

## **A Cage for Isabella MacDuff,**

## **A Crown for Robert the Bruce**

### **A Tragic History of Ambition, Treachery, and Barbaric Revenge**

Alexander III King of Scotland [ our 25<sup>th</sup> great-granduncle ] died without an undisputed heir. Two competitors stepped up: John Balliol and Bruce of Annandale. They were about to go to war, so the barons of Scotland invited King Edward I [ our 25<sup>th</sup> great-grandfather ] of England to pick one. Edward picked Balliol in November 1292. Edward then treated Balliol as an underling and imposed harsh terms on Scotland.

The barons formed a council and made a mutual defense treaty with France. Edward was displeased and invaded intending to throw out the council. He also threw out Balliol in 1296 and paroled him to France. The appointment of a new king was delayed. This led to trouble.

William Wallace led a rebellion intending to restore Balliol as king. Annendale's grandson, Robert the Bruce, treacherously played both sides. He first supported the rebels, then Edward, then back to the rebels, and finally Edward again. After a defeat at the Battle of Falkirk, 22 July 1298, Wallace resigned and the leadership passed to John the Red Comyn and Robert Bruce, who was temporarily back on the side of the rebels. Red Comyn and Robert Bruce were bitter enemies.

Bruce and Red Comyn could not work together. Edward used this discord to launch another invasion in July 1301. Bruce quickly switched sides again and pledged loyalty to Edward.

In 1303 all the main barons surrendered, except for William Wallace. Wallace was captured near Glasgow and was hanged, drawn and quartered in London on 23 August 1305. Edward felt free to punish the Scots. Bruce switched again - Comyn and Bruce made a pact to resist.

Bruce turned on Comyn. He invited Comyn to a meeting and stabbed him in front of the high altar of the Church of Greyfriars in Dumfries. With Red Comyn dead, the new leader of the Comyns now became **John Comyn** [ our 25<sup>th</sup> great-grandfather ] **the husband of Isabella MacDuff**.

Bruce was excommunicated and Edward intended to punish him. That being the situation, Bruce switched again. Bruce had himself crowned King of Scotland in Scone on 25 March 1306.

The Earl of Fife had the duty to crown the new kings of Scotland. The current Earl was Duncan MacDuff. He was not available because he was being held hostage in London by King Edward.

Duncan's sister, **Isabella MacDuff**, [ our 25<sup>th</sup> great-grandmother, wife of John Comyn, Earl of Buchan (a cousin of the murdered John the Red Comyn ) felt it to be her family duty to crown the king herself. She rushed off to Scone to do the job. She arrived the 26<sup>th</sup> of March, one day too late. To deal with this situation, a second coronation was held on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March. Isabella MacDuff placed the crown on Robert Bruce to be King of Scotland.

The Comyns were outraged, thinking John should be king. John's claim to the title was every bit as good or better than Bruce's. The Comyns, supported by Edward, attacked and a long war began.

With Isabella having crowned Bruce and John now leading the attack on him, the domestic household and the Clans were split: Comyn on one side, Bruce and MacDuff on the other.

Bruce lost most of his family in 1306 and 1307. In one famous event, Bruce's wife Elizabeth, daughter Marjorie, sisters Mary and **Christina** [ our 22<sup>nd</sup> great-grandmother ], brother Niall, brother-in-law Christopher Seton, Isabella MacDuff, and their escort John Strathbogie of Atholl were all captured, apparently by William Ross [ also our distant relative]. Ross turned them over to Edward I who extracted his revenge: Niall Bruce and Christopher Seton were hanged. Strathbogie was drawn and quartered. His head was placed on a post on London Bridge. Elizabeth Bruce was placed in house arrest; her nine year old daughter Marjorie was sent to a nunnery.

### **The ladies in the cages**

For the other three ladies, Edward had something special in mind: cages were constructed, the ladies were placed in the cages and the cages were hung on the battlements at various castles – Mary at Roxburgh Castle and Isabella MacDuff at Berwick Castle. For a bit of privacy, privies were constructed in the cages. The widow Christina was let loose fairly quickly and sent to a convent, but Mary Bruce and Isabella MacDuff spent two to seven years in the cages.

Shortly afterwards, Edward I died and left the war to Edward II who was not much of a commander or King. Edward II soon took up with Peirs Gaveston and then Hugh Despenser, causing the problems that led to our **Aunt Isabella's revenge** on Hugh Despenser and Edward.

Robert Bruce lost most of the early battles, but John Comyn met disaster in the Battle at Inverurie May 23, 1308. It was a complete defeat and the Comyns were almost exterminated. After the battle, Bruce carried out the violent and bloody events known as the "Harrying of Buchan". Everything Comyn was killed or destroyed and even the name was outlawed. These war crimes committed by Robert the Bruce were considered excessive, even by the standards of the times.

John Comyn survived the battle and retreated to England where he died the following December. One wonders if he ever went to see Isabella in her cage. What would they have said to each other?

The war dragged on until the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314 where Bruce crushed the forces of Edward II. After the battle, **Isabella MacDuff was finally let out of her cage.**

Bruce was secure in his position although it took many more battles and ten more years to get to a conclusion. After Edward II was killed 21 Sep 1327 by our Aunt Isabella and Roger Mortimer, they had parliament put an end to the Scottish war with the Treaty of Edinburgh-Northampton. The treaty was signed in Edinburgh by Robert the Bruce, King of Scotland, on 17 March 1328.

Robert the Bruce died just a year later. The Bruces, the Comyns, the MacDuffs and the people of Scotland had paid a tragically high price for Robert Bruce to become King for such a short time.