

BRUCE INVASION, 1315-1318

Edward Bruce, Earl of Carrick, Lord of Galloway and self-proclaimed King of Ireland, was the younger brother of Robert Bruce, King of Scots. Described by one chronicler as ‘a little headstrong and impetuous’ (an observation which could be regarded as something of an understatement), Edward Bruce had distinguished himself at the Battle of Bannockburn (24 June 1314). He was also a man of ‘vaulting ambition’ and little evident political acumen. In April 1315 he became heir-presumptive to Scottish throne. Although Robert did not have a direct male heir until 1324, the prospect of Robert Bruce dying without a direct male heir in 1315 would have been considered remote. Being heir-presumptive to Scottish throne was not commensurate with Edward Bruce’s ambition.

Robert Bruce despatched a letter, probably some time in 1315, ‘To all the kings of Ireland, the prelates and clergy and to the inhabitants of Ireland, our friends’:

‘Whereas we and you and our people and your people, free in ancient times, share the same national ancestry and are urged to come together more eagerly and joyfully in friendship by a common language and common custom ... we have sent over to you our beloved kinsmen ... to negotiate with you in our name about permanently strengthening and maintaining inviolate the special friendship between us and you so that with God’s will our nation may be able to recover her ancient liberty’.

The letter was a bogus appeal to pan-Celticism. The Bruces were of Anglo-Norman ancestry. As such they had more in common with the Anglo-Normans in Ireland than the people they were proposing to

liberate. The purpose of the letter was presumably to prepare the ground for Edward Bruce's expedition to Ireland. Although the precise motives of the Bruce brothers are largely conjecture, it seems probable that Edward simply wished to become king of Ireland but Robert was principally interested in diverting Edward II's attention to Ireland in order to allow him to consolidate his position in Scotland and to prevent Ireland becoming a source of manpower, money and supplies for use against Scotland. The idea that Robert wanted his brother out of the way, so he despatched him to Ireland, is surely implausible. It seems most improbable that Robert Bruce would have been willing to commit such significant resources for such comparatively trivial reasons. If Edward was simply a nuisance, Robert could have devised other ways of dealing with his problem brother.

Having sailed from Ayr, Edward Bruce, with an army of 6,000 men, arrived at Larne on 25 or 26 May. According to some accounts, Donal O'Neill invited Edward Bruce to Ireland. O'Neill wanted the restoration of the Irish high kingship and he wished Bruce to be high king. O'Neill was not prompted by altruism: he wanted Edward Bruce to bolster his position against Richard de Burgh, the Earl of Ulster. In 1317 Donal O'Neill sent a Remonstrance to the Pope John XXII explaining his support for Edward Bruce's invasion to counteract English diplomacy in Rome.

O'Neill, O Cathain and O'Hanlon and other Gaels aligned themselves with Bruce. Edward had himself proclaimed King of Ireland, defeated the local Anglo-Norman magnates (Mandeville, Savage, Logan and Bisset) and easily captured the town of Carrickfergus. However, he failed to capture the castle. Edward then marched south, the first of four such campaigns. On 29 June he burned Dundalk but was forced to retreat

northwards by the Earl of Ulster who followed him. On 1 September the two armies clashed at Connor. De Burgh was heavily defeated.

Bruce marched south, defeated Roger Mortimer, Lord of Trim (and future lover of Edward II's queen, Isabella, and effective ruler of England during Edward III's minority), at Kells, Co. Meath, in early December. Mortimer's tenants defected to Bruce and Bruce forged further south. At the end of January 1316 Bruce succeeded in defeating a significant Anglo-Irish force under Butler near Ardscoil, Co. Kildare. He moved into Laois and Offaly.

The period of Bruce's presence in Ireland coincided with a period of bad weather, poor harvests and famine which affected much of northern Europe. This meant he could not live off the country, obliging him to retire to Ulster in mid February. In 1317 the famine was so severe that it gave rise to cannibalism. The Scots 'were so destroyed with hunger that they raised the dead from cemeteries and ate them' and 'women ate their children from hunger'.

While he was in eastern Ulster Bruce endeavoured to consolidate his position. While he managed to win over some of the Anglo-Normans to his cause, most continued to oppose him. On 1 May 1316 Bruce was crowned King of Ireland near Dundalk. Although Carrickfergus castle had been reinforced and supplied by sea in April and July 1316, it fell to Edward Bruce in September 1316.

The following month Edward Bruce wrote to the Welsh modestly suggesting that he should assist them in expelling the English from Wales and that he should become Prince of Wales as well as King of Ireland. Edward Bruce then returned to Scotland to confer with his brother and

succeeded in persuading him to come to Ireland. Before Christmas Edward and Robert Bruce arrived at Carrickfergus with an army of Gallowglasses.

In February 1317 the two Bruces marched south and forced de Burgh to retreat from Rathoath. By 21 February the Bruces were at Castleknock, possibly contemplating the seizure of Dublin. However, the people of Dublin pulled down the settlements outside the city walls. They had two motives: they used the materials to strengthen the fortifications of their city and to deprive the Scots of shelter. However, the Bruces, having no desire to become embroiled in a protracted siege, by-passed Dublin and moved into Kildare and Kilkenny and then westwards into Tipperary and Limerick, plundering and devastating the countryside. The Bruces were shadowed by an Anglo-Norman army which displayed no enthusiasm for battle.

In early April 1317 Roger Mortimer arrived at Youghal with a small military force, a sign that Edward II or the English government were taking developments in Ireland seriously. Edward also began recruiting Genovese mercenaries for Irish service, although it is exceedingly doubtful whether they ever set foot in Ireland. Edward Bruce withdrew to Ulster and in May Robert went back to Scotland.

For almost a year and a half Edward Bruce disappears from the historical record. His activities in this period can only be a matter of conjecture.

In the autumn of 1318 Edward Bruce set out on his fourth and final campaign. Marching south, at the Battle of Faughart, a hill north of Dundalk, on 14 October 1318, Bruce was defeated by an army, commanded by John de Bermingham of Tethmoy and consisting of the

Anglo-Norman gentry of Louth and the townspeople of Dundalk. Bruce was killed in the battle.

Of Edward Bruce's death one annalist recorded:

'Never was there a better deed done for the Irish than this since the beginning of the world ... for in this Bruce's time, for three years and a half, falsehood and famine and homicide filled the country and undoubtedly men ate each other'.

Bruce's head was sent to Edward II. The rest of his body was quartered. His heart, hand and one quarter were brought to Dublin. The other quarters were sent 'to other places'. John de Bermingham was created Earl of Louth. The Battle of Faughart was the only English victory of Edward II's otherwise undistinguished reign.

Although, Edward Bruce's invasion resulted in his defeat and death, his invasion was by no means a comprehensive failure. Bruce wreaked havoc on Anglo-Norman Ireland, greatly weakening the Anglo-Norman grip on the island and was thereby successful in preventing Anglo-Norman Ireland becoming a source of manpower, money and supplies for waging war against the Scots.