

## **Introduction: Families at War**

In August 1299, an English spy reported news of a Scottish council-of-war to his king, Edward I. It was just over a year since the Scots' inspiring if unexpected leader, William Wallace, the second son of a minor knight, had been defeated by Edward at the battle of Falkirk. But the Scots had continued to rebel. In the intervening twelve months two major noblemen had emerged to act as 'Guardians of the realm' to lead the fight in the name of their absent king, John I (or John Balliol), then a prisoner in the Tower of London. However, these new generals - Robert Bruce, earl of Carrick, and John Comyn, son of the lord of Badenoch - were ill-matched allies.

Both in their twenties, these two ambitious knights were now the active representatives in the kingdom of the most powerful families on either side of an intense dynastic competition for the Scottish throne. Comyn and his cousin, the earl of Buchan, and their extensive family backed the right to be king of John Balliol (Badenoch's uncle); but Bruce was always on the look-out for the chance to push the claim of his own kindred, the Bruces of Annandale. As such, the outcome relayed by Edward I's agent in 1299, as a witness to the war council held at Peebles at the height of the campaigning season, was perhaps predictable.

William Wallace, it was reported, had left the kingdom on some unexplained mission to the continent without the permission of the two Guardians. As a result, one of Comyn's followers, Sir David Graham, laid claim to Wallace's lands and goods. But his demand was opposed by Wallace's brother, Malcolm, whom we are told was an adherent of Robert Bruce. A blazing row ensued. In the resulting scuffle 'John Comyn leaped at the earl of Carrick and seized him by the throat, and the earl of Buchan turned on the bishop of St Andrews'. In the end, it took the calming influence of more neutral nobles, like James the Steward, to part the

factions: then, shortly before they all went their separate ways, the bishop of St Andrews was appointed as chief guardian over and above Comyn and Bruce.

Here at once is graphic proof of the violent personal and political conflict which threatened to tear the Scottish community apart at the dawn of the fourteenth century exposing it fatally to English imperialism. In order to assert their claim to power in Scotland, landed nobles like Balliol, the Comyns and Bruce were forced to consider breaking violently with the tradition of holding lands in both the Scottish and English kingdoms (and very often in Ireland too). In doing so these men would be forfeited by Edward I and cease to be part of the wider feudal aristocracy with connections throughout the British isles. They would become simply Scottish king and lords, big fish in a small pond. Yet to achieve this, one party would not only have to fight off English claims of overlordship but it would also have to wrap itself up in a flag of wartime patriotism so as to vilify and destroy the rival claimant and his followers in Scotland. This losing party would turn naturally to aid from its feudal lord, the king of England, who would be only too glad to exploit such a 'fifth column' to make Scotland a vassal state.

This dilemma of whether or not to sacrifice valuable lands in England for unchallenged power in the northern kingdom (or try and retain both) would cause the chiefs and scions of many of the Scottish realm's leading families to vacillate, rebel, submit and betray by turns over the course of two generations. As might be expected, and as one contemporary English chronicler put it, 'in all this fighting the Scots were so divided that often a father was with the Scots and his son with the English, or one brother was with the Scots and another with the English, or even one individual was first on one side and then on the other'.

As we shall see, this quandary of identity and loyalty was most dramatically present in the early career of Robert Bruce, earl of Carrick, the man who would be king after 1306.

However, for all the big players of the realm and more minor figures (like Sir David Graham) this conflict more immediately created opportunities and dangers at a local level. In many ways, the Bruce v. Balliol struggle was a regional feud in south-west Scotland writ large. The Bruces as lords of Annandale and earls of Carrick clashed with their immediate neighbour, John Balliol lord of Galloway, and his in-laws, the Comyns, sheriffs of Wigtown and thus leading policemen for the Scottish kings in the south-west throughout the thirteenth century. The wide-spread family trees of these rival kindreds not only brought them familial claims to the Scottish throne after Alexander III died without leaving a male heir in 1286; but each of these family ties also embroiled their many in-laws and allies throughout the realm in both national and civil war. Neighbour took the chance to destroy neighbour and in the north-east, the western approaches and south-east of Scotland especially we shall see that men most often chose a side in opposition to their local rival.

For others in the kingdom, the cause was arguably much clearer. The leading Scottish churchmen in particular could be said to have already formed a binding national and institutional outlook on relations with England and the Scottish crown before 1286: they had done so in protecting the Scottish church from English interference throughout the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Thus after 1286 the bishops would very often sustain the Scottish resistance effort against England - both in war and diplomacy - through its lowest ebbs. The integrity of the Scottish church depended upon the maintenance of a free Scotland with its own king, owing allegiance to no-one but God and the Pope. Even the great monastic abbeys, priories and nunneries founded by kings of Scots between c. 1100 and 1249 as 'daughters' of leading English or French religious houses had some fear of English meddling in their liberties and vast landed resources.

A much more practical, daily choice of loyalties could also be said to have lain before men of lesser rank in Scotland - minor nobles like William Wallace, the townsmen and

merchants and the mass of the populace on the land. For such people the Anglo-Scottish conflict could be much more strongly drawn by ethnic differences and was very often a simple choice between oppression in the face of new demands from strangers or relative liberty and customary rights under familiar landlords: put at its most simple, the freedom to make a livelihood. Yet even all these bishops and abbots, lesser knights and esquires, trading burgesses and farming freeholders were often younger sons and kin of the leading noble families of the realm or under their direct feudal influence as their tenants: they were thus just as prone to local rivalries and hatreds, or fear and resolve in the face of war, as the leading laymen of the realm, be they of Anglo-Norman, Gaelic or mixed stock.

Besides, for all of these peoples dwelling in the Scottish kingdom it would above all require a victor in the underlying civil feud - Bruce v. Balliol - and the resulting re-establishment of active adult kingship in Scotland for the realm and all of its estates to survive English attack. Most Scots would have to back a horse that could win and pick a side at some point. This was a violent conflict which would see first blood drawn in 1286 - three years before Edward I's first concerted interference in the fate of the realm. The resulting internal strife in Scotland would then be marked by a bitter struggle for the reins of power, the spectacular murder by Bruce of Comyn of Badenoch in 1306, years of fighting which wasted the Scottish lowlands and the co-existence of two rival crowned kings of Scots at war in the 1330s. Indeed, far from being settled by the achievements of the hero king, Robert Bruce, by the time of his death in 1329, this struggle would not really end until the resignation of his claim to the Scottish throne by the sad, dejected figure of John I's son, Edward Balliol, to Edward III of England in 1356. The impact of this civil war on the Scottish political landscape was thus in many ways far more important than the struggle with the 'auld enemy'.