

## UHI Research Database pdf download summary

### A fine great company of good men, well armed and equipped

MacInnes, Iain A.

*Published in:*  
Battles and Bloodshed

*Publication date:*  
2013

*Publisher rights:*  
Copyright © 2016 Cambridge Scholars Publishing. All rights reserved

*The re-use license for this item is:*  
CC BY-NC-ND

*The Document Version you have downloaded here is:*  
Peer reviewed version

### [Link to author version on UHI Research Database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

MacInnes, I. A. (2013). A fine great company of good men, well armed and equipped: Barbour's description of Scottish Arms and Armour in The Bruce. In L. Bleach, & K. Borrill (Eds.), *Battles and Bloodshed: The Medieval World at War* (pp. 39-56). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.  
<http://www.cambridgescholars.com/download/sample/57960>

#### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the UHI Research Database are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights:

- 1) Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the UHI Research Database for the purpose of private study or research.
- 2) You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- 3) You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the UHI Research Database

#### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at [RO@uhi.ac.uk](mailto:RO@uhi.ac.uk) providing details; we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

“A fine great company of good men, well armed and equipped”:

Barbour's description of Scottish Arms and Armour in *The Bruce*

Iain A. MacInnes

John Barbour's romantic epic, *The Bruce*, is one of the major sources for researching the First Scottish War of Independence (1296-1328). Barbour's work has been the subject of an ongoing discourse regarding its validity as a primary source for historical study.<sup>1</sup> The central issues are the work's status as a 'romans', as defined by Barbour himself, and the text's production up to eighty years after the events it describes. Previous research has focused on Barbour's description of chivalric conduct and behaviour, with the suggestion that Barbour confounds traditional representations of chivalry by privileging military expediency and success over acts of personal heroism.<sup>2</sup> The style of warfare practised by Robert I and his commanders was not traditionally chivalric. Though Barbour writes in a stylised romantic fashion, the guerrilla raids and stratagems adopted during the Scottish Wars of Independence are depicted in a realistic manner and this emphasis on verisimilitude is reflected in his sources. Barbour writes that *The Bruce* is based in part on oral testimony, garnered both from men who fought in the campaigns described and their descendants.<sup>3</sup> Other medieval writers, such as Jean Froissart and Thomas Gray, utilised similar sources of information reflecting a contemporary desire for realistic depictions of warfare.<sup>4</sup>

*The Bruce* was produced for the court of Robert II for a specifically knightly audience, suggesting that realism mixed with romance would have been of central interest.<sup>5</sup> In these circumstances it would appear incongruous for Barbour to portray the subject of warfare in a completely unrealistic way.<sup>6</sup> Barbour's depiction of warfare has not, however, attracted any detailed discussion. Analysis has focussed on the

portrayal of chivalry, while the more mundane aspects of conflict are overlooked. This paper will argue that, while the romantic aspects of Barbour's work cannot be refuted, his detailed descriptions of military equipment warrant further examination. Considering that this is a period for which archaeological evidence of Scottish arms and armour is limited, and many other written sources provide bland and ill-informed descriptions of contemporary conflict, Barbour would seem to offer greater possibilities for analysis of Scottish military *materiel*. Barbour also offers insight into warriors' attitudes regarding the equipment that was integral to their protection as well as to their identity.

## **Weaponry**

The combination of relatively few surviving archaeological examples, and a similar lack of material in Scottish administrative records, has meant that knowledge of how Scottish soldiers were armed has been based primarily on pictorial evidence.<sup>7</sup> Images of contemporary warriors from seals, manuscripts and grave effigies all provide interesting evidence of Scottish armaments.<sup>8</sup> In such images, the sword is the most commonly depicted weapon and this correlates with the concept of what it was to be chivalric. The sword was loaded with symbolism that was perpetuated both by the artists who created these illustrations as well as by the knights themselves.<sup>9</sup> It is a weapon that often has supernatural connotations within chivalric romance. In *The Bruce*, however, the sword is depicted as a much more mundane, functional type of weapon. It does not, for example, appear to have been the exclusive privilege of the noble or knightly class. In ~~the~~ *The Bruce's recurring* tales of Robert Bruce fighting alone against three assailants of lower social status, his enemies were almost always armed with swords, along with spears and axes.<sup>10</sup> The sword is depicted more

generally as the principal close-combat weapon. In his description of the battle of Ben Cruachan, Bruce's followers the Bruce Scots initially attack the Argyll men with archery fire, but “then with swords finally they rushed among them boldly because the men of Lorn put up stubborn and bold defence like men.”<sup>11</sup> The sword is also used by men, both on foot and on horseback and, along with the spear, its use is described in almost all accounts of battles and skirmishes. There appears to be little in Barbour’s narrative to suggest that the sword was a particularly special weapon. Even the various descriptions of Robert I’s skirmishes with numerically superior groups of men do little to project an image of the sword as vital to the king’s defence of the royal person. Barbour does, in one instance, describe the king as being “accustomed, wherever he went, to wear his sword about his neck.”<sup>12</sup> This comment ignores, however, other examples of the king defending himself against superior numbers where he utilises a wider array of medieval weaponry, including a spear and a crossbow.<sup>13</sup> If the king did indeed always wear his sword, he did not always use it.

While Barbour’s depiction of the sword is stripped of the typical grandiose topos, his treatment of another type of bladed weapon, the knife, still retains negative associations. The knife is not a weapon traditionally associated with chivalric deeds, its bearer requiring neither instruction nor status. It was an essentially practical weapon, associated with delivering the final kill and with pursuits such as hunting. In *The Bruce*, use of the knife is almost always associated with actions that may be perceived as being less than chivalric. In a particularly violent confrontation at Lintalee between James Douglas and his men, and those of Elias the clerk, the Scots are described as “[dealing] with them remorselessly with swords that cut sharply”, to the extent that none escaped.<sup>14</sup> Barbour then further emphasises the brutality of the engagement by writing that Douglas’s men “dealt with them in such quantity with

slashing swords and with knives that nearly all lost their lives.”<sup>15</sup> This reiteration of the vicious nature of the engagement, including the addition of the use of knives, suggests that this second statement may be describing the aftermath of battle and the execution of those who survived. This less-than heroic description of warfare is corroborated by two other instances in which Barbour describes the use of a knife. Directly before the clash with Elias the clerk, James Douglas and his men skirmished with another English force under the supposed command of the English knight, Thomas Richmond. In this episode, Barbour recounts that Richmond was knocked from his horse, and “Douglas stopped above him, turned him over and then with a knife on that very spot killed him dead.”<sup>16</sup> This remarkable incident is an almost exact repetition of a similar episode from the Irish campaigns. In this other instance, Thomas Mandeville was knocked to the ground, and Edward Bruce, “who was nearby him turned him over, and in that very place took his life with a knife.”<sup>17</sup> Mandeville had attacked the Scots during a period of agreed truce over Easter, during which Neil Fleming was killed. Barbour portrays Edward Bruce as lamenting the loss of Fleming after the skirmish in Carrickfergus; this, coupled with the broken truce, is apparently used by Barbour as justification for Bruce’s behaviour. In a less convincing attempt at justifying Douglas’s behaviour, Barbour suggests that he and Richmond shared a particular dislike of each other.<sup>18</sup> That an explanation is provided at all suggests that Barbour was uncomfortable with such a negative portrayal of two of his heroes. In these circumstances, his choice of a knife as the weapon of choice may have been symbolic of the particular violence inherent in each of these acts. In contrast to the functional sword, the knife’s use was associated with ruthlessness and with the kill, an image with resonance for a knightly elite well versed in the activities of the hunt.

While the sword is by far the most popular weapon depicted in contemporary images of Scottish medieval warriors, images of the spear are also common and this is reflected in its recurring use in narrative accounts. Barbour's text contains various instances of warriors utilising this weapon. His repeated use of the phrase "the breaking of spears that were smashed" in descriptions of combat, evokes the cacophony of sound as two armies clash and the spear is used as a metonym for weaponry in battle.<sup>19</sup> This is striking as the sword is the weapon that is perhaps most associated with chivalric battlefield encounters, and it is with such depictions of the spear that Barbour may be incorporating more realistic Scottish details into his narrative. Narrative flourishes apart, the use of spears is depicted by Barbour in almost every military encounter he describes, even in the small-scale skirmishes that stress the military abilities of Robert I. When defending the ford in Galloway against local forces, the only mention of a weapon is of a spear, "which cut mighty sharp."<sup>20</sup> The regular use of the spear by the Scottish military is emphasised in one telling passage, which recounts the flight of Bruce and his closest supporters towards Argyll in 1306. Barbour describes those in the boat as "rowing on their oars, [with] fists that were stalwart and broad, used to grasping great spears", conveying the prevalence of the spear in the Scottish armoury.<sup>21</sup> In most large-scale military encounters it is depicted in the hands of foot soldiers, such as those at Bannockburn who "like a hedgehog...set out spears all round [them]..."<sup>22</sup> One of the spear's principal uses was, unsurprisingly, to inflict injury on knightly mounts, and this is indeed how Barbour describes their use at Bannockburn.<sup>23</sup> The author also, however, places spears in the hands of horsemen, although this more likely refers to lances and short-spears.<sup>24</sup> Robert Keith's cavalry force at Bannockburn was despatched "to gallop among the [English] archers and so attack them with spears, that they would have no opportunity

to fire.”<sup>25</sup> Colin Campbell unsuccessfully attacked two archers in Ireland with a spear, managing to kill one but having his horse shot from under him by the other.<sup>26</sup> The Scots who mounted a night-time raid on Edward III’s camp during the Weardale campaign “[came] galloping hard and kill[ed] with spears who[ever] they could overcome.”<sup>27</sup> Such use of the lance or short-spear by mounted troops equates with military practise across Europe, but it is useful to have such an image of the Scottish mounted warrior as it is a style of combat often overlooked because of the Scottish propensity to fight on foot.

Barbour’s inclusion of axes as weapons is an interesting addition to his narrative. They are less common than swords and spears in contemporary images of warriors and warfare. One of Barbour’s earliest references to their use is in the description of Bruce forces being defeated by those of the ‘lord of Lorn’ at Dalry. The Argyll men are described attacking fiercely with axes “for they were each and all on foot.”<sup>28</sup> From this position they were able to inflict significant injury on the Bruce horses, killing some and seriously wounding others. Barbour’s suggestion that it was a weapon used predominantly by the infantry is an interesting one and begs the question of why it was used in these instances instead of a spear. Its inclusion may refer to regional usage of this particular type of weapon in a West Highland context. Certainly, depictions of axes on highland grave effigies suggest that it was a standard piece of equipment in this region.<sup>29</sup> The numerous mentions of axe-wielding Scots at Bannockburn may also relate to the participation of West Highland troops. Barbour suggests that the men of the isles fought in Robert I’s own division, describing their “axes that were well ground, with which many a blow was struck” and that they “gave such blows with axes that they split heads and helmets.”<sup>30</sup> Still, the most prominent vignette from *The Bruce* focussing on the use of an axe is, of course, Robert Bruce’s

killing of Henry Bohun at the beginning of Bannockburn's second day. The story is well-known. Bohun, seeing Bruce on a small pony and in advance of his army, charged at the Scottish king. His attack missed its mark, and:

the noble king...standing in his stirrups, with an axe that was both hard and good, struck him a blow with such great force that neither hat nor helmet could stop the heavy clout that he gave him, so that he cleaved the head to his brains. The hand-axe shaft broke in two and [Bohun] fell flat to the ground, because his strength had gone.<sup>31</sup>

When later he was reprimanded by his commanders for tackling Bohun alone, "the king made them answer none, but bemoaned his hand-axe shaft, broken in two by the stroke in that way."<sup>32</sup> Bruce's lament would seem more suited to a broken sword rather than a broken axe. Putting the weapon of a foot soldier in the hands of the king confounds the traditional hierarchy of weaponry and further marginalises the importance of the sword in Barbour's narrative.

The other type of weaponry discussed in Barbour's narrative is the bow. Scottish archers are elusive in accounts of fourteenth-century warfare. They receive passing mention in chronicle accounts of the period, and are even recorded in some remaining administrative records, but there is little suggestion that they were plentiful. This general impression is problematised by the record of Scottish armies that fought in France in the fifteenth century, which, it has been argued, often boasted a ratio of two archers to every one man-at-arms.<sup>33</sup> Barbour provides little evidence to resolve this apparent contradiction. One of the tales that places Bruce against three attackers has a page accompanying the king, who was armed with "only a [cross]bow and a bolt."<sup>34</sup> Bruce uses the bow to shoot one attacker through the eye, before dispatching the other two with his sword. Barbour also appears to comment on the use of bows, and the extent to which they were an 'unchivalric' weapon that made no distinction of



class and military ability. When describing another incident in which Bruce faces three attackers, Barbour describes how:

...they went quickly towards the king, bending their bows when they were near, and he, who had a great fear of their arrows because he was without armour, quickly made an overture to them, saying ‘You ought to be ashamed to shoot at me from afar, *perdé*, for I am one and you are three. But if you have the courage to come close to attack me with your swords, defeating me in this way if you can, you will be the more esteemed.’<sup>35</sup>

Bruce, of course, wins the encounter when the men concede their strategic advantage to adhere to chivalric convention. Again, Barbour flatters Bruce’s military abilities as the hero overcomes unfavourable odds. This episode speaks to a very real concern among contemporary warriors who had watched the archer become the dominant force on the fourteenth-century battlefield. They had demonstrated their worth more than once against Scottish armies, and did so to arguably more devastating effect in France. For the chivalric warrior this reality did not, however, sit well alongside the romantic model of the armoured knight on horseback armed with sword and lance. In a sense, then, Barbour may be seen as passing comment on the changing nature of the medieval battlefield; new forms of weaponry, such as the bow, were making the chivalric ideals of warfare portrayed in contemporary romantic narratives archaic and the very nature of combat was evolving in response to technological developments.

### **Armour and Military Dress**

Discussion of Scottish armour and equipment is assisted by the existence of legislation laid down by Robert I in 1318, which stipulated minimum requirements of protective equipment for those serving in a military capacity. These requirements were based on the wealth of an individual, and the equipment stipulations would have

equated to what a contemporary soldier could afford. Those with goods worth £10 were expected to possess an *aketon* (a quilted jacket, possibly including some plate), a *bascinet* (the standard metal head-protection of the period) and plate gloves. Those without *aketon* and *bascinet* – who could not perhaps afford the best forms of equipment – were instead to provide themselves with a *habergeon* (mail coat), an iron hat and plate gloves. Those with goods to the value of a cow received no stipulation for required armour, although they were expected to arm themselves with a spear or a bow.<sup>36</sup> For the most part, Barbour does not provide much in the way of detailed information of individual pieces of armour, but even passing references allow some insight into the basics of Scottish military equipment. For example, providing a largely generic description of the two forces clashing at Methven, Barbour wrote that, “the blood burst out of their mail-coats.”<sup>37</sup> Following his single-handed defence of a ford in Galloway against his enemies, Bruce’s men rushed to their leader’s aid and found him “sitting alone, having taken off his basnet to take the air, because he was hot.”<sup>38</sup> Thomas Randolph and his troops did likewise at Bannockburn following a skirmish with the English.<sup>39</sup> Robert I’s head protection is further discussed in reference to the second day’s action at Bannockburn, where he is described wearing “on his high basnet a hat of boiled leather, and on top of that, as a sign that he was a king, a high crown.”<sup>40</sup> Barbour also refers to specifically knightly apparatus when describing the incident of an English naval force landing in Fife. The bishop of Dunkeld, who came across various Scots fleeing the disembarking English forces, reprimanded them, declaring that “if [the king] gave you your just deserts he would soon chop the gilt spurs from you right at the heel; that’s what justice requires men to do with cowards.”<sup>41</sup> While most of Barbour’s descriptions of armour are corroborated

by the 1318 regulations, he also includes elements that may have been informed by his knightly sources, such as the use of the gilt spurs.

The description of armour in the narrative is often used as a device with which to invoke the spectacular, such as in the long description of Edward II's army as it traversed southern Scotland. It is the spectacle that allows Barbour to stress the quality of the arms possessed by Scotland's enemies. In his description of Aymer de Valence's army at Loudon Hill, Barbour writes:

The sun had risen, shining bright, which flashed on the broad shields...  
Their basnets were all burnished bright, gleaming in the sun's light; their spears, their pennons and their shields lit up all the fields with light. Their best, bright-embroidered, banners, horse of many hues, coats of armour of diverse colours, and hauberks which were as white as flour, made them glitter as though they were like to angels from the kingdom of Heaven.<sup>42</sup>

Barbour's emphasis on the quality of arms possessed by the English troops serves to enhance the Scottish victory. In overcoming the superiority of English arms and equipment, both at Loudon Hill and at Bannockburn, the Scottish armies achieve even greater renown. It is, however, interesting that such descriptions are almost always used in reference to the English. In contrast, Barbour inserts examples of Scots apparently covering up their armour, hiding their military status. In some cases there are obvious strategic reasons for this. For example, James Douglas and his men donned dark cloaks for their night attack on Roxburgh Castle so that they would look like cattle moving around in the darkness.<sup>43</sup> Such a ruse, and the disguise of a knightly warrior more generally, is a common motif of contemporary romances. Such a narrative trope may also be behind the depiction of James Douglas during the Weardale campaign, where he rode towards the gathered English army "having a gown over his armour."<sup>44</sup> This appears to have been part of a stratagem to lure the English archers into an ambush. The English troops had already begun to surge

towards the lone horseman when they were warned by Robert Ogle that it was a trap, and on hearing that the man on horseback was none other than James Douglas, they retreated in fear of the knight's reputation.

The other occasions when Scots covered or hid their armoured state relate to descriptions of armoured churchmen. Examples of militant Scottish clergy are relatively abundant for this period of conflict. The bishop of St Andrews was captured fully armed by Edward I, and was led off to English captivity in chains having revoked his clerical immunity by taking arms against the English king. Still, for Barbour, himself a clergyman, it may have been difficult to portray the Scottish clergy in such an overtly militaristic fashion and to countenance their activities. It was, after all, quite some time since Scottish clergymen of such standing had actively involved themselves in the conflict with England. The bishop of Dunkeld is, therefore, described wearing "a robe over his armour...to hide what he wore."<sup>45</sup> It is only when he rides off to confront the English that he is described throwing off his cloak and arming himself with a spear. Even then, although he apparently "rode always at their head", there is no description of heroic deeds performed by the bishop in the rather generic description of the skirmish which followed.<sup>46</sup> In another instance, James Douglas sends a friar to spy on the location of English foragers near Melrose during the English invasion of 1322. Like the bishop of Dunkeld, the friar wore a "great hood [that] concealed altogether the armour that he had on him."<sup>47</sup> Again, although the friar is described, armed with a spear bearing down on the English forces, his actions in the skirmish are not. It is possible then that Barbour, knowing of the prominent personal involvement of some Scottish religious during the conflict, wrote these instances into his narrative as reflections of reality. They are not, however, the heroes of the narrative, no matter how bravely they represent Scotland's interests.

And although it has been suggested that Barbour treats the clergy in his narrative “not...as religious but as fighting men”, he may still have used the romantic narrative device of the disguise while also avoiding describing their warlike activities once battle had been joined as a means of protecting these men’s clerical status.<sup>48</sup>

Other references to armour in Barbour’s narrative refer to its value and to the physical activity of arming. Although he provides no detail on the monetary value of armour, Barbour does provide some insight into its relative worth. When depicting the aftermath of the Bruce defeats of 1306, Barbour describes the earl of Lennox and his men fleeing by ship while enemies pursue close behind. With the enemy ship reducing the distance between them, Lennox suggests “that without delay we throw everything except our arms [and armour] into the sea, and thus, when our ship is lightened we shall row, and [make] such [good] speed that we shall escape well from them, because they will stop on the sea to pick up our things...”<sup>49</sup> Although a practical response to their situation – they may have been forced to fight their enemies if they were indeed caught – armour and weapons were valuable enough to retain, even in a situation where weight was a factor. The value of armour is also notable in the aftermath of Scottish victories. Following the first capture of Douglas Castle by James Douglas and his men, they “bundled up all the goods that they thought they could take away, especially weapons and armour, silver treasure and clothing.”<sup>50</sup> The listing of weapons and armour above treasure and clothing implies a higher status, precedence being given to equipment which would perhaps strengthen them militarily rather than monetarily. Similarly, when the Scots entered Perth in 1313, soldiers “ran through the town, [grabbing] for themselves men armour and merchandise in great profusion, and other goods of various kinds, until they, who had been poor and needy before, became rich and mighty with that loot.”<sup>51</sup> The greatest accumulation of

armour and wealth in the aftermath of a confrontation was at Bannockburn. The Scots were able to enrich themselves by raiding the English encampment and seizing various articles of value, including armour, and more military equipment was taken when the English dead were stripped of their arms and “two hundred pairs of red spurs were taken from dead knights...”<sup>52</sup> Although armour and weaponry are esteemed highly in Barbour’s work, the Scottish soldier is still valued above his arms. In one incident, the Scottish forces in Ireland were betrayed by a man named O’Dempsey, who led them to an encampment which was later flooded by the release of a dammed-up river. The Scots escaped with difficulty, Barbour commenting that “[some] of their armour was lost.”<sup>53</sup> Though the loss of the equipment was lamentable, it was preferable to the drowning of the Scottish army. The author makes a similar point when describing the retreat, under John Thomasson, of Scottish forces at the battle of Faughart. The withdrawal was orderly enough “that all those who then fled thither, although they lost [some] of their gear, came sound and safe to Carrickfergus.”<sup>54</sup> In both Irish examples, Barbour indicates regret at the loss of valued equipment, but it is the safety of the Scottish army that is the primary consideration.

Arming, as described by Barbour, was time-consuming, as demonstrated by examples in the narrative which describe the difficulties of arming once battle had commenced. Within specific episodes there may even be an element of instruction, in the way of contemporary *exempla*, acting as a warning of what could happen if caught unawares and unarmed.<sup>55</sup> One of the key early examples of this is the account of Robert I’s troops being ambushed at Methven. In response to the English attack, Bruce, “who was then without armour”, called to his men “To arms, at once, and get ready; here are our enemies at hand!”<sup>56</sup> That Bruce and his men were defeated by the English ambush may be seen as a salutary lesson to remain in preparedness for battle

even if there was an assumption of safety. A similar point may be made by Barbour in relation to the attack on Scottish forces besieging Carrickfergus Castle during the invasion of Ireland. The Anglo-Irish castellan, Thomas Mandeville, sallied out of the castle when the Scots were in the town celebrating Easter. The garrison troops defeated the Scottish forces designated to continue the siege of the castle, but word of the attack reached the Scots in Carrickfergus. Edward Bruce was at the forefront of the Scottish counter-attack with his closest followers, while “all the time, as the Scotsmen could be armed, they came to the encounter and laid into their foes so, that they all turned tail, and [the Scots] chased them to the gate.”<sup>57</sup> On this occasion, the Scots were successful, but at the cost of their skeleton force. Barbour follows this with his description of the battle of Skerries in 1316. Again the Scots appear to have been attacked when unarmed, and although they won the skirmish the suggestion would appear to be that Edward Bruce’s military planning was not always as organised as it could have been.<sup>58</sup> In both cases there is the inference that, had Scottish armies been armed, they would not have suffered such losses.

Barbour uses other *exempla* throughout his text, including cases involving Englishmen. In response to James Douglas’s second attack on Douglas Castle, the English constable, Richard Thirlwall, rode out “suitably armed, completely, except that his head was bare.”<sup>59</sup> Although a seemingly innocuous remark, Thirlwall did not survive the skirmish that ensued and Barbour’s comment on the incomplete nature of his defence may link his unpreparedness to his eventual fate. Barbour may also be stressing that Thirlwall’s death was an unusual occurrence. Andy King has suggested that Anglo-Scottish warfare, for many of those who fought, was not as lethal as may be presupposed. He has argued that detailed descriptions of individuals’ deaths in chronicle accounts are composed because they were anomalous.<sup>60</sup> The case of

Thirlwall may represent a similar example, with Barbour himself seeking explanation for the castellan's death. Although not often replicated, there is another example in *The Bruce* of the author apparently requiring explanation for the death of an individual. In this second case it is a nameless sentry at Douglas Castle, killed by Simon Ledhouse, a follower of James Douglas and the first to scale the castle wall. Having killed one sentry, Ledhouse is met by another, "but [he] slew him at once for he was armed and strong [while] the other was unarmed, I'm sure, and had nothing to stop the blow."<sup>61</sup> The qualification – "I'm sure" – may simply be a narrative flourish to emphasise the author's knowledge of events and to stress the 'truth' of his work. Still, it is a curious entry possibly returning to the theme of unpreparedness already touched upon. The sentry was apparently not ready for the Scottish attack and died as a result. Barbour emphasises the importance of equipment in combat not only through his description of defeat as a result of unpreparedness, but also the survival of individuals owing to their armour. When faced by a force of Galwegians and forced to defend himself at a ford, Robert I "since he was protected in armour...did not need to fear their arrows."<sup>62</sup> Similarly, in one example of the recurring tale of Robert I confronting three assailants, "but for the armour that he wore, [the king] would have been dead, without a doubt."<sup>63</sup> Bruce's foresight contrasts with the unpreparedness of men such as Thirlwall, and even with the conduct of his own brother. Although Robert I was himself defeated at Methven as a result of his lack of foresight, he learned from his experience.

## **Conclusion**

Sonja Cameron wrote of *The Bruce* that "[it] is a romance, not a chronicle."<sup>64</sup> Much of what Barbour portrays does indeed have a romantic flavour to it. As



Cameron herself acknowledges, though, Barbour's romance does not sit completely comfortably as a romance either. *The Bruce* as a chivalric epic spends a great deal of its time subverting the very genre it is supposed to represent. All of the literary discussion about what Barbour's work is has led, however, to its value as a historical source being overlooked. That *The Bruce* is difficult to define does not mean that everything that Barbour wrote should be treated as simple narrative invention. *The Bruce* may indeed represent episodes – real and imagined – from the history of the First War of Independence that Barbour chose to include for purely narrative reasons. He did, though, also construct a narrative that provided an accurate depiction of warfare, for that was what his audience would have expected. It is in these details that Barbour best represents warfare as it was experienced by his knightly audience. For example, when describing the capture of Edinburgh Castle by Thomas Randolph and his men, the Scottish presence, despite taking great pains to remain silent when scaling the crag and the castle walls, was given away in part by “the rubbing of armour” which alerted the sentries.<sup>65</sup> Few if any other Scottish sources provide such detail and although Barbour himself was not a military man – *The Bruce* is not in the same category as Thomas Gray's *Scalacronica* for example – he drew on the testimony of individuals who were. Their input on the final draft of Barbour's work is impossible to judge, but their knowledge is surely visible in the many varied descriptions of warfare and combat that fill the pages of *The Bruce*. It is this information that, when coupled with existing archaeological and documentary evidence, highlights the potential use of Barbour's *Bruce* as an important source for Scottish medieval military history.

<sup>1</sup> See for example, S. Cameron, 'Keeping the Customer Satisfied: Barbour's *Bruce* and a Phantom Division at Bannockburn', in *The Polar Twins*, ed. E.J. Cowan and D. Gifford (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1999), 61-74; R.D.S. Jack, 'What's the 'Matter'?: Medieval Literary Theory and the Irish Campaigns in *The Bruce*', *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, 1:1 (2007), 11-24; A.M. Kinghorn, 'Scottish Historiography in the 14th Century: A new introduction to Barbour's *Bruce*', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 6 (1968-9), 131-45; W.F.H. Nicolaisen, 'Stories and Storytelling in Barbour's *Bruce*', in *Bryght Lanternis: Essays on the Language and Literature of Medieval and Renaissance Scotland*, ed. J.D. McClure and M.R.G. Spiller (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1989), 55-66; N. Royan, 'A Question of Truth: Barbour's *Bruce*, Harry's Wallace and Richard Coer de Lion', *International Review of Scottish Studies*, 34 (2009), 75-105; T. Summerfield, 'Barbour's *Bruce*: Compilation in Retrospect', in *Writing War: Medieval Literary Responses to Warfare*, ed. C. Saunders, F. Le Saux and N. Thomas (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 107-25.

<sup>2</sup> See for example S. Cameron, 'Chivalry and Warfare in Barbour's *Bruce*', in *Violence in Medieval Society*, ed. R.W. Kaeuper (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000), 13-29; B.W. Kliman, 'The Idea of Chivalry in John Barbour's *Bruce*', *Mediaeval Studies*, 35 (1973), 477-508; A.M. McKim, 'James Douglas and Barbour's Ideal of Knighthood', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 17 (1981), 167-80.

<sup>3</sup> See Duncan's introductory notes to *The Bruce*; Kliman, 'Idea of Chivalry', 477; Nicolaisen, 'Stories and Storytelling', 57-9.

<sup>4</sup> C. Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England* (London: Hambledon, 2004), 102-4.

<sup>5</sup> For discussion of Barbour's audience and the context of when *The Bruce* was written, see Summerfield, 'Compilation in Retrospect', 107-8, 110-2; Cameron, 'Keeping the Customer Satisfied', 70-1.

<sup>6</sup> Summerfield, 'Compilation in Retrospect', 113.

<sup>7</sup> For extant archaeological evidence, see for example D.H. Caldwell, 'Some Notes on Scottish Axes and Long Shafted Weapons', in *Scottish Weapons and Fortifications, 1100-1800*, ed. D.H. Caldwell (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1981), 253-314; J.G. Scott, 'Three Medieval Swords from Scotland', in Caldwell, *Scottish Weapons*, 10-20.

<sup>8</sup> See R. Brydall, 'The Monumental Effigies of Scotland, from the Thirteenth to the Fifteenth Century' *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 3rd series, 29 (1894-5), 329-410; K.A. Steer and J.W.M. Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands* (Edinburgh: RCAHMS, 1977).

<sup>9</sup> R. Dressler, 'Steel Corpse: Imaging the knight in death', in J. Murray (ed), *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the medieval west* (New York: Garland, 1999), 135-67; cf. J. Martindale, 'The Sword on the Stone: Some resonances of a medieval symbol of power (the tomb of King John in Worcester Cathedral)', in *Anglo-Norman Studies XV*, ed. M. Chibnall (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1993), 199-241.

<sup>10</sup> *Bruce*, 220, 262, 278.

<sup>11</sup> *Bruce*, 364.

<sup>12</sup> *Bruce*, 218. This statement is broadly repeated in a later incarnation of the tale (*Bruce*, 278).

<sup>13</sup> *Bruce*, 218, 230.

<sup>14</sup> *Bruce*, 602.

<sup>15</sup> *Bruce*, 602.

<sup>16</sup> *Bruce*, 600.

<sup>17</sup> *Bruce*, 558-60.

<sup>18</sup> For discussion of other examples in which Barbour is forced to explain the behaviour of his heroes, see Cameron, 'Chivalry and Warfare', 15-18.

<sup>19</sup> *Bruce*, 306. This example is taken from the description of Loudon Hill, but similar expressions are used in relation to Methven and Bannockburn (see *Bruce*, 98, 474, 476-8, 486-8).

<sup>20</sup> *Bruce*, 230.

<sup>21</sup> *Bruce*, 140.

<sup>22</sup> *Bruce*, 464.

<sup>23</sup> *Bruce*, 434, 474, 484, 496. See also *ibid.*, 534.

<sup>24</sup> Caldwell, 'Long Shafted Weapons', 256-9.

<sup>25</sup> *Bruce*, 482-4. According to Barbour, the spears were used to create gaps within the ranks of the archers into which they could ride their horses, at which point the archers began to flee and were cut down as they ran.

<sup>26</sup> *Bruce*, 586.

<sup>27</sup> *Bruce*, 716, 586.

- <sup>28</sup> *Bruce*, 112.
- <sup>29</sup> Steer and Bannerman, *Medieval Monumental Sculpture*, 170-172; Caldwell, 'Notes on Long Shafted Weapons', 262-276. See also D.H. Caldwell, 'Having the right kit: West Highlanders fighting in Ireland', in *The World of the Galloglass: Kings, warlords and warriors in Ireland and Scotland, 1200-1600*, ed. S. Duffy (Dublin: Four Courts, 2007), 144-68, at 159-68; K. Simms, 'Images of the galloglass in poems to the MacSweeneys', in *The World of the Galloglass*, 106-23, at 117-8.
- <sup>30</sup> *Bruce*, 420. The prominence given to West Highland forces may relate to the elevated political place held by John MacDonald, Lord of the Isles, at the time that Barbour was writing, as a result of his marriage to the king's daughter.
- <sup>31</sup> *Bruce*, 450.
- <sup>32</sup> *Bruce*, 452.
- <sup>33</sup> B. Chevalier, 'Les Ecosais dans les armées de Charles VII jusqu'à la bataille de Verneuil', in *Jeanne D'arc: Une Époque, Un Rayonnement* (Paris: Editions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1982), 85-94, at 87, 88; P. Contamine, 'Scottish Soldiers in France in the Second Half of the Fifteenth Century: Mercenaries, immigrants or Frenchmen in the making?', in *The Scottish Soldier Abroad, 1247-1967*, ed. G.G. Simpson (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1992), 16-30, at 19.
- <sup>34</sup> *Bruce*, 218.
- <sup>35</sup> *Bruce*, 278.
- <sup>36</sup> *APS*, i, 473-4; cf. G.W.S. Barrow, *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988), 297; D. Caldwell, *The Scottish Armoury* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1979), 8.
- <sup>37</sup> *Bruce*, 98.
- <sup>38</sup> *Bruce*, 238.
- <sup>39</sup> "The earl who had so defended himself, and his men too, who were weary, quickly took off their basnets to get air, for they were hot [and] were all covered in sweat" (*Bruce*, 454).
- <sup>40</sup> *Bruce*, 448.
- <sup>41</sup> *Bruce*, 610. Further allusion to the essential pieces of knightly equipment that were spurs is made by Barbour in relation to Douglas's death in Spain. He and his men rode to the rescue of their surrounded comrades, and "swiftly struck their horses with spurs and in a rush soon rode among the Saracens" (*Bruce*, 764-6).
- <sup>42</sup> *Bruce*, 300-2.
- <sup>43</sup> *Bruce*, 380.
- <sup>44</sup> *Bruce*, 716.
- <sup>45</sup> *Bruce*, 608-10.
- <sup>46</sup> *Bruce*, 610, 612-4. For an alternative discussion of Dunkeld's behaviour in particular, and the description of warrior priests more generally in *The Bruce*, see Cameron, 'Chivalry and Warfare', 27-8.
- <sup>47</sup> *Bruce*, 682.
- <sup>48</sup> Kliman, 'Idea of Chivalry', 488.
- <sup>49</sup> *Bruce*, 140-2.
- <sup>50</sup> *Bruce*, 208-10.
- <sup>51</sup> *Bruce*, 342.
- <sup>52</sup> *Bruce*, 504, 502.
- <sup>53</sup> *Bruce*, 538.
- <sup>54</sup> *Bruce*, 674.
- <sup>55</sup> For discussion of Barbour's use of specific incidents to act as *exempla* for his audience, see L.A. Ebin, 'John Barbour's *Bruce*: Poetry, History, and Propaganda', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 9 (1971-2), 218-42, at 220-2.
- <sup>56</sup> *Bruce*, 96.
- <sup>57</sup> *Bruce*, 560.
- <sup>58</sup> *Bruce*, 534-6.
- <sup>59</sup> *Bruce*, 244.
- <sup>60</sup> A. King, "According to the custom used in French and Scottish wars': Prisoners and casualties on the Scottish Marches in the fourteenth century', *Journal of Medieval History*, 28 (2002), 263-90.
- <sup>61</sup> *Bruce*, 382.
- <sup>62</sup> *Bruce*, 230.
- <sup>63</sup> *Bruce*, 268.
- <sup>64</sup> Cameron, 'Chivalry and Warfare', 13.
- <sup>65</sup> *Bruce*, 394.

---

### Select Bibliography

- Barbour, John, *The Bruce*, ed. A.A.M. Duncan (Edinburgh, 1997).
- Caldwell, D.H., 'Having the right kit: West Highlanders fighting in Ireland', in *The World of the Galloglass: Kings, warlords and warriors in Ireland and Scotland, 1200-1600*, ed. S. Duffy (Dublin: Four Courts, 2007), 144-68.
- Cameron, S., 'Chivalry and Warfare in Barbour's *Bruce*', in *Violence in Medieval Society*, ed. R.W. Kaeuper (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000), 13-29.
- Cameron, S., 'Keeping the Customer Satisfied: Barbour's *Bruce* and a Phantom Division at Bannockburn', in *The Polar Twins*, ed. E.J. Cowan and D. Gifford (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1999), 61-74.
- Ebin, L.A., 'John Barbour's *Bruce*: Poetry, History, and Propaganda', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 9 (1971-2), 218-42.
- Kinghorn, A.M., 'Scottish Historiography in the 14th Century: A new introduction to Barbour's *Bruce*', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 6 (1968-9), 131-45.
- Kliman, B.W., 'The Idea of Chivalry in John Barbour's *Bruce*', *Mediaeval Studies*, 35 (1973), 477-508.
- McKim, A.M., 'James Douglas and Barbour's Ideal of Knighthood', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 17 (1981), 167-80.
- Nicolaisen, W.F.H., 'Stories and Storytelling in Barbour's *Bruce*', in *Bryght Lanternis: Essays on the Language and Literature of Medieval and Renaissance Scotland*, ed. J.D. McClure and M.R.G. Spiller (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1989), 55-66.
- Summerfield, T., 'Barbour's *Bruce*: Compilation in Retrospect', in *Writing War: Medieval Literary Responses to Warfare*, ed. C. Saunders, F. Le Saux and N. Thomas (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 107-25.