

## Scottish Society at the time of William Wallace

That the Scots were identified as separate people by the late tenth and early eleventh century can be seen from the chronicles of Durham which record their passage and both successful and failed attempts at conquest.<sup>1</sup> Whether they were independent or vassal kings was not a matter of major significance at the time. Some of them looked to England for support. Malcolm Canmore in 1072 was forced to submit to William the Conqueror at Abernethy. This did not stop him raiding southwards later. His son Edgar said in a charter that he was king “by the grant of my lord, William, king of the English and by paternal inheritance”<sup>2</sup> and he bore a sword at William Rufus’s coronation. Henry I took to wife a Scottish princess. Later kings of Scotland took English queens. The Scottish kings did homage to the English for English lands such as the earldom of Huntingdon, but then the English kings did homage to the French for some of the lands they held in France.<sup>3</sup>

More interesting perhaps is the question ‘What was Scotland in Wallace’s time?’ It was an area which lacked the cultural homogeneity of Ireland or Wales. The Islands and the West Coast were part of the Scandinavian kingdom down to 1100, spoke Norse and used *Odal* law. The kingdom ruled by the descendants of Kenneth MacApline (died c.858) who called themselves kings of the Scots, which had held sway over Gaels and Picts in the west, had by Wallace’s time spread to the south and east which was ‘English’ speaking. But its authority in Galloway and Moray was questionable and effectively non-existent in Argyll and Caithness. It hardly included the highlands which are now the heart of Scottish tourism. The lordship of the Isles since Somerled was in reality a maritime empire with strong sea links to Ireland. Its ecclesiastical allegiance was equally divided between York and the Scandinavian archbishoprics of Trondjeim and Bergen. The races who inhabited her included the remnants of the Picts, the Gallic Irish, the Norse in the Islands and the West coast. The kingship and much of the nobility in the areas under Scots control, had passed to the Anglo-Normans who had come north with David I to take up lands in the lowlands, but they had not displaced the natives despite the imported Flemings who formed a colony around Lanark. Clearly they spoke various languages.

What the king of Scotland claimed to rule therefore was often much more than his reach. In many areas that rule had been enforced only recently — in the Highlands only by the time of Alexander III (1249-1286), and then perhaps more symbolically than actually. What power a claim to rule

<sup>1</sup>Margaret Bonney, *Lordship and the Urban Community: Durham and its Overlords, 1250-1540* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup>Cited in Robin Frame, *The Political Development of the British Isles 1100-1400* (Oxford, 1990), p. 17.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid*, p. 17.

provided over the largely independent lords remains to be seen. Moreover, the ambitions of the Scottish kings to empire were not confined to the difficult Highlands — they still spread to encompassing northern Ireland such as the Bruces, not yet secure on the Scottish throne, went adventuring off to conquer parts of Ulster. Scotland, then, was a country yet to achieve a unified identity, whose heartland was perhaps defined but whose borders were still totally fluid.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, it still lacked a historian of its own.

At the same time, however, the effective limits of English control ended at the Severn and Humber rivers. Had the Scots managed to take over the North of what is now England as it might have done during Stephen's reign the later history of Scotland might have been very different. David I, however, married William the Conqueror's great-niece Maud, and spent more time in England than in Scotland as a friend of Henry I, and then of his daughter Matilda. David had lands in France as well as in England and was one of those who led Normans like the ancestors of Robert the Brus to settle in Scotland. William the Lion (1143-1214), by involving himself in English politics on the side of Henry II's son the young king and losing, had once again at the Treaty of Falaise<sup>5</sup> to acknowledge his subordination and do fealty for the kingdom. Henry took a number of Scottish castles including Roxburgh, Edinburgh and Berwick which he then gave to his own men, as a punishment. In 1189 William was able to have the treaty abrogated in return for money for Richard I's crusade but it made little difference to his position *vis-à-vis* the Angevin kings. He turned to improving his own position, colonising the lands he claimed by importing nobles from the rest of the Angevin empire, or making alliances such as that with Lachlan lord of Galloway who then helped him in 1187 when Donald Mac William in the north attempted to take the throne. He also defeated the Scandinavian Earl, Harald, in 1197-8 when he tried to take Inverness. Royal rule in Scotland was largely imitating English developments, and introducing English institutions.<sup>6</sup> The pattern of inheritance which had been Gaelic was becoming one of primogeniture.

In the first half of the thirteenth century, therefore, the Scottish kings turned to extending their power in the north and west where previous pretenders to the crown or to royal power had often found support. Grants were made to Norman supporters and new royal boroughs were established. Paradoxically, they were aided in this by the extension of English power in Ireland which cut off a source of assistance to the northern chiefs. In 1262 the Norse authority over the Western Islands was eliminated.<sup>7</sup> The colonising settlement of Norman or 'French', or sometimes they are called 'English',

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> The Treaty of Falaise was signed on 8 Dec. 1174. After William I had been captured by the English he agreed to accept Henry II as his feudal overlord, G. Donaldson and R.S. Morpeth, *Dictionary of Scottish History* (Edinburgh, 1977).

<sup>6</sup> Frame, *Political Development*, pp. 89-91.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 42-43.

nobles and burghs however did not occur without a significant history of native risings.

Wallace's rising, therefore, came only a generation after the extension of the authority of the Scottish kings in the north and west and a wholehearted sense of a uniform national identity had hardly had time to develop, if indeed, an aristocracy inextricably intermixed with and generally identical to the aristocracy in the rest of the British Isles could take on such a native colouring.<sup>8</sup> It seems that in the thirteenth century nine out of thirteen Scottish earldoms had English lands, and seven out of twenty two English earls had Scottish lands. The same was true further down the scale.<sup>9</sup> Even in the late thirteenth century, however, it might not have taken very much to shift the border southwards.

Let us look at the borders and where the sympathies of the border lords lay. Hadrian's wall much to the south of the present southern border and Northumberland and Cumberland had been a Scottish ambition since the victory of Malcolm Canmore at Carham in 1018 had shown the viability of a border at the Tees and Eden Rivers. Tynedale and Redesdale — wild country in what we now think of as the English marches — from Cheviot Forest to Kershopefoot in Cumberland, the Bewcastle and Larriston fells, highlands which reach to 1500 feet, were in the Wallace period often owned by lords who also had lands on the Scottish side. They were dominated by the family of de Umfraville, descended from the man known as Sir Robert with the beard, were lords of Tours and Vian' held Redesdale from 1076 until 1436 and were Scottish lords as well. This was country which was cut off from the rest of the thirteenth-century world: English Marches were mainly ruled by Scotland<sup>10</sup> Tynedale and Redesdale were traded by Henry II to the Scots for renunciation by William the Lion of his designs on Northumberland. Forfeited after Alnwick they were restored by the notorious treaty of Falaise by which the Scots acknowledged themselves English sub-kings in 1174. They passed backwards and forwards for the next hundred years. Either way the Umfravilles enjoyed total legal independence from the writs of either king.

How significant, indeed, did the local lords find the conflict between Scots and English in the thirteenth century? Did they expect it in any way to affect their way of life and independence? While the two kingdoms were fronting up in 1290 and Gilbert de Umfraville was ordered by royal justices to hand over some men for trial, Gilbert roundly told them not to stir from their homes, and proved at law that he had by William the Conqueror's grant hearing of all pleas. The Umfraville family were little better than robber

<sup>8</sup> For an account of Wallace's own antecedents see, Andrew Fisher, *William Wallace* (Edinburgh, 1986); or James A. Mackay, *William Wallace: Braveheart* (Edinburgh, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Frame, *Political Development*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Robson, *The English Highland Clans: Tudor Responses to a Mediaeval Problem* (Edinburgh, 1989).

barons. Their chief extorted money by menaces and rode out at the head of his subjects to burn and menace. Men of the church, like Antony Bek prince-bishop of Durham, were no better. The fact that Tynedale had been taken back from the Scottish king (for the fealty of a yearling goshawk) and given to the prince-bishop of Durham was largely irrelevant. Its courts heard cases from the local area regardless of notional borders, if indeed the lord waited for a court. In 1300, Bek sent fourteen score archers from North Tynedale, enemies of Edward I, to besiege the priory of Durham, who forcibly broke down the gates and tortured the prior, Hoton. When the prior escaped, and appealed to the pope, who ordered his reinstatement, the bishop sent the soldiers back and they smashed up the cloisters and refectory and made off with £300.<sup>11</sup>

When archers from Redesdale and Tynedale were involved in fighting during the Wars of Independence it is clear that they were mercenaries fighting for money. When Robert de Umfraville, 2nd earl of Angus, was named Lieutenant of Scotland, and his kinsman became Warden of Carrick, they were chosen for their ability to raise and lead troops accustomed to the countryside and concerned more for the protection of their own lands than for England. It was Redesdale and Tynedale that were ravaged when Wallace's men and the Earls of Atholl and Menteith, and later The Bruce, moved south. The Umfravilles were peers of Scotland who throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had nearly always fought on the English side, but whose loyalty was only to themselves and who probably felt that their control of the borders was better served by subjection to a distant and ineffective English king than to a nearer Scottish monarch.

The Scottish Wars of Independence have been described as civil wars amongst Normans. As in all civil wars the focus of interests split families and also led to changes of side. What is clear is that the borders were still undefined. The Comyns of Badenoch, one of the unsuccessful claimants to the Scottish throne held lands that were ultimately to be on the English side. The Comyn family fought on both sides, although after the Red Comyn had been murdered by The Bruce it is not surprising that his son died at Bannockburn for Edward II (1314), and an illustration of how individual noble families dogged by ill-luck could lose out while judicious changing of sides could result in an increase of fortunes. The issue of where the borders lay would not be settled until well after Bannockburn, when the English marches were held for the king of Scots.

The extent of the Wars of Independence's importance to the ordinary people must remain a little unclear. Were the people likely spontaneously to rise for the king or for the independence of the kingdom? This is of course

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<sup>11</sup> C.M., Fraser, *Antony Bek* (Oxford, 1957).

the substance of the Wallace myth<sup>12</sup> romanticised in nineteenth-century nationalistic writing,<sup>13</sup> which based itself on later poetic works like 'Blind Harry's'. In practice, the attitude of the ordinary people was probably more down to earth. The king's main source of income — mostly the same as the lords — was land ownership.<sup>14</sup> The relationships between king, lords and community were direct and reactive to any attempt to increase revenue or alter traditional agreements.<sup>15</sup> Alexander III in Tynedale trebled rents between 1285 and 1286 which might alone lead to resentment and risings, despite the myths which surround him.<sup>16</sup> Certainly, the people were far from subdued — but earlier native risings, such as those in Galloway in 1160 and 1174, were against rather than for the king and the nobles.<sup>17</sup> The drastic accusations against Wallace in the later texts are perhaps not so unlikely when one looks at other evidence of social tensions — the rolls of Wark for 1279 and 1293 show evidence of organised criminal fraternities, robber bands are accused of murder, in Bellingham William Robson killed the miller's daughter with an axe.<sup>18</sup> Liberty was a great rallying cry but disorder and absence of justice an even greater danger.<sup>19</sup>

Ordinary people were probably even more concerned with the four horsemen of the apocalypse — famine and disease added to fire and sword were disastrous on both sides of the frontier. The Scots invaded England and the borderers retaliated as much in search of food and drink as of securing liberty and freedom. Plunder brought the whole area to desolation and demoralisation. Whatever the rhetoric about independence and the proud boasts of the declaration of Arbroath (1320), it took half a century to restore the borders on either side to some measure of peace. In the meantime, the people protected themselves as best they could without reference to the events at the political level. Although they were rhetorically denounced as evildoers

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<sup>12</sup> Amongst the most notable, *The acts and deeds of Schir William Wallace (1570)* by Henry the Minstrel, Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, introduction by Sir William A Craigie (New York, 1940). There were many earlier editions of this work which is supposed to depend on one who knew Wallace, "This history of William Wallace ... written in Latin by Mr. John Blair ... and turned into Scots metre by one called 'Blind Harry'", *The Life, Surprising Adventures, and Heroic Actions of Sir William Wallace, General and Governor of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1774).

<sup>13</sup> A. Brunton, *Life and Heroic Actions of Sir William Wallace, Knight of Elderslie, in three parts* (1883); J.D. Carrick, *Life of Sir William Wallace of Elderslie* (1840).

<sup>14</sup> Marjorie Ogilvie, Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1973).

<sup>15</sup> For a series of essays which reflect on aspects of this statement see, *Medieval Scotland: Crown, Lordship and Community: Essays presented to G.W.S Barrow*, eds., Alexander Grant and Keith J Stringer (Edinburgh, c. 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Norman H. Reid, ed., *Scotland in the Reign of Alexander III, 1249-1286* (Edinburgh, c 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Frame, *The Political Development*, p. 40.

<sup>18</sup> Robson, *The English Highland Clans*, p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> G.W.S. Barrow, *Kingship and Unity: Scotland, 1000-1306* (London, 1981).

and disturbers of the peace who with armed force committed homicide pillage fire and rape they mostly avoided punishment by either state.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Alexander Grant, *Independence and Nationhood: Scotland 1306-1469* (London, 1984).