
Opening Extract from...

Bannockburn

Scotland's Greatest Battle for Independence

Written by Angus Konstam

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Preface

I first heard about Robert the Bruce thanks to my trio of widowed great-aunts. Their husbands or fiancés had all died in the Great War, and their idea of child raising involved sending their young grand-nephew books rather than toys at Christmas. I was about eight when one of them – I forget which – sent me a couple of Ladybird books, biographies of famous people. One was entitled *Captain Cook*, the other *Robert the Bruce*. The cover of the first showed a smartly dressed naval officer, watching a Union Jack being raised over a deserted beach, while the other showed a bearded man sitting in a cave watching a spider. I was intrigued. One was obviously a great leader. Who on earth was the spider watcher?

It turned out he was actually King Robert I of Scotland, who went on to win a great victory over the English at a place called Bannockburn. For an eight-year-old the story was a little bewildering. One page showed him stabbing someone in a church, and then he was crowned, while five pages later he was hiding in the hills, watching that spider. Further on in the book he was seen capturing castles by hiding his men

in hay wagons, and the finale was that great victory, where his soldiers were shown using their spears to skewer charging knights. It was all enthralling stuff, and confusing enough for me to want to know more. That old widowed aunt knew how to hook a boy on history.

Two years later I visited Bannockburn as part of a school exchange trip. Kids from Edinburgh went to Orkney for a week, and then we 'peedie' islanders headed south to see the sights of the big city. We didn't just visit Edinburgh. We also went on a tour to Stirling Castle, and stopped off at the brand-new Bannockburn visitor centre on the way back. I still have the visitor's brochure from the visit, with its maps showing how the battle unfolded. I also still have a postcard showing a regal-looking statue of Robert the Bruce mounted on his war horse, gazing out across the fields where his spearmen ripped the heart out of English chivalry. It was only later – much later – that I found out the battle was really fought somewhere else, the map was probably wrong, and King Robert probably looked less imposing in the flesh than he did in bronze.

That, of course, is one of the delights of history. There's always something new to learn, something more to uncover. Our ideas about the past change with time, and so too does the way we look at the way history is presented. When we're young, we pretty much accept everything at face value, or at least we do if it's written down in a book. Then we begin questioning things, and sometimes we discover that there's more than one version of what happened in the past. After all, two people can go to the same football match, and then give such radically different versions of what went on that they could have been watching two different games. If they both supported different teams to start with, then their accounts might well reflect their partisan allegiances. History works the same way. The only difference is that if the event took place as long ago as Bannockburn, then sometimes we only have a handful of accounts, some of which were written long after the event by people who weren't even there. That's where history gets really interesting.

It becomes something of a treasure hunt, or a piece of detective work. It also involves some of the skills of the judge, weighing up evidence and trying to work out the truth from the not so true. History is a very personal journey, as everyone who embarks on a historical quest has to make their own way and reach their own decisions. Historians can be just as biased as the people whose accounts they read. Whether we like it or not, every historian has their own agenda. Some of the great historians of the past hundred years have been given labels – so and so has a political, national or ethnic bias, or is an apologist for one side or another. While we usually try to avoid this – or at least not be too blatant about it – we're all human, and so inevitably some degree of bias creeps in.

This isn't necessarily a bad thing – a strictly neutral version of any story can be very dull indeed. It might be more honest to say right at the start that any history is based on the available evidence, but written by someone with a voice, and an opinion. In Scotland, history and politics often become entangled. For some, the past is a source of inspiration for the future. For others, it becomes a salutary lesson in what mistakes to avoid. The one thing Scottish history is not is dead, fit only for scholars and schoolchildren. In Scotland, on the eve of a hard-fought referendum, history is more likely to be seen as a weapon to be wielded in a modern battle for the hearts and minds of the Scottish people.

Bannockburn was a turning point in history, for the English as well as the Scots. This medieval battle helped define the political landscape of Britain. For many Scots this seminal moment from their past has become a patriotic talisman, even though the romantic myths that surround it have all but obscured what really happened. Seven centuries later, debates on national identity and Scottish independence will inevitably be influenced by the events of 1314. While I have my own views on Scotland's future, I've tried not to let them show. After all, this book is really about Scotland's past.

The story of Robert the Bruce, the Scottish Wars of Independence

and the Battle of Bannockburn has been told many times before. Both learned historians and more populist authors have recounted the tale, and the topic has attracted its fair share of cranks and axe-grinders. Much ink has been spilt over the finer points of this important battle, yet still there's disagreement over how the battle was fought, how many people took part, or even where it happened. Academics sometimes argue over the merits of the handful of sources out there, and the value of one medieval writer compared to another. Others are more than willing to overload a reader with facts, in the mistaken belief that dryness and worthiness are closely related.

As a historian I know how to sort the wheat from the chaff. As a writer, my aim is to use what we know about the past to paint as vivid a portrait of it as I can. Fortunately the subject lends itself to the task. Its historical cast includes murderous kings, scheming nobles, warlike bishops, chivalric knights, courtly sybarites, heartless taxmen and strong-willed wives. The story of Bannockburn has it all – it is a history that captures the imagination, and is a tale that deserves retelling. Please join me on a trip into that vibrant past – a journey that for me began almost half a century ago with that little Christmas present.

Prologue

Robert Clifford had met his match. As his weary and frustrated knights circled the ranks of spearmen he must have realised it. It was unthinkable that well-mounted men-at-arms could be beaten by soldiers on foot, but that was exactly what had just happened. An hour before, Clifford and his men had been moving fast across open ground, heading towards Stirling Castle. They could even see its battlements in the distance. Now his knights – the elite of King Edward's army – were being bested by mere spearmen. Clifford was one of the most important magnates in England, and a grizzled veteran of numerous battles and skirmishes. None of this was helping him now, as he stared defeat in the face.

He might have realised the significance of the moment, but despite all his experience he couldn't have been aware this was a defining moment – the turning point of the battle, the campaign and the entire war. Clifford and his men had been tested, and had been found wanting. The date was 23 June 1314, the time early afternoon, and the place Bannockburn – more specifically an area of rough pasture just north of the hamlet surrounding St Ninian's Church. The following day the same ground Clifford had recently passed through would be fought over again, as the battle reached its bloody conclusion. This, though, was the moment when the Scots learned

they were just as good as the most powerful troops the English could hurl against them.

Earlier that day King Edward II's English army had been marching to relieve Stirling Castle when they came upon a Scottish force blocking their path. The vanguard of Edward's army halted in front of the Bannockburn, a stream whose wriggling course barred their advance. The Scots were waiting for them on the high ground beyond the stream, the bulk of their troops hidden by the trees which covered the ridge. In plain view was Robert the Bruce, self-styled King of Scotland, mounted on a small palfrey. The two armies had skirmished across the stream that morning, at the ford where the Stirling–Falkirk road crossed the steep-sided slopes of the Bannockburn. The fighting hadn't gone well for Edward – his men were hemmed in both by the terrain and by the Scottish infantry. He needed to find another route to Stirling.

That was where Robert Clifford came in. The forty-year-old nobleman commanded a large contingent in Edward's army, and when the king called him to his side, he was given fresh orders. Clifford and his men were to cross the Bannockburn further downstream. They would then bypass the wooded slopes and find a new way to reach Stirling Castle. A modern soldier would call this mission a 'reconnaissance in force'. Lord Clifford, though, was a knight, and his orders had a uniquely medieval twist to them. Stirling Castle was held by an English garrison, and its governor had made a promise – one that had led directly to this great battle between two royal armies. A few months before, Stirling's governor had promised that he would hold out until midsummer. If he wasn't relieved by then he would surrender the castle. There was now just one day to spare – Edward had to relieve the castle or lose it to the Scots.

Clifford's extra mission was to fulfil this obligation. Technically the castle had already been relieved when the English vanguard came within three leagues of its walls. Clifford didn't have to cut his way through to the castle gates – but it would be good to make contact

with them, and reassure them that help was on its way. This venture began well enough. Clifford found a place to cross the Bannockburn, well away from the sounds of the fight raging further upstream. His mounted men-at-arms cantered and formed themselves up ready for the two-mile march to the castle. So far everything had gone to plan.

As he advanced across the flat, open alluvial plain known as the Carse of Balquhiderock, Clifford must have kept a wary eye on the wooded slopes to his left. Had the Scots seen him? Who was hidden in the trees? He would soon find out. The road to Stirling ran along the ridge, and emerged from the trees beside St Ninian's Church, where a small hamlet straddled another stream. Clifford's men crossed this burn – the Pelstream – and moved left, skirting a bog to reach the high ground beyond the church. It was then they saw the enemy. Scottish foot soldiers began filtering out of the trees near the church, and started forming up into a 'schiltron', a dense but flexible block of spearmen four or five deep. That day it proved to be a battle-winning formation.

Thomas, Earl of Moray and the nephew of the Scottish king, had been watching Clifford since his men crossed the Bannockburn. He commanded King Robert's reserve, a division of spearmen who were hidden deep in the woods overlooking the carse. He had taken no part in the skirmish near the ford – his job was to protect the Scots army from any move against his flank. While Clifford's men were certainly on the flank of Robert's army, they weren't threatening it. Instead they seemed to be marching towards Stirling. He could obey orders and stay where he was, or he could march out and meet the English. Moray chose the more active course.

When he spotted the Scots Robert Clifford had three choices. He could turn back and rejoin the main army, he could avoid the Scots and head for the castle, or he could form up his men and charge. He probably didn't even consider the first option – to retreat without even fighting would incur the wrath of the king, and he would be labelled a coward. Clifford was certainly not scared of anyone. He had

already fulfilled the main part of his mission – he had been seen by the garrison, and technically he had lifted the siege. Still, to ride on to Stirling meant failure in his other duty – the reconnaissance. For that mission to succeed he needed to probe the enemy's defences, and then return to Edward to give his report. That really left him just one choice. Besides, his 300 mounted men-at-arms included some of the most experienced knights in the army. What could possibly go wrong? Clifford decided to charge.

The chronicler Sir Thomas Grey tells us what happened next. While Grey wasn't there that day, his father was. Also Sir Thomas, the elder Grey was, like Clifford, a battle-hardened veteran. He heard Clifford speak to Sir Henry Beaumont, the king's cousin, who was acting as Clifford's co-commander. Beaumont might have been a bull-headed knight, but he was so sure of himself he advocated waiting, to give the Scots a sporting chance. Sir Thomas wasn't so sure – he argued for immediate action, yelling, 'My Lord, give them what you like now – in a short while they will have everything.' If Clifford had listened to Grey the Battle of Bannockburn might have been over before it had properly begun. Instead Beaumont replied for him, shouting across to Grey, 'Flee then – flee if you're afraid.' That was enough for Grey. He kicked his spurs in, levelled his lance, and trotted off towards the enemy spearmen. Clifford now had no option but to order the rest of his knights to follow.

By now the Earl of Moray and his men were almost ready. As the English knights approached, the last of the spearmen ran into place and levelled their spears. The schiltron was a uniquely Scottish battle formation. While other fighting men, like the Flemings, adopted similar formations, what set the schiltron apart was its versatility. Essentially it involved four or five ranks of spearmen, bunched up to form a single wall of men. When the spears were levelled the schiltron presented a dense wall of spearpoints to the enemy. The schiltron could be deployed as a long line of spearmen, or occasionally its two ends could be doubled back on each other to form a ring of spears.

Like the infantry squares of Napoleon's time these spear rings were almost invulnerable to cavalry, as long as the men held their nerve. If, however, the enemy could break into the ring, then the whole thing fell apart, and it was every man for himself.

Just before the knights reached the schiltron the leading ranks of spearmen would have dug their spear butts into the ground, to help absorb the shock when man and rider hurtled into them. Most horses would shy away at the last minute, but these knights were riding destriers, big battle horses which – if excited enough – just might be convinced to smash into the enemy and ride them down. That, though, was if the enemy didn't stand their ground with levelled spears. The collision must have been breathtakingly ferocious. Sir Thomas's horse was skewered by the well-braced spears and fell to the ground, throwing its rider in front of the spearmen. A stunned Sir Thomas was pulled from his twitching horse, and spearmen hauled him into the centre of the ring. Another knight, Sir William Deyncourt, was killed outright, transfixed by a spearhead. Both knights were well ahead of their companions. The knights behind them saw the horror unfold and at the last minute pulled their horses aside. It was as if they sensed they would be unable to break through the bristling wall of spears.

Clifford and Beaumont, though, were not prepared to give up. While a frontal assault might not work, a more methodical approach should win the day. They needed to find a way into the schiltron – to encourage the Scots to break formation, or to find chinks in the schiltron's defences which could then be exploited using sword and axe. The English men-at-arms rode around the Scottish ring, and began launching coordinated assaults from several directions at once. The ring held. The air became thick with dust, and the men of both sides were now dripping with sweat. The English men-at-arms found it impossible to prise their way in, so they resorted to throwing axes at the spearmen, hoping to create a gap. The Scots knew that an opening in their ranks would be fatal, so when men died others quickly took their place.

The way to crack a schiltron was to bring up archers, just as King

Edward's father had done at the Battle of Falkirk fifteen years before. The trouble was, Clifford was on a mounted reconnaissance – the spearmen and archers he commanded had been left with the king. This meant the battle had to be won the hard way, with lance, sword, axe and knife. So the hacking and stabbing continued – the English knights launching attacks against the wall, and the Scots doing whatever they could to protect themselves. Clifford's men-at-arms threw themselves into the fray, but try as they might they couldn't break into the enemy ranks. Eventually, after an hour or so of struggle, the exhausted riders began to falter.

At that moment a fresh group of Scottish spearmen began appearing at the edge of the woods. These were the men of James Douglas, Bruce's loyal lieutenant. The English men-at-arms pulled back to regroup, giving Moray's men a chance to recover. The English withdrawal also handed the Scots the initiative. Moray ordered his schiltron to advance, and gingerly his troops stepped over the bodies of dead men and horses, moving slowly towards Clifford's horsemen. The English men-at-arms were too exhausted to continue the fight. Instead they began to break and run. This was the moment when Clifford must have realised he was beaten. His men had given their all to the fight, and still the ranks of spearmen remained unbroken. Now the same spearmen were advancing towards him. It was utterly unthinkable, but these lowly Scottish foot soldiers had won the fight.

As Clifford's men fled, either back across the carse or towards the castle, their commander must have wondered just how he could explain his defeat to King Edward. The battle had been hard-fought, but the Earl of Moray and his spearmen had clearly won a great victory. Just as important, the natural order of medieval warfare had been turned on its head. It was a long-established rule of thumb that a mounted man-at-arms would be able to defeat a soldier on foot, and in medieval armies an infantryman was largely there to make up the numbers. His role was to garrison castles, not to win battles. That was the job of the man-at-arms. That afternoon at Bannockburn men-at-arms had been

beaten by common spearmen. It was nothing short of a battlefield revolution. Unfortunately for Edward the lesson went unheeded. As a result, Robert Clifford's defeat was merely a foretaste of what was to come.