

JOHN THE RED COMYN

Died 10 February 1306

Guardian of Scotland 1298–1301, 1302–1304

The most powerful Scottish leader

John Comyn was the most powerful Scottish leader in the struggle against Edward I. He was the son of John Comyn, lord of Badenoch (who died in 1301 or 1302) and Eleanor, sister of King John Balliol. His cousin was yet another John Comyn, earl of Buchan. The Comyns of Badenoch (or 'Red Comyns') had major lordships in the central Highlands (Badenoch and Lochaber), where they built some of the most imposing castles in Scotland at that time, including Balvenie, Inverlochy and Lochindorb. They also had lands and castles in other parts of Scotland and estates in England. John Comyn married Joan de Valence, daughter of the earl of Pembroke and cousin of Edward I. One of John's sisters married Alexander MacDougall, lord of Argyll. The Red Comyns, along with their cousins the Comyn earls of Buchan (the 'Black Comyns'), were the most powerful well connected family in Scotland.

Edward I's conquest and Wallace's fightback

When John Balliol kept his word in his treaty with France and declared war on Edward I in March 1296, he sent an army, including John Comyn, to attack Carlisle. After failing to take Carlisle the army ravaged northern England before speeding home to defend Scotland against Edward I. After being defeated at the Battle of Dunbar on 27 April 1296 John Comyn was captured and imprisoned in the Tower of London. He was released because he promised to fight for Edward I on the Continent. By 1298, however, he was back in Scotland. In the absence of leadership from the Comyns, new men had taken the lead, in particular William Wallace and (to a lesser extent) Robert the Bruce. John Comyn led the cavalry at the Battle of Falkirk on 22 July 1298, and was blamed for the defeat because the cavalry fled. This did not, however, prevent him from becoming Guardian when Wallace resigned.

John Comyn becomes a national leader

John Comyn's father was one of the seven Guardians elected to govern Scotland following Alexander III's death in 1286. He was a major backer of King John Balliol. However, after Edward I's conquest of Scotland in 1296, he no longer played a leading role, even though he lived for another five or six years. Instead it was John Comyn who kept the cause of the absent King John Balliol alive from 1298 until 1304. He held the office of Guardian throughout this period except for a year (when John Soules was appointed Guardian by John Balliol between 1301 and 1302).

John Comyn as Guardian

To begin with he was joint Guardian with Robert Bruce, then with William Lamberton, and finally with Ingram de Umfraville. John Comyn, however, seems to have been impossible to work with. He had a temper, attacking both Bruce and Lamberton on separate occasions. On the other hand he managed to hold parliaments and to lead the army. On 24 February 1303 he defeated the English commander in Scotland at the Battle of Roslin. Unfortunately, once the French made peace with Edward I he could not withstand the might of the English king for ever on his own. Neither could he keep fighting for ever for an absent king, John Balliol. On 9 February 1304 he negotiated favourable terms for a general surrender to Edward I.

The killing of John Comyn

It is likely that John Comyn was waiting for the aging Edward I to die before making his next move. It is impossible to be sure what he had in mind. Like Robert the Bruce he might have realised that you can only fight for an independent kingdom if there is a king to lead it. John Balliol had obviously failed. Like Bruce, Comyn may have thought that he should be the next king. This could explain why the two men wanted to meet on 10 February 1306 in the church of the Greyfriars at Dumfries to thrash out their plans for the future. It was not the first meeting between the rivals that exploded into violence. On this occasion, though, Bruce left Comyn dying at the high altar – the most sacred place in the church. The killing of Comyn was regarded as a sensational atrocity. It meant that the Comyn family could never accept Bruce as king. As a result, the Comyns, who had led the cause of independence, now sided against Bruce at all costs, even if this meant working with the king of England.

Govan: 5 December 1298

A charter of Robert Bruce, confirming William Wallace's gift of land in Dundee and post of castle keeper to Alexander Scrymgeour in the name of Bruce and Comyn as Guardians in succession to Wallace.

Robert Bruce, earl of Carrick, one of the Guardians of the realm of Scotland, to the sheriff of Forfar and his officials: greeting.

I understand that Alexander Scrymgeour has been given possession of Dundee Castle and certain other lands near to the town by the gift of Sir William Wallace. I therefore command you to give him possession of the castle and these lands, both in my name and in the name of Sir John Comyn, my fellow-guardian of the realm of Scotland. Alexander should have them in the same way that is described by the gift of the said Sir William Wallace before we entered into the guardianship of the realm.

Roxburgh: 20 August 1299

A loyal man of Edward I reports to him on events in Scotland, including news of John Comyn.

Sire, I write you with news of the recent meeting by the Scots in Selkirk forest.

A meeting happened there of the bishop of St Andrews [William Lamberton], the earl of Carrick [Robert the Bruce], the earl of Buchan, the earl of Menteith, Sir John Comyn 'the son' [John 'the Red' Comyn], and the steward of Scotland. Their intention was to attack Roxburgh Castle.

My spy told me that disagreements began among them as Sir David Graham demanded Sir William Wallace's lands and goods, as Wallace had been going abroad without leave. And his brother Sir Malcolm Wallace's objected to this, and the two knights [Graham and Wallace] drew their knives. Sir John Comyn took the earl of Carrick by the throat, and the earl of Buchan seized the bishop of St Andrews.

They finally agreed that the bishop of St Andrews, the earl of Carrick, and Sir John Comyn should be Guardians of the kingdom, the first having custody of the castles as the principal Guardian.

They all left Peebles that same day: the earl of Carrick and Sir David of Brechin going to Annandale and Galloway, the earl of Buchan and Sir John Comyn north of Forth, the steward and the earl of Menteith to Clydesdale. The bishop of St Andrews

is still at Stobo, Sir Ingram de Umfraville has been made sheriff of Roxburgh, and Sir Robert Keith warden of Selkirk forest. He has been left with 100 armoured horses and 1,500 foot-soldiers, plus all the foresters, in order to lead a raid on the English Border. Each lord left part of his men with Umfraville for this reason.

Torwood (near Stirling): 13 November 1299

The Guardians write to Edward I telling him that Philip, king of France, has told them that Edward will not trouble them for some time, on Philip's request. The Guardians agree to not cause trouble to the English during this time either, or interfere with the war between England and France.

William, bishop of St Andrews, Robert Bruce, earl of Carrick, and John Comyn, the son, Guardians of the realm of Scotland, in the name of lord John, king of Scotland, established by the community of the realm of Scotland, to lord Edward, king of England: greeting.

The Lord Philip, king of France has told us by his letter that, at his bidding, you will cease and desist from all hostilities against us and the realm of Scotland for a certain time. Lord John, duke of Brittany, messenger of the lord king of France, now in England, has told us this by his letter.

We shall also desist from aggressive hostilities against you and your realm. We shall also desist from interfering with hostilities between you and King Philip.

We have appended our seal, sending this letter with the messenger and signify that we wish Edward to reply to them through the same messenger.

Edinburgh: June 1300

The keeper of Edinburgh writes to one of Edward I's closest officials, giving news of events in Scotland, and an argument between William Lamberton and John Comyn.

John of Kingston, keeper of Edinburgh Castle, to Ralph of Manton, keeper of the king's personal accounts: greeting.

I write to inform you that the leading men in Scotland held a parliament at Rutherglen on 10 May, and after an argument between the bishop of St Andrews and John Comyn, they all agreed to elect Ingram de Umfraville as one of the Guardians of Scotland in place of the earl of Carrick [Robert the Bruce]. They have adjourned the parliament until 27 December because of the earl of Buchan's absence in Galloway.

24 February 1303

John Comyn defeats Sir John of Seagrave, Edward I's Lieutenant in Scotland, at the Battle of Roslin. (Account from the Schøyen chronicle.)

In the year of the Lord 1302 [note that the year was reckoned to begin on 25 March], on the day of St Matthias the apostle [24 February] the Battle of Roslin was fought where many Englishmen were captured, put to flight and killed by John Comyn, at that time leader of the Scots.

Before February 1304

Letter from the countess of Lennox to King Edward, asking him to help the people in her lands who have sworn loyalty to him because John Comyn has sent an army to destroy them.

Margaret, countess of Lennox, to Sir Edward, king of England, lord of Ireland and duke of Aquitaine: greetings.

My liege, I note that Sir John Comyn has sent part of his army across the Forth into Lennox to destroy and ruin those people who have come into your peace. I pray that you send your counsel with aid for the rescue, governance and support of those who have come to your peace. It is said that the army has come with a hundred mounted men and a thousand foot soldiers, and they reached Drymen in Lennox on the Sunday after Michaelmas [29 September].

Wemyss (Fife): 5 March 1304

Edward I orders the sheriff of Lanark to make sure all the people in his lands obey the terms of the surrender by John the Red Comyn and other Scots that was agreed on 9 February.

Edward, king of England, to my sheriff of Lanark, greeting:

Among the conditions of the recent agreement between my envoys and Sir John Comyn of Badenoch [the Red Comyn], all prisoners were to be released (except Sir Herbert Morham and his father) and all ransoms already paid were to be kept and the debts cleared.

However, I have heard that Robert de Barde, who recently captured Brother William Cockburn, monk of Blantyre Priory, is seizing William's goods for ransom, in violation of the agreement. I command you to stop this from happening.

February 1306

Receipt of a payment to a man for strengthening the king's castles (because of Bruce's rebellion) on the way back from telling the chamberlain about John Comyn's death.

Payment made to William of Hawick, chaplain, going from Dumfries to meet the chamberlain of Scotland near Lanark, in order to tell him of the death of John Comyn. On his return he caused the king's castles to be fortified because of the rebellion of the said Robert Bruce.

March 1306

Receipt of a payment to friars from London going to Dumfries to find out if the death of John Comyn in a church was true.

Payment to John of Winton, clerk, sent by the king to the Friars at London for sending 2 friars to Dumfries to make an inquiry into the death of John Comyn. For expenses for 10 days from 5 March: 23s. 9d. [£615 today]

10 April 1306

Charter of Edward I after Robert the Bruce crowned himself King of Scots. Edward I gives all of Bruce's lands to his (Edward's) daughter and her husband because Bruce killed John Comyn.

I, King Edward, have given to Humphrey de Bohun, earl of Hereford and Essex, in return for his good and praiseworthy service, and to Elizabeth his wife, my daughter, the castle of Lochmaben and all the lands in Annandale previously belonging to Robert Bruce, formerly earl of Carrick.

Bruce has forfeited these lands for his crime in rebelliously and treacherously slaying John Comyn of Badenoch in front of the high altar of the church of the Friars Minor at Dumfries, and so committing sacrilege.

The land is to be held by Earl Humphrey, his wife, and their heirs under all kings of England. Failing such offspring, the land should be given back to me and my successors.

Scotlandwell (Kinross-shire): 9 June 1306

Bishop William says he had no part in the death of John Comyn.

William Lamberton, bishop of St Andrews, to Sir Aymer de Valence, lieutenant of our lord the king [Edward] in Scotland: greeting.

We deny any part in the murder of Sir John Comyn and Sir Robert, his uncle, nor in the outbreak of the war.

Lazenby (Yorkshire): 30 July 1306

Record of the sentence to hang John Seton, who helped Robert the Bruce kill John Comyn and take control of the king's castles.

John Seton was captured in Richard Siward's castle at Tibbers, which John was holding against King Edward for Robert Bruce, a traitor.

John is to be drawn and hanged for aiding Robert Bruce in the murder of John Comyn in the church of the Friars Minor at Dumfries, in contempt of God and the most Holy Church, and against the king's peace.

Between August and November 1306

Records of payments made to messengers for taking letters authorised by the Pope against Robert the Bruce and those who were present at John Comyn's death: Alexander de Lindsay, Christopher Seton, and his brothers John and Humphrey.

Payments made to messengers taking two letters to the Irish bishops, sealed by the archbishop of York and the bishop of Carlisle, who were appointed by the pope to give a sentence against Robert, earl of Carrick, and the knights Alexander de Lindsay, Christopher Seton and his brothers, John and Humphrey, who were present at the death of John Comyn.