Robert the Bruce, born 1274
By Sword and Schiltron: An Analysis of the Battle of Bannockburn

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Medieval Scotland, 1314: Following his seditious coronation in 1306, Robert the Bruce, the rebel King of Scots, waged a revolutionary war to free his homeland from English tyranny.\(^1\) Robert’s most pressing objectives included the destruction of castles controlled by England, and thus eight years into the war, Scottish troops laid siege to Stirling castle, one of the few strongholds in Scotland left to King Edward II and therefore a critical war asset. Stirling’s governing officer agreed to surrender the castle if Edward had not relieved him by the 24\(^{th}\) of June, setting the stage for the epic Battle of Bannockburn, the dramatic engagement that determined Scottish destiny.\(^2\) The Battle of Bannockburn supported the theory of weighting quality more than quantity in the calculus of military victory, because while Robert the Bruce galvanized Scottish morale through superior leadership and strategic genius that empowered his heavily outnumbered

\(^1\) Ronald McNair Scott, *Robert the Bruce, King of Scots* (New York: P. Bedrick, 1989), 76.

\(^2\) George Eyre-Todd, trans., *The Bruce Being the Metrical History of Robert the Bruce King of Scots* (Glasgow: Gowans and Gray Limited, 1907), 182.
infantry to rout the English, Edward II incited insubordination, provoked recklessness, and disregarded the principles of war.

With the battle for Scotland’s destiny ordained, the rival kings prepared their armies for war. While Stirling waited for relief, Robert concentrated a force of between five and six thousand infantry and five hundred light cavalry, in a nearby forest south of the Bannock burn, or river. Meantime, Edward summoned an army more than twice that size, and marched north with between ten thousand and fifteen thousand infantry and one thousand to twenty-five hundred heavy cavalry. Heavily armored mounted knights dominated the medieval battlefield; consequently, the army that deployed the largest cavalry force usually won. Confident of victory, therefore, Edward’s war machine came in sight of the environs of Stirling late on the 23rd of June. Edward’s forward division of cavalry pursued Scottish scouts onto the open valley of the Bannockburn. They were confronted by a sizeable force of pikemen in a schiltron, or porcupine formation, under the command of Robert himself. Edward’s knights mounted an ineffectual charge, but, reinforced by a second schiltron, the Scots drove them into retreat. Simultaneously, a second division of English cavalry, attempting to cut off Scottish retreat, engaged another schiltron under the Scottish Earl of Moray, but Moray’s troops inflicted even greater casualties, sending the knights back to the king badly mangled. Edward’s army regrouped in considerable disorder, and camped the night of the 23rd between two rivers:


4 John E. Morris, Bannockburn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Print, 1914), 41.


6 Eyre-Todd, 202-204.
the Pelstream and the Bannockburn. At dawn on the 24th, the Scots launched an all-out frontal attack on Edward’s position in the swamp. The king’s cavalry mounted a charge, but in no order, dying en masse on the Scottish pikes. The restricted space between the rivers prevented the English from maneuvering effectively, and so they desperately tried to flank the Scottish with their archers. Robert sent in his light cavalry and scattered them. Edward’s lines buckled under the irresistible weight of the schiltrons, and finally collapsed, the royal retinue fleeing in disgrace. England had suffered one of the worst military defeats in its history, and Robert had paved the road to Scottish independence with English blood.

Edward II lost the day at Bannockburn even though he outnumbered the Scottish by two or even three to one, and commanded several formidable divisions of heavy cavalry. Despite these daunting odds, Robert the Bruce comprehensively annihilated Edward’s forces, and managed to do it without deploying any of the chivalric horsemen that defined the warfare of his era. The vast disparity between the two king’s leadership

7 Scott, 156.
8 John Sadler, Bannockburn: Battle for Liberty (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2008), 103-104.
10 Sir Herbert Maxwell, trans., The Chronicle of Lanercost, 1272-1346 (Glasgow: James Maclehose & Sons, 1913), 207.
11 Ibid., 208.
12 Scott, 160.
13 Alexander Falconer Murray, King Robert the Bruce (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1899), 93.
14 Sadler, 87.
and strategy, and their subsequent effects on military morale, empowered Robert to visit this extensive ruin upon the English.

As commanders, Robert was intelligent, experienced, hard hitting, and relentless, while “Edward II was simply not fit to command”.\(^\text{15}\) For example, long before the Scottish besieged Stirling, Edward managed to alienate a number of significant nobles by promoting his companion Piers Gaveston to be Earl of Cornwall. This endowed Gaveston with powers previously reserved for England’s actual royalty, and simultaneously inflated his ego to an unbearable size: “Piers became very magnificent, liberal, and well-bred in manner, but haughty and supercilious in debate, whereat some of the great men of the realm took deep offence.”\(^\text{16}\) In fact, the Earl of Lancaster grew so incensed at Gaveston that he surprised, abducted, and beheaded him. In response, Edward instigated a poorly conceived rebellion in Lancaster’s territory, permanently alienating a number of his most significant nobles. These exploits bought Robert time to consolidate his forces and destroy English castles like Edinburgh and Roxburgh,\(^\text{17}\) and also cost Edward substantial war assets in the Bannockburn campaign: “The army lacked the full quota of cavalry as the earls of Lancaster and Warwick and their allies again refused to serve in person”.\(^\text{18}\) The earls’ recalcitrance limited the number of cavalry that Edward could field.

Furthermore, Edward mangled his own leadership structure by appointing rival officers to command of the same troops:

\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., 112.
\(^\text{16}\) Gray, 50.
\(^\text{17}\) Ibid., 51.
\(^\text{18}\) McNamee, 172.
The leadership similarly was in disarray as King Edward, in a foolish gesture of favoritism towards his nephew, the young Earl of Gloucester, had appointed him not only constable of the army on this occasion but also joint commander of the vanguard [or forward division] with Humphrey de Bohun, Earl of Hereford... By advancing Gloucester’s pretensions to command, with a contempt for military considerations, Edward undermined Hereford and left the English van without decisive direction.  

Such indecision proved very costly on the first day, when they mounted a disorderly charge straight into the pikes of Robert’s schiltron. Gloucester bore responsibility for this, because he dashed into battle without deferring to the experience of Hereford and forming up the cavalry division.

In fact, Edward manifested such ineffective and perfunctory command that one of his own knights betrayed him to the Scottish. On the night of the 23rd, Sir Alexander Seton left the English camp in the midst of the pandemonium after the defeat of the two cavalry divisions. The Scalacronica records “Sir Alexander de Seton, who was in the service of England and had come thither with the King, secretly left the English army, went to Robert de Brus in the wood, and said to him: ‘Sir, this is the time if ever you intend to undertake to reconquer Scotland. The English have lost heart and are discouraged, and expect nothing but a sudden, open attack’.”  

Seton bet his life on Bruce winning a direct assault on the king’s camp, and his gamble convinced the Scots to attack on the 24th.  

Conversely, Robert exhibited exceptional leadership skills. The medieval Scottish poet John Barbour wrote that Robert networked personally with his troops

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19 Armstrong and Turner, 48.  
20 Gray, 55.  
21 Armstrong and Turner, 61.
during the preparations for Bannockburn: “Ever, as he met them, he greeted them cheerfully, speaking an encouraging word to one another and they, seeing their King welcome them in so forthright a manner, were greatly heartened and were ready to fight and die to uphold his honor”. Robert led from the front on both days in a spectacular display of valor and martial skill. In the skirmish with the first division of cavalry on the 23rd, as Robert was forming his schiltron up in the open valley of the Bannockburn, a young English knight charged at him with a leveled lance. Instead of taking cover behind his ranks of pikemen, Robert rode out to meet him in single combat, dodging the Englishman’s lance and bringing his axe crashing into the knight’s helmet, breaking the axe handle and killing the knight instantly. McNamee writes “such a personal feat of arms at the very commencement of the battle sent Scottish morale soaring”. Although his officers rebuked the king for putting himself in such danger, Barbour simply records that Robert lamented the loss of “a bloody good axe”. Such a singular display of courage inspired the men in the ranks immensely, and it represented a personal guarantee from their king that he would ask them to take no risks that he would not take himself.

But Robert the Bruce revealed himself as more than just a charismatic demagogue at Bannockburn: he also executed brilliant military strategy, while Edward II blundered his way to categorical ruin. Equipped with an exceptional understanding of Bannockburn’s terrain, Robert set about organizing his defenses long before Edward appeared on the scene: “To prevent the English cavalry deploying onto the open ground

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22 Eyre-Todd, 189.
23 Sadler, 90.
24 McNamee, 172.
25 Ibid., 178.
either side of the Roman road, if they crossed the ford, he honeycombed the area with pits
dug a foot in breadth and knee deep camouflaged with brushwood and grass and had trees
felled and placed in barricades across any tracks through the forest which might be
accessible to horsemen”. Clearly, Robert seized the strategic initiative far before
Edward ever stumbled into Bannockburn. The potholes and barricades denied the English
cavalry certain parts of the terrain, restricted them to unfavorable ground, and forced
them to move in predictable directions. Such predictability enabled Robert to position his
infantry to counter the English in locations of his choosing. Once the defenses were
constructed, Robert stationed his divisions in a thick forest atop a plateau overlooking the
battleground.

The Bannockburn crossed the Roman road leading to Stirling castle, creating a
strong defensive position along with woods and swamps to the east, breached by only one
other road. (See Appendix A). Aware of the risk posed by this breach, Robert stationed
the Earl of Moray to cover this route. Moray carried out his duty gloriously, and forced
the bedraggled English to struggle across the Bannockburn and camp on one of the few
relatively dry areas in the swamps. Their camp appeared relatively safe, protected as it
was on two sides by the rivers. However, Edward failed to engage in sufficient study and
reconnaissance to realize that the Pelstream and the Bannockburn were tidal rivers, and
stood at low tide the night of the 23rd, allowing for his crossing. But the rivers rose in the
night, drawing a watery noose around the English.

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26 Scott, 148.
27 Armstrong and Turner, 54-55.
The English cavalry were enclosed on three sides by the Pelstream and the Bannockburn, as it were, the arc of a bended bow. These streams in the early hours of 24 June would be at half tide and impassable. He [Robert the Bruce] would advance his army so that it formed the taut string between the two ends of the bow and would thus confine the cavalry in so cramped a space that they would be unable to manoeuvre.  

Robert thus consigned his enemies to a severely unfavorable stretch of terrain for the battle on the 24th by boxing them in between the two rivers on the 23rd. Wounded and riderless horses galloped around in confusion, further disrupting English cohesion. Finally, when the English fled, the Bannockburn turned into a deathtrap, and large numbers of men and horses drowned in the panicked retreat.  

In addition, Robert applied tactical coordination and combined arms, in contrast to the lone wolf tendencies of Edward’s isolated divisions, who straggled, battled, and died on their own. Edward failed to communicate with his divisions, which resulted in significant numbers of English infantry spending the night of the 23rd and the morning of the 24th outside the battle. Without the full complement of infantry and the benefit of coordinated, combined arms, the English knights floundered and died upon the Scottish spears. On the other hand, from the very start of the battle, Robert coordinated his light cavalry to lure the English vanguard in to be struck by two schiltrons of pikemen in rapid succession, while the English cavalry galloped off on separate missions with no coordination or infantry support: “They had been sent as a flying column unaccompanied by archers, and without their hail of arrows…” they could not break the hedge of

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28 Scott,156.
29 Murison, 102-103.
30 Armstrong and Turner, 65, 68.
Robert also employed the tactic of coordination by sending reinforcements to assist the beleaguered Moray when the other unsupported division of English cavalry attacked his schiltron. Moray took up position on the open plain and cleverly commanded his rear troops to turn about in order to present a uniform hedge of spear points in all directions. Nevertheless, a sea of heavily armed English cavalry charged and surrounded Moray, and Robert sent a division to the Earl’s relief. As it turned out, the English actually needed the relief: Moray’s soldiers held their ground so ferociously that the horsemen, stymied and enraged, started throwing their weapons at the Scots, so that piles of maces, swords, and axes gathered at the Scots’ feet. The sight of Scottish reinforcements coming over the hill broke the knights’ faltering courage, and they fled, either to the castle or to Edward’s camp in the swamp.

The most virtuosic exposition of Robert’s strategic finesse came during the final melee on June 24th. As Robert and his schiltrons advanced down the hill, he positioned his archers in front of the spearmen, and they engaged a troop of English longbow-men who formed in front of Edward’s camp. The Scottish archers served as a screen for the advancing pikemen, drawing the longbow fire away from the schiltrons. In addition, the archers were in looser formation than the pikemen and therefore harder to hit, while the crowded ranks of English made for perfect targets. The longbowmen, then, did not bloody and drive off the Scottish archers: the archers simply redeployed behind the

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31 Scott, 154.
32 Armstrong and Turner, 53, 56.
33 Scott, 154.
34 Maxwell, 207.
Yeates
Battle of Bannockburn

schiltrons, and fired flights of arrows into the massed English.\textsuperscript{35} The archer’s apparent retreat was actually an exceedingly clever diversion that shielded the pikemen and provided covering fire for the final assault.

The dramatic contrast between the high morale of Bruce’s troops and the low morale of the English was the third and final key to Scotland’s tremendous victory at Bannockburn. From the very start, English spirits plummeted as Scottish spirits soared, and the gulf between the confidence and courage of the two armies only widened as the battle developed. English morale suffered greatly among the officers because of arrogance and infighting, and among the infantry because of hard marching, their conscription, and cavalry losses the first day.\textsuperscript{36} While the Scottish soldiers fought for hearth and home, Edward’s infantry, composed of poorly trained and unenthusiastic conscripts dragged from their homes by royal decree, proved little more than wheat before a scythe when the cavalry collapsed on the second day. They fled from Bannockburn wildly, possessing no desire to die on Scottish soil for a king who was already running.\textsuperscript{37} At the same time, the rash and self-centered English nobility entirely ignored the necessity of combining their mounted arms with the infantry: “The feckless leadership [of King Edward] allowed the arrogant and over confident knighthood to willfully disregard their social inferiors on foot and ride unsupported to disaster”.\textsuperscript{38} The insufferable hubris of the knights and their supreme confidence in their ability to simply roll over the Scottish cost them dearly: “The forward troops, advancing impatiently

\textsuperscript{35} Eyre-Todd, 218.
\textsuperscript{36} Gray, 50-51.
\textsuperscript{37} Armstrong and Turner, 27.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
drawn on by the withdrawing Scottish scouts, had taken on an independent momentum and were now beyond Edward’s ineffectual control”. Edward even incited his nobles to suicidal acts of bravado through his inexhaustible pretension. The king accused the Earl of Gloucester of treachery when the earl disagreed with him on strategy the night of the 23rd, driving Gloucester to charge recklessly into the Scottish lines the next morning, costing him his life, and spreading chaos through the cavalry.

English morale manifested even greater discomfiture and demoralization after the back-to-back defeats of the first day: “from that moment began a panic among the English and the Scots grew bolder”. Their panic even took on a spiritual nature, as the English footmen, huddled fearfully in the middle of the swamp, concluded that God himself had judged the efforts of the English as unjust, and “would accordingly punish those who were in the wrong”. The lethal poison of dismay spread through the whole shell shocked army on seeing their heavy cavalry so viciously repulsed: “When the news spread that a seasoned campaigner like Sir Robert Clifford had been driven from the field by a parcel of footmen, and a champion in the lists had been slain by a man on a pony, the reaction of the rank and file, already dispirited by two forced marches under blazing sun on successive days, was as inordinate as had been their previous assurance”. Clearly, English morale and order deteriorated long before the Scottish stampede.

39 Ibid., 47.
40 Sadler, 103-104.
41 Maxwell, 207.
43 Scott, 155.
In contrast, “The army that Bruce assembled outside Stirling in the summer of 1314 was a formidable fighting force; well trained and led, and motivated by a unity of purpose that was lacking in the English, for the Scots were defending their homes and independence”.\textsuperscript{44} Robert put his faith in men of bravery, not merely in numbers like Edward, and that was a critical difference. In addition, Barbour recounted how Robert inspired his soldiers, relating the king’s address to his officers the night of the 23rd: “And for our children and our wives and for our freedom and our land we are bound to stand in battle... you could have lived in serfdom, but, because you have yearned to have freedom, you are gathered here with me... Happy is this day!... The saints of the Scottish fatherland with us fight today for the honour of the people, with Christ the Lord in the vanguard!”.\textsuperscript{45} Robert the Bruce established himself as the man of the hour at Bannockburn: the avenging hero who led the Scottish charge to liberty.

Without question, Bannockburn shines as the finest moment of Scotland’s arms. Most of the odds of European warfare stacked against the Scottish: Edward possessed superiority in numbers and heavy cavalry, and the battle itself unfolded mostly on open ground, archetypically ideal terrain for a cavalry charge. Chivalric tradition predicted a decisive victory for Edward, but in a brilliant display of intelligence, daring, and skill, Robert the Bruce defeated the English on a grand scale. Robert knew how to handle his officers, inspire his men, surprise his opponent, and capitalize on his gains. He knew the terrain and used it to devastating effect, employing the Bannockburn as a moat, tidal rivers as traps, and barricades, potholes, and swamps as barriers to restrict and predict
Edward’s movements. Robert combined all his arms, including his pikemen, archers, and cavalry, and coordinated the maneuvers of each division so they struck the English in concert. Meanwhile, separated and disorganized English units wasted their blood across the battlefield. Finally, the arrogant, piqued, and reluctant English lost their nerve as the morale of the Scots surged with the flush of victory. Many factors contributed to the Scottish victory at the Battle of Bannockburn, but the majority can be traced back to Robert and Edward. Cynics who claim that an individual cannot change the course of history would do well to read of the rebel King of Scots who freed his country from the foolish King of England who lost his lands.

**Battle of Bannockburn**

Appendix A

58