



The Scottish History Society Learning Resource

The Declaration of Arbroath

Letter of barons, freeholders and the whole 'community of the realm' of Scotland to Pope John XXII, written in Latin and dated Arbroath, 6 April 1320

Outline of What the Declaration Says

By the way, the title 'Declaration of Arbroath' is modern.

1. The letter opens with a list of 40 nobles who send devout greetings to the pope. The letter is formally presented as written in the voice of these individuals and 'the other barons, freeholders and the whole community of the realm of Scotland'.
2. There is then a short account of where the Scots came from and how they arrived in Scotland and took over the country after they had destroyed the Picts. 'As the histories of ancient times bear witness, it has held them free of all servitude ever since.'
3. This is reinforced with the statement that 'in their kingdom 113 kings of their own royal stock have reigned in a line unbroken by a single foreigner.'
4. It is then said that the Scots, 'even though settled in the uttermost ends of the earth', were among the first to become Christian through St Andrew, brother of St Peter.
5. The Scots, we are told, lived in freedom and peace until Edward I 'came in the guise of a friend and ally to invade them as an enemy' at a time when the Scots were without a king. Edward's 'innumerable outrages' are listed.
6. The Scots, however, have been saved by the efforts of Robert Bruce who has been made king
 - (i) 'by divine providence',
 - (ii) 'succession to his right according to our laws and customs which we will maintain to the death', and
 - (iii) the due consent and assent of us all. There then follows the two most famous sentences in the entire document. It is these, above all, which justify the document's modern title as a 'declaration'.
7. The deposition clause:
'Yet if he (King Robert) should give up what he has begun, seeking to make us or our kingdom subject to the king of England or to the English, we would strive at once to drive him out as our enemy and a subverter of his own right and ours, and we would make some other man who was able to defend us our king.'
8. The freedom clause:
'For as long as a hundred of us remain alive, we will never on any conditions be subjected to the lordship of the English; for it is not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we fight, but for freedom alone, which no good man gives up except with his life.'
9. The pope is then asked to urge the king of England, 'who ought to be satisfied with what he has,

since England used to be enough for seven kings or more', to leave the Scots alone, 'who live in poor little Scotland, beyond which there is no dwelling place at all'.

10. It is then observed that Christian rulers fail to go to the help of the Holy Land because of wars with their neighbours. It is claimed that, if only the king of England would leave them in peace, the Scots would be ready to go there.
11. It is pointed out to the pope that, if there is further slaughter and misery because he continues to accept the English version of events, this will be laid at his door by God. They emphasise their obedience to the pope, and their trust in God.
12. The letter ends with a dating clause: 'given at the monastery of Arbroath in Scotland' on 6 April 1320 and the fifteenth year of the reign of Robert Bruce.

Context for why the Declaration was written

King Robert I was under increasing pressure from the pope, John XXII, who refused to recognise Robert's title as king and blamed him for fighting Edward II of England. In June 1320 (that is, before the Declaration had arrived in Avignon in France, which is where the pope was based) Robert I and prominent Scottish bishops were excommunicated. There was also the problem that Edward II, despite his humiliating defeat at the battle of Bannockburn in 1314, showed no sign at all of recognising that Scotland was an independent kingdom. King Robert was also under serious pressure at home.

Dynastic crisis

Although Robert had succeeded in driving the English out of Scotland, his position was weakened by two vital factors:

1. After his brother, Edward, was killed in October 1318 fighting in Ireland, there was no obvious adult male alive who could succeed Robert I as king should anything happen to him. The heir was Robert Stewart, the son of Robert I's daughter. But Robert Stewart was only an infant. This meant that it was becoming risky for nobles to back Robert I: what would happen if he and his grandson died—who would be king then?
2. There was an obvious answer: Edward Balliol, head of a family whose chief supporters had suffered defeat by Robert Bruce. Robert I had become king in 1306 by seizing the throne once occupied by John Balliol. Although King John personally had offered no effective opposition to Edward I of England after the conquest of 1296, Scottish leaders—including William Wallace—had fought in his name as the rightful king. John died in 1314. His son, Edward, was in his thirties. The only land he had was in France, but he must have hoped for English support and recognition to regain his father's throne if the opportunity arose.

Conspiracy against Robert I

In December 1318 a law was enacted in parliament against anyone spreading rumours against King Robert and his government—a sure sign that there was much unrest and speculation about the future. A few months after the Declaration was written, a conspiracy against King Robert was revealed and its leaders dealt with savagely in early August 1320. The 'official' line was that the conspirators intended to oust Robert and install William Soules as king. The incident is therefore known as the 'Soules Conspiracy'. It has been argued that William Soules would not have been a credible king, and

that the conspiracy was really an attempt to restore the Balliol dynasty to the throne. Edward Balliol was certainly in England in July 1320. Four of the nobles named as sponsors of the Declaration were among the conspirators. Were they already plotting against Robert when they affixed their seals to the document?

Creating the Declaration

The letter's main points were probably drafted by King Robert and his council when they met at Newbattle (a few miles south of Edinburgh) in March 1320. Although the letter is dated 6 April, it may not have been sent until May. More nobles sealed it than are named individually in the document. Duncan's study of how the letter was sealed has shown that this was an impressive government-led effort, with nobles being urged or required to send their seals to where the document was kept. This could have taken weeks. This is important for our understanding of the text. It was not drawn up by a large assembly of nobles. Instead, the fifty or more who sealed it were presented with a finished document. It is also highly likely that some did not see the Declaration at all, but sent a clerk with their seal matrix to seal it on their behalf.

Sources

Biblical and Roman

As well as using quotations from the Bible, it has been shown that the freedom clause has been taken nearly word for word from a work called the War of Cataline by a Roman author, Sallust, writing before the Christian Era.

English

The account of where the Scots originated is taken mainly from Henry of Huntingdon's History of English Kings, written in the twelfth century.

Scottish

The statement that there were 113 kings is derived from a list of kings which was in parts totally unhistorical. It began with kings of Scots (in fact, these were kings of Dál Riata in Argyll between the 6th and 8th centuries) followed by Pictish kings and finished with kings of Scots from Cinaed mac Ailpín (Kenneth mac Alpin, d.858), probably going as far as John Balliol. The inclusion of Pictish kings is ironic, given that we are told in the Declaration that the Picts were destroyed when the Scots first arrived in Scotland!

Authorship

The only certainty is that whoever drafted it initially was a highly talented prose writer. The text would have to have been approved by the chancellor, but that does not mean that he wrote it. There is evidence of slight editing at a late stage. There is no conclusive proof for the author's identity. These have been suggested:

Bernard of Linton, who in 1320 was royal chancellor and abbot of Arbroath, has for long been regarded as the most likely author. He would certainly have known the Declaration's text intimately.

Alexander Kinninmonth was one of the emissaries who took the Declaration to the pope. He also would have known in detail what the text said.

Were the barons aware of what the Declaration said?

There has been some debate about how much the nobles who sealed the document knew about what it said. Was the famous clause written only for the pope's ears, or did they also have a domestic audience in mind? This is a key question in the debate about the Declaration's significance. If the barons named at the beginning were largely ignorant of its contents, and were not expected to know what it said, then how could it have been written with an eye to the domestic political situation? How appropriate would it be to see it as a 'declaration' of constitutional significance if those who sealed it thought it was simply a letter to the pope?

The nobles, of course, could not have read and understood the Latin of the document. But they were also accustomed to dealing with this handicap. In this period almost all public documents were in Latin. A noble would normally have a clerk to read it and translate it for him before he sealed it. Presumably on this occasion the nobles sent their clerks with their seals. It is hard to believe that the clerks would not have read the letter and reported back to their lords the main points of what it said. Those outside Robert I's council may not have had a say in what the Declaration said, but the text could still have been written in the expectation that they would learn of its contents—especially the most dramatic parts.

Debates

Everyone accepts that the letter is superbly written, and is one of the most evocative pieces of official prose from the Middle Ages. This high estimation rests particularly on the two most famous clauses. But historians do not agree on how to interpret them.

The deposition clause

All would agree that the clause has some constitutional content.

- But was it meant to be read primarily as a deliberate statement of the relationship between the king of Scots and his people?
- Was it little more than a rhetorical flourish?
- Or was it written for an immediate political purpose—to undermine those who thought a Balliol, and not Robert Bruce, should be king?
- If so, did they have John Balliol in mind (who reigned 1292–1304) or his son, Edward?

A rhetorical flourish?

Simpson in particular has argued that the Declaration should be seen as one of a number of letters to the pope in which a king justified his resistance to the pope's demands (in this case, that King Robert should stop fighting the English). The main element in these letters was that it was claimed that the barons would not allow the king to obey the pope. There are examples of letters of this kind from Kings John and Edward I of England and Philip II of France. In this context, the threat to depose the king is simply a dramatic pose. It was written for the pope's benefit alone. It was never intended to be read as a constitutional statement, and was not remembered as particularly significant until modern times. Lynette Wyness (in an unpublished study) has pointed out that the Declaration is unique in saying that the king might be deposed. Other letters of this kind went no further than suggesting that the barons might prevent the king from doing something.

A constitutional statement?

Cowan in particular has argued that the deposition clause is the first statement by a government in Europe of the 'contractual theory' in its full sense that a king who fails should be deposed by their barons in the name of the people. It was accepted in theory that, if a ruler was incapacitated, he might remain only as a figurehead while someone else governed in his place. But medieval thinkers were generally reluctant to go the whole way and state that a bad king should be deposed by his people. The first to do so in theory was John of Paris in 1302. When Robert Bruce became king in 1306 he saw himself as deposing John Balliol—who, though still alive, had failed. In the Declaration he made it explicit that a king would be deposed if he failed the essential test of preserving the kingdom's independence.

The community of the realm

Barrow saw the clause in terms of the king's relationship with the 'community of the realm'. Who or what was this? Barrow's answer is: 'in practice, no doubt, nobles, prelates and substantial freeholders, but in theory the entire Scottish nation'. In the absence of a monarch after the death of Alexander III in 1286 government had been by the authority of the community of the realm. This had been reasserted even when there was a king again after 1292. In 1295 the running of the kingdom had been taken from the hands of John Balliol and entrusted to a council of twelve. After Edward I's conquest in 1296 had been largely overturned, government by the authority of the community resumed with William Wallace and other guardians until Edward I reconquered Scotland in 1304. In 1306 a new stage was reached when Robert Bruce had, in effect, been elected not as a guardian but as king by a group intent on reviving the idea of government by authority of the community. If the community could create a king, it was a small step to think that they could remove a king who threatened their existence.

A coded attack on Balliol?

It would be absurd to imagine that Robert Bruce, now that he was king, was likely to 'sell out' to the English, or that the threat of deposition was not made with his approval. Was the statement really directed at someone else?

John Balliol

Goldstein and Grant pointed out that Robert Bruce needed to justify the fact that in 1306 he had replaced John Balliol as king of Scots. Even though King John had left the country in 1296, he was still the king in whose name the cause of independence had been fought by Wallace and the Comyns. The deposition clause stated a basic criterion that every king should satisfy. John Balliol

had failed, therefore, he had been replaced by Robert Bruce, who had succeeded.

Edward Balliol

Broun has argued that Edward Balliol, not his father King John, was the target. The clause talks not about a king failing despite his best efforts, but of a king who actively seeks to make the kingdom subject to the English. The Bruce government was worried by the threat posed by Edward Balliol's supporters in Scotland, and wanted to make two points: (i) if Edward Balliol became king, he would throw away Scottish independence because he would depend on English support, and (ii) anyone could be king as long as he could preserve Scottish independence—so, even if the Bruce dynasty died out, their cause would continue, because they were prepared to make 'some other man who was able to defend us our king' (presumably one of Bruce's leading henchmen).

The freedom clause

The Declaration speaks vividly of freedom from the English.

- But is this simply freedom for the kingdom from domination by another?
- Or is it linked to personal freedom?
- If so, whose freedom?

Personal freedom and the freedom of the kingdom

Barrow shows that the freedom clause has been carefully written from different parts of the War of Cataline by the Roman author, Sallust. The result is 'to emphasize liberty, individual as well as regnal, as the overriding desire of the nation'. Broun has argued that the idea of freedom in the Declaration was already articulated vividly in a history of Scotland written no later than the 1260s.

Whose freedom?

Not everyone was 'free' in society. Anyone was regarded as 'free' if they had property with the right to pass it on to their children. This could include peasants as well as knights. Their land and goods were theoretically guaranteed by the king because he was regarded as the ultimate authority in the kingdom. This would be threatened if Scottish sovereignty was challenged. For these people personal freedom and the freedom of the kingdom and were intimately linked.

But there were also many who were not allowed to leave their local community. They and their children were regarded as part of the land and therefore someone else's 'property'. For Goldstein this inequality means that 'freedom' was only for those who lived off the labour of the unfree.

Personal freedom

Why did those who were already 'free' in society fight the English 'for freedom'? Duncan has argued that, after Edward's conquest in 1296, when all the leading nobles were taken captive, the freeholders who formed the backbone of the Scottish infantry took matters into their own hands in the cause of resisting the heavy demands of Edward I's government. For them, freedom from the English was not just about Scottish independence in its own right, but was also because they rejected Edward I's oppressive style of government and demands for taxation.

Freedom from tyranny

Cowan sees this desire for freedom from oppression in constitutional terms. The intrusive style of

government of Edward I and Edward II was tantamount to tyranny, and some political theorists asserted that it was legitimate to depose tyrants. In this way Cowan links the freedom clause with the general principle behind the deposition clause.

Suggested reading

Translation

Many translations have been published, but the one that is referred to most often is by Professor Duncan published as an appendix to his edition and translation of Barbour's *Bruce*: John Barbour, *The Bruce*, edited with translation and notes by A. A. M. Duncan (Edinburgh, Cannongate Classics 78, 1997), 779–82.

Classic studies

G.W.S. Barrow, *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland* (first published in 1965, new editions in 1976, 1988 and Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2005)
A.A.M. Duncan, *The Nation of Scots and the Declaration of Arbroath, 1320* (London, Historical Association Pamphlet, 1970)
Grant Simpson, 'The Declaration of Arbroath revitalised', *Scottish Historical Review* 56 (1977) 11-33

Recent books

Geoffrey Barrow (ed.), *The Declaration of Arbroath: History, Significance, Setting* (Edinburgh, Society of Antiquaries Monograph Series, 2003)
Edward J. Cowan, 'For Freedom Alone': the Declaration of Arbroath (East Linton, Tuckwell Press, 2003)

Other studies

G.W.S. Barrow, 'The idea of freedom', *Innes Review* 30 (1979) 16-34 (reprinted in G. W. S. Barrow, *Scotland and its Neighbours in the Middle Ages* (London, Hambledon, 1992), chapter 1
Terry Brotherstone and David Ditchburn, '1320 and a' that: the Declaration of Arbroath and the remaking of Scottish History', in Terry Brotherstone and David Ditchburn (eds), *Freedom and Authority, Scotland c.1050-c.1650. Historical and Historiographical Essays presented to Grant G. Simpson* (East Linton, Tuckwell Press, 2000), 10-31
Dauvit Broun, 'The Declaration of Arbroath: pedigree of a nation?', in *The Declaration of Arbroath: History, Significance, Setting*, ed. G. W. S. Barrow (Edinburgh, Society of Antiquaries Monograph Series, 2003), 1-12
Dauvit Broun, *Scottish Independence and the Idea of Britain from the Picts to Alexander III* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007), chapter 9.
A.A.M. Duncan, *The Kingship of the Scots 842-1292: Succession and Independence* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2002), final chapter.
R. James Goldstein, *The Matter of Scotland. Historical Narrative in Medieval Scotland* (Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1993), esp. chapter 6.
Alexander Grant, 'Aspects of national consciousness in medieval Scotland', in C. Bjorn, A. Grant and K.J. Stringer (eds), *Nations, Nationalism and Patriotism in the European Past* (Copenhagen, Academic Press, 1994) 68-95