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*Barbour's Bruce and its Cultural Contexts:
Politics, Chivalry and Literature in Late Medieval Scotland,*
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The Bruce, the long poem completed in 1375 by Archdeacon of Aberdeen, John Barbour, is undoubtedly deserving of focussed interdisciplinary study and this symposium volume provides a number of engaging perspectives on this epic Scottish work. As a collection, however, it does read more as a range of current research interests forwarded by contributors rather than specific commissions designed to provide a comprehensive overview of its subject from all angles.

The editors provide a valuable introduction, foregrounding the context of Scottish political society and increasingly belligerent Anglo-Scottish relations in the 1370s and thus the intended courtly audience for this c.14,000 line vernacular (Middle Scots/English) 'verse romance' or 'chivalric biography'. The poem focusses upon the heroic efforts of King Robert Bruce/I (1306-29), knight Sir James Douglas, and a number of their contemporaries, in their struggle to secure the Scottish kingdom from English conquest c.1286-c.1332. The introduction rightly scrutinizes the evidence for Barbour's having drawn on earlier verse lives and histories of events in Scotland and Ireland first produced c.1314-29, under Robert I himself, or even in the 1330s and 40s, as Anglo-Scottish dynastic war resumed. This is sensitive to the possibility of Barbour modifying these earlier works to suit his later fourteenth-century audience and his intended rhetorical purpose, as well as to his working in phases, perhaps appending additional material after his coverage of Robert's achievements up to and including his famous victory in battle over Edward II of England at Bannockburn in 1314. Perhaps the most intriguing point to emerge at the outset of this volume is evidence for connections between Barbour and Archibald Douglas, Lord of Galloway and future 3rd Earl of Douglas, the bastard son of the poem's celebrated Sir James (and a man who prospered and remained hugely influential through the bumpy transition between Bruce and Stewart dynasties in 1371).

The editors then develop some of these key ideas in their individual papers. Susan Foran [ch. 6] reflects on her earlier important perspective on Barbour's literary and linguistic creation of a community identity of chivalry and service for later fourteenth-century Scottish knights. This is a context which Steve Boardman [ch. 9] sharpens through a close examination of the 1370s and Barbour's commemoration of the deeds of their 'nobyll eldyrs' as a means to inspire Robert II (1371-90), his several Stewart noble sons, the Douglas earls/lords and others, i.e. the descendants and heirs of Bruce's and James Douglas's generation, to resume an honourable and open struggle against Plantagenet aggression and occupation of Scottish territory. Boardman is surely right to illustrate the mood of 'despondency' amongst the Scottish lay elite after successive defeats and invasions at the hands of England's Edward III

(1332, 1333, 1346 and 1356), a reality exploited by Robert I's son David II (1329-71) in his pursuit of Anglo-Scottish rapprochement c.1346-69.

However, it might be argued that such a mirror of princes or even an openly critical motive for Barbour's work remains underappreciated. Can we take this interpretation further, pointing out that Barbour compiled his work at a time when Robert II and many Scottish nobles, despite their history of opposition to the apparently Anglophile David II, were hesitant to resume open warfare against England while Edward III remained alive? Was this a source of tension and even embarrassment? It is perhaps telling that a later Scottish (Latin) chronicle, Abbot Walter Bower's *Scotichronicon* of the 1440s, whilst it celebrates Barbour's great work, perhaps deliberately re-dates Robert II's 1371 renewal of an anti-English but thus at first unused Franco-Scottish treaty to 1381, i.e. four years *after* (rather than six years before) the Scots' actual renewal of open aggression, now against the troubled minority regime of England's Richard II. In the same way Bower would go on to draw on later fourteenth-century sources to celebrate the Scottish generation of earls and great lords which achieved a major victory over England at Otterburn (1388) but narrate the valour and exemplum bravery of only *lesser* Scottish knights who continued to fight into the 1390s and even in defeat at Humbledon Hill in 1402 whilst their leaders too often favoured truce and squabbled amongst themselves.

In this regard, Barbour's work as a rather more accusatory critique of later fourteenth-century royal policy towards England (which Robert II smartly endorsed, rewarded and thus adapted) might also be projected back into the reign of David II. Here the cleric-poet's possible passage to Oxford for tuition and his early connections with Archibald Douglas in the 1360s should be reconsidered: for the raids to recover Scottish border territory which marked the 1370s actually began c.1368-70, perhaps encouraged by David, who was also the first king to send Archibald to Paris to reopen potential alliance talks, thus anticipating Robert II's embassy emphasised in this volume. Did Barbour thus voice a growing expectation of Scottish identity which therefore transcended and blurred political faction? Similarly, Biorn Tjallen's [ch. 7] fresh take on Barbour's much debated, apparently anti-climactic, even bitter, 'eulogy' on 'fredome'/the absence of 'thralldom', as exemplified in a lord's payment of his wife's debts before he does his civic duty, is persuasive in suggesting a scholastic perspective rooted in the archdeacon's education. But this might also have benefitted from a more nuanced consideration of Barbour's context: was he motivated in the first few lines of his work to critique thralldom thus as one of many clerics who apparently protested when David II levied successive taxes on ecclesiastical revenues to pay his ransom but squandered the money on other things (including a mistress)?

The volume's remaining papers are similarly thought-provoking. Rhiannon Purdie [ch. 2] cautiously draws the reader towards an understanding of why Barbour may indeed have deviated from factual history to heighten the essential essence of the martial achievements of his audience's ancestors: she surveys some of the mostly French romance texts/models known to Barbour in Scotland. Theo van Hiejnsbergen [ch. 3] also delineates Barbour's 'rhetorically informed history-making' and how he conventionally plied drama, speech and prologue explanation to inspire and morally inform a 'textual community' of readers, one thus *persuaded* of the true spirit of the times (rather than provided with what modern historians' might anachronistically expect by way of 'truth'). These are both challenging chapters and might have benefitted from some parallel discussion of how the text was

disseminated by reading and perhaps even performance. After all, for all their weak image the first two Stewart kings did patronise chivalry with Robert III (1390-1406) sponsoring such an (annual?) event as a gold challenge tournament cup as well as transferring Barbour's royal pension to Aberdeen cathedral after the archdeacon's death so as to mark his obituary each year. Moreover, a late fourteenth-century breviary survives for Aberdeen (associated with the Keith family whose ancestors feature prominently in *The Bruce*) which records commemoration of major battle anniversaries, strikingly both victories and defeats, and thus hints strongly at the wider culture within which Barbour's work shone.

Chris Given-Wilson [ch. 4] provides a compelling survey of the vernacular 'chivalric biography' tradition across Europe. Indeed, the power and growing popularity of this genre rather suggests earlier scholars were perhaps right to argue that Barbour drew on existing chivalric lives for his larger work, including a book of Robert I's deeds reportedly used, too, by English and French chroniclers. Diana B. Tyson's comparison [ch. 5] of Barbour's chivalric vocabulary with that of near contemporary verse biographies of the Black Prince, Bertrand du Guesclin and Peter I of Cyprus confirms that Scottish poets and chroniclers were well versed in the chivalric sources and discourse of the day. Dauvit Broun's [ch. 8] adapted professorial inaugural lecture, rethinking the origins of the Scottish kingdom and people, also suggests a further intriguing layer of meaning to search for in Barbour, drawn from consideration of the linguistic evidence of Scottish charters and chronicles in the thirteenth century: that of 'subconscious' (reflex/natural/default) references to accepted authority, race and allegiance as a measure of developing identity.

It is, though, bookend chapters 1 and 10 here which arguably furnish the freshest perspective on this great poem. Firstly, Emily Wingfield makes a detailed survey of the two extant manuscripts of Barbour's text, dated to 1487 and 1489, confirming their scribe as the same copyist, a John Ramsay, working for a Simon Lochmalony of Auchtermoonzie in North Fife (she also partly details the early print history of Barbour's poem). Michael Brown is then able to use record linkage to illustrate an impressive network of literary patronage and production – including Barbour, Blind Hary's *The Wallace* of c.1484x88 and other texts – amongst several minor if upcoming 'lairdly' (gentry) families, often in fifteenth-century crown service, within this district. Indeed, Brown paints such a potent picture of this circle's use of literary works in the turbulent political context of the 1480s that one is left wondering if this group perhaps nurtured further amendments of Barbour's original text to suit their ends: is the text we know in fact quite different in key ways/sections from that first read/heard/performed in the 1370s, and thus very much a 'living' work?