

Robert the Bruce: King of the Scots

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Reviewer: Fiona Watson

It has become a commonplace to assert that biographies are unfashionable these days. I'm not sure that's entirely true, even for English history (female subjects certainly buck the trend), but there is no doubt that they are still the staple of Scottish history, particularly when it comes to the middle ages. In part, this is a question of sources – a subject to which we'll return in due course. Certainly we are most unlikely to see an entire book dedicated to *The Black Death in Scotland*, for example, a subject regularly tackled south of the border. But I think it is also true that a certain type of great man exerts a particular influence over the Scottish psyche and, for historians, biographies are still therefore the most effective means of exploring earlier periods and shedding light on a range of topics that would otherwise be difficult to cover on their own and/or difficult to 'sell'.

In 2006 Robert the Bruce came third in a poll of 'most important Scots', behind William Wallace and Robert Burns. Leaving aside what that says about the nation that produced, among others, David Hume and Adam Smith, Alexander Fleming and John Logie Baird, there can be no doubt that a king that ruled 700 years ago is still very much remembered by Scots today and, even more pertinently, that his life and achievements are deemed to be profoundly influential. It is hard to imagine Edward III or Henry V of England being similarly admired, but at least this should augur well for scholars of the wars between Scotland and England in general, and Wallace and Bruce in particular.

Dr Penman and his publisher have unashamedly and quite rightly sought to capitalise on the fact that 2014 marks the 700th anniversary of King Robert's dramatic and, on paper at least, unexpected victory over King Edward II of England at Bannockburn (though I suspect that exploiting the rigid deadlines that such commemorations impose is actually more of a curse than a blessing to the academic juggling a myriad of other responsibilities). But while those south of the border might have remained unaware of the Bannockburn anniversary, it will not have escaped anyone's notice that 2014 is also the year in which Scotland is voting in a referendum to decide whether or not to become fully independent. It might have been imagined that a book on such an important Scottish figure would add to the colour and content of that debate. However, the evidence so far (and it is now too late) would suggest that the Yes campaign, far from embracing Wallace and Bruce, has sought to distance itself from that violent and unavoidably anti-English past. It is the No campaign that is the more historically concerned, citing the political, cultural and economic

inheritance of 300 years of conjoined history between England and Scotland since 1707. *Robert the Bruce. King of the Scots* has not therefore – and thankfully – been hijacked for current purposes by either side and remains free in terms of public perception to distil at length some far more complex insights into a period that is certainly not the black and white affair that many might deem it to be.

Dr Penman introduces the book with an impressive and ambitious set of aims. Firstly, he intends to rectify a major deficiency in the current historiography; namely to provide a proper and coherent analysis of Robert the Bruce's reign *after* his great victory at Bannockburn. It has been a source of frustration to those of us teaching in this period that, up until now, the foremost biographer of Bruce – the late Professor G. W. S. Barrow with his *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland*, first published in 1965 and revised and republished no less than four times – steadfastly refused to devote any more than one chapter and 36 pages out of 420 (in the final 2005 edition) to the post-1314 period, which encompasses almost two-thirds of Bruce's reign (1306 to 1329).

Secondly, however, Penman's new book attempts to recast King Robert's entire life and reign through discussions of key influences, including Edward I, the English king who set his sights on conquering Scotland from 1296, as well as various of Bruce's friends, family members and notable politicians, especially from among the clergy whose words sought to influence both contemporaries and posterity.

Thirdly, King Robert's reign, and events as a whole from 1286 (the death of Alexander III of Scotland in that year ultimately precipitated a succession crisis, which Edward I of England soon exploited) are viewed within the context of the profound changes in the relationship between rulers and those over whom they exerted authority throughout north-western Europe. Even a comparatively un-centralised kingdom like Scotland found it necessary to introduce some of the increasingly defined and complex mechanisms then emerging to negotiate the relationship between the governors and the governed.

In Robert the Bruce's case, however, this focussed on his need to define and defend his legitimacy to the 'community of the realm' – that nebulous collection of the great and the good, the men responsible for making decisions for the nation as a whole, that had come to the fore during the difficult, kingless years between 1286 and 1292, and again after 1296. It is no overstatement that Bruce fundamentally split that community when he seized the throne in violent circumstances in 1306 and, like all usurpers, he suffered the consequences throughout most of his reign, whatever his own propaganda might assert to the contrary. Fourthly, as an extension of this last point, Dr Penman sets out to explore how King Robert sought to bolster his own position by various stratagems designed to enhance the aura surrounding the Scottish monarchy as a whole. Most originally, this includes an analysis of the various saints whom King Robert venerated in both a private capacity and, with the deliberate potential for propaganda as well as pious effect, as Scotland's monarch.

Finally, the increasingly well-documented impact of European-wide environmental crises from cattle disease to extreme weather events, particularly in the years following on from Bannockburn, are included as part of the wider political, economic and social analyses. It is notoriously difficult to separate chicken from egg when trying to marry together what Nature gets up to with specific actions undertaken by human societies. Nevertheless, that is no excuse for leaving Nature out when it has been, and still is, one of the most powerful actors on this planet.

So, has Dr Penman succeeded in all these laudable aims?

First of all, I would have to say that I found myself wrestling with how and to what extent largely circumstantial evidence should be integrated into a historical narrative. The discussion beginning on p. 94 of Robert Bruce's actions in the immediate aftermath of his murder of the most important man in Scotland and former leader of Scottish resistance to Edward I, John Comyn of Badenoch, is a case in point. Bruce's grandfather had come off second best in 1292 to a rival claimant to the Scottish throne, John Balliol, who then reigned for four years until Edward I deprived him of his kingship in 1296. John Comyn of Badenoch,

as Balliol's nephew, had both an arguably better claim by blood and certainly by power, influence and track record than Robert Bruce. This, as Dr Penman convincingly argues – but, like so much about this period, cannot prove – is exactly why the latter had to 'deal' with his rival before seeking the throne for himself.

In this fracturing and fevered environment, the would-be king turned to Bishop Robert Wishart of Glasgow, a man who had shown himself consistently motivated since the 1280s by a desire to keep Scotland intact and independent (though he, like most Scots, had on occasions been forced to acknowledge King Edward as ruler of the northern kingdom). We do not *know* that Bishop Wishart made Bruce 'swear upon the Holy Gospels and the tomb of St Kentigern' to pursue the cause of Scottish independence with his life, if necessary. Equally, no chronicler at the time mentions the introduction of elements of sacramental kingship that the Scots had long sought from the pope but been denied thanks to English claims of overlordship on the day that Bruce finally did become king (25 March 1306, the feast of the Annunciation of the Virgin – and, indeed, the beginning of the New Year).

Nevertheless, the arguments presented here are worth thinking about, which was surely the intention. So too are the elements of piety – royal visitations to sites associated with particular saints as well as appropriation of revenues on their behalf, along with the noting of what took place on which saint's day and whether there might be a connection – that wash through the book and imbue the reader with a sense, however fleetingly, of the importance of such considerations to the medieval mind in general, and in particular to Robert Bruce, a man possessed of the ability to think laterally and effectively on almost every issue but saddled by his own hand with one of the most dodgy starts to a successful reign as any in history.

A similar layering of circumstantial evidence applies to the question of influences – inevitable, really, in an age when letters and diaries from the protagonists are not available to provide at the very least what they would like us to believe proved formative. To this we must add the fact that, in an un-centralised polity like Scotland, there was always bound to be less governmental paperwork than that of bureaucratic England, a situation hugely exacerbated by the inevitably destructive consequences of war and the deliberate removal of much of Scotland's formal record by Edward I. The discussion over Robert Bruce's birthplace – Turnberry in his mother's family's earldom of Carrick on the west coast of Scotland or Writtle in deepest Essex – is not designed to provide a definitive answer, which once again the absence of evidence will continue to prohibit. Rather, it is to highlight to the reader the essential point that the young Robert Bruce grew up in a world of fluid identities, no doubt speaking a number of languages, and with easy access to both the overtly powerful and impressively formal English court as well as the highly personal and personable style of kingship still preferred in Scotland.

But lest anyone should think that this book is a somewhat ephemeral piece of work, there is plenty of new material in here grounded very firmly in the written record. As part of Dr Penman's determination to provide a proper assessment of the post-1314 period, the discussion that begins on page 190 on the crucial parliament of 1318 is highly illuminating. Here we not only witness the cracks that national and civil wars had wreaked on the Scottish polity and the careful, canny negotiations with his political community that King Robert deemed were necessary to head off opposition (and in this he was by no means successful in the short-term); but the lid is also lifted on the more autocratic – and hence, perhaps, more desperate – tactics that Bruce used earlier in his kingship, most particularly the commandeering of noble seals to be attached to documents of state in order to present a veneer of unity to the outside world (a tactic that he may well have adapted from Edward I's large-scale demand for Scottish seals to acknowledge his right to rule Scotland in 1296 in what soon became known as the Ragman Roll).

Another important area covered here which really needed investigation is Bruce's policy towards the granting of land. In his early (ie. pre-Bannockburn) insecure days, he was careful not to alienate royal demesne; but thereafter, and particularly after 1318, he needed to court a range of interests, often in order to begin to rebuild his shattered kingdom, as well as to court particular individuals, both lay and clerical. This study is valuable in itself, but it also helps us to understand the extraordinary (in Scottish terms) grant by a parliament of 1326 of a tenth of fermes and rents to endure for King Robert's lifetime because royal

revenues 'had become so diminished by various gifts and transfers made because of the war that he did not have appropriate support for his position without intolerable charges and inconveniences to his people' (p. 270). It is unusual for the dealings between ruler and subjects to be so baldly, indeed boldly, articulated without the prompting of a violent encounter between the two, but the Scots seem to have long been a particularly blunt and honest people. Nevertheless, in the fallout from the final peace treaty agreed between the two kingdoms, which included a promise by the Scots to hand over a colossal indemnity of £20,000 – requiring a further bout of taxation – the 1326 arrangement seems to have been 'quietly' dropped. King Robert, as always, knew when to demand and when to placate.

Finally, it must be added that the book's conclusion is, quite frankly, brilliant, and can be recommended for anyone interested in history, not just this particular period. Here we have elegance combined with erudition that brings everything to a satisfactory conclusion within the balance of probability. I will confess that sometimes I found this elegance lacking in other parts of the book, where fiendishly long sentences and even longer lists of information (some of which might have been better transformed into graphs or other visual aids) left me sometimes struggling for the meaning. This is also not the place to go to for an understanding of King Robert's military strategy, presumably because it is well covered elsewhere. I sincerely hope that a second edition comes along in due course without the pressure of an anniversary to provide breathing space for some of those sentences and allow elegance of writing to shine through the entirety of the book.

Nonetheless, this is an outstanding piece of work that shines a light on some extremely murky corners of history and allows King Robert's genius as a lawmaker and diplomat to rival his undoubted skill as a military leader. I have the distinct impression (perhaps because I feel the same myself), that the more Dr Penman reveals about the difficulties that Bruce faced as king even in the years after his sensational victory, the more the author is impressed with this eminently energetic and inventive monarch. And if we have to work hard in order to win out the copious nuggets of gold from this book, then it is no less than Robert the Bruce deserves.

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