



The Scottish History Society Learning Resource

The Balliol Dynasty

Key figures

John (I) Balliol (c.1210-68)

The first John Balliol, father of King John, was a prominent member of a family that originated from Picardy. He was a key player in many English political events of the thirteenth century and was a hardy supporter of King Henry III. He married Dervorguilla, daughter and co-heiress of Alan, lord of Galloway, and grand-daughter of David, earl of Huntingdon. The couple's three surviving sons married into the English royal family. When John (I) died, he left behind a legacy of political power and wealth, which would dissipate significantly following the deaths of his two elder sons, Hugh and Alexander. He was also the founder of Balliol College in Oxford (c.1263).

Dervorguilla, daughter of Alan, lord of Galloway (d.1290)

Dervorguilla's royal lineage – as grand-daughter of David, earl of Huntingdon, brother of William I – would give her son, John, his claims to the Scottish throne after the death of Alexander III in 1286. She herself was a wealthy widow, having accumulated lands in England from John, earl of Chester, her uncle, and lands in Galloway from her father. Her marriage to John (I) in 1233 would produce eight children, four sons and four daughters. In her widowhood, she completed the foundation of Balliol College and also founded Sweetheart Abbey near Dumfries. She died in 1290, passing on her own fortune and lands in England and Scotland to their only remaining son, John.

John (II) Balliol (c.1249-1314) – King John Balliol of Scotland

As the fourth son of John (I) and Dervorguilla of Galloway, John (II) was probably trained for a clerical career at Durham and had no experience in politics – especially Scottish politics – until the Great Cause of 1291-92. Until this point, he had remained on his English estates in Northumberland and Durham. Through his mother, he could claim the throne of Scotland after the death of Alexander III's granddaughter, Margaret, Maid of Norway, in 1290. Though being politically inexperienced and seemingly indifferent, the Comyn family stepped in to promote his claims to the throne. John had married a cousin of King Edward I of England – Isabella, daughter of John de Warenne, earl of Surrey – though she appears to have been dead by the time he succeeded to the throne. He died in November 1314 on his ancestral lands in Picardy.

Edward Balliol (c.1282-1364) – King Edward Balliol of Scotland

The only son of John (II) and Isabella de Warenne, Edward Balliol was born around 1282. His godfather was King Edward I and his early life was probably spent in England or at the royal court. He was certainly at the court of Prince Edward (the future Edward II) during John Balliol's reign and remained there until his father's death in France in 1314. In 1320, a conspiracy was uncovered involving William de Soules and others who hoped to depose Robert Bruce in favour of Edward Balliol, but the conspirators were duly punished. In 1332, Balliol launched an invasion of Scotland with the assistance of 'the Disinherited' lords and was crowned king shortly afterwards. Though his reign was marked by war and dissension, he continued an attempted kingship until he formerly abdicated in 1356. He then became a pensioner of the English Crown and died in January 1364. A betrothal in 1295 to Jeanne de Valois, niece of Philip IV of France, never materialised and there is only loose evidence that he ever married, perhaps to Margherita de Taranto, an Italian noblewoman with de Valois links.

Edward I of England (d.1307)

A powerful statesman and key figure of the 13th century, King Edward also had close ties to the Balliol family through John de Warenne, earl of Surrey, who had married Edward's aunt. King Edward supported the decision of the Scottish and English magnates to elect John (II) to the throne of Scotland but immediately sought to undermine John's kingship by seeking the new king's homage and taking advantage of his inexperience.

Edward II of England (d.1327)

Edward I's eldest surviving son would succeed him to the throne in 1307. He had probably known Edward Balliol throughout his childhood, though as king, Edward II would not grant Balliol his family estates, meaning that Balliol had to live off the Crown. Edward II's reign was plagued by his own political problems and he died in suspicious circumstances in 1327.

Edward III of England (d.1377)

Edward III succeeded his father after a successful coup against Edward II undertaken by his mother, Isabella of France, and her lover, Roger de Mortimer. Though he initially supported Edward Balliol's invasion and subsequent campaigns, by the late 1330s, he had become distracted and eventually more invested in his campaigns in France with the outbreak of the Hundred Years War. By the early 1350s, he had abandoned Balliol and accepted the latter's resignation in 1356. He offered Balliol a £2,000 annuity for the rest of his life in exchange for the kingdom.

'The Disinherited'

The Disinherited lords were a group of notable and lesser Scottish landholders, including Henry de Beaumont, David of Strathbogie, Gilbert de Umfraville and members of the Mowbray family, who had been disinherited of these lands by Robert Bruce after Bannockburn. They sought to recover these shortly after Bruce's death and the succession of his young son, David. They threw their support to Edward Balliol at the time of his invasion in 1332, but by the 1340s their support had diminished.

Key Events

The Great Cause (1291-92)

The Process of Norham and the Great Cause are the terms given to the nearly two-year judicial process beginning in early 1291 whereby John (II) Balliol was chosen king of Scotland and enthroned in November 1292. He was elected by 104 auditors from a group of thirteen competitors, the most serious of which was Robert Bruce, earl of Carrick (d.1295), grandfather of the future Robert I. The Process of Norham also established Edward's overlordship of Scotland, which would cause further problems for the new king and his kingdom. Balliol's case rested on his position as surviving heir of Dervorguilla, eldest daughter of Margaret, eldest daughter of David, earl of Huntingdon, brother of William I. Bruce argued his case as 'nearer in degree' to David, earl of Huntingdon, since he was the son of David's second eldest daughter, Isabella. Scotland's laws of succession, though, were through primogeniture making Balliol the successful candidate.

Kingship of John Balliol (1292-96)

Following the decision in Balliol's favour on 17 November, he quickly gave fealty to Edward I as his overlord and was enthroned on St Andrew's Day. During Christmas celebrations that year, he also gave homage to Edward for the kingdom of Scotland – the first in a series of bad political moves which would result in his surrender and the outbreak of war. His reign was only three and a half years long, but saw advancement in certain areas during this time, such as a general return to stability, parliamentary development and the formation of the alliance with France in 1295. Yet, too many times his authority as king was undermined by political opposition from the Bruce faction, such as initial issues of homage and the Whithorn election of 1294. In 1295, in order to negotiate the treaty with France and to give support to King John, a council of twelve was created, sparking debate on whether John was completely removed from power. While his removal was unlikely, it would discredit his adeptness and authority as king. Angered at the Franco-Scottish alliance, Edward I declared war on Scotland and, after a series of disastrous defeats, John resigned the kingdom and surrendered to Edward I in July 1296.

The Wars of Independence (1296-1304)

Scottish patriots William Wallace and Andrew Murray fought in the name of King John and in the early years of the war, the goal was to reinstate their deposed king. This underlines firm loyalties that Balliol had, despite his less-than-illustrious kingship. The wars lasted until the Scots, led by John Comyn of Badenoch (also Balliol's nephew), surrendered in September 1304, two years after Balliol had given up his own attempts to be restored.

Exile of King John (1299-1302)

John was held first in the Tower of London, though after a few months he was released under lenient house-arrest in Hertfordshire. Following the summer 1297 uprisings in Scotland, John was returned to the Tower once more and remained there until July 1299, when, as part of Anglo-French negotiations, the former king was handed over to papal custody in France. While in France he probably attempted to contact William Wallace and other Scots who were in Paris attempting to negotiate support for their cause. In 1302, he was finally released to his ancestral lands in Picardy. Between 1296 and 1302, he had remained an important symbol of the Wars of Independence.

The Second Wars of Independence (1332-57)

War was probably already on the horizon within a year of Robert Bruce's death in 1329, as the Disinherited and Edward Balliol began making plans for invasion in mid-1330. Bruce's young son, David was quickly crowned king in November 1331 and by July 1332, Edward and his forces had landed at Kinghorn, Fife. Balliol won a quick victory and was himself crowned in September of that year. David Bruce was hastily taken to France for protection, but the Scots were able to regain some control and support by the late 1330s. The Anglo-Balliol cause was ultimately lost by the 1350, despite victory at Neville's Cross in 1346 and the capture of David II. Following Balliol's abdication in January 1356, a treaty was negotiated which ended hostilities between the two kingdoms in 1357.

Kingship of Edward Balliol (1332-56)

Though he secured his authority within weeks of the successful invasion, Edward Balliol's regime had problems from the beginning, the most apparent being a lack of a natural following and unstable loyalties. Major defections in the early years led to the regime's loss of many key magnates by the 1340s. He was also forced to rely too heavily on financial and military assistance from Edward III, to whom he had given fealty just as his father had done to Edward I. Balliol also granted £2,000 worth of Scottish lands south of the Forth to England and the six southern sheriffdoms, which in essence, left him with very little kingdom to call his own. By 1341 and with the return of the now-adult King David, Balliol's cause was essentially over, yet, despite losing English support in the early 1350s, he continued desperately as the 'pseudo-king of Scotland' until his surrender in 1356.

Brief timeline

DATE	EVENT
1268, 17 x 24 October	Death of John (I)
1278, x 13 November	Death of John (II)'s eldest surviving brother, Alexander; John ends his clerical career and inherits the family's English estates
1284, February	John (II) makes his first known appearance in Scottish politics, recognising the Maid of Norway's rights to the throne should Alexander III die without heirs
1286, 19 March	Death of King Alexander III; Six Guardians are established to oversee the kingdom
1290, 28 January	Death of Dervorguilla of Galloway
1290, September /October	Death of the Maid of Norway
1291-92	The Process of Norham and the Great Cause
1292, 30 November	John Balliol enthroned as king of Scots at Scone
1295, October	Treaty with France concluded; ratified by parliament in Feb. 1296
1296, 27 April	Scots defeated at Dunbar
1296, 10 July	John surrenders the throne to Edward I; taken into custody at Tower of London but released in November to Hertfordshire
1297, August	John returned to Tower of London
1297, 11 September	English defeated at Stirling Bridge
1298, 22 July	Scots defeated at Falkirk

1299, July	King John released into papal custody in France
1302	King John released from captivity to his private estates in Picardy
1304, September	Scots surrender to Edward I
1314, November	Death of John (II); Edward Balliol asks for English inheritance but is refused; leaves for France
1318-20	Soules Conspiracy against Robert Bruce
1331, October	Balliol returns to England and begins plans for invasion of Scotland
1332, 6 July	Invasion of Edward Balliol and the Disinherited at Kinghorn Fife
1337	Outbreak of the Hundred Years War between England and France; Balliol loses major support
1350/1	Edward III excludes Balliol from negotiations with Scotland
1356, 20 January	Edward Balliol surrenders the throne to Edward III at Roxburgh
1364, 1 x 24 January	Death of Edward Balliol at Wheatley near Doncaster, Yorkshire

Changing perspectives

King John's actions after his success in the Great Cause would kick-start the propaganda mills and create the family's blackened reputation. Balliol was frequently identified as a puppet king of Edward I, though the facts are not so clear cut. Events from 1284 highlight a man 'trapped by circumstances', as one historian has mentioned, and he showed frequent reluctance to enter into any arrangements concerning the succession. During John's reign, his political inexperience showed through on numerous occasions, and he may have become more dependent on the more politically-adept Comyn family. Further complicating his reign was his relationship to the English royal family. The reign was not entirely a disaster, however, as evidence of seven parliaments, the creation of new sheriffdoms in the West, the restoration of some political order, and the military alliance with France all point to a king who was keen to reverse last six year of problems which the country had faced. But, unfortunately, it was Balliol's weaker character, inexperience and relationship with Edward I of England which would be remembered by chroniclers and later historians. Much of the blackened reputation of the Balliol Dynasty has come from earlier assessments of their roles as Scottish kings, rather than as Anglo-Scottish barons. Early writers of Scottish history tended to focus on the more praise-worthy reigns of Alexander III (1249-86) and Robert Bruce (1306-29), and as King John's reign was plagued by his links to England, most medieval writers do not comment favourably on his kingship. In the last fifty years, though, historians have begun to challenge the reputation of the Balliol Dynasty and attempts have been made to assess the family within a British context. However, modern historians are still careful when approaching the misunderstood King John.

King Edward Balliol has also received much criticism for his links to England and the second outbreak of Anglo-Scottish wars in the 1330s. Yet, the context of his life before 1330 reveals a much more ambitious and determined political figure than what he is given credit for. Having been under the patronage of the English kings virtually all his life, Balliol had been supported both financially and militarily in his Scottish conquests while his biggest failures were his lack of property, landed wealth, and thus, territorial following in his campaigns. There were, as in John's kingship, a few positive aspects to his reign. His use of the military, the rise of the Disinherited and even his reliance on the English king marked a substantial shift in crown-Baliol relations. During his reign, the participation and intervention of Edward III proved paramount and crucial to the success of the Balliol regime.

In previous histories, writers had dismissed the Balliols' status as committed English lords, beginning with the political career of John (I) in the mid-thirteenth century. But his influence and relationships with Kings Alexander II and Alexander III of Scotland and Henry III of England underline John's power and ambition as an independent lord, whose identity remained wholly English. Reassessment of John (I)'s career has shed new and brighter light on the political roles and kingships of John (II) and Edward Balliol and underlines how the family has been unfairly judged through centuries by both chroniclers and historians who have assessed them as Scottish kings rather than as English lords.

Suggested reading

Classic studies and texts

- G.W.S. Barrow, *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland* (3rd edn., Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1988)
- A.A.M. Duncan, *Scotland: The Making of the Kingdom* (Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd, 1975)
- F.J. Watson, *Under the Hammer: Edward I and Scotland 1286-1307* (East Linton, Tuckwell Press, 1998)

Most recent books

- A. Beam, *The Balliol Dynasty, 1210-1364* (Edinburgh, John Donald, 2008)
- M. Brown, *The Wars of Scotland, 1214-1371* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004)
- A.A.M. Duncan, *The Kingship of the Scots, 842-1292: Succession and Independence* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2002)
- M. Penman, *David II* (East Linton, Tuckwell Press, 2004)