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The Declaration of Arbroath

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Medieval Europe

Dr. Hicks

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One of the most famous documents in Scottish history may very well be the Declaration of Arbroath. However, while the most famous portion, declaring that the Scots would “never on any conditions be brought under English rule” and that their fight was “for freedom alone”,¹ is certainly the most quoted, there is far more to this fascinating document than defiance of the English crown. In addition to the beautiful and stirring passages about the defense of freedom, it also includes other early ideas relevant to people even today, such as the idea that a leader is subject to his people. It provides a look into how the author of the letter and those around him saw their country, or how they wanted it to be seen, and some of the political maneuvering going on during a very dangerous and tumultuous time.

When this document was written in 1320, Scotland had been at war with England for over twenty years, and had been experiencing internal turmoil for about a decade before that. The sudden death of their king, Alexander III, in 1286 resulted in a succession crisis because his only surviving heir was his granddaughter Margaret. Having her as queen was politically problematic both because of her young age (she was three at the time) but because of the issue of marriage. Marrying a Scot could upset the balance of power among the nobles, marrying a foreigner could bring Scotland under the rule of another country, and not marrying at all would lead to the extinction of the line, since it was evident that Alexander’s wife was not pregnant.² However, these concerns seemed small in comparison when the young Maid of Norway died on her way to Scotland at the tender age of seven. At this point, at least thirteen individuals made claims upon the vacant throne, but the most important were John Balliol and Robert Bruce. The trouble lay in that both claimants traced their line through the nieces of King William (Alexander

1. "The Declaration of Arbroath; April 6, 1320." The Avalon Project.

2. Barrell, A. D. M. *Medieval Scotland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 93.

III's grandfather), but Balliol was two generations away from the elder niece while Bruce was one generation away from the younger, resulting in an apparent stalemate.³ To avoid civil war, the Scots asked their southern neighbor to mediate.

Looking at this decision in hindsight seems to be an incredibly foolish and naïve thing to do, but the countries had been at peace for many years, with nobility often intermarrying, so the English king seemed to be a very logical choice at the time. It isn't even entirely certain that Edward originally had territorial designs on Scotland. His conquests would seem to suggest that he did, but it is also possible that he simply seized the opportunity that presented itself.⁴ His appointment of John Balliol has often been considered a move to put a puppet in power that he could then take over from when it was expedient, but whether this was actually his intention or not, the royal line would still have passed through Balliol before reaching Bruce. It is only after seeing the terrible violence that would follow that the error is obvious.

Balliol did not fare terribly well in his reign as king, and was soon disposed by Edward in 1296, earning him the scornful nickname of 'Toom Tabard', or "empty coat". He and many other nobles were then forced to swear allegiance to Edward and he took over the country. This was soon challenged, however, most famously by William Wallace, Andrew de Moray, and Robert Bruce, the grandson of the former claimant to the throne. By the time Bruce began his work, however, both Wallace and de Moray would be dead, as de Moray fell at Stirling Bridge and Wallace was captured and executed in 1305. It might seem that the fight was over, but Bruce would soon declare himself king, though not in the most orthodox fashion. In 1306, he would meet John Comyn, a supporter of Balliol, in Greyfriars Kirk in Dumfries. Whether in a fit

3. Barrell, 98-99.

4. Barrell, 22.

of rage or an act of premeditated murder, he stabbed Comyn to death inside the church. Exactly why is unknown, but he immediately found himself in danger of becoming a fugitive. He hastily had his crime absolved by the Bishop of Glasgow and declared himself king, placing himself above the law, though earning himself a sentence of excommunication in the process.

He would then go on to continue the fight for Scotland, including the surprising Scots victory at Bannockburn in 1314, defeating not only “proud Edward’s army”, but Edward II himself, who rode into battle and fled back to England. Edward took the throne after his father died in 1307, but evidently had less interest in Scotland than his father. However, he would still stubbornly refuse to acknowledge Bruce as king of Scots. Furthermore, when Pope Boniface VIII, who had been sympathetic to the Scots, died, he was replaced by two more unsympathetic men, Clement V and John XXII.⁵ This complicated matters, because then there were two powerful leaders who opposed Bruce’s claim to the throne and Scotland’s right to sovereignty. Finally, in 1320, Bruce and his supporters drew up a letter to be sent to the Pope to explain their viewpoint and convince him to help bring peace between the kingdoms. This letter would later be called the Declaration of Arbroath.

It is not known for certain who it was who originally wrote this document, but it is commonly believed that it was Bernard de Linton, the Abbot of Arbroath. He first appears in 1296 as one of the men forced to swear allegiance to the English king and very likely had seen some of Edward’s atrocities for himself, which may have influenced his writing. There are also other official documents from around this time attributed to him, including a letter to Philip the Fair of France and a declaration of the bishops in favor of Bruce, which have a similar style to

5. Fergusson, James. *The Declaration of Arbroath*. Edinburgh: University Press, 1970, pg. 13.

the Declaration.⁶ The letter was sent to Pope John XXII, who took over after Clement V died. He received it, but did very little about it. Eventually, however, he would lift Bruce's excommunication and the interdict issued against Scotland and would begin outlining a truce between the countries.

Interestingly, the letter opens, after the customary greeting, with a description of Scotland's mythical origins. According to this, they originally came from Scythia (possibly because Andrew was said to have preached there), travelled to Spain, crossed over into Britain (comparing it to the Israelites crossing the Red Sea), and settled in the west, defeating all tribes that came against them and having an unbroken succession of 113 kings (including Robert Bruce).⁷ Other parts of the legend, not included in the Declaration, also say that the Scots were descended from an Egyptian princess who carried Jacob's Stone to Scotland, where it became the Stone of Scone.⁸ However strange this tale sounds, though, the point was not so much to tell a factual history as to make a statement, that Scotland was an ancient and legitimate kingdom with a long history of independence and one with Christian connections through Andrew, the brother of Peter.

It then goes on to tell about the specific grievances they had against Edward, seeming to contrast their peace and piety with Edward's violence and sacrilege. All had been peaceful until the English king came as "a friend and ally" and began to attack these people who had done him no harm. It then makes a detailed list of the acts he had committed, including massacre,

6. Fergusson, 29-31.

7. "The Declaration of Arbroath; April 6, 1320."

8. Magnusson, Magnus. *Scotland: The Story of a Nation*. New York, New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000, 41-42.

imprisoning prelates, destruction of monasteries, and violence against monks and nuns.⁹

However, this description is very clearly through Scottish eyes and obviously ignores the bits of history that are not well suited to their argument, including the fact that Edward was invited to mediate the dispute between the claimants and that Scots had committed similar terrible acts themselves, both during the war and before. Again though, the point was not to give an objective description of events, but to persuade. It is worth noting that the Pope had also been receiving English reports of the conflict which were equally exaggerated.

The next portion is the most famous, though the latter part is more well-known than the former. It describes how Bruce delivered them from these evils through divine providence and how the nobles pledged to support him to the death as their rightful king because of his deeds. However, as loyal as they would be to him as long as he maintained their rights, if he failed them and agreed to make them subjects of the English, they swore to “drive him out as an enemy and a subverter of his own rights and ours” and to replace him with someone who would defend them. It then delivers the ringing statement of the reason for the Scots’ fighting, the freedom that they would not lose “but with life itself”.¹⁰ This is an especially important point in the document, for it not only declares the support of Bruce as king, but makes stipulations against him, the first clearly expressed explanation of the idea that leaders were subject to their people in the same way that their people were subject to them.¹¹ Maybe the Scots would not really have ousted Bruce should he betray them and the whole thing was just a rhetorical point, but it is possible that they may have at least intentioned to do so should the situation arise, though it probably would not have been practical given their last experience with the sudden departure of a king.

9. "The Declaration of Arbroath; April 6, 1320."

10. "The Declaration of Arbroath; April 6, 1320."

11. Magnusson, 189.

Either way, the point still stands as a very special concept that would appear again in the centuries to come.

The attention then turns to the Pope and earnestly asks for his support in bringing about peace. It describes in very humble terms how the English king should be happy with his power in England because it should be more than enough and how he should leave the inoffensive and uncovetous Scots to their home. They are willing to cooperate with him to bring about peace, it claims, provided that it does not encroach upon their previous condition. It reminds the Pope of the fight against Christendom currently being fought and states that both the king and his people would happily fight to defend it, if only they could be left in peace. It also implies that should the Pope refuse to help them, the violence would continue and the blood of the dead would be on his hands. It ends very formally, saying that the letter was given in 1320 and in “the fifteenth year of the reign of our King aforesaid”, reaffirming their support of Bruce.¹² This is very interesting diplomacy. It was probably quite necessary for the humble tone of this portion because the entire country was under an interdict after Bruce had angered the Pope by refusing to receive a letter he sent to him because it had been addressed to the “governor”, not the “king”, of Scotland. He was already not particularly sympathetic to Bruce or his cause, favoring the English and remembering his act of bloodshed in a church, so it was necessary for the Scots to tread lightly. However, sandwiched between two declarations of the Scots’ fidelity to the Church and their willingness to obey the Pope’s commands, is an ominous note mentioning the consequences of failing to support them. Could it also have been meant to remind the Pope of the earlier passage saying that Bruce would be replaced if he did not uphold the country’s interests, perhaps hinting that they

12. "The Declaration of Arbroath; April 6, 1320."

likewise would not support a pope that turned them over to the English? It seems a rather bold statement to make, but so was the idea of replacing a king.

At the end of the document are affixed many wax seals acting as the “signatures” of the nobles who agreed to the letter. Thirty-nine men are mentioned in the text, but only nineteen of the seals can be found on the modern copy. This was a very risky thing for the nobles to do, as it easily could have been signing their own death warrant should things not go well, because if Bruce was defeated and Scotland brought under English control they could all be executed as traitors. Bruce’s family had been executed shortly after he came to power, and the gruesome death of William Wallace was still within memory, so the dangers were very real. It can be seen as an enormous vote of confidence in Bruce, but it can also be observed that refusing to agree to the letter could cast serious doubts on their loyalties in Scotland, which could also lead to serious consequences. In fact, the suggestion has been made that some of the nobles may have been chosen specifically for the purpose of testing their loyalty.¹³

Three copies of the Declaration of Arbroath were made in 1320. One was the original draft, arguably written in Newbattle instead of Arbroath,¹⁴ one was the final sent to the Pope in Avignon, and one was the copy held in Edinburgh today. Fergusson explains how this copy we have today may have been produced after the others as a “file copy” for records and proof of the nobles’ acquiescence, but written in great haste, making many errors along the way. He addresses how there are a couple different versions of the document found in various manuscripts, but how comparison of them can lead to a reasonable conclusion of the text of the

13. Fergusson, 22.

14. Fergusson, 29.

original, now lost.¹⁵ The physical document on display in Edinburgh is no longer legible in many places due to age and water damage, but it was very carefully copied down except for two words.

This letter did not seem to have the intended effect at the time that it was written, as the Pope made little move to acknowledge it and didn't begin to make peace until later. Formal peace between the countries and the lifting of the excommunication and interdict would occur in 1328. However disappointing as the original results may have seemed, though, there is a case to be made that the document has had a significant historical impact since then. It has been said that it was not only a very early appearance of nationalism but also of constitutionalism.¹⁶ Both of these ideas play a great part in politics and events today. The idea of a leader keeping his power through the will of the people is a comfortable one for us today, but obviously it was not always so. In the fourteenth century, it could have been profoundly shocking. It was surprising even in the eighteenth century, when revolutions were carried out in pursuit of freedom and to be led by an individual who would look after those under them. The Declaration of Arbroath has sometimes been accredited with giving these revolutionaries some of their ideas about government, ideas that are considered far less radical today. In addition, it has shown to be crucially important in the hearts and minds of Scottish people, forming part of their national identity. Some aspects of this identity may have still occurred even without this document, but there are others that probably would not have developed. How much of an impact that would have had is open for speculation, but this letter and the events surrounding it have entrenched themselves in the national consciousness for many generations, helping to build a people and possibly affecting their actions.

15. Fergusson, 23.

16. Magnusson, 189.

The Declaration of Arbroath contains a wealth of information for historians to study. For one thing, there is the text itself, which is often quoted in parts but has not always been read in its entirety. More than this, though, is the many different messages and ideas being communicated through the words. Some of these are really obvious, such as the wish for the conflict with England to be ended, while others, such as the portrayal of the Scots and English versus the reality, are a bit less so. This latter part is especially interesting because it shows that the concept of painting a better picture of yourself and your country is not at all a new idea, but shows up even in official letters to the Pope, who would probably not be considered the best person to stretch the truth with. It also shows how it was that the author of the letter wanted others to see the country and the struggle, regardless of how accurate that depiction may have been. This glimpse into the political actions between the powers can help to understand exactly why it was the leaders reacted the way they did and to better grasp the narrative as a whole. Finally, as discussed, it may very well have influenced more recent beliefs about freedom and the relationship between leader and citizen, and it certainly provides a window into a fascinating period of history.

The Declaration of Arbroath is one of the most treasured and respected documents in Scotland for the many different things found within its single page. It not only has significant historical value, but political and cultural value as well. In addition to providing more information on a crucial point in Scotland's history and about one of the key figures of the time, it reaches into the modern world through constitutional leaders, the pride some Scots those of Scottish descent take today in their past, the rich world of ballad and song, and in the continued thirst for independence. It has reached a significance today that the original individuals probably never

even dreamed of and remains important even seven hundred years later. The inspiring words are still cherished in the hearts of many, and very likely will continue to be for years to come.

Bibliography

Barrell, A. D. M. *Medieval Scotland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

This book explained the history of Scotland that occurred between the mid-eleventh century and the Protestant Reformation. It contained some very interesting information on the political situation of the time when the letter was written, such as the trouble with having Margaret as Queen. In addition, it took a slightly more generous view of some of the more unpopular figures, Edward I and John Balliol, and explained how it could be possible that they don't deserve all of the criticism they receive.

"Declaration of Arbroath." British Library - Taking Liberties. Accessed April 22, 2015.

This is where I started my search. It provided a basic overview of the events leading up to the writing of the document and some of its results. It also provided the clearest picture of the document as it appears in the *Scotichronicon*. However, the information provided is very limited and does not go very far in explaining the document or its significance.

"The Declaration of Arbroath; April 6, 1320." The Avalon Project. Accessed April 22, 2015.

This site includes the full English text of the document, translated from the Latin. However, it does not include the Latin text, so it is not possible to check the translation, and it provides no background information. The text seems to be taken from the Fergusson translation, which may be why there is no Latin.

Fergusson, James. *The Declaration of Arbroath*. Edinburgh: University Press, 1970.

In this book, Fergusson includes both the Latin original and his English translation side by side, along with his notes on translation. In addition, he provides information on the presumed author of the letter, Bernard de Linton, and some of the historical events surrounding the document. Finally, he explains a few of the problems that have come up, such as the accuracy of the copy and the location of writing, and puts forth his own theories.

Magnusson, Magnus. *Scotland: The Story of a Nation*. New York, New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000.

This book provides a detailed account of Scotland's history from its earliest beginnings to 2000, when it was written. The most useful chapters were the ones from the death of Alexander II through the death of Robert Bruce, but it was also useful for confirming the origin myth and viewing influences of the Declaration on later periods in history. Much of the background information comes from this book.

