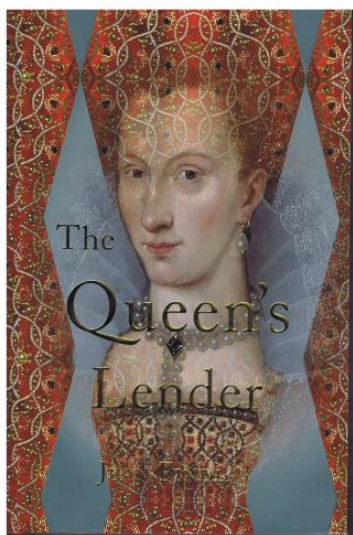


'The Queen's Lender', by Jean Findlay

Review by Martyn Colebrook



It's rare that I have such an immediate response to, and impression made by, a work of fiction but occasionally a novel comes along which is that pleasurable you almost feel compelled to return immediately to the first page and begin again. That is the minimum level of praise that *The Queen's Lender* warrants; in all honesty, it deserves a great deal more. If this novel does not win a major award in the next publishing cycle, it will be a travesty and a disservice to the talents and intelligence of the author. I'm effusive and unashamed in writing such a review.

Meet George Heriot, the Queen's Lender. Based in Edinburgh, Heriot is a goldsmith by trade, royal-appointed jeweller and subsequently a philanthropist. A detail which the author brings to attention is that the role of the goldsmith in the seventeenth century was not just to produce jewels and precious metals but also to fulfil a number of other financial services to the monarch, thus Heriot becomes the Queen's Banker. Mr Heriot holds the ear of the Queen as well as the purse strings, and both provide him with sufficient information and strategic knowledge to ensure that his fortune is made, yet despite this he serves dutifully and ably. Discretion sits well with debt in this case and whilst Heriot is depicted as a loyal servant, the reader is in no way deluded that Heriot's main priority is the preservation of himself and his family.

Heriot ascends the ranks of the court, initially selling items to Anne of Denmark (Queen Consort) before his appointment to serve the Queen. Anne's reputation for her love of jewellery is portrayed well, as is the lavish spending which was undertaken by her and James VI. What is significant about this portrayal of Heriot is the manner in which it illustrates how his philanthropic activity and considerations were borne out of concerns about the spendthrift and extravagant nature of the monarchy's activities. He hears: 'the Masque of Blackness ... cost over £100,000 - enough to build a palace, or to educate the whole of Edinburgh.' It is at this point Findlay is able to offer Heriot's counterpoint to the significant wealth he accrues and benefits from due to such expenditure.

Findlay is able to depict the tales of each critical member of the ruling family and their critical roles in the formation of the United Kingdom with a tenderness and humanity that is often markedly juxtaposed against the violence and brutality which characterised the court of James VI of Scotland. The young boy subjected to a brutal glossectomy for praying with a rosary is a harrowing but tender scene that sticks long in the memory.

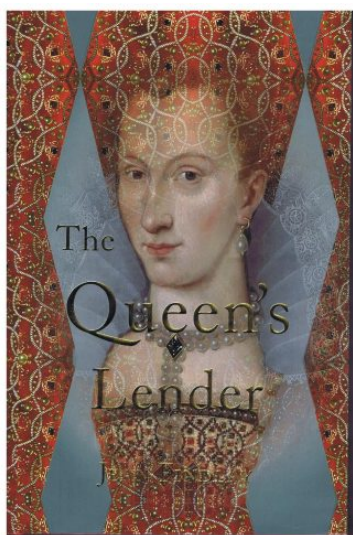
Anne's lack of financial acumen, James's paranoia about witchcraft and his subsequent purging of East Lothian, the appointment of the grandiloquent Shakespeare as Court Playwright and the broader commentary on the relationship between Europe and the United Kingdom gives this novel a timely resonance on the principles that history doesn't repeat itself, it simply rhymes. As Ben Jonson is heard to say: 'We English need separation, independence, none of your wet alliances with Spain ... England has never liked Europe ... We do not need them, we can fight the world alone.' From the need to move away from one's home in order to prosper to the political division and nepotism which dominates, this astute piece of fiction is both in and out of its time.

The elegance of Findlay's documenting this figure is enhanced by the laser-focused attention to his troubled private life as a father and husband who was often bereft of his wife and children by circumstances beyond his control, including death in childbirth and a childless marriage. At the point of Union and James I's decision to move to London, we see Heriot's concern as to the consequence of his wife's travelling to London. This is a sequence where Findlay's ability to bring the subject of her fiction to life, a touching and humane set of exchanges where the dialogue and scene-setting is delightful. She excels in conveying the environment and interrelationship between that and the emotions

experienced by the characters, whether the reader is in the privacy of the Queen's own chamber, a pungent fishmonger within the lively atmosphere of an Edinburgh street, an aromatic garden, or a claustrophobic and unsettled cabin in a ship sailing at the mercies of sea.

There is much more that could be said about *The Queen's Lender* but this will hopefully sufficiently whet the appetite for the sumptuous feast of fiction that lies ahead for curious readers. Mr Heriot's legacy has lived on through Heriot's Hospital, George Heriot's School and Heriot-Watt University. I expect that reputation to be burnished by this marvellous account of his life and the circumstances in which he lived.

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