



*Robert the Bruce:
King of the Scots*

Michael Penman

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Review by: Michael H. Brown



Robert the Bruce: King of the Scots. By Michael Penman. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. ISBN 978-0-300-14872-5. xi + 443 pp. £14.99.

The royal biography probably remains the most widely-read form of writing on the medieval past. The Yale English Monarchs, the Penguin Monarchs, and the Stewart Dynasty in Scotland are all series that demonstrate the popularity of this form in contemporary historiography. Geoffrey Barrow's *Robert the Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland* (1965), which is arguably the most influential book on medieval Scotland, is part of this genre. First published over fifty years ago, Barrow placed the king at the heart of a study of the Scottish kingdom's struggle for survival against conquest and absorption between 1286 and 1329. Michael Penman's *Robert the Bruce: King of the Scots*, which was first published in 2014 and was issued in paperback in 2018, is the fullest re-appraisal of this crucial figure since the 1960s. In his approach, Penman is openly conscious of the shadow of the earlier work. From the outset he sets a different path. The emphasis is moved from the period 1306 to 1314, when Bruce secured the kingdom, to the following fifteen years, when he was able to rule Scotland. Although it deals with the later period, Barrow's account culminates in Robert's victory at Bannockburn. Penman, who gives an impressively short and downbeat account of the battle, treats this as the start of the real reign. This shifts the focus onto Robert as a medieval monarch rather than the 'outlaw king,' and opens up space for the consideration of his achievements and legacy beyond those won on the field of war. As a result, Penman brings into debate a whole gamut of issues and evidence produced between 1314 and 1329 that have previously been neglected. This represents a major advance in the study of this critical period in the shaping of the late medieval Scottish kingdom.

The overall success of Penman's efforts, however, is hampered by the nature of his approach. Studies of medieval monarchs have followed different paths. While many operate as studies of a reign as a defined period, others take a more heavily biographical approach. This difference is evident within Yale's English Monarchs series. Older works, for example Michael Prestwich's *Edward I*, first published in 1988, make the king the focal point for consideration of government and politics in the reign. By contrast, Seymour Phillips's 2010 study of Edward II is a largely chronological examination of that ruler's life and reign. While both approaches are valid, the latter depends on the availability of evidence for the actions, personality, motivations, and a full life history of the subject. It is unfortunate then that *Robert the Bruce* takes the path of life story because the key tools for this approach are missing. Unlike Edward I and Edward II, we have no developed sense of Bruce's

character. Penman rightly uses John Barbour's epic poem, *The Bruce*, written in the 1370s, with caution, but without it Robert can only be dealt with as a nobleman, royal claimant, and ruler, not as an individual. This is especially clear before 1306. Much is hung on a single reference, from an English account written only a decade before *The Bruce*, which stated that Robert was in Edward I's household. Even after he became king, it is hard to form a sense of Robert as a personality beyond some pithy quotations in English narratives.

Penman's efforts to consider Robert's personal life create problems. Much weight is placed on the king's residence in, or patronage of, religious institutions as evidence of his concerns, both moral and physical. To take one example, Penman asserts that Robert's visit to Scotlandwell in Fife in 1314 demonstrated evidence of the king's illness (138). Such a claim, however, rests on the existence of a hospital there that was probably founded for pilgrims to St Andrews rather than for medical concerns. Likewise, Penman hypothesises a series of religious ceremonies after Bannockburn for which no evidence survives (149–150). The search for religious motivations and patterns of spiritual affiliations is certainly valid and potentially rewarding. It cannot, however, be used as a template to explain royal movements and motivations without more direct corroboration of its meaning and significance than can be provided for this reign.

The strong focus on Robert's recorded acts as the basis of discussion has the effect of narrowing the range of the book. By making this a royal narrative, the full implications of the king's positions and decisions are lost. Bruce's kingship was defined by his relations with other key figures (many of whom started as his equals). Details of his dealings with these individuals are included, but are presented only from a royal perspective. More disappointingly, although Penman brings the names of a large group of Scots onto the page, he does little to help his readers understand their individual and collective dealings with the king. When, for instance, Penman states that “[David] Barclay, sheriff of Fife, had received lands in Glenesk, Perthshire, forfeited by David de Brechin, and would soon become steward of the royal princes' household,” he is displaying the process by which a new regime was cementing itself via bonds of service and reward with minor barons, but this fact passes without comment (267). Given Penman's excellent work on the Soules conspiracy of 1320, which rests on such an analysis, its relative absence here is surprising.

It does seem as if such analysis is being sacrificed to a narrative impulse. The book is firmly, even remorselessly, chronological in approach—while in the chapters after 1314 this means that a strong sense is developed of a continued series of challenges facing Robert, the key developments and

relationships of the king's reign are never examined in depth. The years between 1314 and 1329 provide some of the earliest evidence of Scottish government in action. Penman discusses these, but by doing so in a narrative frame, he denies himself the chance to contribute to debates about Robert's contribution to law and government, or the way these different aspects of royal administration changed. The narrative approach has a similar effect in terms of the wider context of Robert's kingship. At the outset, Penman states an intention to consider Robert's reign in terms of a crisis of European monarchy, but this potentially fascinating approach is not given the space to develop. Similarly, though greater coverage is given to the Irish war than by Barrow, the description of this as "a dangerous front too far" (175) suggests a sense that Scotland was the proper focus for Robert's ambitions and the wider political world that the Bruces inhabited is kept to the margins. Perhaps the biggest lack is an extended assessment of Robert's significance as a ruler both in European and Scottish terms. His responsibility for the near-collapse and survival of his achievements in the 1330s forms no real part of the discussion. The question of whether his legacy was of intensive royal government or of the delegation of regional power to magnate dynasties is only briefly touched upon in the conclusion. The death of the king, ending the personal narrative, left many questions unanswered.

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