruler, despite his youth. He did his best to consolidate and unify a scattered kingdom consisting of isolated communities with little in common except the need for the protection of a strong ruler.

Macbeth lived at a fascinating time in history. Europe was full of young kings, all ambitious to make their mark, all plotting deviously to overthrow their rivals. Macbeth proved to be a shrewd tactician, holding his own in these convoluted power games for close to seventeen years. King Canute ruled England, and also Denmark and Norway. He was succeeded by Edward the Confessor, who was conquered, in 1066, by William of Normandy, the beginning of the Norman domination of England. To the south, one of Macbeth's staunchest allies in the Machiavellian power struggle taking place throughout the land, was Earl Leofric of Mercia, married to the legendary Lady Godiva. The Scottish king also, at various times, forged alliances with Norway and Denmark to the north, and Ireland to the west.

At one point, he undertook a mission to Rome to invite the Pope to send priests to Alba, which would, he hoped, have a civilising influence on this disparate and somewhat uncouth nation of fighters and farmers. From his stronghold in Orkney he built a powerful fleet, manned by skilled and experienced sailors, which traded far and wide for the essentials to keep his country going, and patrolled the coastal waters to keep his enemies at bay.

In the end, however, the ambitions and plotting of his enemies proved to be too much. Betrayed by his allies, he was defeated and slain by Duncan's son, who became Malcolm III, and married the widowed Groa.

Having had my appetite whetted by Dunnett's work, I began reading around the play. Amongst others, I found a rather interesting little publication called **Macbeth with related readings**, in the *Global Shakespeare Series*. In addition to an annotated text of the play, it includes a number of pieces adding insight to the work - some light-hearted, others more serious criticism. There is a delightful piece by James Thurber, entitled *The Macbeth murder mystery*, which analyses the plot according to the conventions of the classic detective story, along the lines of Agatha Christie and Hercule Poirot, and comes to the conclusion that it was not Macbeth 'whodunit': the murderer was obviously Macduff.

It also includes a piece by Kingsley Amis, *Affairs of death*: an account of the king's visit to Rome. According to Amis, the purpose of this visit was to beg absolution from the Pope for Duncan's murder, and to set the record straight for future generations. 'My reign has not been untroubled', he tells the Pope, 'and some of the events in it, and even more those attending to its inception, were violent, confused and ambiguous. Not long after I am dead the generally accepted account of my reign, is like to deviate absurdly and irrecoverably from historical fact.' In Amis's version, Duncan is characterised by Macbeth as ...'a wretch, mean of spirit, vengeful, I think a little mad; no one was safe from his sudden rages. Wasteful and indolent. Unclean in his person - he stank under our knives, not only from fear. Not kingly. It is put out of sight that his nickname of the Gracious was a jest, a taunt.'

So few of the actual facts are reflected in Shakespeare's play that I wonder why he bothered to pretend that it was history. He could easily have used other, fictitious names. It would not have detracted from his work in the least: it would have remained a masterly analysis of an heroic figure of a man, transformed by ambition into a depraved monster, and finally destroyed by his own guilt. Instead, he has done a hatchet job on a king who, from all accounts, did nothing to deserve the notoriety which has followed him since the seventeenth century.



BETWEEN THE LINES

Cecily van Gend