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Barbour, Blind Harry, and Sir William Craigie

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STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

Barbour, Blind Harry, and Sir William Craigie

There is no doubt that Blind Harry’s Wallace has suffered unduly through comparison with Barbour’s Bruce, but the late Sir William Craigie, in trying to redress the balance, upset it even further in the opposite direction, enhancing the reputation of his favourite only at the expense of denigrating those parts of Barbour’s work that are in fact most worthy.

Craigie’s evaluation may most conveniently be criticized under the headings of Prologue and Epilogue. Barbour’s introduction, in Craigie’s opinion, is coldly academic: — “Barbour opens with scholastic remarks on the pleasures of reading and a frigid distinction between truth and fiction.” But the opening lines of The Bruce are really invaluable as revealing the author’s purpose and the light in which he wished his work to be regarded. The poem clearly takes its way from the French medieval romances; if these gave pleasure, reasons Barbour, how much more so would “romances” that described realistically historical persons possessing more interest than shadowy heroes of fiction. And on the other side, there was no reason why history should not aspire to be classed as literature, if presented in a style that was artistically acceptable. “He anticipated Macaulay’s ambition in that his history was to differ from the most attractive literary matter only in being true.” It is plain that Barbour intended his work to have a two-fold appeal: —

Than suld storys that suthfast wer,
And that war said on gud maner,
Have doublil plesance in herynge,
The fyrst plesance is the cynyg,
And the tochir the suthfastnes
That chawys the thing rycht as it wes:
And suth thyngis that ar likand
Tyll manys herynge ar plesand.4

More to Craigie’s taste is the beginning of Harry’s poem: — “Blind Harry, on the other hand, plunges at once into the intensely national

3 The Bruce, ed. W. M. Mackenzie (London, 1909), p. xv. All subsequent references are to this edition.
4 The Bruce, I, 3-10.
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tone which characterises his whole work. We neglect the noble deeds of our ancestors 'throw very sleuthfulness.' Reading this in the light of Scottish history, we fail to see in it anything but a strong and true expression of patriotic feeling, certainly not a 'ludicrous prejudice': read Barbour himself and see whether his or Harry's tone is most likely to be that of Scottish feeling in general.\(^5\)

In fact, however, the sentiment of the two prologues is the same — "Let us now praise famous men and our fathers that begat us." The difference is that whereas Barbour can still extol the medieval and truly supranational virtue of chivalry,\(^6\) Harry is sufficiently a man of the Renaissance to prize the narrower national quality of patriotism. Indeed, Neilson has shown\(^7\) that Harry's intense nationalism was inspired not so much by the War of Independence itself as by events of the poet's own time.

It is rather misleading of Craigie to suggest that while Barbour requires 476 lines to get really started, Harry requires only 16.\(^8\) At that point, Harry has done no more than complete his apologia for writing the work. If this constitutes the prologue, then Barbour requires only 10 more lines to finish his. Many of Barbour's 476 preliminary lines are taken up with historical background, which Harry feels quite as much to be necessary.

There is thus a certain parallelism between the two poets' methods of setting about their work: —

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When we turn to Craigie's commentary on the Epilogue, a serious misunderstanding is revealed. After quoting The Bruce, XX, 611-617, and Wallace, XI, 1451-1458, he continues: — "The feeling of imperfection with which the old man leaves the work of his lifetime to future generations is surely something far finer than Barbour's somewhat conventional desire for the good behavior of his heroes' descendants."\(^9\)

In fact, it is Harry's conclusion that is conventional, not Barbour's. Craigie has apparently failed to recognize the passage he quotes from Harry as a specimen of the literary device known as the envoy (cf. James I, Kings Quair, excv), in which the author's profession of modesty about

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\(^5\) Craigie, p. 181.

\(^6\) The Bruce, I, 21-23.


\(^8\) Craigie, pp. 179, 180.

\(^9\) Craigie, p. 181.
his work had become more or less stereotyped. The lines from Wallace, “Go nobili bux, fulfflit of gud sentens . . .” are interesting certainly, but only as a variation within the convention.

Even more common in medieval poetry is the final prayer, which terminates both The Bruce and Wallace. It was customary for the poet to express the hope that his hero, or he himself along with his readers, might enjoy the bliss of heaven. Lines 612-617 of The Bruce Book XX should therefore be considered as part of this prayer. Setting aside, then, the purely conventional termination and considering the conclusion proper (i.e. that which comes between the close of the narrative and the prayer), over against Harry’s envoi we must place one line of The Bruce — The lordis deit ap on this wis (XX, 611) which for laconic simplicity, hiding deep feeling, is comparable to Thucydides —

\[ \tau\alpha\tau\alpha \mu\epsilon\nu \tau\alpha \pi\epsilon\rho\ \Sigma\iota\kappa\varepsilon\lambda\iota\alpha\nu \gamma\iota\varepsilon\mu\epsilon\nu\alpha \]

This line also serves to refute Craigie’s criticism that the poem should have ended with Book XIII after the Battle of Bannockburn. Barbour, mindful of his duties as a historian, concludes not unfitnessingly with the death of the chief actors in his narrative. It is the passing of an age.

Craigie does not, however, confine his depreciation of The Bruce to Prologue and Epilogue. He finds a serious flaw in the lack of an important personage to provide a contrast to the hero, a flaw all the more lamentable because Harry for his part has shown keen literary judgment in providing for this need. Unfortunately, to make such a criticism is to ignore the presence of Edward Bruce, who in Barbour’s work provides a consistent contrast to his brother, not only in character, but also in action and its consequences. Edward Bruce was second to none for valour, but lacked moderation:

Had he had mesure in his deid,
I trow that worthyar than he
Micht nocht in his tyne fundyn be,
Outakyn his brother anyrly,
To quhom, in-to gude chevelry,
I dar peir nane was in his day,
For he led hym with mesure ay,
And with gret wit his chevelry
He governit ay sa worthely,
That he oft full unlikly thing
Brocht rycht weill to gud ending.

10 Thucydides, VII, 87.
11 Craigie, pp. 179-180.
12 Craigie, p. 200.
13 The Bruce, IX, 661-671.
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His failure to conquer the whole of Ireland is directly attributed to his headstrong will:

Couth he haf governit hym thorow skill,
And followit nocht to fast his will,
Bot with mesour haf led his deid,
It weill lik, withouten dreid,
That he mycht haff conquerit weill
The land of Ireland everilk dill.
But his outrageous success
And will, that mar wes than hardy,
Of purpos letit hym, perfay,
As I heir-efir sall yhow say.\(^{11}\)

Barbour uses this contrast between the two brothers to illustrate his ideal of true leadership, which is not synonymous with animal courage: \(\text{"For, but wit, worchip may nocht be."}\)\(^{15}\) Robert Bruce meets this requirement, Edward Bruce does not.

The temptation to compare the two works, in spite of their differences, is great, because they stand alone in Scottish literature, both on account of scope and of subject matter. Harry too, notwithstanding the literary sophistication of his style, is just as capable as Barbour of producing a direct realism reminiscent of the ballads, as in the account of Wallace’s laconic conversation with the boy who had carried food for the five assassins:

Than to the chyld sadly agayn he socht.
"Quhat did thow hir?" The child, with pall face,
On kneis he fell, and askit Wallace grace.
'With thaim I was, and knew no thing thair thocht.
It to service, as thai me bad, I wrocit.'
"Quhat berys thow hir?" 'Bot mëit,' the child can say.
"Do, turs it up, and pus with me away.
Mëit in this sym is far bestyr than gold.'\(^{16}\)

The archdeacon is probably just as guilty as the minstrel of exaggeration (cf. The Bruce, VI, 67-178), but even the sober truth about the patriots’ exploits was startling enough, and both the biographers give the same reason for their success — strategy which never allowed the enemy to strike the first blow, which involved speed of movement, avoidance of pitched battles, and recognized the value of a strentch.\(^{17}\)

Such comparison is legitimate for the purpose of evaluation; but to go further and praise one at the expense of the other is to ignore the fact

\(^{14}\) The Bruce, XVI, 321-330.  
\(^{15}\) The Bruce, VI, 358.  
\(^{16}\) Wallace, ed. J. Moir (Edinburgh, 1889), XI, 632-639.  
\(^{17}\) The Bruce, IX, 632-635; Wallace, VII, 1135-1136, IX, 828.
that the poems belong to two different ages, two different genres. There is no need to search for an expressly-formulated theme, such as the triumph of freedom, in The Bruce. The narrative by itself illustrates the chivalric concept of nobility and honour, so that Barbour can with perfect propriety intervene to censure his own hero when he transgresses that code by the sin of sacrilege in slaying Comyn at the high altar of the Friars’ Kirk:

He mysdyd thar greily, but wer,
That gave na gyth to the awter.
Tharfor sa hard myschiff him fell,
That Ik berc nevir in romanyys tell
Off man sa hard frayir as wes he,
That eftirwart corn to sic bounet. 18

Harry, on the other hand, preoccupied with the patriotism of his own day, does not blame Wallace for inconsistency in killing his own follower Fawdoun who lagged behind, but rather attempts to justify him (Wallace, V, 107-122). As a narrator, he disclaims all moral prejudice in the matter, merely suggesting that in time of national peril one cannot afford to take chances with people of doubtful loyalty.

Nevertheless, though disregarding convention in one respect, Harry shows himself extremely sensitive to it in another, when he anticipates the possible criticism that his principal character was not a man of high degree and therefore unsuited for the part he had to play: —

Wallace a lord he may be clepyt weyll,
Thocht ruryk folk tharoff haff liüll feill;
Na deyme na lord bot landis be thair part.
Had he the world, and be wrachit off hart,
He is no lord as to the worthiness;
It can nocht be, but fredome, lordlyknes. 19

— an interesting facet in the history of the attributes of the hero in literature.

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18 The Bruce, II, 43-48.
19 Wallace, VII, 397-402.