

Robert II (1371-90)

Robert Steward was fifty-five when he unexpectedly became king. Like John Balliol, his rule was plagued from the start by the fact that many powerful Scottish nobles continued to view Robert as their equal or less. Yet even without this problem, Robert would have offered very different prospects as king after the east-coast, Anglophilic, authoritarian and chivalric David II.

Robert was probably born in early 1316, about a year after the marriage in April 1315 of his father, Walter, the 6th High Steward of Scotland, and the eldest daughter of Robert I, Marjorie Bruce (who died after a fall from her horse probably in 1317). But Robert grew up as a west coast magnate on the Stewart family lands in Renfrew, Clydeside and the Gaelic-speaking isle of Rothesay: he was perhaps fostered out as a child to an Isles or Argyll family. His household and private faith would remain centered on this region throughout much of his life.

There is no doubt, however, that Robert was, even in adolescence, an extremely ambitious and capable politician. If all went well for the Bruce dynasty, Robert would remain simply the next head of his family to take up the now purely honourary title of High Steward of Scotland, a royal household role which his Breton ancestors (the FitzAlans) had been given by David I (1124-53). But as we've seen, Robert I's line was by no means secure. Thus Robert Stewart's importance in the kingdom had been inflated from the first.

Between Edward Bruce's death in 1318 and the birth of a royal son in 1324, the infant Robert Stewart was recognised as heir to the throne: the 1326 parliamentary Act of Succession recognised him as second behind prince David. With this role came extensive new estates in Knapdale (Argyll), the Lothians and Roxburghshire: Robert may also have been promised possible inheritance to the earldom of Fife. That made the new Steward (after the death of his father on 9 April 1327) the most important regional magnate of Scotland alongside the key Bruce allies, the Randolphs and Douglases.

So when Edward Balliol and England threatened through war to deprive Robert Steward of his inheritance he would play a crucial part in the recovery of Bruce Scotland. On 19 July 1333 - aged just sixteen - he lead a division of his landed followers against

Edward III in the army of Guardian Archibald Douglas at the defeat of Halidon Hill. Then in 1334 Robert only narrowly escaped by boat to Dumbarton castle as his western lands were over-run by his Anglo-Balliol enemies. But while David was taken into exile in France, Robert stayed to fight and, teaming up with the Campbells of Lochawe, waged a campaign to recover castles and land around the Clyde and in south-west Scotland.

At this stage, a fifteenth century Scottish chronicler describes Robert as winning the loyalty of many Scots: ‘a young man of attractive appearance above the sons of men, broad and tall in physique, kind to everyone, and modest, generous, cheerful and honest.’ But this influence, and Robert’s undoubted attempts to increase his landed interests during the war, brought him into conflict with David’s chief councillors while he was King’s Lieutenant in 1334-5 and again - although Robert seems to have submitted to Edward III briefly in between - in 1338-41. By the time David returned in June 1341 the lines were drawn for a tense struggle between crown and heir presumptive for control of territories and policy. As part of this rivalry, David and his supporters would influence contemporary Scottish writers to ignore and defame Robert’s achievements as Lieutenant before 1341 (and again between 1347 and 1357)

This contest dominated David’s adult reign and the best years of Robert’s life. On the whole, David managed to continually intimidate and frustrate Robert’s landed ambitions, even imprisoning him briefly with at least one of his sons in 1368. Yet without a Bruce son David could never completely break Robert. The Steward - nearly always at the royal court throughout the reign - repeatedly proved himself able to sabotage or limit the king’s power, abandoning him in battle in 1346 (the only time Robert would ever cross the border into England), delaying David’s release from captivity (1347-57), joining a rebellion against the crown in 1363 and, on several occasions, mustering opposition in parliament to obstruct David’s plans to admit an English royal to the Scottish succession.

In doing so, Robert’s strength lay in the control he and his growing family exerted over much of western, central and north-eastern Scotland by 1360-70. For while David was barren, Robert had four sons and several daughters by his first wife, Elizabeth Mure (d. c. 1349-55), daughter of Adam of Rowallan in Ayrshire, although Robert had to seek

legitimation for this brood in 1347 and perhaps go through a formal marriage: he then had several more children by his second wife, Euphemia, widow of John Randolph, earl of Moray, and sister of William, earl of Ross, whom he wed in 1355. Robert also had several illegitimate children by various mistresses.

It was naturally to this ‘family firm’ or network that Robert turned in 1371. While David II had sought to overawe his great regional magnates with his own authority and household government, Robert was prepared to compromise with the great families in power in the various quarters of Scotland, and to delegate power to them there while seeking either a useful marriage to one of his daughters or advancement of the lordship of one of his cunning adult sons.

This approach enabled Robert to buy his way out of an immediate crisis in spring 1371 - a challenge before his Scone coronation from William, earl of Douglas. By 1382 it had also seen the Stewarts sideline many of David II’s old supporters and gain control of eight of the fifteen Scottish earldoms and of many more valuable lordships, as well as most of the key royal castles and offices north of the Forth-Clyde line. This included the earldoms of Fife and Menteith, snapped up by Robert’s second surviving son, Robert; Buchan, Ross and Badenoch, all grasped in the north-east by the fourth son, Alexander; and Caithness which fell to Robert’s fifth son (his first by his second wife), David, who also inherited the earldom of Strathearn thanks to the strong-minded influence of his mother, Queen Euphemia. All these lands were added to those held by Robert II before 1371, namely the western Stewart lands and the Perthshire earldom of Atholl.

In addition, John MacDonald lord of the Isles, John Dunbar earl of Moray and James, the future second earl of Douglas, were Robert’s sons-in-law. Robert also managed to quash doubts about the royal Stewart line through further parliamentary Acts of Succession in 1371 and 1373 which entailed the kingship in turn on each of Robert’s sons and their male heirs only: the memory of the problem-filled female succession disputes of 1286-92 clearly still haunted the community and there was an equally pressing need to vanquish doubts about the legitimacy of Robert II’s first family. At the same time, Robert pushed the Stewarts’ image as the true heirs of Robert Bruce and - along with the Black

Douglas family in the south - as Scotland's champions against England. This was a patriotic strengthening of the new royal house enshrined in John Barbour's *The Bruce*, one of several such court works paid for by Robert II by 1375.

For the best part of a decade this loose, decentralised style of kingship seemed to work well enough. During the 1370s, Robert II was mostly to be found in and around the burgh of Perth and his nearby lordship of Methven or making devotional visits to his ancestral lands in the west: predictably, he was in no way as energetic a king as either of the younger Bruces. However, because much of Robert II's power throughout the realm lay in the hands of 'the sons he maid rych and mychty' as well as other regional magnates, all of whom he normally left to their own devices, it was very difficult for Robert to be seen to lead from the centre when a crisis arose. This was especially true when open rivalry erupted between Stewart princes.

By 1382 Alexander Stewart, the king's justiciar and lieutenant in the north, had obviously became part of the problem - rather than the crown's solution - of mounting Highland lawlessness. Alexander had built a territorial empire using 'caterans' - Gaelic mercenary companies. When this was decried by fearful parliaments in the English-speaking lowlands, the king was unable to punish his fourth son's violent acquisition of land in the north-east and Ross. Fatally, Robert's impotence provided his eldest son and heir, John, earl of Carrick, impatient for power, with a pretext to remove the king from government.

In a council at Holyrood in November 1384 a bloodless palace coup was effected. It was recorded that: 'because our lord the king, for certain causes, is not able to attend himself personally to the execution of justice and the law of the kingdom, he has willed...that his first-born son and heir...is to administer the common law everywhere throughout the kingdom.' This was to be the first of several occasions over the next three decades upon which powerful magnate interests - the real authority throughout Scotland - would manoeuvre to control the proceedings of council or parliament in a transfer of Scottish government out of royal hands.

Carrick's assumption of his Lieutenancy brought control of gifts of royal lands, offices and pensions and, crucially, the direction of foreign policy to a magnate coalition headed by James, second earl of Douglas, and the Lindsays. This meant an instant escalation of the bubbling conflict with England. This had been an uneasy front on which Robert II - although he had continued the truce and payment of David II's ransom until the death of Edward III in 1377 - had been prepared to allow southern Scots to raid and seize disputed border lands, putting an end to the Scottish pilgrim, church and trade traffic to England of David's reign. After 1378 Robert also promised Scotland's support to the pro-French Pope in Avignon while England backed the rival Pope in Rome during a period of papal 'schism'. Continuing this course, in 1383 Robert agreed to renewed alliance with France which included promises of men and money for a joint campaign against England's troubled Richard II: this allowed Carrick and the Douglases to step up their aggression. But ultimately, King Robert was not prepared to initiate all-out war and sought Scotland's inclusion in Anglo-French peace talks in 1384.

So Robert's removal from power later that year cleared the way for war. By June 1385, a company of some 1,200 French troops led by Sire John de Vienne were billeted in Scotland. The great contemporary chronicler, Jean Froissart, would later describe this expedition. However, influenced by Scots loyal to Carrick and Douglas, he would also paint the revealing picture of a feeble Robert II which forever coloured the first Stewart king's historical reputation. For just as he had done when a smaller French expedition came to Scotland in 1355, Froissart's Robert did not come to greet the French knights in 1385. Instead he remained in '*le sauvage Ecosse*', surely a reference to either Perthshire or his ancestral lands in the Gaelic west: worse, he had 'red-bleared eyes, of the colour of sandal-wood, which clearly showed that he was no valiant man, but one who would rather remain at home than march to the field'.

Thus it was Carrick, Douglas, the king's third son Robert Stewart earl of Fife, James Lindsay earl of Crawford, and the Dunbar earls of March who joined the French on a profitless campaign in 1385. The Scots and French quickly quarrelled and the English retaliated burning much of Lothian including Edinburgh: the Scots were forced to accept

truces until 1388. For Robert II in the west this meant little. But it gave a critical voice to rivals of Carrick's administration. At the same time, like his father, Carrick was unable to cope with lawlessness in the north and Alexander Stewart's power there increased.

Nonetheless, it required a dramatic shift in the balance of magnate power in Scotland to allow for another coup in royal government. This came in August 1388 when the Douglas earl was killed in the course of what was actually a famous victory over English forces at Otterburn in Northumberland. The Douglas inheritance fell into dispute and Carrick became quickly isolated. In a Council at Edinburgh on 1 December that year he was obliged to resign the Lieutenancy to his brother, Robert, earl of Fife, who pointed to Carrick's inability to see justice done in the north and defend the realm from English attack. Yet in reality Fife swept into power on the back of several political deals. In 1384 both Fife and Archibald Douglas, lord of Galloway, had exempted their lands from Carrick's Lieutenancy powers: now in 1388, Fife promised to support Archibald as the next Douglas earl. Fife also vowed to deal harshly with Alexander Stewart in the north, a stance favourable with many lowlanders in Council. In addition, Fife could continue to bleed the financial resources of the crown: he had controlled these since the murder in 1382 of Sir John Lyon, Robert II's son-in-law and Chamberlain, an office Fife thereafter assumed for himself.

For the last two years of his life, then, Robert II was once again at the beck and call of one of his powerful magnate sons, expected to appear at Councils and private meetings when needed to confirm grants to Fife's and Archibald's followers or to approve their redirection of policy. This saw him involved in a Stewart civil war, acting at the fringes of Fife's campaign to oust Alexander as Lieutenant and Justiciar north of Forth and to deprive him of his influence in Moray and Ross.

These clashes were a direct legacy of the build up of his family's power which had characterised Robert II's tactic for governing Scotland in the 1370s. Now they formed the backdrop to the end of the old king's life. For after a royal circuit around the north-east in January 1390 - to show crown approval for Fife's actions - Robert retired to die, aged seventy-four, at his private tower castle of Dundonald in Ayrshire on 19 April. Yet he was

buried in late April not in the nearby Stewart family foundation of Paisley Abbey, or at the Canmore-Bruce resting grounds of Dunfermline, but in the Abbey of Scone, the inauguration site of the kings, close to the Stewart lands of Strathearn and Methven and presumably beside his Queen who had died in the winter of 1387-88.

It would probably have been of little comfort for Robert to know that the Stewarts would long reign in Scotland. But it was during these Stewart kingships that much of the historical damage to Robert II's reputation was done. Late fourteenth century writers were split between those who favoured David II and sought to blacken Robert Stewart's career before 1371; and those writing after 1371 who fell in either with Carrick or Fife and had to justify their removal of a weak King Robert II. His name never recovered from his failure in old age: in 1521, historian John Maior could write that: 'I cannot hold this aged king...to have been a skilful warrior or wise in counsel'. Modern historians have only very recently shown that with regard to Robert Stewart's career and policies before 1382 this was unfair. But in the end, Robert II was overtaken by time and the ambition of his own dynasty.