



David Cornell, *Bannockburn: the triumph of Robert the Bruce*, (Yale University Press, 2009) 295pp £25.00

Doubtless anyone of Scottish ancestry, real or imagined, will home in on this title to read with relish how the overwhelming forces of the Auld Enemy led by their limp-wristed king, fell prey to outstanding bravery and tactical brilliance of 'The Bruce'. Nor should they be disappointed as Cornell's lively (and often purple) prose delivers a telling account of how the English, all-conquering under Edward 'Hammer of the Scots' came to lose the battle, reputation and power over Scotland within a few years of his death.

Actually, less than two score of the 300 pages deal with the events of the two-day encounter that resulted in the worst defeat for an English royal army since Hastings. This is hardly surprising since the evidence for medieval battles is usually slight and open to immense *parti pris* on the part of its chroniclers. Battles themselves often last little longer than 'the fleeting hour' accorded by contemporaries to the conflict of 24th June 1314. Significant battles were rare at the time because of the huge risk when rulers fought in the front rank. They could really only come about by the mutual consent of both parties. The most frequent occasion for a battle to take place was when a fortress was being besieged and a relieving army advanced to its rescue. This was indeed the case in 1314 as Edward II needed to relieve Stirling. Along with Roxburgh and Edinburgh it was one of the chief castles of Scotland. Almost incredibly by the standards of the time both the other places had fallen to desperate night time assaults earlier in the year and the English Crown could not afford to lose the third. To lose one vital fortress might be considered unfortunate, but to lose two looked like carelessness, and King Edward knew that if he was to retain any morsel of face then he had to prevent Stirling's fall.

In fact, medieval warfare was based around the control of fortresses, occasioning campaigns of slow manoeuvre and long sieges. This does not mean that battles were pointless, since the symbolic significance of the English king fleeing combat was huge, and indeed:

'Bannockburn irrevocably changed the character of the war. No longer did the English possess strongholds in Scotland. Their ability to project power north of the border so severely curtailed, mounting a successful campaign became that much harder. Bannockburn consequently marked a significant turning point in the conflict with England. (p. 240)

Bruce's success was based upon what contemporaries called 'secret war' (i.e. not contested in the open field) which we would categorise as 'small war' or 'guerrilla' warfare. After a humiliating rout at Methven in 1306 what really put Bruce back on track was the ambush of some attempted ambushers at Ben Cruachan some two years later. He had built up a strong position by 1311 due to a raiding strategy;

'During August and again September [harvest months] he led his forces on devastating raids on northern England... and [later in the year] accepted payments of tribute in exchange for local truces, which spared the immediate town or region that had paid.... This systematic destruction worked due to the level of discipline that Bruce was able to instil in his troops, the people of northern England being of more value to Bruce alive than dead. The tribute payments generated a tremendous amount of money, which Bruce used to finance the prolonged campaign he waged against English-held castles in southern Scotland.' (p. 86)

What medieval rulers wanted from warfare was the ability to establish their lordship over disputed territories, as *de facto* control which could later be recognised *de jure* by subsequent treaty



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arrangements. The same strategy after Bannockburn helped the Scots to force their more powerful neighbour to negotiate. This was the exactly the right way to proceed, and on his deathbed in 1329 Robert urged his successors to continue the policy. It was precisely because King David ignored this advice at the battle of Neville's Cross outside Durham a couple of decades later that he was captured by the English and had to pay a huge ransom to Edward III.

Cornell's grasp of the tactical aspects of warfare in 1314 is generally sound. He explains how it was that the schiltron of lightly armoured Scottish pikemen was able to hold off the charge of the flower of the English chivalry: on the side of the Scots high morale and determination, on the part of the English knights lack of experience in big-battle manoeuvre and fighting. I would have liked him to have taken more account of the role of the English archers, though, deadly at Falkirk in 1298 but useless in 1314. As I have argued elsewhere, it was the commander's ability to combine the power of missiles and impact that made the English armies of the mid-14th century onwards so effective. This Edward simply failed to do at Bannockburn (rather like the French at Agincourt) and so his troops paid the penalty. I prefer this interpretation to Cornell's idea that there were simply not enough archers to have any effect (p. 142).

Overall, though, there is great deal to like about the book. I understand that the doyen of Scottish medieval history, Geoffrey Barrow, is not so happy, but since I have not seen anything in print from the great man I am unaware why. It's possible that Cornell's account is insufficiently nationalistic for a country once more on the brink of independence in the early 21st century; but this is pure speculation. There may be an aversion to some of the more flamboyant language employed. For example, at Pentecost 1306 (22nd May) Edward, Prince of Wales and almost 300 esquires were knighted as a prelude to reviving Edward I's campaigns in Scotland. This was entirely in keeping with the chivalric festivals espoused by the king who reconstructed the Round Table at Windsor (which may still be seen in Winchester Castle). Cornell muses that:

'They were not to know that, in less than a decade, their blood would flow as freely as the wine did that night.' (p. 55)

Hhm, quite; but if the reader is prepared to forgive a rather overblown style at times then s/he will learn a great deal about both the psychological and practical aspects of medieval warfare.

One last point: maps are essential for understanding military campaigns, especially at the strategic level, but there are only three in the book. Two cover the battle, reasonably well since it is so difficult to reconstruct (and different options for troop positions are offered); but the third map of Scotland is desperately inadequate to follow the campaign narratives for which a much more detailed sources (such as even a modern road map) will need to be to hand. Of course, the author is not necessarily to blame since publishers are notoriously mean about paying for illustrative material; but since they are seriously short-changing their product as a result they ought to read these comments and change their minds.

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