



A Great and Terrible King: Edward I and the Forging of Britain

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The English and the Scottish have had a Love/Hate relationship for well over a thousand years. With the Scottish referendum looming, let's look at a little at the historical context.

One of my favourite films remains Mel Gibson's *Braveheart*, (1995). Its plot tells the story of the freedom fighter who begins a rebellion against the rule of the 'evil' English King, Edward 'Longshanks'. The Scots eventually win their independence as a result. It is indeed an inspiring story, even to a patriotic English teenager (at the time) like me. But, as always with Hollywood, much of the story - which is presented as unambiguous historical fact in the movie - is simply untrue. For the truth about Edward, Robert Bruce, Wallace and the story of England and Scotland, one needs to read 'proper' history books on the subject. Like this one.

Though he may have been a hard man and a fearsome enemy, Hammer of the Scots, conqueror of the Welsh, scourge of the French and respected in the Holy Land where he crusaded (as a young Prince) against the Muslims, there is also a good deal to admire and respect about Edward. As a young boy, he escaped prison to lead an army against the rebelling barons who had imprisoned his father, but with a pragmatism many of his fellow king could only dream of, he negotiated with them the foundations of Parliament as we know it - two houses sitting in Westminster with some say over how the country is run. More importantly still, he was the first King since the Norman conquest to speak English regularly, something that would fully mature under his equally impressive grandson, Edward III, a few decades later.

Ultimately, and from the English point of view, Edward I took a country on its knees and made it strong again, and every detail of the journey - and indeed Edward's whole life - is written and recorded here. Best of all though, though it is written in a captivating style that will hold the attention of many readers, Mr. Morris's text is also fully footnoted and referenced. So, the moral of this story is, if you want to really understand what happened in the past, read a book.

9 sausages out of 10

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