Politics, Chivalry and Literature in Late Medieval Scotland

Steve Boardman and Susan Foran (eds.)
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Review by: Gordon McKelvie

John Barbour’s The Bruce, written between 1372 and 1375, is the first great piece of vernacular literature written in the British Isles during the late medieval period—predating Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales—and is a core source for historians of medieval Scotland. Unfortunately, few scholars outside of Scotland have paid sufficient attention to this important piece of medieval vernacular literature. This volume of essays is a valuable contribution to the historiography of late medieval Scotland, and demonstrates the need for those beyond Scotland to pay much closer attention to The Bruce.

The introduction stretches to thirty-one pages, and provides a vital overview of the poem’s contents, composition, and later reception. The volume consists of ten chapters, and has two main distinctions: between those written from a historian’s perspective, and those written from a literary scholar’s perspective; and between those directly concerned with Barbour’s Bruce in detail, and those that set the epic in its broader social, political, and cultural milieu. These differing perspectives all serve to demonstrate where the poem sits within the broader context of chivalric writing in medieval Europe. As this reviewer is a historian, the main focus of this review will be on the value of these essays, including those written by literary scholars, for the discipline of history.

The first chapter, by Emily Wingfield, and the last, by Michael Brown, consider the earliest surviving manuscripts of The Bruce, and its reception in later centuries. In what seems to have been an instance of accidental coherence, both Wingfield and Brown independently identified the same notary from Fife, John Ramsay, as the scribe for both of the earliest manuscript copies. Wingfield provides a valuable history of the early manuscripts from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, along with the history of the printed versions of the text from the first printed edition in 1571. Brown considers the earliest extant copies of the poem from 1487 and 1489 (over a century after the completion of the original text), along with those of The Wallace, and shows how it not only illuminates the politics of the 1480s, but also provides insight into the literary tastes of the lesser nobility of late fifteenth-century Fife.

The need to consider The Bruce as a work of literature is highlighted in several of the chapters. Rhiannon Purdie tackles the question about how The Bruce should be classified by both literary scholars and historians, noting the influence of the romance genre on Barbour’s writing, along with the need for
some semblance of historical accuracy. Theo van Heijnsbergen’s contribution offers a useful reminder to historians that *The Bruce* needs to be read as a work of literature and rhetoric that conformed to certain cultural and literary expectations. Susan Foran’s discussion of the community of the realm in *The Bruce* notes the importance of the text for creating a shared sense of the recent past for the Scottish nobility. Biörn Tjällén’s contribution considers the discourse on thraldom, highlighting the influence of Aristotelian and scholastic traditions in Barbour’s writing, which provides an important insight into the cultural and intellectual milieu in which *The Bruce* was written. Together, these four chapters are important reminders of the need for historians to consider the literary context of *The Bruce*, and indeed all other similar chivalric texts.

The topics of three of the essays may appear to be odd choices for this volume, as they only discuss the poem briefly, but they all provide a useful discussion of the broader context in which the poem was written, and are excellent works of scholarship in their own right. Chris Given-Wilson addresses the broader topic of Chivalric Biography, which sets *The Bruce* more firmly in the context of late medieval chivalric biographies across Europe. The appeal that *The Bruce* had in Scotland was similar to the appeal of the works of Froissart, Geoffroy de Charny, and the Arthurian tales. In these works, it was not the story that mattered, but their cultural importance, and the political and moral advice they gave. Diana Tyson’s essay places *The Bruce* in the broader European context by examining the language of the poem in conjunction with Chandos Herald’s biography of the Black Prince, and against two French biographies—Jean Cuvelier’s *Chanson de Bertrand du Guesclin*, and Guillaume de Machaut’s biography of Pierre I of Cyprus. Rather than considering the European context of the poem, Dauvit Broun offers a wide-ranging analysis of Scotland’s origins before the Wars of Independence, and discusses how the geographical limits of Scotland known by both John Barbour, and those living today, came into existence. Although the chapter draws primarily on earlier sources and offers no direct analysis of *The Bruce*, it helps to understand the ways that ‘Scotland’, as understood by Barbour and indeed by modern readers came in to existence. The range of sources examined is impressive, and Broun’s discussion of the methodological issues raised by the sources is illuminating: in particular, his discussion of passing references to ‘Scotland’ and ‘Scots’ in light of new insights by philosophers on social imagination. The chapter should be key reading for any scholar interested in the origins of national identity or state formation of any place or period.

Steve Boardman’s contribution highlights the importance of *The Bruce* for understanding the 1370s, a period during which Anglo-Scottish warfare was being renewed. Boardman shows that in one sense the poem can be
reviewed as part of an effort to galvanise and inspire a new generation of Scottish fighters. The chapter is particularly insightful when it notes the tension that Barbour needed to reconcile between the ideal chivalric warfare, and the tactics that the Scots needed to adopt when facing larger armies. Indeed, as historians such as Maurice Keen and Matthew Strickland have stressed, it was this tension between the ideals of warfare and the realities of warfare that were at the heart of much of the chivalric discourse across medieval Europe.

In all, this volume highlights the various ways that medievalists can approach Barbour’s Bruce in an interdisciplinary manner. Readers of this journal will be interested in how the biography of one of Scotland’s most famous medieval kings is key to understanding the wider social, cultural, and nationalistic concerns of late medieval Scots. Royal biographies were a key genre in medieval writing, and they provide an insight into a diverse range of topics (as this volume aptly demonstrates). The collection should be required reading for any scholar of chivalry.

One final point should be made in this review. Around a century after Barbour’s The Bruce, another poem was composed about Scotland’s other famous medieval military commander, William Wallace. As Michael Brown’s contribution to this volume noted, Blind Harry’s The Wallace’s “basic conception, its literary form and in its blatant borrowings from The Bruce … demonstrated an obvious knowledge of the earlier work” (213). Written in the 1480s, and with an eye to the turbulent politics of James III’s reign, The Wallace has not attracted the same amount of scholarship as its late fourteenth century predecessor. Is it too much to ask for a similar volume of high quality essays on The Wallace, too?

GORDON MCKELVIE
University of Winchester