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THE SCOTTISH UNICORN

Robert the Bruce

Douglas Days
in Teba, Spain

Women in the World
of Robert the Bruce:
Wife, Sister, Daughter



A Wee Note from the Editor

Robert the Bruce has been looking over my shoulder for years.

This brass rubbing of Scotland's most legendary king came home with me from a trip to the UK in the mid-1990s and has been with me ever since – in my living rooms in Vancouver and New York and now watching me work every day from my home office in Toronto. He has always inspired me: a man who confronted tremendous odds, lost everything, never gave up hope and finally emerged victorious on the battlefield of Bannockburn.

Perhaps that's why I've particularly enjoyed putting together this issue of *The Scottish Unicorn*. We began, naturally enough, with Robert himself. But the more we explored his remarkable story, the more it led us into the lives of the people around him.

There was James Douglas, Robert's closest friend, who, after Robert's death, carried his heart toward the Holy Land—and into an unexpected battle in Teba, Spain, from which Douglas never emerged. That battle is still remembered every August, when Scots and Spaniards come together with pipe bands and costumes under the Andalusian sun to celebrate Douglas Days in Teba.



There were also the women whose lives were profoundly changed by Robert's quest: His wife Elizabeth, his sister Christina and his daughter Marjorie. Their stories take us well beyond the battlefield—to years of captivity, the defense of a castle and the beginnings of a royal dynasty.

That is one of the things I love most about Scottish history. You can begin with a legendary king and find yourself following all sorts of unexpected paths, discovering remarkable people and stories along the way. I hope you'll enjoy making some of those discoveries with us in this issue.

And if you have a moment, please drop by our website at www.scottishunicornnetwork.org and check out our Special Issues and blogs. **Scots are famously thrifty so don't worry, they're all free.** And if you enjoyed this issue of *The Scottish Unicorn*, I'd truly appreciate it if you'd pass it on to any other Scots or Friends of Scotland who may enjoy it, too!

Blyth Douglas

Robert the Bruce: *The Making of a Legend*

The Fate of Scotland Hung by a Thread

Before Robert the Bruce stood the largest English army ever assembled to invade Scotland.

Around him gathered an army of perhaps 6,000 Scots—farmers, townsmen and seasoned warriors who knew that if they lost the coming battle, Scotland's dream of independence might die with them.

It was the morning of June 24, 1314.

By the end of the day, the Battle of Bannockburn would transform Robert the Bruce from a hunted outlaw into one of history's greatest national heroes.

Yet this remarkable story did not begin on the battlefield.

It began years earlier with a kingdom without a king, a bitter rivalry between two noble families, a murder inside a church that shocked medieval Europe, years spent as a fugitive - and a determination that refused to yield, even when all seemed lost.

Some of the stories that surround Robert the Bruce are firmly rooted in historical fact. Others—like the famous tale of the spider patiently spinning its web—have become part of Scotland's rich tradition of legend and folklore. Together they tell the story of a man whose life became larger than history itself.

To understand how Robert the Bruce became Scotland's greatest king, we must journey back to a country in crisis at the end of the 13th century.



A Kingdom Without a King

Scotland was plunged into uncertainty when King Alexander III died in 1286 after falling from his horse on a stormy night. His only surviving heir was his young granddaughter Margaret, the Maid of Norway. But she died four years later while travelling to Scotland to claim the throne. Suddenly, a kingdom that had enjoyed decades of stability found itself without a clear successor.

In what became known as the **Great Cause**, thirteen claimants eventually stepped forward, each asserting a right to Scotland's crown. Among the strongest were John Balliol and Robert the Bruce's grandfather, also named Robert Bruce. Rather than settle the dispute themselves, Scotland's nobles made what would prove to be a fateful decision. They invited **King Edward I of England** to arbitrate between the competing claims.



Known to history as "Longshanks," Edward was one of the most formidable rulers in medieval Europe. He agreed to judge the succession—but only after insisting that Scotland recognize him as its feudal overlord. Reluctantly, the Scottish nobles agreed. Edward ultimately awarded the crown to John Balliol, but his decision came at a heavy price. Scotland's independence was steadily eroded as Edward treated Balliol less like a king than a subordinate.

It was only a matter of time before conflict erupted.

When Balliol resisted English demands, Edward invaded Scotland in 1296. He deposed the Scottish king and carried away the Stone of Scone - or Stone of Destiny, upon which all Scottish kings were traditionally crowned - to Westminster Abbey. Scotland was now under English occupation, and resistance began to grow. It was against this turbulent and dangerous scenario that Robert Bruce would eventually emerge—not merely as another nobleman with a claim to the throne, but as the man who would redefine Scotland's future.

Two Rivals – One Crown

Robert the Bruce was born in 1274 into one of the kingdom's most influential noble families. His grandfather had been one of the principal claimants to the Scottish throne during the Great Cause, and although Edward I ultimately chose John Balliol, the Bruces never abandoned their belief that they possessed the stronger claim.

Young Robert grew up in a Scotland divided by competing loyalties. Like many nobles of the time, he held lands in both Scotland and England and, at different moments, found himself navigating a complex political landscape. His family sometimes supported the English king and at other times the Scottish cause—not because they lacked principles, but because survival during this turbulent period often demanded difficult choices.



As resistance to English rule gathered momentum under William Wallace and other Scottish leaders, Robert Bruce watched events unfold. Unlike Wallace, he was not born into obscurity nor did he begin life as a national hero. He was an ambitious young nobleman with a legitimate claim to Scotland's crown who would eventually face a decision that changed both his own life and the history of Scotland forever.

Bruce's greatest rival for the crown of Scotland was **John Comyn**.

The Comyn family controlled vast estates and had been closely allied with the Balliol family, whose claim to the throne Edward I had recognized years earlier.

In other words, Bruce and Comyn represented two competing visions of who should lead Scotland. At times the two men cooperated against the English. At other times, their rivalry simmered beneath the surface. Each knew that the other's ambitions stood in the way of his own.

By early 1306, that rivalry had reached a breaking point.

Murder in a Church

History often turns on a single decision. For Robert Bruce, that moment came on February 10, 1306, inside the Church of the Greyfriars at Dumfries.

Bruce and his great rival, John Comyn, met in the church to discuss their competing claims to the Scottish throne. What was said between the two men has been debated ever since. But whatever it was, the meeting ended in violence.

Bruce drew his dagger and stabbed Comyn before the altar. According to later accounts, when Bruce's followers learned that Comyn might still be alive, they returned to the church and finished the deed.

The murder shocked not only medieval Scotland, but all of Europe. To kill a political rival was one thing; to shed blood inside a church was considered an act of sacrilege. Pope Clement V excommunicated Bruce, while Edward I now regarded him not simply as a rebel but as a murderer who had to be destroyed.

Yet there was no turning back. Within weeks, Bruce was crowned King of Scots. It was a bold declaration, but it also marked the beginning of the darkest period of his life.



The King Who Lost Everything

Edward I responded swiftly. Within months, Bruce's small army was defeated at the Battle of Methven, forcing the newly crowned King of Scots to flee for his life. Hunted by English soldiers and Scottish nobles loyal to Edward, Bruce found himself transformed almost overnight from king to fugitive.

His family's suffering was even greater. Three of his brothers were eventually captured and executed. His wife, Elizabeth de Burgh, his young daughter Marjorie, and several of his sisters were taken prisoner. Some endured years of harsh captivity.

Bruce himself disappeared into the wild places of western Scotland. Whether hiding in the rugged Highlands or seeking refuge among the islands off Scotland's western coast, he survived with only a small band of loyal supporters. For a time, it must have seemed that everything he had risked—the crown, his family, and perhaps even his soul—had been lost.

It was during this bleak period that one of Scotland's most enduring legends was born: According to tradition, Bruce took shelter in a cave, where he watched a spider repeatedly attempt to spin its web. Again and again the tiny creature failed, only to begin once more. Finally, after many attempts, it succeeded. Inspired by the spider's determination, Bruce is said to have resolved never to give up his own struggle.



Whether the tale of the spider is true remains uncertain. Historians generally regard it as a later legend rather than a documented event. Yet for more than seven centuries, the tale of Bruce and the spider has endured because it captures something that was undeniably true about the man himself: Faced with overwhelming odds, Robert the Bruce refused to surrender.

Gradually, the tide began to turn.

The Road to Bannockburn

Robert the Bruce understood that he could not defeat England by fighting on England's terms. Instead of seeking another great battle, he spent the next several years rebuilding Scotland piece by piece. Moving swiftly across the countryside, he launched surprise attacks against isolated English garrisons while avoiding confrontations with larger armies. One by one, castles fell into Scottish hands. Many were deliberately dismantled to prevent the English from using them again.

Slowly but steadily, Bruce regained control of much of his kingdom. With every victory, more Scots rallied to his cause. The hunted fugitive who had once wandered the western isles, taking shelter in caves, was becoming a king in more than name alone.

By the spring of 1314, only one major English stronghold remained in Scottish hands: Stirling Castle. Its governor, Sir Philip Mowbray, reached an extraordinary agreement with Bruce's brother Edward. Unless an English army arrived to relieve the castle by Midsummer's Day, it would be surrendered to the Scots.

The agreement forced England's hand. King Edward II could not afford to lose one of his most important fortresses—or the prestige that went with it. He assembled the largest English army ever to march into Scotland, determined to crush Bruce once and for all.

Robert the Bruce knew exactly where he wanted to meet them: Near the Bannock Burn, a small stream just south of Stirling Castle. Bruce carefully chose a landscape that would neutralize England's greatest military advantage—its heavily armored cavalry. Marshy ground, narrow approaches and concealed pits dug by the Scots army would funnel the advancing English into a killing ground where their superior numbers would count for little.

As dawn broke on June 23, 1314, the two armies finally faced one another.

The Scottish King and the English Knight

The battle had scarcely begun when one of the most famous moments in Scottish history unfolded before both armies.

An English knight, Sir Henry de Bohun, caught sight of Robert the Bruce riding a small palfrey armed with little more than a battle axe. Recognizing the Scottish king, de Bohun lowered his lance and thundered across the field. If he could kill Bruce before the battle truly began, Scotland's hopes of independence might die with him.

Bruce waited.

Only at the last possible moment did he guide his horse aside. As the English knight swept past, Bruce rose in his stirrups and brought his battle axe crashing down upon de Bohun's helmet with such force that it split both helmet and skull. The English knight fell dead.



The Scots army erupted in cheers. But Bruce's companions were less impressed. According to tradition, they scolded their king for risking his life so recklessly. To which Bruce is said to have replied, with characteristic calm, that his only regret was that he had broken his favorite axe.

Whether the details of the exchange survived the centuries exactly as they occurred is impossible to know. But there is little doubt that Bruce's extraordinary feat inspired his men while sending a powerful message to the English army: Scotland's king would lead from the front.

Victory at Bannockburn

Over the next two days, Bruce's carefully chosen battlefield proved every bit as important as his personal courage. England's heavily armored cavalry found itself hemmed in by marshy ground, narrow approaches and the disciplined Scottish schiltrons—dense formations of spearmen whose long pikes blunted one charge after another. Unable to deploy their superior numbers effectively, the English army gradually descended into confusion.

By the morning of June 24, panic had replaced confidence. As Scottish forces advanced, the English line collapsed. Thousands fled toward the River Forth while others became trapped in the marshes surrounding the battlefield. King Edward II himself escaped only with difficulty, abandoning both the field and any hope of crushing Scotland's rebellion. Against overwhelming odds, Robert the Bruce had won one of the most remarkable victories in medieval history.



Bannockburn did not end Scotland's struggle for independence – that would require another sixteen years of war and diplomacy. But it changed its course forever.

The victory at Bannockburn established Bruce as Scotland's undisputed king, inspired a generation of Scots to continue the struggle, and laid the foundation for the Declaration of Arbroath in 1320, one of history's greatest statements of a nation's right to determine its own future.

More than seven hundred years later, Robert the Bruce remains a symbol of courage, perseverance and leadership.

History remembers him as the king who refused to surrender. Legend remembers him as the man inspired by a humble spider. Together, they tell the story of how one determined leader helped to shape the destiny of a nation.

The Black Douglas and the King's Heart

Few figures in Scottish history inspired as much admiration among their friends—or as much fear among their enemies—as Sir James Douglas. Across Scotland he was celebrated as "the Good Sir James," Robert the Bruce's most trusted companion and one of the greatest warriors of his age. But south of the border, parents were said to comfort young children at bedtime with this telling little rhyme:

*"Hush ye, hush ye, little pet ye. The Black Douglas
shall not get ye."*

His reputation spread throughout medieval Britain. English garrisons dreaded his sudden raids. Castles thought secure found themselves under attack without warning, while soldiers learned that wherever Douglas appeared, defeat often followed.

Yet remarkable as his military exploits were, they are not the reason his name has echoed through the centuries. The story for which James Douglas is best remembered began not on a battlefield, but at the bedside of a dying king - Robert the Bruce.

Bruce's Closest Companion

James Douglas had already pledged himself to the Scottish cause by the time Robert the Bruce claimed the Scottish throne in 1306. The ancestral lands of the Douglas family had been seized by Edward I of England, giving him every reason to oppose English rule. But Douglas fought for more than revenge. Over the years, he and Bruce forged one of the strongest partnerships in Scottish history.

Douglas stood beside the king during Scotland's darkest days, when defeat, exile and uncertainty seemed almost certain to destroy Bruce's dream of an independent kingdom. Together they endured years of hardship before finally seeing that dream realized at Bannockburn in 1314.

As Scotland celebrated its greatest victory, Douglas had become far more than one of Bruce's commanders. He was his closest friend, his most trusted lieutenant and, in many ways, the sword arm of the Scottish king. That bond would soon be tested in an extraordinary way.



A Dying King's Request

Fifteen years after Bannockburn, Robert the Bruce lay dying. Although he had secured Scotland's independence and established himself as one of the nation's greatest kings, one burden continued to weigh heavily upon him: Bruce had never forgotten the killing of his rival John Comyn before the high altar of Greyfriars Church in 1306.



Medieval Christians regarded such an act as a grave sacrilege, and Bruce hoped to perform one final act of penance to save his soul.

Unable to undertake the journey himself, he asked that after his death, his heart be removed from his body, placed in a silver casket and carried to Jerusalem, where it would be laid to rest in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

There was only one man he trusted with such a sacred mission. And James Douglas accepted it without hesitation.

After the king took his final breath, Bruce's heart was embalmed and sealed within a beautifully crafted silver casket, which Douglas wore around his neck. With a company of Scottish knights as his entourage, Douglas set out in the spring of 1330 on what would become one of the most remarkable journeys in Scottish history.

A Detour into Spain

By the time Douglas and his knights set off for the Holy Land, his reputation had spread across Europe. Kings and princes knew the name of the Black Douglas, whose exploits against the English had earned him a place among the most celebrated knights of Christendom.

As Douglas and his men approached the Strait of Gibraltar on their mission with the king's heart, messengers from King Alfonso XI of Castile sought them out. Alfonso was engaged in a bitter campaign against the Moorish kingdom of Granada and appealed to Douglas to lend his legendary skill in battle.

Douglas agreed. The campaign, he believed, would be a worthy chapter in his pilgrimage before continuing on to Jerusalem.

History, however, had other plans.

The Battle of Teba

In August 1330, Douglas and his companions joined Alfonso's army near the fortified town of Teba in Andalucía.

During the fierce fighting, Douglas and a small group of Scottish knights became separated from the main force and found themselves surrounded by enemy cavalry. Realizing escape was impossible, Douglas performed the act that would forever define his legend. According to tradition, he removed the silver casket containing Robert the Bruce's heart and hurled it into the thick of the fighting, with the words:

"Lead on, brave heart, as thou wert wont! And Douglas will follow thee or die!"

Then he spurred his horse forward.

Douglas was killed in the charge, along with many of the Scots who had followed him from their homeland. Yet their desperate stand helped turn the battle, allowing King Alfonso's army to capture Teba and secure victory. The silver casket was later recovered from the battlefield. Robert the Bruce's heart was carried home to Scotland and eventually laid to rest at Melrose Abbey.



A Legacy of Loyalty

James Douglas never completed the mission his king and friend had entrusted to him. Bruce's heart never reached Jerusalem. Yet few stories in Scottish history speak more powerfully of loyalty, courage and friendship.

For nearly seven centuries, the tale of the Black Douglas has endured because it reminds us that the bond between these two men did not end with victory at Bannockburn. Even after Bruce's death, Douglas remained faithful to the promise he had made, carrying that promise across Europe until his own life came to an end on a distant battlefield beneath the Spanish sun.

Today, the Douglas family coat of arms bears the crowned heart of Bruce beneath its three silver stars, a lasting reminder of the remarkable friendship between Scotland's greatest king and his most loyal knight.

And every summer, in the Andalusian town of Teba, that story comes to life.

The Battle of Teba Comes to Life

Douglas Days in Andalucía

Nearly seven centuries after Sir James Douglas rode into battle carrying the heart of Robert the Bruce, the people of Teba have not forgotten him. Every August, this small town in the hills of Andalucía turns back the clock to 1330 for **Douglas Days**, a celebration of the extraordinary Scottish knight whose journey to Jerusalem ended on a battlefield beneath Teba's Castillo de la Estrella. This summer marks a milestone. From **August 20–23, 2026**, Teba will celebrate the **20th edition of Douglas Days**, with four days devoted to the Black Douglas and the centuries-old connection between Teba and Scotland.

For several days, Scottish flags appear in the streets and the sound of bagpipes mingles with Spanish voices. Medieval markets fill the town, costumed performers recreate scenes from the past, Celtic music echoes through the plazas and visitors arrive from Scotland and elsewhere to commemorate the man Teba still remembers as Sir James Douglas. It is an extraordinary legacy for a knight who arrived in Spain almost by accident.



This year's program includes historical and cultural presentations, music, theater and the medieval market, along with the traditional *Douglas' March to Teba*. The town's Municipal School of Bagpipes will also participate, while *Lágrimas por Itaba*, a theatrical production inspired by the Battle of Teba, will bring the events that claimed Douglas's life back to the place where they happened nearly 700 years ago.

Remembering the Black Douglas

Douglas had never intended Teba to be his destination. His mission was to carry the heart of his dead king, Robert the Bruce, to the Holy Land. But after arriving in Spain in 1330, Douglas and his Scottish companions joined the forces of King Alfonso XI of Castile in his campaign against the Moorish kingdom of Granada. The decision brought Douglas to Teba—and to his death.

Centuries later, the people of the town began formally commemorating their unlikely Scottish hero. A monument honoring Douglas was erected in Teba in 1987, and the connection has continued to grow. Today, Douglas Days is recognized as a festival of Provincial Tourist Interest and draws participants and visitors from beyond Spain, including Scots who make the journey to Andalucía to take part.



Bagpipes Beneath the Spanish Sun

For a few days each August, medieval Teba comes alive again with markets, street performances, concerts, historical presentations and reenactments. Residents decorate different neighborhoods to evoke the Christian, Muslim and Jewish cultures of medieval Andalucía, while bagpipers and Scottish traditions add another culture to the extraordinary mix.

At the heart of it all is Sir James Douglas. A procession through Teba culminates in a tribute at the monument erected in his honor, while music and theatrical performances recall the events of 1330. The *Douglas' March to Teba* has become part of the festivities, and the town has even established its own Municipal School of Bagpipes—a remarkable example of a Scottish story becoming part of the cultural heritage of a Spanish community.



The celebration is therefore about much more than recreating a medieval battle. Over the years, it has become an expression of friendship between two places separated by more than a thousand miles but connected by the story of Robert the Bruce and the knight who carried his heart.

From Teba to Melrose

The connection reaches all the way back to Scotland. After Douglas was killed at Teba, his remains and the silver casket containing Bruce's heart were recovered. Douglas was eventually buried in Scotland, while the king's heart was taken to Melrose Abbey.

Today, Teba and Melrose share a relationship born from those extraordinary events. Scottish visitors travel to Teba for Douglas Days, while representatives from Teba have made the journey in the opposite direction to Melrose. What began as one knight's final act of loyalty has become a living connection between communities in Scotland and Spain.

Perhaps that is the most remarkable chapter in the story of the Black Douglas. He rode into Teba in 1330 as a stranger, intending to stay only long enough to fight one battle before continuing his journey to Jerusalem.

He never left—and nearly 700 years later, they still remember him.

Women in the World of Robert the Bruce

A Wife. A Sister. A Daughter.

The story of Robert the Bruce typically focuses on battles, kings and warriors. We remember Bannockburn, the struggle against Edward I and Edward II, the Scots who rallied to Bruce's cause and the long fight to secure Scotland's independence. But the world of Robert the Bruce was also populated by remarkable women—and the struggle that made him a legend changed their lives just as dramatically.



Elizabeth de Burgh, his wife, married Robert when he was still Earl of Carrick. Four years later, she became Queen of Scots, only to see her husband's new kingdom collapse almost immediately. Captured by the English, Elizabeth spent eight years as a prisoner before Robert's victory at Bannockburn finally brought her home.

Christina Bruce, his sister, also endured eight years of English captivity. But Christina's remarkable story did not end with her release. Nearly three decades

after Robert claimed the Scottish throne, with Bruce rule again in peril, she found herself defending Kildrummy Castle against an enemy army. Christina refused to surrender, holding one of the last great strongholds of her family's cause until help arrived.

Marjorie Bruce, his daughter. Still a child when her father became king, she too was captured by the English and held prisoner. Marjorie's greatest importance emerged long after her early death. Through her son, Robert Stewart, she became the link between the Bruce dynasty and the royal House of Stewart that would rule Scotland for centuries – and eventually, England, as well.

Their stories remind us that the world of Robert the Bruce extended far beyond the battlefield. These three women experienced imprisonment, loss, political upheaval and extraordinary reversals of fortune as the Bruce family rose from near destruction to Scotland's royal house.

Robert became a legend. These are the lesser-known stories of three remarkable women who lived through it all with him.

Elizabeth de Burgh: Robert the Bruce's Queen

History remembers Robert the Bruce as warrior, rebel and king: the man who seized the Scottish crown, survived near-destruction and ultimately defeated a far larger English army at Bannockburn. But beside that famous story is another, much less familiar one – that of his queen.

Elizabeth de Burgh married Robert before he became king. She watched his bid for the Scottish throne turn their lives upside down, fled with his family when his cause appeared lost and spent eight years as a prisoner of the English. She lived long enough to see the fugitive she had married become the undisputed King of Scots—and to give him the son who would inherit his throne.

Her own story would end far from the great battlefields of the Scottish Wars of Independence, in a small town on Scotland's northeastern coast. What happened after her death created one of the more unusual royal burial stories in Scottish history.



An Earl's Daughter Marries a Bruce

Elizabeth was the daughter of Richard de Burgh, Earl of Ulster, one of the most powerful Anglo-Irish nobles of his age. Her father's vast estates and political influence made the de Burghs important players in the world of King Edward I of England.

In 1302, Elizabeth married Robert Bruce, Earl of Carrick. Robert had already been married once; his first wife, Isabella of Mar, had died after giving birth to their daughter Marjorie. When he married Elizabeth, Robert was an important Scottish nobleman with a distinguished lineage and a claim to the Scottish throne—but he was not yet the heroic figure later generations would remember.

Indeed, his political loyalties shifted during the turbulent years following Edward I's invasion of Scotland. Like many Scottish nobles, Robert had at times accommodated himself to English rule and at other times, resisted it. His marriage to the daughter of the Earl of Ulster strengthened his connections to the Anglo-Irish aristocratic world.

Four years later, everything changed.

In February 1306, Robert Bruce killed his rival John Comyn inside Greyfriars Church in Dumfries. Within weeks, he made his bid for the Scottish throne and was crowned King of Scots. Elizabeth de Burgh was now a queen—but it was a magnificent title attached to a precarious throne.

A Crown—and Catastrophe

Edward I regarded Robert not as a legitimate King of Scotland, but as a rebel. English forces were sent north, and in June 1306 Bruce's army suffered a devastating defeat at Methven. Robert became a fugitive, his supporters were hunted down and members of his family faced imprisonment or execution.

Elizabeth, Robert's daughter Marjorie, his sisters Christina and Mary, and Isabella MacDuff, Countess of Buchan, were among the women sent north toward Kildrummy Castle for safety. But Kildrummy itself was threatened, forcing them to flee again. They hoped to escape still farther north, possibly reaching Norway. But instead, the women were captured and handed over to the English.

Edward I dealt savagely with some of them. Mary Bruce and Isabella MacDuff were famously confined in cages, while Christina Bruce was imprisoned at a priory in Lincolnshire. Elizabeth's treatment was less brutal, probably in part because of her status and her powerful de Burgh family connections. But she was nevertheless a prisoner, separated from her husband and with no way of knowing whether his apparently hopeless struggle would ever succeed.

Eight Years Spent Apart

Elizabeth's captivity lasted eight years. During those years, the husband she had last known as a defeated king on the run accomplished one of the most remarkable reversals in medieval history.



Robert returned to the Scottish mainland in 1307 and began rebuilding his cause. Gradually, English strongholds fell, Scottish opponents were defeated and territory was recovered.

By 1314, only a handful of major fortifications remained outside Bruce control. Elizabeth could only have learned about these events from a distance.

Then came Bannockburn. On June 24, 1314, Robert

Bruce's army defeated the much larger English army near Stirling. The victory transformed Robert's position—and it also transformed Elizabeth's.

Among the important English nobles captured in the aftermath was Humphrey de Bohun, Earl of Hereford. He was an exceptionally valuable prisoner, and Robert used that value to secure something that must have mattered to him far more than ransom money: the return of his family.

Elizabeth, Marjorie and other members of the Bruce family and household were exchanged for English prisoners captured after Bannockburn. After eight years, Robert's queen finally came home. When she returned to Scotland in 1314, Elizabeth came back to a very different country—and to a husband who had gone from fugitive king to master of most of Scotland.

A Queen, At Last

Elizabeth could finally begin living the life that had been promised by her coronation eight years earlier. But there was an urgent dynastic problem to solve: Robert had a daughter, Marjorie, from his first marriage, but no son. Medieval kingship depended heavily upon secure succession. The absence of a male heir created the possibility that another struggle for the Scottish throne could follow Robert's death.

Elizabeth and Robert had daughters, including Matilda and Margaret. Then, in March 1324, Elizabeth gave birth to twin boys. One, John, died in childhood. The other was David.

At last, Robert the Bruce had a male heir. David would eventually succeed his father as King David II of Scotland. Elizabeth's return had therefore done more than reunite a husband and wife after years of war. She had become central to the continuation of the Bruce monarchy.

Yet the dynasty Robert and Elizabeth were building remained surrounded by uncertainty. Scotland's independence had still not been formally recognized by England, and warfare continued intermittently for years after Bannockburn.

Only in 1328, with the Treaty of Edinburgh-Northampton, would England formally recognize Robert as King of Scots and Scotland as an independent kingdom.

But Elizabeth would not live to see that day.



The Queen at Cullen

On October 27, 1327, while staying at the royal residence at Cullen in Banffshire, on Scotland's northeastern coast, the queen died. She was probably still only in her forties, and Robert would survive her by less than two years.

Her death in this more distant part of the country created a practical problem: Elizabeth was Queen of Scots, and her body was to be taken to Dunfermline Abbey, the great royal burial place where Robert himself intended to lie. But Cullen was roughly 150 miles from Dunfermline—a formidable journey in the fourteenth century, particularly when transporting a body.

The solution sounds startling today but was not unknown in medieval Europe. Elizabeth's body was embalmed, and her internal organs were removed before the long journey south. Her body was then transported to Dunfermline Abbey, where she was buried in November 1327.

Her internal organs, however, remained in Cullen. They were buried at Cullen Auld Kirk, a church whose history stretched back at least to the early thirteenth century. A much later royal charter recorded that Elizabeth had died in Cullen and that her “bowellis” had been buried in the church there.

Robert did not allow the place where part of his queen had been laid to rest to be forgotten. He endowed a chaplaincy at Cullen, providing five pounds Scots so that a resident chaplain would

pray for Elizabeth's soul. The connection between the queen and the kirk survived long after both Elizabeth and Robert were gone. The church survived, too.

Today's Cullen Auld Kirk has been altered and enlarged considerably during the nearly seven centuries since Elizabeth's death.

The precise place where her internal organs were buried can no longer be identified.

But the remarkable connection remains: part of Robert the Bruce's queen still rests here.



Cullen Auld Kirk - Banffshire Scotland

Photo Credit: Gordon Ferrier

As a result, Elizabeth de Burgh has two burial places: Her body lies at Dunfermline, among Scotland's royal dead. But her internal organs remained at Cullen, where Robert ensured that prayers would be offered for the woman who had shared the most turbulent years of his extraordinary life.

Robert the Bruce's Queen

Unlike her husband, Elizabeth de Burgh did not become a national legend. She married a Scottish earl and four years later became his queen. She saw his new kingdom collapse and was captured. She endured eight years of captivity while her husband fought his way from hunted fugitive to victory at Bannockburn. She returned to Scotland a short time later, eventually giving birth to the son who would inherit the Bruce crown. After surviving the most dangerous years of her husband's struggle, Elizabeth died just months before England formally recognized Robert as King of Scots and Scotland as an independent kingdom.

Nearly seven hundred years later, Cullen Auld Kirk provides an unexpectedly tangible link to her story. Behind its stone walls lies part of the woman who lived through Robert Bruce's transformation from earl to outlaw to king. History gave Robert the legend. But at Cullen, Scotland still holds a remarkable piece of his queen.

Christina Bruce: The Sister Who Wouldn't Surrender

History remembers Robert the Bruce as the king who fought for Scotland's independence. It remembers his great victories, his defeats and remarkable comeback, and the warriors who stood beside him. But Robert was not the only Bruce with an extraordinary capacity for survival.



His sister Christina lived through many of the same upheavals that shaped her famous brother's life. She lost her husband to an English executioner, spent eight years as a prisoner in England and watched the Bruce family come perilously close to destruction. Decades later, when Scotland's independence was again under threat, Christina found herself inside one of the country's last remaining Bruce strongholds with an enemy army outside its walls.

She refused to surrender.

A Family at War

Christina was probably close in age to Robert, although neither her exact birth date nor her place within the large Bruce family can be established with certainty. By the time Robert seized the Scottish crown in 1306, she was married to Sir Christopher Seton, a knight whose family had longstanding connections to the Bruces.

Seton threw himself behind his brother-in-law's cause. But Robert's new reign almost immediately descended into catastrophe. His forces were defeated, his supporters hunted down and members of his family scattered as they attempted to escape capture.

Seton was taken at Loch Doon Castle and executed at Dumfries. Christina tried to flee Scotland with other women from Robert's household, probably hoping eventually to reach her sister Isabella in Norway. Instead, she was captured and handed over to the English.



Edward I reserved particularly harsh treatment for some of the Bruce women. Robert's supporter Isabella MacDuff and his sister Mary were famously confined in cages, while Christina was sent to the Gilbertine priory at Sixhills in Lincolnshire.

There she remained a prisoner for eight years.

Christina was finally released in 1314, after Bannockburn transformed her brother's fortunes. Humphrey de Bohun, Earl of Hereford, had been captured following the Scottish victory and was sufficiently valuable to the English that he could be exchanged for several members of Robert's family and household, including Christina.

The woman who returned to Scotland had survived the darkest years of the Bruce struggle.

A Life Rebuilt

Christina did not immediately remarry. Instead, she appears to have maintained a strong attachment to the memory of Christopher Seton. She founded a chapel near Dumfries where prayers could be offered for her dead husband, and Robert supported the foundation.

Her brother also granted Christina the lordship of Garioch in Aberdeenshire, providing her with income and giving her considerable responsibilities as a landholder. Surviving records show that Christina was no mere ceremonial aristocrat. She granted land, managed estates and exercised authority in her own name.

In 1326, some twelve years after returning from captivity, Christina married Sir Andrew Murray of Bothwell. Murray had also experienced English imprisonment and came from one of Scotland's great patriotic families: his father, Andrew Moray, had fought alongside William Wallace at Stirling Bridge and died from wounds suffered during the campaign.

Christina and her second husband had both grown up in a Scotland at war. They would soon find themselves fighting for its future again.

Robert the Bruce died in 1329, leaving the throne to his young son David II. Within a few years, Scotland was plunged into another struggle as Edward Balliol, supported by Edward III of England and a group of Scottish nobles dispossessed under Bruce, attempted to seize the kingdom.

By 1335, the situation was desperate. Much of Scotland had fallen under the control of Balliol and his allies, and only a handful of important fortifications remained in Bruce hands.

One of them was Kildrummy Castle. And the person holding it was Christina Bruce.

The Siege of Kildrummy

Kildrummy was one of the great castles of northern Scotland, an imposing fortress commanding the approaches through Strathdon. It was also a place with painful memories for the Bruce family. In 1306, Robert's brother Neil had defended the castle against the English before being captured and executed.

Nearly thirty years later, another Bruce would be called upon to defend its walls.

In late 1335, David Strathbogie, Earl of Atholl and one of the most powerful supporters of the Balliol cause, brought his forces against Kildrummy. Christina's husband, Andrew Murray, was away in the south. Responsibility for the castle's defense therefore fell to Christina and the garrison inside.

The most detailed surviving account comes from the Scottish chronicler Andrew of Wyntoun, writing in the early fifteenth century. He described Christina as making a “stout and manly resistance”—high praise in the language of his age—and credited her with organizing an aggressive defense of the castle.



The defenders did not simply wait behind Kildrummy's formidable walls. Wyntoun tells us that Christina's forces repeatedly drove their attackers back, suggesting that the garrison may have mounted sorties against the besieging army as well as defending the walls themselves.

Christina held Kildrummy. And every day she held it gave the Bruce cause something desperately needed: time.

The Battle That Changed the War

When Andrew Murray learned that Kildrummy was under siege, he headed north with an army to relieve it. Strathbogie was forced to respond, drawing his forces away from the castle and

toward Murray. The two armies met on November 30, 1335, at Culblean, roughly twenty miles south of Kildrummy. Murray's army defeated the larger Balliol force and Strathbogie was killed.

Culblean proved an important turning point. The victory restored momentum to the supporters of the young David II and helped begin the recovery of Bruce authority in Scotland. For centuries, the men who fought at Culblean received most of the credit.

But there would have been no relief of Kildrummy if Kildrummy had already fallen.

Modern scholarship has begun restoring Christina to the story. Historian Morvern French argues that her successful defense played a decisive role in the downfall of Strathbogie and the revival of Bruce fortunes. Christina had done much more than wait inside a castle for her husband to rescue her. She had held one of the last strongholds of her family's cause against a determined enemy until help could reach her.

Christina's Legacy

Christina continued to hold Kildrummy for years after the siege. In 1342, her nephew King David II and his queen, Joan, visited her there. Records from her later life also reveal a woman who continued to exercise authority over her estates and even became involved in helping resolve an international trading dispute.

Andrew Murray died in 1338. Christina lived for nearly another twenty years, dying in 1357 at what a medieval chronicler described simply as “a good old age.” She was buried at Dunfermline Abbey, the great royal burial place where her brother Robert had been laid to rest nearly three decades earlier.

Christina Bruce never wore a crown. No great medieval epic was written about her, and for centuries her role at Kildrummy was overshadowed by the men who fought the battle that followed.



But when the Bruce cause was once again fighting for survival, Robert's sister proved that courage—and the stubborn refusal to surrender—ran in the family.

Marjorie Bruce: The Daughter Who Founded a Dynasty

Robert the Bruce's daughter Marjorie never ruled Scotland. She did not even live long enough to see her thirtieth birthday. Yet few women who lived such short lives left a more enduring mark on Scottish royal history.

Through the only child she left behind, the bloodline of Robert the Bruce passed into the House of Stewart—a dynasty that would rule Scotland for more than three centuries. Eventually, Marjorie's descendants would sit on the throne not only of Scotland, but of England and Ireland as well. It was an extraordinary legacy for a little girl who spent much of her youth as a prisoner of the English king.

Robert's Firstborn Child



Marjorie was born around 1296, the only child of Robert Bruce and his first wife, Isabella of Mar. Her mother died while Marjorie was still an infant, leaving Robert a widower and his baby daughter without a mother.

When Robert married Elizabeth de Burgh in 1302, Marjorie was still a small child. Four years later, her world changed dramatically. Her father claimed the Scottish throne, was crowned King of Scots and almost immediately saw his new kingdom collapse around him.

As we have already seen in the stories of Elizabeth and Christina, the women of the Bruce family paid a heavy price for Robert's rebellion. After his defeat at Methven, Marjorie fled north with her stepmother, her aunts and Isabella MacDuff, Countess of Buchan. They were captured in 1306 and handed over to the English.

But Marjorie's fate contained a particularly chilling detail.

The Cage Edward Never Used

Edward I was merciless toward the women he regarded as accomplices in Bruce's rebellion. He ordered Mary Bruce and Isabella MacDuff to be imprisoned in cages, and he initially intended something similar for Marjorie, who was only about ten years old.

Instructions were issued for a cage in which the young princess could be confined. But the order was reconsidered before it was carried out, and Marjorie was instead sent to the Gilbertine convent at Watton in Yorkshire.

It was certainly a less barbaric punishment, but she remained a prisoner, separated from her father and family during some of the most formative years of her childhood.

For roughly eight years, Marjorie grew up in English captivity. Bannockburn not only transformed her father's fortunes in 1314, it also helped bring his family home. Marjorie, now a young woman of about eighteen, was finally released.



She returned to Scotland with an importance she could scarcely have possessed when she left it. She was the daughter of the King of Scots—and Robert still had no son.

The King's Heir

Today, it is easy to think of David II as Robert the Bruce's inevitable successor. But David was not born until 1324. For much of Marjorie's life, Robert had no legitimate male heir, making his daughter enormously important to the future of the Bruce monarchy.

In 1315, Marjorie married Walter Stewart, 6th High Steward of Scotland. Walter belonged to one of Scotland's most important noble families and had fought for Robert at Bannockburn. The marriage therefore joined the royal House of Bruce to a family already deeply committed to Robert's cause.



The Stewarts took their family name from the hereditary office they held: High Steward of Scotland. Neither Marjorie nor Walter could have known quite how important that name would eventually become. Their marriage was brief, but it produced one child, a son born in 1316.

They named him Robert.

A Life Cut Short

Marjorie died in 1316, probably when she was only about twenty years old. For centuries, tradition has connected her death with a riding accident near Paisley. According to the familiar account, Marjorie was pregnant when her horse stumbled or threw her; she was fatally injured, but her unborn child was delivered and survived.

The dramatic story has become part of Marjorie's legend, and a monument near Paisley marks the place traditionally associated with the accident. The precise circumstances of her death, however, are not firmly established by surviving contemporary evidence.

What we do know is poignant enough. Marjorie's life ended almost as soon as her adult life had begun, leaving behind an infant son. She was buried at Paisley Abbey, a religious house with longstanding connections to the Stewart family. At that moment, there was little reason to imagine that the baby she left behind would one day become a king.

The Other Robert

Marjorie's half-brother David was born eight years after her death. When Robert the Bruce died in 1329, five-year-old David inherited the crown as David II. Marjorie's son Robert Stewart therefore grew up in the shadow of another branch of the family. He was the grandson of Robert the Bruce, but David II stood between him and the throne.

Then came the dynastic twist that changed Scottish history. David II married twice but produced no children. When he died in 1371, the direct male line of Robert the Bruce came to an end, and the Scottish crown passed through Bruce's daughter.

Marjorie's son, now in his fifties, became **Robert II, King of Scots**. And with his coronation, the royal House of Stewart began.

A Dynasty Is Born

Robert II was only the beginning of the Stewart dynasty. His descendants would occupy the Scottish throne generation after generation: Robert III, James I, James II, James III, James IV and James V. Then came Mary, Queen of Scots, and her son James VI.

In 1603, another remarkable turn of history extended Marjorie's legacy far beyond Scotland. Elizabeth I of England died without children, and the English crown passed to James VI of Scotland, who became James I of England, as well. The two countries were still separate kingdoms, but for the first time they shared a monarch.

Nearly three centuries after Robert the Bruce fought English kings to preserve an independent Scottish crown, his descendant inherited the throne of England. And the genealogical bridge that made it possible was Marjorie Bruce.

The Daughter Who Founded a Dynasty

We know frustratingly little about Marjorie herself. History has preserved no detailed correspondence or intimate portrait of her personality. A picture of her life comes to us largely through the extraordinary events that happened around her.

She lost her mother as a baby. At about ten, she became the daughter of a king and then, almost immediately, a prisoner of that king's enemies. She spent much of her childhood in English captivity, returned to a transformed Scotland after Bannockburn, married Walter Stewart and died while still a very young woman.



Marjorie's importance lies partly in what happened after she was gone. Robert the Bruce won his crown through extraordinary persistence, warfare and political skill.

His son David inherited it, but when David died without children, the future of the Scottish monarchy reached back to the daughter Robert had left behind.

Through Marjorie, Bruce became Stewart. Her son became Scotland's king; her descendants included Mary, Queen of Scots and James VI.

And the dynasty that began with Marjorie's child, Robert, would eventually carry the bloodline of Robert the Bruce onto the throne of England.

While Marjorie Bruce never wore a crown herself, she became the mother of a royal dynasty.

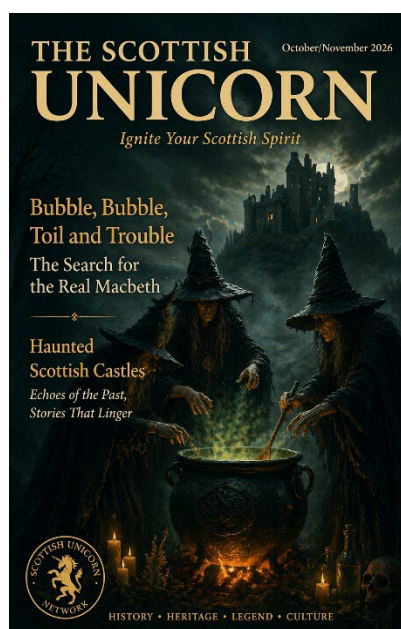
Coming Soon.....

As we close this issue focused on Scotland's legendary king, Robert the Bruce, we turn to more great stories waiting to be told. We hope you'll visit our website (www.scottishunicornnetwork.org) to download Special Issues, read our blog posts and subscribe - or email our editor: blyth@scottishunicornnetwork.org to do so.

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October/November Issue: Bubble, Bubble Toil and Trouble

Our Hallowe'en/Samhain issue builds out the tale of Scotland's most famous literary witches – the three who met Macbeth at the roadside and whose prophecies steered his fate from Thane of Cawdor to King of Scotland. Did Shakespeare base his Scottish play on a real historical figure? It seems so.

And what's more fitting for the season than some spooky tales of haunted Scottish castles, from weeping green ladies to spectral pipers, we'll offer plenty of spine-tingling stories for chilly autumnal evenings.

And it's a special birthday – this issue marks one year since The Scottish Unicorn debuted in 2025.

December/January Issue: Why Scotland Banned Christmas

For nearly 400 years, Christmas was banned in Scotland. Our December/January issue explores why it happened, how Scottish families kept Christmas traditions alive and how this unusual chapter of Scottish history helped make Hogmanay Scotland's great winter celebration.

Then we'll ring in the New Year Scottish-style, exploring the traditions that made Hogmanay so special—from first-footing and fire to festive foods, old superstitions and the singing of *Auld Lang Syne*. It's a celebration with a distinctly Scottish story behind it—and the perfect way to close one year and welcome another.

