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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

The Significance of Barbour’s Naming of Commoners

John Barbour’s name is relatively unknown to modern readers, partly because he wrote in the fourteenth century and partly because he wrote in Scotland (though in English). Barbour, who describes in The Bruce (1375) how Scotland avoided becoming the victim of English imperialism in the early fourteenth century, has himself become the victim of literary neglect and is often slighted in English literary histories. This neglect is unfortunate for a number of reasons. First, he is a good writer who tells a rousing story. Second, he bridges a gap between history and literature, using the techniques of both chronicle and romance to tell his essentially true story. Third, he has a significant place in the history of ideas because he is one of the first western writers to extol freedom and nationalism. And fourth, his work is an important contribution to the history of literature because of his novel use of commoners.

The national situation he describes, a struggle for independence from England, made him realize that all the Scots had to fight together on pretty much equal terms. While continuing to idealize chivalry, he accepts and glorifies the democratic fighting style made necessary by the guerrilla warfare the Scots fought. In this paper, I am concerned with showing that his use of commoners and his assignment of distinguishing names to them is a function of his concern for freedom and nationalism.2

Not until the rise of the realistic genre, the novel, do names of ordinary commoners appear regularly in fiction.3 According to the

2. A version of this paper was presented at the American Name Society Meeting in Denver, December 1969.
3. Beginning in the thirteenth and fourteenth century when social intercourse became complex enough to demand it, people in England and Scotland began to use full identifying names. But in literature, full names were not generally used until much later. See Robert W. Hanning, "Use of Names in Medieval Literature," *Names*, XVI (1968), 325-38; Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley, 1965), pp. 18-21. Chronicles, on the other hand, frequently include the names of commoners.
medieval doctrine of the separation of styles, commoners were not to be given important roles in a serious treatment of any subject whose hero was a king. Barbour thus departs from the usual practice of medieval writers to include individual commoners in heroic action, showing that they too can participate in the qualities of personal sacrifice, leadership, intelligence and independent action that are usually associated with the chivalrous warriors of the upper class. They too answer the Bruce’s call to freedom and play a role in achieving victory in the Scottish war of 1306-1328. Barbour’s view of this struggle as democratic is mirrored not only by the action but also by his use of the same kind of identifying names for both commoners and nobility.

The presence of commoners has, also, interesting stylistic implications, for it enables him to use colloquialisms associated with the low style. And because commoners share in heroic action with the nobility, Barbour can use elevated language in describing them and colloquial and dialectical language in describing the nobles.⁵ The result is a consciously manipulated mixed style, and as Erich Auerbach points out, it is possible to approach realism seriously only through the medium of the mixed style.⁶ Such a mixed style is not uncommon in the Middle Ages, particularly in satiric works, but it is rare in chivalric romances. Barbour is perhaps the first to present seriously a realistic portrayal of commoners in a chivalric and heroic work.

Eight commoners have important roles. Tom Diesoun, an old servant who takes part in one of Earl James Douglas’ earliest guerrilla attacks, is the first to whip out a sword and begin fighting and among the first to die. His behavior is in the faithful-retainer tradition — the servant who dies for and sometimes with his master (V, 271-333).

Philip the Forster, or forest-keeper, on the other hand, is a commoner who acts on his own initiative. Gathering men and ladders, he steals into English-held Forfar Castle and takes it easily. The family


⁶ Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, trans. Willard Trask (Garden City, 1953), pp. 27, 433-34, 490.
became prominent later in the century, perhaps as a result of the Bruce's favor (IX, 310-24).  

In Book X Barbour groups three incidents involving commoners, who act both independently and in concert with nobles. He thus develops one of the major themes of the poem, the theme of chivalry in conflict with strategy, and he provides a background for Edward Bruce's rash commitment of the Scots troops to a standing engagement with the English at Bannockburn, the decisive battle of the war.  

In the first incident, William Bannock, who acts on his own, arranges to bring hay to the garrison at Linlithgow. In the wagon and also nearby he hides men in ambush. When the gate is opened, he and his men surprise the garrison and take the town by entering and breaking the traces of the wagon so that the gate cannot be closed again. The Bruce rewards Bannock (X, 150-258).  

Froissart, in his account of the Scottish wars, may have adapted this incident from Barbour and conflated it with another incident from Barbour involving James Douglas. In The Bruce, Douglas entices John of Webroun into ambush by having fourteen of his men disguise themselves as lads carrying grain to market on horseback. When John and his men take the bait, the men on horse throw off the sacks of grain and their gowns, reveal their armor and rush toward John, who tries to get back to safety. Douglas prevents this by coming out of ambush. Thus the Scots kill John and his men and take Douglasdale (VIII, 437-520). Froissart tells the comparable story of William Douglas' capture of Edinburgh. He has ten or twelve of his men disguise themselves as tradesmen leading horses loaded with sacks of oats, meal and coal. They approach the porter, who readily opens the gate for them. Throwing down their loads of coal so that the gate cannot be closed, they seize and kill the porter and open the other gates to let in the Scots in ambush.  

The similarities between this episode and those in Barbour are striking. The key features of Barbour's separate incidents — an impediment used to prevent the lowering of the gate (Bannock incident) and knights disguised as tradesmen (James Douglas incident) — are both included in Froissart's one account. The significance of the difference between Froissart and Barbour is that the Scot does not hesitate to give a commoner a lead-

7. George Fraser Black, Surnames of Scotland, (N.Y., 1946), p. 274. Mr. Black traces all the names mentioned in this paper.  
ing role, while the Frenchman seems to prefer noblemen disguised as commoners.

Also in Book X, Sym of the Ledhows, a craftsman who knows how to make hemp ladders, helps Douglas take Roxburgh. The Scots, including Douglas, pretend to be cattle, creeping on all fours to the castle one dark night. The first to scale the wall and grapple with a guard, Sym shouts encouragement to others following him (X, 352-355). Sym's surname, as well as his craft, establishes him as a commoner.9

Randolph, Earl of Murray, who had been opposed to guerrilla warfare as unchivalrous, learns that Douglas, with the help of a commoner, has taken Roxburgh. He determines to combine 'slicht' with 'full hye chivalry' to take Edinburgh. "Slicht" means stratagem, but has the connotation of cunning, guile, deceit, and obviously is antithetical to chivalry in the usual sense. William Francass, whose father had been a keeper of the castle, offers to lead. Because he had loved a wench in the town and had gotten to her by scaling the steep rock, Francass knows a way into the fortress. Once they enter, Randolph has an opportunity to prove his chivalry in a heated battle. (X, 506-702).

This episode is important because while Randolph, who like most noblemen had been opposed to non-chivalric warfare, learns to work with a commoner and to use stratagems to win, the king's brother, Edward Bruce, who leads the siege of Stirling, does not follow the example of Douglas and Randolph. Preferring to act in his own gallant way, he gives Stirling a year's respite. The Battle of Bannockburn (1314) is the direct result (X, 805-25). Thus the role of commoners in Book X serves both a thematic and a structural function, thematically pointing up the conflict between chivalry and guerrilla warfare, and structurally leading to the climactic turning point at Bannockburn — where, by the way, unnamed Scots commoners speed the English on their way home (XIII, 225-345).10

Other commoners who play notable roles are Gib Harper, Sym of Spalding and John Crab. Gib, probably a minstrel as his surname suggests, fights and dies with Edward Bruce in Ireland. Barbour says that Gib 'wares the douchtryest of deed That than wes lifand of his stoc.'

9. The Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue has under "ledhous" the definitions: "a 'lead-house'; a plumber's workshop; a storeroom for lead."

and that "men held [him] withouten peir Of his estat." He wears Edward Bruce's armor and is mistaken for him. After the battle, the Irish, thinking Gib is Edward Bruce, cut off his head, salt it and send it to Edward II of England, who rejoices to see it. In battle and in death, Barbour implies, there is no essential difference between a nobleman and a commoner (XVIII, 94-174). Sym of Spalding, a burgess of Berwick, develops a plan to take that last strategic stronghold of the English in Scotland (XVII, 22-38). John Crab, not a Scot but a Flemish commoner, an engineer whose war machines Barbour describes so colorfully, helps the Scots keep Berwick in 1319 and receives land from Robert Bruce (XVII, 239-490; 589-790).

Several of these commoners, significantly, have names that are associated with Aberdeen, where Barbour was Archdeacon for most of his adult life until his death in 1395.11 The Aberdeen court records, an excellent early source for names of commoners, unfortunately begins in 1388, so it is not always possible to determine the earliest date these names are found in Aberdeen.12 Still, it seems reasonable that the achievement of public office follows rather than precedes renown and that any person well-known in 1398 might have come from a family known to Barbour at the time of writing The Bruce. Obviously I am here in the realm of supposition rather than fact. It is nevertheless interesting that at least seven of the eight names are connected to Aberdeen.

A William Dicson, with the title "Magister," was a bailie of Aberdeen in 1398, as was Symon de Bynninge. Several other Benyns are also prominent in the Aberdeen record. According to Nisbet's Heraldry, the name Bunnoch evolved into Binning, and the family's arms containing a wagon connect them to Bunnoch's brave act.13 More closely linked to Barbour's time, Adam de Ledhous who held land in Aberdeen in 1363 is, according to George Fraser Black, probably the same Adam de Ledgous who was a burgess of Aberdeen in 1391. The Spalding family is mentioned in connection with Aberdeen as early as 1294, and in 1398 William of Spalding was elected a lineator there. A Paul Crab was prominent in Aberdeen in 1310, and another John


12. Early Records of the Burgh of Aberdeen: 1317, 1395-407, ed. William Croft Dickinson (Edinburgh, 1957). The 1317 court record is very short and mentions few names. Information on the names was derived from these early records or from Black or both.

13. See Skeat's note to X, 153.
Crab, probably the engineer's son or grandson, was burgess and customer in Barbour's time. This Crab was one of the men appointed in 1357 to treat for the ransom of David II, held prisoner then by the English. Barbour was among those appointed that year to arrange for paying the ransom, but it is not clear that he actually executed his commission. 14 Other Crabs are mentioned frequently in the Aberdeen court records. So too are men named Foresta (Forster) and Harpar. Only the name Francass, in fact, does not appear to be connected to Aberdeen in the fourteenth century.

The association of these commoners with Aberdeen suggests both a possible source of Barbour's information and his motive for including the particular names he uses: he heightens realism and adds interest to events by referring to names known to his audience. His naming of commoners goes beyond realism, however, for this device mirrors the ideological premise that informs the poem. He names commoners and gives them as well as nobles important actions because his theme is national freedom and because nationalism, by definition, involves the participation of all classes. Thus, for Barbour, the idea of freedom led to a startlingly new use of commoners in The Bruce, a significant milestone in literary history.

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