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Robert the Bruce: A Life Chronicled (review)

Alasdair Ross

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*Robert the Bruce: A Life Chronicled.*

By Chris Brown. Pp. 416.

ISBN 0 7524 2575 7

Stroud: Tempus Publishing Ltd. 2004. £30.00.

It was with a great deal of interest that I agreed to review this book. The publisher's 'blurb' which accompanied the text further piqued my curiosity. This described it as 'a masterpiece of research [...] essential reading for any student of the period [...]', and as 'the only source book for documents on the life of Robert the Bruce'. These are very bold claims since historians interested in this period have been well-served of late.

During the last two decades three excellent books have been published that approach the first phase of the wars of independence from different angles. These are *Edward I* by Michael Prestwich (1988), *The Wars of the Bruces* by Colm McNamee (1997) and *Under the Hammer* by Fiona Watson (1998). All of these books are required reading for any student of the period. A number of important articles by authors like Dauvit Broun, Sonja Cameron, Sean Duffy, A.A.M. Duncan, Michael Penman and Grant G. Simpson (to name but a few) have also appeared in various journals during this time and have added greatly to the debate surrounding various aspects of the wars. Last, but by no means least, we also have two older books that are still considered to be essential reading: G.W.S. Barrow's evergreen monograph *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland* (4<sup>th</sup> edn, 2005) and *The Scottish War of Independence* by E.M. Barron (1934).

All of these publications have been largely based on primary source material edited during the nineteenth century. This material includes works like the *Calendars of Documents Relating to Scotland* edited by J. Bain (4 vols, 1881-88), the *Documents and Records Illustrating the History of Scotland* edited by Francis Palgrave (1837), and the *Rotuli Scotiae* (2 vols, 1841). Some important additions to this collection of primary source material have also been made during the last fifty years. These comprise *Edward I and the Throne of Scotland* by E.L.G. Stones and Grant G. Simpson (2 vols, 1978), Barbour's *Bruce* edited by M.P. McDiarmid and J.A.C. Stevenson (3 vols, 1980-85), and *Regesta Regum Scottorum*, v, edited by A.A.M. Duncan (1988).

Mr Brown gives a single rationale for producing this new book: he wanted to make some of the surviving documentary material on the life of Robert I '[...] more readily available'. This intention is to be commended, even though the author soon admits (thereby contradicting his publisher) that the book is useless to students because he has not provided the reader with the proper academic apparatus for analysing the text. Taking this comment into account, it can only be presumed that this book is aimed at a general readership. This in itself is no bad thing, provided the information in the book is reliable.

The author has divided his book into twelve sections. Seven of these twelve chapters are devoted to primary source material in translation: Sir Thomas Grey of Heton's *Scalacronica*, John of Fordun's chronicle, the Lanercost Chronicle, the acts of King Robert I, the Chamberlain's rolls, English state records and Barbour's *Bruce*. These were presumably chosen to provide a fairly representative mix of the surviving records from both sides of the border.

To any reader with an interest in the history of mediaeval Scotland this list should look odd. It has been recognised since 1999 that John of Fordun was not the author of the *Gesta Annalia* appended to *Chronica Gentis Scottorum*, and therefore not the author of these extracts on King Robert. Instead, in his seminal chapter in *Church, Chronicle and Learning in Mediaeval and Renaissance*

*Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1999), Dauvit Broun demonstrated that these passages were part of a manuscript that he called *Gesta Annalia II*, and which was derived in some way from a St Andrews chronicle. In choosing to ignore (if that is indeed what happened) the historiographic consequences of Broun's chapter, and in continuing to assign the authorship of the *Gesta Annalia* material appended to *Chronica Gentis Scottorum* to John of Fordun, Mr Brown is helping to perpetuate yet another chain of error in Scottish history.

Dauvit Broun, however, should not feel too offended. As far as this book is concerned he is in good company since the author also fails to include any mention of McDiarmid and Stevenson's edition of Barbour's *Bruce*. Accordingly, anyone reading Mr Brown's commentary on A.A.M. Duncan's edition of *The Bruce* (1997) might be led to believe that Professor Duncan was wholly responsible for interpreting the Edinburgh manuscript, 'E'. In fact, in his edition of the text Duncan makes it quite clear that he adopted McDiarmid and Stevenson's edition entirely and only made some literal changes to the text.

The remaining five chapters of *Robert the Bruce: A Life Chronicled*, amounting to about 10 per cent of the book, are short commentaries written by the author that either cover aspects of King Robert's reign or are concerned with a particular extract. Among these sections the author has contributed material on why there was a battle at Bannockburn in 1314, tactics used during the battle, the people of King Robert, a commentary on Barbour's *Bruce*, and King Robert in romance. While pleasant to read, these sections offer no great insights or new revelations about Scotland between 1306 and 1329.

Unfortunately, however, these five chapters also contain a number of glaring errors. The worst of these must be Mr Brown's description of the Treaty of Berwick in 1328 in which the Scots and the English made peace. Any member of the public looking to follow this reference up and read more about this treaty will search in vain. Perhaps the author meant to refer to the Treaty of Edinburgh-Northampton? Mr Brown also occasionally has a problem in identifying the correct geography. The island he discusses on page 43 was not Galloway but most likely Threave island (Richard Oram, *The Lordship of Galloway* (Edinburgh, 2000), 222).

In fact, this book gives every impression of never having been proof-read. If it had been, such simple errors would surely have been picked up. This also probably explains why at least four books are referred to in the text but never appear in the bibliography: Herbert Maxwell's translation of the Lanercost Chronicle (actually Chapter 3 of the book); *Calendar of Documents Relating to Scotland*, v, (1986) by G.G. Simpson and J.D. Galbraith; *Image and Identity* (eds Dauvit Broun, R.J. Finlay and Michael Lynch, 1998), and Roger Mason (ed.), *People and Power in Scotland* (1992). In similar vein, not too many general readers might be aware that Mayhew and Gemmill's *Changing Value of Money* (p. 13) is actually the same text as Gemmill, E. and N. Mayhew *Changing Values in Mediaeval Scotland* (bibliography).

My last bone of contention is this: Mr Brown's sole rationale for cobbling this book together was to make some of the surviving evidence for the life and times of King Robert I more readily available. In fact, Barbour's *Bruce*, which accounts for 210 pages (over 50 per cent) of the text, can quite easily be bought as a Canongate paperback either for £5 second-hand or for £10 new. Similarly, another sixty-eight pages can also be easily accessed in Llanerch reprints. This means that over two-thirds of this book can quite easily be found in any high-street bookshop, probably most second-hand bookstores, and any public library. The remaining third is not worth the £30 price-tag.

This book was a good idea but poorly executed. It is not the only source book on the life of King Robert I for historians. It cannot be recommended as

essential reading for students. It most definitely is not a masterpiece of research. Had I paid for this book I would have demanded my money back.

*University of Stirling*

ALASDAIR ROSS

*The Declaration of Arbroath: History, Significance, Setting.*

Edited by Geoffrey Barrow. Pp xiii, 148.

ISBN 0 903903 27 X.

Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. 2003. £19.99.

The appearance of a second book in two years dealing with the Declaration of Arbroath is testimony to the special significance accorded to this letter by modern audiences. No other mediaeval Scottish diplomatic missive has produced even a fraction of the material written on this 1320 letter in the name of the Scottish barons to Pope John XXII. It has even become the focal point for global celebrations of Scottishness as well as being the subject of a conference in 2001 whose proceedings form this volume. At the outset, however, it is important to understand the importance of the sub-title, 'History, Significance, Setting'. For this is a book about the place of the Declaration, geographical and historical, more than about its content or immediate context.

The arrangement of the seven articles included could have made this clearer. Rather than being organised alphabetically they might have been more helpfully grouped according to theme. For example two chapters clearly deal with setting. Richard Fawcett provides a detailed architectural description and history of Arbroath Abbey which includes a fascinating account of the move from hostility through neglect to conservation in the treatment of the building after the Reformation. This account would sit well alongside the excellent discussion of the abbey's foundation and growth up to 1320 by Keith Stringer which gives a convincing analysis of this exceptionally well-endowed community. Stringer's argument that fresh impetus was provided by new endowments from King William in the 1190s exactly fits with Fawcett's dating of the main building period, not to the initial foundation of the 1170s but to the end of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. These two articles provide a second study of a major reformed abbey alongside the recent study of Melrose Abbey by Fawcett and Richard Oram.

Three papers deal with the transmission and commemoration of the Declaration. Grant Simpson discusses the recent debate about the document, in which his role has been central, and then looks at the early transmission of the text. What is clear from this examination is that, for someone like Walter Bower, the 1320 letter had no special importance and its purpose was imperfectly known. Bower included many similar documents and accords greater significance to the writings of Baldred Bisset twenty years before. J.N.G. Ritchie's discussion of celebrations in Arbroath to mark the Declaration is a fascinating account of twentieth-century perceptions of the Scottish past and their importance (even sensitivity) in discussions of the Scottish present and future. By comparison Edward Cowan's piece relating the development of 'Tartan Days' in North America and Australasia seems rather too close to the events it describes, both in terms of the author's personal attitudes and in terms of chronology.

What is most striking about this collection is that only two of the essays actually focus on the events of the early fourteenth century. Moreover, one of these, Archie Duncan's analysis of the context and content of the letters of 1309-10, known as the Declaration of the Clergy, is something of a prequel. Though long known about and much-quoted, this is the first detailed examination of the