William Wallace, Robert the Bruce, and the Wars of Scotland

This webpage gives an historical overview of the 150 years between the death of David I, in 1153, and the coronation of Robert I, "the Bruce", in 1306. The purpose of this webpage is provide historical background for one of the most remarkable reigns in Scotland's history, namely, that of Robert the Bruce. (Many Americans have been introduced to Robert the Bruce through the film Braveheart, where Robert appears as the vacillating Earl of Carrick, grandson of the leprous Robert de Brus, one-time heir of Alexander III.) There are several overarching themes to Scottish history for this period, including the following:

- One theme is the recurring crises of the royal succession; a problem that plagued the entire MacMalcolm dynasty, it was just such a crisis — triggered by the death of Alexander III and then the death of his only heir, Princess Margaret, "the Maid of Norway" — that initiated the Wars of Scotland.

- A second theme is recurring weakness to the Scottish crown brought on by vassalage to the kings of England; again, this is a problem that plagues the entire MacMalcolm dynasty.

- Third, the Wars of Scotland signal the end of a long "golden age" in Scottish history, corresponding roughly to the 12th and 13th centuries; during this period population, wealth, trade, and agriculture all increase, but the golden age is brought to an end by the virtually constant warfare of the 14th century — the Wars of Scotland — as well as the coming of the "Black Death" in the mid-fourteenth century.

- Fourth, this period saw the emergence of the Lord of the Isles, a quasi-independent kingdom on the west coast of Scotland, that would figure prominently in Scottish history for the next few centuries.

- Finally, there is the recurring attempt to offset the English menace through alliances with France (especially) and Norway.

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Commentary</th>
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<td>1153</td>
<td>David I dies, and is succeeded by his eldest grandson, Malcolm IV; Malcolm, &quot;the Maiden&quot; (because he had no children), is a relatively weak character, and almost immediately becomes vassal to the capable and aggressive English King, Henry II (Henry's Archbishop was Thomas a Becket).</td>
<td>Henry II</td>
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<td>1156</td>
<td>Somerled defeats the Norse King Godfrey, and becomes the first Lord of the Isles (Somerled's descendents include the clan Donald, or MacDonald).</td>
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1165 William the Lion succeeds his brother, Malcolm IV, as King of Scots; he earned the moniker "the Lyon", not because of his character, but because he replaced the royal boar with the lion rampant; William I reigned for 49 years, but like his brother was seriously handicapped by being Henry II's vassal.

1189 Henry II's son, Richard the Lionheart purchases William's vassalage to finance Richard's Crusade against the Saracens; the Scots King is free once again.

1203 Ronald, Lord of the Isles, begins rebuilding the Abbey on Iona, colonizing it with Benedictines.

1214 William's son, Alexander II, becomes King of Scots upon his father's death; Alexander is vigorous, free from English overlordship, and is able to re-establish (Norman) control over the kingdom.

1215 Henry's villainous son, King John, is forced to sign the Magna Carta by the English nobles.

1238 Alexander II, having no heirs at the time, recognizes Robert Bruce, "the Competitor" (Robert I's grandfather) as the legitimate heir to the Scottish Crown; Queen Joanna dies (childless), and Alexander marries Mary de Coucy — a move that angers his southern neighbor, King Henry III of England; as settlement, Alexander pledges that his young son (by Mary de Coucy), Alexander III, will be wed to a daughter of Henry — a pledge that will prove disastrous for Scotland.

1249 Alexander II, on a military expedition to the western seaboard, takes fever and dies; his son, Alexander III, age 9, assumes the throne; a power struggle ensues during Alexander's minority, but when he comes of age, Alexander III is a strong, forceful king.

1251 Alexander III is married to Margaret, daughter of Henry III.

1263 Alexander defeats the Norwegian King, Hakon, at the Battle of Largs — the Norse menace to Scotland is gone for good.
1272 Edward I, "Longshanks" — Alexander's brother-in-law — becomes King of England; before long Edward will be known as "The Hammer of the Scots".

1275 Queen Margaret dies (not only did she have a weak constitution, but so did all of her children).

1281 Prince David, the younger son, dies.

1283 Princess Margaret, having married King Eric of Norway, dies giving birth to Margaret, the "Maid of Norway".

1284 Prince Alexander, the older son, dies.

1286 Alexander III is killed while rushing on horseback (at night, in rough terrain) to be with his new wife, Yolanda de Dreux, Duchess of Brittany; the nobles hold a Council of State, and six Guardians are selected; the Guardians appeal to Edward I to decide the succession; Edward, after occupying all of the castles in Scotland, chooses John Balliol (a member of the Comyn faction); Balliol is forced to pay homage to Edward.

1290 Margaret, the Maid of Norway, dies in the Orkney Islands, while making her return trip to Scotland; Balliol, tired of Edward's heavy handed tactics, resists — Edward retaliates by sacking Berwick, and forcing the Scots' nobles and abbots to sign the Ragman Roll.

c. Aroused by the English oppression, and Edward I's savagery, William Wallace and Sir Andrew Moray initiate a Scottish insurrection.

The Princess Margaret's death initiated a monarchial crisis in Scotland, for with her death there were no direct heirs to Alexander III.
1297 The insurrection peaks at the Battle of Stirling Bridge, where Wallace and Moray's ragtag army defeats the battle-hardened and well-equipped (but Edwardless) English army; in the aftermath, Moray dies of wounds inflicted during the battle — a sore loss for Scotland — and Wallace is knighted, most likely by Robert the Bruce.

1298 The celebration did not last long, however, for Edward returned with a second army, and this time defeated Wallace and the Scots at the Battle of Falkirk (this is the battle where the Scottish cavalry deserted Wallace during the battle, but Wallace and a few of his men managed to escape); Bruce and the "Red" Comyn are made joint Guardians, but as rivals for the crown, find it impossible to cooperate.

1305 Wallace is betrayed, captured by the English, and, according to the customs of the era, hung, drawn, and quartered.

1306 Robert the Bruce slays the "Red" Comyn, taking the first step on the long road of his kingship, and the eventual restoration of Scotland as an independent kingdom.