

*Introduction***The Anonymous Face of Scottish Kingship**

‘On account of sin, disaster comes in’.

Abbot Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon*, c. 1440-9

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Just after daybreak on Tuesday 17th October 1346 a sizeable Scottish armed force was foraging for victuals on the church manors of Ferryhill and Merrington eight miles to the south of the rich English cathedral town of Durham. According to Jean Froissart, the late fourteenth-century Hainault traveller and chronicler of courtly Europe, this body numbered about five hundred men - probably a handful of Scots knights and men-at-arms mounted on purpose-bred warhorses (or ‘runcies’), the rest highly experienced peasant footmen some of whom would be accustomed to riding stocky hackney or ‘hobelar’ ponies until a battle was engaged. The leader of this contingent was Sir William Douglas, the famed ‘knight of Liddesdale’. He had made his warrior’s reputation and an enviable landed fortune over the previous decade by recovering Scottish castles and territory in the border marches from English occupation, and in tournaments to-the-death against English knights organised during truces.² But for the past three weeks in autumn 1346 Douglas’s battle-hardened company had formed part of a much larger army of at least ten thousand men, the first national host led across the border into England by a Scottish king for

¹ *Chron. Bower*, vii, 273.

² *Ibid.*, 139, 143-7; M. Brown, ‘The Development of Border Lordship, 1332-58’, *Historical Research*, lxx (1997), 1-22.

almost twenty years. This force had penetrated Cumberland and then Northumberland to raid and plunder towns, farms and churchlands to maximum effect while Edward III and most of his nobles were absent on the continent fighting Scotland's ally, Philip VI, the first Valois king of France.

Yet despite the easy pickings, there was palpable tension within this Scottish army. Several of Scotland's young and ambitious nobles - including Douglas - men who had fought hard to win their own lands and followings over the past two decades, had recently clashed with their 21-year-old monarch, David II, son of Robert Bruce. One lord, William, earl of Ross, had even slaughtered a local rival, Ranald MacRuairidh of Garmoran, favoured in his stead in the north-west of the kingdom by the crown over the last five years, while he lay asleep near Perth at the muster for the Scots' campaign. Ross and his men had then deserted the king's service.³ But, far worse, long before the campaign of 1346 King David had also found a myriad of reasons to distrust and actively antagonise his half-nephew and the heir apparent to his throne, Robert, the twenty-nine-year-old Steward of Scotland, the greatest Scottish noble landowner of his day. After only a short period of adult rule it was painfully obvious that David did not want Robert Steward to succeed him or to add to the vast Stewart territorial holdings in western and central Scotland.⁴

In spite of this ill-feeling, however, David must have felt firmly in command of a host which had been gifted a lucrative free rein to devastate England's northern frontier. The continued success of this leisurely mounted raid or *chevauchée* – perhaps with the fitting climax of reducing an English castle or walled town - would fulfill David's debt

³ *Chron. Bower*, vii, 253.

⁴ M. Penman, 'The Scots at the Battle of Neville's Cross, 17 October 1346', *SHR*, lxxx (2001), 157-80.

and treaty obligations to King Philip, who had given him vital refuge in France between 1334 and 1341 following England's renewed invasion of Scotland. But far more importantly, David must have hoped that the 1346 campaign would also cement his assertion of his personal authority over those of his more headstrong subjects who had exploited his turbulent childhood on the throne (1329-41) for their own gain. Nobles like Douglas certainly seemed prepared to support the king in what promised to be a profitable and patriotic excursion: the Steward was at least in attendance in command of one of the Scots' three battalions. Here was the perfect chance for David to prove himself his father's son.

But in the end, this venture produced almost completely the opposite results to those to which David had aspired. For without warning on the morning of the 17th, Douglas's foraging party was disturbed by the vanguard of an English army of roughly six to eight thousand men led by the Archbishop of York and several northern lords, including Sir Ralph Neville, Sir Henry Percy and the heir to the Scottish dynasty usurped by the Bruces, Edward Balliol, son of John I of Scotland (1292-6). A veteran and victor of many skirmishes with smaller English forces, Douglas turned his men and withdrew at best speed for the Scottish royal host encamped some seven miles to the north on the Beaurepaire (Bearpark) of the bishopric of Durham. According to the contemporary chronicler of the nearby priory of Lanercost, a house sacked by the Scots during the same campaign:

William then returned to the Scottish army, hot and shouting very vigorously, 'David! Rise quickly; look, all the English are attacking us'. David replied that this was not possible, saying, 'There are none in England but wretched monks, disreputable priests, swineheads, cobblers

and skimmers; they dare not face me, I am safe enough;’ but they did face him, and as was clear afterwards, they were only gently testing him. ‘Certainly,’ said William, ‘O dread king, saving your peace you will find otherwise...’⁵

Thus David II was roused rudely from sleep, either in his grand tented pavilion or the bishop’s manor house within the Bearpark, and plunged into what would turn out to be his first and last pitched battle. It was also to prove the defining moment of his long and difficult reign.

David’s character was such that in spite of this surprise encounter he must have remained – not unreasonably - confident of victory as the early morning moisture cleared and the rival hosts manoeuvred to face each other across a narrow area of the parkland, broken with hillocks, gullies and stone, to the west and within sight of the cathedral tower and castle of Durham. Since his return from childhood exile in France just over five years previously David had applied himself to winning the affection and loyal following of most of his subjects as their leader in war. This had been no easy task. While he had grown to adolescence in safety in a quiet corner of Normandy, the Scots had succeeded in stalling and gradually winding back the occupation forces of Edward III of England (1327-77) and his vassal pretender to the Scottish throne, Edward Balliol. Since the summer of 1332 these allies had sought to recover by force the control over the Scottish realm seized by Edward I (1272-1307) and briefly held by King John respectively. Indeed, in 1332 Edward Balliol’s small force alone, and then in 1333 a much larger English royal army, had succeeded in inflicting two calamitous defeats upon the Scots at

⁵ *Chron. Lanercost*, 348-51; A. Grant, ‘Disaster at Neville’s Cross’ and R.A. Lomas, ‘The Durham Landscape and the Battle of Neville’s Cross’, in D. Rollason and M. Prestwich eds., *The Battle of Neville’s Cross, 1346* (Stamford 1998), 15-26, 66-77, and section of Illustrative Documents, 138-41.

Dupplin and Halidon Hill and in occupying most of the southern and central shires of the kingdom. Balliol had been crowned king of Scotland at Scone in September 1332 within a few weeks of his initial invasion, just ten months after David II's own coronation.⁶

Balliol's ultimate success would have obliterated the memory of what the English monarch had denounced as the 'cowardly' peace of 1328 which David's father had dictated to the weak, unpopular minority English regime which had dethroned and murdered Edward II (1307-27): the Bruce dynasty would thus have lasted only three decades. But the Bruce Scots were preserved and aided in their struggle by Edward III's obsession with over-running France, a goal he actively pursued after 1337. Such was the degree of Edward's distraction and the dogged, grinding success of the military efforts of the Scots – led by men like Douglas, Ross, Steward and others - that there was really only a fringe of Scottish border territory and a few castles left for David to recover personally to his rule after his return home in June 1341.

Nonetheless, David's undoubted youthful vigour and his generous patronage to his warlike subjects won him the backing of by far the majority of his substantial subjects during the first five years of his adult rule. Abbot Bower of Inchcolm isle in the Forth, writing a century later, trumpeted the host which David assembled under his banner to invade northern England in late September 1346 as evidence that the king was 'fully reassured and supported by the knightly young men of military age'.⁷ Probably some eight to twelve thousand Scots – two to three thousand of them at least mounted in some fashion – assembled for this campaign. They had come from all quarters of the Scottish kingdom, including a few from those regions only loosely controlled by the crown, the

⁶ R. Nicholson, *Edward III and the Scots: the Formative Years of a Military Career, 1327-35* (Oxford 1965), 1-138.

⁷ *Chron. Bower*, vii, 151, 253.

outlying west and far north. Their muster was prompted by David's favourable response to the French king's letters pleading for a diversionary Scottish invasion while Edward III was in France and England's northern counties were – as Philip VI put it - left as a 'defenceless void'.⁸

However, the bloody Scottish defeat in the unexpected battle which ensued outside Durham brought home more than the cold reality of continued Scottish vulnerability against superior English archery, infantry and cavalry. Two entire divisions of the larger Scottish army were destroyed; most of David's closest magnate councillors were slain; and the king himself suffered two grave arrow wounds to the face before his ignominious capture at the hands of a mere English esquire. This threatened to undo in the space of just a few hours all that had been achieved over three hard decades by Robert I and his generation for the establishment of Scottish independence and a Bruce dynasty, as well as all the Bruce Scots had fought to recover in the 1330s. The English defeat at Bannockburn in 1314 was avenged in spades.

Yet this lost battle also deepened the cracks in the Scottish political community. For the cruel reality was that David's army had been further deserted and fatally weakened in its moment of need by those disgruntled Scottish magnates whom the young king had undermined since 1341 for their apparently self-serving actions during his childhood. This fatal withdrawal was headed by the leading magnate and royal heir presumptive, Robert Stewart, and others like Patrick Dunbar, ninth earl of March. In doing so, the Stewart must have hoped he was returning home to be king after the death of his younger half-uncle, David, in battle.⁹ But as he lay captive, recovering from his

⁸ Philip's letter reproduced in *Chron. Hemingborough*, , ii, 421-2

⁹ Penman, 'The Scots at the Battle of Neville's Cross'.

wounds, David's mind must only have become embittered and crystallised as to the need to strangle and break the Steward's territorial and political influence in fourteenth-century Scotland. This would be the king's paramount domestic goal for the rest of his reign.

However, for David, undermining the Steward – and his magnate co-deserters – would be inseparable from the other major consequence of his capture on that fateful day. To secure favourable release terms and to perpetuate English recognition of an independent Scotland and a Bruce king, David would have to strike a peace deal with Edward III. This time England could dictate the terms. After an excruciatingly frustrating eleven years of captivity – during which the Steward as heir to the throne dominated the government of Scotland – David was lucky to finally secure his release in return for a ten-year Anglo-Scottish truce and a ransom of 100,000 merks (£66,666 13s 4d) in late 1357. But despite this grave burden David also found hope in his relations with Edward III, a monarch and brother-in-law he grew to admire. On several subsequent occasions David would return to London to try to mitigate his ransom burden by seeking a full peace treaty which would recognise either Edward III or one of his six sons as heir presumptive to the Scottish kingship: this would have displaced the claim as next in line to Scotland's throne of Robert Steward and his several sons. In David's eyes such a re-arrangement became all the more vital the longer he ruled without producing his own Bruce offspring. Crucially, this was something he seemed physically incapable of doing despite two wives and several mistresses. But David would still be preoccupied with siring an heir, securing a cheaper peace with England, altering the Scottish succession or otherwise reducing Stewart power at the time of his premature death from an unexplained illness on 22 February 1371. He would be just forty-seven years old.

Thus what would prove to be one of longest reigns of the independent Scottish kingdom came to an early, quiet, almost anti-climatic end and the second Bruce king's memory and plans were swept aside by the new Stewart dynasty as Robert the Steward succeeded as Robert II (1371-90).¹⁰ David's rule had been marked by important and dramatic developments in the exercise of royal power and government in Scotland and in Anglo-Scottish relations: as we shall see, Scottish chivalric culture had also flourished. Yet despite these achievements, modern historians have until recently preferred to focus on David's very apparent failings, most of which were exposed by or sprang from the compromising events of 17 October 1346. As a result, David has received an overwhelmingly negative press.

Lord Hailes and other nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers concentrated on the 'dark and drublie' shortcomings of David's reign: his seven year exile as a child; his disastrous generalship and capture in 1346; his seemingly traitorous ideas for an English succession in Scotland; his subsequently sour and vindictive relations with his great nobles; his inability to father a son and his estrangement from his first wife, Edward III's sister, Joan of the Tower (d. 1362), and his second, Margaret Logie, a divorce from whom David's regime botched in 1368-9. Thus Victorian and Edwardian historians almost inevitably rounded on David for failing to live up to the high morals and achievements of his patriotic predecessor: David was 'weak and capricious, violent in his resentments, and habitually under the dominion of women...he degenerated from the magnanimity of his father...[to] the allurements of present ease [and]...base jealousy...[and] was willing to surrender the honour, security and independence of that

¹⁰ Only William I, 'the Lion' (1165-1214), and James VI of Scotland (1567-1625) and I of England (1603-25) ruled longer.

people whom God and his laws had intrusted to his protection'. 'Incompetent', 'unpatriotic', 'recreant', 'pleasure-seeking' and 'worthless' were further epithets thrown at the childless second Bruce king by writers who preferred to pass on to the accession of the Stewarts¹¹: and for these critics, condemnation of David's 'unbecoming' adultery was certainly to be found in near contemporary chronicle histories like that of Abbot Bower writing in the 1440s.¹² This was an intemperate king who needed to be contained by a responsible political community. Taking this lead, modern parliamentary historian Sir Robert Rait even went so far as to assert that David's rule had thus been one marked by 'baronial rule over a weak monarch' in which the magnate leaders of the political community made an 'honest effort' to prevent David's 'extravagance, weakness and indifference' from wasting revenues raised for administrative purposes and to pay his ransom after 1357. Overall, David was certainly not a man to celebrate in popular biographical volumes of *Eminent Scotsmen*: in the celebrated frieze of famous Scots

¹¹ Sir David Dalrymple, Lord Hailes, *Annals of Scotland from the Accession of Malcolm III to the Accession of the House of Stewart* (3rd edition, Edinburgh 1819), ii, 320-3; P.F. Tytler, *History of Scotland* (8 volumes, Edinburgh 1829), ii, vii, 1-194 ['it is painful to dwell on the character of this prince who was, in every respect, unworthy of his illustrious father...we look in vain for a noble, or even a commendable quality...while the darker parts of his disposition are prominently marked...he was uniformly actuated by a devotion to his own selfish pleasures, and a reckless disregard of all those sacred and important duties which a king owes to his people...[his succession plans were] a measure of single baseness and audacity']; J. Mackintosh, *The History of Civilisation in Scotland* (4 volumes, Edinburgh 1878) i, 333-43 ['a man of this stamp was poorly qualified to lead the nation']; T. Thomson, *A History of the Scottish People* (6 volumes, Edinburgh 1893), ii, 308-331 ['a sated voluptuary who had tried every pleasure and experienced the worthlessness of them all...[with] little feeling in common with Scotland...a sordidness of spirit...[and who could never] feel shame or compunction when the memory of his father flitted like a reproachful shade before him']; J.H. Burton, *The History of Scotland* (8 volumes, Edinburgh 1897), ii, 309-42; A. Lang, *A History of Scotland* (Edinburgh 1900-7), i, 264; J. Mackinnon, *The Constitutional History of Scotland* (London 1924), 193-5 ['entirely incompetent...bellicose and brave to rashness...but for the patriotic spirit of the people, he would have tamely bartered the independence of his country as the price of his release from English captivity...oppressive taxation and misgovernment...his disastrous and disgraceful rule had fatally reduced the crown from the strong position in which his father had placed it']; A.M. Mackenzie, *The Rise of the Stewarts* (London 1935), 17-60 ['he had nothing of his father in him except a decent share of physical courage, a handsome presence, and some charm of manner...[yet he died] leaving Scotland in ruins, but still independent'].

¹² *Chron. Bower*, vii, 321-3.

painted for the Scottish National Portrait Gallery by William Brassey Hole (1867-1917), David is depicted as a child, protected by Robert I's followers, his two awkward periods of adult rule ignored.¹³

This condemnation of the mature David persisted into the twentieth-century. As late as 1954, David II was still being bashed in a *Historical Association* pamphlet by a historian who had earlier found virtue in studying the career of James I (1406-37), who could be viewed as a masterful 'lawgiver' king of Scots (and Bower's employer) who was also a long-time captive of the English crown. E.W.M. Balfour-Melville took care to outline David's difficult inheritance as a five-year-old child in a time of renewed war and he looked in more detail than hitherto at the complex diplomacy and internal tensions of his adult kingship. But David still emerged in this short study as an inadequate figure in one of 'the most dismal reigns...as calamitous a contrast to his father as Edward II to his...through him [David] his country's hard-won freedom would again be threatened'.¹⁴ As late as 1965, Geoffrey Barrow, in his classic study of Robert I and the political community, echoed this bitter regret by remarking that 'it would have been better for Scotland if David Bruce, who was born too late (5 March 1324), had never been born at all...the disasters of David II's minority, exceeded only by the disasters of his maturity, might conceivably have been mitigated if not wholly avoided' and adult Stewart kingship ushered in forty years earlier.¹⁵ Such historical disappointment was still surely influenced

¹³ R. Chambers, *A biographical dictionary of eminent Scotsmen* (5 volumes, Glasgow 1855); R.S. Rait, *The Parliaments of Scotland* (Glasgow 1924), 20-5. W.Croft Dickinson, *Scotland from the Earliest Times to 1603* (Oxford 1959, revised by A.A.M. Duncan 1977), ch. 16. 'Dark and Drublie Days' depicts David as a somewhat hazy figure, a 'devious king...[who] ruled circumspectly but efficiently...a very different man [to his father] but one no less determined that, whoever lost his patrimony, it should not be the Bruce'.

¹⁴ E.W.M. Balfour-Melville, *Edward III and David II* (Historical Association Pamphlet G. 27, 1954) and *James I, King of Scots* (London 1936), 2-3.

¹⁵ Barrow, *Bruce*, 413.

by the stark contrast between ‘Good King Robert’, the victor of Bannockburn, and David, the weaker son who got what he deserved at Neville’s Cross.

However, a revisionist, more balanced view of David was at hand. Bruce Webster (1965) challenged the accepted picture of the king as a dilettante, unpatriotic monarch by playing up the apparent strengths of his later period of rule, 1357-71. These were so impressive, it was argued, as to make amends for David’s youthful failings and ‘intermittent and rather fitful government’ before 1346. After 1357 David could be said to have been a king deeply interested in government, restoring parliaments, justice circuits or ‘ayres’ and exchequer audits after his absence. Webster argues that David made a ‘deliberate effort to rule with circumspection and a wide measure of consent’, including the great magnates in his talks with England as well as favouring a wide number of lesser knights as his counsellors. This meant that ‘there was no collapse in David’s reign...the king was not overwhelmed by the power of his barons. Any collapse...came after 1371’. David clashed with Thomas Stewart, earl of Angus (1360-2), over the murder of the king’s mistress in 1360; with Thomas, earl of Mar, resulting in a successful royal siege of Kildrummy castle (1362) and that earl’s imprisonment (1369); and he faced down a major rebellion by the Stewarts and the earls of March and Douglas in 1363. But still, ‘[David] possessed what was more valuable than mere energy, an unusual political maturity...[and] seems from 1363 to have ruled at peace with most of his leading nobles. This must imply restraint and some statesmanship on both sides’.¹⁶

Ranald Nicholson soon went even further than this. In a highly entertaining article, ‘David II, the historians and the chroniclers’ (1966), he argued that David was a

¹⁶ B. Webster, ‘David II and the Government of fourteenth Century Scotland’, *TRHS*, 5th series, xvi (1965), 115-30.

far more capable, calculating and authoritative king than the late medieval Scottish chroniclers – most of whom assembled their material after the accession of Robert Stewart as Robert II in 1371 – would have their readers believe. For Nicholson, the disastrous early years of David's reign were clearly beyond his control; his defeat and capture at Neville's Cross may have been the fault of a young, rash but nonetheless brave Bruce king. But from 1350 David's entertainment of the possible recognition of an English royal as his heir presumptive was a shrewd gamble. It was worth making if it brought about his release and the avoidance of a crippling ransom, and if he besides could wipe the slate clean by producing his own Bruce son. After 1357, David continued his hard bargaining with England and proved himself well able to assert his authority over his baronial subjects.¹⁷ As Nicholson pointed out, the *Orygynale* chronicler, Andrew Wyntoun (c. 1355-1422), prior of St Serf's priory of Loch Leven in Fife, certainly used a source written by a contemporary of David's reign compiled c. 1390 which emphasised the king's assertion of his stern personal authority – his so-called '*raddure*', indeed, was such that '*nane durst withstand his will*'.¹⁸

These were themes developed further in Nicholson's essential *Scotland – The Later Middle Ages* (1974) which stressed David's reconstruction of the administration of Scottish kingship after its collapse under the Lieutenancy of Robert Stewart, 1346-57. Effective justice ayres and regular extraordinary taxation granted by annual councils or parliaments – attended by the '*tres communitates*', the three estates – amounted to a regime of 'unexampled intensiveness' in Scotland, founded on a 'real civil service'. David's personal hard-headedness and his sharp distribution of patronage to lesser Scots

¹⁷ R. Nicholson, 'David II, the historians and the chroniclers', *SHR*, xlv (1966), 59-78.

¹⁸ *Chron. Wyntoun*, vi, 234.

with their own followings to win support enabled him to exert his will over troublesome provincial magnates: ‘royal patronage went to a nobility of service...almost all who held the rank of earl were cowed into submission’. Thus for Nicholson this was an impressive reign of ‘relative success’ and royal strength after 1357: ‘David with a few assets save his own astuteness and forceful personality made himself so completely the master of Scotland. Only in his second wife did he meet his match’!¹⁹

However, before David could attain an historical image as a confidently masterful monarch some perceptive words of caution were voiced. For Alexander Grant (1984), although David was a ‘tough and energetic’ king seemingly in ‘firm control of his kingdom’ at the time of his death, his was nevertheless ‘the kind of kingship that brought several English kings to grief’ – intrusive, disruptive and grasping, unacceptable to Scottish regional magnate sensibilities so long left to their own devices. Before the disaster at Neville’s Cross ‘David’s kingship had been distinctly partisan, a dangerous sign when coupled with the connections between central rivalries and local feuds’. After 1357, David’s anxious pursuit of a peace deal with England and his repeated wilful interference in the lands of some of the great Scottish magnates provoked instances of ‘temporary strictness’ enforced by the king against these nobles. The intermittent threat of rebellion and civil war was defused only by ‘the general reluctance throughout the political community to take disputes to extremes’, staying David’s hand on several occasions and limiting his powers of taxation.²⁰

Michael Lynch’s stunning one-volume *Scotland – A New History* (1989) echoed this mixed review of David’s accomplishments. Here, this Bruce reign is portrayed neatly

¹⁹ R. Nicholson, *Scotland – The Later Middle Ages* (Edinburgh 1974), ch. 6 ‘The Son of King Robert and the Son of King John’ and ch. 7 ‘The Ransom, the Succession and Intensive Government’.

²⁰ A. Grant, *Independence and Nationhood: Scotland, 1306-1469* (Edinburgh 1984), 18-25, 35-9, 131-180.

as one of two distinct kingships, 1341-6 and 1357-71. In the first phase, however, David's rule showed little maturity and in the second his reconstruction of royal government and finance was offset by his controversial relations with England and 'signs less of troublesome magnates, than an inability on the part of an inexperienced king to keep a range of noble interests in balance'. David had to learn the hard way that he needed the consensus of his subjects in parliament to make policy and avoid rebellion: moreover, he 'failed to realise that some of his liaisons had serious political repercussions...[at a time of] dangerous isolation for the royal house of Bruce', but he died before any firm assessment of his achievements might reasonably be made.²¹

A.A.M. Duncan has also recently thrown badly-needed light on the mixed success of David's complex diplomatic dealings with Edward III after 1346. In these time-consuming talks David comes across as extremely capable and calculating amidst his own difficult personal circumstances and the wider quicksands of the first decades of what would be over a century of war in north-western Europe. His goals were rational, consistent and not unrealistic, especially in terms of the effect they might have had on the politics of Scotland. However, Duncan is convinced not only that the scale of opposition in Scotland to David's allied diplomatic and domestic plans was much greater and more organised than has previously been recognised, but also that the king's agenda was increasingly weakened after 1350 by his continued 'self-deception' in thinking that he could still sire a Bruce son of his own to offset any concessions he might make to Edward

²¹ M. Lynch, *Scotland – A New History* (London 1991), 128-37.

III. The obvious conclusion to be drawn from this argument is that David was incapable of fatherhood, a deluded dynast.²²

Conversely, the most recent historical work on fourteenth-century Scottish kingship has given David an almost ironically ‘fatherly’ image in highlighting his ability to attract and command the support of a wide, powerful circle of vigorous, well-motivated lesser magnates, knights and esquires, as well as clerics and burgesses, to call upon in his diplomacy and his frequent intimidation of his greatest noble subjects. Stephen Boardman has written a groundbreaking study of the reigns of Robert II and his son, Robert III (1371-1406), both key subjects in David’s reign before their accession - as Robert the Steward and, before his name-change, John Stewart of Kyle, respectively. This research has shown that David used such patronage, centred around his professed interest in chivalry and the crusades, to win and reward support for the crown in clashes against the Stewarts and other magnates over vast, valuable provincial titles: David did so from the very beginning of his adult rule.²³

After 1346, moreover, David’s attempt to cut a succession-ransom deal with Edward III and his search for a Scottish bride capable of giving him a son were both bound up with his mounting desire to contain, really to break, the territorial and political influence and autonomy of the Stewarts and other great regional nobles. Carefully cultivated support allowed David to pursue domestic and foreign policies which were ‘increasingly aggressive and independent’. Indeed he had been able to suppress the Stewart-led backlash against this agenda and achieve a strong position of authority and

²² A.A.M. Duncan, ‘Honi soit qui mal y pense’: David II and Edward III, 1346-52’, *SHR*, lxxvii (1988), 113-41, 139; idem, ‘The Regnal Year of David II’, *SHR*, lxxviii (1989), 105-19; idem, ‘A Question about the Succession, 1364’, *Scottish History Society Miscellany*, xii (1994), 1-57.

²³ S. Boardman, *The Early Stewart Kings: Robert II and Robert III, 1371-1406* (East Linton 1996), 1-70.

the promise of royal supremacy in the future by the time he died in 1371. Michael Brown has similarly illuminated the parallel interaction between the intrusive and aggressive David II and the several scions of the house of Douglas, a contest in which by 1370-71, the king had undeniably succeeded in shifting the balance of power to favour the crown and its preferred followers.²⁴ In these studies, then, David can be seen as a generous, charismatic benefactor to some but a deeply unpleasant, threatening enemy, almost a tyrant, to others. Such work has prompted Alexander Grant to offer a slightly modified view of Scotland post-1329, highlighting the essentially factional nature of crown-magnate politics but pointing to a stalemate in which ‘compromising greatly outweighed the acts of violence’ until ‘high politics became a matter of life and death’ c. 1402.²⁵

Study of David’s personality and style of rule and the dramatic events and crown-magnate relations of his reign has, therefore, clearly advanced considerably since the scholars of the nineteenth-century bemoaned a dearth of original sources from the period. But despite this work, there is arguably still no popular received view of this long reign in the public domain. More often than not David enters historical discussion simply as ‘Robert Bruce’s son’. He then exits – along with four decades of fascinating Scottish politics – until mention of his death and the advent of the long-running Stewart dynasty in 1371 and the generation of the next Scottish victory over England at Otterburn (1388): crucially, as we shall see, this was a period dominated by men anxious to censor the achievements and legacy of the last Bruce king. At best, David retains consequently only a vague image of limited success in a few areas overwhelmed by drastic failure in others.

²⁴ M. Brown, *The Black Douglases: War and Lordship in Late Medieval Scotland* (East Linton 1998), 33-75, 122-31, 135-52, 160-80, 186-92, 204-13.

²⁵ A. Grant, ‘Fourteenth-Century Scotland’, in M. Jones ed., *The New Cambridge Medieval History: IV c. 1300-c. 1415* (Cambridge 2000), 345-74, at 362 [49n], 367.

The exact nature of his relations with England does not sit well with the traditions of the modern patriotic nation born on the field of Bannockburn: on the other hand, David's dealings with England were arguably so ambivalent and potentially two-faced that he cannot be easily championed by present-day unionist commentators in Britain. Even much of the physical legacy of David's reign has been obliterated over time: his tomb in Holyrood Abbey vandalised in the late seventeenth-century and his bones scattered; his devotional church at St Monans in Fife partly absorbed by later work; his square Tower House at Edinburgh castle destroyed in an English bombardment in 1573 and over-built. Thus in the most recent one-volume analysis of the nation's past, David's was still understandably 'one of the most anonymous reigns in Scottish history': even in 2002 this king received no individual entry in the *New Oxford History of Scotland*.²⁶

Arguably, he deserves better. David's reign saw Scotland not only through the first decades of the Hundred Years War but also the most virulent period of the Black Death (c. 1349) with all the suffering and social, economic and political upheaval and change these Europe-wide experiences heralded. But more importantly, as the most recent research has suggested, David's reign – and the period of the Bruce dynasty as a whole – proved the key formative years of the late medieval Scottish kingdom's politics and collective identity.

Out of the Wars of Independence a recast Scottish monarchy, nobility and community emerged, with a conflicting variety of both traditional and new expectations

²⁶ Lynch, *A New History*, 135. Idem ed., *The New Oxford History of Scotland* (Oxford 2001) – although it is the editors' intention in this work to steer away from the 'Great Man' approach. Similarly, no outright opinion of David II is cast in the thematic study of R.A. Houston and W.W.J. Knox eds., *The New Penguin History of Scotland* (London 2001), 96-181. G. Donaldson's *Scottish Kings* (London 1967), 30-4, includes only a couple of pages on David's mixed career, remarking that he was unfairly condemned for womanising whilst Robert II, father of many bastards, was not.

for the future. It was during both the years of David's long absences and his personal monarchy that the balance of power between the at-once complementary and competing interests of crown and three estates in Scotland was first worked, and often fought, out. A detailed picture of David, his inheritance and his kingship is necessary to bridge the gulf between the established view of the massive achievements by 1329 of Robert I, his warrior lieutenants and patriotic churchmen on the one hand, and, on the other, the immense difficulties of the new Stewart monarchy after 1371, its authority often dangerously eclipsed by the demands of its princes and regional magnates.

More specifically, a number of questions about David's personality and policies, and the events of his long reign, remain unanswered. David would develop a unique style of personal lordship and royal household, court and government to suit the trying circumstances at home and abroad which he inherited from the period 1306 to 1341, and those which he encountered and created for himself thereafter. But just what was the influence of the legacy he inherited from his father? Why did David fall into conflict so quickly with Robert Stewart and other great Scottish magnates whose families had gratefully supported Robert I and fought hard in the 1330s? Were David's ideas about closer relations with England after 1346 completely abhorrent to his subjects after two generations of warfare against the Plantagenets? Did David's style of kingship amount to the kind of authoritarian model which he himself must have observed in Edward III's rule? In this sense was it also a model of hard-headed rule which the fifteenth-century Stewart kings of Scotland would look to as a template to assert over their subjects, all too often with violent consequences and necessary bloodletting? Or were David's personal failings and problems – most obviously with the succession and Anglo-Scottish relations

– such that he never really convinces as Nicholson’s masterful king of Scots? These issues, and others, form the main themes of this book.