

# King James II of Scotland

Pg 1/2



Born: 16 Oct 1430 Perth, Scotland

Married: 3 Jul 1449 Marie Guelders

Died: 3 Aug 1460 Kelso, Scotland

Parents: James Stewart & Joan Beaufort

James II of Scotland (Holyrood Palace, Edinburgh, 16 October 1430 – 3 August 1460) reigned as king of Scots from 1437 to 1460.

He was the son of James I of Scotland and of Joan Beaufort (daughter of John Beaufort, 1st Earl of Somerset and of Margaret Holland). He had an elder twin, Alexander Stewart, Duke of Rothesay, who lived long enough to receive a knighthood, but died in infancy. James became the father of James III. He gained the nickname "Fiery face" because of a conspicuous vermilion birthmark on his face. He had six sisters, who married into various European royal dynasties. He was killed by the accidental explosion of one of his own cannon at the siege of Roxburgh Castle in 1460.

## Child King

Inheriting the throne at under seven years old, James saw the government in the hands of others for most of his reign. The assassination of his father James I had formed part of an attempt to usurp power by Walter Stewart, 1st Earl of Atholl, but it failed miserably, and James's guardians had Atholl and his allies captured and executed in the months after the assassination.

From 1437 to 1439, Archibald Douglas, 5th Earl of Douglas, as lieutenant-general of the realm, headed the government. After his death, and with a general lack of high-status earls in Scotland because of deaths, forfeiture or youth, power became shared uneasily between William, 1st Lord Crichton, Lord Chancellor of Scotland (sometimes in co-operation with the Earl of Avondale) and Sir Alexander Livingston of Callendar, who had possession of the young king as the warden of the stronghold of Stirling Castle.

In 1440 Edinburgh Castle became the location for the 'Black Dinner', which saw the summary execution of the young William Douglas, 6th Earl of Douglas and his brother. Commentators tend to place the blame for the Black Dinner at the feet of Crichton, Livingston and particularly Avondale, as Douglas's death brought him the earldom of Douglas (as 7th earl), and the position of the most powerful magnate in Scotland.

The precise details of who ran the government year by year between 1439 and 1445 appear complex and far from certain, but in 1445 the Livingstons co-operated with William Douglas, 8th Earl of Douglas, son of the recently-deceased 7th Earl, to drive Crichton from power. Douglas now took the lead in governing Scotland until 1449, placing his brothers and other family members in positions of power. Yet the wily Crichton soon returned to influence, now co-operating with the Douglases.

## Struggles with the Douglases

In 1449 James II emerged into adulthood, yet in many ways his 'active kingship' differed little from his minority. The Douglases used his coming of age as a way to throw the Livingstons out of the shared government, as the young king took revenge for the brief arrest of his mother (in turn as a means to remove her from political

influence) that had taken place in 1439. Douglas and Crichton continued to dominate political power, and the king's ability to rule without them remained arguably limited.

But James did not acquiesce with this situation without argument, and between 1451 and 1455 he struggled to free himself from the power of the Douglases. Attempts to curb the Douglases' power took place in 1451, during the absence of the Earl of Douglas from Scotland, and culminated with the murder of the 8th Earl of Douglas at Stirling Castle on 22 February 1452.

The main account of Douglas's murder comes from the 'Auchinleck Chronicle', a near contemporary but fragmentary source. According to its account, the king accused the Earl (probably with justification) of forging links with John Macdonald, 11th Earl of Ross (a.k.a. the Lord of the Isles) and with Alexander Lindsay, 4th Earl of Crawford. This bond, if it existed, created a dangerous axis of power of independently-minded men, forming a major rival to royal authority. When Douglas refused to break the bond with Ross, James broke into a fit of temper and stabbed Douglas to his death. His court officials (many of whom would rise to great influence in later years, often in former Douglas lands) then joined in the bloodbath, one allegedly striking out the Earl's brain with an axe.

This murder did not end the power of the Douglases, but rather created a state of intermittent civil war between 1452 and 1455. James attempted to seize Douglas lands, but his opponents repeatedly forced him into humiliating climbdowns, whereby he returned the lands to James Douglas, 9th Earl of Douglas and a brief and uneasy peace ensued.

Military campaigns ended indecisively, and some have argued that James stood in serious danger of being overthrown, or of having to flee the country. But James' patronage of lands, titles and office to allies of the Douglases saw their erstwhile allies begin to change sides, most importantly the Earl of Crawford, and in 1455 James struck a decisive blow against the Douglases, and they were finally defeated at the Battle of Arkinholm in May 1455.

In the months that followed the Parliament of Scotland declared the extensive Douglas lands forfeit and permanently annexed them to the crown, along with many other lands, finances and castles. The Earl fled into a long English exile. James finally had the freedom to govern as he wished, and one can argue that his successors as kings of Scots never faced such a powerful challenge to their authority again. Along with the forfeiture of the Albany Stewarts in reign of James I, the destruction of the Black Douglases saw royal power in Scotland take a major step forward.[1]

Effective ruler

Between 1455 and 1460 James II proved to be an active and interventionist king. Ambitious plans to take Orkney, Shetland and the Isle of Man did not succeed. The king travelled the country, and has been argued to have originated the practice of raising money by giving remissions for serious crimes, and that some of the unpopular policies of James III originated in the late 1450s.[2] In 1458 an Act of Parliament commanded the king to modify his behaviour, but one cannot say how his reign would have developed had he lived longer.[3]

James enthusiastically promoted modern artillery, which he used with some success against the Black Douglases. His ambitions to increase Scotland's standing saw him besiege Roxburgh Castle in 1460, one of the last Scottish castles still held by the English after the Wars of Independence. On 3 August, one of his cannon exploded, killing the King. The Scots carried on with the siege and took the castle.

Robert Lindsay of Pitscottie wrote in his *Historie* concerning the accident that befell King James II, that as he stood near a piece of artillery "his thigh-bone was dug into two with a piece of misframed gun that broke in shooting, by which he was stricken to the ground and died hastily". It should be noted, however, that Pitscottie was writing a century after the events he was describing.[4]

Marriage and children

James married Mary of Gueldres at Holyrood Abbey, Edinburgh, on 3 July 1449. They had seven children:

An unnamed son. (Both born and died on 19 May 1450).

James III of Scotland (1451/1452 - 1488).

Alexander Stewart, 1st Duke of Albany (c. 1454 - 1485).

David Stewart, Earl of Moray (c. 1456 - 1457. He was created Earl of Moray on 12 February 1456.

John Stewart, 1st Earl of Mar and Garioch (c. 1459 - 1479).

Princess Margaret Stewart of Scotland. Married William Crichton, 3rd Lord Crichton of Auchingoul. She became the mother of Margaret Crichton and mother-in-law of George Leslie, 4th Earl of Rothes.

Princess Mary Stewart of Scotland (d. 1488). Married first Thomas Boyd, 1st Earl of Arran and secondly James Hamilton, 1st Lord Hamilton. She became the mother of James Hamilton, 1st Earl of Arran.