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Book Report:

John Barbour’s
“The Bruce”

A, fredome is a noble thing!

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1. Introduction

“The Bruce” by John Barbour is a long poem of approximately 14,000 lines telling the heroic story of King Robert I, who is also known as ‘Robert the Bruce’. During the Wars of Independence at the beginning of the fourteenth century, Robert I led the campaign against King Edward I of England, who claimed overlordship of Scotland. Thus, the Bruce became one of the greatest Scottish national heroes for succeeding in the struggle for Scotland’s independence.

John Barbour, who lived from about 1320 to 1395, was Archdeacon of Aberdeen. “The Bruce” is Barbour’s best known work of literature and was completed in 1375. It “crosses many generic boundaries, encompassing features of epic, romance and chronicle”\(^1\). The poem starts with the death of King Alexander III who leaves the Scottish throne without an heir. Several noblemen, among them Robert the Bruce, claim their right to the throne. The Scottish nobility cannot agree whom to appoint successor of Alexander III. Finally, they ask King Edward I of England to decide for them. As it has always been the aim of English kings to gain control over Scotland, Edward I chooses John Balliol as king on condition that he be vassal to England. Soon, the English King invades Scotland. Occupation and oppression are the consequences for the Scottish people. As the Scots are a freedom-loving people, they would not bear this. Robert the Bruce, after having murdered his last competitor John Cumyn, is now the only candidate to the throne of Scotland left. He is crowned King Robert I of Scotland and he becomes the leader of the Scottish struggle for independence. His brother Edward Bruce and James of Douglas are his loyal friends and lieutenants. Through support from Scottish clergy and nobility and growing military success, Robert I gains control over the territory north of the Forth. This forces England to action. The Battle of Bannockburn in which Robert the Bruce defeats the English army is the central episode of Barbour’s poem. But though this battle is won, the war is not. It takes many more battles until finally the English accept Scotland’s independence and make peace. Only shortly afterwards, King Robert I dies and orders that his heart be taken to the Holy Land by James of Douglas.

2. The Scottish Wars of Independence

Taking a closer look at the historic events described in Barbour’s “Bruce”, the question if the poem can be treated as a chronicle or rather as fiction is legitimate. As Barbour was a young

\(^1\) Gifford, D., Dunningagn, S., Gillivray, A., Scottish Literature, Edinburgh 2002, p. 5.
boy when Robert I reigned and “The Bruce” was written about 50 years later in 1375, he lived only shortly after the time he wrote about. He may have had the chance to talk to veterans of Bannockburn or other battles of the Wars of Independence and he also may have had access to sources and documents that are lost today. According to Barbour’s own words, “The Bruce” is a ‘romance’ and thus a work of literature:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Lordingis quha likis for till her,} \\
\text{Ye romanys now begynnys her} \\
\text{Off men yat war in gret distres} \\
\text{And assayit full gret hardyness} \\
\end{align*}
\]  
(I, 445-448)

The poem is “crammed from beginning to end with exciting incidents which could well belong to the realm of myth or romance, were they not verified from other factual sources”\(^2\). By interpreting and selecting happenings rather than recounting them, the author acts a ‘director’ of the events.\(^3\) Considering these observations, “The Bruce” cannot be regarded as a chronicle in its strict and narrow sense but rather as an example of national epic. Therefore, historic events and details as they are described in “The Bruce” should be handled with care and not taken for granted.

It is striking that William Wallace, the victor of the Battle at Stirling Bridge and Bruce’s successor, is not even mentioned. By omitting the achievements of William Wallace, Robert the Bruce is presented as the glorious leader who began the struggle for independence. King Robert learned his “philosophy of war” which is basically guerrilla warfare from Wallace.\(^4\) As the English army is military superior to the Scottish troops, attacking English garrisons in Scotland and Scottish noblemen who favor the English is the only chance for Robert I to weaken the English supremacy.

Therefore, the King is never safe and his life is always in danger. Barbour tells of several attacks and intrigues on Robert I, e.g. when Ingram Umfraville bribes a traitor to murder the king (V, 515- 647) or the Men of Galloway attack and hunt him (VI, 32- 58). The Queen and her daughter Marjory are taken captive in Tain and imprisoned in England (IV, 39- 56).

At the beginnig, the King has to suffer several setbacks and defeats. The defeat at Methven is described in fair length and bloody detail (II, 345- 470). Only after the death of King Edward I (IV, 323-335), the Scottish King gains more and more success in battle.

When Robert the Bruce and his men lay siege to Stirling Castle, it finally comes to open battle. Bruce gives a speech to motivate his men in which he stresses the “Scottish cause”\(^5\)

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\(^2\) Scottish Literature, p. 6.


The Scottish host and the English host meet in the Battle of Bannockburn. The English force is drawn into marshland between Forth and Bannock Burn:

*And fled sa fast rycht effryitly*
*Yat off yaim a full gret party*
*Fled to ye water of Forth & yar*
*Ye mast part off yaim drownyt war,*
*And Bannokburne betvuix ye brays*
*Off men [and] hors swa stekyt wais*  

(XIII, 333-338)

King Edward leaves the battle field early and escapes to Dunbar where he is given “A bate and send ye king by se/ to Bawmburgh in his own contre.” (XIII, 619- 629).

The English are defeated, yet the war for independence is neither won nor ended. Barbour goes on telling that, after this glorious battle, the King’s brother, Edward Bruce, leaves for Ireland: “And had na will to be in pes,/ Thocht yat Scotland to litll wes [...] Yat he off Irland wald be king.” (XIV, 3-4, 7). Thus, he opens a second front in the war with England. Later on, Robert the Bruce joins his brother in Ireland (XVI, 37- 38).

Back in Scotland, the war continues on Scottish territory. After a failed conspiracy against Robert I (XIX, 22- 30) and more smaller battles, the Scottish invade Northumberland and force the English king to accept the peace. Robert the Bruce lives not long to enjoy his success. Soon afterwards, King Robert I dies. On his deathbed he commands that “On Goddis fayis my hart to ber” (XX, 195). James of Douglas is chosen for this task and he sets out for the Holy Land. In Spain, he joins the fight against the Saracens and is killed in battle. Douglas’ remains and the king’s heart are returned to Scotland and

*With gret worschyp has gert bery*
*Ye kingis hart at ye abbay*
*Off Melros, quhar men prayis ay*
*Yat he and his have paradys.*  

(XX, 608-611)

### 3. Nationalism and the topic of ‘freedom’

In Barbour’s “Bruce” the reader also gets an impression of what society was like in 14th century Scotland. After King Alexander’s death, the country falls into deep trouble:

*Qwhen Alexander ye king wes deid*
*Yat Scotland had to steyr & leid,*
*Ye land [sex] yer &mayr perfay*
*Lay desolate eftyr hys day*  

(1, 37-40)

The dispute over the question of his succession endangers the stability of the kindom. Because of the traditional clan system, the nobility consists of powerful clan chiefs who all
desire to place a member of their own clan on the throne to gain more power. For leaving the
decision to King Edward I and delivering Scotland at the hands and the arbitrariness of the
English king, Barbour calls the Scots “A! Blind folk full of foly...” (I, 91).6
In spite of all disputes and hostility between the different clans, what unifies them is their
Scottishness. As the English king is about to gain control over Scotland, it is particularly
their independence and national identity that is in danger. A king is needed to unify the clans
under the Scottish crown for the Scottish cause.
As not only goods are taken from the Scottish people, they are also severely limited in their
personal freedom, the Scottish suffer terribly from the English occupation:

\[
\begin{align*}
[Alas] & \text{ yat folk yat euer wes fre}, \\
& \text{And in fredome wount for to be,} \\
& \text{Throw yer gret myschance and foly} \\
& \text{War tretyt yan sa wykkytly} \\
& \text{Yat yer fays yer iugis war,} \\
& \text{Quhat wrechitnes may man have mar.} \quad (I, \, 219-224)
\end{align*}
\]

This short excerpt shows that the Scottish are a people accustomed to ‘fredome’ and now that
their country is occupied and they are treated badly, they live in total wretchedness. They are
robbed of both their economic and their social basis of existence. In this context, Barbour
places his famous praise of freedom:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{A, fredome is a noble thing,} \\
& \text{Fredome mays man to haiff liking,} \\
& \text{Fredome all solace to man giffis,} \\
& \text{He levys at es yat frely levys. [...]} \quad (I, \, 225-248)
\end{align*}
\]

Scottish people consider ‘fredome’ as a central defining feature of their social and national
identity. According to the statement given here by Barbour, freedom is not understood as a
privilege for the nobility, but as a basic human right to all Scots and all men.7 This may be
called some kind of “democratic element”8.
In the Scottish case, ‘freedom’ has not only a national, but also an individual dimension.9 For
the nation, it means freedom from occupation and oppression and for the individual it means
to be able to do what he pleases to do. In his speech to his army the night before
Bannockburn, Bruce states that the Scots fight for their lives, their families, their freedom and

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6 Cf. Scottish Literature, p. 5.
7 Cf. Barbour’s Bruce, Volume I, p. 49.
8 Scottish Literature, p. 7.
their country. “Freedom is best won by free men”\textsuperscript{11}. Only free men can fight out of their own convictions and are prepared to give their lives for the cause.

To regain their lost freedom, the Scottish have to fight together. But the struggle for independence can only be successful if it is organized. Therefore, Barbour is also concerned with the “leadership that freedom requires”\textsuperscript{12}. He states that his poem is

\begin{quote}
\textit{Off mychtý kingis, as sayís ye story,}
\textit{And delyueryt yar land all fre,}
\textit{Quharfor yar name suld lovyt be.} \textit{(I, 474- 476)}
\end{quote}

It is Robert the Bruce who takes the leadership. He manages to unify the Scottish nobility and the folk under the Scottish crown for the Scottish cause. He leads his folk through long times of war into independence. Barbour presents him as charismatic, noble and wise king. His patriotic devotion to “ye kynryk” and “ye folk” (I, 478- 479) emphasize that “Ye king Robert ye Bruys is he./ Yat is rycht lord off yis countre” (VII, 251- 252). Robert the Bruce is admired as a great hero while he is still alive and after his death his fame and glory all the more grow. Up into our days, Robert the Bruce is remembered as one of the greatest if not the greatest Scottish national hero for the establishment of Scotland’s independence from England.

\textbf{4. Conclusion}

Reading and studying Barbour’s “Bruce” is not only literary but also cultural and historic experience. Although the Medieval language of Older Scots seems to be a barrier at first sight, after a couple of pages the reader gets more and more familiar with the words and sounds of Older Scots. The language as well as rhyme and meter of the poem have a special effect: the modern reader is taken on a journey back to the heroic days of the Scottish Wars of Independence.

The beginning of the 14\textsuperscript{th} century was a troubled time for Scotland. It was a “struggle for the very survival of the nation”\textsuperscript{13}. The campaign led by Robert the Bruce was not only about royal interests but also about the patriotic motivated preservation of the kingdom. The Wars of Independence is a time for noble men and noble deeds. The motif of ‘freedom’ is the central theme. Freedom is presented as a defining feature of free men and of Scottishness. To regain their status as free men in an independent country, the Scottish fight for more than two decades. The Battle of Bannockburn is not only the central episode in Barbour’s “Bruce” but

\textsuperscript{10} Cf. The Brus, XII, 231-253.
\textsuperscript{11} Barbour’s Bruce. Volume I, p.49; McDiarmid, The Metrical Chronicles and Non-alliterative Romances, p.29.
\textsuperscript{12} Cf. Barbour’s Bruce. Volume I, p. 46.
also the major event in the Scottish Wars of Independence. When finally the English have to give in, the Scottish can truly say: “A, fredome is a noble thing!”

5. Bibliography

Selected passages from: John Barbour, “The Bruce”

I, 225-248 → Barbour’s praise of freedom

A, fredome is a noble thing, 225
Fredome mays man to haiff liking,
Fredome all solace to man giffis,
He levys at es yat frely levys.
A noble hart may haiff nane es
Na ellysnoch yat may him ples 230
Gyff fredome failyhe, for fre liking
Is yharnyt our all oyer thing.
Na he yat ay has levyt fre
May nocht knam weill ye propyrte
Ye angyr na ye wrechet dome 235
Yat is cowplyt to foule thyrldome,
Bot gyff he had assayit it.
Yan all perquer he suld it wyt,
And suld think fredome mar to prys
Yan all ye gold in warld yat is. 240
Yus contrar thingis euer-mar
Discoweryngis off ye toyer ar,
And he yat thryll is has nocht his.
All yat he has enbandownyt is
Till hys lord quahat-euer he be. 245
Yheyt has he nocht sa mekill fre
As fre wyll to leyve or do
Yar hys hart hym drawis to.
XII, 218- 254 → Bruce’s address to his men before Bannockburn

And as ye luf me I yow pray
Yat ilk man for his awne honour
Purway him a gud baneour,
And quhen it cummys to ye fyght
Ilk man set hart will & mycht
To stynt our fayis mekill prid.
On hors yai will arayit rid
And cum on yow in full gret hy,
Mete yaim with speris hardely
And think yan on ye mekill ill
Yat yai and yaris hasa done ws till,
And ar in will yeit for to do
Giff yai haf mycht to cum yar-to.
And certis me think weill yat ye
For-owt abasing aucht to be
Worthy and of gret wasselagis
For we haff thre gret awantagis.
Ye fyrst is yat we haf ye rycht
And for ye rycht ay God will fycht.
Ye toyer is yat yai cummyn ar
For lyppynyng off yar gret powar
To sek us in our awne land,
And has brocht her rycht till our hand
Ryches in-to sa gret quantite
Yat ye powrest of yow sall be
Bath rych and mycht yar-with-all
Giff yat we wyne, as weill may fall.
Ye thrid is yat we for our lyvis
And for our childer & for our wywis
And for our fredome and for our land
Ar strenyeit in-to bataill for to stand,
And yai for yar mycht anerly
And for yai lat of ws heyghtly
And for yai wald distroy ws all
Mais yaim to fyght, bot yeit may fall
Yat yai sall rew ayr barganyng.
And certis I warne yow off a thing,

XX, 23-43 → Peace is made with England

Ye landis off Northummyrland
Yat neyst to Scotland war liand
In fe and heritage gave he,
And yai payit for ye selys fe.
On yis wys raid he destroyand
Quhill yat ye king of Ingland
Throw consaill of ye Mortymar
And hys moder yat yat tym war
Ledaris of him yat yan young wes
To king Robert to tret off pes
Send messyngeris, and swa sped yai
Yat yai assentyt on yis way
[Yan] a perpetuale pes [to] tak,
And yai a marriage suld mak
Off ye king Robertis sone Dawy
Yat yan bot fyve yer had scarsly
And off dame Ihone als off ye Tour
Yat syne wes off full gret walour,
Systre scho wes to ye king
Yat had Ingland in gouernyng,
Yat yan of eild had sewyn yer.
The earliest printed versions of *The Bruce* raise yet another issue bearing on the purity of the text. The first is apparently of the year 1571, and only one copy is known to exist. It does not, however, differ materially from that of Andro Hart, published at Edinburgh in 1616.