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Michael Penman, *Robert the Bruce King of Scots* (Padstow, Cornwall: Yale University Press, 2014. Pp. xi + 443; illus. Cloth ISBN 978-0-300-14872-5, £25).

Historians interested in the reign of our only ‘hero king’ have generally been well-served to date. The first port of call for most people was the umquhill G.W.S. Barrow’s all-conquering biography, *Robert Bruce & The Community of the Realm of Scotland*. First published in 1965, this book ran across four editions (to 2005) and was highly valued for its erudite scholarship, both among the academic community and among the general public. Yet, among some of those same readers there was an (often unstated) uneasiness about Barrow’s accomplishment because it clearly was a classic ‘book of two halves’. The author, perhaps echoing Barbour’s *Brus*, took twelve chapters to get to 24 June 1314, some eight years into Bruce’s reign (1306-29). Thereafter, a further three chapters were devoted to the equally interesting fifteen remaining years of that king’s rule. One further criticism of Barrow’s book - if I may - was that the author rarely took the opportunity to update the various editions to take account of post-1965 scholarship on the same topic. Despite these flaws, *Robert Bruce & The Community of the Realm of Scotland* clearly remains a classic book beloved by many across the field and anyone trying to surpass it faced a difficult task.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the choice to publish such a successor in 2014, the seven hundredth anniversary of the hero king’s greatest victory was inevitable. It is clear from the acknowledgements that Penman intended this book to stand alongside the Yale English Monarchs series, likely the magisterial *Edward I* by Michael Prestwich in particular. I think Penman has largely succeeded in this but Yale has done both him and his readership a great disservice in the way *Robert the Bruce* has been assembled for publication. Placement of the abbreviations and the acknowledgements at the end of the book – each separated from the other by endnotes - can only be described as ‘eccentric’. Furthermore, the denial of footnotes plainly wrongs the reader. Endnotes have no place in a text of this complexity. This reviewer is also of the opinion that a text of this length is deserving of a competent proof reader. Occasionally tortuous sentences and a number of spelling mistakes are clear evidence to the contrary. The dust jacket is plainly unimaginative – is this really the best Yale’s graphics department could stretch to for a seven hundredth anniversary and the first full-length study of a major medieval European monarch who went on Crusade like no other had previously done?

But such complaints are perhaps misleading because they largely do not impinge upon enjoyment of the prose. In eleven chapters – five pre-1314 and six post-1314 – Penman takes a more balanced view of Bruce’s reign than any previous author. Within a chronological framework the author explores the intricate expansion of royal and lordly power within a wider European context as royal lineages failed, the equally complex shifting political and social norms within Scotland itself as different communities were empowered – or not – and how Bruce himself determined to ensure that his legacy survived his own mortality. Perhaps more impressively, Penman also frames much of the post-1314 period within research currently being undertaken on the medieval European climate using both record and proxy climate data. For example, while we have long known that Edward Bruce and his army faced famine in Ireland, new research demonstrates this was only one facet of much wider apocalyptic events that medieval Europeans faced in the years 1315-24 and which encompassed climatic downturn, various animal epizootics, and a devastating famine. Despite our relative lack of Scottish sources on such topics, understanding these debilitating crises is key to understanding Scottish raiding and Brucean policies post-1314.

But this book is not just a synthesis of work undertaken elsewhere on either Bruce himself or on wider European medieval histories. Throughout the volume, but more noticeably on the post-1314 period, Penman grasps this opportunity to examine key events in close detail and his findings should help energise ‘Bruce studies’ for years to come. Of particular interest might be the thought-provoking discussion about the parliaments of 1318 and 1326; the

former in relation to Bruce's negotiation with the political community about the succession crisis and other grievances, the latter in relation to the diminution of royal lands as Bruce moved to secure support through patronage. This, and much more, is brought together in a concluding section that says as much about Robert Bruce the man and his plans, hopes, and fears, as it does about Penman's scholarship. This section alone should inspire students of Bruce for years to come.

In this reviewer's opinion it should never be regretted that the 1995 film *Braveheart* wholly overshadowed the execrable 1996 film *The Bruce*. The latter's lead, played by Sandy Welch, never really stood a chance against Mel Gibson's wonderfully blue William Wallace. I wonder how many readers of Penman's *Robert the Bruce* will notice that each chapter title is also the title of a Humphrey Bogart film. Like Rick in *Casablanca*, Bruce too might have uttered the immortal line: "I'm the only cause I'm interested in" (with apologies to Murray Burnett, Joan Alison, and Michael Curtiz).