RESTLESS LAND

A radical journey through Scotland's history

Volume One (500AD–1914)

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For Robbie

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Foreword

It's October 2001, and I've just arrived in the Pakistani frontier city of Peshawar to report on the political and social repercussions of the bombing of Afghanistan.

A short drive away, up beyond the Khyber Pass, American B52 bombers roar over the Hindu Kush mountains of Eastern Afghanistan, turning villages into mass graves at the flick of a switch. Down here in the crowded marketplace of the Sadaar Bazaar, I'm startled by a magazine front cover on sale on the book and newspaper stalls.

It's a familiar image from back home – *Braveheart* actor Mel Gibson, glowering defiantly from the front cover of a Pashtun magazine, his sword flashing, his face daubed with blue and white warpaint. Except for one detail. Courtesy of Photoshop, William Wallace has a black Taliban-style turban wrapped around his head.

Every nation has its legends, its heroes and its villains, its glories and tragedies. Scotland may be a small country – 0.07 per cent of the world's population at the last count – but from the Wars of Independence to the melodrama of Mary Queen of Scots, from the massacre of Glencoe to the Parcel of Rogues, from Bonnie Prince Charlie to Red Clydeside, we have an almost embarrassing surplus of colourful, if not garish, history.

Great storybook stuff. But as Scotland stands on the threshold of the biggest decision the people of the nation have ever taken, what does it matter?

In one sense, it doesn't. The debate electrifying Scotland right now is not about the battles or betrayals, the triumphs or the injustices of centuries past.

It is about the years, the decades and the centuries to come. For good or ill, the decision made by the people of Scotland at the ballot box will affect not just the generations who live in this country, but the generations yet to be born.

Yet history does matter. Just as individual human beings are shaped by their own accumulated experiences, so societies and nations are moulded by their past. The repercussions of events in one period don't just stop dead. They reverberate down through the years, the generations, the centuries even, influ-

encing politics, culture and ideology far into the future. To even begin to understand Scottish politics today, our relationship with the United Kingdom, and our sometimes obsessive focus on matters of nationhood and identity, it is helpful to first try to make some kind of sense of our history.

All history, however, is controversial – even the recent, two-hours ago variety. Just tune into any Saturday evening radio phone-in during the football season and hear the airwaves crackle with conflict. No-one will dispute the final score, the number of corner kicks, the names of the players shown the red card. But move beyond the bare facts and you stray into stormy waters. Should that penalty have been disallowed? Did that foul deserve a red card? Was that first goal offside? Did the losers deserve a kicking, or was they robbed?

A House of Commons debate on the pros and cons of entering a world war is but a gentle disagreement compared to the Saturday night fever that rages throughout the football season. If a 90-minute game, played out that same day on a small patch of grass with 20,000 witnesses (not to mention officials and TV cameras) can fire such passionate debate, we can hardly expect polite consensus over heroics and horrors whose finer details are lost under the dust of centuries.

The historian EH Carr once compared history to angling. The facts are not laid out like dead fish on a supermarket counter, he explained; they are more akin to creatures swimming around in a vast and unfathomable ocean. What you discover very much depends upon which part of the ocean you dip into, and what you use as bait.

Invariably, even the most fair-minded historian will select and emphasise the importance of those historical facts which vindicate his or her own political standpoint. History is never fully objective, no matter how exalted the professor, or how many pages the appendix runs to.

In this book, we have tried to be absolutely scrupulous over the facts. We have checked, double-checked, triple-checked where necessary. We have relied heavily, especially in the earlier centuries, upon the research of professional academic historians. In later chapters we have also used newspapers, court transcripts and other first-hand records. The facts, we hope, are as accurate as it is possible to be.

But we do not stand aloft and aloof from the facts. We venture opinions and draw conclusions. We take sides. Some of our analysis directly challenges

conventional history, and not just the version taught in universities or printed in scholarly tomes. It also presents a contrary view to some left-wing versions of Scottish history.

Scotland has always been a restless land, in conflict with itself as much as with anyone else. This book, volume one of a two part history, tries to chart and explain that conflict from a radical and working class standpoint all the way from 500AD to August 1914, when the world was turned upside down by the greatest cataclysm in history.

In the interests of disclosure, I should say that both authors intend to vote Yes. Both of us stand on the political left. Neither of us are members or supporters of the SNP.

We would, however, like to think this book will be read across the political spectrum, and has something to say to both sides in the referendum debate, and to those who have yet to make up their minds. Not because this referendum is about the past, but because the past helps us better understand the present and the future.

Alan McCombes, July 2014

1

BIRTH OF A MONGREL NATION

The misty millennium

The first ones are lost from the record. Their roots, their deeds, their language, all scratched from the face of history. We can say that the Picts were here, but the rest is fragments.

There are no surviving native historical texts or documents written before the second half of the eleventh century. Most were destroyed in Viking raids, and thus what little we have learnt of Scotland's first-known inhabitants has been gleaned mainly from archaeological remains and a few isolated texts.

From the remnants of the ancient Pictish language that still survive in place-name prefixes such as Aber (as in Aberdeen, Aberfoyle, Aberfeldy) and Pit (Pitlochry, Pittenweem, Pittodrie), we know that Pictish was a Celtic language, but of the Brythonic strand, making it more akin to Welsh and Cornish than to Scottish or Irish Gaelic.

Until recently, the Picts were imagined by historians as primitive warriors, famed chiefly for halting the Roman occupation of Britannia in its tracks at the Antonine Wall. Even their name – from the Latin word pictus, which means painted – conjures up a vision of terrifying, woad-dyed savages. But excavations between 1994 and 2008 of a sixth century Pictish monastery in the village of Portmahomack in Easter Ross uncovered unexpected evidence of a highly sophisticated culture, capable of producing magnificent art and extraordinary architecture.

The monastery itself was built on the principle of what would become known, centuries later, as the 'Divine Proportion': a ratio of dimensions – 1.618 to one – which appears in nature, including in seashells and in the faces of people considered beautiful. During the fourteenth century, the ratio was used to construct Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris and the Alhambra Palace in Spain. But the mysterious Picts had been there and done that, eight centuries earlier. According to Martin Carver, a professor of archaeology at York University, 'They were the most extraordinary artists. They could draw a wolf, a salmon, an eagle on a piece of stone with a single line and produce a beautiful naturalistic drawing. Nothing

as good as this is found between Portmahomack and Rome. Even the Anglo-Saxons didn't do stone-carving as well as the Picts did. Not until the post-Renaissance were people able to get across the character of animals just like that.'

Another distinctive feature of Pictish society was its matrilineal system of succession – probably a common-sense arrangement if you believe in royal bloodlines, because legitimacy is never in contention.

But how and why Pictavia was transformed into Gaelic-speaking Alba – or Scotland, as it was renamed by the Anglo-Saxons – remains a mystery. We know that the Scoti Gaels, who gave the land its modern name, came across the narrow stretch of sea that separates Scotland from the north of Ireland, and built settlements across Argyll, Galloway and Strathclyde. In the fifth century, they formed their own kingdom, Dalriada, along the western seaboard, which for the next four centuries co-existed alongside the Pictish kingdom that comprised most of the landmass north of the Forth and Clyde, including what is now Central Scotland, Fife, Perthshire, Grampian, Easter Ross, Caithness, Sutherland and Orkney.

Sometime around the end of the ninth century, Pictavia turned into Alba. Were they ethnically cleansed? Most historians now reject that theory. There is no evidence, nor even folklore, pointing to great battles between the two ethnic groups. The fact that the Pictish royal line, the MacAlpine dynasty, simply changed the name of their land from the Kingdom of the Picts to the Kingdom of Alba suggests that this was a peaceful transition. We don't know exactly how it happened because there is no explicit account of the demise of the Picts. But we can speculate.

Emeritus Professor John Foster of the University of the West of Scotland has argued convincingly that the two peoples were first thrown together to protect themselves from Viking plunder and terror. Modern Scandinavians may have acquired a reputation for easy-going liberalism, but their Norse ancestors did not arrive across the North Sea as polite tourists speaking perfect English. At the height of Viking power, their feared longships wreaked terror across the Baltic, North Sea and English Channel. They even reached down into the Mediterranean and pillaged the shorelines of southern Europe, North Africa and Asia Minor. Their military might was based on advanced marine technology: with access to abundant quantities of timber and iron, the Vikings perfected the craft of shipbuilding in the fjords of Norway.

When they first took to the seas in pursuit of plunder, Scotland, just a few hundred miles from the west coast of Scandinavia, was a prime target. The northern Vikings could make the voyage within one day. And this was a brutal, slave-trading empire, which carried out human trafficking on a mammoth scale. In a single raid, they seized thousands of Scots in Dumbarton, and transported them in hundreds of longships to their pirate base in Dublin. The Vikings would also ship their human treasure to the slave markets of Constantinople to be traded for gold and silver. Modern DNA techniques suggest that many inhabitants of modern Iceland are probably descended from slaves captured in the Hebrides. Those who tried to resist were punished mercilessly: the children massacred, the women raped and the men castrated. Torture techniques included the grisly Blood Eagle, in which a live victim would have their heart and lungs torn from their chests, then spread out on the ground to resemble the wings of a giant bird of prey.

The Norsemen also began the ecological destruction of Scotland's landscape that would accelerate down through the centuries. In these pre-feudal times Scotland's greatest natural resource was the Great Forest of Caledon, vast woodlands of oak, pine, birch, alder, hazel, aspen, willow and rowan, teeming with wildlife and vegetation, which in turn provided an abundance of food, shelter and natural materials. From the Viking invasions onwards, that precious asset was relentlessly slashed and burned until it was finally stripped almost bare to make way for sheep farms and deer forests by the Georgian and Victorian landlords and capitalists.

The west coast was especially vulnerable. In contrast to the stark and open North Sea coast, the secluded inlets, islands and peninsulas of the Atlantic seaboard provided a multitude of hidden natural harbours. For three centuries, from the first raid on the holy island of Iona in 798 AD, these scattered coastal communities were terrorised. This in turn seems to have provoked a major population shift within Scotland, from west to east, as Gaelic refugees fled into the heartlands of Pictavia. Although their languages were different, they were both Celtic – and probably not mutually incomprehensible.

The two communities of Scotland had other things in common. They were peaceful farmers, combining livestock and crops. Their society was egalitarian, for the practical reason that this was a subsistence economy, with no great surplus produced that could be creamed off by a privileged class. Furthermore,

the Celtic system of 'partible inheritance', in which land was divided equally between sons, then further sub-divided with each successive generation, prevented individuals from amassing great estates.

Both ethnic groups were also united by the distinct version of Christianity that had taken root in Scotland and Ireland from the sixth century. The term 'Celtic Church', used by some historians, is not strictly accurate. Christianity in Scotland and Ireland was, from the beginning, formally part of the Catholic Church. Yet from its spiritual HQ in Iona, it developed independently of Rome, at least until the mid-twelfth century when the church, as part of a wider advance of feudalism, became more centralised. Before then, instead of a hierarchy of archbishops and bishops, it was based on a looser network of monasteries and missionaries. It was more ascetic, with none of the ostentation of Rome. Its philosophy included sanctity of the clan and family, and opposition to slavery. It used ancient druid symbolism, as seen in Govan Old Parish Church today, which has a remarkable collection of Celtic crosses and hogback memorial tombstones, all carved between 800 and 1000 AD.

All of these elements – social, cultural, economic, religious – meant resistance to the invaders would not only unite Picts and Scots, but would also blossom into a socially progressive struggle to defend basic rights and liberties.

For a time, the Vikings did manage to annex big chunks of territory, including Caithness, Sutherland, the Hebrides and the Northern Isles. Gradually, over centuries, these areas were freed from Norse control. Many descendants of Viking settlers, however, remained in Scotland to become peaceful farmers and fishermen. They intermarried, converted to Christianity and embraced Gaelic culture. Within a few generations, all that was left in mainland Scotland of the Viking invasions were the strange-sounding place names, such as Staxigoe, Occumster, Skrithe, that pepper the maps and road signs of the far north-east to this day. But the biggest single legacy of the Norsemen was to force the native peoples together, laying the basis for the rise of a single, united Gaelic-speaking kingdom.

Creeping feudalism

From the beginning, Scotland was largely shaped by its own geography. At a time when overland travel was difficult and dangerous, this narrow kingdom was always easily accessible to outsiders. At its furthest point, it is just 45 miles from the sea, and comprises 10,000 miles of coastline, 790 islands, plus innu-

merable peninsulas, bays and natural harbours. To the west, the Irish Sea functioned as a broad highway connecting Scotland with Ireland, England, Wales, Cornwall, and kingdoms further afield, across the Bay of Biscay. To the east, a multitude of links were forged down the east coast of England, and to Scandinavia, the Baltic and the Low Countries.

By the start of the second millennium, Scotland was already a multicultural confederation, including Gaelic Celts in the north and west; Brythonic or Welsh-speaking Celts in the south-west; Anglo Saxon and Flemish settlers in the south-east; and the descendants of Norse settlers to the far north. In the twelfth century, there was an influx of Anglo-Norman knights and barons, including the Balliols, the Stuarts, the Bruces and the Comyns, who had been awarded land by the King of Scots, David I, in return for military service.

Historical records report that in 1138, at the Battle of the Standard, over disputed lands in Northumberland, the English were astonished at the diversity of the Scots armies. These included, according to the historian Michael Lynch, 'Normans, Germans, English, Northumbrians and Cumbrians, men of Teviotdale and Lothian, Galwegians [from Galloway] and Scots'. So how, why and when was this sundry ragbag of peoples moulded into a single nation?

As a general rule, nations do not ignite in the minds of visionary kings, priests or poets. And, unlike ships and babies, their entrance to the world can rarely be pinned down to a single date. They emerge slowly and uncertainly, into the dim and fitful light of history, either in response to internal social change, to external danger, or to both.

By the thirteenth century, Scotland was again under threat – this time from a force so cohesive, disciplined and efficient, it made the Vikings look like a chaotic rabble. The Normans, descendants of a band of Viking warriors who had established the world's first fully-fledged feudal state in the Seine Valley, had conquered England following the Battle of Hastings in 1066. This was an unprecedented and formidable military machine, and it proceeded to crush all resistance with clinical brutality.

From the English Channel to the River Tweed, the Normans atomised the older, looser Anglo-Saxon class structures, and imposed instead a rigid, hierarchical regime of total subjugation. Two hundred Norman barons grabbed half of all English land, turning the peasantry into their own personal property, while building a chain of mighty stone castles across the land to consolidate

their supremacy. Within two decades, the entire English ruling class of church and state spoke French, the adopted language of the Normans.

This was the third full-scale foreign military occupation of England in a thousand years. The Romans, followed by the Anglo-Saxons, had already ravaged the old Celtic system and language, driving it out to the Western fringes of Wales and Cornwall. None of these invading forces had ever conquered the land that the Romans called Caledonia – more, perhaps, for geographical than military reasons. The result was that, other than in those pockets colonised by the Vikings, Celtic society had survived and flourished north of the Tweed for the best part of a millennium. But in the south the old ways were dying. Society was changing fast. Feudalism was ascendant.

The pre-feudal Celtic kings and chieftains never claimed personal ownership of the soil, which was always regarded as the common property of the clans who lived on it. Nor did clan chiefs inherit their position on the basis of primogeniture, where power was handed down from father to eldest son. Instead, in the tradition called Tanistry, the successor to the clan chieftain was elected at a general clan assembly from a group of male candidates deemed eligible by bloodline. The Tanist, who was both deputy and heir to the current chieftain, was elected on the basis of qualities such as bravery, intelligence, fairness and good judgment.

While the triumph of feudalism in England had involved a cataclysmic transformation, the advance of the new system into Scotland was a more subtle, gradual and piecemeal process, begun by an influx of immigrants. But these weren't poverty-stricken refugees fleeing famine and torture; they were wealthy young men embarking on the great scramble for Scotland. Many were the younger sons of feudal barons, disinherited because they happened to be born a bit later than their brothers. Deprived of landed estates in England, they headed north in a quest for land and power. Others were military professionals, Anglo-French and Flemish knights, who had first arrived in England after 1066 as part of a mass invasion of colonists. Thousands subsequently spread northwards into Scotland, where they used their wealth and military expertise to establish a foothold for feudalism.

To be fair, they were encouraged by the new Scottish elite that had begun to crystallise in the south and east of the country, where fertile farmlands and a reasonable climate ensured a burgeoning prosperity. In contrast to the subsistence economy across most of the Highlands and Islands, the Lowlands

was now producing a surplus, allowing for the rise of a privileged class at the top, especially around the royal court.

When David I ascended the throne in 1124, with the support of his brother-in-law Henry I of England, he began to assume legal ownership of the land. This break with Celtic tradition was the first step on the road to feudalism. The process accelerated with the king using land to reward allies and buy off enemies. The Stuarts, for example, were originally the 'Stewards' – henchmen, in other words, who hired themselves out to the royal court in return for land. This emerging aristocracy didn't overthrow the old Celtic system so much as gradually erode it from within. The feudal nobility never openly conquered Scotland. They just wheeled and dealed, intimidated and ingratiated, plundered and murdered their way to power.

Nonetheless, when feudalism finally emerged dominant in Scotland, it was more diluted and restrained than its southern counterpart. It was also geographically restricted to the Borders and Lowlands. By the end of the twelfth century, there were over 200 motte-and-bailey castles glaring down at the peasantry south of the Great Glen. But to its north? Not one.

Even in the Lowlands, the new lords were constrained by deep-rooted Celtic traditions. Feudal Scotland, unlike feudal England, was considerably less inclined to throw its weight about on the international stage. As a general rule, smaller nations, especially those with larger, more powerful neighbours, tend to desist from imperial conquest. Thus, Scotland's medieval campaigns were either defensive in character, or confined to more localised battles in the disputed border territories of Northumberland and Cumbria. By contrast, England was knee-deep in relentless, expansionist wars against France, Spain, the Low Countries, Wales and Ireland. Then it began to look to the north.

Scotland's troubles with England began with the death of a little girl in 1290. Margaret, the Maid of Norway, had fallen ill after a stormy voyage across the North Sea to attend a coronation – her own. Under the rules of feudalism, she had inherited the throne after her grandfather, Alexander III, was killed in a riding accident in Fife leaving no male heirs. Her mother – Alexander's daughter – had married King Eric of Norway, and then died in childbirth. As the only living descendant of Alexander, the seven-year-old Margaret was next in line to the throne of Scotland.

Having to settle for a queen rather than a king was always a serious incon-

venience to the feudal establishment of any country. Women were deemed barely fit to rule, but the men in grey suits of armour would sometimes temporarily tolerate a female monarch to ensure the continuity of the royal bloodline. A queen would be more figurehead than genuine monarch, performing ceremonial duties while the real business of government was carried out by big, serious men over her head. But when this child queen died in Orkney, the entire royal line – the House of Dunkeld – came to a full stop. Scotland became a kingdom without a monarch. Worse, there were 13 contenders, all male, and every last one of them claiming to have the right mixture of blood and genes. As the country slithered towards civil war, the bishops began to panic – so much so that they invited King Edward of England to adjudicate. It was the first step along the road to a long, bloody war that for most of the next 60 years would convulse the borderlands straddling the two kingdoms.

Hammer of the Scots

Prior to his accession to the English throne, Edward Plantagenet had distinguished himself during the Crusades for laying waste to the entire population of Nazareth. Soon afterwards, as Edward I, he deported the entire Jewish population of his kingdom. He also pioneered an early form of colonialism by invading Wales, dividing it into six counties, and imposing English laws and customs on this Celtic stronghold.

Under the strict feudal rules of primogeniture, it was unlikely that this classical Norman king would choose anyone other than John Balliol to take the throne of Scotland. The fact that Balliol was notoriously weak-willed wouldn't have harmed his chances either. For three years, King John was monarch in name only. Edward forced him to pay homage to the English throne, appointing himself the final legal arbitrator in any disputes that arose between the Scottish king and his subjects, and extorting large sums of money from the Scottish exchequer to pay for his relentless wars against France.

But then Edward overstepped the mark, by demanding that King John raise an army to join England's military campaign against France. Under pressure from his advisers – a panel of twelve 'Guardians' – Balliol found the courage to defy his overlord and signed a treaty with the French king, initiating what became known as the 'Auld Alliance'.

When Edward staged a series of cross-channel invasions, Scotland re-

sponded by sending a force over the border to attack the English garrison at Carlisle. It was both a gesture of solidarity with France and an attempt to reassert Scottish power while Edward's attention was focused on Europe. To the furious English king, this was unforgivable. Scotland would have to pay the price. He dispatched a 30,000-strong invasion force to Berwick, Scotland's main port, centre of its wool industry, and most vibrant and prosperous town. His vengeful army butchered its way through Berwick's narrow streets and wynds. More than half the population of 13,000 was slaughtered – 'falling like autumn leaves', according to one contemporary chronicle.

Edward's armies then advanced up the east coast, occupying town after town from Dunbar all the way to Aberdeen, Banff and Elgin. At Edinburgh Castle, they looted Scotland's holiest relics. And at Scone Palace, in Perthshire, Edward seized the Stone of Destiny, the ancient slab of red sandstone that symbolised Scottish sovereignty.

Balliol was dragged in person before Edward, where he abjectly confessed to an 'unlawful rebellion', blaming 'unwise counsel' from his advisers and his own dull-mindedness in accepting their advice. His tabard, inscribed with the royal arms of Scotland, was stripped theatrically from his body, and from then on, King John would be known as 'Toom Tabard', meaning empty coat – King Nobody, King of Nothing. With Balliol exiled to the continent, Scotland was again a kingdom without a monarch, and Edward looked invincible.

Five hundred years later, Robert Burns wrote 'Wha will be a traitor knave? Wha will fill a coward's grave? Wha sae base as be a slave?' The poet knew his history: faced with Edward's brutal display of power and bloodlust, the Scots' ruling elite – earls, knights, barons and bishops – chose to be traitors, cowards and slaves. In total, over 2,000 Scots signed their name to the Ragman Roll manuscript, pledging eternal homage and fealty to Edward. The sheer number of signatories extended way beyond the nobility, suggesting that many had been pressurised into adding their names by their feudal superiors.

A typical Ragman Roll signatory was the Borders racketeer Richard le Scott, who would pillage, bribe and slaughter his way across the south of Scotland, finally becoming one of the most feared warlords in the business. His legacy was lasting: le Scott's descendant, the Duke of Buccleuch, is the largest private landowner in Britain today, with 430 square miles of prime agricultural land, stretching from the Solway to the Forth.

In the looming Wars of Independence, the main concern of the Scottish nobility was to be on the winning side. Devoid of loyalty to anyone but themselves, their personal wealth and ambition was always paramount. Their prostration before Edward could have extinguished the emerging flame of national consciousness, and Scotland could have become simply another region of England, alongside Yorkshire or Northumberland. But there were pockets of resistance: the Bishop of Glasgow, Robert Wishart, refused to surrender, as did 22-year-old Robert Bruce, whose grandfather – also Robert Bruce – had been overlooked by Edward I for the crown of Scotland in favour of John Balliol. Isolated from the rest of their social class, however, these mutineers were petrified in their tracks.

The wealth and power of the feudal aristocracy on both sides of the border was built on violence. These were the medieval equivalents of today's gangland godfathers, who prey on the weak and mercilessly liquidate their rivals. Yet the national struggle to maintain the liberty of Scotland was more than just an extension of these personal power struggles. As King of England, Edward represented a more draconian, more oppressive and more commercial form of feudalism than had ever taken root in Scotland.

The Scottish rebellion would come, eventually, but its origins would be way down the social scale.

2

CRY FREEDOM

Enigmatic outlaw

Because he was an obscure commoner who died an outlaw, there is a dearth of documentation regarding the life of William Wallace, leaving the door wide open for the most romantic of interpretations. Like Jesus of Nazareth, Wallace's story would be worked and woven with artistry and passion by successive generations of writers, transforming this plain man of the people into a saviour in spun gold. Almost 300 years after his death, the poet Blind Harry would pen an epic, 11-volume rhyming narrative, which in turn would become the basis of innumerable biographies and the foundation stone of the 1996 Hollywood epic, *Braveheart*.

Blind Harry remains something of a mystery. We don't even know his surname. Furthermore, his vivid geographical descriptions suggest that Harry wasn't even very blind. Most serious historians reject his poem, *The Wallace*, as an admirably graphic and gripping work of historical fiction, based loosely on real events. According to Harry, Wallace was a seven-foot tall giant, who once killed a lion in France with his bare hands.

> 'He was very fair in his judgements... he was most compassionate in comforting the sad… he was very patient… he was a distinguished speaker… he hunted down falsehood and deceit and detested treachery.'

Modern historians have managed to piece together a more plausible account of Wallace's role in the defence of the Scottish kingdom. We cannot be definitive, but his name suggests he was either a native Strathclyde Brythonic Celt, or possibly of Welsh descent. His exact birthplace has never been established beyond reasonable doubt, but recent research points to Ayrshire – which means that all those commemoration marches and rallies through the town of Elderslie, in Renfrewshire, have been staged in the wrong location. Nor was Scotland's rebel hero the son of a landowner called Malcolm Wallace, as most historians previously believed. In fact, it seems his father was Alan Wallace, a crown tenant in Ayrshire, and thus a man of considerably more lowly status.

We do know for sure that in May 1297, while Scotland was under military occupation, Wallace and his accomplices attacked an English garrison in Lanark – which, as it happens, is much closer to Ayrshire than to Renfrewshire – and assassinated the English sheriff in charge of the burgh. According to Blind Harry, and *Braveheart*, this execution was an act of revenge for the murder of Wallace's wife or sweetheart by English soldiers. There is no evidence to either support or contradict this claim. Nevertheless, the incident was a turning point in the life of this previously unknown young man.

By this time, Southern Scotland was bridling angrily at English occupation, accompanied not only by punitive taxation to fund England's foreign wars, but also military conscription to provide the manpower to fight them. A network of sheriffs, lords, sergeants, tax collectors, rent collectors and customs officials was established to keep this once prosperous region under an iron thumb. It was proved a promising time for an outlaw with nothing to lose, and Wallace escalated his mutiny against English oppression into an all-out guerrilla war. With every successful raid and ambush, his small militia grew stronger.

Meanwhile, the Scots nobility had abandoned any notion of an independent Scottish kingdom. Some had gone into hiding; others had enlisted to fight France as officers in the English army; and some were even assisting Edward's occupation of Scotland. This was more than just a matter of cowardice on the part of the Scottish elite; land and wealth were at stake. Large swathes of the aristocracy, particularly in the far south, held properties on both sides of the border. Any hint of dissent and their estates in England would be forfeited. So they did the opposite of dissent.

The nobility were essentially medieval devolutionists: although they believed in a Scottish kingdom, they simultaneously acknowledged English supremacy. Perhaps Balliol, or a successor, could be restored to the throne of Scotland; but that would be a decision for Edward, the royal overlord of both kingdoms. Wallace, on the other hand, stood firm for full-blooded independence. His movement was drawn from the common people: agricultural labourers, poor peasants, craftsmen from the burghs, and dispossessed small landholders whose properties had been plundered by the Norman warlords.

They were poorly armed, with makeshift spears, axes and knives. They wore no helmets or armoured plating, only tunics of leather and cloth, and survived on a frugal diet of oatmeal and lentils. But they were fired with the zeal of a

rebel army challenging oppression and injustice. In stark contrast to the hocus-pocus propagated by right wing groups in America, who treated the film *Braveheart* as a celebration of Celtic racial purity, Wallace's army included Irish, French, Flemish and English immigrants as well as Gaelic-speaking Highlanders and English-speaking Lowland Scots. What had started as a local revolt now began to develop into a national movement.

As Wallace's men marched towards Perth and Dundee, another army was being mustered in the far north by Andrew Murray, a nobleman's son who had broken ranks with his social class. After the sacking of Berwick, Murray had fought with his father against Edward's army at the Battle of Dunbar, where he was captured. He then escaped back to the Highlands, where his private army drove the English garrison out of Urquhart Castle, on the shores of Loch Ness. This seemingly unstoppable force then seized Inverness, before sweeping through Aberdeenshire towards Perth, where it is believed he met Wallace for the first time.

There, the two young men formed what they called 'the Army of the Kingdom of Scotland' and marched south, over the Ochil Hills, onto the Carse of Stirling and up onto Abbey Craig, where the Wallace Monument now stands, to do some serious battle. Far below, the formidable English army, its infantry bolstered by heavy cavalry and troops of archers, assembled on the south bank of the River Forth at Stirling Bridge.

The action began with a catastrophic blunder by the English commander, the Earl of Surrey, who ordered his cavalry to advance two abreast across the narrow bridge and onto the causeway that stretched for a mile over the flood plain. For hour after hour they proceeded to the north bank, while Wallace and Murray watched and waited from their elevated vantage point. Once the English frontline troops had separated themselves from the massed battalions on the other bank, the Scots swooped down. There was no place to run, no place to hide. The bridge was too narrow, either for retreat or to bring across reinforcements. And they were hemmed in on three sides by a loop in the river, where now stand the playing fields of Stirling County Rugby Club. The vanguard of the English army was annihilated, while the rearguard fled in disarray. In all, perhaps as many as 5,000 English cavalrymen and infantry were either cut down or drowned as they tried to escape back across the river.

Andrew Murray was gravely wounded in the battle, and several months later

died of those wounds. But the events of that day, 11 September 1297, electrified Scotland. A raggle-taggle horde of ill-equipped amateurs had routed the most fearsome military machine in Europe. Patriotism was back in fashion, and suddenly the nobility rediscovered the Scottish cause. William Wallace, a commoner whose name had been unknown outside of his own village just four months earlier, was appointed Guardian of Scotland– the *de facto* leader of the entire kingdom, in the absence of the exiled John Balliol.

Operating on the principle that the best form of defence is attack, Wallace pushed down over the border into Cumberland, Northumbria and Durham. Unlike Edward, Wallace had no colonialist ambitions. His aim was neither to rule England, nor even to annex its northern territories. This was simply a preemptive strike, a warning shot to the English to desist, or else.

If Blind Harry would later transform Wallace into something of a saintly superhero, contemporary English propaganda did quite the reverse – 'filthy swine, malignant savages, murderers', it said of this Scottish warrior and his trusty fighters. That said, medieval warfare was a brutal business, and it's highly likely that, having crossed the border, Wallace's army sought retribution for the persecution of Scotland. On a more strategic, less emotional level, Wallace's troops would certainly have been inclined to create a climate of terror and spread demoralisation across the north of England, in a Dark Ages version of the Dresden bombings or the nuclear obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

But Edward, who would later have the words 'Malleus Scotorum'– Hammer of the Scots – engraved on his tomb, wasn't a man to run up the white flag. The white-haired warrior-king returned in person to Scotland the following year, along with a mighty phalanx of cavalry, knights, and archers, to meet a Scots army at Falkirk. It was a bloodbath. Most of the Scots nobility fled early from the Falkirk battlefield, including one of the strongest claimants to the throne of Scotland, John Comyn. His main rival, Robert the Bruce, wasn't even there.

Wallace himself survived the battle and managed to escape to the Trossachs. Reputedly angry at the cowardice of the nobility, he resigned his post as Guardian of Scotland and pledged himself again to the common people. Now a fugitive, he is reputed to have lived in forests and caves, from whence he launched his guerrilla hit-and-run campaigns against the English occupation. Fanciful biographies of Wallace suggest he was the archetypal noble savage, a Caledonian Hawkeye from *Last of the Mohicans*. But the real Wallace was rather

more sophisticated. As Guardian of Scotland, he had tried to re-open trade links between Scotland and Germany. As a refugee, he travelled through Europe to Norway, Germany, Rome and France, seeking international allies in the struggle for Scottish sovereignty. On his return to Scotland, he no longer commanded an army, but a band of insurgents. And he was now being hunted down, not only by the English occupying forces, but by the Scottish ruling elite.

In a deal negotiated by John Comyn in 1304, the nobility had once again surrendered to Edward. For three months, a small garrison at Stirling Castle held out as an outpost of defiance, until it finally fell to siege engines supplied to Edward by the man who would later become an icon of Scottish national independence – Robert the Bruce.

Wallace's days were numbered, and on 5 August 1305, he was captured by a Scots nobleman, Sir John Menteith, the keeper of Dumbarton Castle and sheriff of the town. Paraded past jeering crowds in London, Wallace then faced a show trial in the grand surroundings of Westminster Hall. He was subsequently hanged, disembowelled, beheaded and tortured, the various parts of his body put on public display in town centres across Scotland as a warning to any future potential rebels. Some of the more starry-eyed versions of medieval Scottish history suggest that the martyrdom of Wallace was a turning-point, the catalyst that turned quiescence into rebellious, unstoppable fury, and brought on Bannockburn. More sober accounts mention no uprisings or protests of any kind. Far from provoking a backlash, the death of Wallace seems to have left Scotland demoralised and pacified.

Like the leaders of Vichy France, those who regarded themselves as Scotland's natural-born leaders were in league with the occupiers. Surprisingly, then, the next leader of the Scottish resistance would spring from the treacherous heart of this very same, self-serving elite.

From pariah to saviour

Robert Bruce was born in Turnberry Castle in Ayrshire, his father a wealthy nobleman of Norman origin and royal lineage, his mother from the old Celtic aristocracy in the Gaelic speaking south-west. The Bruce dynasty owned vast estates on both sides of the border, including land in what is now the London Borough of Haringey. In contrast to the incorruptible Wallace, Bruce was cynical, calculating and driven by a burning personal ambition rather than the

searing pinpricks of injustice. In the early years of the Wars of Independence, he had performed a series of bewildering zig-zags between the oppressors and the rebels. When the tide of independence was surging high, he backed the rebels, but in 1302, with Wallace on the run, the future hero of Bannockburn made his peace with Edward and received a royal pardon. He was even appointed Sheriff of Lanark.

In 1304, he assisted the English king in the recapture of Stirling Castle, the last stand of the rebel army. Yet even with the fight in full fray, Bruce slipped away to hold clandestine discussions with church leaders in Cambuskenneth Abbey, just outside Stirling, where they agreed a secret pact to install Bruce as King of Scotland when the time was ripe – probably after the death of the ageing Edward.

Bruce was a brilliant strategist and a cunning tactician, and would eventually prove his mettle as a military commander *par excellence*. His defenders maintain that he ultimately succeeded where Wallace failed precisely because of this flexibility and pragmatism: he knew when to advance and when to retreat; his wheeling and dealing was necessary for his own survival; and his apparent treachery was a manoeuvre to buy time and live to fight another day. Whatever his motives, an incident one cold February day in 1306 forced him out of the shadowy world of double-dealing and into open revolt.

Bruce had arranged to meet John Comyn – his main rival for the future throne of Scotland – in a Dumfries churchyard. No-one knows what was on the agenda. Perhaps they intended to thrash out who would be Scotland's next leader? Maybe Bruce wanted to offer Comyn a consolation prize in return for his support? And maybe the Red Comyn, who was still loyal to the exiled John Balliol, refused to countenance such treachery? Whatever they said, they said it within the walls of Greyfriars Kirk while their bodyguards waited outside. Voices were raised and angry words exchanged until, in a sudden flash of anger, Bruce drew a blade and fatally stabbed Comyn. Even for these violent times, this was a shocking and sacrilegious murder. And by taking out his main rival, Bruce had also killed his own chances of persuading Edward to crown him king.

With Scotland's two most powerful figures now out of the picture – one in his grave, the other on the run – the astute Edward seized the chance to consolidate his power over the unruly north. In Westminster Hall, before hun-

dreds of English nobles, he vowed to bring the killer to justice. But he never did. In the summer of the following year, the 68-year-old king died of dysentery at a military camp just south of the border, *en route* to Scotland. He was replaced by his son, Edward II.

Bruce may have turned the bravado dial right up to 11 by declaring himself king, but he was now a pariah within his own social class. The slaying of a rival to the throne was a rather clumsy breach of social etiquette, to say the least, especially as it had taken place on consecrated ground. The Scottish elite ditched him, and the English occupying forces went after his blood. Cornered thus, he was damned if he did and damned if he didn't – and so his all-out struggle for independence was launched. As the writer and historian John Prebble puts it, 'the liberty of Scotland was now the only cause that might preserve his own', and to further that cause, he turned to the same social forces that Wallace and Murray had mobilised a decade earlier: the common people.

Much of what we know of Bruce's campaign comes from the epic poem *The Bruce* by John Barbour, an eminent scholar who studied at Oxford and Paris before becoming an Archdeacon in Aberdeen. Written 60 years after Bannockburn, it is considered a more reliable account than Blind Harry's *Wallace*. Whatever motives and ambitions impelled Bruce into action, what is clear is that the struggle itself was much more than a war between two medieval kings.

The name of Robert the Bruce may be a byword for Scottish liberation, but his victory could never have been achieved had it not struck a deep and resonant chord with the people of Scotland. The Battle of Bannockburn was not simply declared one fine summer's day, like a duel or a wrestling match. For seven long years previously, guerrilla war had raged across Scotland, as members of the English occupying forces found themselves subject to ambush, raid and assassination. This, he found, was a much more successful ploy than the ruinous policy, as seen at Falkirk, of engaging the English military machine in direct battle. With thousands of men under his control, Bruce marched from the south-west to the north-east, capturing one key fortress after another whilst avoiding any head-on conflict. Other armies were raised by allies of Bruce in Galloway, the Borders and the north of Scotland. It was, as they say, all happening.

Nonetheless, a confrontation was inevitable, and when Bruce's army came face-to-face with the mightiest army in Europe on the banks of the Bannock

Burn, the result should have been a foregone conclusion. On one side, perhaps 10,000 footsoldiers armed with spears and broadswords; on the other, 30,000 crack troops, with chainmail, cavalry battalions and massed ranks of archers. One reason for the gross imbalance is offered by historian David Cornwell, an authority on Bannockburn, who states it was 'partly a product of the Scottish feudal system, which, where it existed, was less developed than its English equivalent. Scottish knights were far fewer in number than their English counterparts and generally were in possession of less wealth and fewer resources.'

Another reason was that Bruce had no state machine behind him, and no colossal war chest to fund his campaign. What he did have, however, was a risen people who had suffered decades of occupation and oppression. The Scots army was an irregular volunteer force drawn from the depths of society. It included, according to one account, 'all the men of Carrick, of Argyll and Kintyre, and of the isles, and a great host of men from the Lowlands'. Although heavily outnumbered, proportional to the Scottish population of perhaps half a million it was a mobilisation on the scale of the great demonstrations that marched through Glasgow and London in the run-up to the Iraq war.

Seven hundred years on, the date 1314 has become to Scotland as resonant as 1066 to England, or 1789 to France. The battlefield is not the most pristinely preserved historical site in Scotland, much of it lying submerged beneath a jumble of houses, schools, roads, and a disused railway line. Nonetheless, every year, on the last Saturday in June, a boisterous tartan-clad procession weaves its way through the backstreets of Stirling, flags flying and pipes skirling, before proceeding to a patch of land on the southern outskirts of the town, where the giant statue of King Robert stands triumphant.

Many modern Scots, even of a nationalist disposition, would prefer to leave the past behind. Prominent SNP politician Kenny MacAskill, for example, spoke out against the Bannockburn annual celebration in 2003, writing in *The Sunday Times* that 'it's time for Scotland to take a long, hard look at itself and move on from defining ourselves against past glories, illusionary or otherwise'. This is understandable. Hollywood movies, folk songs and even history books tend to sanitise the wars of long ago; Bannockburn was anything but a pretty sight. According to contemporary accounts, the scene was one of carnage. Where now stand quiet suburban streets, then lay thousands of bloody, mutilated corpses, rotting in the fierce midsummer sun. They had been

stripped naked by hordes of scavengers, while carrion crows feasted on the carcasses of dead horses and the gory entrails of the remnants of the English army. Scotland would do well, in future, not to glorify bloodshed.

Bannockburn did not mark the end of the Wars of Independence; they had another nine years to run before peace was declared, for four years, before the second war erupted. But the battle was a turning point. After 1314, Bruce's army swelled in numbers and confidence. They appeared to be invincible, at one point driving Edward II's forces out of Edinburgh and chasing them deep into Yorkshire. They marched through the north of England as far south as Lancashire, using violence to force a peaceful recognition of Scotland's independent status.

The strategy proved successful, with a defeated Edward II ending his campaign to rule Scotland. It was pragmatic retreat. He still claimed sovereignty over Scotland, but the liberated kingdom now began a process of coalescence into a rudimentary nation-state, with its own social hierarchy, legal system, church, currency, and parliament.

Yet this was no isolationist outpost. Scotland had always been a maritime kingdom, but more now than ever before, its survival depended on forging links across the sea. Locked in a cold war with its larger, more powerful neighbour, Scotland reached outwards, to Scandinavia and the Low Countries, and south, beyond England, to France and mainland Europe. Independence was secured by internationalism.

The nature of the struggle that set Scotland on the road to freedom also created a new internal balance of forces within. In times of all-out war, ruling elites are always forced to rely on the lower classes, who in turn become more conscious of their own strength and power. This was demonstrated in dramatic fashion in the aftermath of the two world wars of the twentieth century, when mass radicalisation spread across Europe, shaking the old order to its foundations. On a more rudimentary scale, the same process affected Scotland after the Wars of Independence.

Scotland was born a rebel nation, resisting outside oppression. The common people, though scattered and disorganised, became a force to be reckoned with. Meanwhile the nobility, who had covered themselves with shame, found their position weakened. It was no coincidence that within 50 years of Bannockburn, Scotland became the first part of Europe to rid itself of serfdom. It took England a further hundred years to do likewise.

The progressive character of Scotland's national independence struggle was most eloquently expressed in the wording of the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath, agreed by the Scottish Parliament six years after Bannockburn. This document reflects, above all, a sense that the Scottish elite, including even Robert the Bruce himself, could not be fully trusted to defend Scotland's independence, given the slipperiness, selfishness and, at times, outright cowardice they had displayed over the preceding decades. Amidst the rambling medieval mysticism and the pious appeals to the Pope, one passage stands out, not only for its defiant assertion of national sovereignty, but also, almost half a millennium before the French Revolution, its renunciation of the divine right of kings:

> 'Yet if he [Bruce] should give up what he has begun, and agree to make us or our kingdom subject to the King of England or the English, we should exert ourselves at once to drive him out as our enemy and a subverter of his own rights and ours, and make some other man who was well able to defend us our King; for, as long as but a hundred of us remain alive, never will we on any conditions be brought under English rule. It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we are fighting, but for freedom – for that alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself.'