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The Bruce, The Wallace and the Declaration of Arbroath

The foundations of Scottish literature are the foundations of Scotland itself, in three epic poems and a letter. A fortnight ago (December 9), The National's cover carried an image of Robert the Bruce's face, the reconstruction from a cast of his skull. Yesterday a damp squib of unionist doggerel referred to Bruce and Wallace as no more than empty icons of hollow nationalism. Maybe it's worth pausing to ask what they really mean.

Alan Riach

The battle of Bannockburn, 1314, the defining moment of victory for Bruce and the Scots and the turning point in the Wars of Independence, was in fact followed by many years of further warfare and even the Declaration of Arbroath in 1320 did not bring the threat of English domination to an end. John Barbour (c.1320-95) was born around the same year as the Declaration was written and his epic poem, *The Bruce* (1375), was composed only sixty years or so after the events. While Latin was the language of international politics, *The Bruce* was written in vernacular Scots for a local – including courtly – readership, drawing on stories Barbour had heard, some no doubt from eye-witnesses. Barbour had become Archdeacon of Aberdeen in 1357, travelled to study at Oxford and Paris, and was a man of high authority in both church and civil law, Auditor of the Exchequer to King Robert II, grandson of the Bruce, from whom he received a regular pension after 1378, partly in recognition of his writing *The Bruce*.

The poem is a masterpiece: hyper-tense stories, of course, but everything propelled by radical declarations of strong resolutions and high hopes. Its most famous exclamation comes after a description of the brutish English occupation of Scotland. This is when the call in praise of “Freedom” rings out:

A! fredome is a noble thing!
Fredome mayss man haiff liking,
Fredome all solace to man giffis;
He levys at ess that freely levys.

We meet other characters, including Bruce's great friend, the ferocious fighter Sir James of Douglas. (Incidentally, this is the precedent for the relation in *Trainspotting* between Renton and Begbie.) After Bruce kills the Red Comyn, we follow him on the run, through various battles, over the sea to his refuge on Rathlin Island, and to his hiding out in the mountains, taking shelter.

Episodes of lurid violence flash through the poem, as when the "Douglas Larder" is described: Douglas captures a castle, eats his fill and throws all the goods his soldiers can't carry into the cellar with his prisoners, then takes savage revenge:

And the prisoners that he had tane, Richt tharin gert he hed ilkane. Syne of the tunnys the hedis out-strak, A foul melle thair can he mak; For meill, malt, blude, and wyne Ran all to-gidder in a mellyne...	And the prisoners he'd taken, He there had beheaded, every one. And then the wine tubs he did smash And made a foul and bloody mash. For meal and malt and wine and blood Ran all together in a flood...
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One of the most climactic stories is the Battle of Loudoun Hill. On the edge of Ayrshire and Lanarkshire, south-east of Glasgow, as the main north road from Carlisle to Edinburgh cuts overland from south-west to north-east, Loudoun Hill still sits like a couchant lion near the road running up the Irvine valley. English soldiers coming up from the south wouldn't have been able to see the preparations Scots troops might have made for them, the trenches and dykes Bruce orders constructed in the poem. The English would have narrowed their front to proceed by the river Irvine, so that a smaller opposing force might tear through them fast and gain the advantage before the strengths of the invading army could be properly mustered. By the end of the fight, "The feld wes weill neir coverit all / Bath with slayn hors and with men..."

Finally we come to the Battle of Bannockburn. As the troops are drawn up on either side, a David and Goliath scenario is enacted with a small army facing much larger forces. As Bruce is encouraging his soldiers before battle begins, riding up and down in the field in front of them on a small, light horse armed only with a battle-axe, the English knight Sir Henry de Bohun emerges from the English ranks, a big, black-bearded man with heavy lance on a great charger. De Bohun spurs the horse onwards, lowering and pointing his lance, intending to skewer the Scottish king and end the battle before it begins. Bruce, seeing the danger at the last moment, stays steady then suddenly wheels his small horse round, evading the lance and

swinging his battle-axe with all his strength, bringing it down as de Bohun hurtles by, splitting through his helmet and cleaving his skull to the neck-bone. As the big Englishman hits the ground, Bruce holds up what remains of his weapon and drily complains that he has broken the hand-shaft of his good battle-axe.

A different kind of realism is encountered in Robert Baston's poem of Bannockburn, recorded in Walter Bower's Latin history of Scotland, *The Scotichronicon* (1440-47). The occasion of the poem is rich with irony. The English King Edward II sent Baston, a Carmelite monk and prior of the abbey of Scarborough, with his army to Bannockburn, with instructions to write a poem about the great victory over the Scots he was certain they would win. After Bannockburn, the Scots held on to Baston and agreed that he should indeed write the poem. To the credit of the Scots, and Baston, and the Latin poem's 21st-century translator, Edwin Morgan, what comes across clearly is not smug triumphalism but the physical horror of the murderous clash and the pain of its aftermath. If the battle was indeed worth fighting, this measures something of its cost.

"This is a double realm" Baston tells us, noting that the urge to dominate and subjugate has led to the slaughter he witnessed:

Hence this waste of men, crossed out by war's black pen,
Whole peoples sunk in the fen, still fighting, again and again,
Hence white faces in the ground, hence white faces of the drowned,
Hence huge grief is found, cries with which the stars are crowned,
Hence wars that devastate field and farm and state.

Drawing on vernacular tradition like *The Bruce*, *The Wallace* (c.1477) by Blind Harry (1450-93), is one of the most popular Scottish literary works of all time, also abundant with gory effects, close-up accounts of blood-letting, split heads and limbs chopped off in battles. Like *The Bruce*, it's an accumulation of stories, many of them showing perspectives and episodes which reveal Wallace and his struggle in the light of personal as well as national significance. There is unaffected, unsentimental poignancy in Harry's representation of Wallace's unflinching, broadsword-slicing vigour. This was probably a touchy subject: King James III was trying to establish peace with the English when the poem was written. Harry claimed to be following a Latin text written by Wallace's chaplain but the poem breathes vernacular Scots immediacy on every page.

It embodies the myth of Wallace as a man of the people (even though he was a knight's son) who had to be knighted himself to be allowed to join the aristocratic men directing the Wars of Independence. He was made "Guardian of Scotland" and led the Scots to victory most memorably at the battle of Stirling Bridge. He was let down by his own aristocratic supporters and betrayed by the Earl of Menteith, taken to London and tried for treason. He pointed out that he never swore allegiance to the King of England so could not be tried for treason, but this was no defence and his public execution made him a martyr. At the heart of the poem, Wallace's brief marriage allows a poignant moment of domestic respite which must be left behind for the greater struggle ahead. When Wallace's wife is killed, the national purpose melds with the motive of personal vengeance to heighten the story's urgency.

Just as Barbour's Bruce travels through Scotland, Harry's Wallace crosses the terrain of the nation and further, into England for the siege of York. Unlike the hero of Barbour's poem, however, Harry's Bruce is compromised by his wavering loyalty to King Edward, and a haunting image sees him after the battle of Falkirk, where he had fought on the English side against the Scots. He sits to eat at table without washing, and is mocked by his English peers: "The South'ron lords did mock him in terms rude / And said, 'Behold yon Scot eats his own blood!'" From this moment, Bruce begins to realise which side he should be on.

Wallace is heroic but vulnerable, not only as revenge deepens and twists his personal motivations but also as cruelty sometimes escalates his actions. He promises "Rivers of floating blood, and hills of slain!" and the poem delivers. But also, in Book V, Wallace is haunted by the ghost of one of his victims and runs from a blazing castle with a headless corpse in pursuit. The extremes of atrocity and repulsion are matched by dedication and righteousness, so that when Wallace is left for dead at one point, women nurse him back to health, one of them suckling him at her breast.

After Baston's Bannockburn poem and behind both Barbour's Bruce and Harry's Wallace, there is a different kind of historical document which retains immense authority, one of the most significant and lastingly influential pieces of writing in Scottish literature, the Declaration of Arbroath (1320).

It is literature in the sense of composed writing, rhetoric, an artifice of language, not in the sense of fiction or play. It was originally a letter, written in Latin, attributed to Bernard de Linton (d.1331), the King's chancellor, and signed by a number of Scottish earls and barons, addressed to the Pope, appealing to him to approve their cause above the oppressions of the English. Yet it is not merely a political gesture generated by religious or military

strategy, nor is it simply the product of relatively wealthy people with vested interests who might have cared nothing for the people who lived on the land they claimed as property. The point about this document is that it articulates ideas that have quickened the sense of value people have and their – and our – desire to want better. The same can be said for any great work of literature, music or art, in the most abstract terms. The abstract ideas – the nation, rule of law, truth, liberty, honesty – are generalities that always have specific reference. Essentially they are about self-determination. They are the ideals whose endorsement is the means to bring about the freedom to effect that self-determination. This is not a call to attack, conquer, colonise and rule other people elsewhere, but a defence of the right to choose your own form of government. It is anti-imperialist and lies at the heart of a vision of social justice that need not be exaggerated into caricature or denigrated as merely idealistic. This is how it concludes:

Yet if he [Robert the Bruce, King of Scots] should give up what he has begun, and agree that we or our kingdom should be subject to the King of England or the English, we should exert ourselves at once to drive him out as our enemy and a subverter of his own rights and ours, and make some other man better able to defend us our king; for, as long as one hundred of us remain alive, never will we be brought under English rule. It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we fight, but for freedom – for that alone, which no honest man gives up except with life itself.

In the public debate at Oxford University on December 3 1964, Hugh MacDiarmid spoke alongside the black American revolutionary Malcolm X, who was assassinated in 1965, to approve the motion that “Extremism in the defence of liberty is no vice; moderation in the pursuit of Justice is no virtue.” You can hear him online at:

<https://soundcloud.com/gairmscoile>

MacDiarmid quoted the last sentences of the Declaration and then said, “My people, the Scottish people, have done little but betray that oath ever since.” But things have changed a bit since then. There are a lot more than a hundred of us now. So merry Christmas, one and all. Let 2017 bring better things, and our resolution stay strong.

[Off-set:] *The Bruce is translated into modern English verse by Archibald AH Douglas (Glasgow: William MacLellan, 1964). There are modern scholarly editions of The Bruce, annotated and introduced by AAM Duncan with facing-page English prose translation*

(Edinburgh: Canongate, 1999) and The Wallace, edited and introduced by Anne McKim (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003). Robert Baston's Metrum de Praelio apud Bannockburn / The Battle of Bannockburn is translated by Edwin Morgan (Edinburgh: Scottish Poetry Library, Akros and Mariscat Press, 2004).