

Latticed and Cross-Barred: Isabella, Countess of Buchan¹⁾

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Isabella, Countess of Buchan in 1306 C.E., stood in her chambers in her husband's castle in the northeastern earldom of Buchan. The tapestries hanging on the interior walls of the castle did little to fend off the boreal winds of March but her feelings were in great contrast to the arctic cold. She had just received information that a young earl from the southwestern part of Scotland named Robert Bruce was soon to be crowned King of all Scotland. Her excitement at the news was palpable for this young Earl of Carrick represented a chance for Scotland to get out from under the hammer of the belligerent English King, Edward I.

With only a few ladies in attendance, she paced the floor of her chambers recalling the last few years as a Scottish countess living, as all patriotic Scots did, under the constant assaults of Edward I whose overriding ambition was to subjugate and control Scotland.

Although Isabella was elated by the news, she found herself in a quandary. Her father's family, the MacDuffs of Fife, had been officially crowning the Kings of Scotland at a place called Scone since Malcolm III had instituted the tradition in 1058 C.E.. If this Bruce held his coronation ceremony on March 27, 1306 as planned, there would be no Fife there to set the crown upon his head. Her father was dead and her brother Duncan, the present Earl of Fife was being held in an English prison by Edward I. What could she do? Her thoughts raced in circles around her leaving her confused but energized.

Suddenly, she stopped. She knew what she had to do. Although no woman had ever placed the crown upon a Scottish monarch, she realized she was the only person available who was legitimately empowered to perform the ritual. She would go to Scone. She would become a part of this latest effort to free Scotland from the manipulations and machinations of England.

Isabella charged into action. For several months, she'd been locked in head-to-head combat over the future of Scotland with her husband, John Comyn, 3rd Earl of Buchan. Bruce's efforts to step into the power vacuum created by Edward I's torture and disembowelment of William Wallace, Guardian of Scotland, gave her the motivation to

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abandon her husband and his kin whose raw ambition and greed had helped Edward I but not Scotland. Her loyalty to her country emerged as her loyalty to her husband diminished.

Fortuitously, her husband was away storming a castle on behalf of the English King whose interests he occasionally served. The countess reasoned that if she could persuade her husband's knights who had remained at the castle for defense purposes, to accompany her to Scone, she might reach the coronation site in time to perform the ceremony on behalf of her family and her country.

Although she was known for her extraordinary powers of persuasion, she knew that what she was about to ask the knights to do amounted to nothing less than treason in the eyes of her husband and Edward I. Nevertheless, she had set her mind to be a part of freeing Scotland and so she hardened her nerves and began the arduous process of persuading the knights. She guardedly approached each knight who'd ever demonstrated loyalty to Scotland and laid out her plan before him. Within several hours, she had convinced each knight in turn to ride with her to Scone.

The knights reminded her that what they were about to embark upon meant certain death if they were caught. They also reminded her that the King of England was at that very moment inside the borders of Scotland; and although physically incapacitated by six months of dysentery, the king was not mentally incapacitated. They asked her again if she were prepared for her death at the hands of the English. She responded by turning on her heels and ordering her ladies to pack her trunks. The men needed no further proof of her certitude and commenced their own preparations.

Before dawn, she and a large contingent of her husband's retainers departed from the Buchan stronghold. She did everything possible to keep the noise created by the heavy warhorses and the armed knights and lesser retainers to a minimum; nevertheless, the clatter could be heard for some distance. With that in mind and knowing that time was against her, she urged her followers out of the castle and into the bitter cold morning.

She pushed the group to its limits trying desperately to reach Scone by March 27th. But the group was too heavily-laden to move at much more than a slow trot. Fear of being found out by Edward I's men or Scottish traitors increased her anxiety and desire to reach Scone where she would be under the protection of Bruce's men.

At last, after several days of sitting astride her horse, she heard the cry go up from one of her scouts. He could see Robert Bruce's encampment on the plain below Scone. She gave her horse a great kick and galloped full-stop into the camp. Bruce's soldiers tried to block her path but her speed and determination caused them to jump out of her way as she and her horse careened past them. Their shouts set up the alarm throughout the camp and drew Bruce's attention while he sat in a council meeting. So surprised were the soldiers at seeing a slight Scottish lass crashing into camp astride a powerful

charger, that she was able to get almost to the council meeting site before a line of soldiers guarding the meeting successfully blocked her path.

She could see Robert Bruce striding toward her and demanding to know the source of all the noise. By the time he reached her, her knights had formed a wall-like line behind her and sat rigidly still according to Isabella's wishes.

Without social formality, she informed Bruce of her Fife lineage and thereby her right to crown him King of Scots. He bent his head for just a moment before looking up to her and saying she was two days too late. The coronation had occurred as planned on March 27, 1306. She insisted on speaking further with him.

Within minutes, he'd given her his hand and lifted her from her horse. While she smoothed her cumbersome dress, he ordered his men to feed and quarter the Buchan knights and servants. He turned, offered her his arm and led her into the council meeting.

There, she recounted her story of hearing the news about him, about convincing her husband's knights to abandon their fealty to the Earl of Buchan, about her gallop to Scone, and about her desire to fulfill the tradition of a Fife crowning the King. Bruce's councillors stared incredulously at this woman. Although it was not unheard of for a Scottish woman to be involved in politics or even to fight on a battlefield, it was nevertheless unusual for one to betray her husband, steal his horses and knights and to gallop to a man she hardly knew. They knew as well as she did that her life as the wife of John Comyn ended with her dash to Scone and that from this point on, her life was in grave danger.

Bruce listened intently to the impassioned words of the Countess before he commenced his recitation of the events surrounding his coronation. His biggest disappointment, he said, was that the ceremony had been "unavoidably shorn of much of the august splendor"²; it should have had. Edward I had stolen the Stone of Destiny³ and the sceptre of power in his 1296 C.E. rampage through Scotland. Bruce himself had little with him but his horse and men. The Abbott of Scone had loaned his ornate chair and the Bishop of Glasgow had provided an elegant robe as well as a golden circlet reputedly taken from a statue in the Abbey. The ceremony took place outdoors following the tradition begun by Alexander III in 1249 C.E..

Bruce went on to say that neither his predecessor, John Balliol, nor he had been crowned by the official representative of the Fifes which Isabella well-knew since her brother Duncan was held prisoner by the English. He himself had had to depend upon the Bishop of St. Andrews to place the circlet on his head.

Isabella's eyes never strayed from Bruce while he recounted his story. At the end of his narration, she informed him quietly that the Scottish tradition did not say that the Earl of Fife had to crown the king but rather that a Fife had to. Bruce got her point and

ordered the ceremony to be performed again.

This time, because the Countess had brought a great train of followers with her as well as great trunks full of clothes and jewelry, the ceremony was conducted with more appropriate pomp. She gracefully approached the makeshift throne before which Bruce stood. Without faltering, she went straight to within two feet of him and stopped. The Abbot held out the gold circlet on a velvet cushion. Isabella reached for the circlet, took it, turned back to face Bruce who bent his head slightly toward her. Gently, she placed the crown of authority on his head making him King Robert I of Scotland.

Meanwhile, Edward I, so infirm he could no longer walk, directed his armies to destroy this new king and all associated with him. Edward's knights raced to central Scotland from their various outposts and burned and looted everything along their paths.

Isabella knew she could not return to Buchan because her husband was making public threats against her life. She allied herself completely with the new king and his ragtag group of supporters.

Within a few days, she sensed that Bruce was preparing to move on. She'd heard that the knights of the belligerent Edward I had captured the Bishops of Glasgow and St. Andrews as well as the Abbot of Scone. These eminent Church leaders were dragged in chains to English castles where they were fettered for life.

Alarmed at the ruthlessness of Edward I, Isabella concurred with Bruce's decision to move on in search of desperately needed food, supplies and safety. Constant problems beset the group's progress north including the threat of attack by a fellow Scot who had an old grudge against Bruce.

Bruce informed Isabella one night that Edward I had "issued a proscription"⁴¹ against the women accompanying him. Edward had ordered his men to capture all the women and to place them in various castles where they would be seen by the public as a warning to others contemplating supporting Bruce.

Isabella, therefore, did not hesitate to break away from Bruce's entourage after receiving the information. She accompanied Bruce's wife, daughter, sister and others under the protection of several knights. They went to Kildrummie Castle near Buchan territory because everyone believed Kildrummie to be a secure castle. It was a mistaken assumption.

A large contingent of the English army attacked the castle shortly after the ladies arrived. Many of the castle defenders escaped and fled north before the English soldiers could get inside and count their captives. To their surprise, the attackers did not find any Scottish noblewomen or many Scottish knights. This group had moved a short time before the assault to the sanctuary of St. Duthac at Tain.

A Scottish earl in the service of Edward I heard of their whereabouts and broke into the sanctuary, rousting both knights and ladies. He and his men dragged everyone out

of the chapel and delivered them to the waiting English army. Isabella felt the shackles being roughly clamped on her hands but stood straight and still in the face of her captors. She and the other women were herded together into a flat field where they were forced to watch Edward's soldiers torture and butcher the Scottish knights. Some of the women fainted or vomited, but Isabella remained rigid; determined not give Edward I's men the satisfaction of seeing her distraught.

Shortly after the slaughter of the Scots, the English divided the women into groups. The rationale behind the composition of the groups was not made known to the women. However, Bruce's wife, his daughter, his sister and one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting were taken on horseback directly to England where they were confined in separate castles. Their confinement was not entirely unpleasant because Edward I accorded them some of the privileges that belonged to their rank. Each woman had opulent chambers and a few servants to attend to her needs. True to his mercenary style, however, Edward I sent bills to the Scots for their upkeep.

No one knows why Mary Bruce (Bruce's other sister) and Isabella, Countess of Buchan did not fare as well as the other women. Both these women were ordered placed in cages and put on public view. Mary did not survive a year in her cage suspended in one of the towers of Roxburgh Castle; but Isabella not only survived, she did so with dignity.

Chroniclers of the period wasted no time writing Isabella's story. One English chronicler wrote:

That impious conspiratress, the Countess of Buchan, was taken prisoner, respecting whom the King was consulted, when he said, ' Because she has not struck with the sword, she shall not die by the sword, but on account of the unlawful coronation which she performed, let her be closely confined in an abode of stone and iron, made in the shape of a cross, and let her be hung up out of doors in the open air at Berwick that both in her life and after her death, she may be a spectacle and eternal reproach to travellers.'⁵⁾

Other historians of the period confirmed that she was indeed confined in a cage at Berwick, but did not corroborate the story that her cage was to "be hung up out of doors. . ." In fact, Edward I's ordinance, literally translated from the original French in which all English feudal documents were written, said:

Be it commanded, that the Chamberlain of Scotland, or his Deputy at Berwick-upon-Tweed shall cause a cage to be constructed in one of the towers of the Castle of Berwick, and in the place which he shall find most

convenient for the purpose. This cage shall be strongly latticed and cross-barred with wood, and secured with iron; and in it he shall confine the Countess of Buchan, taking special care that she be therein so well and safely guarded that in no sort may she issue therefrom. He shall appoint one or more women of Berwick, who shall be English, and liable to no suspicion, who shall minister to the said Countess in eating and drinking, and in all things else convenient, in her said lodging - place. He shall cause her to be so carefully and strictly guarded in the said cage that she may not be permitted to converse with any person whomsoever of the Scots nation, or with anyone else, saving the women who attend upon her, and the guard who way be in custody of her person. The cage shall be so constructed that the Countess may have therein the convenience of a decent chamber; yet all things shall be so well and surely ordered that no peril may arise respecting the secure custody of the said countess; and the person into whose custody she may be committed shall be responsible, body for body, and he shall be allowed his reasonable charges.⁶⁾

Clearly, Isabella was in some kind of cage inside Berwick Castle on the southeastern border between Scotland and England. Whether the cage hung inside or outside the tower doesn't change the fact that the confinement was degrading and abhorrent to her.

The cage was made of wood lattices and iron crossbars. A rug covered the wooden floor in the bottom of the cage and the occasional tapestry reduced the drafts. At no time, however, was she out of sight of her guards and at all times she was visible to passersby.

Despite the confinement, Isabella survived the daily humiliation. She half expected some communication from her husband if only to chastise her for her behavior toward him, but he made no attempt to visit her, and indeed made no attempt at any communication with her. Her isolation was complete.

Nonetheless, the guards or the women attendants occasionally reported Scottish activities to her. Most reports were negative and designed to demoralize her but sometimes an inspiring piece of news would reach her and encourage her to hold fast. One such note informed her that Bruce had ridden into the Earl of Buchan's territory and had transformed it into a "blackened desert"⁷⁾ by burning everything in sight. The Scots, well aware of her debilitating confinement behind lattices and crossbars, were galvanized by her stoic example and more determined than ever to force the English out of Scotland.

In 1307, Edward I was near death. He called his son, Edward II, to his bedside and extracted a promise from the young man that he would continue the onslaught against Bruce and Scotland after he became King of England. The young Edward was not his

father, and wasn't particularly interested in wars or the people of Scotland. He preferred a dandified life of luxury in England. After his father's death, Edward II retreated with his followers from Scotland and did not keep his promise to his father.

Without warning one day, the English guard told Isabella to gather up her possessions and to prepare to be transferred. She had endured four years in the cage and had been granted "a milder and more becoming form of duration in the monastery of Mt. Carmel at Berwick."⁸⁾ Edward II's advisors would not allow him to free her completely because, after all, she had betrayed her husband and Edward I but they did counsel him to put her in a less oppressive situation. She was relieved to have the privacy and quiet of the monastery.

Three uneventful years later, an English magnate, Henry de Beaumont, rode into the monastery grounds and presented documents from Edward II assigning the guardianship of the Countess to him. He was to take custody immediately. No one told her why her duration was being changed again and she did not ask. She merely faced de Beaumont squarely, picked up her few possessions and rode into obscurity with him. She was never heard of again and the facts of the remainder of her life survive only in conjectures and myths. Scots choose to remember her as the dashing, somewhat reckless lass who stole her husband's horses and rode to Scone in order to see that Robert I was crowned in the tradition begun in 1058 C.E.

ENDNOTES

- 1) Pronounced "buck-en"
- 2) Fittis, Heroines of Scotland (Paisley, Scotland: Alexander Gardener, 1889), p.12.
- 3) The Stone is important to Scots, as a symbol of their tradition. A new king would sit on Stone, the history of ancient Scottish chiefs would be sung; and men would clash their swords against their shields. After Christianity became a part of Scottish life, bishops also attended the ceremonies. (Paraphrase of Neal Ascherson in "The Stone of Scone...", THE INDEPENDENT, July 14, 1996. p.14). In 1296, Edward I raided Scotland and took the Stone of Destiny to Westminster. The Stone is still in Westminster although there is presently a debate in Great Britain about returning the Stone to the Scots.
- 4) Fittis, p.28.
- 5) Ibid, p.30.
- 6) Ibid, p.30.
- 7) Ibid, p.30.
- 8) Ibid, p.35.

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[Received December 10, 1996]