

Ross, Sutherland and the Scottish Wars of Independence (1296-1357)

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Over a century ago, Evan MacLeod Barron, prominent Invernesian and one-time editor of the *Inverness Courier*, wrote a book about the Scottish Wars of Independence. As he argued:

“the Highlands have for so long been treated with such ignorance, neglect, and, I regret to say, contempt by Scottish historians, that I have found it necessary to emphasize, in a manner which some people may resent, the part played by the Highlands and the rest of Celtic Scotland in the War of Independence...I would ask [historians] to realise that the history of Scotland is not the history of the southern counties which the kingdom of the Scots added to itself by conquest and annexation, but the history of the whole land and people of Scotland.”

Barron’s complaint, that the wars were seen as a largely “southern” Scottish affair, has been addressed in part by more recent examples of Scottish history produced since Barron wrote his own. Still, there remain obvious gaps. While some families and regions have been subject to considerable study, and have gained better representation in the histories of this period, such as the Campbells or the MacDonalds, many others remain under-represented. History is, of course, never fully “written,” and these historiographical gaps keep people like me in a job. But it remains that the north of Scotland is still somewhat dis-served by accounts of the Wars of Independence. I will, then, try and provide something of a counter to that in this talk where I shall take as my focus the medieval earldoms of Ross and Sutherland and their involvement in and contribution to this conflict.

To begin, however, we are perhaps in need of just a little bit of context. The Scottish Wars of Independence sprang from a catastrophic series of events that began in 1286 with the death of King Alexander III. Predeceased by all his children, Alexander’s sole remaining heir was a granddaughter, Margaret, daughter of Eric II of Norway. She nominally succeeded as Queen Margaret, but died in Orkney before reaching Scottish soil. This left Scotland in an unprecedented position of having no king, and no obvious successor. Scotland was on the

brink of civil war as nobles jockeyed for position, and in such circumstances the Scottish interim government turned to outside help. They turned to King Edward I of England. Edward oversaw a complex legal process called the “Great Cause” which undertook to find who had the best claim to the throne of Scotland. Representatives of the families of Balliol and Bruce were held to have the best claims, and it was the Balliols who won the crown when King John was inaugurated in 1292. However, John’s reign was problematized by the power wielded by Edward I as a consequence of his adjudication in the Great Cause, and the Scottish king was undermined at almost every turn by his neighbour to the south. Backed into a corner, the Scots signed a treaty of mutual assistance with France in 1295, and launched a raid into England in 1296. Edward I’s response was quick, large-scale and effective. The Scots were defeated in battle at Dunbar, and King John was forced to surrender. He was stripped of his royal status, and Scotland lost even the title of kingdom. It was in future to be simply a “land,” a part of the greater English hegemony. Scotland’s apparent defeat was relatively short-lived, and there began the first in a series of phases of conflict from 1297 to 1304, when the Scots rebelled against Edward I’s attempts to complete his conquest. This was the phase of Andrew Murray and William Wallace, of battles at Stirling Bridge, Falkirk and Roslin. Over time, however, the Scots were worn down. A general surrender in 1304 looked to end the war, but fighting resumed once more in 1306 as a result of rebellion focused on the person of Robert Bruce. Grandson of the Bruce competitor at the Great Cause, Robert sought to make himself king. Early defeat in 1306 was overturned by success from 1307 onwards. Scotland was riven by infighting, but Bruce spent much of his early campaigns focusing on defeating his Scottish enemies, and those who continued to ally themselves with the English kings. Bruce’s greatest victory, at Bannockburn in 1314, was not the decisive moment some would have us believe, and he spent the remaining fifteen years of his life making his kingship a reality and building a coherent kingdom that supported his

dynasty. Still, many Scots did not. To them, Bruce was a usurper, a murderer, and a man who had brought war and devastation to various parts of Scotland as he fought to defeat internal opposition. Such opposition did not disappear.

And so, following Robert I's death in 1329, and the succession of his son, David II, as a five-year-old child, that opposition was made manifest. An invasion of Scotland occurred in 1332. Led by Edward Balliol, son of King John, it included numerous men who had lost out when Bruce stripped lands from those who had fought against him. This group, known as the Disinherited, won a battlefield victory at Dupplin Moor in 1332 and King Edward of Scotland was anointed at Scone. Rebellion by those loyal to David II began almost immediately, however, and the Disinherited sought English help to complete their victory. Thus began what has come to be known as the Second Scottish War of Independence. A war of attrition followed as Disinherited-English invasions occurred each summer, and Bruce forces swept the countryside after they had departed. This was a war less about land, and more about the loyalty and support of the people. As the 1330s progressed, the Bruce Scots slowly turned back the Disinherited advance and, as Edward III of England became less focused on Scotland, the forces of David II gained the upper hand. In 1341, the young king, who had spent seven years in French exile, returned to his kingdom to lead the war effort. His huge invasion of England in 1346 ended, however, in defeat outside Durham at the battle of Neville's Cross. David, and many of his nobles, spent the next eleven years in English captivity, and this phase of conflict was only ended with the Treaty of Berwick in 1357, which purchased David's release.

This whistle-stop tour of history provides, then, the context for what I am going to focus on in the remainder of this talk, which is the extent to which these events impacted upon this region, and the involvement of people from this region in these national endeavours. As with much of medieval history, those we know most about are those at the

top of the social scale, and so I will begin by looking at the earls of Ross and Sutherland. Medieval earls wielded power over those who held or worked land in the earldom in a hierarchy that was nonetheless based upon reciprocal activity. The earl demanded loyalty, recognition of his authority, financial privileges, and the right to call up and lead his tenants in war. In return, the earl provided protection to his people, both in a physical capacity, but also in terms of legal and other forms of support. The actions of the earls, therefore, were only in part based upon personal self-interest. There was also a healthy dose of collective interest informing their decisions. Still, these men made their own judgments, and the different paths taken by the earls of Ross and Sutherland at the war's outset are illustrative of their families' respective approaches throughout the conflict.

So, Earl William II of Ross was active in the war's initial acts. He was one of the Scottish commanders who led their forces to defeat at Dunbar in 1296. Captured in its aftermath William of Ross spent seven years as an English prisoner. Earl William (II) of Sutherland, on the other hand, appears to have taken no part in such actions, and submitted to and supported the English regime in the war's early years. He was amongst those notable Scots who attended Edward I's Scottish parliament in May to August 1296. Edward I wrote to him in 1297 regarding matters in Scotland, and Sutherland ignored the rebellion of his neighbour to the south, Andrew Murray of Avoch and Petty, thus also avoiding the Scottish victory at Stirling Bridge. Indeed, a letter of 1298-9 from Alexander Comyn to Edward I stated that the earl of Sutherland was "loyal to the king." Earl William would not be alone in taking this stance. Scotland's earls had most to lose if caught on the wrong side of any rebellion. Certainly, William of Sutherland remained well-thought-of by the English crown, and a letter to him of April 1304 recorded that King Edward I "thank(s) you greatly for the good faith and the good will which you have still borne towards us." By this date, William of Ross had been released from English captivity, and had too made his peace with Edward I.

He was with Prince Edward of Caernarvon at Perth in late 1303, and with Edward I at Dunfermline in 1304, following which he was made warden of the north beyond the Spey for the English. Of course, the context of the Wars of Independence changed many times and the landscape shifted dramatically around men like the earls of Ross and Sutherland. They were forced to navigate their way through an unstable situation while trying to retain their lands and preserve their rights for their successors. It was a nigh-on impossible task, made more complex by the actions of others. And the rebellion of Robert Bruce changed much.

Bruce's rebellion began when he slew his rival, John Comyn of Badenoch, at the altar of Greyfriar's kirk in Dumfries in 1306. This act started a blood-feud between the supporters of Bruce and Comyn that arguably lasted decades. Earl William of Ross had a Comyn mother, and so joined the Comyn side in the civil war which followed Bruce's rebellion. This position led to one of the more famous episodes of this phase of the war, and certainly the most relevant to our location today. For it was at St Duthac's shrine in Tain that Robert Bruce's wife, daughter, two sisters, and the countess of Buchan, sought sanctuary as they fled north following the erstwhile king's defeat at the battle of Methven in 1306. Earl William (II) of Ross ignored the rules of sanctuary and seized the Bruce women, handing them over to Edward I of England, from whom they suffered years of imprisonment, in the case of at least two of them, in cages made especially for their captivity. Earl William (II) of Sutherland died during these events and was succeeded by his son, Earl William (III), who remained a minor. As a result, Edward I awarded control of the young earl of Sutherland to the Ross family. Ross's influence may have ensured that, in this period, the earl of Sutherland was similarly opposed to Bruce. But Robert I, who returned to Scotland in 1307 from a short exile and set about defeating his Scottish enemies in the wake of Edward I's death, soon brought war into the north. Indeed, William of Ross was forced to face Bruce alone following Bruce's defeat of the MacDougalls, and again following his defeat of the Comyns. Ross agreed to a truce

with Robert I in late 1307, and submitted outright to the king in late 1308. As a result, both the earls of Ross and Sutherland attended Bruce's first parliament in 1309.

Thereafter, there is relatively little mention of either earl in the accounts of the period. Earl William of Ross was treated quite leniently by the king following his surrender, despite his treatment of the Bruce women (who remained in captivity), and the earl's youngest son, Walter, fought and died at Bannockburn. Indeed, his brothers may have fought there too, and Walter at least appears to have been active in the service of Edward Bruce, Robert I's brother and heir presumptive until his death in Ireland in 1318. William of Sutherland may still have been too young at this point to have been active in such affairs, or else he may have remained only a lukewarm supporter of Robert I. An apparent lack of involvement in the major events of the day could be partially related to location or because of issues closer to home. The earls of Ross and Sutherland had ongoing problems with feuding in their regions and keeping the peace amongst various families was an ongoing task in itself. Still, lukewarm support for the Bruce cause may also align with the other mentions of both Earls William in this period, namely the attachment of their seals to the famous Declaration of Arbroath in 1320. Their appearance in this document is usually taken as a sign of their commitment to the Bruce kingship, but Michael Penman has argued that Robert I utilised extreme methods to collect as many seals as possible to append to what was, at the end of the day, a document that was a very carefully produced piece of royal propaganda. Seals were forcibly seized for this use and, Penman argues, this caused disquiet within Scotland's noble class which may have led in part to the major rebellion launched and ultimately defeated in the same year that the declaration itself was written. There is no suggestion that the earls of Ross and Sutherland were involved with this rebellion – known as the Soules Conspiracy – but there remain questions over the extent of support for an alternative Balliol ruler at this time. Considering that William of Sutherland did not appear to benefit territorially or financially from Bruce's

kingship, and William of Ross's existing Comyn connections, we may yet question their full commitment to Robert I. This is speculative, of course, but it is worth just reinforcing the reality that Robert Bruce's kingship was not welcomed wholeheartedly by all. And we should not rush to assume that those historical figures we know less about were either obviously or logically supporters of the king.

During the period of the second war, the earls of Ross and Sutherland had somewhat different experiences once again, although both were at times actively involved in its prosecution. In spite of their geographical remoteness from much of the wartime action, they are represented in several engagements from the period. Indeed, the war may have had a more Highland aspect to it than is normally understood. Neither Earl Kenneth of Sutherland nor Earl Hugh of Ross appear to have been present at the catastrophic Bruce defeat at Dupplin Moor, near Perth, in 1332. Their absences are curious considering that the leader of the Bruce army at Dupplin was Donald, earl of Mar, to whom both earls were related through marriage. Mar's army was also representative of the collected forces of Scotland north of the Forth, as a second southern army was in the field at the same time, and so the absence of the earls is notable. This resulted, however, in both men escaping the slaughter of Bruce forces at Dupplin as Mar's larger army was decimated by English archers and the Disinherited forces under Edward Balliol won the day. Such survival was, however, short-lived. For both men took their places in the large army summoned by the new Scottish Guardian, Archibald Douglas, for the invasion of England in 1333, intended to relieve King Edward III of England's siege of Berwick-upon-Tweed. The failure of this effort resulted in Douglas marching his army to Halidon Hill, near Berwick, to battle the English king. Less than twelve months after Dupplin Moor, Bruce Scottish forces succumbed to another resounding defeat. Forced to abandon a defensive position and march through boggy terrain before ascending Halidon Hill itself – all the while under withering English archery fire – the

Bruce Scots were overwhelmed when they finally met the enemy face to face. In apparent recognition of his status, Earl Hugh of Ross commanded the third Bruce division, which attacked the troops of King Edward Balliol himself. Earl Kenneth of Sutherland fought in the same division as his neighbour.

According to the fifteenth-century chronicle of Walter Bower, this division

“bravely thrust from the side into the troop led by Edward Balliol; but there was no way in which [they] could break it up as it was intent on pressing forward. With no delay the troops on both sides rushed to and fro; and joining in battle they wore themselves out in a tremendous fight. But the Scots were out of breath because of the ascent, and after immense bloodshed were forced to retreat. And so there was pitiful slaughter, astonishing flight, and the capture of Scots on an indescribable scale.”

Writing before Bower, and incorporating some different sources into his work, Andrew Wyntoun wrote lamentably that Earl Hugh “made stalwart and rycht lang fychtyng, / That serwyd bot off lytill thyng; / For he wes dede, and all his men / Ware nere-hand slayne about hym then.” Earl Hugh may have been killed in spite of supposed saintly protection. John Maior, writing in the 1520s, suggested that Earl Hugh had ridden into battle wearing a relic of St Duthac’s hair shirt. Indeed, we might envisage Hugh coming to Tain, being blessed by the clergy and receiving the saintly relic before heading off to war. As Turpie writes, however, if this was indeed the case then “the relic failed spectacularly.” Wyntoun’s account suggest both earls, with their men, were killed during the battle, although it’s also possible that they were felled in the flight described by Bower, in which English knights summoned their horses from the rear and rode down the fleeing Scots.

Succession was therefore required in both earldoms, although the exact nature of what followed is confused by a lack of historical detail. Earl William (IV) of Sutherland appears to have succeeded to his earldom upon his father’s death, but his first appearance in contemporary events is not recorded until 1336. Interestingly, the same is true of Earl William (III) of Ross, although it is suggested that he was in exile in Norway when his father died and

so only returned to take up his earldom in 1336. There is, however, some question of the accuracy of this, and work I am currently undertaking regarding this phase of conflict may point to the flight at least of William of Ross in the face of Disinherited military activity following Halidon Hill, led by David Strathbogie, claimant to the earldom of Atholl. Strathbogie claimed a raft of territories through his own and his wife's Comyn descent, including Atholl and Badenoch, but also potentially extending into Mar, Buchan, Moray and even potentially Ross. Strathbogie certainly set himself up, for a short while at least, as the pre-eminent power in Northern Scotland, and so it may not have been safe for the young earls until Strathbogie was removed from the picture.

And the death of Strathbogie in battle at Culblean, on St Andrew's Day, 1335, makes the reappearance of the two Earls William from the historical shadows in 1336 even more suggestive of a period of Strathbogie dominance before they were able to exercise lordship for themselves. William of Sutherland's first military activity was at the siege of Cupar Castle in Fife in May 1336. This was not, however, the most auspicious of military endeavours. John Stirling, the Anglo-Scottish keeper of Edinburgh Castle, took 120 men of his garrison by boat across the Firth of Forth and they "set fire one morning to a couple of villages near [Cupar Castle], and suddenly attacked those who were besieging [it]." Thinking that this was the precursor to a much larger English relieving army, the Bruce Scots:

"[seeing] the neighbouring villages in flames, a body of men charging fiercely upon them, and those in the castle making a sortie, they took to instant flight, abandoning their siege engines, arms, stores, and all that they had...Sir John [Stirling] hotly pursued them with his party...killing those whom he could catch, and driving the others away. Afterwards he returned, seized their baggage, and burnt their engines. After this successful exploit, he marched back to Edinburgh."

Following this, William of Sutherland disappears from the next few years of Bruce military effort. Earl William of Ross, however, seems to appear in his place, and took part in the Bruce siege of Perth in 1339, where he was able to employ miners who, according to Bower,

“constructed tunnels, digging them over long distances, by which means they drew the water out of the moats and left them dried up.” Ross, however, had a falling-out with the Bruce Guardian, Robert the Steward, during or after the siege, and so when the latter took his forces to besiege Stirling Castle (unsuccessfully), Ross was not with him.

Ross in turn disappears from the active military record for the next few years, but in his place emerges once more William of Sutherland. He took part, alongside Patrick, earl of March, in leading a Bruce raid into northern England in 1340. Earl William was a long way from home, but was very obviously performing the military activities of a notable Scottish lord.

Indeed, an English letter to Edward III provides details of this raid:

“Earl Patrick and the earl of Sutherland entered England on 28 June last and pillaged the land up to 2 leagues from Bamburgh, taking a good 2000 fat beasts and many prisoners. When they had taken their booty and burned the land, they went towards Dunbar, and a good 4 leagues within Scotland the [English garrison of] Roxburgh encountered them and dismounted and fought with them, with the result that they were discomfited and more than half of their people taken and killed. All the prisoners and beasts that they had taken in England were rescued, and the two earls escaped with great difficulty.”

This was, then, another unsuccessful experience for William of Sutherland and may explain why he again disappears from the military record for another few years.

Both Williams were called upon to serve their kingdom once more, however, in one of the largest summonses of Scottish forces in over two centuries. For both men collected their retainers in answer to King David II's call for a Scottish army to invade England in 1346. The experience of both men in this instance was, however, very different. For William of Ross, it was a short-term commitment only. Similar to his fallout with the Steward in 1339, the earl was by this time also in an active feud with Ranald MacRuairidh. Such enmities did not cease when these men were summoned to a national host, and the collection of lots of armed men in one place could historically be problematic for kings. So it turned out in this instance. Having

led his men to the northern staging point at Perth, William of Ross took advantage of the proximity of his MacRuaridh rival. He despatched his men in the night to Elcho Priory, where MacRuaridh was staying, and had his rival northern lord assassinated. Following this act, Ross and his men fled back north to escape royal censure.¹ William of Sutherland was not, however, involved in any such shenanigans, and took his place in the Scottish army which invaded Cumberland, moved east and south through Northumberland and into County Durham. It was just outside Durham itself, at the bishops' manor of Bearpark, that the Scottish army camped for the night, but it was disturbed on the following morning by the arrival of a hastily-arrayed levy of northern Englishmen. The fight which ensued, known as the battle of Neville's Cross, was yet another example of Scottish forces facing the English in pitched battle and losing resoundingly. King David II and others of his nobles are recorded putting up tremendous personal resistance during the battle. It may be presumed that William of Sutherland behaved similarly, but like his king, he was captured during the battle or in its immediate aftermath.² Although he managed to avoid the fate of his father, William of Sutherland's military career largely ended with this defeat. He appears to have secured his release from English captivity, presumably for a large-scale ransom, by 1351, although it is alternatively suggested that he escaped from imprisonment.³ This period of freedom was, however, short-lived, Sutherland returned to English captivity in 1357, this time as a hostage for David II as part of the terms of the Treaty of Berwick and the king's own release from English captivity.⁴ William of Ross, on the other hand, put aside past enmity with the Steward to form an alliance with the heir presumptive to the throne and made hay during the king's enforced absence. Although he too was ordered to act as a hostage for the king's release, he

¹ *Chron. Wyntoun* (Laing), ii, 472; *Chron. Bower*, vii, 253; Penman, 'Scots at Neville's Cross', 175-6.

² *Chron. Bower*, vii, 29-61. Henry Knighton mistakenly lists Earl William amongst the Scottish battle dead (*Knighton's Chronicle*, 69-73).

³ *Rot. Scot*, i, 741; Given-Wilson and Beriac, 'Edward III's Prisoners', 811, n. 42.

⁴ Penman, *David II*, 145; McGladdery, 'Sutherland family'; *SP*, viii, 326-7; cf. Given-Wilson and Beriac, 'Edward III's Prisoners', 811, n. 42.

appears never to have served this role. The Treaty of Berwick, for the time being, ended war between England and Scotland and both earls were instead caught up in the fractious politics of the remainder of David II's reign. The two Williams had achieved some interesting experience of war, but had also sat out various phases of its progress, and succeeded where their fathers did not in at least surviving it. Considering the rollcall of Scottish noble dead during this period, this was no little achievement.

The history of Northern Scotland in this period was not just about its earls, of course, but also about its people. Unfortunately, such people are often difficult to trace in the surviving evidence. Still, broader consideration of the examples we do know about can help to illuminate the effects that war had on the people of this region. So, it is firstly worth emphasizing that war relatively rarely intruded directly into this part of Scotland. Still, there are notable examples of when it did, and what can be suggested from such even if the detail we might like has not come down to us. So, there is the capture of Skelbo Castle on Loch Fleet in 1308 by forces loyal to Robert I, led by William Wiseman. This was part of the campaigns that Bruce launched against his northern Scottish enemies in the winter months of 1307-1308, but it's unlikely that he was at Skelbo in person. Indeed, the association of Wiseman with this episode suggests that it was he who took the castle. Still, this episode is not without some confusion. At this time the earl of Ross had made a truce with Robert Bruce to keep his earldom free of destructive raiding. Wiseman's activities in seizing Skelbo, a castle belonging to the earl of Sutherland, who was still at this time a ward of the earl of Ross, is curious. Wiseman may have been allowed passage through Ross under the truce, but this seems unlikely.

Instead, and considering its location on Loch Fleet, it seems more likely that Wiseman – who would later be created sheriff of Elgin – took ship in Moray and sailed to take Skelbo. Perhaps it was an attempt to pressure the young Sutherland earl, who would soon be making

his own decisions, to break from the earl of Ross and to align with Bruce and his growing band of allies. If so, it may have worked, as Earl William (III) appeared in March 1309 as a titled earl in his own right at the St Andrews parliaments. The Skelbo episode should also not be seen as just an attack on and capture of the castle itself. Throughout Bruce's northern campaigns, fire and destruction had been the weapons of choice of the would-be king as he took his war to his Scottish enemies. Castles were slighted to deny their use by Bruce's enemies, and town and countryside were put to the flame. Inverness, Nairn and Elgin were all affected by wartime destruction in these campaigns, and the infamous "herschip of Buchan" was said by John Barbour to have been lamented by local people fully fifty years after its occurrence due to the scale and intensity of destruction meted out by Bruce in the region. It would be naïve to assume a different approach in this example and just because the events themselves are not recorded in surviving evidence – beyond the brief reference to Skelbo – it does not mean that there was not similar destruction in the surrounding Sutherland territories as a result of this incursion, as a means of forcing the earl's allegiance.

When considering the period of the second war, and the already-mentioned short period of Strathbogie ascendancy, it again seems possible that war made its way into the north. Indeed, David Strathbogie may have made use of Gaelic kindreds as a means to do so. Robert Bruce acted similarly against his northern enemies in 1307-8 when the MacDonalds and MacRuaridhs were wielded against their own local enemies, the MacDougalls, to the benefit of the king. And so, as I have suggested in work currently under way, it appears that David Strathbogie may have married off his younger sister, Margaret, to John (II) MacKenzie of Kintail. The MacKenzies were involved in long-running conflict with the earls of Ross during this period over territories in Kintail and North Argyll. As a prominent neighbour of Strathbogie's territories to the north, the Ross family may have been a threat to Strathbogie's aspirations to control across Northern Scotland. After the death of Earl Hugh of Ross at

Halidon Hill, and the apparent Norwegian exile of Earl William III, control of the Ross kindred appears to have passed to Hugh Ross of Philorth, a man with territorial interests in Buchan which may have conflicted with those of Strathbogie and his father-in-law. That Strathbogie was involved in pushing his influence north into Ross during its period without an earl is suggested by the seventeenth-century Ross family history. This notes that, when Earl William returned from exile in Norway around 1336, he “fand his men convertit to the obedience of England” and that the earl spent the next period of time working to reverse this state of affairs. Further, the English Lanercost chronicler suggests that the earl of Ross fought with the Bruces at Culblean (although this is likely an error for Hugh of Philorth), suggesting a personal vested interest in conflict with Strathbogie. And Earl William of Ross appears to have seized the office of justiciar north of the Forth by 1339, a position that Strathbogie had himself previously held. All of this suggests at a possible regional rivalry between Strathbogie and the Rosses. In such circumstances, a marriage alliance with the MacKenzies would appear to have been advantageous. It also suggests that war may have been physically visited on Ross at this time, and that it took some time to overturn this situation, something which may account at least for some of Earl William III of Ross’s absences from national events.

The earls of Ross also provide useful evidence in relation to the military capacity of these earldoms and the impact that military service had on the people of this region. Again, in relation to the 1307-8 campaigns, the earl of Ross wrote to King Edward II of England to defend his recent conduct in taking a truce with Robert I when he had appeared on the borders of Ross. According to Earl William, “[he] heard of Bruce's coming...with a great force...[and] called out his men and remained a fortnight on the borders of his earldom with three thousand men at his own expense, and on the borders of two other earldoms, Sutherland and Caithness. Bruce would have destroyed them utterly had not the earl taken a truce from him until...[2 June 1308].” We must be careful, as with all medieval sources, about numbers.

Just because the earl of Ross indicated that he had 3000 men in his service, does not mean that it was so! Indeed, considering the context, a letter intended to reinforce his loyalty to Edward II of England, it makes sense that Ross may have inflated the numbers of men with whom he defended these lands. Still, such evidence does at least point towards the military *potential* of the earldom of Ross. Historical evidence also shows that summonses of local men to deal with invasion and the possibility of attack would likely bring out greater numbers than would be the case if those men were expected to go and fight elsewhere. Ross's comments in 1308 also suggest that he was making use of the system of military muster that was replicated across the medieval kingdom of Scotland.

In such circumstances, all men between the ages of 16 and 60 were eligible for military service. A certain number representative of land-based units at a local level would be required to muster at predetermined places, armed and with supplies to feed themselves. At these "weapon-showings" (*wapinschaws*) there might be the chance to do some basic training, receive some element of uniform, and reject those insufficiently prepared for the task at hand. What this system produced was a force of armed men representative of the region, but not a force of men who were necessarily the best-prepared, best-skilled or best-armed to mount that defence they were meant to provide. Still, these were forces arrayed in times of need, and the presence of Robert Bruce and his forces in the north does indeed appear to have been just such a time. And the men of Sutherland appear to have done their duty in this regard, although the period of two weeks in the field does not at first sight seem too onerous. We need to remember, however, that Ross's letter was written in late 1307-early 1308, and so these men were providing military service during the winter months. Not the most pleasant time to be required to provide military service in Ross-shire, but then that was part of the tactics of Robert I. Fight when your enemy did not want to, when they least expected to have to, and when the support of tenants to provide that service may be greatly tested.

The system of military recruitment alluded to here would also have been the same utilised for offensive operations, such as those already discussed. Certainly it would have been that used for the Neville's Cross campaign. As already indicated, men would be required to assemble at local muster points armed and ready for the campaign ahead. But they would then be required to march to larger-scale regional muster points and then to a national muster point, at which stage the entire army was assembled. For the Neville's Cross campaign, for example, we may presume that the Sutherland muster took place at a recognisable administrative centre, such as Dornoch, with the Ross muster perhaps centred on Dingwall. Those men chosen for service would then have proceeded to a further muster of forces from north of the Forth, in this case at Perth. It was here that William of Ross departed, following his men's murder of Ranald MacRuairidh, and presumably much of the Ross contingent left with him. But the Sutherland men continued south and crossed the English frontier before laying siege to the border fortress of Liddel. The logistics of all this, the time it would have taken, and the sheer effort of walking (or perhaps riding) from the far north of Scotland – even before they got to England – is rather impressive. This slide shows a very basic suggestion of route. The march from Dornoch to Durham would have been at least 350 miles. And that does not account for the return journey, when the Scottish forces who did escape the battlefield defeat were fleeing for their lives in the aftermath of Neville's Cross. Indeed, this example provides a useful case study (even with relatively little evidence) of the impressive nature of Highland military service in this period. The Neville's Cross campaign took place in October, but considering the distances involved, the preparations and musters for such would have begun some time earlier. This had the potential to upset the agricultural calendar and have a very real effect on people in the earldom as their men had to pick up and leave for military service. Such an impact was made inordinately worse by the loss in battle and the casualties that invariably ensued.

Battle itself and the flight afterwards, with mounted English knights chasing after and riding down fleeing Scots, accounted for many deaths. And while we have no account of the physical suffering of the Sutherland contingent, we may assume that it was substantial. The capture of the earl suggests his involvement in the thick of the action, and his men were likely right there with him. A description of Dupplin Moor noted how the earl of Fife “was captured, and with him various nobles and brave men, after three hundred and sixty men in armour had first been killed under his standard.” An earl’s retinue was intended to protect its lord to the end, and so it is not outwith the realms of possibility that the earl of Sutherland’s men performed a similar duty at Neville’s Cross. Still, knightly warriors could at least expect some possibility of surrender. Knights were, after all, part of the chivalric world and were valuable prisoners for the ransoms that could be expected to purchase their release. For those further down the social scale, escape from the battlefield would have been more difficult. Surrender was not really an option as they were not worth anything as prisoners. Therefore, foot soldiers are often described being slain as they tried to flee, past Scottish defeats being described in terms of running Scots being pursued up to and across the border itself. So, those Sutherland men in service of their lord would likely have struggled to escape. Those that did, had a long journey ahead of them to return home. Some were likely injured, and some may have struggled in the long-term with disabilities caused by military action. And back home, the loss of life would have had various implications for urban and rural communities as men were lost from the workforce and families with holdings were affected in the longer-term by the loss of a husband or a son. Ultimately, we cannot know the total impact of such loss, but it remains worthy of consideration if we are to appreciate the impact of the events discussed here on populations in this region.

To conclude, then, I have endeavoured today to put together a consideration of Ross and Sutherland’s involvement in and contribution to the Scottish Wars of Independence. Such a

study is not straightforward, for reasons of lack of evidence, but it remains possible to piece together something of the involvement of these regions with the war, and the participation of people from the area in its events. The Scottish Wars of Independence were indeed a national effort, echoing Barron's comments at the outset. While they were increasingly fought in the border regions, the various periods of active conflict, fought across much of the kingdom, and involving men and women from across the entirety of Scotland, emphasise the broader nature of the war. And while the actual goings-on in Ross and Sutherland during this period are often absent in the historical record, and we often have little or no idea of what was actually happening on the ground, we can at least try to recapture the involvement of some northern Scots where evidence allows us to take snippets of information and build it into the better-known context of events. And beyond the battles that everyone knows, and the historical figures that remain discussed to this day, were many other individuals whose histories are fragmentary, or indeed invisible in the historical record. And work like this affords us the opportunity to consider their lives, their experience, and what effect the war had on them.

Thank you.