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Why leaders in Scotland are excited about a battle that happened 700 years ago

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1314 an 'a that. Aaron Bradley, CC BY-SA

Bannockburn in Stirlingshire is playing host to a major event to commemorate the 700-year anniversary of the **battle of the same name**, where the Scots under the leadership of **Robert the Bruce** won a famous victory over the English army of Edward II.

Bannockburn Live is the signature event of **Homecoming Scotland 2014**. Homecoming is the Scottish government's cultural extravaganza for attracting people with Scottish roots there from all around the world, and is course taking place in the run-up to the independence referendum. The Bannockburn event will encompass battle re-enactments, Scottish contemporary and folk music, storytelling for children and adults, panel discussions, representatives of near 40 clans and families, and a vast array of Scottish food and drink. It is the largest of numerous events and commemorative publications organised to mark this momentous triumph of the underdog over its oppressive neighbour.

The celebration of victory is certainly nothing new, despite the horrors of war which inevitably have to take place first. And the commemoration of this victory was in fact well underway in Bruce's own lifetime, perhaps unsurprisingly considering the impact it had on his success as a monarch. The battle that took place on June 23 and 24 1314 was to become the crowning glory of a king whose royal beginnings were questionable to say the least.

Robert I had been inaugurated as king of the Scots at Scone in Perthshire in March 1306 after murdering his great rival, John "Red" Comyn a few weeks earlier. The ceremony was hastily orchestrated to prevent a reaction from his rivals following a long conflict over the crown, including English interference in Scottish affairs for a number of years. In a sign of the controversy surrounding the occasion, Robert had not obtained official permission from the pope to use unction and crowning in the ceremony. But since these rites would nullify past misdemeanours and legitimise his shaky grasp on power, they appear to have been used nonetheless.

Bruce comes in from the cold

But by 1314 the tide was certainly turning for this man who is remembered most commonly today as a hero rather than an excommunicated criminal. Where Bruce's coronation had been highly controversial, his victory at Bannockburn sealed his ascendancy as a heroic saviour of his people. So when Bruce was planning his funeral in later life, during the long illness that would lead to his death, it was this victory to which he drew attention. This is different to other monarchs of the era, who are known to have tried to draw attention during their funeral ceremonies to their coronation as the point at which they were closest to God and at the pinnacle of their majesty.

After Robert's death on June 7 1329, the evidence proves that the extended burial procession on the 60 to 70 mile journey from his home in Cardross to Dunfermline Abbey passed the infamous battlefield. The timescale involved also suggests that the king's body was finally laid to rest – amid the flickering lights of hundreds of candles under a temporary painted wooden chapel decorated with gold leaf – on the 15th anniversary of his Bannockburn victory. The image of the strong warrior king that was projected to those who viewed these solemn events was all the more important as Robert left his five-year-old son David to succeed him and his dynasty was by no means secure.

And Bruce was certainly not the only Scottish king to draw on the battle to bolster the royal image at difficult and controversial moments. The incoming **Stewart dynasty** – which succeeded the childless David in 1371 – made many a ceremonial connection to Robert the Bruce.

The Stewart connection

Perhaps the two most interesting of these are **James III** and **James IV** in the 15th century. James III clearly desired his historic predecessor's luck in battle when he rode out to battle in June 1488 brandishing Bruce's sword. Yet the **battle of Sauchieburn**, fought within the vicinity of Bannockburn against a Scottish rebellion side using his son and heir as their figurehead, ended in James III's murder. The discovery of his treasure horde in the aftermath of this event would further confirm his veneration of Bruce. In his collection were a shirt and four maces listed as those belonging to the former king.

This perhaps makes it ironic that to add legitimacy to his son James IV's coronation, it returned to the ancient site of Scone in a departure from the previous two monarchs. It was also held on the anniversary of Bannockburn, and it is likely that the new king's henchmen carried the four Bruce maces.

Wallace and unionist-nationalism

A later national effort to immortalise the heroes of the wars of independence was the Victorian creation of the national Wallace monument that watches over Stirling. During the mid-19th century, Europe was in the grip of revolutions spurred on by nationalist movements. Nationalist sentiment was reignited in Scotland too, but the Scots differed from their European neighbours in that while they wished for greater autonomy and a refocusing on their individual national identity, most wanted to remain in the union with England.

One of the outcomes of this paradoxical unionist-nationalism was the Wallace monument. He was seen more symbolic as a hero of the people than as an out and out independence figure like Bruce, but each stage of its conception and construction focused around the dates of Bannockburn (the first planning meeting in 1856 and the laying of the foundation stone in 1861) and the Battle of Stirling (final completion ceremony on 11 September 1869).



Wallace monument suited 19th century nationalism better than Bruce Schikard, CC BY-SA

These ceremonies were not commemorations in the overt manner we expect today, where events are often ostentatiously designed to transport us back to a specific time and place. But subtle connections to the victorious past or iconic religious moments can often be found in the choice of place, date, or prop in the ceremonies of monarchs and nations across all ages. We have, and hopefully always will be, a society that reaches backward into our heritage to project forward and shape the future.

To find out what Bannockburn did for England, [click here](#).



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