

ST MARGARET THE PEARL OF SCOTLAND

I enjoy researching saints' lives, and recently, I was researching the patron saints of the British Isles. I mentioned this to a friend, who then asked me if I knew the patron saint of Scotland. I didn't hesitate and said, St. Andrew. He said yes, but then asked if I'd heard of St. Margaret, the Pearl of Scotland. I hadn't and said so, which made me wonder why he'd asked.

This definition of 'Pearl of Scotland' intrigued me, and when I researched it, I found a saint who had lived in various countries around the time of 'William the Conqueror'. She was born in Hungary in 1045 yet spent most of her life living in and helping Scotland and its people. I found her story so interesting.

Margaret was an English princess born in Hungary and raised in a very religious court. Her father was the expatriate English Saxon prince 'Edward in Exile'.

He was a possible successor to Edward the Confessor, who was ill. As a result, the family returned to England, but her father died soon after landing. Margaret was still a child but was allowed to live in the English court, where Edgar, her brother, was considered a possible successor.

In 1066, Edward the Confessor died, but Harold Godwinson was elected king. At that time, William of Normandy also claimed the throne and invaded England. He defeated Harold at the Battle of Hastings and marched on London to take the throne. Although Margaret's brother Edgar had been named king, he was never crowned, and William of Normandy became king of all England.

Margaret and her family, among the last remaining Saxon Royals in England, found themselves in a precarious position. Fearing for their lives, they fled northwards, away from the advancing Normans. In 1068, Edgar, Margaret, Cristina, and their mother initially sought refuge in Northumberland, with the intention of sailing back to the Continent. However, their plans were thwarted by storms, and they found themselves in Fyfe, Scotland. Here, they were fortunate to find a protector in King Malcolm III.

Margaret was a very pious young girl, spending time in prayer, devotional reading, and ecclesiastical embroidery. Malcolm was illiterate and not religious but admired her piety. He soon fell in love with her, and they married in 1070.

Margaret became the mother of three kings of Scotland, or four if Edmund of Scotland (who ruled with his uncle, Donald III) is counted, and of Matilda of Scotland, queen consort of England.

Queen Margaret was a strong, pure, noble character who had a great influence over her husband and, through him, over Scottish history, especially in its ecclesiastical aspects.

She even established a ferry across the Firth of Forth so pilgrims could reach St. Andrews in Fife, which resulted in the names of the two towns: South Queensferry and North Queensferry.

Her charitable works included serving orphans and the poor every day before she ate and washing the feet of the poor in imitation of Christ. She rose at midnight every night to attend the mass. She used a cave on the banks of the Tower Burn in Dunfermline as a place of devotion and prayer. This became known as St. Margaret's Cave.

Her husband Malcolm III, and their eldest son Edward, were killed in the Battle of Alnwick against the English on 13 November 1093. Her son Edgar told his mother of their deaths. Margaret died three days later, 16 November 1093, at Edinburgh Castle. The cause of death was reportedly grief.

I found reading about this 'Pearl of Scotland' very moving and how its people benefitted greatly from the many charitable and religious events attributed to her. She must be one of Scotland's greatest, if not the greatest, of its revered Queens and female Saints.

FEASTDAY: 16th November, Patron of Scotland.

CANONISED: by Pope Innocent IV in 1250.