

The Randolphs of Scotland

Thomas Randolph was a trusted lieutenant of Robert the Bruce, King of Scots. Sir Thomas has been called a nephew of the Bruce, either directly or through marriage.

Randolph's most famous victory took place on March 14, 1314 when he carried out a daring attack on Edinburgh Castle, which had been in English hands for twenty years. The castle stood high on an impregnable rock. According to legend, Randolph learned about a path up the rock from the son of a former Governor of the castle who had used the path to sneak out into the town at night. Randolph led his men up the path and captured the castle. In gratitude, an inscription to Randolph hangs in Edinburgh Castle to this day.

At the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314, which secured Scottish independence, Randolph led a division of the Bruce's infantry. Following the victory, Randolph, now the first Earl of Moray, served the Bruce in a number of ways including negotiating a defense treaty with France. Upon the death of Robert the Bruce, Randolph was named regent for the Bruce's five-year-old son David. Randolph died three years later of a sudden illness on his way to battle.

Randolph had two famous children, John and Agnes. John fought in battle for Scotland. Captured by the English, he was confined for a time in the Tower of London before being returned to Scotland in a prisoner exchange. John died in battle against the English in 1346 at the battle of Neville's Cross, outside Durham, England.

Meanwhile his sister Agnes married Patrick, the the Earl of Dunbar. She was often known as Black Agnes of Dunbar. Agnes became renowned for her heroic defence of Dunbar Castle against an English attack in 1338. While her husband was off fighting the English, English forces came in January and besieged the castle where Lady Agnes was left alone with only servants and a few guards. She refused to surrender the castle, by one account declaring, "Of Scotland's King I haud my house, I pay him meat and fee. And I will keep my gude auld house, while my house will keep me."

The English began their siege with a bombardment by catapults, throwing huge rocks and lead shot against the ramparts. Lady Agnes responded by having her maids dress in their Sunday finest. She led them to the ramparts where with their handkerchiefs they nonchalantly dusted away the debris.

Next the English assaulted the castle with a battering ram. Agnes dropped over the walls a huge bolder that had been sent up by the English catapults, smashing the ram.

According to legend, at one point, the English captured her brother John and paraded him in front of the castle with a rope round his neck, threatening to hang him if she did not surrender. She told them to go ahead and hang him, as she would then inherit his earldom. John survived.

Finally in June the English withdrew, leaving Lady Agnes in possession of her castle.