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Thomas R. Dale

From Epic to Romance: Barbour's *Bruce* and
Scott's *The Lord of the Isles*

The Lord of the Isles was the last published but one of Scott's poetic romances and perhaps the least praised by contemporary critics. It seems to have been projected (under the title of *The Nameless Glen*) as early as Spring, 1810, soon after *The Lady of the Lake* appeared, but the actual writing of it was postponed in favor of other tasks, notably *The Vision of Don Roderick* (1811), *Rokeby* (1812), *The Bridal of Triermain* (1813), the edition of Swift's works (completed 1814), and *Waverley* (1814). Since the first three cantos and part of the fourth are set in the West Highlands and Islands (Artornish Castle on the Sound of Mull, and the southern coast of Skye) it is almost certain that they were written after Scott's excursion around the Northern coasts of Scotland with the Commissioners of Lighthouses in the summer of 1814. The passages which comprise the rest of the poem—King Robert's fictitious recapture of his own castle of Turnberry from the English and their Highland allies, and his historic victory at Bannockburn—could have been written at any time. They and many scenes like them had been part of Scott's consciousness from his childhood on, and may have been partly composed when *The Nameless Glen* was projected.

As it finally developed, *The Lord of the Isles* showed clear signs of a variety of intentions. Scott was continuing his experiments with historical romance, presenting a more or less conventional, and attenuated love story in a carefully realized historical and geographical setting. *Waverley*, of course, is of the same general pattern extended into a substantial novel. Then, as his other long poems had shown different parts of Scotland and the manners and

traditions of different Scottish peoples, he undoubtedly welcomed the opportunity to extend his geography to the Western Isles.

Perhaps Scott also wished to pay compliments to the friendly chiefs who had received him in the course of that memorable voyage. Above all, the story of King Robert I, "The Bruce", was a natural choice for a great romance. Scott, like most of his countrymen, knew well the traditions about the great liberator: at first a willing or perhaps secretly unwilling vassal of Edward I of England, then an ambitious rebel and homicide, a futile, defeated, crowned king without subjects or army, an incredibly successful guerilla leader, the best man-at-arms in Europe, and finally a magnanimous, wise, and chivalrous hero-king. Bruce was a fit subject for a national epic.

Of course, that epic had already been written by the first of Scottish poet-historians—John Barbour, Archdeacon of Aberdeen, who was born in the reign of the great king, only a few years after the great victory at Bannockburn. He wrote his poem in the second half of the fourteenth century. It is an epic in the sense that it presents the rise of the national hero, his struggle against formidable enemies, and his final triumph. It claims kinship with other epics by comparing the deeds of the hero-king and his chief captains with those of various heroes of classical antiquity, and elevates or ornaments factual narrative with philosophical or religious commentary. It does not exhibit the formal pattern of a classical epic, but sets forth the events of the heroic life in chronological order, without supernatural intervention or miraculous deeds. Above all, the author insists on the literal truth of his narrative.

"....I wald fayne set my will
To put in wryt a suthfast story,
That it lest ay furth in memory.¹

He claims to be a veracious historian no less than a makar, and prays:

Now God gyff grace that...
...I say nocht bot suthfast thing. (*Bruce*, I, ll. 34, 36)

There is no evidence that Scott was tempted to rewrite and adapt *The Bruce* to contemporary taste, but much that he had strong reasons against

¹*Barbour's Bruce*, ed. Matthew P. McDiarmid and James A. G. Stevenson, STS, 4th Series, 12, 13, 15 (1980-85), Bk. I, ll. 11-14. Subsequent citations in text refer to this edition by book and line number. The book and line citations fit various other editions which divide Barbour's text into twenty books. The references given in most editions of *The Lord of the Isles* are badly confused because they rely on Lockhart's *Magnum* version which uses two different texts of Barbour and two methods of identifying passages.

such a project. In the first place he had been extremely successful with the six-canto form of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, *Marmion*, *The Lady of the Lake*, and *Rokeby*; a tight well-knit structure with a short, dramatic, time-scheme. A longer poem, attempting more, might accomplish far less. Besides, he had quite definitely renounced the epic in his verse introduction to Canto First of *Marmion*. In it he had claimed that he could not sustain the "high themes" of tragedy and epic. "Nature disciplines her son" by warning him from "unequal tasks" and making him keep to the humble scenes he knows best, or the minstrel tales of chivalric romance. And in the introduction to Canto Fifth of *Marmion* he argues against writing by the established rules of poetry. His work is "irregularly traced and planned" in contrast to classic and neoclassic epic. Finally, he admired and respected Barbour, and undoubtedly felt that *The Bruce* should be more widely read. In fact, he included a notice of Jamieson's forthcoming edition of the poem in the advertisement which appeared in all authorized editions of *The Lord of the Isles* during his own life time. In the advertisement too, Barbour and Lord Hailes are acknowledged as the authorities used.

In his poem Scott ingeniously interweaves a completely fictitious romance, some straightforward scenic description, some sequences of *eident* historical pastiche, mainly from Barbour, and a considerable section direct from Barbour rewritten in modern idiom.

The eponymous hero, Ronald MacDonald, the Lord of the Isles, so Scott carefully explains in a note, is the fictional counterpart of Angus Og MacDonald who aided Bruce when his fortunes were at their lowest, and sent a contingent of Islesmen to fight at Bannockburn. His destined bride, to whom he is unfaithful (at least in intention) at the beginning of the action, is Edith MacDougall, a sister of the historical John of Lorn, but presumably completely fictional, as are her heroic adventures. Isabel Bruce, unwilling rival to Edith in Ronald's affections, is historical in the sense that a lady of that name really existed. But she married Erik, King of Norway in 1293, and though she was a young widow at the time of the action, can hardly have been free to roam the western isles of Scotland with her warlike brothers. Robert and Edward Bruce of course are historical. Their characters and exploits are faithfully rendered from Barbour, and documented by extensive quotations from *The Bruce*. My intention is to set forth in some detail the various ways in which Scott borrows and treats his borrowed material.

Scott's first three cantos and the first nine stanzas of the fourth, somewhat more than half of the whole poem, are obviously and avowedly fiction. Set mainly in the castle of Artornish and the Isle of Skye in the late winter and early spring of 1307, the action is in places and at a time when, according to Barbour, King Robert was in Rauchryne, or Rathlin, Island off the Ulster coast, from the time of his leaving Kintyre in defeat (*Bruce*, III, ll. 679-

762) until his setting out to join James Douglas in Arran (*Bruce*, IV, ll. 460-66) to begin his career as a guerilla leader. Modern chroniclers calculate this period as September 1306 to February 1307.

In Canto Fourth, stanza xviii, the King and his associates arrive in Arran and rejoin the verifiable history recorded in Barbour's lines. Canto Fifth deals with the landing of the royal forces in Carrick, and the capture of the castle of Turnberry. This incident, as Scott hastens to point out in a note, is only a "flattering and pleasing tradition" which is "not accurate." Most of the sixth and final canto follows Barbour's narrative quite closely in its rendering of the great victory at Bannockburn.

The time actually represented in Scott's account is a matter of a few days: two at Artornish, another two in Skye, a short but indefinite time at sea on the way to Arran, two in Carrick, and then, after a seven-year gap, two days on the field of Bannockburn. This gap is an astonishing one for the historian to contemplate, as the omitted years were those of the great war of liberation when Bruce, at first a hunted fugitive, became a great guerilla leader, and finally a warrior king at the head of a national army. Scott ingeniously manages to include sufficient representative episodes of that protracted war by referring to them in prophetic utterances, in symbolic parallels in fictitious episodes, or by transferring them with little change in substance from their historical time and place into his poetic narrative.

The extensive notes must be regarded as an essential part of the work. They occupy 165 pages of the first edition to 275 pages of the actual poem, but the notes are in smaller type and more closely printed. They include no less than 527 lines from Barbour, directly quoted, and several more substantial passages in condensed prose form. Taken together with citations from other sources and some connective passages and dates, they constitute an epitome of the King's biography in those crucial years, 1307 and 1314, with a few incidents beyond. Their relationship to Scott's verse rendering of the same events varies a good deal. Read carefully with the text of the poem, these notes show more clearly than most of his notes to other works his actual handling of his sources.

The most direct and obvious use of the source quotation is to tell the reader that a given passage in the poem is documented history or fiction. The Bannockburn narrative in the final canto shows this close documentation. Barbour is directly quoted on the arrival of the English army on the scene of battle, the combat of the King and Sir Henry Bohun, the advance of the English army to the attack, the rout of the English archers by Sir Robert Keith's light cavalry, and the charge of the camp followers from Gillies Hill in the final stage of the battle (126 lines altogether).

Other parts of the poem use incidents from Barbour but change the time or place. A fairly extensive sequence from Canto Third of *The Lord of the*

Isles illustrates this. The scene is the bleak southern coast of the Isle of Skye. King Robert and his newly converted supporter Ronald MacDonald, the Lord of the Isles, have arrived there on a recruiting expedition. They leave their small ship to hunt game, attended by Ronald's page Allan. At nightfall they encounter five sinister strangers who offer to share their newly killed deer and the shelter of their hut for the night. These sinister ones are pirates who owe at least nominal allegiance to the extremely hostile John of Lorn. With them is a captive boy, apparently mute. In the early morning darkness the pirates attack their sleeping guests and kill the page Allan. All five are in turn killed by the King and Ronald (King, 3; Ronald, 2). This scene is copied, Scott points out, "from a striking incident in the monarch's history, told by Barbour..." Actually the borrowing is more complicated. There are four anecdotes of the King's foiling attempted assassination, all from the spring of 1307, when he was waging guerilla warfare in Carrick against superior numbers of English reinforced by MacDougall's Highlanders. The passage Scott quotes (*Bruce*, VII, ll. 105-232) has three men with a "mekill bounden wether" which they kill for supper. In the night attack the King's foster brother, his only companion, is killed, and so are the three assassins. In an earlier episode (*Bruce*, VI, ll. 587-668), the King and the foster brother are attacked by five men. The King personally kills four, the foster brother one. In another encounter (*Bruce*, V, ll. 555-659) the King has only his page to help him against three attackers. He borrows the page's bow to kill one, and despatches the others with a couple of sword-strokes. Finally, in the last of these feats, he disposes of three assailants with the help of his hunting dogs (*Bruce*, VII, ll. 407-494). Details from all but the last of these are incorporated in Scott's fiction. The chief original detail is that, as the attack begins, the supposedly dumb captive boy screams to awaken the King and his companions. The captive later turns out to be Edith of Lorn in disguise; a development which has absolutely no basis in Barbour's narrative.

Immediately after this adventure the King and Ronald, with the dumb captive in tow, are rejoined by Edward Bruce. He brings news of risings against the English and the death of King Edward I. As Scott points out in the usual note, this actually happened on July 6th, several months later. The shift in time allows King Robert to express magnanimous sentiments concerning his late enemy. The Bruces and their new allies at once sail south to join James Douglas and other royal supporters in Arran. On their way, to avoid hostile ships off the Mull of Kintyre, they cross the narrow isthmus linking Kintyre and Knapdale, hauling their galley on rollers over a short portage. This is documented from Barbour, who mentions that this action fulfilled a prophecy, and added considerably to the King's prestige in the West Highlands. Scott says that the crossing was made "two or three years

later" than he has it in the poem. Actually it was nine years later. The notes are not always strictly accurate.

Another use of the notes is to support some general view of a character or characters. This appears in the note to stanza xx of Canto Fourth, where the "kind but fiery character of Edward Bruce" is documented by six lines from Barbour. Obviously the character of King Robert himself is most fully documented; a high proportion of the quoted lines refer to him. His extraordinary strength and skill in combat are presented in two major scenes already mentioned—the fight with the pirates, and the combat with Sir Henry Bohun on the eve of Bannockburn. These are reinforced with reported actions, in general terms like the Abbot's prophecy in Canto Second, and anecdotes like the one referred to in the song "The Brooch of Lorn" in the same canto. The kindness and gentleness of his private actions, which are a large part of the romance, are also documented, e.g., from Barbour's account of his concern for the laundress in childbirth.

The story is from Barbour's account of the King's campaign in Ireland in 1317. King Robert delays his army's march in order to allow one of the camp followers, a laundry-woman, to give birth to her child in the privacy of a tent and with the comfort of other women. (See *Bruce*, XVI, ll. 275-96; *The Lord of the Isles*, IV, xxvii.) And the passage just referred to, the eulogy on King Edward I, is supported by Scott's remark, "The generosity which does justice to the character of an enemy, often marks Bruce's sentiments as recorded by the faithful Barbour". One might observe that Edward Bruce does not share the King's magnanimous respect for the late enemy; nor did the Scots critics who attacked the poem when it was published. They scolded the mildness of the references to the English kings and the defeated English army. Scott of course added some magnanimous sentiments of his own to those he attributed to the King—notably in the final canto, with the tribute to Sir Giles De Argentine.

Evidently Scott prized Barbour as a reliable historical source—a view which has been upheld by some recent research—both in respect to the main facts and the character of King Robert himself. In appealing so frequently to the records of the period, and especially to Barbour, he was validating his own historical viewpoint, and affirming that his poem, however it might play with the details of chronology and action, was not a falsification of essential history. He was also promoting public interest in Barbour as the first of Scotland's major poets, just as he had in his first important published work called attention to the tradition of Scottish ballads. In *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* his stated purpose was to "[contribute] somewhat to the history of my native country; the peculiar features of whose manners and character are daily melting and dissolving into that of her sister and ally."

Scott's *Lord of the Isles*, the notes and comments as well as the romantic narrative, evinces his life-long concern with preserving the story of Scotland's past—traditions, popular feelings, manners, as well as the more soberly recorded facts. The quotations from Barbour, the paraphrases and comments scattered through the extensive notes, constitute a powerful tribute to the elder poet and a strong recommendation to read *The Bruce*.

Lawrence University