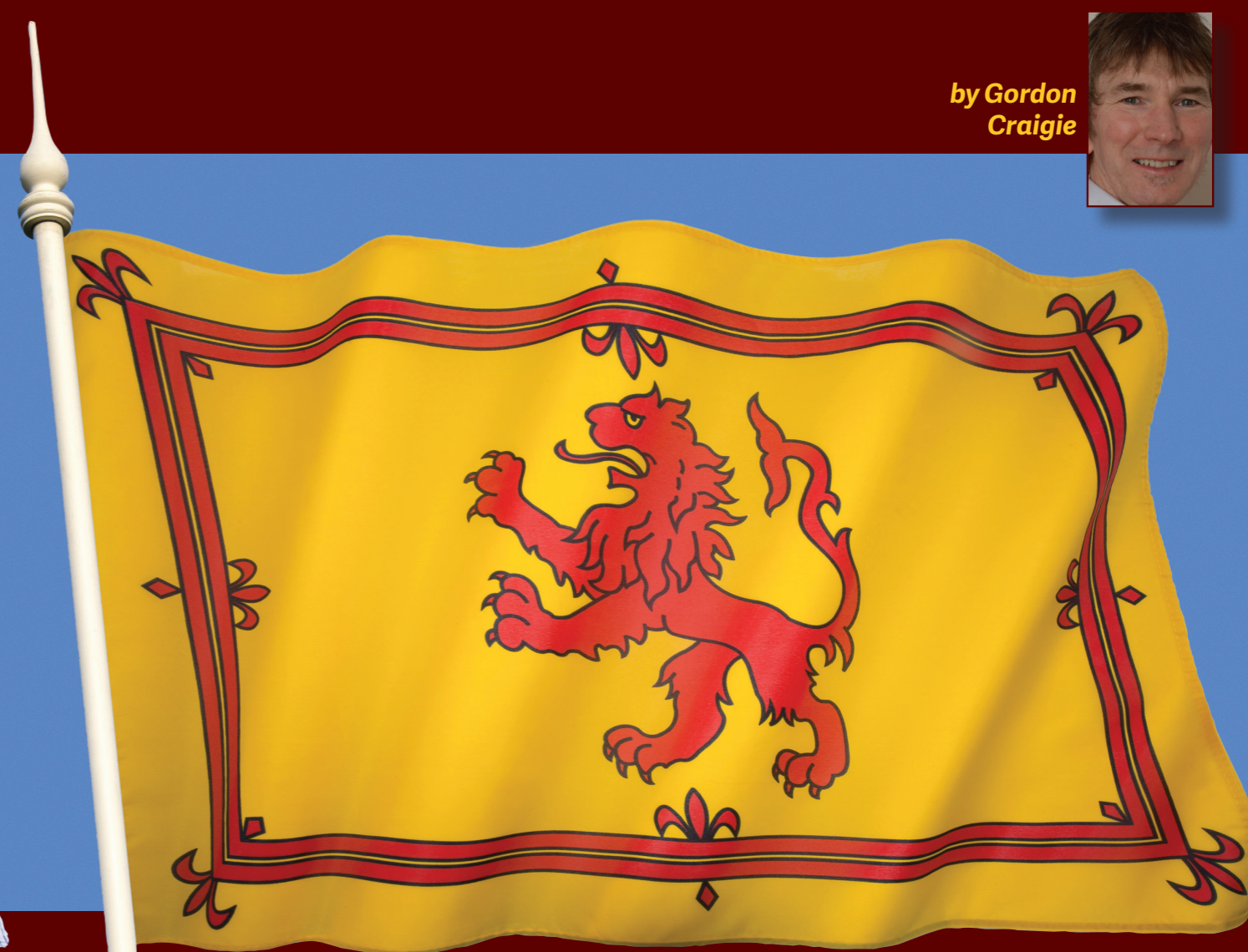


by Gordon
Craigie



700 Years?

And the rest... it's time to finally declare!

SCOTLAND'S celebrations of the 700th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Arbroath in April 1320 may have been a wee bit muted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the significance of that document should not be underestimated. Similarly, the same month saw not-too-much attention paid, in mainstream circles anyway, to the 200th anniversary of the 1820 Radical Rising. Maybe it's just me, or maybe it's the effects of having too much time on my hands during lockdown, but I can see a thread connecting these and other events in Scottish history that are very relevant to exactly where we are today...

For generations we Scots have been denied our history at the most fundamental level, our schooling

The eminent Scottish historian, Professor Geoffrey Barrow, who wrote what is widely acknowledged to be the definitive book on the life and times of Robert the Bruce, *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland*, succinctly defines the problem that continues to haunt Scotland to this day: "To make a nation conscious of its identity you must first give it a history." In that statement he was referring to the situation Scotland found itself in in the thirteenth century but, if anything, it rings even more true today. For generations we Scots have been denied our history at the most fundamental level, our schooling. We were taught about Henry VIII, the Norman Conquest, the Pilgrim Fathers – a whole range of totally meaningless and irrelevant people and events – but nothing about the Picts and Scots coming together under the first King of Scots, Kenneth I MacAlpin, to establish the Kingdom of Scotland in 843AD, or the struggles through the years of Wallace and Bruce to maintain our independence in the face of England's

expansionism, or the brutal occupation of Scotland by the British military after 1746, or the Clearances, or... the list is virtually endless. In his book *Scots, The Mither Tongue*, Billy Kay tells the story of a Labour minister, probably sometime in the 1990s, on being asked why Scottish history still wasn't being taught in schools, responding, "I do not see my role as educating a generation of young nationalists". To make a nation conscious of its identity you must indeed first give it a history!

One misconception that has been repeated in a few articles I've read recently is that the Declaration of Arbroath is Scotland's Declaration of Independence – it's emphatically not, as clearly there was no need for an already long-established, sovereign, independent nation to declare its independence. Scotland is, arguably, the oldest nation in Europe - by the time of the signing of the Declaration in 1320, the Kingdom of Scotland had already been established for almost 500 years! No, the

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Declaration of Arbroath was an appeal to the papacy, the United Nations of medieval times if you like, to *recognise* Scotland's *continuing* right to independence and to ask for protection from English aggression. In the thirteenth century, according to Barrow, Scots "might be of Pictish, British, Gaelic, Scandinavian, English, Flemish or Norman descent. However inappropriate, however ironical it might seem, they all took a pride in the Celtic past of their country." Not for the first time in researching Scottish history, I have a feeling of déjà vu – this time in how much that statement resonates with the concepts of 'New Scots' and our present-day sense of 'civic nationalism'.



Bernard De Linton (Abbott of Arbroath) and Robert the Bruce statue, Arbroath
Photo © Karen Vernon (cc-by-sa/2.0)

Barrow goes on to say, "Above all, Scotland was always a North Sea country, looking eastward and southward to the other countries which faced the same sea and used it increasingly as the highway for their trade ... Insofar as it was not self-supporting, Scotland lived by exporting hides, wool, timber and fish, and it was the trade in these goods which built up the North Sea towns. Aberdeen was as close to the Elbe as to the Thames, and closer to Norway than either." And, crucially, he goes on to conclude, "Political bonds, admittedly, are seldom exactly the same as the ties of trade, and it was an obvious necessity for Scotland to keep on good terms with England, not only its closest neighbour but also the only country in a position to inflict

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serious injury upon it. (As the English barons are reported to have said in 1244, their nation was powerful enough to wipe out the people of Scotland without the help of others.) But it would be a mistake to think that Scotland's relations with England, political, cultural and economic, were the only ones that mattered to it, or that it counted in any way upon English protection and patronage. Enjoying no special favours, hampered by no special prejudices or hostility, the Scots of the thirteenth century were accustomed to earning their own living and making their own way in the community of North Sea peoples." Again, a Scotland with trading and, inevitably, cultural ties to other northern nations – Iceland, Faroes, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Netherlands etc. – resonates strongly with the Scottish people's vote to remain in the EU and the Scottish Government's desire to present Scotland as an outward-looking, collaborative European nation. Yet again, plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose – the more things change, the more they stay the same...

Barrow doesn't doubt the Declaration's historical and constitutional importance, observing, "In 1320, king and



Portrait of Kenneth I MacAlpin, King of Scots (843-63)
Photo © Jacob de Wet II / Public domain



Declaration of Arbroath
Photo © Public Domain

community combined to produce a clear statement of their mutual relationship which was at the same time a declaration of the independence of Scotland, the most eloquent statement of the case for national independence to be produced anywhere in medieval Europe." Professor Ted Cowan agrees its importance, adding, "It sounds impossible that something like this should arise in a wee country in the north, beyond which there is no dwelling place at all, as the document says, but I believe that this is the first time we have an actually explicit reference to the contractual theory of monarchy, if you will, anywhere at all. It is a great moment, this, in Scottish history. I think it's the beginning of the sovereignty of the people, and I think there's some evidence to back that up, but in its own right it's a tremendous thing."

Sovereignty of the people is a great line, and extremely pertinent in the next steps of our independence movement. What the Declaration actually states, in relation to Robert the Bruce, is:

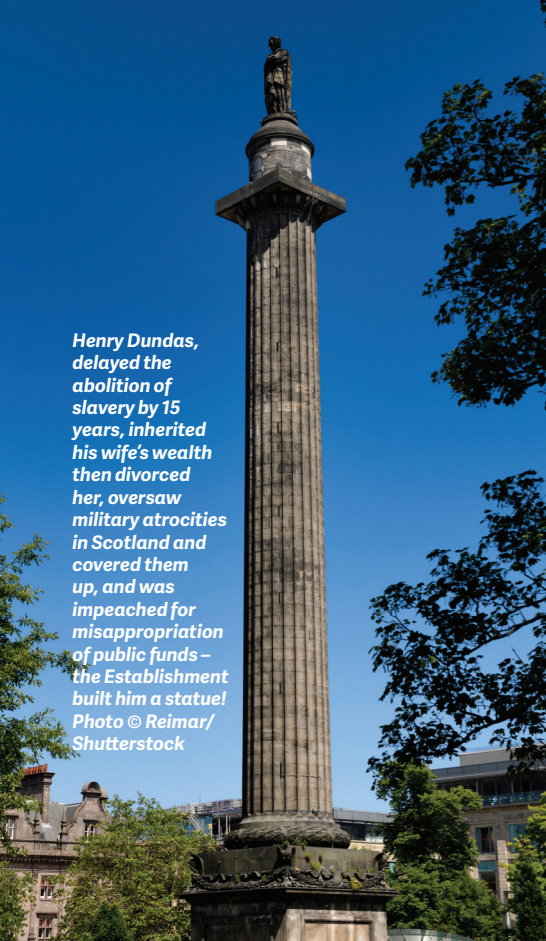
To him, as to the man by whom salvation has been wrought unto our people, we are bound both by his right and by his merits that our freedom may be still maintained, and by him, come what may, we mean to stand. Yet if he should give up what he has begun, seeking to make us or our kingdom subject to the King of England or the English, we should exert ourselves at once to drive him out as our enemy and a subverter of his own right and ours, and make some other man who was well able to defend us our King; for, as long as a hundred of us remain alive, never will we on any conditions be subjected to the lordship of the English. It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we are fighting, but for freedom alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself.

This is a statement of popular democracy and, as Ted Cowan confirms, contractual monarchy – we, the people, will support our King as long as he defends us and our rights to nationhood but, if he betrays us then we reserve the right to replace him with someone who will represent our wishes. Being of its time the Declaration

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speaks of and to monarchy, and is apparently composed by the nobility, but the sentiments are driven by the 'Community of the Realm of Scotland', representing the will of the ordinary people, and are enlightened enough to equally apply today in either a constitutional monarchy or a modern republican setting. And perhaps we'd already be in that republican setting if the other event referred to earlier, the 1820 Radical Rising, had been successful...

Kenny MacAskill has written several books on Scotland's radical history and his latest, *Radical Scotland*, traces the roots of the 1820 Rising, which culminated in a general strike in the west of Scotland, back to the 1790s. Kenny argues that ordinary Scottish people had been inspired by the French Revolution, describing the 1790s and the activities of radicals like Thomas Muir as being, "that time when the French Revolution ignited the working people of Scotland, who saw for the first time that there was another way, that it wasn't just a promised land in heaven, that there could be a different way here on earth". Muir, a Glasgow lawyer, played a leading role in the *Friends of the People*, a radical Scottish organisation which, among other things, supported universal male suffrage and the principles of the French Revolution. MacAskill points out, "The franchise in the 1790s in Scotland was available to 4,000 people. It was reckoned that half of them were fictitious, and this was a country that had a population approaching 2 million. This wasn't a

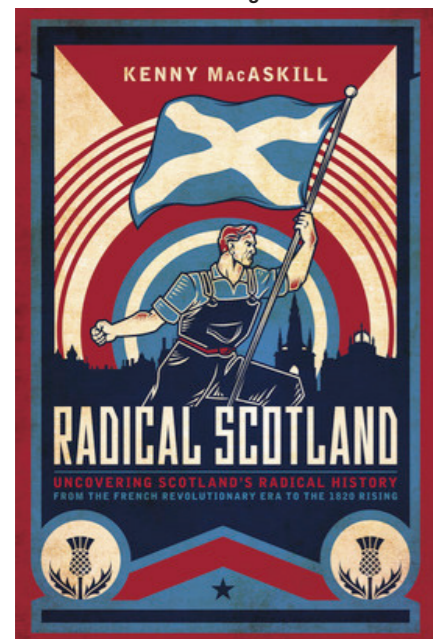


Henry Dundas, delayed the abolition of slavery by 15 years, inherited his wife's wealth then divorced her, oversaw military atrocities in Scotland and covered them up, and was impeached for misappropriation of public funds – the Establishment built him a statue! Photo © Reimar/Shutterstock

democracy, it was an oligarchy of landlords." Unsurprisingly the activities of the *Friends of the People* did not sit well with the Establishment – Muir was charged with sedition and sentenced to 14 years transportation to Australia.

Much unrest was happening in Scotland during this period and MacAskill relates a particular scandal of the time, in his own parliamentary constituency in 1797 – the Massacre of Tranent. "[This] was a military atrocity that became a state cover-up. It was anti-militia riots that took place all

Book by Kenny MacAskill
Photo © Biteback Publishing



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over Scotland in 1797 as people objected to conscription being brought in as the army required soldiers for the Napoleonic wars. They also required soldiers for, as they put it, "internal tranquillity", which was a euphemism for repressing the people who had been inspired by the French Revolution. 12 people were killed as the army, frankly, ran amok in my small constituency ... and the military commander in 1797 was the Earl of Liverpool who [later] became the Prime Minister and, ironically, ... was [the] Prime Minister at the time of the 1820 Rising who oversaw the hanging and then the beheading of Baird, Hardie and Wilson, some of our Scottish martyrs."

MacAskill is particularly scathing of the Establishment role played by Henry Dundas who, between 1794 and 1801, was the Secretary of State for War. "[Dundas] was a despotic figure, and his contribution to the British Empire was shameful in many ways given that he [had earlier] postponed action being taken against slavery. He basically ran Scotland as a despot. He was in control of something like 41 out of 43 Tory MPs at one stage in Scotland. He ran it as an oligarchy on behalf of the rich landlords. Sometimes I look at the names of the rich landlords that he represented, and I look at the House of Lords and the ownership of land in Scotland [today] and I wonder what's changed after all these years! ... Dundas and his nephew, the Lord Advocate Robert Dundas, were shameful. Going back to the Massacre of Tranent, you read the state archives, they knew it was a military atrocity, they covered it up. The only person to be prosecuted was, in fact, a magazine that ran a letter from one of the victim's widows or widower who told what had happened and they were sued for defamation by one of the military officers involved! They knew what had happened, they covered it up, and that was why they were building garrisons all across central Scotland because they knew that the people of Scotland didn't ... view France as the enemy. They [the Scots], in 1794 as with Thomas Muir, saw France as the opportunity for working people, ordinary people to control their own lives and destiny." Henry Dundas would later become, in 1806, the last person in the UK to be impeached for misappropriation of public funds, some £15 million (around £1.2 billion in today's money!), yet incredibly the Establishment still erected a prominent statue to his memory in Edinburgh...

There is definitely a thread running through these themes – the time of the Declaration, the concept of the Community of the Realm and the sovereignty of the people of Scotland in medieval times carries through into the radical mood of the people as exemplified by the *Friends of the People* and support for the French Revolution. It's a thread endorsed by the political commentator George Kerevan too, who says, "Scotland began socially in religious communities where people met every week and they discussed the bible, and they discussed the Old Testament where the Kings of Israel were held to account if they didn't do right by the people and by morality. I think that tradition is deeply imbued in Scottish history and even in modern days the revival of nationalism in Scotland and a radical left in Scotland actually began in the 1960s with the folk music movement, and people marching against nuclear missiles in the Clyde and recovering their old folk songs and putting new lyrics onto them. And that then morphed into opposition to the then Harold Wilson Labour Government, and that led to the occupation at Upper Clyde shipbuilders in opposition, in the 1970s, to the return of mass unemployment. All of this traditionally was from below and it's quite often the case that it's the politicians who have to react to the people rather than the other way around ... We just had a general election and in Scotland the left parties gained something like two thirds [actually 65%] of the popular vote. In the rest of Europe, the left-wing parties collectively in any election are lucky if they get up to 45%. So, there's a deep movement and what

has, I think, put Scotland ahead of the game of the rest of Europe is the combination of a revulsion at austerity combined with the desire for independence, for Scotland to take back its ancient right of self-determination ... When the two come together, when the Scots decide not only are they morally outraged but they want to do something about it by taking back control, to coin a phrase, and run their own affairs then politics becomes potent north of the border ... What always dominates in the end is this radical sense of fairness and justice, social justice, and that always triumphs in the end."

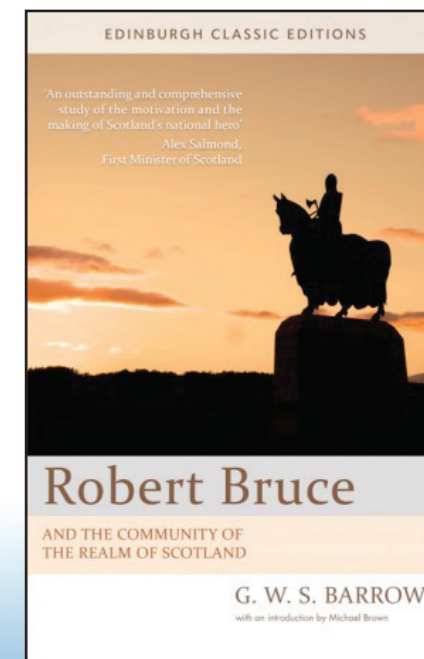
Kerevan also senses "a mood of frustration" in the country today, and draws comparison with the 1920s when radicals like James Maxton and John Wheatley were elected to Westminster "on the back of the great movement on Red Clydeside after the First World War". He explains that "they just didn't make speeches, they made a nuisance of themselves. They were outraged [at being] stuck in a chamber that was unwilling to do anything about mass unemployment and mass hunger. There's a feeling up here that now today in Scotland that maybe the kind of anger that the Red Clydesiders showed, we need that anger back again in the chambers both at Holyrood and Westminster ... The Scots, [even] right back to [the time of the Declaration of Arbroath] have been a people who asserted, from below, their right to be a nation. We're still fighting, and I think we'll go on fighting until that nationhood is re-established, hopefully soon".

So, it's clearly not just me – there is a thread running through Scotland's history. The Declaration of Arbroath may have been written by the ruling classes, but it was representative of the mood and wishes of the Scottish nation at the time – the people's consistent resistance to English aggression over the following centuries, before the enforced and unwanted Union, demonstrates that. The riots all across Scotland when the nation was eventually sold out by a parcel of rogues, bought and sold for English gold, then the various, ultimately unsuccessful, Jacobite Risings of 1715, 1719, 1745; support for the French Revolution leading to the Radical Rising in 1820; the Red Clydeside movement of the early 1900s – all manifestations that Scotland was not prepared to be assimilated as North Britain. Now, as we all eventually emerge blinking and squinting into the sunlight of a post-pandemic world, yet still mindful of the lies and incompetence of the British Establishment during the crisis, that radical sense of fairness, justice and popular sovereignty will be more important than ever. We should be angry at the way the British Nationalist, neo-liberal Establishment are enabling the gap between rich and poor to grow at an ever-increasing rate, at the normalisation of foodbanks and the creeping privatisation of essential services, at the tax-dodging cronyism, at the state-controlled media presenting government ideology unchallenged, and at everything else that stinks in Broken Brexit Britain. As a society, as the present-day Community of the Realm of Scotland, we simply have to take action to say resoundingly NO to austerity, NO to neo-liberalism, NO to extreme capitalism, NO to xenophobic isolation from our European and northern neighbours, NO to incompetent and self-serving politicians in a corrupt administration that was not elected by our nation's citizens – and YES to the restoration of our ancient right to self-determination. Scotland deserves better, and it always did. Stay safe, stay focused, stay angry – but stay positive. It really is time to finally declare.

iScot Magazine is grateful to The Alex Salmond Show for kind permission to reproduce quotes from Professor Ted Cowan, Kenny MacAskill and George Kerevan.



Massacre of Tranent statue. Photo © Kim Traynor (cc-by-sa/3.0)



Book by Geoffrey Barrow
Photo © Edinburgh University Press



Different countries, different directions – it's time for Scotland to declare!
Photo © GrAI/Shutterstock

Stay safe, stay focused, stay angry – but stay positive