

BRUCE 700 : Rathlin Island - the Birthplace of Bannockburn

The story of an Ulster island, a King in exile, a determined spider... and the greatest military triumph in Scotland's history

(by Mark Thompson, Chairman, Ulster-Scots Agency; with thanks to Doug Archibald of The Robert the Bruce Commemoration Trust - www.bruce Trust.co.uk)

The Bruce Campaign in Ireland and the Death of Edward Bruce

PART SIX: September 1316 - With King Robert the Bruce of Scotland reunited with his brother Edward Bruce, High King of Ireland, they set about taking the entire island. However, their ambitions were to be thwarted...

February 1317 - The March to Dublin

Having arrived at Carrickfergus to join with his brother Edward, Robert the Bruce's strategy was to go for the jugular, straight to the seat of English power in Ireland - Dublin. By taking Dublin, he could then take the whole country. The Bruce army marched southwards.

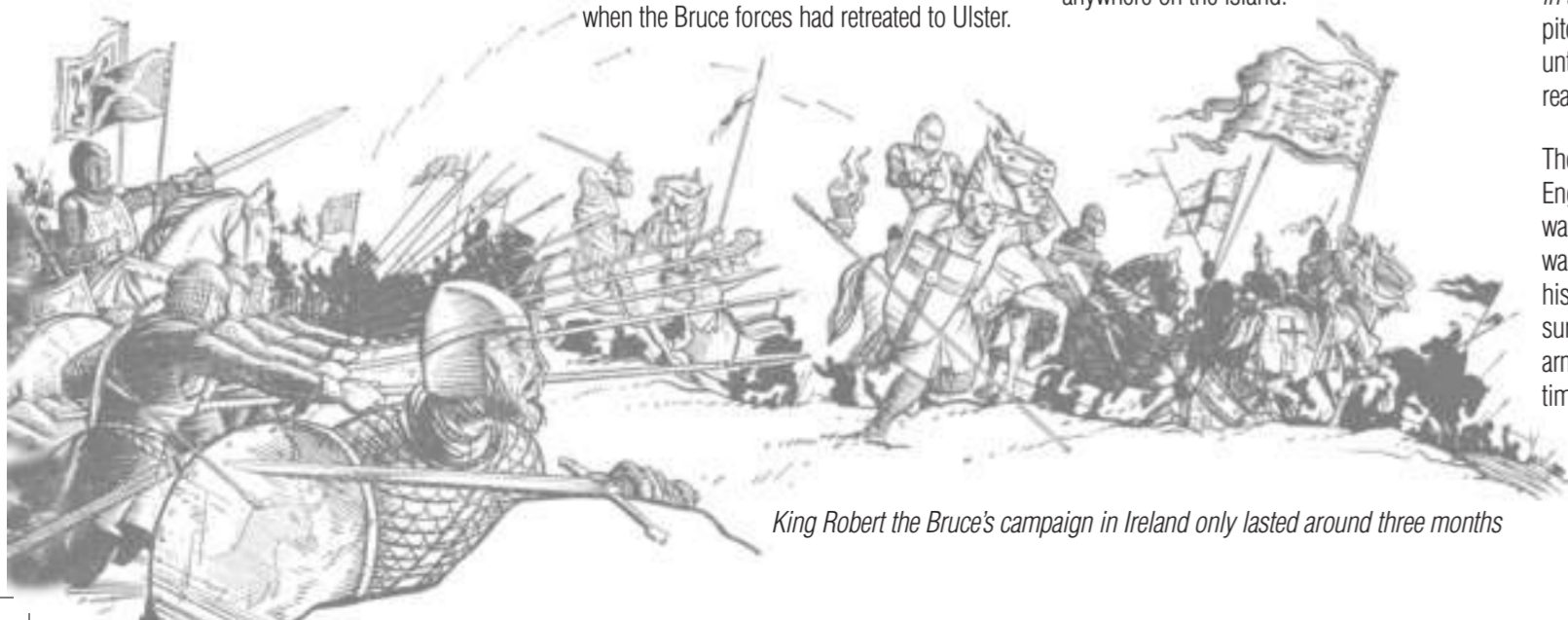
However, as they arrived on the outskirts of the city, Bruce was informed that his father-in-law and foe - Richard de Burgh, the Earl of Ulster - had been suspected of treachery by the Dublin authorities. They were concerned that de Burgh's opposition for his son-in-law Robert the Bruce was only a lure, an elaborate smokescreen aimed to deceive them, and to put de Burgh and the Bruces in command of the whole island.

So De Burgh and his kinsmen were arrested by the Mayor of Dublin on 21st February and were held hostage in the city - should the Bruces attack Dublin, de Burgh would be put to death.



The strategy worked. Bruce's army did not attack, but encamped just outside the town. That night the people of Dublin began a scorched earth policy, setting fire to the suburbs and buildings, and began strengthening the city walls.

Seeing such determined opposition, the Bruce army marched away. However, despite writing to the King of England demanding his immediate release, de Burgh was held for almost three months - until 8th May 1317 - when the Bruce forces had retreated to Ulster.



King Robert the Bruce's campaign in Ireland only lasted around three months

"Laying Waste the Entire Country"

As a retaliation to having failed in Dublin, the Bruce army set about a campaign of devastation, destroying the estates of the leading English lords in Ireland. Sir Edmund Butler's estate at Ormond in Co. Tipperary was targeted. In February 24 1317 they encamped at Leixlip, they burned the ancient town of Naas, plundered Castledermot Friary, marched to Gowran and reached Callan about 12th March. From here they marched to Limerick "...laying waste the entire country...", and "...burning, slaying, plundering, spoling towns, castles and churches..."

The Scots army was starving, and many died of hunger while others resorted to eating their horses. By 27th March Bruce had reached Kells, via Cashel and Nenagh - "...marking his course by a broad train of fired and smoking habitations..."

But there was no major battle, no Bannockburn, fought in Ireland during Robert the Bruce's campaign here. The Scots army did not lay siege to any walled town anywhere on the island.

If Robert the Bruce had hoped that the Gaelic chiefs would rally to the cause and help him in overthrowing English power in Ireland, he was wrong. Sir Edmund Butler's oncoming English army, totalling about 30,000 men, grew stronger, and the Bruces had to retreat northwards.

Birth and the Boyne

During this return north, a famous event took place which shows that Bruce, even in the midst of such destruction, had a compassionate side. As the Scottish army was moving its camp, Bruce heard the cries of a washerwoman. He sent for one of his men to find out what was wrong - the woman was pregnant and had just gone into labour. She was terrified of being left behind, and of falling into the hands of the English army.

Bruce stopped the march northwards, saying "there is no man that will not pity a woman in such extremity". He ordered a tent to be pitched for her and the army remained here until the baby was born and the woman was ready to travel.

The unexpected delay confused the English forces - they thought that Bruce was trying to trick them - that he was waiting for major reinforcements to join his own army in order to launch a surprise counter attack on the English army. So they held back, creating more time for Bruce.

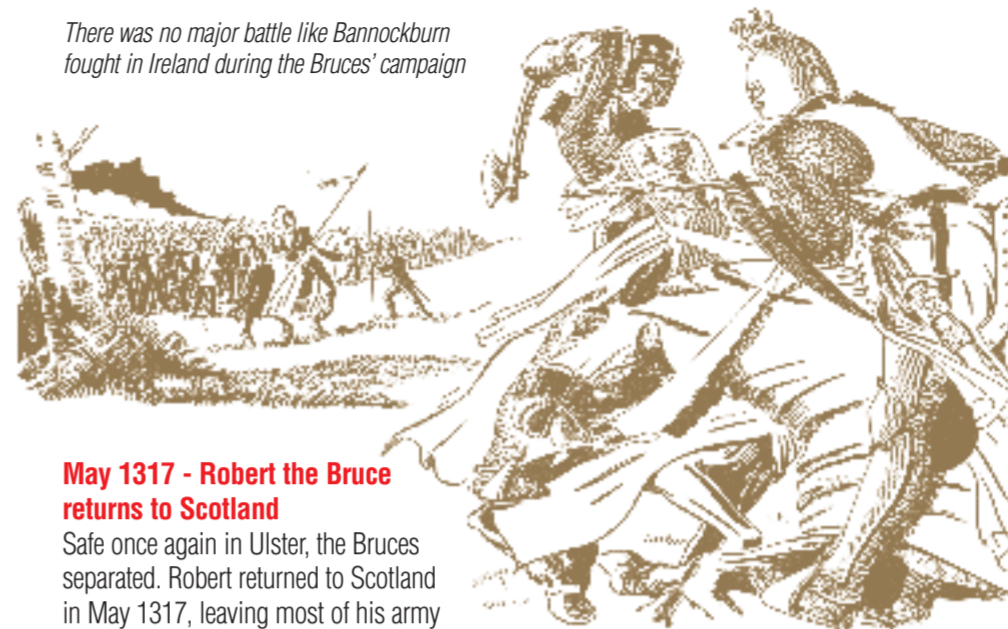


The exhausted and starving Scots marched through Kildare, and rested for several days in a forest on the famous "green grassy slopes" of the River Boyne. Nevertheless, many of the Scots died there, and on May 1st, the Bruces led their troops back into Ulster, to Carrickfergus.

The campaign in the south of Ireland had been short, only about three months. It had failed in its twin aims of shattering English power in Ireland, and in winning the allegiance of the Gaelic chieftains.



There was no major battle like Bannockburn fought in Ireland during the Bruces' campaign



May 1317 - Robert the Bruce returns to Scotland

Safe once again in Ulster, the Bruces separated. Robert returned to Scotland in May 1317, leaving most of his army under the command of Edward Bruce.

At this time a severe famine swept the British Isles, and Edward remained inactive in Ulster for about six months. However, despite advice to the contrary, he gathered some of his army and once again marched south towards Dundalk, possibly in search of food and supplies for his beleaguered force of about 2000 men.

Hearing of this, the English raised an army of 20,000 and headed north to meet Edward. Undaunted, he declared that his men could defeat an army of 120,000!

His senior generals Stewart and Mowbray advised him to hold back until reinforcements arrived, but their advice was rejected. Edward Bruce was obviously as reckless as he was courageous.

Flos Scotiae

("Flower of Scotland") is a Bruce reenactment society based in Germany which was formed in 2001. One member of the group, Ralf Huels, emailed the Ulster-Scots Agency a few weeks ago having seen our BruceRathlin1307 website, and sent us the photographs shown here. Flos Scotiae now hope to visit Rathlin sometime soon. For more information, visit www.Flos-Scotiae.com



Other Ulster-Scots groups travelled to Bannockburn during the summer to take part in the re-enactment of the battle. It's good to see that the Robert the Bruce message is spreading!

14th October 1318 - The Battle of Faughart

Two miles outside Dundalk, the small Scots army (with some support from the Lacys) squared up to the mighty English force commanded by John Bermingham.

In an interesting twist, the night before the battle Bermingham infiltrated the Scots camp, dressed as a friar, and approached Edward Bruce. Bruce was disturbed by the presence of the friar but he didn't realise that it was his military opponent.

The battle began the next day; the Scots were routed and Edward Bruce was killed by Sir John Mapas. Bruce's body was quartered and was sent to various parts of Ireland, with his head sent to King Edward II of England. Mapas was rewarded with an estate.

The Annals of Ulster record of Edward's death that "...there was not done from the beginning of the world a deed that was better for the Men of Ireland than that deed. For there came death and loss of people during his time in all Ireland in general for the space of three years and a half and people undoubtedly used to eat each other throughout Ireland..."

There is also a small grave near Faughart to this day (shown below), with a simple shield-shaped headstone, bearing the inscription "Edward Bruce, Killed in Battle at Faughart, 14th Oct 1318."



Edward Bruce's alleged grave at Faughart

The Final Retreat and the Return to Scotland

Edward's force headed back towards Carrickfergus, pursued the whole way by Bermingham's English army. Ironically, the retreating Scots were met partway by a new force of Scottish soldiers which Robert the Bruce had sent across the water as reinforcements. Perhaps if Edward Bruce had delayed as he had been advised, the outcome at Faughart would have been very different.

The Scots were attacked the whole way to Carrickfergus, but they wasted the land as they went. They boarded ships and returned to Scotland. The three and a half year campaign of the Bruces in Ireland was over.

[Footnote: The Ulster Journal of Archaeology records that "...the desolation of Eastern Ulster, consequent on three years' ravage and famine, permitted the Gaelic clans to reconquer the country..." In the years that followed the failed Bruce campaign, it was a branch of the O'Neills - Clann Aodh Buidhe ("Clan of the Yellow Haired Hugh") - who moved from Tyrone over the River Bann to claim most of East Ulster.

The lands they adopted were later known as Upper Clandeboye, Lower Clandeboye and the Great Ardes. And nearly 300 years later, in 1606, these O'Neill estate lands would be divided between Con O'Neill, James Hamilton and Hugh Montgomery, becoming the location of the first large-scale permanent Scottish settlement in Ulster.



Hamilton & Montgomery

So whilst the Bruces' own invasion plans for Ireland had failed, their campaign here paved the way for the huge Scottish migration to Ulster in the 1600s.]

In the next edition of The Ulster-Scot: Final Part: The Declaration of Arbroath and the Death of King Robert the Bruce

