

REVIEW: THE DECLARATION OF ARBROATH

Richard Oram

E.J.Cowan, **'For Freedom Alone': The Declaration of Arbroath, 1320**,
Phantassie, East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2003, 162 pp + 11 b/w plates,
pb, £9.99, ISBN 1-86232-150-7.

As exercises in historiography go, Professor Ted Cowan's most recent analysis of the Declaration of Arbroath, that most iconic of Scottish medieval documents, is a masterly example. Cowan takes a document that many of us think we know and understand, explores the popular myths and hard historical facts that surround it, examines its fourteenth-century context and its long afterlife, and questions traditional assumptions that have established themselves as the received 'facts' which relate to it. This is not just a deconstructive exercise, however, for he has also subjected many of the central 'truths' of Arbroath's historiography to forensic scrutiny and from that exercise has built a refreshingly frank re-evaluation of the document and its enduring historical significance.

The context for this present work is set out clearly in the opening chapter of the book, which provides a concise statement of the most commonly held views relating to the Declaration, current popular perceptions of it, and the manners in which it is presented to the public both at home and abroad. The tone is coloured by the caustic humour which is Cowan's hallmark, but the underlying scholarship here, and throughout the text, is clearly focused, cogently argued and almost disturbingly honest in its admission of gaps in our knowledge. Where he makes a leap of faith, Cowan first explores alternative interpretations before vaulting the void, and always emphasises the nature and

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extent of the gap rather than discreetly skating over it. It is an approach to scholarship from which many of us would benefit.

As the argument develops, discussion alternates between extended narratives which set the stage for the document and its production in the context of the Scottish Wars of Independence, and more technical explorations of the political/constitutional theories and philosophies woven into its fabric. The tone and pace of delivery likewise alternates with these sections, with the narratives delivered in Cowan's easy-flowing, witty and accessible prose, which will no doubt render them the target of most undergraduate users of this book, and the analysis given in a more heavy-duty academic style, which, sadly, few modern students will make any real effort to engage with and understand. Where the study really gathers pace and has its greatest impact is in Cowan's discussion of the Declaration's post-medieval significance. Contrary to the traditional argument that, having been consigned to the papal rubbish-bin by John XXII, it languished forgotten by the Scots until its rediscovery by Sir Walter Scott in the early 1800s, he presents a tightly argued case for its continuing significance and use from the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries.

While some readers will be disappointed by Cowan's ultimate failure to clearly establish the often-suggested lineal descent of the American Declaration of Independence from the Declaration of Arbroath, what he does successfully establish is that awareness of the latter remained high amongst educated Scots throughout the later medieval and early modern periods. Indeed, his discussion of particular scholars whose work reveals implicit knowledge of Arbroath and its central ideas raises a new image of the composition, interests and activities of political society in Scotland, and points to deeper, much earlier origins for the radical opinions presented conventionally as the legacy of the Scottish Protestant and dissenting traditions. Cowan argues – and largely convinces – that the medieval theories of contractual government expressed in the document were far more than just empty rhetoric and that they remained at the heart of political debate in Scotland, rising repeatedly to the forefront during periods of constitutional crisis: the early fifteenth century; the religious conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; the political revolution of 1688-90; the Union debate; the Jacobite challenge; and informing the opinions of the Scottish intellectuals who had a hand in the framing of the American document.

A study of this kind needs a scholar of Cowan's range and versatility. As comfortable in discussing twelfth-century theories of kingship and contract as

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in exploring the educational baggage of the men who drafted the American Declaration of Independence, he possesses a sureness of grasp and a breadth of vision which ensures that his long view approach works. While there will no doubt be many who disagree profoundly with much of the argument and presentation, from the discussion of Bruce kingship to the significance of Scots in 1776 American politics, at the very least Cowan has successfully stripped away the enveloping dross to expose the key questions which still surround the document. As he intended, far from claiming to close the debate, he has blown the field wide open and thrown down the challenge to a new generation of Scottish historians to take a fresh look at a familiar document and reassess traditional interpretations of it.

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