# First James

**The of Scotland**

**By Rballoch.**

**James1 of Scotland  
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**On 20 February, 1437 King James I of Scotland was assasinated. In memory of this King, I have written a small biography of his life and his reign. This by no means is a full account of the events in the Kings life -- or the events that took place in Scotland at the time, but the major events are covered to give an idea who this man was.**

**JAMES I of Scotland  
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**King of Scots (1424--37), born in Dunfermline, Fife, the second son of Robert III. After his elder brother David was murdered at Falkland (1402), allegedly by his uncle, the Duke of Albany, James was sent for safety to France, but was captured by the English, and remained a prisoner for 18 years. Albany meanwhile ruled Scotland as governor until his death in 1420, when his son, Murdoch, assumed the regency,  
and the country rapidly fell into disorder.**

**The Regents  
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**James Stewart of the Royal house of Stuart spent most of his childhood life in exile as a prisoner of the English. The Scots who ruled in his absence as regents would not pay his high ransom the English demanded for his return to Scotland. Finally, after 18 years in exile, his countrymen agreed to his ransom and James returned to Scotland.**

**Scotland was in a near state of armed insurrection when James returned. The previous regent, Murdoch, had been a poor and corrupt regent and the clan feuds in the Highlands continued unabated. In the Lowlands and Borders, the Border Barons rode their raids, terrorized the burghs, and pursued the Crowns revenues by theiving the crown taxes for themselves. Less that 4% of revenues were actually reaching Edinburgh when James took over.**

**Murdoch, the regent soon regretted paying for James's return. "If God gives me but a dog's life," said James when he saw and heard what had befallen his country, "I will make the key keep the castle and the bracken bush keep the cow through all Scotland". In a week after his coronation a parliament at Perth declared that peace would be enforced throughout the realm, and of "any man presume to make war against another he shall suffer the full penalties of the law."**

**Once released (1424), James dealt ruthlessly with potential rivals to his authority, executing Murdoch and his family.**

**Within a year, James had broken the power of his cousins the Albany Stewarts and seized their estates. Upon some real or contrived charge of treason, the former regent of Scotland who had let James remain a prisoner in England so long, Murdoch and his two sons, with the aged father-in-law of one of them, were first imprisoned and then taken to the heading-block at Stirling.**

**There were men who mourned their death, despite all the corruption, believing them friends of the poor and the victims of James's tyranny. The romantic and frequently misguided attachment to the unsuccessful members of the House of Stewart has deep roots in Scotland's history.**

**James Takes Control of Scotland  
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He was 32 when he came back to Scotland, of medium height but large-boned and thickset, quick in his movements like a fox. He was an athlete, rider and wrestler, skilled with bow and spear, and proud of the strength in his broad chest and muscled arms. His darting and inquisitive mind was fascinated by the machinery of war, gunnery in particular, as it intrigued most men of the day. He was also a poet and  
muscian, and almost unique in the contradictory powers of tranquil reflection and uncompromising action. Beyond firm government perhaps, the greatest gift he brought to a bleak Scotland was some of the first of its lyrical verse.**

**Idle as a prisoner, albiet well kept prisoner, in England he had read all he could, and his long poem "The Kingis Quair", inspired by Chaucer's translation of a French allegory, is a soft voice speaking with a love of evocative words.**

**James was the first of many Stewart kings to act as a patron of the arts, and almost certainly wrote the tender, passionate collection of poems, ("The King's Quire" or book), c.1423--4.**

**It was not a woeful wretch who came home to Scotland, but the first real king the country had had since the death of Robert Bruce in 1329.**

**His bride was Joan Beaufort, a niece of English king Henry IV, and a sixth of his ransom had been obligingly remitted as her dowry. It was not only a marriage of dynastic arrangement, and many believe the tender poem referred to above , was about her as he viewed her from his prison tower, and fell in love with as she walked among the court.**

**From James I, perhaps comes that legendary Stewart charm, more disasterous to Scotland than an Albany's corrupt rule. But, the man who had sighed and written for and about love at a garden window in London, was merciless and resolute on a throne. His concern for law and order, while it was needed to secure his crown, also had roots in a poet's sense of justice, but he did not respond like a poet. When he had exterminated his cousins, he turned upon the Highlands. He was the first  
of his family to treat the clans like cattle, showing that contempt most of them had for the Gaelic people, and making the Highlander's ultimate self-sacrifice for the House of Stewart as pointless as it was herioc.**

**He summoned over 40 Highland Chiefs in 1428 before him and his parliament at Inverness. Among the Highlanders were Alexander of the Isles, (the current Lord of the Isles), the son of Donald of Harlaw. They were greeted as thugs upon arrival, as each appeared before the throne he was seized by men-at-arms and thrown into the dungeon pit. One by one, the Chiefs of Clan Donald, MacKay, MacKenzie, Campbell and all the tribes and leaders of the north, while the poet king entertained the  
parliament with a witty Latin squib on their certain hempen departure. In fact, three were hanged and the rest released after a brutal , but short imprisonment. Clemency was granted for any offences they might have commited, but it was wasted on Alexander of the Isles. He and his wild Islanders, remembered the treachery that had preceded it, and when King and parliament were gone, came back by ship over rivers, and burnt the burgh of Inverness to the ground, one of seven bonfires which  
the MacDonald's lit upon that ground in their clan's riotous history.**

**James marched to Lochaber, isolated Alexander from his allies, and forced him to come to Edinburgh in submission. Wearing shirt and drawers only, holding his 2 handed claymore by the blade, he knelt before the high altar of Holyrood and humbly offered the hilt of the weapon to the king. James would have hanged him, it is said, but for the intercession of the Queen, and was instead sent to a Lothian castle in the keeping of a Douglas earl.**

**In the 13 years he strengthened the machinery of government and justice, replacing the baron's law with the king's law, and restoring the crown to a respect it had not received since Bruce's heart was taken from his rib cage. Copies of law were distributed among all sheriffs so that no man might claim ignorance of the law. Of course this really only worked in the Lowlands, as the Highlands and Isles were still ruled by the clan system and the supreme authority there, was the individual Chief of the clan -- with the King coming in a distant second.**

**Justice was attempted to be available to all, but since this principle was easier to enact through parliament than to put into actual practise, the king himself chose a special court from the Three Estates to consider complaints and abuses. He also set up a commitee of wise and discreet men to examine the laws at intervals, and to advise upon their admendment if neccessary. The power of the civil justice and criminal courts were strengthened under James I's reign. He clearly wished to  
establish a parliament such as he had seen at work in England.**

**For more information of his mammoth changes to Scottish courts and parliaments, see the book "Scotland from the Earliest Times to 1603" - by William Croft Dickinson. (Although it may be difficult to obtain a copy).**

**Though orthodox in faith and sincere in piety, he was a rough opponent of Rome when he felt it threatened his own countries independence. He denied the Pope's power of provision, the right to appoint bishops to vacant sees on Scotland, and thus have influence over one of the estates in its parliament.It had become the kings right to approve a bishop-elect before consecration and papal promotion, and he stopped his churchmen from bargaining with Rome for these benefices, arguing with some justice that the traffic was impoverishing his kingdom. With his parliament, he declared this "barratry" illegal, taxed the export of gold and silver, and forbade the clerics to travel abroad without royal license, the Pope demanded the repeal of the acts. The king's response was to acknowledge the authority of the Counsil of Basle, which had attempted to reform such papal powers of provision.**

**He was hard and exacting on the true duties of his churchmen, and ordered them to set their house in order, lest the crown's past generousity be cut. But, Scotlands detestment of so called "heretics", which resulted in the first heretical buring, during the regent before James' reign, was started again in 1433. A second was burnt, Paul  
Crawar, a reasonable fellow by the sound of him, a Bohemian graduate of medicine and the arts who had come to St. Andrews University as an emissary of the Hussites. He was said to have preached free love and socialism (or a form of it) by his detractors, that enduring combination of human desires. The smoldering flames that would spread from his burning, burnt longer than his judges could have imagined.**

**Law, administration, and political and church reform were all done or attempted during James I's reign. No king had done so much for Scotland, outside of war and independence, since Alexander II, and few had so many enemies. The work he set off was too great for any one man, and in his efforts to break the powers of the barons he was often careless and foolish. He alienated the Douglases (one of the most powerful Lowland Scottish families) by imprisoning their earl, and deprived the Earl of March of his title and estates because of his father's desertion to the English 30 years before. Four-fifths of his ransom was yet to be paid and many of the lords had kinsman still held hostage in England, and bitterly resented the kings indifference to them. His custom of appropriating estates to the crown when there was doubt about an heir may have been good housekeeping or feudal custom, but most men considered it robbery. His large family of first and distant cousins was full of jealousy, spite, envy and greed, and it was perhaps inevitable that this Stewart king should die by a Stewart plot.**

**He himself made it possible by weaking his prestige with a half-hearted war with England. On her way to marry the Dauphin his daughter Margaret narrowly escaped a piratical attack by an English ship, and what seems on the surface to be a good excuse, James besieged the castle of Roxburgh, which had been in English hands now, for 100 years. He abandoned it without assualt, the reason is unclear, but it is said that his wife warned him of plots against him if he pressd on. And there was  
a plot, within his own family and his own household, and the unpopularity of the king's withdrawl from a chivalrous field (the castle) gave the plotters courage. At it's veiled centre was the Earl of Atholl, "that old servant of many evil days", a son of Robert II's second marriage and by his own reckoning the rightful king of Scotland.  
His son, Sir Robert Stewart, was the King's Chamberlain, and it was he who found a willing assassin in Sir Robert Graham, a man with his own festering grudge and a scarred memory of the imprisonment and banishment.**

**At the end of 1436 James went to keep Christmas with the Dominican friars at Perth. As he crossed the Forth a Highland woman warned him that he would never return alive, a common warning in Scots history and just as commonly ignored. She followed him to Perth, it is said, repeating her tedious warnings, and she was present on the night of February 20 when Robert Stewart opened the door of the convent where the King was staying, and admitted the Graham.**

**James was in his wife's chamber, talking to her and her ladies, relaxed in his dressing-gown, amused by the Highland's woman's last warning and telling stories of omens and premonitions. When he heard the noise of heavy feet, clanking armour, his quick mind sensed what they meant. He wrenched up the planking of the floor and dropped into a vault or drain below, hoping to escape into a court beyond but forgetting that its mouth had recently been sealed to prevent his tennis-balls from rolling into it. Graham and his eight confederates broke into the room, dragged  
out the fighting King, and butchered him with twenty-eight dagger-strokes.**

**The Queen was wounded in her efforts to save her husband, and it might have been better for Graham had he killed her too since he had gone this far. This "freshest and fairest flower" of the King's youth became a tigress in revenge. Atholl and Robert Stewart, Graham and his hired cutthroats were soon taken, and suffered long and appalling torture until the Queen's grief was satisfied and they were sent to the merciful headsman.**

**And so ended the life of James I of Scotland on 20 February, 1437....560 years ago this year.**