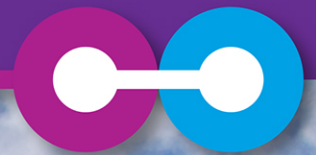


# The Wars of Independence

1286–1328



Helena Anderson  
Michèle S. Duck

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# Introduction

The Scottish Wars of Independence were a series of battles fought by Edward I of England, his successors and members of the Scottish nobility between 1286 and 1328. The people and events have often been romanticised. Tales of the battles and the men who fought in them have been retold and popularised by films like *Braveheart* and *Outlaw King*. These films portray blue-faced Highland armies, clad in billowing tartan kilts, playing the bagpipes as they run through heather headlong into the armoured knights of the English forces. However, this book will help you begin to explore what we really know about the Scottish Wars of Independence. Information about this period comes from sources written for entertainment, some of which only exist in part, or sometimes written many years after events. So, historians are sometimes still not in complete agreement about what they tell us – this is reflected in this book. The memory of the Wars still informs the discussion about political unity today and so it is important to understand the reality, as much as possible, of the events that took place.

Scotland in the thirteenth century was very different from the place we know today. The king of Scots governed with the help of powerful families from across the country. There was not one **parliament** building or regular parliaments. Travel was expensive and so government was conducted all over the country. Most people would never leave their local area. Although there were some well-known routes through the kingdom, there were no smooth roads and those who travelled did so by foot, cart, horseback or boat. Travel by boat was by far the fastest way to get around – across seas, between lochs and along rivers. Merchants took their supplies by boat between markets and armies were supplied by ships from the sea. Scotland actively traded with France and England and exported wool in return for imports of wine and other luxuries.

There had been strong social links between the kingdoms of Scotland and England. Before the Wars, subjects of the king of Scots had been able to hold lands in England, and English subjects were able to hold lands in Scotland. For much of the period, the Wars of Independence were as much a civil war as they were a war against the overlordship of Edward I. Scottish nobles fought for and against both sides, and between themselves, in an effort to maintain their own power. However, after 1314, cross-border land ownership was forbidden by the Scottish king and the nobility had to choose to keep either their land in Scotland or their land in England. By 1328, Scotland had established itself as an independent kingdom, without English influence, under one king. But how and why did this happen?

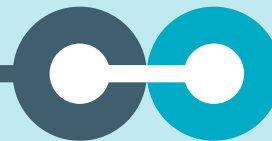
To help us, we must answer the following questions: why was Scotland thrown into a succession crisis after the death of Alexander III? What role did Edward I play in choosing the next king of Scots? Why did John Balliol I have difficulties ruling Scotland? How did Scotland resist English overlordship and how did Edward assert it? What was William Wallace's contribution to the resistance and how effective was other resistance? Why was Robert VII able to rise to become the king of an independent Scotland?

The answers to these questions are included in the following pages. Note, there is not one simple answer to each. Instead, we will be dealing with evidence-based arguments. You will use the straightforward and clear structure to target different sections of this text. This will allow you to find the relevant, accurate and developed knowledge needed to support a convincing argument that answers a key issue. You will also find explanations and analysis of these arguments, helping you to integrate this information in source question responses. Finally, activities at the end of each section will help you develop source skills and nurture the understanding needed to write clear and well-reasoned responses.

Whether you are revising for an assessment, writing an assignment or deepening your understanding of a particular area, this book will help you.

Good luck!





# Chapter 1

## The succession problem, 1286–1292

The aim of this chapter is to evaluate the reasons for the succession problem in Scotland, 1286–92.

It will cover the political situation of Scotland following the death of Alexander III in 1286, and will discuss how the Guardians reacted to the succession crisis. It will investigate the concerns Scottish nobility had over a female **monarch** along with analysing the efforts the Guardians went to in order to secure peace and avoid **civil war**. Finally, it will examine how Edward I used his authority to dominate choosing a new king for Scotland.

### Link to the assessment

#### National 4 and 5

##### Key issue 1: The succession problem, 1286–92

- The succession problem following the death of Alexander III
- The Scottish response
- The death of Margaret the Maid of Norway
- The Scottish appeal to Edward I
- Bruce versus Balliol
- The Great Cause
- Edward I's choice

### Using this information in your assessment

In assessments, the succession problem is often referred to as the succession crisis.

## Background

Alexander III's reign as king of Scotland, 1249–86, is often described as being a 'Golden Age'. First, there was peace with England. Alexander was married to Edward I's sister Margaret, which helped promote friendly relations between the two kingdoms.



Furthermore, Scotland had developed profitable trading routes around the North Sea, particularly linked to the wool industry. During Alexander III's reign, the Western Isles, under the terms of the Treaty of Perth 1266, were officially transferred from Norwegian to Scottish control.

Scotland, until the death of Alexander in 1286, appeared to be a relatively secure kingdom with a flourishing economy.

Alexander died in 1286 with no surviving children. The political crisis that followed his death is regarded in Scottish history as 'the succession problem'. This developed into a crisis as it was not a problem that was easily solved and civil war between noble families was a real possibility.

However, it would be incorrect to assume that Scotland was faced with a crisis as soon as Alexander died. Alexander's wife, Yolande, was pregnant when he died. To maintain stability until Yolande gave birth, Scotland was run by a group of Guardians.

The Guardians were noblemen who owned land in Scotland or were important figures in the Church such as **bishops**. There is every indication that the government of the Guardians was successful. They negotiated treaties and blocked internal disputes. However, Yolande and Alexander's baby was **stillborn**.

Following this, the next heir to the throne, Margaret the Maid of Norway, died on her way to Scotland from Norway. It was after Margaret's death that Scotland faced a political crisis.

Competition between nobles with rival claims to the throne placed Scotland on the brink of civil war. To avoid conflict, Edward was asked to help choose a new king for Scotland. His actions and decisions at Norham and Berwick contributed to the succession problem and the rise of John Balliol as the new king of Scots (King John I).

The government and society of Scotland in the late thirteenth century was structured around the political authority of the king. Kings had significant political and legal powers. Kings handed powers to their nobles and in return expected loyalty and support.

Status and position were often marked with land ownership. Farmers paid rents and provided military service to

### Note

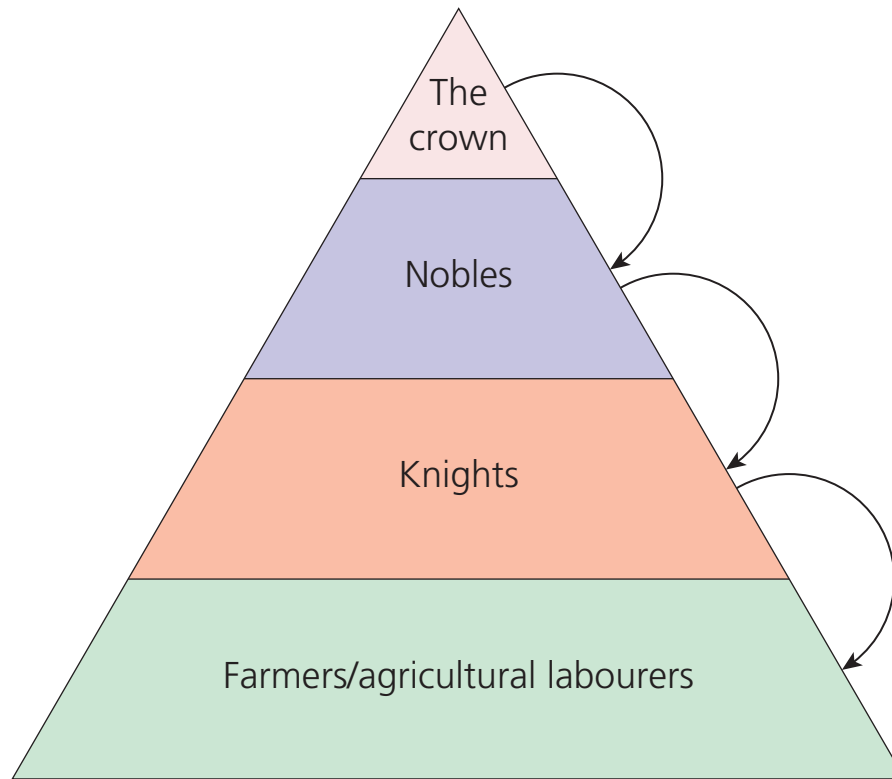
During the Scottish Wars of Independence Scotland and England were kingdoms. They were under the control of a king or queen. Scotland was not called a 'nation' until 1648.



**Figure 1.1** Map showing important towns in thirteenth-century Scotland. Scotland was well connected, with Scottish ports trading with other countries such as Ireland and Norway.

the lords who controlled the regions in which they lived. Scotland, like the rest of Europe, was a deeply religious place. The Church and the pope, as head of the Roman Catholic Church, had significant power.

At the centre of this social and political structure was a king, whose line normally extended through his eldest son. With this line threatened and eventually broken, Scotland was in a so-called 'succession crisis'.



**Figure 1.2** Diagram showing how medieval Scottish society was organised. The crown (king or queen) were at the top of the hierarchy, above their nobles, knights and ordinary people.

It is helpful to think of this period in three distinct phases.

### *The first phase*

The first was April to November 1286. Alexander's wife, Yolande, was pregnant and so a potential succession crisis was on hold. If a boy had been born there would have been no crisis of succession; there would have been a political challenge about how to govern, but the Guardians were already in place to deal with this challenge.

### *The second phase*

The second phase was November 1286 to October 1290. Yolande's stillbirth meant that Margaret the Maid of Norway was generally acknowledged as the heir. The only people who disagreed with this were the Bruces in the south-west of Scotland. Their short-lived rebellion did not really amount to a national crisis, but it was certainly a regional one. On the whole, while there were political problems, this period is not normally understood as a succession crisis.

### *The third phase*

Finally, when Margaret's death became known in October 1290, there was definitely a crisis of succession. Civil war was likely and help had to be sought from Edward of England.

## 1.1 The succession problem following the death of Alexander III

It is important to understand why Scotland faced problems over the succession to the throne.

In order to do this, it is necessary to understand the impact of the death of Alexander III and the competing aims of the Balliol and the Bruce families. Additionally, it is important to consider the role of Edward before and during the **Great Cause**.

### 1.1.1 Death of Alexander III

#### *From Edinburgh to Fife*

On 18 March 1286, Alexander left Edinburgh to visit his new wife, Yolande of Dreux, who was staying at the royal palace in Kinghorn, Fife. Yolande was Alexander's second wife who he hoped would provide him with a **legitimate heir**. Alexander's first wife, Margaret, and all three of their children died before him – Alexander (1284), David (1281) and Margaret (1283). This created a problem of succession as there was not a direct heir to replace him.

Alexander had spent the day at Edinburgh Castle in meetings with Scottish lords. Despite the stormy weather he was determined to visit Yolande. Figure 1.3 shows Alexander's journey.



**Figure 1.3** Map showing Alexander's journey to visit his wife, Yolande, who was waiting for him at his palace in Kinghorn, Fife



The king arrived at Dalmeny ready to sail, but the ferryman warned him against attempting to cross the dangerous Firth of Forth. That warning was ignored and the crossing made to Inverkeithing; again he was advised against further travel. Instead, he was offered lodgings for the evening. Alexander, however, refused the offer and continued his journey on dangerous roads to Kinghorn.

This part of the voyage proved to be fatal. Alexander rode ahead from his group, becoming separated from his bodyguards. He was not found until the next day, dead from a broken neck and likely to have fallen from his horse in the darkness.

### Source 1.1

In October 1285 Alexander remarried. Yolande of Dreux, from a French noble family, was his new bride. He hoped that this match would produce a child of his own to succeed him. It was his enthusiasm to return to his young Queen that led the King to leave Edinburgh and cross the Forth. On his journey from Inverkeithing to the royal manor at Kinghorn, Alexander was thrown from his horse and died, his neck broken.

**Brown, M. (2004) *The Wars of Scotland 1214–1371*, Edinburgh University Press, p.67**

### Impact of Alexander's death

While Yolande was pregnant, there was the chance that she would give birth to a healthy heir. Leading Scottish noble families waited in anticipation for the baby to be born, as the child would be the heir to the vacant throne.

Political leaders, known as the Guardians, gathered at Clackmannanshire to witness the birth in November 1286. However, the child was stillborn. This was an important part of the succession crisis because, when news of the stillborn child spread, it caused some political tensions.

### 1.1.2 The Guardians of Scotland

#### *Ruling on behalf of the community of the realm*

In February 1284 Alexander had summoned a meeting at Scone near Perth. Present were all 13 Earls of Scotland, 24 barons and leaders from the Western Isles. They recognised that Alexander's granddaughter, Margaret the Maid of Norway, was heir to the Scottish throne. It was assumed that when old enough, Margaret would marry and rule with the help of her husband.

This recognition was a 'back-up' plan as Alexander had hoped to have children with Yolande. However, after Alexander's death and Yolande's stillbirth and, in an effort to avoid civil war over rival claims to the throne, it was agreed in April 1286 at Scone that seven Guardians would rule Scotland. Once Margaret was old enough to rule she would take control.

The Guardians were 'appointed by and governed in the name of the **community of the realm**'. In other words, they were chosen by the nobility (their peers) and were charged with ruling Scotland for the benefit of everyone rather than to gain anything for themselves. These Guardians were earls, barons and churchmen.

The men chosen were:

- William Fraser, Bishop of St Andrews
- Robert Wishart, Bishop of Glasgow
- Duncan, Earl of Fife
- Alexander Comyn, Earl of Buchan
- James Stewart
- John Comyn of Badenoch
- and recently a new source has come to light which shows that the seventh Guardian was Bishop William of Dunkeld.

The Guardians were to be peacekeeping caretakers, tasked with running the kingdom until the new monarch was **enthroned**.

### Problems with the Guardians

However, there were challenges. For example, Guardians William Fraser, Alexander Comyn and John Comyn of Badenoch all had political ties to Balliol and the Comyn family, whereas Robert Wishart and James Stewart supported the Bruces, another powerful Scottish family.

Also, the Guardians were not replaced when they died. This meant that when there was an even number of Guardians alive, it was more difficult to reach a majority decision.

Finally, the Guardians were a temporary fix. They would not be in power forever, therefore it was not possible for them to remove political instability facing the Scottish kingdom.

### Activities

- 1 Describe Scotland during the 'Golden Age' of Alexander III's rule.
- 2 Create a flowchart to show the events that led to the death of Alexander III.
- 3 a) Who were the Guardians of Scotland?  
b) Explain how the Guardians of Scotland attempted to stop a civil war.

### Key fact summary

#### The succession problem following the death of Alexander III

Alexander died in 1286 after falling from his horse near Kinghorn, Fife.

Alexander's three children had all died before him, leaving Scotland without a direct heir.

At the time of Alexander's death his wife, Yolande, was pregnant but this resulted in a stillbirth.

Margaret the Maid of Norway, was Alexander's grandchild and the next heir to the Scottish throne.

Alexander had recognised Margaret as his rightful heir in 1284.

Seven Guardians ruled Scotland on behalf of Margaret. They represented the community of the realm.

The Guardians' rule was a temporary solution to the succession problem.

## 1.2 The Scottish response

### 1.2.1 The Treaty of Birgham

With Margaret as Alexander's successor when Yolande's baby was stillborn in November 1286, there was an urgency to secure her a marriage. That was necessary to ensure the continuing line of succession. When Margaret married, her husband would rule with her and together they would have children, which would secure Alexander's family line.

#### Note

Although referred to as a 'treaty', the Treaty of Birgham did not actually exist. Instead it was an agreement as part of a series of negotiations that was meant to lead up to a marriage treaty.

Until a marriage agreement could be approved for Margaret, Scotland remained vulnerable to attack or political interference. In 1289 Scottish representatives led by Bishop Fraser of St Andrews travelled to France, where Edward was visiting, and attempted to negotiate terms for a marriage between Margaret and Edward's son, the future Edward II. The issue of Scottish succession was of great interest to Edward due to the political and family connections. Edward and Alexander were brothers-in-law and Edward was Margaret's great-uncle. However, the involvement of Scotland and the Guardians in negotiations was not as strong as that of the rulers of Norway and England.

### 1.2.2 Norwegian influence

King Eric II of Norway, Margaret's father, was keen for his daughter to sit on the Scottish throne. He sent an **envoy** to Edward around 21 September 1286, asking him for a loan of up to £2000. He asked for this because the Scots had not paid the £700 annual **dowry** to Margaret's mother, also called Margaret, for four years.

Edward put pressure on the Guardians to pay Eric back and, in return, gained a say in Margaret's future. This was an important factor in the succession crisis as Edward's funding enabled the negotiations to bring Margaret to Scotland, with Edward acting as **arbitrator** between Scotland and Norway. The financial and diplomatic contribution made by Edward gave him a significant position in deciding what would happen to the Scottish throne.



**Figure 1.4** Stained glass window depicting Margaret, Maid of Norway.

Edward and Eric were discussing this as parents, so there was no need for them to involve the Guardians except to make sure that they would hand over the kingdom to the couple. The Guardians' negotiating position was weak because it was difficult for them to justify a refusal when they had already acknowledged Margaret as the legitimate heir of Alexander III.

### 1.2.3 Marriage proposal

In May 1289 Edward sent representatives to Rome to gain a **papal bull** for a marriage between his son and Margaret the Maid of Norway. By November 1289 the pope had approved his request. This meant that the Church had permitted a marriage but, importantly, it did not contract one.

Marriage discussions involving England, Norway and Scotland began in autumn 1289 when Scottish and Norwegian envoys met at Salisbury to draw up a **preliminary** marriage treaty. The Scots were represented by the Bishops of St Andrews and Glasgow, John Comyn of Badenoch and Robert Bruce V, the 5th Lord of Annandale, also known as Bruce the Competitor.



## Terms of marriage

### Treaty of Salisbury

On 6 November 1289 the terms of the Treaty of Salisbury were decided. It was agreed that:

- Margaret was to be brought to Scotland or England free of marriage contracts by 1 November 1290
- Margaret would live with Edward I and when old enough would travel north to Scotland
- the Guardians would not arrange a marriage for Margaret without the agreement of King Eric of Norway and Edward
- Edward would pay the dowry payment that the Scots owed to Norway.

These terms gave the Guardians a guarantee that Scotland would remain peaceful; they offered Norway confidence that they would not only receive the outstanding dowry but also secure a marriage for Margaret. Crucially, Edward's agreement to pay off Scotland's large debt perhaps reveals his intention of becoming increasingly involved in Scottish affairs.

### Treaty of Birgham

On 18 July 1290 an initial agreement for marriage, known as the Treaty of Birgham, was finalised between the Guardians and Edwards representatives.

For the Guardians the treaty provided guarantees of Scottish independence, while also solving the succession problem, and of avoiding civil war.

For Edward it offered an opportunity to gain influence within Scottish politics. Crucially it did not guarantee a marriage as Norway was not involved, and the agreement of Eric of Norway was required for Margaret to travel.

The treaty allowed for the promise of marriage between Margaret and Edward II (son of Edward I). And, perhaps most significantly, it allowed Scotland to remain an independent kingdom, free and separate from England.

By Edward giving his personal agreement to these terms at Northampton on 28 August 1290, he was going as far as recognising Scotland's independence. He went this far to ensure that he would gain political control over Scotland through the royal marriage of his son Edward II. This would not have been the same as governing Scotland directly. Nonetheless, Margaret and Edward II would have followed English interests, and the threat of France allying with Scotland against England would have been removed, as both Scotland and England would have the same ruler.

### Source 1.2

We ... authorise in the name and place of our lord ... the rights, laws, liberties and customs of the realm of Scotland to be preserved in every respect ... we promise ... that Scotland shall remain separated and divided and free, without subjugation to England.

**From the Treaty of Birgham, July 1290**

Nonetheless, the treaty was short-lived. Edward did not wait until the marriage before intervening in Scottish affairs. The Isle of Man had been under Scottish control since 1266. However, in the summer of 1290 Edward ordered one of his military commanders, Walter de Huntercombe, to attack the island. This attack was successful and Edward's actions showed that he was trying to interfere and influence Scottish politics to suit his ambitions. He appointed his special advisor on Scotland, Bishop Bek, as the 'lieutenant' for Margaret and the young Edward II. This meant that he was to act on the young royal couple's behalf.

## Activity

- 4 If these are answers about the Scottish response and the Treaty of Birgham, what are the questions?
- a) Bishop Fraser of St Andrews
  - b) Eric II of Norway
  - c) Papal bull
  - d) Treaty of Salisbury
  - e) Scotland to remain an independent country, free and separate from England

## Key fact summary

### The Scottish response

A suitable marriage was needed in order to help Margaret rule and prevent civil war in Scotland.

A marriage between Edward I's son, Edward II, and Margaret was favoured by both the Guardians and Edward I.

In 1289 Edward gained a papal bull from the pope which permitted, but did not contract, a marriage between his son and Margaret.

The Treaty of Salisbury agreed arrangements before the marriage. For example, Margaret was to be brought to England to live and would travel to Scotland when she was old enough.

The Treaty of Birgham was a preliminary agreement not a marriage contract. It guaranteed Scottish independence from England and promised a marriage between Edward II and Margaret.

Edward aimed to exercise his control over Scotland by invading the Isle of Man in the summer of 1290. Previously the Isle of Man had been under Scottish influence.

Edward appointed his special advisor on Scotland, Bishop Bek, to take care of Edward II and Margaret.

## 1.3 The death of Margaret the Maid of Norway

### 1.3.1 Problems with a female monarch

Although Margaret the Maid of Norway had a clear claim to the Scottish throne (her mother, also called Margaret, was Alexander's daughter) there was no precedent for a queen ruling Scotland in her own right.

Margaret was only seven years old in 1290, so a **regent** or the Guardians would have to rule during her minority. This would mean a number of years of potential political instability. In addition, death in childhood in Europe was common and there was the real chance that Margaret would not survive to adulthood.

Having the Guardians ruling Scotland helped to avoid a power struggle. The fact that the Guardians acknowledged Margaret as heir to the Scottish throne through their **oath** of loyalty secured her position. However, there was also a possibility that Margaret would face competition.

# The Wars of Independence 1286–1328

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## What does the cover photo show?

A picture of the statue commemorating the signing of the Declaration of Arbroath in 1320. This document was written by the 'community of the realm of Scotland' to Pope John XXII. Some historians argue the Declaration of Arbroath signalled Scotland's desire to be an independent nation.

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