

The Battle of Bannockburn 1314: Its Legacy Then and Now

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ABSTRACT

Popular culture has provided the world with the exploits of William Wallace as in the 1995 Mel Gibson film *Braveheart* and his band of rugged Scots in their struggle for freedom from the English in the late 13th century to early 14th century. It was, however, the leadership, resolve and fortitude of its warrior-king Robert the Bruce that saw this struggle brought to fruition. This study examines the military prowess that Robert the Bruce utilized at the tactical level to overcome both the numerical and more heavily armed English on the grounds near the stream of Bannockburn in 1314. The use of primary sources of the battle help to relay the sequence of events, while reflecting the politicization of the actual events. This study concludes with the legacy of the battle in both military lessons and tactics as well as its symbolism to the people of Scotland and for the cause of freedom and independence.

Keywords: Bannockburn, Schiltrons, Pikeman, Stirling Castle, Wars for Scottish Independence, Knights, Cavalry, Infantry, Archers, Geography

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RESUMEN

La cultura popular ha proporcionado al mundo las hazañas de William Wallace, como en la película de Mel Gibson de 1995 *Braveheart* (Corazón Valiente) y su banda de escoceses rudos en su lucha por liberarse de los ingleses a finales del siglo XIII y principios del siglo XIV. Sin embargo, fue el liderazgo, la determinación y la fortaleza de su rey guerrero Robert the Bruce los que vieron cómo esta lucha fructificó. Este estudio examina la destreza militar que Robert the Bruce utilizó a nivel táctico para superar tanto el inglés numérico como el más fuertemente armado en los terrenos cerca del arroyo de Bannockburn en 1314. El uso de fuentes primarias de la batalla ayuda a transmitir la secuencia de eventos, al tiempo que

refleja la politización de los eventos reales. Este estudio concluye con el legado de la batalla tanto en lecciones como en tácticas militares, así como su simbolismo para el pueblo de Escocia y por la causa de la libertad y la independencia.

Palabras clave: Bannockburn, Schiltrons, Pikeman, Castillo de Stirling, Guerras por la Independencia de Escocia, Caballeros, Caballería, Infantería, Arqueros, Geografía

1314年班诺克本战役：过去和现在的影响

摘要

流行文化向全世界传播了威廉·华莱士的壮举，正如1995年梅尔·吉布森导演的电影《勇敢的心》所展现的那样，13世纪末至14世纪初一帮苏格兰人为获得自由、摆脱英国控制而奋斗。不过，让这次奋斗得以成功实现的却是勇士之王罗伯特·布鲁斯的领导力、决心和勇气。本研究分析了1314年罗伯特·布鲁斯为战胜班诺克本河畔附近数量更多、武装更强的英国人而使用的战术军事才能。使用关于这场战斗的第一手资料，以期帮助梳理事件次序，同时反映真实事件的政治化。本研究的结论描述了这场战斗对军事经验和战术的影响，以及其对苏格兰人、以及自由和独立事业的象征。

关键词：班诺克本，长矛阵，长矛兵，斯特灵城堡，苏格兰独立战争，骑士，骑兵，步兵，弓箭手，地理

The shocking Scottish victory at the Battle of Bannockburn over the 23rd and 24th of June in 1314 was a demonstration of Scottish King Robert I's (r. 1306-1329) adaptability, acute understanding of the capabilities of both his troops and those of his enemy, as well as masterful use of the local topography. The English, who were in turn led by Edward II (r. 1307-1327), sought to maintain their stranglehold and claim to the Scottish throne.¹ They

would collide in the shadow of Stirling Castle—the Battle of Bannockburn was the most decisive engagement of the First War of Scottish Independence (c.1296-1328). The Scots' brilliant use of geography, and the defensive and offensive use of pike formations to defeat the largest English army to have ever invaded Scotland, secured Scotland's independence from England.

This unforeseen victory, by leveraging the cohesive strength of pike-

armed *schiltrons* in conjunction with the carefully chosen and restricted ground of the area, allowed Robert the Bruce to engage and defeat a much larger English army on his terms. The best sources of information for the improbable Scottish victory of infantry over the full might of the English are those from an unknown English author and *The Chronicle of Lanercost, 1272-1346*.

The Chronicle of Lanercost is believed to have been written by a number of authors during the actual events. Its most prominent translator, Sir Herbert Maxwell, has become synonymous and representative of the most widely used translation of it. The *Chronicle* covers the Wars for Scottish Independence from 1272 to 1346 in their breadth, along with key persons of the time, and serves as the main resource of the battle of Bannockburn from the English perspective.

Robert the Bruce, who was crowned king of Scotland at Scone on 25 March 1306, proved to be the catalyst that forced the elderly Edward I to take action and quell the Scots.² The frail English King at the head of his army with his son, Edward II, led a force north to personally subdue the Scots once and for all. King Edward fell prey to “A seiknes [that] tuk him in the way” and died on 7 July 1307 at Burgh-on-Sands, thus making his son, Edward II, king with the expectation to pursue the war against Robert the Bruce and the Scots.³

Edward was believed to have displayed little of the martial talents or skills of his father, though new research is challenging those assumptions. The

King’s return to the safety of England, for instance, was very much an acceptable course of action for the period. After Edward’s return to his noble surroundings, Robert surmised that to break England’s stranglehold on Scotland, various English castles would have to fall.⁴ To achieve this, Robert planned on taking these castles using “blockade[s], and partly through unorthodox tactics such as stealth and surprise, the English castles began to fall like ripe fruit.”⁵ These asymmetrical tactics used by the Scots included feigned retreats followed by stealthy incursions through freezing moats, hay carts being used to keep a portcullis gates open for Scottish troops, and even subterfuge by Scotsmen disguised as cows to get near a castle’s walls to scale them.

By midsummer 1313, all English castles of consequence were now under Scottish control save one—Stirling Castle. The capture of Stirling Castle was critical to the Bruce’s entire endeavor as it was the key to control of Scotland. The problem was that the castle was nigh impregnable, especially for a Scottish army severely deficient of siege equipment and materials. Robert the Bruce struck a deal with the castle’s governor, Sir Philip Mowbray (d. 1318), for the castle to surrender if they were not relieved by the English by June 24, 1314.⁶

Edward “had made up his mind to strike a blow which should not merely relieve Stirling but finally crush the Scottish insurrection.”⁷ There is debate as to the actual size of the English army, but it was likely a force that consisted

of between 2,000–3,000 heavy cavalry and knights, roughly 10,000 English and Welsh foot soldiers, with around 1,000 longbowmen and a relative handful of crossbowmen, for a rough total of 20,000 men.⁸

Scotland was at a serious manpower disadvantage as it had a population of only one fifth that of England at the time. Robert the Bruce and his Scots could only field an infantry driven force of *schiltrons* of around 7,000, with minimal archers and cavalry support of no more than five hundred.⁹ These *schiltrons*, similar to the ancient Greek phalanx, were deployed in three divisions that contained two *schiltrons* in each division, with the small force of cavalry positioned to the right and rear of the army.¹⁰ Undeterred by the numerical disadvantage, Robert placed his faith not in the quantity of men he had in his charge, but rather in their heart to fight as he declared that he only wanted me who would “wyn all or die with honour.”¹¹

Robert chose a position roughly two miles from Stirling Castle where “massed cavalry charges—always a favorite English ploy—could be blunted, if not stopped altogether.”¹² In the firm spots of the ground, Robert had his men dig pits with sharpened spikes at their base, then cover them up with brush. Additionally, the Scots sowed “caltrops (four-pronged metal devices arranged in such a way that one spike was always pointed upward)” over the land in between the pits, which would injure any man or animal that stepped on them.¹³

The vanguard of the English

army came into view late in the afternoon on June 23, 1314. Having marched the roughly 14 miles to beat the June 24 deadline, the force was tired and exhausted, but the sight of the Scottish army seemed to light a spark in the young English knights who nearly immediately charged the Scots. They were astonished to find themselves rebuffed by the stalwart Scots, as their impromptu charge proved ineffective.

The English vanguard and the subsequent engagement on day one of the battle is outlined in the *Chronicle*:

Thus before the feast of the Nativity of S. John the Baptist, the king, having massed his army, advanced with the aforesaid pomp towards Stirling Castle, to relieve it from siege and to engage the Scots, who were assembled there in all their strength. On the vigil of the aforesaid Nativity the king's army arrived after dinner near Torwood; and, upon information that there were Scots in the wood, the king's advanced guard, commanded by Lord de Clifford, began to make a circuit of the wood to prevent the Scots escaping by flight. The Scots did not interfere until [the English] were far ahead of the main body, when they showed themselves, and, cutting off the king's advanced guard from the middle and rear columns, they charged and killed some of them and put the rest to flight. From that moment a panic among the English and the Scots grew bolder.¹⁴



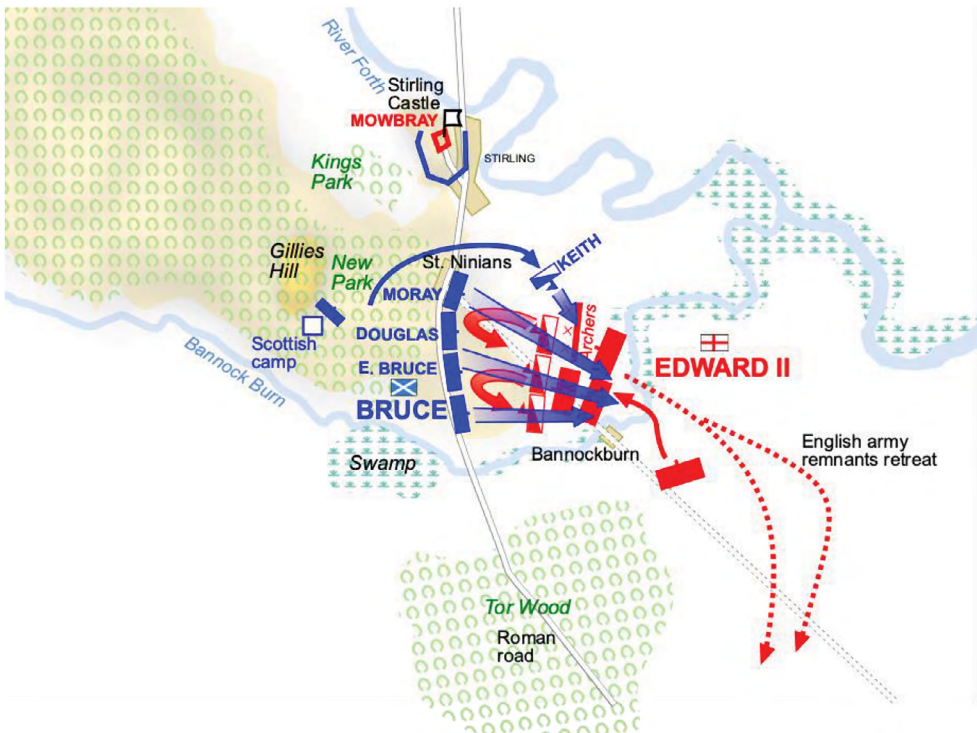
Robert the Bruce, King of Scots, circa 1684-1686, painted by Jacob de Wet II. Wikimedia Commons.

This passage of the arrival of the English vanguard near Torwood suggests a careful choosing of words by the author(s). This is so, in that there is no mention of the ill-conceived charging of the English knights against the Scots once they got sight of them. The author merely relays how the cavalry under Lord Clifford positioned his force in such a way as to prevent the Scots from escaping or to

“take the Carse road and enter the castle,” as another version contests.¹⁵ Additionally, the *Chronicle* notes the English force being cut off from the main body, which was representative of the trap Robert the Bruce set for them. The political spin of the *Chronicle*, however, is that it fails to mention the hundreds of English knights that were trapped and killed. This would include the death of



King Edward II of England, 19th century. Wikimedia Commons.



Battle of Bannockburn map, January 20, 2008. Wikimedia Commons.

Sir Clifford, which was a crushing blow to English morale early on.

Elsewhere on the field, an English cavalry force of around 700 found their way between a gap that had opened in the Scottish formations.¹⁶ Having lured the English force in to exploit the gap in his lines, Robert ordered the trap closed. In short order, the Scottish *schiltrons* on the right flank went on the offensive and engaged the English cavalry. Robert Clifford, commander of the English cavalry, was killed along with most of his force in the engagement.

On the following day, June 24, Edward II ordered his cavalry to charge the Scottish *schiltrons*. The prepared and marshy ground, in conjunction with the bristling pikes of the Scots, proved deadly to the English cavalry who were soon beaten and impaled. At the same time, Edward had failed to forward deploy his archers, so they were rendered ineffective.

The Scots pressed the English, who were caught between 12-foot pikes and the prepared muddied ground of the area. English archers began to rain arrows on the packed Scottish formations. Robert the Bruce saw what was occurring and ordered his small cavalry to ride around and hit them from the rear, decimating them. Recognizing the moment, Robert the Bruce ordered his hidden reserve forward.¹⁷ This broke the English, as “panic set in and ‘the men in the English rear fell back on the Bannock Burn ditch, falling one over another.’”¹⁸

The calamity of day two of the battle, including the English archer at-

tack as well as the full engagement with the Scottish *schiltrons*, is described in the *Chronicle*:

On the morrow—an evil, miserable and calamitous day for the English—when both sides had made themselves ready for battle, the English archers were thrown forward before the line, and the Scottish archers engaged them, a few being killed and wounded on either side; but the King of England’s archers quickly put the others to flight. Now when the two armies had approached very near each other, all the Scots fell on their knees to repeat *Pater noster*, commending themselves to God and seeking help from heaven; after which they advanced boldly against the English. They had so arranged their army that two columns went abreast in advance of the third, so that neither should be in advance of the other; and the third followed, in which was Robert. Of a truth, when both armies engaged each other, and the great horses of the English charged the pikes of the Scots, as it were into a dense forest, there arose a great and terrible crash of spears broken and of destriers wounded to the death; and so they remained without movement for a while. Now the English in the rear could not reach the Scots because the leading division in the way, nor could they do anything to help themselves, wherefore there was nothing for it but to take to flight.

This account I heard from a trustworthy person who was present as eyewitness.¹⁹

The disastrous second day of the battle for the English is carefully parlayed in the *Chronicle* to minimize the political, religious, and military damage to the crown. The military ineptitude of Edward II is presented here by the author in his placement of the rear English forces. Additionally, the mention of the Scots and their call to God before their advance lends itself to a holy sanctioning of the Scots in their victory over the English. The discussion of English archers being positioned forward and in turn engaging their Scottish counterparts, who were soon put to flight according to the text, is not backed up with any evidence. David Cornell believes that if this happened at all that it was “merely a preliminary to battle which was to be of no significance.”²⁰

The ensuing description of the clash of the Scottish *schiltrons* with the disorganized English force correctly gives the reader an accurate description of the tangled mess of man, horse, mud, and death. The *Chronicle*'s mention of the English infantry in the rear not being able to deploy is important in reconstructing the narrative of the battle. The ground carefully chosen by the Bruce had restrictions, which created a funnel that did not allow for the English infantry to come into play, thus negating them and their potential impact.²¹

The final key passage from the *Chronicle* addresses the toll in lives that the battle took on the English.

In the leading division were killed the Earl of Gloucester, Sir John Comyn, Sir Pagan de Typtoft, Sir Edmund de Mauley and many other nobles, besides foot soldiers who fell in great numbers. Another calamity which befell the English was that, whereas they had shortly before crossed a great ditch called Bannockburn, into which the tide flows, and now wanted to recross it in confusion, many nobles and others fell into it with their horses in the crush while others escaped with much difficulty, and many were never able to extricate themselves from the ditch; thus Bannockburn was spoken about for many years in English throats.²²

This passage is important as to the consequences of Edward II's reckless approach to Bannockburn, as it relates to England's greatest loss since the Battle of Hastings in 1066. The loss of so many noblemen, especially the defeat of armored knights by the Scots who were looked down upon by many of English nobility, was profound. For Edward, his escape from the battlefield and subsequent “political fallout of the catastrophic defeat threatened to engulf him.”²³

The fact that the *Chronicle of Lanercost* is primarily an English text must be viewed critically in its descriptions, especially of those at Bannockburn. The English were notoriously protective of their image of supremacy. As such, even the debacle at Bannock-

burn, with the key faults being laid at the feet of Edward II, was accordingly massaged to mitigate its negative impact as much as possible. This is typified in the *Chronicle* when:

The king [Edward II] and Sir Hugh le Despenser (who, after Piers de Gaveston, was as his right eye) and Sir Henry de Beaumont (whom he had promoted to an earldom in Scotland), with many others mount on foot, to their perpetual sham fled like miserable wretches to Dunbar Castle, guided by a certain knight of Scotland who knew through what districts they could escape.²⁴

While critical of Edward, the *Chronicle* still withheld the fact that the king was rebuffed entry into Stirling Castle after escaping the battlefield and was forced on to Dunbar Castle. This careful phrasing accordingly protects the position and sanctity of the king as a position, not the man himself.

A major point of contention between *The Chronicle of Lanercost* and historians is that of the actual numbers of troops present at Bannockburn. Both the English and Scottish accounts of the forces present have been debated and contested for hundreds of years, as contemporary sources of the time from *The Lanercost Chronicle* to John Barbour's *The Bruce* suggest unrealistic numbers of troops present. For instance, taking multiple contemporary sources into account from the time, including *The Chronicle*, speak to the English fielding up to 100,000 troops against the Scots

at Bannockburn.²⁵ This has been determined unrealistic based on numerous factors such as available knights, population and the like, which brings the realistic number down to approximately 20,000-25,000 including knights, infantry and archers.²⁶ This accounting for the Scottish army must also similarly be scrutinized. The Scottish poem *The Bruce* by John Barbour states Robert the Bruce as fielding an army of roughly 30,000 at Bannockburn, which would have been a "huge proportion of the Scottish population of that time."²⁷ Realistically, based on Robert's fractured available pool of manpower due to many clans not yet supporting him, as well as their meager population base to begin with, the Scots were believed to have fielded a more viable force of around 6,000 infantry, possibly up to 1,500 archers, and around 500 light cavalry in the end.²⁸

The use of *The Chronicles of Lanercost* is important to the study of the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314 and to the history of both England and Scotland. Understanding and putting into perspective the likely English-leaning author(s) of the text in conjunction with the works from Barbour, modern scholarship, and ongoing archaeological discoveries, will provide a more realistic and accurate reconstruction of the study of the Battle of Bannockburn.

The battlefield of Bannockburn is located two miles south of the city of Sterling, which is centrally located in Scotland. The entire battlefield area is maintained by the National Trust for

Scotland and is one of the country's most important historical sites. The battlefield site complex contains commemorative monuments, a state-of-the-art visitor center, and an immersive Battle of Bannockburn experience to immerse visitors into the story of the battle.

The battlefield beyond the fully modern visitor center contains the rotunda that wraps around the memorial cairn with a flagpole that is topped by a battle-axe weathervane. A pathway from the rotunda leads visitors to the iconic bronze Robert the Bruce monument that was fully restored in 2014. Additionally, a new poem was commissioned and added to the rotunda by Scottish writer Kathleen Jamie, in which the last lines address the importance of the location: "Come all ye, the country says You win me, who take me most to heart."²⁹

The battlefield site is as preserved as possible, with centuries of growth of both buildings and the natural environment; however, the overall integrity of the general site is well protected as it is seen as a national treasure to the people of Scotland. There has been contention as to the exact location of the engagement between the two forces on the second day of the battle, as the *Lanercost* did not specify. The debate seems to be whether the Scots engaged the English at the Dryfield of Balquhikerock or the Carse of Balquhiderock. This is made ever more difficult by the changes in natural environment. These changes include less woodlands now than in 1314, more pervasive bogs and marshes than there were then, and well-tend-

ed farmland now that dominates large swaths of the broad battlefield. Ongoing archaeological digs at the site by the National Trust for Scotland hope to finally answer this question.

The site overall is critically important to the people of Scotland, but also serves as an inspiration for the desire for freedom to people the world over. In 2018, the Netflix film *Outlaw King* was released, which showcased actor Chris Pine as Robert the Bruce. The film was made in consultation with the National Trust for Scotland and made use of the surrounding area in its portrayal of Robert and his time up to and including the Battle of Loudoun Hill in 1307. The inspiring story of Bannockburn and Robert the Bruce, and its resulting desire of a people to fight for their freedom and to control their own destiny, continues to ring true for both the people of Scotland to this day, as well as millions of others throughout the world.

The Battle of Bannockburn in 1314 and its documentation in *The Chronicles of Lanercost* provide valuable insight into the conflict between the monarchically power of England and the resurgent people of Scotland under their king, Robert the Bruce. As in most writings of the medieval period, troop numbers (often exaggerated), casualties (underplayed for the English typically and overplayed for the Scots), and acts of heroism (such as that by the knight Sir Henry de Bohun who Robert killed in combat) must always be taken with caution.

As to the military lessons learned, Robert's victory at Bannockburn show-

cased that well-trained pikeman in formation could stand up to and defeat heavily armed knights and cavalry. Additionally, the skill demonstrated by Robert in the careful choosing then shaping of the battlefield to negate the enemies numerical and tactical advantages cannot be understated. These principles of warfare would be studied by commanders and students to gain insight and understanding of how to use carefully chosen ground, to drive the enemy to them at a time and a place of their choosing while mitigating their advantages while maximizing their own. The study of Bannockburn is a study in the seizing of victory from what on paper, should have been certain defeat.

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