

ROMANTIC HISTORY AND POETRY IN MEDIAEVAL SCOTLAND

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C. M. Bowra, writing on heroic poetry and listing examples of this genre, draws his illustrations from classical and modern literature, from the writings of the Anglo-Saxons, from little-known Slavonic poems of action and even from a tenth-century Arabian epic.¹ Although he succeeds in communicating the impression that the heroic battlefield is "a large feld to ere," he somehow fails to mention either Barbour's *Bruce* or Blind Harry's *Wallace*, both of which are worthy examples of the Scots heroic epic. These are omissions for which there seems to be little excuse, for though these poems draw upon the techniques of the authors of mediaeval chivalric romance, the romantic action does not lie so much in the realm of the marvellous as in the spectacle of Scotland fighting heroically against mighty odds. Heroes like Bruce and more especially Wallace became symbols of the national character and provided both scholars and minstrels with material for romantic history and poetry.

Barbour's account of the career of Bruce is a verse-chronicle written in the spirit of a noble romance and its author managed to impart to it a unity rarely found in a continuous historical record. It is difficult to determine exactly how far the *Bruce* is actual history, and the task of separating fact from fancy is further complicated because Barbour's poem is itself the main Scottish authority for the events it records. John of Fordun's *Latin Chronicle of the Scottish Nation* was continued only as far as the reign of David I, who died in 1153, and the author of *The Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland*, Andrew of Wyntoun, deliberately avoids poaching on Barbour's preserves. Since Wyntoun was a contemporary of Barbour and from his tone a faithful recorder not given to embellishment or undue prejudice, his respect for the Archdeacon should not be ignored in assessing the latter's value as a historian. Several scholars have noted the early reference to Bruce as "Thys Lord the Bryss, I spak of ayr"—which may in any case be a scribal flaw—and pounced on it as an obvious error since the Bruce mentioned earlier is not the patriot himself, but his grandfather. Either by accident or design, Barbour or the scribe had bolstered up the hero's

(1) *Heroic Poetry* (London, 1952), 48ff.

case by confusing him with an ancestor who had neither sworn fealty to the English king Edward nor done homage to the puppet Baliol. But this is a minor point. Throughout the poem there is certainly a tendency to exaggerate the exploits of Bruce and his fellow-champions, but the exaggerations, though often wild—especially with reference to the numeration of the English soldiery—is never connected with the belittlement of a brave enemy.

The *Bruce* was written over forty years after the death of its hero, and although Barbour undoubtedly had the testimony of eye-witnesses for some of the events, and access to documentary records for others, many of his impressions must have been derived from traditional or other secondary sources. It is an indication of his probable worth as a historian that he seems to have lacked neither the intuition and capacity for judging men and circumstances nor such impartiality as might reasonably be expected from a Scot of that time endowed with strong nationalist feelings and considerable literary gifts. In many details he is corroborated even by English chroniclers, and Scottish state documents, so far as they are available, substantiate his claim that he wrote the truth as it appeared to him. The difficulty of deciding what is "truth" in history, particularly in the face of contradictory second-hand evidence of equal *prima facie* value, complicates the task of the chronicler and the historiographer. No matter how much he may insist upon scholarly integrity, his account of a complex chain of events will certainly suffer, not only through his own liability to error in the selection of accurate details, but also because of the rapidity with which legend casts its veil over important personalities and incidents. It is impossible to refute Barbour on existing evidence except on minor points and it is unimaginative and even unfair to judge him on modern historiographical standards (though even on these he cannot be denied considerable credit). In any case, events of long ago need a spark of fancy in their retelling.

To appreciate *Bruce* as a poetical achievement one must first accept the fact that it was an original venture in literature and the first poetical production written by a Scot to break away from the wonders of the older alliterative romance tradition. Barbour is looked on as the father of Scots poetry and occupies a position in Scots literature analogous to that of Chaucer in English literature. Not only did he create a formal literary language but he also characterised, for the first time, the nationality of the Scot—an independent trend that may be

traced through the country's literature from the time of Dunbar and the "makars" to that of Fergusson and Burns and which in our own century distinguishes the poetry and prose of Hugh Macdiarmid. Barbour's narrative, written in octosyllabic couplets, has none of the southern melody and rhetoric, but is instead plain and animated, unornamented and vivid, hearkening back to the Anglo-Saxon poet of *Maldon* in the evocation of tone and the stark delineation of character. Bruce himself is depicted as brave, fierce, magnanimous and kind to the humble, though merciless in war. James of Douglas, the second hero, reflects the qualities of his chief while remaining a distinct and perhaps a more romantically-appealing personality. All the named personages are human beings, drenched in flesh and blood, not simply the wooden figures of impersonal record, while the glimpses we have of the common people show them to be lively, like Chaucer's pilgrims, and of one mind with their leaders. In Bruce's Scotland, heroism is in the air.

Barbour has an eye for colour and frequently stops to note details like the blinking of the sun on the shields of the warriors and the colours of their armour and trappings. He gives us a vigorous account of Bannock-burn which, though rougher-hewn than Scott's description of Flodden, maintains a dignity which the latter never reaches. The poet is at his best as a scenario-writer, in describing scenes of action, of which one of the finest examples is the fight between Bruce on his grey palfrey and the English champion de Bohun on his war-horse, whom Barbour generously calls "ane gud knycht and hardy." The work is essentially masculine in temper and its vocabulary is somewhat cryptic and limited in range, as might be expected of any report on a military expedition, yet the poet does not lack the felicitous touch which saves *Bruce* from baldness. The description of the Queen and her ladies taking leave of their knights before going to Kildrummy Castle for shelter is one memorable example:

Men mycht haiff sene, quha had bene thar,
 . . . knychtis, for ther luffis sak,
 Baith sich, and wep, and murnyng mak.²

The atmosphere of the poem, evoked by the economy of its language, the episodic quality of its narrative, and the occasional flashes of lyricism suggests that Barbour's poetic technique has much in common with that of the balladists. There is a strong element of minstrelsy about it and the ability to mark

(2) W.W. Skeat, ed., *The Bruce* (printed for the Scottish Text Society, 2 vols London and Edinburgh 1894), I, 64.

out a scene in a few powerful strokes is the essence of the ballad-maker's art.

Although he was a contemporary of Chaucer, Barbour exhibits no signs of "Chaucerianism" and in fact had finished *Bruce* before Chaucer had fully emerged from his period of literary apprenticeship. Like Chaucer, however, he was stimulated by the Anglo-Norman romances of chivalry, and spiritually, at least, *Bruce* owes a good deal to such tales as *The Romance of Fierabras* or that of *Alexander the Great*, which are introduced as illustrations in the early part of the poem. But Barbour is first and foremost a Scot and never indulges in decoration for its own sake in the tradition of Chaucer's followers. He is writing history before poetry and entertains a concept of historical truth similar to that of the nineteenth-century German historian Ranke, who resolved to interest himself only in what actually happened. Bruce is not endowed with superhuman strength, nor is he assisted by miracles, as many epic heroes were; his struggle may result in victory or defeat at any time during his campaign. We encounter no chivalrous cavaliers in search of a phantom honour, nor do we find the courtliness of the verse romances, wherein the Royal Court is graced with splendour. The Scots Court moved about with the King, and often had the heavens for a roof and the battlefield for a floor. Bruce is a general and is described as such—a man who regrets the necessity for fighting Bannock-burn at all and who is sufficiently aware of his own human fallibility to seek the advice of his men before committing them to battle. Barbour's portrait is one of realism, not of romantic abstraction, and he depicts a man, not a demi-god.

About a century later, a somewhat more ambitious work was written in the national spirit by a shadowy figure known as "Blind Harry," referred to in John Major's *History of Britain* (1521) as an itinerant minstrel. There seems to have been a real Harry, mentioned by Dunbar in "Lament For the Makaris," who recited traditional stories about Wallace and whose name appears in a few scattered entries in the Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland for the period between New Year's Day 1490 and New Year's Day 1491. "The nakit blynd Hary" makes a brief appearance in an anonymous poem entitled "Ane Littill Interlud of the Droichis (Dwarf's) Part of the Play" which may have been part of a masque performed before the magistrates of Edinburgh. These items represent practically all that is known about the author of *Wallace*;³ on external

(3) J. Moir, ed., *Schir William Wallace* (printed for the Scottish Text Society, 3 vols London and Edinburgh 1884-89), introd. vi-viii.

evidence the poem may be dated between 1474 and 1479,⁴ and the MS upon which all the printed editions of this epic have been based was written in 1488 by a scribe who also made a transcript of *Bruce*.

One might expect *Wallace* to reflect the apparently lowly origins of its author and to be illiterate work, but it soon becomes evident that Blind Harry, naked sightless mendicant or not, was a well-read man who was familiar with *Bruce*, the English, Scots, Latin and French chroniclers, the *Book of Alexander*, Huchown's *Morte Arthur* and, *inter alia*, *The Canterbury Tales*. Perhaps following a mediaeval fashion, he claims to be merely a translator, and declares *Wallace* to be a rendering in Scots of the Latin works of a certain John Blair, a schoolfellow and comrade-in-arms of Wallace himself.⁵ This, according to Harry, is reinforced by information obtained from Thomas Gray, parson of Libertoun, but Harry further confesses that he did not invariably abide by these two sure witnesses, Blair and Gray, adding that he was led astray by two knights who made him make "wrang record." No trace has ever been discovered of Blair's Latin *History*, though we have Wyntoun's authority that "gret gestis" or tales of Wallace's brave deeds were in existence before Harry's version appeared. As it stands, *Wallace*, though it purports to be history, is so far removed from the actual circumstances of the hero's life as to make historians feel assured of Harry's ignorance and incapacity to represent Wallace's activities with any degree of accuracy.

However, since it is obvious that Harry's account of Wallace's adventures is highly-coloured and largely the result of a free exercise of his own vivid imagination, the work ought to be accepted, not as false history, but as romantic biography composed by an author who believes that he has license to modulate the known facts in the compelling interests of patriotism. Blind Harry had to return to the past for his idea of nationality, for in his own day apathy was rife in Scotland. James III had proposed a marriage with the English throne so that the two countries might be more closely united, while at the same time his own nobles were intriguing with elements in England against him. In such a period of anarchy and treachery in high places, the flame of patriotism flickered dangerously low. The political situation of the time was a far cry

(4) See Matthew P. McDiarmid, "The Date of the Wallace" (*Scottish Historical Review*, XXXIV.1, April, 1955), 26-31.

(5) Blair himself may have existed, since a "Master J. Blair" is mentioned together with members of the Wallace family in charters dated 1477 and 1486 and someone of that name made a transcript of *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* for James III in 1467, but there is no tangible evidence connecting him with Wallace. (See McDiarmid, *op. cit.* 27.)

from the glorious triumph of yesteryear, when Wallace and Bruce had battled against the Southron invader and the *Declaration of Arbroath* (1320) had proclaimed Scots independence to Pope John XXII as international arbitrator, stating that "so long as there shall but one hundred of us remain alive we will never subject ourselves to the dominion of the English."⁶

This is the historical background of *Wallace*, and accordingly the character of the work is very different from that of *Bruce*. In *Bruce* the poet impresses his audience with the patriotic feeling of the nobleman, whereas in *Wallace* it is the poor man, ashamed of the decadence of his social superiors, whose national pride is reflected. When Wallace set out on his patriotic mission the Scottish nobles, who owned holdings in England as well as in their own country, refused to support him, since they feared that their possessions South of the border might be forfeit if they did so. Opposition to English administration came from the common people, who suffered greatly from the unnecessary cruelties perpetrated by order of Edward I's emissaries. Lacking the influence which accompanied feudal rank, Wallace's authority rested on the people at large and on his success as a military leader.

Harry's poem, then, as we gather from the bitter opening lines, is the work of a man seeking to rouse ordinary Scotsmen to a renewed awareness of their long-dormant national pride, and it can be seen how he employed his wide knowledge of classical and mediaeval literature in order to exaggerate the deeds of a hero long dead and so to encourage the contempt of his hearers for the abject state of purposelessness into which once-proud Scotland had relapsed during the years between. The theme of *Wallace*—an individual fight for liberation—suggests the need for reliberation in fifteenth-century Scotland and points the way through the personality of the hero, who himself subordinated all other considerations to the end of expelling the English invaders.

As in the case of *Bruce*, little is known of the details of Wallace's campaign except what Harry tells us. A few incidents, such as the slaying of Hesilrig at Lanark, are authentic and English chroniclers yield a few additional items of information. Wyntoun and Bower are fragmentary, and in any case Harry borrowed liberally from both the *Orygynale Cronykil* and the *Scotichronicon*. Contemporary English opinions are without exception markedly hostile and abusive, and it is perhaps

(6) Translation of 1703 from the Latin original.

not surprising that his enemies heard of Wallace as a blood-thirsty savage or that the English recorders—mostly churchmen—described him in terms of opprobrium.⁷

Harry's poem is composed with rhapsodical fervour and must be taken to represent the concentrated enthusiasm of a popular mediaeval hero-cult, for the narrative is largely fictitious. There was, for example, no siege of York, no invasion of England farther than Newcastle, no plea for mercy from a craven Edward I hiding in the Tower (who sent, so Harry tells us, his wife Eleanor to plead for him before Wallace),⁸ and of course no supernatural visitants. Like Barbour, Harry exaggerates the numerical superiority of Wallace's foes, but unlike Bruce, chivalry is not a feature of the earlier hero's conduct, and his prosecution of the war is founded wholly upon his desire for vengeance, frequently of a gruesome kind. There are none of the gentlemanly reflections or moral scruples of Bruce in the make-up of Wallace, who neither asks for quarter nor gives any. Only on one or two occasions does he demonstrate any respect for courtliness and even then it is of a rough, masculine variety, but he behaves well towards Queen Eleanor on her suppliant mission and being human accepts the treachery of his mistress with resignation. Harry is painting a full man—the first portrait of its kind in Scots literature—and although his account of Wallace's exploits is not really history or even imaginative biography but is instead patriotic propaganda, such has been its effect on Scotsmen throughout the ages that we should regard it as we regard the tales of King Arthur or the adventures of Robin Hood and say that even if the *Wallace* is not true, it ought to have been.

As poetry, Harry's work is not so distinguished as Barbour's; though he had the same inborn emotional sympathy with his subject as the author of *Bruce* he is too much concerned with detail and his decasyllabic couplet is inclined to ring monotonously. Nevertheless, he shows himself to be a rhetorical artist of considerable ability who seizes every opportunity to display his talent. We may take it that his blindness debarred him from first-hand natural description, but he depicts martial scenes enthusiastically and his racy dialogue looks forward to Scott's. But, in general, he concentrates on exposition rather than upon the production of a work of art, and *Wallace* is much closer to the style of the straightforward

(7) e.g. the editor of the *Lanercost Chronicle*; Matthew of Westminster in the *Flores Historiarum*, who is especially vehement; Florence of Worcester; and others.

(8) Edward had no Queen at the time at which this incident is supposed to have taken place. (1298). Eleanor died in 1290 and he did not remarry until September, 1299.

chronicle than is *Bruce*. When Harry is "poetic," the result is highly artificial and lacks the stamp of originality; many such passages suggest that he was an intelligent imitator of certain alliterative romances, notably the *Gest Historiale* and the *Morte Arthur*.⁹ But his language is, like that of the ballad-makers, a heightened form of the common-speech of his day and by placing the narrative first, Harry occasionally achieves a pathos which no amount of contrivance could better.

The wemen cryede; "Our bukler player is slane."

The man was dede; quhat nedis wordis mair?"¹⁰

The Scots nature is so strongly bound up with the spirit of nationalism that no matter how they themselves understood the words, all the successive protagonists of freedom, liberty, self-government and independence in Scotland have found their sentiments symbolised in the personalities of Bruce and Wallace as depicted by Barbour and Blind Harry. Modern historians may, and perhaps rightly, seek the reasons for Scotland's survival in economic fields as much as on those of battle and ascribe England's failure to the activities of a small Scots mercantile group whose continued alliance with European traders prevented a blockade, rather than to the tenacity of any individual or patriotic group.¹¹ But the romantic view of the War of Independence, however naive it may be, has exercised a continued attraction on Scotsmen and still serves as a worthy example. The Covenanters who fell to the sabres of Claverhouse's dragoons, the clansmen who flung themselves at the guns of the Hanoverian mercenaries at Culloden, the patriotic members of the "Easy" and "Cape" Clubs of eighteenth-century Edinburgh, and all those Scots who, with sword or pen, have tried to defend themselves against English incursions into their way of life, remembered these early champions of the Thistle and the poets whose imaginations created flesh and blood from bare bones.

(9) See J. T. T. Brown, *The Wallace and the Bruce Restudied* (Bonn 1900), 34ff.

(10) *Wallace*, ed. cit., I, 45 (lines 368-69).

(11) See W. Stanford Reid, "Trade, Traders and Scottish Independence" (*Speculum*, XXIX, No. 21, April 1954, 210-222.)