



The Scottish History Society Learning Resource

The Wars of Independence

Brief account of events

1296-1305: Edward I conquers Scotland twice.

Scottish knights put up little resistance as Edward I marches through Scotland in 1296, reaching as far north as Elgin. He leaves Scotland in the hands of English officials who face stiff resistance, particularly from William Wallace, and most of the kingdom is liberated. During this period Scots are fighting to restore their king, John Balliol, who Edward had removed. In 1303 Edward I again leads an army to Elgin. In 1304 the Scottish government, led by Balliol's son-in-law, John (the Red) Comyn, surrenders, and in 1305 Edward settles how a conquered Scotland is to be governed.

1306-1309: Civil war, Bruce v. Comyn.

Robert Bruce kills John (the Red) Comyn and seizes the throne, but is soon defeated and flees. He returns in 1307 and begins a highly successful campaign against Scots, led by the Comyns, the most powerful family in Scotland, who regard John Balliol, not Robert Bruce, as their rightful king. Edward I dies in 1307 while leading an army against Bruce. Buchan in the North-East, a powerbase of the Comyns, is ravaged by Bruce's forces.

1310-1314: Robert Bruce reconquers Scotland.

Edward II's campaign in Scotland fails, and Bruce's forces capture and destroy all remaining major castles in English hands. Edward II leads another army into Scotland, and is defeated by Bruce at Bannockburn. Bruce is now master of Scotland.

1314-1323: Bruce takes war to England.

Edward II of England refuses to recognise Bruce as an independent king. Bruce raids Northern England and his brother, Edward, leads an invasion of Ireland (which was partly an English colony). In 1320 Bruce organises Scottish barons to send a letter to the pope making a powerful case for Scottish independence. (This letter is known as the 'Declaration of Arbroath'.) But Bruce still faces serious threats. The wounds of the civil war have not healed. In 1320 a conspiracy to kill Bruce is brutally crushed.

1323-1329: Scottish independence recognised

A truce with England begins, and a treaty of alliance with France is agreed. The adolescent Edward III becomes king of England in 1327. Bruce puts pressure on the weak English government, who in the Treaty of Edinburgh (1328) formally recognise Bruce as king of an independent Scotland. Bruce dies in 1329 before hearing that the pope, too, has recognised him as king of an independent Scotland.

1332-1335: Civil war and English occupation

Bruce was succeeded by David II, who was only five years old. By 1332 Bruce's leading captains were dead. There were still some who supported Balliol not Bruce. John Balliol had died long ago, and his son Edward now came to prominence, leading a band of knights into Fife and briefly becoming king in 1332. In 1333 Edward Balliol returned, this time supported by Edward III. The Bruce party were defeated and many killed. David II was taken to France in 1334. Edward Balliol was again king, and gave over the south of Scotland (including Edinburgh) to Edward III of England.

1335-1341: Revival of the Bruce cause

The last Bruce leaders in the field were Robert Stewart in Bute and Andrew Murray in the North. Andrew Murray leads a brutal and successful campaign which turns the tide. In 1337 Edward III turns his attention to invading France, and Edward Balliol loses support and flees. In 1341 David II returns from France.

Stalemate after 1341

The wars never formally end. There was no treaty in which the king of England recognised the king of Scotland as an independent monarch. But conquest was no longer on the cards. The last reigning king of England to invade Scotland was Henry IV in 1400. Some Scottish strongholds near the border remained in English hands. Roxburgh was not finally retaken by the Scots until 1460. Berwick before 1296 had been Scotland's wealthiest town. Between 1296 and 1482 it was more often in English than in Scottish hands, and after 1482 remained in England. The continuing hostility with England, and England's long war with France (1337-1453), meant that Scotland became close allies with France. After Henry V of England won the Battle of Agincourt the main force which prevented him from conquering France was a Scottish army which defeated and killed Henry V's brother at the battle of Baugé in 1421. This Scottish army was eventually defeated and destroyed at Verneuil in 1424.

Changing Perspectives

Key change

Historians have moved a long way from seeing the wars in simple terms as Wallace and Bruce versus the English, and seeing Scots who supported the English as traitors. This is because:

- (i) The 'civil war' dimension is more openly recognised, especially after 1306. Some Scots, quite naturally, felt they could not change the fact that John Balliol was their king, however hopeless his cause was. For them Robert Bruce was a self-serving usurper. The Comyns, in particular, could not support Bruce after he killed their leader, John (the Red) Comyn.

(ii) More attention is paid to the period 1296-1305, and particularly the role of the Comyns in leading opposition to Edward I after Wallace's resignation.

Bruce's achievement reassessed

Does this diminish Robert Bruce's achievement? The fact that not all Scots were convinced that he should be king means that Robert Bruce had to work hard throughout his reign in order to maintain his position. He had to be not only a brilliant military commander but also a masterly politician. It is a measure of his success that, in the end, he was regarded as one of the most famous knights in Europe, not only because of his fighting prowess, but also his demonstration of other chivalric virtues, such as generosity in victory.

Patriotism not the only reason to resist English occupation

Historians are also more willing to recognise that motives for fighting the English could be complex. A crucial issue is that royal government in England was much more heavy and demanding than royal government in Scotland. The Scots objected to English occupation so strongly because, in part, they were not used to the experience of strong central government. This was particularly true after Edward I's conquest because Edward, in his desperation for money to finance in war against the king of France, ordered all wool waiting for export to be seized. The wool trade was vital to the Scottish economy, so this measure brought immediate suffering to merchants and better-off peasants with wool to sell, as well as to greater landholders. The leaders of society at all levels (village, locality and region) had a powerful motive to rise against Edward I and insist on the restoration of a Scottish king who would govern Scotland in a much less oppressive way, as of old.

William Wallace

The film *Braveheart* is almost entirely fictional. Wallace was no commoner. His father and brother were knights who followed a great noble, James Stewart. It was, however, unprecedented for someone of Wallace's status to lead a kingdom. He provided leadership at a time when the 'natural' leaders in medieval society, the higher nobility, were almost all in Edward I's power after the conquest of 1296. But he was not alone: Andrew Murray escaped from captivity and led the uprising in the north, and William Douglas led men from the south. At the famous victory of Stirling Bridge (1297) the army were led by Andrew Murray as well as Wallace. Murray died two months later, leaving Wallace in charge. Wallace was recognised as guardian, but resigned after losing the Battle of Falkirk in 1298. He continued to serve the cause of independence as a diplomat. After the submission of 1304 Edward I refused to make peace with Wallace and demanded that he be hunted down. He was captured a year and a half later and executed in London for treason.

Key figures

Edward I, king of England 1272-1307

He was determined to assert what he saw as his rights as king. He limited the power of major landholders, conquered Wales (1282-3), and resisted the king of France's authority over Edward's lordship in Gascony. His military ambitions in Britain and France were a serious financial strain. This was met by unprecedented levels of taxation, which nearly led to revolt in England.

Edward II, king of England 1307-1327

Failed to overcome the political and financial problems he inherited from his father, Edward I. He managed to alienate his family, and became increasingly ruthless and oppressive. He was deposed by his wife, and afterwards killed.

Edward III, king of England 1327-1377

After supporting Edward Balliol as king of Scots, his attention turned to France in 1337 where he achieved notable military success, although he failed to make real his claim to be king of France. He finally abandoned Edward Balliol in 1350 and recognised David II as king of Scots. David II was at the time Edward's prisoner. Edward realised that he could achieve more concessions for David's release if David was treated as a king, not a rebel.

Edward Balliol, king of Scots 1332, 1333-1335

The son of King John Balliol, he was raised in England following his father's capture. His only lands were in France. In 1330 he incurred the displeasure of the king of France and fled. He turned his attention to Scotland and became briefly a successful leader of the 'anti-Bruce' cause in Scotland. He clung on in part of Galloway for many years, but was abandoned by Edward III. He died in 1364, over eighty years old.

John Balliol, king of Scots 1292-1304

The son of a major English noble, he was one of the main claimants to the throne when the main Scottish royal line died out in 1290. During the first years of his reign he was caught between Edward I's assertion of overlordship and the determination of Scottish leaders to resist this. When Edward I conquered Scotland in 1296 John was taken to London as a prisoner. Eventually he was released to his ancestral estates in France. A government ruled unoccupied Scotland in his name until 1304, by which time it was clear that John would never return to rule Scotland in person.

John (the Red) Comyn, killed 1306

The leader of the most powerful Scottish family, he was prominent in governing unoccupied Scotland. He was the son of John Balliol's sister. Once it became clear that John Balliol would never return, John Comyn may have been regarded as the best hope for a king of an independent Scotland once Edward I was dead. This may be the reason why Robert Bruce killed him before seizing the throne for himself.

Robert Bruce, king of Scots 1306-1329

Earl of Carrick from 1292, when he was 18, and leading figure in governing unoccupied Scotland until defecting to Edward I in 1302 in order to safeguard his powerbases. As soon as his father died in 1304 Bruce began planning to take the throne, enlisting the support of the bishop of St Andrews. His killing of John (the Red) Comyn in 1306 made the Comyns his implacable enemies. As king Robert not only took military control of Scotland, but developed parliament as an instrument of his political authority.

Roll-call of battles

Dunbar (27 April 1296)

Scots host defeated by John de Warenne leading advance force in Edward I's invasion.

Stirling Bridge (11 September 1297)

John de Warenne, who Edward I had left in charge of Scotland, defeated by William Wallace and Andrew Murray.

Falkirk (22 July 1298)

William Wallace defeated by Edward I (but English invasion halted).

Roslin (24 February 1303)

English force based in Edinburgh Castle defeated by John (the Red) Comyn.

Methven (19 June 1306)

Robert Bruce defeated by English.

Loudon Hill (c. 10 May 1307)

English defeated by Robert Bruce.

Inverurie (23 May 1308)

John Comyn, earl of Buchan, defeated by Bruce.

Pass of Brander (mid-August 1308)

John Macdougall of Lorn defeated by Bruce.

Bannockburn (23-24 June 1314)

Edward II defeated by Robert Bruce.

Dundalk (14 October 1318)

Edward Bruce killed by English-Irish force.

Byland (20 October 1322)

John of Brittany, earl of Richmond, defeated by Robert Bruce raiding in Yorkshire.

Dupplin (10 August 1332)

Donald earl of Mar, guardian for David II, defeated and killed by Edward Balliol.

Halidon Hill (19 July 1333)

Archibald Douglas, guardian for David II, defeated and killed by Edward III.

Culblean (30 November 1335)

David Strathbogie (leading supporter of Edward Balliol) defeated and killed by Andrew Murray, guardian for David II.

Suggested reading

Classic studies and texts

G. W. S. Barrow, *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland* (first published in 1965, new editions in 1976, 1988 and Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2005)

A. A. M. Duncan (ed. and trans.), *John Barbour. The Bruce* (Edinburgh, Canongate, 1997).

Alexander Grant, *Independence and Nationhood: Scotland 1306-1469* (first published in 1984; republished Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1991)

Most recent books

Amanda Beam, *The Balliol Dynasty, 1210-1364* (Edinburgh, John Donald, 2008)

Michael Brown, *Bannockburn: The Scottish War and the British Isles, 1307-1323* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2008)

Michael Brown, *The Wars of Scotland 1214-1371* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004)

Edward J. Cowan, *'For Freedom Alone': the Declaration of Arbroath* (East Linton, Tuckwell Press, 2003)