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Legend of Freedom: Rethinking the Role of Robert the Bruce in Shaping the Scottish Identity

Department of History

University at Albany, State University of New York

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for graduation with Honors in History

Deina Carbonara

Research Mentor: Patrick Nold, Ph. D.

Research Advisor: Michitake Aso, Ph. D.

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Abstract

This paper explores the link between King Robert the Bruce and the evolution of the Scottish nation in the early fourteenth century. While many Scottish people today, and in the centuries since his life, believed that Bruce was the primary driving force of a consolidation of the Scottish nation and its independence, this paper will show that Bruce was only able to succeed to his position as monarch and to gain recognition of Scotland as a sovereign kingdom due to the actions of earlier peoples. Specifically, I examine the foundations of Christianity within Scotland and how the Church's insistence to be independent from the English bishoprics set the initial ideas of an independent Scotland. I also examine the few Scottish monarchs who shirked the tradition of swearing allegiance to the English king as a matter of proclaiming their sovereignty. Rather than entirely eschewing his achievements, the paper highlights the fact that Bruce was a shrewd politician who was able to expertly weave pieces of earlier precedents to strengthen his relatively weak claim to kingship. My thesis argues that Bruce's more unsavory actions—such as the murder of his primary competitor for the throne and his penchant for siding against the Scots alongside the English just prior to his reign—were calculated and necessary steps for the ultimate success of the country rather than the chaotic choices made by a power-hungry madman. Most significantly, my paper shows that Bruce was not a “Great Man of History” but rather the beneficiary of being the right man at the right time and place.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank Dr. Aso for his opening statement for this year-long project: “this will undoubtedly be the hardest and most rewarding experience of your undergraduate career.” I thought the statement was overly hyperbolic, or perhaps true for some, but certainly wouldn’t be the case for me. How wrong I was. I have spent countless weeks and months over the last year endlessly agonizing about this project. It was the throughline of stress that punctuated every quiet (or increasingly hectic) moment. But the endless encouragement and guidance from Dr. Aso reeled me back from the edge countless times and he persistently challenged me to question myself, my methods, and my intentions, ultimately culminating into a thesis that exceeded my expectations.

I am endlessly thankful for the choice to ask Dr. Nold to mentor this project. Despite having never met or been aware of each other’s work, he graciously accepted my request, and ended up being the exact match I needed. Dr. Nold trusted me to work as independently as I needed, yet was consistent in his support and encouragement. Despite an unconscionably busy schedule and responsibilities, I knew my work had significance in his mind due to the random, and exceedingly helpful, source suggestions throughout the year. And his expertise in the fields I didn’t know I’d venture into were an absolute blessing. He trudged his way through my earlier (terrible) drafts, yet never had a negative word to say or questioned my ability to get to the finish line. Working with Dr. Nold helped cement my choice to apply to UAlbany grad program with the hope of continuing to work together.

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Introduction

Sir Henry de Bohun, an English knight and cousin to the Earl of Hereford, Constable of England, was among the cavalry charge against the Scots in the effort to relieve Stirling Castle on 23 June 1314.¹ The start of the Battle of Bannockburn was slow, with each side quietly observing the other, waiting to see if there could be a bloodless surrender. Hereford led a garrison through the Torwood, a large forested area north of Stirling, where the Scots had rested the night before, and came upon a valley across which a small cluster of them could be seen. De Bohun, a young and rash man, rode hard ahead and reached the huddled Scots.² As they came closer into view, de Bohun saw one figure separated from the rest, sitting atop a demure grey pony, holding a small axe. Glancing closer, he saw that the helmet of this lone rider held a crown. Hoping to achieve swift glory and end the battle before it began, de Bohun charged headlong toward King Robert the Bruce, his lance at rest. Bruce watched this approach and sat steady. Just before the moment of impact, Bruce made a slight pivot on his pony, stood tall in his stirrups, lifted his axe overhead, and smashed it down onto the helmeted head of de Bohun. His axe exploded from the force, leaving him holding just the stub, for the blade had sliced through the helmet of young Henry de Bohun and cleaved his head in two.³

The Battle of Bannockburn marked a significant turning point in the Scottish Wars of Independence, which lasted from 1296 through 1357.⁴ It was within this battle, in 1314, that

¹ Agnes Mure Mackenzie, *Robert Bruce, King of Scots* (New York: MacMillan, 1935), 263-265.

² G. W. S. Barrow, *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 312.

³ Sir Herbert Maxwell, *Robert the Bruce and the Struggle for Scottish Independence* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1897), 205.

⁴ For more detailed information of the Scottish Wars of Independence, see Barrow's *Robert the Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), A. A. M. Duncan's

there was a growing sense for the Scottish people that they finally had a king that could secure for them an independence from England. It was also highlighted by tales of heroic deeds by their king, and was the first chapter of a long and triumphant national story. The battle commenced following the 1314 invasion into Scotland by England's King Edward I, following the demand of Bruce, as the new Scottish king, that all Scottish subjects still loyal to the ousted former king, Balliol, declare their loyalty to himself, lest they be stripped of their lands. Edward's men were holding Stirling castle, a key strategic location and a fortress that had changed hands between the English and Scots repeatedly throughout the wars. Stirling was under siege by the Scottish troops, whose numbers were less than half of the English troops. The battle was assumed to be a quick victory for the English, due to their number as well as their more advanced skills and organization. The Scots, however, ultimately triumphed, and the first action on the first day of the battle stood as a beacon of inspiration and pride for the rest of the Scottish people's history.

This opening scene to the battle was just one of the events to secure Bruce's heroic reputation in his own time, and his legendary status that has lasted for seven hundred years. Robert the Bruce was King of the Scots from 1306 until his death in 1329. His path to the throne was tumultuous and dramatic, won through brilliant politicking and statesmanship, genius military strategy, master manipulation, and random good fortune. Past Scottish writers have lauded Bruce as the greatest king their land has ever seen and the only man capable of securing their independence and sovereignty. His detractors, both in his lifetime and since, have held the view that Bruce was simply an opportunistic megalomaniac, intent on his own preservation and advancement, rather than protecting the Scottish people. Despite the triumph at Bannockburn,

Scotland: The Making of a Kingdom (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1975), and Herbert Maxwell's *Robert the Bruce and the Struggle for Scottish Independence* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1897)

critics have held the opinion that Bruce's deeds there were substantially exaggerated by writers like John Barbour in his work *The Brus*, commissioned to inflate his achievements.⁵

There were several momentous actions taken by, or attributed to, Bruce that some believe warrant a revision of his legacy. Notable among these was the conflagration of Bruce's triumphs during the Scottish Wars of Independence, as told in *The Brus*, which were said to be massively exaggerated as a form of propaganda.⁶ Further, Bruce's having sworn allegiance to England's King Edward I, and having fought with the English armies against the Scots prior to ascending the Scottish throne, as well as Bruce's hand in murdering his primary competitor for the throne, John Comyn, in the chapel of Greyfriars Monastery. Within this paper, I examine each of these scenarios and study them against the context of their occurrence. I demonstrate that the deeds were not only justified, but indeed served a grander purpose in the cementing of Scottish identity.

Yet, my paper does not stop at Bruce. It demonstrates that Scottish independence and sovereignty was not a singular and heroic effort of Bruce alone, but a process that had begun prior to his reign, and even prior to his life. While Bruce is considered the savior of the Scottish people and their greatest hero, his efforts were not isolated nor all-encompassing; his success was dependent on the efforts of various threads of ethnogenesis and revolution that had been growing for generations before him, and threads which he was able to manipulate and weave together to the benefit of himself and his people. Bruce gained support from various factions within Scottish society. Much of the nobility supported him, as well as the disenfranchised but ardent freedom fighters, such as Wallace, but, perhaps more importantly, key figures within the

⁵ Stuart Cowie, "Robert the Bruce: A Heroic Reputation That He Is Unworthy Of" (Masters diss., University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, 2014), 12-13, Academia.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

Church supported him. It was in this variety of supporters that Bruce was able to fortify his position and consolidate the masses to the singular cause.

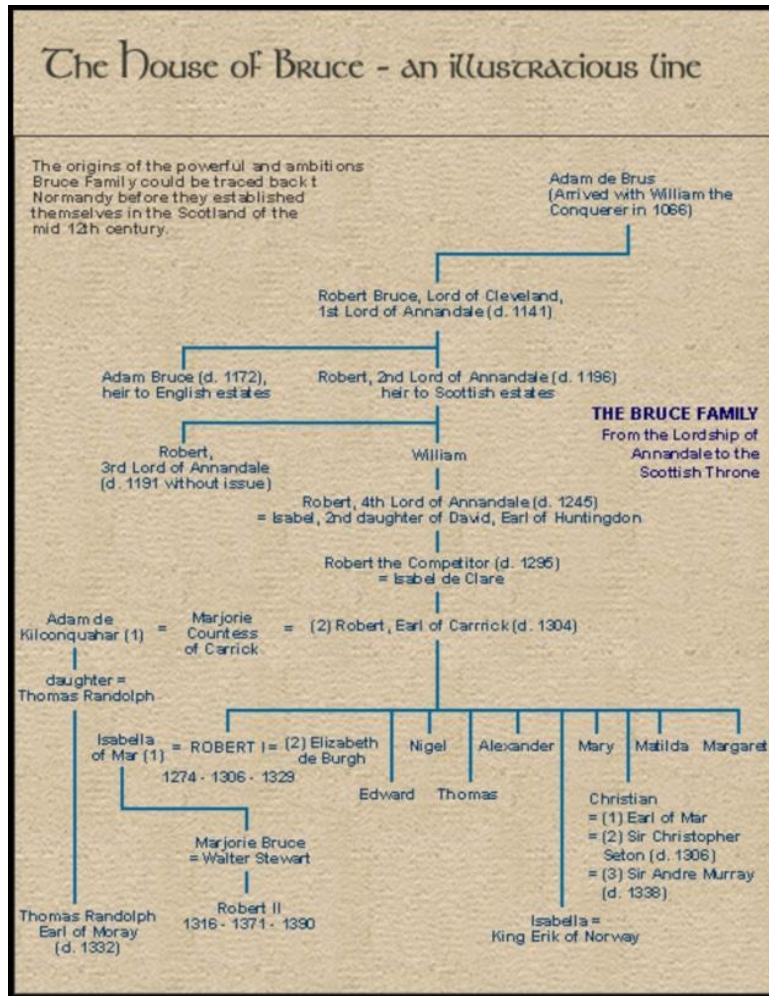
In my research I explore and analyze several sources from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. In order to gain an understanding of the history of the Scottish monarchy and relations between England and Scotland during this period, I examine the *Documents and Records Illustrating the History of Scotland, and the Transactions Between the Crowns of Scotland and England*, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and John of Fordun's *Chronica gentis Scotorum*. I also delve into contemporary sources that give a keen sense of the Scots' opinions of their own identity, as well as their reverence for their king, including the *Declaration of Arbroath*. I build on this research with extensive modern sources, from G. W. S. Barrow, A. A. M. Duncan, and Dauvit Broun, to gain an understanding of Bruce's legacy throughout the succeeding centuries. To gain a sense of the rise of a Scottish identity, the first glimmers of which came due to the actions of the Scottish church, I employ Robert J. Wright's *The Church and the English Crown, 1305-1334* and Barrow's *The Kingdom of the Scots: Government, Church and Society from the Eleventh to the Fourteenth Century*. In this process, I build on the link between Bruce and the growing move toward a Scottish identity and how the two became entwined. One of the points of this thesis is to examine the interpretations of historians throughout the last century, to fill in the missing pieces of Bruce's history, correct the misgivings, and shine a light on the less savory yet necessary steps on the path to freedom.

Robert the Bruce has often been depicted as one of the "Great Men of History," a theory that posits that great leaders are born, not made, and these individuals come into the world possessing specific and peculiar abilities and characteristics not shared with the masses. These traits lead them to shape and change history, in ways it would not otherwise have done without

them. Many people believe Scotland would not have existed without Bruce, nor would the idea of a unified Scottish people. However, in my research, I came to realize that Bruce was not the first step on the path to recognized sovereignty, and was not the point of creation of a Scottish identity, but instead a vehicle by which this identity became solidified and recognized. I found that Bruce was not the theorized Great Man. He did not create history nor change its trajectory. He did not rewrite the story of Scotland from scratch. Bruce's greatest triumph was his gift of ambition and his masterful ability to manipulate the movements already set in motion before his time, and being fortunate enough to be exactly the right kind of man at the right time and place.

In order to demonstrate these points, the first sections of my paper examine the details of Bruce's background and familial connections that got him within striking distance of the throne, but also highlight the original distance from it. The next sections will analyze the praise and criticism of Bruce in the modern era. Following that, I discuss the ancient history of the lands and the early formations of the clans, as well as the development and evolution of Scottish traditions, in order to get a clearer sense of the medieval society in which Bruce lived and an understanding of where the formation of the Scottish identity began, before continuing into the contemporary history of Bruce, the more immediate causes of his rise, and the context that addresses the criticisms laid against him. The second half of the paper discusses the importance of the Church, as well as the significance of Bruce's life and reign on the foundation of Scottish identity.

Background of Bruce



At the time of his birth on July 11, 1274, Robert the Bruce would have had no reason to believe he would ever be king, nor the man who would have a permanent influence on the whole of the country. Bruce was the eighth direct-descendant of Norman baron Adam de Brus, who came to England with William the Conqueror, and the seventh of that line to be called Robert the Bruce, or “de Brus.” The original de Brus fought alongside the Conqueror and was given a grant

⁷ *The House of Bruce Family Tree*, digital media, Bruce Trust. Accessed May 8, 2023, <http://www.bruce-trust.co.uk/lineage.html>.

of “ninety-four manors, extending to 40,000 acres in Yorkshire”⁸ as a reward for his service. The first Robert de Brus, son of Adam, befriended King David I of Scotland and from him received a grant of Annandale, a tract of land surrounding the River Annan, just north of the modern Scottish-English border, bringing the Bruces to Scotland and earning their lordship.⁹ The Bruces remained in close connection to the crown, with several generations marrying in to the royal family.

The first instance of the Bruces marrying into the royal line occurred when the fourth Lord of Annandale, second-great-grandson of the original progenitor, married Isobel of Huntingdon, second daughter of David I’s third son, David, Earl of Huntingdon. The Earl of Huntingdon never reigned, nor did any of his direct descendants, yet he was still a notable figure, being the son of a king and brother to two more. Isobel, at the time of her marriage to Robert (IV), was also niece to the reigning king, William the Lion.

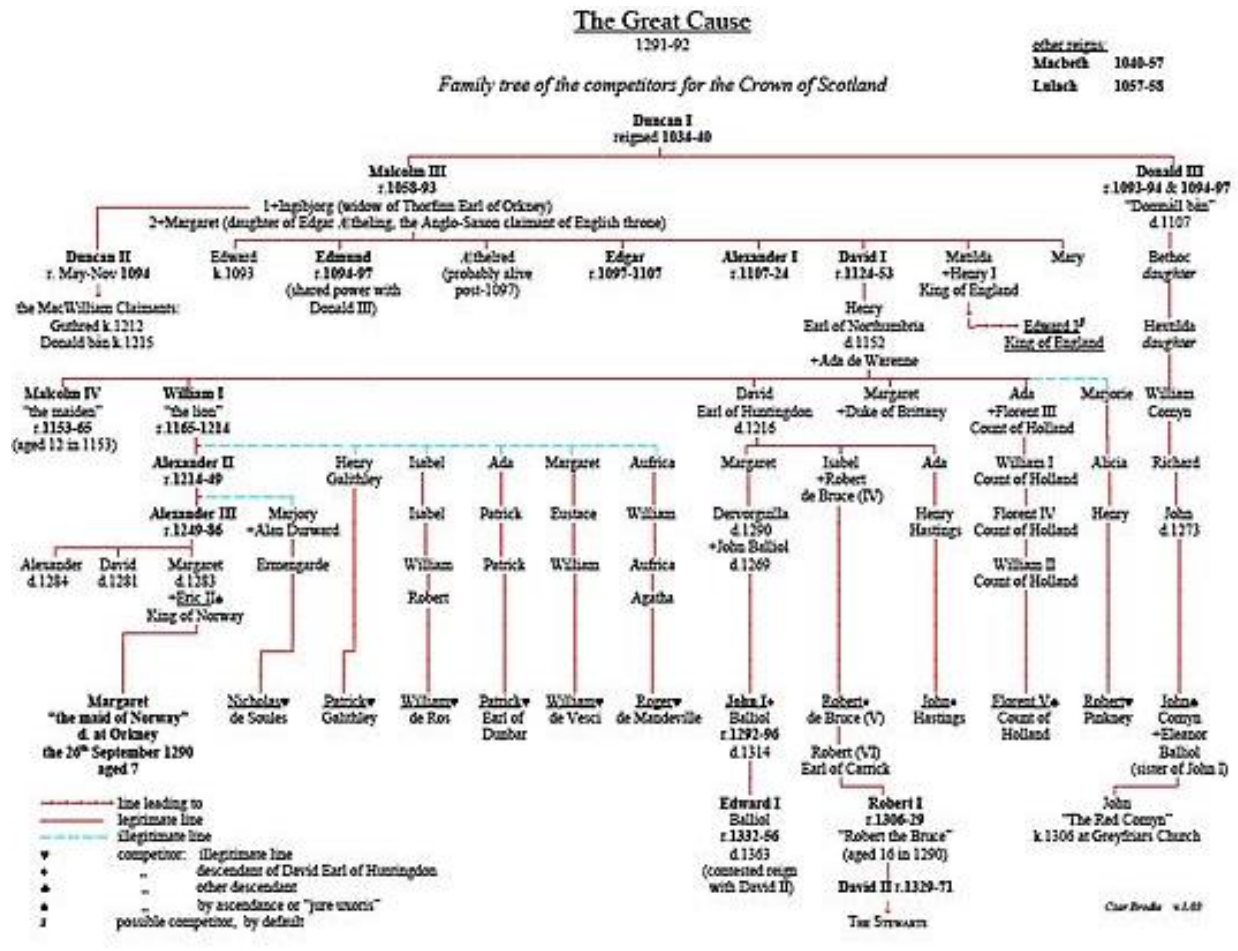
The position of Robert (IV) within the realm was significant, being married to the niece of the monarch. Through this marriage, he acquired substantial manors within Essex, in England, and with each subsequent generation and marriages, the Bruce holdings continued to expand in both countries. It was his son, Robert (V), known during his lifetime as the Competitor, that had the family’s first claim to the throne be officially recognized, owing to his descent from King David I. Two of David I’s sons became kings of Scotland in turn, firstly Malcolm IV, who reigned from 1153 to 1165, then William the Lion from 1165-1214. The throne was inherited by William the Lion’s son, Alexander II, then his grandson, Alexander III. Robert (VI) married Marjorie, Countess of Carrick, and thus inherited her familial earldom. Marjorie was also

⁸ Sir Herbert Maxwell, *Robert the Bruce and the Struggle for Scottish Independence* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1897), 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

granddaughter of Walter Stewart, third High Steward of Scotland, an office designation for the master of the royal household. Walter Stewart's paternal great-grandson would go on to marry Marjorie Bruce, the daughter of the future king Robert (VII), starting the Stewart royal line of Scotland, which would later unite the crowns of Scotland and England under James I & VI in 1603.

Crisis



10

¹⁰ Czar Brodie, *Great Cause Family Tree*, 2009, digital media, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Competitors_for_the_Crown_of_Scotland#/media/File:Great_Cause_Tree.jpg.

The reign of Alexander III was the last of his line. It was characterized by chaos due to the successive deaths of all of his heirs, and led the kingdom into a succession crisis. Alexander had married the sister of England's Edward I, Margaret, who bore him three children, two of whom were sons. By the time of her death in 1275, the succession seemed assured with three surviving children. However, both sons died young; the presumptive heir at the age of twenty. Their daughter would marry King Eric II of Norway and before her equally young death, she would produce her own daughter, Margaret, Maid of Norway. In February of 1284, following the death of all of his closest heirs, Alexander summoned a parliament at Scone in which the "community of the realm," in this case the leading men of the nobility, "pledged a collective oath to recognize [his] granddaughter, Margaret, daughter of Eric II of Norway, as his heir until a new royal son might be born."¹¹

England also recognized the environment this heir signaled. Thus, England's Edward I sent a marriage envoy to Norway in hopes that he would gain control over Scotland through the marriage between his son and grandniece. This was one of the first examples of England's intentions and a warning for the coming crisis.

In a final effort to give the realm a male heir, Alexander III remarried the then-eighteen-year-old Yolande de Dreux, in 1285. His efforts would prove unsuccessful. Five months after their betrothal, on 18 March 1286, Alexander III was meeting with his counsellors in Edinburgh while his new wife waited at Fife, thirty-five miles away. Alexander decided to leave the meeting late into the night to make his way back to his queen in the midst of a winter storm, despite the protests of his officials. Alexander eschewed the warnings and took two companions with him on the journey. Over the course of the night, the companions became separated from

¹¹ Michael A. Penman, *Robert the Bruce: King of Scots* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 21.

their king, who was found the next morning dead from a broken neck, likely a result of falling from his horse in the gale. With the death of Alexander III, the sole surviving heir of his body was now Margaret, Maid of Norway, then aged three.

Despite swearing allegiance to the child, the Scottish nobles knew her ascension would lead to instability and turbulence. The elders of the nobility also recognized this weakness as an opportunity to assert their own claims. The recognition of the young Margaret as heir was seen as a general recognition of the legitimacy of “female blood succession,”¹² which further legitimized the claims of most of the men present at the Scone parliament, particularly the Bruces and the Balliols, both descended from King David I through the lines of two of his great-granddaughters.

The oath of allegiance to the young Maid of Norway would ultimately prove unnecessary. She had departed Norway to claim her throne and become ill on the journey. The ship stopped within the Orkney Islands, about 150 nautical miles from mainland Scotland, in September 1290, where the young uncrowned queen died, aged seven. Despite her death, the events leading up to it had significant impact on the years to come. Due to Margaret’s age, six men were selected from the nobles who had sworn allegiance to serve as regents, and were known as the Guardians of Scotland. Among the guardians were Robert the Bruce (V) and John Balliol, the elder. The selection as guardians positioned both men as senior leaders within the realm, honoring their place not only within the succession, but cementing the idea that their primary focus was on the preservation and advancement of Scotland, itself.

One further development that resulted from Margaret’s placement as heir was a growing influence in Scotland by the English king. Prior to Margaret’s voyage to her new throne, the

¹² Ibid., 22.

Scottish nobles and Margaret's father, Eric II of Norway, had negotiated her marriage to Edward I's son, the future Edward II. The marriage alliance ensured that Edward I would have continued influence over the Scottish kingdom, first from the fact that Margaret was his grandniece—being that her maternal grandmother was Edward I's sister—then, by the fact that his son would be its king. The fact that this marriage never took place only slightly hampered Edward's involvement, however. Prior to Margaret's intended arrival, a Norwegian envoy had been sent to Scotland to claim its throne for her. At his arrival, Robert (V) the Bruce and his son, Robert (VI), raised a rebellion against her ascension. Robert (V) seemed to believe his claim was stronger than the young queen. While both of their claims were by descent through a female line, his was not the most senior, nor was he nearer in degree to a king. His primary source of claim strength was the fact that he was an adult, and a male. His choice to lead a rebellion was in direct contrast to the oath taken to recognize and support Margaret as heir to Alexander III. As it went, Robert (V) gathered his supporters in Turnberry, where an oath was sworn to see through Robert (V)'s claim and rebel against that of Margaret. The faction went on to seize both royal and Balliol castles, yet was ultimately defeated by early 1287.¹³ As a result of this rebellion, Eric II of Norway was uneasy with the idea of sending his, at this time, three-year-old daughter to a turbulent and unsafe kingdom. Instead, he sought the support and safety of his ally, Edward I. In 1289, Eric called on Edward I to intervene in Scotland on behalf of Margaret and ensure her station. Edward I was essentially granted regency over her rule. Despite her early demise, Edward I held on to the idea of his having power over the succession, particularly after his help was sought once more in the crisis that followed her death.

¹³ A. A. M. Duncan, *Kingship of the Scots, 842-1292* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 178-179.

Great Cause

Now left without a named and recognized monarch or heir, the Scottish realm was plunged into a controlled chaos: the kingdom was in crisis, yet not completely bereft of leadership, as Margaret's position had led to the appointment of the Guardians, who ruled circumspectly until 1289.¹⁴ While the Guardians were upholding the temporary management of the kingdom, there was an obvious need for a monarch to be selected. While the earlier decision in February 1284 had cemented the succession of the Maid of Norway to the Scottish throne, there had been no plans for what would occur if she were unable to take her place, or if she had failed to produce an heir. From the periphery, in the wake of her death, would arise thirteen claimants, the most significant of which were Robert (V) the Bruce, fifth Lord of Annandale, styled "the Competitor," and John de Balliol.¹⁵ Each of the claimants held a relatively weak claim, yet still represented the strongest claims available, as with the Maid of Norway, the line of William the Lion and Alexander III had also died.

Robert (V) the Bruce, the Competitor, had machinations for kingship fifty years earlier. In 1238, Alexander III's father, Alexander II, had been made a widower at the death of his first wife, Joan, who had died childless. With no heir apparent, Alexander II had summoned the nobility and with their consent had named the Competitor as heir presumptive, owing to his position as one of the most influential men in both England and Scotland, due to his massive landholdings in both countries.¹⁶ While Alexander II had managed to remarry and produce the

¹⁴ Ibid., 179.

¹⁵ Sir Herbert Maxwell, *Robert the Bruce and the Struggle for Scottish Independence* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1897), 59.

¹⁶ Ronald McNair, *Robert the Bruce, King of Scots* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 11.

eventual heir in Alexander III, the Competitor would foster this sense of a legitimate claim¹⁷ throughout his life and the lives of his son and grandson. Being raised to believe he had a strong claim to the throne of Scotland outside of the direct line descended from William the Lion, coupled with the disastrous events of 1286-1289 put Robert (VII) in a fortuitous position to overtake the other claimants following the death of the Maid of Norway. The works of his father and grandfather had afforded the youngest Bruce a strong and loyal following amongst the nobility, which were far keener to follow Bruce than his primary competition, who was well-known to be a pawn of England's Edward I.

While John Balliol had been the rival of Bruce the Competitor, and eventually installed as puppet king of Scotland by Edward I, his reign was short-lived and he was summarily deposed in 1296 by the Scottish nobility after Edward had subjugated Balliol and Scotland into a vassal state of England. During Balliol's reign, Robert (VII) quietly rallied his supporters and travelled to his family's holdings throughout the kingdom and in England.

Around 1293 while in England, Robert had paid homage to Edward for the family's holdings in Essex and the Midlands within England, and where it is assumed that he had found favor with the English king.¹⁸ Later historians remarked on Bruce's paying of homage as a sign of his lack of conviction toward an independent Scotland or of his insistence on manipulating the circumstances around him only in an effort to further his own power. Perhaps worse, many historians gloss over these facts or skip them entirely, rather than giving them proper credence and placing them within their medieval contexts, which is further delved into later in this paper. This first noted instance of the later king Bruce's paying of homage was expected due to his

¹⁷ Sir Francis Palgrave, trans., *Documents and records illustrating the history of Scotland, and the transactions between the crowns of Scotland and England* (Great Britain: Record Commission, 1837), xiii

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

possessions within the kingdom of England, necessary to continue possession and ensure continuing revenue from the estates. His later swearing of allegiance to Edward, and even fighting with him against the Scots, was necessary foremost for his preservation, but also as an indication of his later position, as the Scottish kings' tradition of swearing fealty to England was one with roots extending back to William the Conqueror. It is further within this tradition that traces of independence can be seen, for those Scottish kings with significant enough power to shirk the tradition.

Praise and Criticism of Bruce

The majority of Scottish historians, and laypeople alike, have placed the success of the Scottish Wars of Independence, as well as the forging of the nation itself, firmly at the feet of Bruce. Mackenzie introduces Bruce as the man who “took the broken sword and reforged it, reforged the nation, won through nearly a quarter-century of war against odds more impossible than those confronting St Joan or Garibaldi, worked one of the miracles of history.”¹⁹ McNamee describes him as “a colossus among men...[who] saved the ‘idea of Scotland’ for future generations.”²⁰ Maxwell, in describing the treatment of Bruce’s body and tomb after his death, mentions the expectation that the nation of Scotland “would have guarded his tomb with sleepless vigilance [since it] owes its very existence to the strong will and ready arm” of Bruce.²¹

While there are seemingly few critics of Bruce and his actions leading into and during his reign, the other end of the scale has the tendency to overinflate his triumphs, painting a picture of

¹⁹ Agnes Mure Mackenzie, *Robert Bruce, King of Scots* (New York: MacMillan, 1935), 5.

²⁰ Colm McNamee, *Robert Bruce: Our Most Valiant Prince, King and Lord* (Edinburgh: Birlinn Limited, 2006), 3.

²¹ Sir Herbert Maxwell, *Robert the Bruce and the Struggle for Scottish Independence* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1897), 341.

a man without whom Scotland would have never been free and independent. There is no question that Bruce was an ingenious statesman and political architect, as well as a brilliant and massively effective military leader, yet it is naïve and misleading to attribute the entirety of the independence movement and its success squarely on Bruce's shoulders.

Historians critical of Robert the Bruce have pointed to his having sworn an oath of fealty to Edward I as evidence of his unworthiness of a heroic status, deeming this action to be reflective of his history of choices motivated entirely by self-preservation.²² Those in support of Bruce have either entirely failed to mention this allegiance to avoid casting a shadow on his legend, or mentioned it as a small caveat to his wider intentions, without giving it the context it deserves. Given that Bruce had a deep understanding of the political environment of thirteenth-century Scotland, his choice—and indeed responsibility—to swear fealty to Edward was a calculated one, made to ensure his station and secure his future claim.

Superficially, one might see Bruce having sworn fealty to England's Edward I, and his taking up arms within the English army against the Scots, as proof of his caring more about preservation of himself rather than that of the Scottish people. However, it is necessary to view these actions in the context of not only the political landscape of the time, but also with an eye toward Bruce's ultimate intentions. There had been a generations-old tradition of Scottish kings swearing fealty to England, to varying degrees of sincerity and for varying degrees of landholdings. Bruce having made this oath ahead of his ascension set the stage for him to eventually take the throne, and was also likely done to give Edward I less reason to obstruct that ascent.

²² Stuart Cowie, "Robert the Bruce: A Heroic Reputation That He Is Unworthy Of" (Masters diss., University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, 2014), 10, Academia.

Similarly, there is a consistent question over Bruce's choice to fight alongside the English against the Scottish forces. Particularly, those who consider that act to be a choice believe it was made by a man motivated entirely by his own sense of preservation and desire for advancement, who held no qualms with fighting against the countrymen he would claim to represent and defend.

The most significant point of contention within Bruce's rise to power is regarding the murder of his primary competition for the throne, John Comyn. Comyn was third cousin to Robert the Bruce, and nephew to John Balliol, who was installed as king of Scotland by England's Edward I for a short period following the death of the Maid of Norway. Comyn's claim to the throne was unquestionably stronger than Bruce's—he was the closest male descendant of the most recent king, and both Balliol and Comyn were descended from the eldest great-granddaughter of David I, whereas Bruce was descended from the second eldest great-granddaughter. While neither was a particularly optimal choice, having been descended from a female line, they were still the best choices available as all of the male lines were extinguished with the deaths of Alexander III and the Maid of Norway. On a surface-level examination of the facts: that there were two men in competition for the throne of Scotland and one died at the hands of the other, it is reasonable to conclude that the one who committed the murder did so for the explicit reason of eliminating his competition and having a swift victory. It is also reasonable to view this act as one committed without mercy or morality and as the cold and calculated choice of one driven by greed and thirst for power. It is due to this potential view that the majority of historians tend to gloss over or entirely fail to mention Comyn's murder when discussing Bruce's rise to power. However, once again considering the context of the political environment of the time—particularly England's Edward I and his oppressive power over

Scotland, the struggle to rid the country of him, the fact that it was well-known that John Balliol was his installed puppet and that John Comyn was not only assumed to become the same, but actively shown he would be—that his elimination was not only preferable, but necessary, and not only for Bruce to be victorious, but to ensure that Scotland stood a chance at sovereignty from England, rather than continuing on as its vassal.

In order to gain a sense of the evolving Scottish identity, as well as how the country got to the position of fighting for sovereignty from England, culminating in the death of one of two competitors for an empty throne, it is necessary to go back to the beginning to see how each of these strands were created.

Early History of the Scots



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²³ Chris Gerrard, *Kingdom of Alba map*, digital image, Pinterest, accessed May 4, 2023, <https://www.pinterest.it/pin/375769162653255339/>.

The formation of the Highland clans signified a consolidation of authority over the land. The first iterations of the very early history the Scottish tribes are found in the writings of the ancient Roman historian, Tacitus, who described the clans in his works surveying the Roman conquest of Britannia. The Romans had conquered and occupied the southern section of the isles, and while they had tried several times to infiltrate the north—into what is now Scotland, and which they had called Caledonia—they had ultimately failed to capture it. We learn from Tacitus’ histories that the northern section of Britannia was populated with various tribes of loose organization and varied alliances. In the era following the Romans, three significant tribes within the lands of what is now Scotland had risen from the others and become the most powerful and influential: the Picts, who are believed to be the descendants of the Caledonii—the indigenous tribe of the Scottish isles—and occupied the far north; the Dál Riada, who occupied the Western coast and isles; and the Britons, who lived in the southern borderlands.²⁴

The Dál Riada were a tribe which had begun as a group of about one hundred fifty Gaelic-speaking *Scotti*, meaning “bandits”²⁵ and had originated in Northern Ireland. They had been driven from their homelands due to their banditry and sought new settlement in what is now Argyll, in southwest Scotland. The Dál Riada had established a small kingdom there in about 501 CE and soon after began engaging in warfare against the settled Picts. By 559, the Picts had decisively defeated the Dál Riada, who seemed on the brink of being forced back into Ireland. Before successively ridding himself of the Dál Riada, however, the Pictish king was convinced to end his attacks on them when Columba, the Irish abbot-turned-saint, who was responsible for the spread of Christianity throughout Scotland, made his way to the king’s capital in Inverness

²⁴ Michael Brander, *The Making of the Highlands* (London: Constable, 1980), 23-25.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

and converted the king to Christianity,²⁶ marking the first time the religion would have a significant impact on the political structure of the future nation.

Though much of the history of the proceeding three centuries is lost, it is known that the Picts were eventually weakened through continuous Viking raids. By 843, the king of the Dál Riada, Kenneth MacAlpin, was able to absorb the remaining kingdom of the Picts and merged their crowns to form the Kingdom of Alba. The most significant remnants of the Picts can be found in the wealth of metal and woodworks left behind, specifically in the form of brooches and buckles adorned with wolves, deer, and boars, which some historians believe could be symbols of the earliest forms of clans.²⁷

Bede, the great scholar and historian of the Anglo-Saxon period, indicated within his histories that the Scottish people were showing signs of increasing insulation and solidification in the face of a growing influence from their southern neighbor, stretching as far back as the fourth century, particularly demonstrated within *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, in which Bede recounts the ongoing tumult between the Scots and Britons, the latter of whom were repeatedly “ravaged” by the former, to such an extent that required salvation from the Romans and Angles.²⁸ As the Anglo-Saxon threat continued to grow, the various clans eventually consolidated their power into a chief of chiefs, leading to the creation of a King of Scots.

The clans of the Highlands began forming properly around the twelfth century, with clan chiefs claiming descent from the earliest kings and demigods from Irish mythology. Their system of organization and land ownership differed greatly from their European neighbors at the time.

²⁶ Ibid., 25.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ The Venerable Saint Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People; with Bede's Letter to Egbert* (London: Penguin, 1990), 673-735.

While most of Europe, including England, had already plunged into a system of feudalism, whereby a lord owned all of their land and let it to their vassals, the land of particular clans was owned by the whole clan, who were fiercely loyal to their clan chief. Most clan members could also trace direct kinship to their chief, though kinship was not a requirement. The continued strengthening of the clan families became a direct response to the encroachment into Scotland of outside forces, particularly the English²⁹.

While the early Scottish kingship was similar in name to those of neighboring countries, there were significant differences and holdovers from earlier periods which would contribute to the veracity of Bruce's later claim. For instance, a particular holdover from the Picts was the tradition of matrilineal accession to the throne of Pictland. While Bruce's eventual claim was thought weak due to his descent from David I through David's great-granddaughter, Isobel of Huntingdon, this earlier matrilineal link allowed for some forgiveness of Bruce's position.

Further forgiveness had to be given due to the fact that Isobel of Huntingdon was not even the eldest of David I's great-granddaughters, and the eldest, Margaret, had male descendants alive during the Bruce's time. The relative weakness of Bruce's claim in this sense was overlooked with bolstering from the Alban tradition of agnatic seniority succession, in which the throne is passed through a singular generation from eldest to youngest, before moving to the next. In this method, the succession prefers the reigning monarch's younger brother before passing to the monarch's eldest son. While Bruce's claim does not fit neatly within this method of succession, the generations of disorder, due to competing egos and power, and enough confusion and disorganization, muddied the process enough to allow for a line of succession with

²⁹ L. G. Pine, *The Highland Clans* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1972), 21.

less clear and strict rules than the English throne. With enough sway, a claim slightly weaker due to the ages of two far-off women could be easily mitigated.

Tradition of Fealty

Prior to the Norman invasion of England, the seven individual English kingdoms had operated within the manorialism social structure, wherein the land was owned by local lords and farmed by peasants. After the Norman conquest, feudalism was introduced, under which the king was the absolute owner of all of the land within the country, the nobility—termed vassals—held the land in exchange for military service, allegiance, and taxes paid to the king. No such structure existed within Scotland, though the Scottish nobility’s generational holding of vast lands within both Scotland and England began introducing the idea of feudalism, as they had to accept the structure for their holdings within England. The tradition of the Scottish kings specifically swearing fealty, or paying homage, to English kings can trace its origin back to this period, when William the Conqueror forced the submission of Malcolm III.

As William swept through the British Isles, defeating Harold Godwinson, the last Anglo-Saxon king, and taking the throne of England, he faced growing opposition in the north. Many Anglo-Saxon earls and nobility, particularly Edgar Ætheling of the dispossessed house of Wessex, had sought refuge in the court of Malcolm III of Scotland. As the revolts grew more intense, William led his army on a campaign of terror in the winter of 1069-1070 to put them down, what would later be called the Harrying of the North. On the heels of this routing, Malcolm III married Edgar’s sister, Margaret,³⁰ and thus his connection to the house of Wessex

³⁰ William Croft Dickinson, *Scotland from the Earliest Times to 1603* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 57.

grew stronger, as did the threat he posed to William. In 1072, William led forces over sea and land into Scotland.³¹

After William's crossing of the River Forth, Malcolm relented and joined William in the signing of the Treaty of Abernathy. The treaty succeeded in establishing the English king as overlord of the Scottish, as Malcolm had become William's "liege-man,"³² a feudalistic vassal owing allegiance to the king. In exchange for this allegiance, Malcolm was granted lands in Cumbria, in the northwest of England at the Scottish border, further defining subsequent Scottish kings' subordinate relationship to English kings. By granting the Scottish monarch lands in England, for which he was expected to swear fealty, lines between the sovereignty of the two nations became blurred. Many later generations made no distinction between paying homage for their landholdings within England, and doing so for the land of Scotland, itself.³³ This relationship was further solidified during the reigns of William's son, William Rufus, and Malcolm III's sons, Duncan II and Edgar. In two of the earliest Scottish charters, it is recorded that Duncan "did homage and fealty and from Rufus he received a kingdom – Scotland" and Edgar acknowledged his possession of both Lothian and the kingdom of Scotland "by paternal inheritance and by gift of King William his lord."³⁴

Edgar's recognition of Rufus as his overlord was among the first few examples of the Scots using the English claim as a tool for their own victory, which would be echoed by Robert the Bruce two centuries later. Starting with Kenneth MacAlpin, the Scottish throne was not

³¹ Robert Sangster Rait, *An Outline of the Relations Between England and Scotland (500-1701)* (New York: Blackie & Son, 1901), 11-12.

³² "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," Project Gutenberg, last modified 1996, <https://archive.org/stream/theanglosaxonchr00657gut/angsx10.txt>.

³³ Dauvit Broun, *Scottish Independence and the Idea of Britain from the Picts to Alexander III* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 101.

³⁴ A. A. M. Duncan, *Scotland: The Making of the Kingdom* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1975), 125.

inherited through primogeniture, but instead passed from the king to his younger brothers before carrying on to the next generation. This method eventually created tension and resulted in the murder and exiling of many whom would vie for the throne throughout the centuries, particularly as the Norman tradition of primogeniture had growing influence on the Scots. Kenneth's throne was passed to his younger brother, Donald I, due to agnatic succession, before ending up with Kenneth's eldest son, Constantine. Agnatic succession resulted in many of the Scottish kings of the next three hundred years being forced from power or assassinated as each of the royal men waited for their turn to rule.

By the beginning of the eleventh century, the Scots had seen a growing influence of the Normans within their borders. The line of succession was one of the points altered by this influence. In 1005, a decree was ratified by Malcolm II which stated that a king would be succeeded by "his son, daughter, grandson, granddaughter, or, in collateral line, brother or sister – in short by the nearest in blood to the king surviving, even if an infant."³⁵ Despite the introduction of succession by primogeniture, the old method of succession mingled with the new for a few generations, before becoming solidified following the reign of Malcolm III's seventh son, David I. David's only son predeceased him but left him three grandsons left to inherit the realm. The eldest, Malcolm IV, died without issue, thus his brother William (the Lion) became the next king. William reigned for 49 years and left the throne to his only son, who left it to his own only son, Alexander III.

Malcolm III's sons sought the support of the English king, and his armies, to claim the throne in exchange for their oath of fealty.³⁶ It is through this history of the tradition of fealty that the emergence of the idea of Scottish independence can be seen. This has been most clearly

³⁵ Ibid., 27.

³⁶ A. A. M. Duncan, *Kingship of the Scots, 842-1292* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 53.

demonstrated in the several instances in which Scottish kings refused this paying of homage, particularly as with David I, the youngest son of Malcolm III, in 1135.

The civil war in England between 1138 and 1153, termed “The Anarchy,” pitted the Empress Matilda, daughter and chosen successor of the most-recently deceased English King Henry I, and Stephen of Blois, nephew of Henry I, against each other in the struggle for the throne. The political crisis within England put Scotland’s David I, and his son and heir Henry, in a stronger position than many of his predecessors. David supported Matilda and led several battles against Stephen’s forces, resulting in the capture of extensive lands in the north of England. Stephen relented vast tracts to David to be given as possessions to his son, including Carlisle, Huntingdon, and Northumberland. When Stephen was captured at the Battle of Lincoln in 1141, David proclaimed that “his son ruled northern England in complete independence of Stephen and that they acknowledged no other superior.”³⁷ This example of the extension of David’s kingdom and his ability to refuse fealty to the English king shows that the act itself waned and waxed based on the power each Scottish king possessed. When his station was weakest, he relied on the English sovereign and thus swore allegiance, and when he was independently powerful, he cast off the English and proclaimed his own autonomy.

When the Scottish monarchy was at its weakest, following the death of Alexander III and the Maid of Norway, the Scottish nobility chose to invite England’s Edward I to help them choose the next heir, owing to the majority of the nobles’ relationship with Edward as the sovereign over their lands within his realm and the fact that he was the nearest absolute monarch. When the forerunners for the throne, including the eventually-chosen Balliol, became the strongest candidates, their submission to Edward I was essential to strengthening their position,

³⁷ Dauvit Broun, *Scottish Independence and the Idea of Britain from the Picts to Alexander III* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 12-13.

as they were relatively weak: their inheritance was not clear-cut nor obvious; each had to fight for it, and those that fought needed the most backing they could find. In Bruce's case, his early swearing of fealty was essential to keeping hold of his English possessions, a vital source of income and power. His later submissions were necessary to continue his hold on his Scottish possessions, once Edward became the secured overlord of the entirety of the islands. Despite the criticism levied against Bruce about his changing allegiances, it is clear that he made his oaths out of necessity and survival, in order to accomplish his desired ends of an independent Scotland. This is further solidified with the realization that once all of Bruce's competitors were eliminated and his power was consolidated, Bruce no longer needed the safety and support such an allegiance to Edward could offer and thus rescinded his oaths and rejected Edward, both due to his lack of need and on Edward's treatment of Scotland in the preceding years. Bruce's rejection of Edward only added to his own strength, as the rest of the country had also rejected Edward, and any potential king who would become a puppet for England, as evidenced by the community's later assertions to the Pope in the Declaration of Arbroath, discussed later in this paper.

The vacillating tradition of oaths of fealty to England throughout the generations was not the only early evidence of a move away from English submission. There had been a growing resentment of the English within the Scottish church for which the church had been advocating for independence from the English archbishoprics well before Robert's victory, but its stirrings had helped cement the idea of the Scottish being a separate and unique identity, requiring a formal division from their English counterparts.

The Church

The step toward autonomy in the realm of the church would become especially significant in the process of the Scottish people's proclamation of their independence. While the papacy had continually restated their support of Edward I and Edward II in the overlordship of Scotland, and twice excommunicated Robert the Bruce, it was ultimately a culmination of the Scottish church's independence from the English church that helped them secure the ability to anoint their sovereign with holy oils, and their advocacy for Bruce to have his excommunications rescinded, which worked toward the Pope recognizing Scotland as an independent state and urging England to do the same.

The anointing of the monarch with holy oils was a powerful symbol of their right to kingship and authority from God to rule. While it seems clear the general community of the Scots had a less stringent tie to the processes of the Church, evidenced by Bruce being coronated without religious connotations, the fact that they were later allowed helped solidify Bruce's right even more. The importance of Scottish traditions over the wider Christian traditions was seen in the fact that his initial coronation was carried out by traditional customs³⁸: being crowned upon the Stone of Scone, with a circlet of gold, placed by the head of Clan MacDuff. The head of this clan at the time, Isabella MacDuff, was particularly significant due to the fact that she was married to John Comyn, 3rd Earl of Buchan, cousin to the John Comyn that was murdered by Bruce³⁹, showing that the drive of the community to support a king that would win their independence trumped the controversy of his questionable acts, and highlighted the assumption that the murder of Comyn, while not celebrated, was deemed justifiable.

³⁸ William F. Skene, trans., *Johannis de Fordun Chronica Gentis Scotorum* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1871), xliv.

³⁹ Michael A. Penman, *Robert the Bruce: King of Scots* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 95.

Christianity had been introduced to the region that became Scotland during the time of the Dál Riada's merging with the Picts. St Columba had established monasteries in Iona and eventually created an extensive network of daughter-houses throughout Scotland. The Celtic version of Christianity, despite its growth, evolved to be markedly different than Roman Christianity. It also remained relatively small in relation to the daily lives of the laypeople, until the reign of Malcolm III, and specifically until the intervention of his wife, Margaret of Wessex. Margaret was the sister of Edgar Ætheling, both of whom fled to the court of Malcolm III in the wake of the Norman conquest of England. Malcolm III had fallen in love with Margaret at first sight and took her as his wife, whilst offering sanctuary to Edgar and his allies. Margaret, having grown up in the English court, was deeply religious and though she was reasonably accepting of the Celtic brand of monasticism, it wasn't long before she began introducing the English order.

Several prominent figures within the English church structure had also sought refuge in Scotland following the Norman invasion, including Turgot, Archdeacon of Durham. By 1075, five years after Margaret's betrothal and entrance into Scotland, Turgot had become her "spiritual confidant"⁴⁰ as well as her biographer. He recounted that Margaret had succeeded in founding the first Scottish daughter-house of an English monastery. The church, Christ Church in Dunfermline, is also where she had wed Malcolm III. Its establishment as a daughter-house meant that it would exist under the purview of its mother-house, Christ Church in Canterbury, and not as an independent and self-governing body. This was the general hierarchy established for each new Christian church established within Scotland—the *Ecclesia Scoticana*; all were under the direct control of their English counterparts, specifically under the metropolitan jurisdiction of the archbishops of York and Canterbury. Tensions eventually arose when it came

⁴⁰ G. W. S. Barrow, *The Kingdom of the Scots; Government, Church and Society from the Eleventh to the Fourteenth Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), 166.

to the matter of papal representation and the performance of judicial activities. Despite their similarities, the communities of England and Scotland were far removed, yet command and control of the Scottish parishes lay in the hands of the English archbishops.

This was particularly egregious, in the minds of the Scots, as the papal representatives for Scotland were unlikely to have ever set foot in the country.⁴¹ There was also significant infighting between the archbishops of York and Canterbury over the matter of primacy, specifically which of the archbishops was the head of the ecclesiae for the whole of the British Isles. William the Conqueror had established the first archbishoprics at York and Canterbury in 1072, shortly after the Norman conquest, and from that time of establishment there was a continuing conflict over which of the archbishoprics would hold primacy over the other. The conflict had a continued effect on the representation of Scotland as both archbishops would issue, at times competing, commands to the Scottish churches, whilst continuously failing them in efficient structure and operation.⁴²

After years of clashing between the two sees, the matter of preeminence was established by William and a papal legate, which determined that York would be subordinate to Canterbury, the primate of the whole of Britain, while York was deemed to have “authority over the bishop of Durham and all regions north of the River Humber to the extreme limits of Scotland.”⁴³ This authority was largely ceremonial for the next forty years, until further feuding between Canterbury and York pressed the issue when York tried to assert his dominance of the Scottish bishops in an effort to have them acknowledge his “superior authority”. In response, in 1125,

⁴¹ Paul Craig Ferguson, “Medieval Papal Representatives in Scotland: Legates, Nuncios, and Judges-Delegate, 1125-1286” (PhD diss., Columbia University, New York, 1987), 10, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴³ Donald Watt, *Medieval Church Councils in Scotland* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 9-10.

Bishop John of Glasgow argued to the papal curia that “Scotland was not a part of the realm of England” and thus St. Andrews should be elevated to a metropolitan see, parallel to York.⁴⁴

While the primacy of York over Scotland was established, there was little heed paid to John of Glasgow’s request for elevation of St. Andrews, and the Scottish churches’ frustration over indirect representation would not be settled until the end of the century.

Conflict remained steady within the political sphere of the church throughout the next seventy years. There were various wars between England and Scotland in this time over borderlands that raised tension in the matter of jurisdiction, as well as the papal schism in 1159, in which the two countries supported opposing sides. The incumbent pope was unable to recognize the *Ecclesia Scoticana* as independent from the primacy of York for fear that would push the English king to support the anti-pope, nor was he able to outright refuse the Scottish request for the establishment of their own archbishopric for fear they may end their support of him, despite the fact that it seemed the papacy was ready to establish an archbishop in St. Andrews by this point. Further adding to the pressure was the ascension of Malcolm III and Margaret of Wessex’s son, David I. While his mother had succeeded in establishing a growing connection to the English churches in Scotland, David I had enacted extensive reforms during his reign.

While David I had a strong connection the English king of the time, Henry I, and owed much of his early career to him, Henry I’s death marked a significant change in Anglo-Scottish relations. David was embroiled in the English war of succession between Henry I’s daughter, Empress Matilda, and Henry I’s nephew, Stephen. David had sworn an oath to Henry to uphold Matilda as heir and Stephen’s ultimate victory in the civil wars that followed marked a public

⁴⁴ Ibid., 12-14

change in David's disposition and his moves toward independence. These moves were most evident in David's refusal to pay homage to Stephen and his insistence upon the Scottish church being independent from England, particularly due to the close interrelation of the church and the state.⁴⁵

Eventually, once the papacy found more stability toward the end of the twelfth century, Pope Celestine III was in a position to sever the relationship between the Scottish church and York, which would serve as a significant step in the idea of Scottish autonomy from England. Celestine III issued a papal bull—an official decree—in 1192, the *cum universi*, which was the culmination of repeated efforts of the bishops of the Scottish church throughout the early twelfth century to establish independence from the Archbishops of York and Canterbury.⁴⁶

The Scottish church's independence from England and creation as a direct agent to Rome would have significant impacts on the later consolidation of the country. After the death of the Maid of Norway, and the English king, Edward I, declaring himself as overlord of Scotland, the Scottish church was once again under threat of being subservient to the English church. While the chief men of the Scottish realm—bishops included—were forced to swear an oath of allegiance to Edward, it was these bishops, particularly Bishop Wishart of Glasgow, who had been one of the original Guardians of Scotland during the regency of the Maid of Norway, who would go on to form a foundation in support of Scottish independence from England, as independence for the Scottish kingdom meant independence for the Scottish church. Wishart was in an advantageous position for resistance: being a high dignitary within the Church, “he was better able to organize a national movement against the English than were most of the nobility,

⁴⁵ William Croft Dickinson, *Scotland from the Earliest Times to 1603* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 129.

⁴⁶ Paul Craig Ferguson, “Medieval Papal Representatives in Scotland: Legates, Nuncios, and Judges-Delegate, 1125-1286” (PhD diss., Columbia University, New York, 1987), 266-270, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

whose authority was confined to their own lands, and whose power was further diminished by cross-currents of family and political feud.”⁴⁷ It was also these bishops who, upon learning of the murder of John Comyn by Robert the Bruce, secreted Bruce away to Scone to crowned king.

Wishart had been a revolutionary voice on the path to independence, and may have been the linchpin which allowed Bruce to win the support of the larger community of the realm. He was known to have conspired against Edward I’s interjection into Scottish affairs following the Maid of Norway’s death and “ever foremost in treason, conspired with the Steward of the realm, named James, for a new piece of insolence, yea, for a new chapter of ruin. Not daring openly to break their pledged faith to the king [Edward], they caused a certain bloody man, William Wallace, who had formerly been a chief of brigands in Scotland, to revolt against the king and assemble the people in his support.”⁴⁸ When Edward I arrived in Norham in May 1291 demanding recognition of his claim, Wishart is claimed to have stood forward and stated that “the kingdom of Scotland is not held in tribute or homage to anyone save God alone.”⁴⁹

Though he suffered greatly for his reproaches against Edward, including exile and imprisonment at various points, Wishart was steadfast in his support of Bruce to kingship, particularly with the recognition that Bruce would not become that pawn that Balliol had been, and Comyn would likely be. After the murder of Comyn, it was Wishart who “apparently persuaded [Bruce] to abandon hopes that Edward I would acknowledge his right and to take the throne.”⁵⁰ Wishart was also instrumental in securing the backing of the wider Scottish clergy, whose support of Bruce helped solidify his legitimacy as the people’s chosen king, evidenced by

⁴⁷ Agnes Mure MacKenzie, *Robert Bruce, King of Scots* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 92.

⁴⁸ Sir Herbert Maxwell, trans., *The Chronicle of Lanercost, 1272-1346* (Glasgow: J. Maclehose, 1913), 163.

⁴⁹ G. W. S. Barrow, *Robert the Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 44-45.

⁵⁰ A. A. M. Duncan, *Kingship of the Scots, 842-1292* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 324.

the fact that the Declaration of Arbroath, in which the realm declared their independence from England, was written by the chancery scribes of Arbroath Abbey.⁵¹

The Bruces Against the Scots

Edward I of England had repeatedly endeavored to claim Scotland as his dominion. First with his marriage pact between his son and the Maid of Norway, second when he used his influence to be called upon by the Guardians to help select a new king after the Maid's death, and finally after selecting John Balliol with the understanding that Balliol would operate as a puppet king for England. The Bruce family rejected Balliol's selection to kingship, having never sworn fealty to him, never recognizing his coronation, and never giving up their claim to the throne.⁵²

In 1294, the French king had demanded fealty from the English king for the latter's French possessions, just as the English king demanded of any Scottish king who held English lands. When Edward failed to appear at the French parliament to pay fealty, the French king stripped him of his French duchy. Edward in turn gathered English troops in order to recover his French lands. En route to his port of departure, the Welsh rose in revolt against England, forcing Edward to abandon his plans in France. Meanwhile in Scotland, the Scottish nobility were growing displeased with John Balliol in his role as king and installed a Counsel of Twelve—four earls, four bishops, and four barons—to manage the government instead of Balliol. Edward saw this rebellion as a direct challenge to his overlordship and determined to conquer Scotland. The

⁵¹ "Drafting the Declaration," *The Declaration of Arbroath 700th Anniversary Display* (Edinburgh: National Museum of Scotland, 2022). National Records of Scotland, https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files/research/NRS_DoA_English_booklet_700_Spreads_WEB.pdf (accessed May 8, 2023).

⁵² Ronald McNair, *Robert the Bruce, King of Scots* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 34.

Counsel called on the Scottish people to assemble in Balliol's name to defend against the English. The Bruces chose to honor their earlier vows of allegiance to Edward, particularly with the promise from Edward that, if Balliol and his rebellion were crushed, the elder Bruce would succeed him as king of Scotland. When the Bruces failed to assemble, they were immediately stripped of their Scottish holdings which were then given by Balliol to his nephew, John Comyn, further instigating a brewing feud.⁵³

Edward quickly swept through the Scottish rebellion, his forces—which included the Bruces—crushed Balliol and his Scottish supporters within six months. Balliol sent his letter of submission to Edward by July 1296, after which Balliol was arrested and imprisoned within the Tower of London, and Edward had finally managed to hold control of a kingdom which now included all of England, Wales, and Scotland. In August of that year, he summoned a parliament at which every landholder in Scotland was forced to declare and sign an instrument of fealty, known now as the Ragman Roll,⁵⁴ under threat of having their lands stripped of them. Edward had declared that now that his puppet king had been defeated, Scotland now belonged to him, and it was no longer even a country, but in fact an extension of England, itself. This was further symbolized by his confiscating of the stone of Scone, a stone on which every Scottish king since the Dál Riada had been crowned, and shipping it to London to be installed under the seat of his throne.⁵⁵

Historians most critical of Bruce would see this upholding of his earlier vows of allegiance, and particularly the acts of fighting alongside the English against the Scots, as clear proof of his disregard for the desire for an independent Scotland, for Scotland's sake, and rather

⁵³ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁴ Agnes Mure MacKenzie, *Robert Bruce, King of Scots* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 90.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 89-90.

a clear sign that his only loyalties laid within himself. However, given his understanding of not only the machinations of the feudal system of governance, but the realization that this early rebellion was doomed to failure, the most pertinent move in these circumstances would be to follow Edward, crush a rebellion that was begun in the name of Balliol in order to remove him, then gather the remaining threads of disdain coupled with their strengthening claims, in order to rid of the English once and for all. While this method may be viewed from a lens of Bruce acting out of his own best interests, the results of his choices prove his intentions of manipulating the landscape to reach the best ends.

It Had to Be Bruce

Despite Edward's triumph over the Balliol rebellion, the Scottish people were not broken. After Edward had returned to England, he left Englishmen to fill Scottish castles and churches, displacing, dispossessing, and oppressing the Scots inhabitants. A growing number of men, angry and resentful over their dispossessions, began to band together and "[t]he pent-up resentment of a proud and spirited race, smoldering like a peat fire below the surface, burst into flame."⁵⁶ There were various local leaders of this growing resistance, the most significant of which were two high-ranking nobles, William Douglas and Andrew Moray, and one low-born knight, William Wallace. Wallace was a significant figure within the rebellion, but one that could never accomplish the feats that Bruce eventually would: gathering the support of not just outlaws and the downtrodden, but uniting the nobility and church behind his cause, with the help

⁵⁶ Ronald McNair, *Robert the Bruce, King of Scots* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 38.

of his station. Bruce would, however, greatly benefit from the work that Wallace would accomplish over the next six years.

Wallace was a member of the lower nobility, whose family were vassals of James Stewart. He and his brother had been stripped of their possessions after failing to swear fealty to Edward after he had crushed the Balliol rebellion. This obstinance had made him an outlaw and he soon “became a magnet for the discontented.”⁵⁷ Wallace’s rebellion began in desperate revenge. A wanted man, he sought refuge in the home of his new wife in Lanark—in the southeast of Scotland, near Glasgow—while being pursued by an English patrol. The English came upon the house and “hammered on the front door [as] he escaped by the back.”⁵⁸ Incensed by Wallace’s escape, the English sheriff ordered the home to be burned down and Wallace’s wife and servants to be executed. The results of that day would spark in Wallace a singular desire for unyielding vengeance against the English.

In the spring of 1297, the English garrisons positioned throughout Scotland were facing growing signs of revolt. Moray had raised a force in the north, Stewart, alongside Bishop Wishart, had done so in the southwest, and Wallace in Lanark, where he had captured and killed the English Earl that Edward I had installed as sheriff. Wallace continued on raiding English posts through Glasgow and Scone. While the growing rebellion was of concern to Edward, he was primarily focused on the rising conflict with France. As France was proving to quell, Edward decided to cross the Channel himself. His concerns over Scotland were somewhat insignificant: he had removed the threat of Balliol, had Balliol’s heirs in his command, and Bruce the Competitor was recently dead, his heir newly married and settled in a seemingly quiet life in the country. The youngest Bruce, the unbeknownst future king, could prove trouble for

⁵⁷ Ibid., 39.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Edward, so he demanded a renewed oath of fealty and sent Bruce north to reclaim the lands of Douglas. He aimed to force Bruce under his control, while also sowing discord between him and the nobles leading the revolts. In the midst of complying, the young Bruce seemed to have a change of heart and abandoned his orders, renounced fealty to Edward, and joined the rebellion.⁵⁹

While many of the finer details of Wallace's life are unknown, or otherwise blatant and fanciful exaggerations, as in Blind Harry's *The Wallace*, it was the symbol created in Wallace's name that became the spirit of rebellion, and of which Bruce would profit and continue to catapult. Wallace had set the stage and imbued the essence—an underdog and outlaw, a rebel with a distinct cause for vengeance and liberty against a Goliathan oppressor—which Bruce was able to seamlessly adopt. However, Bruce benefited particularly from his distinction from Wallace: his actual ability to enact change and win independence, owing to his station as a noble and legitimate heir, through his descent from David I.

Wallace's downfall came with the battle of Falkirk in 1297. Despite the growing rebellion, the Scottish armies were ill-equipped to defeat the English, particularly so close to the border and in the lands with the densest concentration of English troops. In the rousing defeat, Edward had “destroyed the authority of Wallace”⁶⁰ and forced the Scots further north. Following his capture in 1305 near Glasgow, Wallace was sent to London where he was hanged, drawn, and quartered, with each quarter being displayed separately at four central places of rebellion in Scotland. Rather than quelling the unrest, the grotesque display incensed the Scottish people.

John Comyn, nephew to Balliol, was by now the main competitor against Bruce for the throne of Scotland. Despite this, both men served together as the new Guardians of the realm.

⁵⁹ Agnes Mure MacKenzie, *Robert Bruce, King of Scots* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 97-99.

⁶⁰ Ronald McNair, *Robert the Bruce, King of Scots* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 51.

Bruce's choice to serve as Guardian at this time, in which they were effectively acting in the name of the deposed Balliol, would seem on the face to be blocking his own family's claim to the throne. Yet this choice would seem prudent with the later results: Bruce was positioning himself at a point of significant power, with only one substantial obstacle in his way. While Balliol had been imprisoned in the Tower of London, he had the growing support of the French king, who was rumored to be preparing to reinstate Balliol to his throne, at the head of a powerful French army. Meanwhile, Comyn would become the effective ruler of the realm if his uncle were restored, as Balliol was still under the control of England due to his imprisonment. Due to his years heading the rebellion against England, Bruce had been stripped of his English possessions, losing a significant amount of his wealth. If Comyn were to come to power, Bruce stood to lose his Scottish lands as well, due to the bitter feud between the two.

Edward was equally wary of Comyn coming to power, particularly with the backing of the French. If the French army were to be the effective standing army within Scotland, they had a strong base with which to invade England. It was through this mutual concern that Edward and Bruce would find understanding and begin talks of a truce between the two. In February of 1302, Bruce once again submitted to Edward, in specific terms:

Be it remembered that Robert Bruce the younger, who was in homage and faith of the King of England for the Earldom of Carrick, rose in rebellion against the said King his Lord, through evil counsel and has submitted himself to the peace and will of the same King, in hope of his good grace...that Robert and his men and his tenants of Carrick will be guaranteed life and limb, lands and tenements, and will be free from imprisonment...[a]nd because it is

feared that the Kingdom of Scotland may be removed out of the King's hands which God forbid and handed over to Sir John Balliol...the King grants to Robert that he may pursue his right [to the throne].⁶¹

With this agreement, Robert was once again swearing allegiance to Edward and effectively declaring rebellion against Balliol and Scotland. Watson notes that this behavior is indicative of Robert's continuous vacillation between allegiances, settling on whichever guaranteed his own survival and success in each moment, specifically "trying to exploit every inch of advantage, every favorable connection, to enhance his...position."⁶² Viewing it in light of Bruce's precarious position in 1302, it's clear such a truce was not simply tactful, but necessary. With it, Bruce was protected against landlessness and granted permission to marry his second wife, Elizabeth de Burgh, daughter of one of Edward's most ardent lieutenants, the Earl of Ulster.⁶³

By the end of 1302, it was clear that Balliol was no longer a threat, as he would be unlikely to return to Scotland whilst under English dominion. In the year following, Comyn continued to enjoy a strong base in the north of Scotland, his lands and resources protected against the English troops, who limited their raiding and destruction to the south. At the start of 1304, however, Edward was preparing an offensive into the north, for which Comyn would be unable to gather an effective resistance. Faced with this, Comyn signed a peace treaty with Edward, effectively placing him under Edward's control, as had been feared throughout the prior decade. Despite both Bruce and Comyn coming to an agreement with Edward, Bruce continued

⁶¹ E. L. G. Stones, ed., *Anglo-Scottish Relations 1174-1328* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 131-132.

⁶² Fiona Watson, *Traitor, Outlaw, King* (Independent, 2018), 1.

⁶³ Ronald McNair, *Robert the Bruce, King of Scots* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 61.

to collect support and build his resources in preparation for his strengthening claim, while Comyn seemed to fall in line with Edward with little resistance or renewal of efforts against him.

In 1306, Comyn and Bruce would meet at Greyfriars Church for an occasion that would signify a momentous shift in the story of Scotland. While the finer details of what transpired inside of the church are not known, the effects of it were widely and immediately felt. In the end, John Comyn was dead at the hands of Bruce and suddenly no other man stood in the way of Bruce's ascension, perhaps saving the Pope. The murder of Comyn, at the high altar of a church, was a grievous sin in the eyes of the Christian Church, and the Pope would soon excommunicate Bruce for the act. Closer to home, however, the clergy saw the deed in a vastly different light. While not necessarily condoning the murder, Wishart, the leading figure in the rebellion faction of the Scottish granted Bruce absolution and convinced the clergy throughout the country to support him, recognizing that in doing, they had the best chance at independence from the English. Soon enough, the majority of the Scottish realm would stand behind Bruce and press the recognition of Scotland as an independent nation.

Declaration of Arbroath

The most significant stage of this recognition began with the Declaration of Arbroath. The Declaration of Arbroath is the most significant document in Scotland's history, and for the importance of Robert the Bruce for a Scottish identity. It is considered to be Scotland's "declaration of independence" from England and to the rest of Europe. The declaration is a letter dated 6 April 1320, written at Arbroath Abbey and addressed to Pope John XXII. The letter was written in Latin and contains the names and seals of an estimated 50 men: 8 earls, 31 barons, and likely 11 additional barons and non-noble freeholders. The inclusion of non-noble landholders is

significant as it shows that the views expressed within the letter represent those of multiple classes of citizens, rather than just the elite.

The letter begins by giving a heroic history of the Scottish people, claiming they originated from Greater Scythia, the steppe region of Central Asia, and journeyed through the Tyrrhenian Sea, and then dwelt in Spain and finally settled in the land of Scotland. The story of this migration is based on legend, but its inclusion in the letter seems intended to create the idea of an ancient and separate lineage for Scots, intended to bolster their claim of independence due to their having a history and identity unique from the other inhabitants of the British Isles, notably separate from the Anglo-Saxons and Normans. Beyond the lineage, they explain why they are a sovereign people, based on the claim that they've had an unbroken line of 113 native Scots kings, have never been ruled by a foreigner, and actively defended themselves for centuries against the Britons, Picts, Vikings, and English.

The writers then describe the intervention of Edward I into the affairs of the Scottish monarchy, framing themselves as naïve and desperate, going to Edward as a friend who then took advantage of, betrayed, and slaughtered them, in his pursuit of power over their kingdom, particularly mentioning the English's crimes against the religious sect: burning of monasteries and the "robbing and killing of monks and nuns."⁶⁴ Painting a picture of devastation and turmoil, they then introduce Robert the Bruce as their hero; the only man who could free them from English tyranny. The writers compare Bruce to the biblical Joshua and Judas Maccabeus, again specifically appealing to the Pope on a theological level. They write nothing of Robert's controversial deeds, but ask the Pope to rescind Robert's second excommunication—declared

⁶⁴ "Transcription and Translation of the Declaration of Arbroath, 6 April 1320," National Records of Scotland, last modified 1970, <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files//research/declaration-of-arbroath/declaration-of-arbroath-transcription-and-translation>.

due to Bruce's refusal to agree to a truce in the First War of Scottish Independence—while framing him as a virtuous and steadfast Christian, upholding the values and morality of God, and deserving of his place within the Church. They also claim he is not deserving of the excommunication, as a king with the right to continuously defend his land against foreign invaders.

The framing of the Scots narrative within the declaration is an important signifier of how the people of this time conceived of the idea of identity. Medieval societal identity was often framed around their monarch, rather than their ethnicities or the lands in which they lived. The declaration left some room for the later idea of collective identity, however, in that the writers didn't entirely frame their identity around Bruce, himself, but specifically state they are choosing Bruce as the representative of the identity they had already been forming.

The Scots appealed to the Pope's greatest concern of the time, which was the Crusades. In exchange for the Scots assistance in the Crusades, in order to defeat "the savagery of the heathen raging against the Christians,"⁶⁵ they entreated the Pope to recognize them as sovereign and to "admonish and exhort"⁶⁶ the English king for claiming overlordship of Scotland, paralleling his treatment of the Scottish people to the "heathens" the Pope was warring against.

The most significant aspect of the letter, in regard to the idea of the nation, is the fact that the writers state that government is contractual, and that if Bruce does not do his duty and instead makes Scotland a subject of England, or otherwise works against the community of the realm, they will drive him out as an enemy and choose another man to be their king.⁶⁷ This is the first instance of a declaration by the people that they are the source of their monarch's power, rather

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

than that power coming from God, and it is the first time the people have proclaimed that, if their king fails them, they have the power to remove him.⁶⁸ While the Magna Carta had been a novel creation just over one hundred years before the Declaration of Arbroath, it fell short of acknowledging the people's right of choosing to replace their monarch if the monarch failed to uphold their interests.

The Pope's immediate reaction was to write to Edward II urging him to make peace with the Scots, but by the next year, the Pope was back to supporting the English in their pursuit of Scotland, issuing six papal bulls in the effort. It wasn't until eight years later, on 1 March 1328, that the new king of England, Edward II, signed the Treaty of Edinburgh-Northampton with Bruce, in which Edward II renounced all claims to Scotland. Nine months later, the Pope finally rescinded Bruce's second excommunication. The following year, 1329, the Pope issued a bull allowing Scottish kings to be anointed with holy oil. The Declaration of Arbroath had paved the way for the events of 1328-1329 and finally succeeded in Scotland's independence being recognized throughout Europe.

Despite its importance and revolutionary ideas and pronouncements, the letter was relatively unknown until the seventeenth century, at which point it was put in print for the first time and disseminated as a response of the Glorious Revolution. It was at this time that it was first considered a declaration of independence, long before the term would be used by any other nation. The revelation of the Declaration of Arbroath being a beacon of Scottish identity helps cement the point that the formation a new concept of a Scottish nation was growing in importance in the fourteenth century. It was at this time that the whole of Europe was encountering monumental shifts centered around famine, plague, war, and the degradation of the

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Catholic Church. These events resulted in a social, spiritual, and economic decline throughout most European countries and, in many sectors, an internal crisis of identity.

One of the contributing factors to this evolving idea of Scottish identity is the push for people to determine what they were not, in an effort to help define who they are. For the Scots—as well as for the Welsh and Irish—an important point of what they were not, was English. The English monarchy and Church were becoming increasingly powerful and without check. The English had subjugated the Welsh and Irish, and were locked in the 100 Years War with France. They had spent generations aiming to securely fix the Scots under their control and, for the first time since William the Conqueror, the state of the Scottish monarchy was weak enough that the English found it ripe for complete domination. It was only through the strong sense of individualism and a unique identity cultivated by centuries of strong decentralization that led the Scottish people to rebel against the English interference. The Declaration was also a strong indication of the Scottish peoples' divergence from the majority of other Europeans at the time, in that religion and the papacy were not the ultimate sources of authority over them. The Scots showed that they were free to follow the leader they believed would serve them best, and would confront the Pope to rescind an excommunication, in effect rejecting his commandment. The Declaration of Arbroath helps encapsulate the growing feeling of identity amongst the Scottish people, as well as their determination to be masters of their own domain, through their proclamation of their inherent right to choose their leader, and the right to oust one they disapprove of.

The Creation of a National Hero

While the recognition of an independent Scotland was a monumental achievement, for which thousands had fought and died for decades, there continued to be some hints of instability throughout Bruce's reign and following his death. Bruce had fathered several children with his second wife, Elizabeth de Burgh, and the eldest son would succeed him as king at his death in 1329 and become David II. David would reign for 42 years yet would ultimately die childless. He was succeeded by the son of his eldest sister, Marjorie, whom had married Walter Stewart, 6th Steward of Scotland, and son of James Stewart, one of the Guardians along with Robert Bruce, and a lifelong ally. Their son, King Robert II, would reign for nineteen years, yet he endeavored repeatedly to strengthen the legitimacy of his rule.

One method of doing so was in the commissioning of John Barbour to record the life of his grandfather, a labor which would ultimately succeed in immortalizing Robert the Bruce as the hero of Scotland. Barbour's long, narrative poem, *The Brus*, was written around 1375. Barbour was commissioned and paid a pension by Robert II, the first king of the Stewart dynasty, in an effort to help bolster his own legitimacy by portraying his grandfather as the savior and hero of Scotland. Robert's character within the story overshadows every one of his associates. Even in accounting for the victories of Edward Bruce, who conquered Ireland, Barbour states "he might have rivaled any of his contemporaries, excepting only his brother".⁶⁹

The centerpiece of the poem is the Battle of Bannockburn, recounted at the beginning of this paper. The scene of de Bohun's death, the opening of the notorious battle, was enough to make Robert a hero and an exalted king, yet this battle also marked the turning point in the Wars of Independence, in which the Scots ultimately triumphed. By the time Bannockburn

⁶⁹ John Barbour and Michael Macmillan, *The Bruce of Bannockburn* (University of Michigan: E Mackay, 1914), ix.

commenced, there had been a twenty-eight-year fight for the Scottish throne and decades of interference by the English. The English had taken much of the southern Scottish lands, but by 1314, Bruce's forces had pushed them back into northern England, "leaving Stirling alone in foreign hands."⁷⁰ Edward II of England finally rallied a sizable army intent on relieving Stirling, bringing de Bohun in range of Bruce.

While the defeat of de Bohun, and the English troops entirely at Bannockburn, are events supported by other sources, Barbour has been met with criticism due to his embellishments. He greatly inflated the numbers of English troops and minimized the number of Scottish troops, making it look as though Robert was up against far greater odds than he truly was, thus making his victory even more unlikely and impressive. In reality, the numbers were still daunting: the English numbered 25,000 infantry soldiers and 2,000 horses to 6,000 Scottish soldiers, who ultimately triumphed primarily due to guerilla tactics.

Another source of consternation is the fact that Barbour had combined the character of Robert the Bruce within his poem with the lives of both Bruce's father and grandfather. In doing so, he attributed the triumphs and tragedies of each of the Bruces to the king, thus creating a character more downtrodden and victimized by the English than he had been in reality. Barbour's exaggerations and abuse of poetic license resulted in the creation of Robert into a biblical David against England's Goliath, inflating his legend into myth. Despite the acknowledged hyperbole, Barbour was a significant near-contemporary of the Wars of Scottish Independence and was able to see the evolution of Bruce's reputation following the wars. Beyond the creation of a national hero, Barbour uses his poem to construct a national story, which tells us about Barbour's ideas about what constitutes a nation. The poem has further been

⁷⁰ Fitzroy Maclean and Magnus Linklater, *Scotland: A Concise History* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2012), 41.

compared to Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, in that it was written in the vernacular; its composition was the first to help cement the Scots language and grammar, which was a significant step toward Scottish ethnogenesis. Having a piece of literature written in the spoken tongue helps cement a culture's identity, particularly as that literature expounds on the culture's history and values. Barbour's work was also significant in that it effectively erased the role of the Church and other revolutionaries in the creation of the Scottish identity and placed it squarely on Bruce and his assumed triumphs. The fact that much of the character created by Barbour is what is remembered about Bruce proves that the propaganda created about his life are as important to the idea of Scottish identity as Bruce himself was.

Conclusion

Robert the Bruce has been lauded throughout the centuries for being the greatest king in Scotland's history, as well as having secured her independence as a sovereign nation. While there is no doubt that Bruce was a skilled warrior and even more skilled politician, he was not the theorized "Great Man;" he did not create history nor change its trajectory, nor did he rewrite the story of Scotland from scratch. Certainly, Bruce played a significant role within Scotland's history, and his character and persona helped unite the Scottish people and gave them a national hero and national story, but it cannot be said that Scotland would not have achieved the status as an independent and sovereign nation if it were not for him. Overall, the mixing of traditions in both the swearing of fealty and the method of succession, coupled with the growing movements of independence, the proponents of which saw Bruce as the best choice for carrying their causes across the finish line, made Bruce into the king he would be remembered as. Bruce greatly benefited from generations of lax rules and whispers of an evolving Scottish identity,

manipulated those factors to his greatest advantage, and catapulted himself and the whole of the nation into the next chapter. The fact that Scottish identity was consistently shaping and changing is a poignant example of the tendency of identity to be relational, and a characteristic that may bend and mold with shifting times and influences.

As has been demonstrated, there were growing, though disconnected, roots of a nation for generations. Some of these roots, such as the religious split from England, were taking shape for well over a century by the time of Bruce's ascent, and thus cannot be attributed to him. In essence, Bruce cannot be downplayed for leaving an indelible mark on the country and her history, but he also cannot be viewed as the savior of it. Bruce was able to deftly capitalize on his position within the nobility, tenuous as it may have been at his birth, as well as his expert grasp on the political landscape, in order to maneuver himself into the most advantageous position, to ultimately realize the overall goal of gaining complete independence and severance from England. It is evident that the move to sovereignty and Bruce's rise relied on each other, but it is overly simplistic and incomplete to say that they could not have existed without the other. Sovereignty had already occurred; it was a matter of what form it would take. Bruce's existence within a time of crisis and his manipulation of the circumstances within the realm helped hasten a trend that was already taking shape, and he was able to benefit from various circumstances that were already in place to ensure his own rise and ultimate triumph.

Researching the history of Scottish independence is significant to not only understand how the Scottish sense of identity developed, and why Bruce still holds a meaningful position within the Scottish mind to present day, it also helps to understand why there are continual suggestions of an independent Scotland to modern times, as seen in the recent referendums exploring the possibility of both devolution and complete separation from the United Kingdom.

While it is notable to consider Bruce's hand in shaping the Scottish identity, it is as important to realize that there had been a continual idea of Scottishness and a need for sovereignty and independence for as long as there had been an idea of submission under England, from a political, social, and religious perspective. The idea of an independent Scotland was not simply a story of a man who rose to power and became the figurehead of a movement seven centuries ago, it is a throughline that has existed throughout the earliest history of the country and has held strong throughout its various states of existence.

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