

# CELEBRATING BANNOCKBURN, 1314-2014

Stephen Cooper and Ashley Cooper

It has now been agreed that a referendum on Scottish independence will be held on 18 September 2014, not long after the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn. The leader of the Scottish National Party, Alex Salmond, has long told how his imagination was fired as a boy by tales of William Wallace and Robert the Bruce; but does the mythology tell us much about modern day Scotland?

Excessive concentration on Bannockburn obscures the complexity of events. Even in the conventional narrative, there were two Wars of Scottish Independence, the first being fought between from 1296-1328 and the second between 1332 and 1357; and some 27 battles between Scots and English. These Wars did indeed involve a great deal of English oppression, but they were also in part civil wars. King Alexander III of Scotland died in 1286, leaving a four year old girl, Margaret ('the Maid of Norway') as his heir; but she died soon afterwards, leaving no less than 13 candidates for the succession, including the grandfather of Robert the Bruce and John Balliol, Lord of Galloway. The Guardians of Scotland then asked Edward I of England to adjudicate. Edward agreed - on condition that he be recognised as feudal overlord of Scotland - and then chose Balliol, who was crowned King of Scotland.

The settlement broke down because Edward pressed his claims too far, requiring the Scots to provide troops for an invasion of France. Rather than submit to this, the Scots formed the 'Auld Alliance' with the French in 1295, and when Edward led the first of a series of invasions of Scotland, he met with stiff resistance, at first from William Wallace and his followers, but then from others. From at least 1306, the civil war between Bruce and Balliol was reignited, and it was the claimant Bruce's grandson who led the Scots to victory at Bannockburn. This more or less brought the First War of Independence to a close.

There was a Second War of Independence, again involving a civil war in Scotland. Not long after Edward III succeeded Edward II in England the English decided to back Edward Balliol, son of John, and a group of Scottish nobles known (for good reason) as the 'Disinherited'. These men invaded Scotland by sea and defeated the royal Scots army at Dupplin Moor in 1332. Several more years of warfare ensued, before the House of Bruce ultimately prevailed once more and Scottish Independence was finally recognised at the Treaty of Berwick in 1357.

It could therefore be argued that the Scots secured their independence, not on the field of Bannockburn, but by wearing the English down, over many years, so that they eventually lost the will to attempt further conquest. What would have happened if the Scots had been defeated at Bannockburn? Would they have lost their liberty forever? In our view, this is unlikely. If Edward II had been more like

the man his father had been (and his son proved to be), Scotland would have preserved her independence anyway. She was always a more difficult 'nut' to crack, militarily, than Wales, because the 'nut' was much bigger. Whereas Edward had been able to build castles all around the Welsh heartland in Snowdonia, Scotland was too large for any medieval army to hold down. Edward could 'hammer' away all he liked; but there were too many fastnesses for the rebels to take refuge in. Even the Romans had found Scotland too much to handle, and in the eighteenth century, it required muskets, roads, and long years of persecution to break the clans and impose the rule of the South on the Highlands.

The Scots were also a more difficult people to dominate than the Welsh, who lived in a collection of principalities, some of them antipathetic to others, rather than in a kingdom. By contrast the Scots, though often plagued by civil wars and baronial revolts, had their own realm for 300 years before Edward I tried to conquer them; and they soon acquired a powerful ally in France.

Concentration on Bannockburn also obscures what happened after 1603. The Union of the Crowns in that year was entirely peaceful and the Union of the Parliaments of 1707 was voluntary (though various historians have sought to show that there was a great deal of bribery involved). The Union brought many undoubted advantages to Scotland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not least participation in the new British Empire. The oppression of the clans in the Highlands, after the Jacobite Risings of 1715 and 1745, was the work of the new British State, and of the Lowlands of Scotland, rather than of England alone; and the Highland Clearances of the nineteenth century were the work of the lairds. In contrast to Ireland, Scotland experienced no Potato Famine, no more armed risings and no republican terrorism. There is a stark contrast with Ireland, where the Irish Free State of 1922 was born in war, after a majority of the Irish came to see British rule as the product of eight centuries of English (and Scottish) oppression.

What Scotland did suffer from (or enjoy) after 1603 was an elaboration of myth. The late Hugh Trevor Roper wrote, somewhat insultingly, that "myth, in Scotland, is never driven out by reality, or by reason, but lingers on until another myth has been discovered, or elaborated, to replace it." In his *Invention of Scotland* (published posthumously in 2008), he exposed the political myth of the 'ancient constitution' of Scotland; the literary myths of 'Ossian' and Walter Scott, and the sartorial myth of kilt, tartan and clan.

The myths now they extend to Bannockburn. In the late twentieth century the Scots stopped singing *Rule, Britannia!* (1740), the *National Anthem* (1745) and even *Scotland the Brave* and started to sing *Flower of Scotland* (1965). A much older song, Robert Burns's *Scots Wha Hae* (1793) was partly about Bruce, who was the victor at

Bannockburn, but partly about William Wallace (who had been executed some years before):

*Scots, who have with Wallace bled,  
Scots, whom Bruce has often led,  
Welcome to your gory bed  
Or to victory.*

In contrast, *Flower of Scotland* is entirely about Bannockburn:

*O Flower of Scotland,  
When will we see  
Your like again  
That fought and died for  
Your wee bit hill and glen.  
And stood against him,  
Proud Edward's army,  
And sent him homeward  
To think again.*

The third verse begins to question the relevance of what happened in 1314:

*Those days are past now  
And in the past  
They must remain...*

But the conclusion is a firm one:

*But we can still rise now  
And be the nation again!  
That stood against him  
Proud Edward's army  
And sent him homeward  
To think again.*

This celebration of Bannockburn was also repeated in the appalling *Braveheart*, starring Mel Gibson, in 1995, which was mainly concerned with Wallace but finished with Bruce's victory in 1314. *The Times* called this 'the second most historically inaccurate films of all times'; but it was phenomenally successful, gave a considerable boost to the Scottish tourist industry and may even have helped to swing the result of a previous referendum on devolution in 1997, which was held on the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Wallace's victory at the Battle of Stirling Bridge.

Why this concentration – with or without the inaccuracies - on a battle which took place 700 years ago? The Scots are famously a proud nation but it would be open to them to take pride in many other things. These might include: the internal

peace which has prevailed, even in the Borders, since 1603; the defeat of King Charles I in the British Civil Wars of the seventeenth century; the benefits of common citizenship, a common market and a common currency; their achievements in education and missionary work and exploration; the Scottish Enlightenment of the eighteenth century; the industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; British inventions, engineering, science and the arts; the growth of trade unionism and the Labour Party; participation in British governments, from Lord Bute to Gordon Brown, by way of Campbell-Bannerman, Bonar Law, Ramsay MacDonald and Alec Douglas-Home; the defence of the nation in two World Wars; and the contribution made by Scottish judges to the development of the law in the House of Lords and the Supreme Court.

The tenacity and ferocity of Scots national feeling can be appreciated when we read the Declaration of Arbroath of 1320. There is much bogus history here but the drive for liberty and independence is there for all to see. The most famous passage runs:

*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....*

This is stirring stuff and it was written only six years after Bannockburn; but is there any need for such ferocity now?