HISTORY SHAPERS

THE STORY OF ROBERT BRUCE

JEANIE LANG

This edition published 2025
by Living Book Press

ISBN: 978-1-76153-563-5 (hardcover)
978-1-76153-572-7 (softcover)

First published in 1906.

A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

The Story of Robert Bruce

by

Jeanie Lang

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PLEASE NOTE

In this series, you will read about historical figures who displayed courage, bravery, self-sacrifice, and many other admirable traits. Their stories remind us that many people in history took bold actions and made tough choices. Yet, even those who achieved great things sometimes held ideas or pursued goals that were not beneficial to everyone. History is full of complex individuals—parts of their lives inspire us to be brave and stand up for what is right, while other parts remind us to consider the unintended consequences of our actions.

As you explore these biographies, we invite you to reflect on the qualities that enabled these figures to achieve greatness and the lessons we can learn from their mistakes. Maybe you too can become a History Shaper—someone who learns from the past and helps to make our world a better place for everyone.

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How the War Between England and Scotland Began

"Rule Britannia! Britannia rules the waves!
Britons never, never, never will be slaves!"

Do you know that song, you English boys and girls? And do you ever think, when you hear it, that not so very many hundreds of years ago there was no such kingdom as the kingdom of Great Britain? Or do you remember that before the country of Britain became the kingdom of Great Britain, Scotland had to fight for her freedom, and, with the blood of her people, win it from the king who ruled over England?

This is the story of how Scotland fought and won. And before we begin the story of Robert the Bruce, who led Scotland safely through those evil days, we must first learn something about how the war between England and Scotland began.

For nearly seven centuries the English and Scottish kings had quarrelled over certain pieces of land. These were mostly in the "Debateable Land," as it is still called, that lies on either side of the Tweed and the Cheviots, and

where still, in many parts, only the wail of the curlews and the tinkle of mountain burns break the stillness of the lonely hill and moorland.

Because England was a much richer land than Scotland, and because its people had ceased to be savage long before the people of the north land, each succeeding king of England also thought that the Scottish king should be his "man"—that is, that he should own him to be his overlord and master.

In the thirteenth century a king called Edward I. sat on the English throne.

If you, who read this story, should be an English girl or boy, you will probably have learned that Edward I. was one of the wisest and bravest kings that England ever knew.

But should you be a Scottish girl or boy, it is more likely that you may believe that Edward I. of England was one of the most cruel, most greedy, and most unjust kings that ever wore a crown.

Had we lived in Scotland in the days of Wallace and of Bruce, it must have been impossible to think anything else. We must have hated the English as the Boers hated the British a short time ago; as the Japanese hated the Russians; as one nation has, from the beginning of time, always hated the nation with which it was at war. And we must have hated the king who ruled England just as much as English boys and girls then, and English men and women, hated the man they called "The Wicked Wallace."

But now that we Scotch and English are one nation

under one king, we are able to look back and see that Edward I. was truly a very great king and a very wise one, and that he was one of the strongest men that ever held the English sceptre. Far, far ahead of his own time he looked, and saw how good a thing it would be to have, instead of four countries always at war, one great kingdom, the Great Britain of to-day, in which should reign peace and prosperity.

But instead of bringing peace to his own country and to Scotland, it was Edward who brought about the war which ended in Scotland gaining her freedom.

For the lands held by the English kings in France they rendered homage to the French king.

For those lands held by them in England the Scottish kings did the same to the English king.

But in England the English king, and in Scotland the Scottish king, owned no master.

In England the King of Scotland was on the same footing as the English barons, and was ready to fight against foreign kings for the King of England if need arose.

Edward I. had not long come to the throne before he began to claim more than merely his allegiance for his English lands from Alexander of Scotland.

At Westminster, in 1278, Alexander did homage for the lands he held in England—"*saving my own kingdom.*"

The Bishop of Norwich interrupted him. "And saving the right of my lord, King Edward, to homage for your kingdom," said the bishop.

"I own my kingdom direct from God," proudly answered the Scottish king.

On a stormy night in March 1286, Alexander III. met his death by falling over a steep cliff on the Fife coast. His two sons died before him. His daughter, the Queen of Norway, was also dead.

And Scotland was left with no one to rule her but a motherless baby girl of three, the Princess Margaret, whose father was king of the land that in Scotland they called "Noroway owre the faem."

Edward of England lost no time in making up his mind what he had best do now, to gain Scotland for himself and for future kings of England. He arranged a marriage between the little queen and his son Edward, Prince of Wales, a boy only fourteen years old.

The marriage must take place in England, he said, and when Princess Margaret was six years old, he sent what was then called "a great ship" from Yarmouth to Norway to fetch the little bride.

It was like a ship in a fairy tale, richly furnished, and loaded with all the sweetmeats and good things that the wise English king knew that little girls liked. There were sugar—then thought a rare and delicious thing in England—walnuts, figs, and raisins, and 28 lbs. of gingerbread.

But the ship came home without her.

It was on a Norwegian ship that, a few months later,

she left her snowy hills, and blue fjords, and great pine forests, and sailed away to Scotland to be its queen.

But she never got further than the bleak Orkney Islands.

Just when the land over which she was to reign was seen, a faint blue line in the south, the little maid sickened and died.

It was a sad ship that sailed again across the sea, and took home a little dead queen to lie in her own north land.

She had reigned four years, six months, and seven days.

John Balliol

As soon as news came from the Orkneys that the Maid of Norway was dead, there were many men who claimed for themselves the Scottish crown.

In all there were thirteen "competitors," as they were called, as if it were a game, or races.

The two whose claims seemed the strongest were John Balliol and Robert Bruce, grandfather of Robert the Bruce, both descendants of William the Lion, grandfather of the late king. Balliol was the great-grandson of David, Earl of Huntingdon, younger brother of William the Lion; Bruce was the grandson of the same man. But Balliol was descended from Earl David's eldest daughter, and Bruce from a younger one.

Edward of England then took a bold step. He invited the Scottish nobles and clergy, and all who laid claim to the crown, to meet him at Norham, a castle past which the silver Tweed runs between wooded banks, dividing England from Scotland.

At Norham, said Edward, he would decide for the Scottish nation who was the right man to reign over them.

The meeting took place on May 10th, 1291, and Edward made his power the more felt by the kingless people of

Scotland because of his noble escort of knights and barons in glittering armour.

"I come as your lord," at once he told the Scottish nobles. "Unless you grant that I am Lord Paramount, I will not help you."

The Scots wisely answered—

"We have no king. How can we say if our king, when we have one, will bow to you as his overlord?"

Then said Edward, in a rage—

"By Saint Edward, whose crown I wear, I will maintain my just right, or die in the cause!"

Thus it was that Scotland's fight for freedom began. Edward unjustly claimed the overlordship as his right, and all true-hearted Scotsmen denied him their homage.

Yet, at this time, the nobles who longed to wear the crown of Scotland thought second of their country, and first of themselves.

When Edward made it a condition that the man whom he, as umpire, made king must own him as master, there was not one of those who claimed the crown who did not give in to his demands.

In November 1292, in the great hall of Berwick Castle—which is now a railway station through which the trains rush which bring you from England to Scotland—Edward held a great assembly of English and Scottish nobles.

"Can you divide the kingdom of Scotland and its revenues?" Edward asked the assembly.

"No," was the answer.

"Then," said he, "as it cannot be shared between Bruce and Balliol, I appoint John Balliol, as having the stronger claim, to be your king."

John Balliol swore that he would be a faithful vassal to the King of England, his "Lord Superior." At Scone, near Perth, he was crowned on the "Stone of Destiny," upon which had never sat a more unkingly king.

The Scots called their new king the "Toom Tabard," or empty coat, so little of a man did they think him.

"We do not want this man to reign over us," they angrily said.

"But," says an old chronicler, "he, as a simple creature, opened not his mouth, fearing the frenzied wildness of that people, lest they should starve him, or shut him up in prison. So dwelt he with them a year, as a lamb among wolves."

In England, and by King Edward, Balliol was as little respected as he was in Scotland; Edward treated him not as a monarch, but as a servant whom he scorned. He heaped insults upon him, and tried by every means in his power to make Balliol repent that he had ever claimed the crown.

It was all part of Edward's scheme to win Scotland for himself.

"When I have goaded this worm into turning," he planned, "and into rebelling against me, I shall then punish him and his followers by taking his country and his crown for myself."

And presently it fell out as Edward had schemed.

The worm was provoked into turning. Balliol leagued with France against England, and defied Edward by invading the counties of Northumberland and Cumberland.

But Balliol had no loyal subjects to back him up. His people despised him. His nobles were jealous of him; many of them he had offended.

When Edward heard that Balliol had laid waste with his rabble army two English counties, his wrath was great.

"Has the fool done this folly?" he cried. "If he will not come to us, we will come to him."

With a fleet of ships, and with an army of 30,000 foot soldiers and 50,000 horsemen, he went to Berwick-on-Tweed, and besieged it by land and by sea.

Berwick was then the greatest seaport town in Scotland, the home of rich Flemish merchants who exported wool, skins, hides, and salt fish, and imported cargoes of wine, spiceries, and corn.

Its gallant garrison defied King Edward. From behind the wooden stockade, which was its only rampart, they shouted and sang mocking verses that made Edward still more furiously angry.

With the loss of only one knight, the stockade was stormed. Nearly 8000 of the citizens were slain, and a handful of brave Flemish merchants who held out in the Town Hall when all others were forced to surrender, were burned alive in it. Edward let his soldiers sack, and plunder, and pillage, and butcher wholesale men, women, and children.

"As leaves in the autumn the Scots fell," says a chronicler, and for days the Tweed ran red across the bar into the grey North Sea, carrying the dead with it.

It was only when a procession of priests bore into Edward's presence the holiest things of their Church, and begged for mercy, that the angry king made the slayers sheathe their swords.

Berwick's greatness was gone for ever. From that time it sank into a little seaport town.

The king who had dreamed of a Great Britain over which he ruled in peace and prosperity, had done the worst possible thing to make his dream a reality.

In his rage he had grown cruel, and it was a cruelty which the Scottish people never forgot or forgave.

A few weeks later the Scots brutally avenged themselves. At Corbridge, in Northumberland, they set fire to the schools and burned to death 200 "little clerks," as the schoolboys then were called.

Before he left Berwick, Edward had a deep fosse, or ditch, dug round the town, and a high wall built. Now that Berwick belonged to him, he meant that proper care should be taken of it, and so good were his fortifications that you may see parts of the "Edwardian Wall" standing at Berwick to this day. They say that he was so keen that the work should be quickly done, that he himself wheeled a barrow for the builders.

Victories at Dunbar and other places followed that at Berwick, and Edward marched in triumph through Scot-

land, claiming and getting the submission of the Scottish nobles. "Ragman's Roll" is the name of the document they signed, promising to be Edward's vassals, and very poor beggar-men they sound.

This done Edward returned to England, taking with him everything that it was possible to take in the way of royal plunder.

Amongst other things were the Stone of Destiny, and the Holy Rood. It was from this Holy Rood, said to be a piece of the Cross upon which Christ was crucified, that Holyrood Palace takes its name.

The Stone of Destiny belonged to the Scots from the very earliest days when they, it was said, sailed to Ireland across the sea from Spain. Many tales were told of it. One was that it was the stone upon which Jacob's head rested when he dreamed of angels going up and down to heaven.

On that stone the kings of Scotland had always been crowned, and now that England and Scotland are at war no more, those who reign over Great Britain still are crowned on the Stone of Destiny that stands in Westminster Abbey.

Chief amongst those who had helped to make Edward master of Scotland was Robert Bruce, called Le Vieil, son of that Bruce, now dead, who had claimed the crown when it was given to Balliol, and father of Robert the Bruce.

After the battle of Dunbar he came to King Edward and reminded him that it was now his turn to be king. Not only was he the nearest heir to the throne, but in days when Alexander III. had no children, he had promised Robert

Bruce, Lord of Annandale, his friend and cousin, that he should succeed him.

"Have we nothing else to do but to win kingdoms for thee?" was Edward's scornful answer.

So did Edward try to humble one of the most powerful nobles in Scotland.

King "Toom Tabard" he humbled in yet another way.

Stripped of his kingly ornaments, and with a white wand, such as penitents carried, in his hand, Balliol humbly gave up to Edward all his rights to the kingdom of Scotland. For three years he was imprisoned in London, and was then allowed to go to his estates in France, where he died thirteen years later.

Scotland was once again without a king, and was in even worse case than when its sovereign was a little girl, far across the sea.

Its castles were in the hands of English governors, who took from the Scots any property they took a fancy to. English soldiers were allowed to rob, beat, and even kill the Scots, their wives, their daughters, and their little children, without punishment.

In the years that followed Edward's triumph, had it not been for William Wallace, one of the truest patriots and greatest heroes that ever lived, the freedom of Scotland might have been lost for ever.

From 1297 until 1305 Wallace waged war against England, at first winning battles against heavy odds.

In 1305, through the treachery of a Scottish nobleman, he was betrayed to the English and brought to London.

By the king's command he was drawn on a hurdle from Westminster to the Tower, and from the Tower to Smithfield, and there he was hanged, disembowelled, and beheaded.

His limbs were sent to Newcastle, Berwickon-Tweed, Stirling, and Perth, to be exhibited there as parts of a traitor to the English king. His head was stuck on London Bridge, for the sea-birds that come up the Thames with the tide to peck at, and for sun and wind, snow and rain, to beat upon.

For fifteen years Edward I. had struggled with Scotland. When he rode across London Bridge and looked at the head of his enemy, Wallace, bleaching there, he must proudly have thought that the fight was over at last, and that he had won. He was overlord of Scotland—king in all but name.

Little he knew that in his own court, perhaps even in the train of knights who rode with him, there was one who, in six short months, was to defy the victorious king, and win for Scotland a freedom that she was never more to lose.

Robert the Bruce and the Red Comyn

You have read that the two "competitors" who had the strongest claim to the Scottish crown were John Balliol and Robert Bruce.

Robert Bruce, Lord of Annandale, was an old man while all these disputes took place.

In 1295, at the age of eighty-five, he died at his castle of Lochmaben in Dumfriesshire. His son, known as Bruce *Le Viel*, Earl of Carrick, although he had fought bravely against the Saracens in the Crusades, was a weak man, who liked better to stay peaceably in his English home than to fight for a crown which he might possibly never win.

"Have we nothing else to do but to win kingdoms for thee?" Edward I. had asked him in scorn, and Bruce *Le Viel* never put forward another claim.

When his eldest son, Robert, was seventeen, he gave up to him the earldom of Carrick, which had come to him through his wife, and until his death in 1304 he spent most of his time peacefully in England, leaving his sons

to do battle for his Scottish property and the Scottish crown if they chose.

At Writtle Manor in Essex, an estate of his father's, Robert the Bruce was born on July 11, 1274.

His father's ancestors were of the noblest chivalry of France. De Brus, a Norman baron, who took his name from the lands of Breaux, in Normandy, came over with the Conqueror. Bruce's mother, daughter of the Earl of Carrick, was descended from the fighting Celtic chiefs of Galloway.

The Bruce boys, Robert, Edward, Thomas, Alexander, and Nigel, were brought up in England, and educated as English knights.

They must have grown up to hate Balliol, who had got the crown which their grandfather had claimed, and which King Alexander had promised that a Bruce should wear.

Still more must they have hated Balliol when he seized their father's lands in Annandale, and gave them to his own friend, John Comyn; at the same time taking from Robert, the young Earl of Carrick, the earldom which his father had given to him only a short while before. And Robert the Bruce, who was a strong man, and feared no one, must have scorned the Toom Tabard, who, although he wore the crown of Scotland, yet allowed the English king to order him about as a big boy orders his fag at school.

Yet, while he was a lad, and even when he was a man, at first we cannot find that Bruce had any great love for

the land for which he was later to fight so nobly. He would have loved to be a king—what boy would not? But it was only of the crown of Scotland that he dreamed, and not of Scotland's freedom.

Historians in our own days say hard things of him, because sometimes he fought for Edward of England, sometimes against him just as it suited him best, so they say.

They may be right, yet Bruce was placed in very much the same position as the boy whose parents are Scotch, but who has been born in England, educated at an English public school, and at Oxford or Cambridge, and who is asked to play in the English XV. against Scotland.

And so Bruce played for England, and against the very land of which he wished to be king, as his father and grandfather had wished before him.

Of the two older Bruces Edward had always felt fairly sure. But the young Earl of Carrick, the tall, strong, handsome youth, who seemed to have no fear, and who bore himself so proudly, kept him anxious.

He did all he could to bind Robert the Bruce to him. For his services he praised and rewarded him. In 1296 he spoke of "the great esteem he" (Edward) had "for the good service of Robert de Bruys, Earl of Carrick." In the very next year he "feared for the faithlessness and inconstancy of Sir Robert de Bruys." And Bruce gave him reason to fear, by joining, for a short time, the side of Wallace. In 1298, when Edward came to Scotland to

overthrow Wallace, Bruce burned down the castle of Ayr, lest Edward should take it, and retreated into the wilds of Carrick, whither he knew that an English army could not follow him.

For this Edward punished him by marching through Annandale, taking the Bruces' castle of Lochmaben, and wasting their estates.

A few weeks later, Robert the Bruce was again fighting under the English banner. But in 1299 we find him trying to drive out the English garrison placed by Edward in the castle of Lochmaben. Once more, in 1304, he changed sides. He was in charge of the English guns which battered against Stirling Castle, and which were to put an end to Wallace's struggle for freedom.

Perhaps it was at Smithfield, where, on an August day in 1305, he saw Wallace martyred for his country, that the heart of Bruce changed in its feelings to Scotland.

But of that we do not know.

There is an old story that, after one of the battles that Robert the Bruce had helped to fight and win for England, he sat down to eat with his hands still stained with the blood of the Scots he had slain. "Look at the Scotchman eating his own blood," said one English soldier to another. And Bruce was filled with shame, because he knew that what the man said was true.

Bruce's hatred to Balliol he had handed on to Balliol's nephew, John Comyn, called, from his red hair, "the Red

Comyn." Comyn was the son of one of the other claimants to the crown, and his mother was a sister of John Balliol.

More than once Comyn had defied King Edward, and he was always ready to pick a quarrel with Bruce.

In 1299, at the sleepy little town of Peebles, on the Tweed, there was held an election of guardians for Scotland. The guardians chosen were Robert the Bruce, Bishop Lamberton, and the Red Comyn.

During the council meeting of the Scottish nobles who made the choice, hot words passed between Bruce and the Red Comyn.

A chronicler tells us that Sir John Comyn "leaped on Robert Bruce, Earl of Carrick, and took him by the throat," and that John Corny, Earl of Buchan (Sir John's uncle), leaped on William Lamberton, Bishop of St. Andrews, "and they held them fast until the Steward and others went and stopped the scuffle."

In January 1306 Robert the Bruce was at Edward's court in London, one of the finest-looking of the noble knights there.

Edward must have felt about him rather as does a man who has tamed a lion, and who is never quite certain whether it will not again one day turn upon him and kill him. Yet there seemed no reason for mistrusting the lion, who had fought for him so bravely, and who for some years had served him so well.

But from Scotland there came bad news for King

Edward. The Red Comyn wrote and confessed that he and Robert the Bruce had been plotting together.

To Comyn, Bruce had said: "Give me your lands, and I will help you to win the crown for yourself; or take my lands, and help to make me king."

Comyn had agreed to take Bruce's estates, and to help him to win the crown, and had solemnly sworn to tell no one of their compact.

But not even kings or bishops in those days thought it wicked to break their oaths or mean to break their promises.

The Comyn saw a fine chance of avenging himself on his old enemy the Bruce, and told Edward the whole tale.

Edward promised to reward Comyn, and, in a great rage, sent for Bruce.

To all the king's questions and accusations Bruce answered so wisely and so pleasantly that the king's rage was softened. Until he got more news from Scotland he decided to do nothing, but forbade Bruce to leave the court without his leave.

One night, as the king and some of his lords sat over their wine, the king told the lords that he did not mean to delay any longer, but was going to have Robert the Bruce put to death on the morrow.

The Earl of Gloucester, a cousin of the Bruce, heard this. To Bruce's house he sent a trusty messenger with twelve silver pennies and a pair of spurs.