‘Suppos þat þai be nocht bot fabill’: Medieval Film and Robert the Bruce[1]

Duncan Sneddon

Films set in the Middle Ages, by virtue of depicting a time before the movie camera, are necessarily imaginative recreations, rather than direct representations, of the past. Furthermore, they are made by and for people who look back on the medieval period through intervening centuries of change and of reflection on the past, in which ideologies from religious reform and restoration movements to nationalism, Romanticism and (post)modernism have made use of the past in creative, rhetorical, propagandistic and parodic ways. Thus, a contemporary filmmaker (or critic, actor, score composer, set designer and indeed viewer) may know and have experienced the Middle Ages not only through research and consulting primary sources (usually in translation) and visiting castles, cathedrals and other “medieval” locations, but also through art produced centuries after the Middle Ages ended, from statues and paintings to other medieval films. Contemporary expectations of medieval film – of how the Middle Ages looked and sounded – are largely shaped by our experiences of other medieval films, rather than by the “real” Middle Ages (which none of us have experienced) or by sober research and source criticism (which few people practice) (Sorlin 1980: 20). While historians may be irritated by anachronisms and other historical inaccuracies in films, audiences and critics are usually content with internal consistency and fidelity to a general sense of “decorum or fittingness” (Woods 2004: 47). An out of place accent disrupts the illusion of historical immersion (Woods cites Kevin Costner’s ‘casual surfer-boy inflection in *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves*’) but ‘a fifteenth-century bridle on a fourteenth-century horse’ does not (Woods 2004: 47). The films about Robert the Bruce considered in this discussion, *The Bruce* (1996), *Outlaw King* (2018) and *Robert the Bruce* (2019) do have their share of anachronisms (Robert jumps the historical gun considerably in telling Scott to help his mother peel potatoes in *Robert the Bruce*, as this chieftain o the tuber race was of course unknown in Europe in the early fourteenth century), but the mere hunting out of historical errors makes for limited and uninteresting criticism on its own. As such, where there are clear divergences from known history in these films, they are approached here as choices made with narrative or thematic goals in mind, rather than mere historiographical

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(or historiocinematic) blunders. As Salih notes, contemporary film criticism is less concerned with historical film as "authentic" representations of the past resembling academic historical consensus than it once was: "[e]xamining the points of contact between [academic and cinematic] modes of representing the past can be most informative, but their purposes and criteria for success are quite different." (Salih 2004: 20)

This leaves us looking for a theoretical model for approaching these films *qua* films rather than as more-or-less accurate reproductions of the past. One such is provided by Bettina Bildhauer in a thought-provoking study, *Filming the Middle Ages* (Bildhauer 2011), in which she develops a model for viewing medieval film as a coherent genre, with generic conventions beyond being set in the Middle Ages. Indeed, several of the films she considers as "medieval films" with respect to these conventions are not set in the medieval period at all, though they mostly have either fantasy or early modern settings which broadly resemble the medieval period (Aleksei German's *Hard to be a God* and Paul Wegener's *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam*) or connections to medieval figures in their plots and themes, (Ron Howard's *The Da Vinci Code* and Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *A Cantebury Tale*). She considers the following three traits to be characteristic of medieval film as a genre: that the Middle Ages were "allegedly less reliant on linear time, on writing and on individualism than modernity" (Bildhauer 2011: 11). These, she stresses, are grounded on modern perceptions or stereotypes about the medieval period, rather than necessarily being representative of the worldviews of the actual, historical Middle Ages. They are fundamental to how contemporary culture understands the Middle Ages to have been, and are thus fundamental to cinematic representation of the period (Buildhauer and Bernau 2009: 8 – 16). Accordingly, medieval films often feature non-linear narrative devices such as flashbacks and anachronisms, display a suspicion or critique of writing and are set in a world in which the individual subject is more or less subsumed into collective identities. We may compare this last point to the sixth of Umberto Eco's "Ten Little Middle Ages":

> 6. The Middle Ages of *national identities*, so powerful again during the last [i.e. 19th] century, when the medieval model was taken as a political utopia, a celebration of past grandeur, to be opposed to the miseries of national enslavement and foreign domination. (Eco 1998: 70)

For Eco, the present, or returning, Middle Ages we culturally experience and recreate now are often preoccupied with issues of national identity, something that we shall see is frequently the case in our three Robert the Bruce films: national independence, national leadership, the assumption of a national interest in which that leadership is not only entitled but obliged to act – these are constant concerns in films built around the story of a historical character who has been constructed over centuries as a national hero.

Bildhauer's model has been generally seen as a substantial contribution, especially in positioning medieval film as art which owes fidelity to generic conventions as well as (or perhaps more than) to a Rankean positivist attempt to depict the past

wie es eigentlich gewesen ist (Ganim 2012). While her book has been hailed for its systematically consistent approach and for her treatment of German film in particular (Lindlay 2014: 404, 406), it has also been criticised as a model for a cinematic genre for using characteristics which are widespread but hardly universal, Lindley arguing that "[f]ew of her criteria... are common enough to be definitive" and that the corpus of medieval-themed films is more diverse than a coherently-defined "medievalist cinema" allows, arguing instead for localised cinematic medievalisms of which the Weimar-inflected tradition identified by Bildhauer is only one (Lindlay 2014: 405 – 406). Chapman also doubts that a single theoretical framework can account adequately for the vast range of medieval films, arguing that Bildhauer's criteria relate well to the films studied in her book, but not necessarily to medieval film more generally, especially outwith the Weimar Expressionist tradition (Chapman 2012: 330 – 332, cf. Finke and Schichtman 2010: 39 - 40).

With such criticisms in mind, this study will consider the Bruce films in turn, first with observations about their historicity and presentation of their subject matter, and then with respect to Bildhauer's criteria. This study treats this small corpus of Bruce films – unquestionably medieval films with respect to setting – as a test for Bildhauer's model, while also finding the model a useful way to consider the filmmakers' choices in a wider generic context, rather than merely assessing them for how closely they approximate historians' understandings of the period and people they depict.

THE BRUCE, DIR. BOB CARRUTHERS AND DAVID MCWHINNIE (1996)

Filmed following the success of *Braveheart*, this tells the story of Robert the Bruce from just prior to his seizing the kingship of Scotland in 1306 to his victory at Bannockburn in 1314. The film depicts Bruce (Sandy Welch) as a consistent supporter and leader of the struggle against English domination, ignoring his and his family's earlier sometime affiliation with Edward I of England (played with typical bombast by Brian Blessed). He is presented as a straighforwardly patriotic hero, as a voiceover introducing the film intones:

> During the early years of the fourteenth century, the people of Scotland fought a series of long and bitter wars in the cause of freedom from the tyranny of Edward of England [...] One man had the courage to renew the fight. His name: Robert the Bruce, claimant to the vacant throne of Scotland. He alone was prepared to risk everything in a desperate last throw of the dice.

The war is presented straightforwardly as a national struggle for freedom, and while Bishop Wishart (Oliver Reed) chastises Bruce for thinking too much about Bruce the king and too little about the people of the Scottish kingdom, it is an unargued part of the narrative framing that the struggle against Edward is one of a national community, that the struggle requires the leadership of the right man (who unlike John Comyn is no puppet of Edward), that his victory by definition means justice and freedom for the nation as such.

With regard to plot and characterisation *The Bruce* makes a number of ahistorical choices.

Most notably, Bruce's murder of Comyn (Pavel Douglas) is recast to absolve Robert of guilt. Here, Comyn betrays and attempts to kill Bruce as the Scots army is ambushed by the English forces. Bruce survives the attempt and escapes, but his brother Nigel (Ross Dunsmore) is killed, having taken Robert's armour and been mistaken for him in a situation reminiscent of the death of Patrolcus in the *Iliad*. Bruce confronts Comyn in a church, both men – clad in armour – draw their dirks simultaneously and fight until Comyn is killed. The killing of an unarmed man on sacred ground, so awkward for the narrative of the heroic Bruce, is thus reframed as a fair fight in the immediate context, and as justified vengeance for Comyn's attempted murder of Bruce and the death of Nigel. Another ahistorical choice is the character of Bishop Wishart, whose role is increased from that of an ecclesiastical ally of Bruce to a former leader of the Knights Templar, a formidable warrior in his own right, whose personal involvement helps to turn the tide of the battle in the Scots' favour at Bannockburn, in which battle he is himself killed. These choices are ahistorical, but serve the film both in creating a straightforwardly heroic, idealised Bruce (comparable in this respect to beginning the film after, and never mentioning, Bruce's earlier affiliation with Edward), as well as providing Bruce with a foil in the form of Wishart, who can act as his moral guide and enable the film to invoke the mysterious associations in populuar culture of the Knights Templar as elite holy warriors. Similarly, the voiceover at the end of the film which states that Bruce "was to rule Scotland in peace and justice until his death in 1329" smooths over the continuation of war and power struggles such as the Soules Conspiracy (Penman 2014: 162 – 163, 224 – 225; Stevenson 2014: 55) in his post-Bannockburn reign, making Bannockburn a conclusive victory not merely in the consolidation of Bruce's kingship, but of wider moral good as well. The stakes – now achieved – are more clear-cut in a narrative sense.

The film is in English, with a few Scots words such as "wee", "bonnie" and "aye" used by the Scottish characters (Bruce at one point says "I ken them both", rather than the fully English "I know them both" or the fully Scots "I ken them baith"). The Scottishness of the Scots characters is thus indicated, but linguistically the film represents the English-dominant present rather than its Scots- and Gaelic-dominant medieval past, and also avoids ecclesiastical or diplomatic use of Latin. As Carol O'Sullivan notes, films in modern languages can make use of phrases or idiomatic constructions to suggest a medieval setting without needing to make the film consistently linguistically medieval (O'Sullivan 2009: 62 – 64). The same is true of phrases and constructions that suggest a Scottish setting.

With respect to Bildhauer's generic criteria, we can see that *The Bruce*'s narrative is not entirely bound by linear time. The film is bookended by scenes of Bruce's heart being taken on Crusade (which historically happened in Spain, but given the presence of the Great Pyramids in the background here appears to have been relocated to Egypt). Furthermore, there are two kinds of flashback used. When Robert learns of Nigel's death, he mourns and buries his brother, intercut with slow-motion footage of Nigel smiling and bantering from previous scenes in the film.

There is also one flashback to a time before the film's setting, as Wishart remembers his time on Crusade – pyramids again suggesting that this was in Egypt – using footage not previously seen by the viewer.

The film transcends the chronology of its historical setting in other ways. Some of these are trivial anachronisms, such as Dee Hepburn's perm or musicians playing modern Highland pipes. Others are more interesting, and relate to the construction of Robert the Bruce and the historical memory of the Wars of Independence in literature and popular culture. The story of Bruce being inspired to fight on by watching a spider spinning its web – unattested in contemporary sources, and recognised as legendary since the nineteenth century at least (Maxwell 1897: 14 – 16) – is relayed twice here. The first time follows Nigel's death, as Bruce hides in a cave from pursuing English soldiers. This scene (which also features flashbacks to footage of Comyn from earlier in the film) shows a spider spinning its web, not – as in the traditional story – repeatedly trying, failing, and eventually succeeding in spanning a gap in the cave. Thus, the scene relies on the audience's prior knowledge of the story, as there is no obvious connection otherwise between the spider and Bruce's current situation in the film.

The second time (using the same musical theme as the first) is in the buildup to the film's climax, when Bruce, having recaptured his castle, finds that his wife has been taken hostage. Wandering through the castle, he sees a spider spinning a web. The scene cuts back and forth between the spider and Bruce and Wishart discussing their situation and the spider's:

> Wishart: What do you see?
>
> Bruce: Oh, one of our subjects in as much trouble as we are. Trying to build his little home and live in peace. [addressing spider] You're just like me. Trying and failing.
>
> Wishart: This time you'll win.
>
> Bruce: Six times I've tried. Six times I've failed.
>
> Wishart: You'll succeed. Don't you sense it?
>
> Bruce: I can sense... the loss of my brother. The loss of my family. The loss of my hope.
>
> Wishart: He'll [i.e. the spider] try again. So should you.
>
> Bruce: If I fail, I'll lose everything.
>
> Wishart: We all do. Sometimes it's, it's better than to have no life at all.
>
> Bruce: I'm terrified of losing.
>
> Wishart: I know. But the tide must turn.

Wishart then informs Bruce that Edward I has died, and that the tide of the war is indeed turning. This scene uses the traditional story, but subverts it subtly. Bruce does not, as in the story and as earlier in the film, obvserve the spider and draw his own conclusions about persevering, rather his inner struggle and doubts are externalised in dialogue, and he requires Wishart, his advisor and spiritual guide, to interpret the spider's lesson and the current situation of the war for him (and thus for the audience).

There are also instances in which the historical memory of the Wars of Independence in later literature is invoked. One comes near the start of the film, with Edward I rousing his troops, saying

"I declare that Scotland is no longer a nation, but a province of England." This seems to refer to Burns' "Sic a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation", in which the narrator calls post-1707 Scotland "England's province" and declares that he would rather be dead, as Bruce and Wallace are, than endure this (Noble and Hogg 2003: 393 – 394). More strikingly, Bruce's speech at Bannockburn at the film's climax combines phrases from the Declaration of Arbroath (written in 1320, six years after Bannockburn) and another Burns poem, "Scots Wha Hae". The speech is quoted below, with the phrases – direct or slightly adapted quotations or allusions – from the Declaration of Arbroath in bold and those from Burns in italics:

> *Now is the day. Now is the hour.* **It is not for glory, or honour, or riches that we fight** this day**. We fight for freedom alone, which no man will willingly give up but with his life.** *See even now your enemy approaches. Proud Edward brings with him the chains of slavery.* Why? They have not lands here, or homes here. Yet they come here to make this nation their own. We alone can stop them! If there are those among you who do not have the will to fight, you may leave now with no dishonour. **But honest men who value freedom above all** else will carry the fight this day. And if we stay then we must be ready to *do or to die!* (cf. Noble and Hogg 2003: 466 – 468); Fergusson 1970: 9)

In weaving these later, well-known, texts into the speech, the film positions the significance of the battle – and of Bruce – as something not bound only to its immediate historical context, and also explicitly places the film as a representation of Bruce's leadership within a continuing tradition, alongside two prestigious, important texts in the construction of Scottish national identity. By putting words from later texts into Bruce's mouth (and bearing in mind that Burns' poem is of course also framed as Bruce's pre-battle speech), as with the recreation of the tale of the spider, *The Bruce* makes creative use of anachronism, making its central character congruent with the culturally constructed Bruce of subsequent centuries, rather than with the historical Robert I.

Bildhauer's second criterion, that of the critique of writing, "showing written documents to be dangerous instruments of power, often in the hands of self-interested elites... one of the genre's defining features is its sceptical stance towards writing" (Bildhauer 2011: 100 - 101) is also in evidence. Characters on both sides of the conflict show disdain for written texts. On the English side, Prince Edward's assistant Aubrey sarcastically asks de Bohun if he needs instructions for a mission written down, but most of the comment – all negative – on written texts comes from Scottish characters. Following defeat in the film's first battle, with Bruce presumed dead, the Scottish nobles are shown squabbling about their next move. They are shown jabbing at, but not reading, documents which contain agreements which are not outlined but which are clearly unable to maintain a peaceful order. As they bicker, one says:

> We do not concede on a piece of paper what we do not concede on a battlefield!... What we will not do is sign away on a piece of paper what is our right.

Wishart, too, dismisses the document, jabbing

at it and declaring it, "a recipe for villainy". He further disregards the authority of a written document at Bruce's coronation, announcing, "I have this day recieved the papal bull of excommunication against Robert. Let nobody doubt that as long as I am head of God's church in Scotland, it will remain unserved." In these cases written documents are presented as impediments to the just outcome (Bruce's kingship) and thus can and should be dismissed; whatever authority lies behind them can be challenged by force of arms or simply not acceded to. Power on the ground trumps power on the page, the former is where the hero can fight and win and has support, the latter is where his enemies seek to manipulate and marginalise him. The sword is mightier than the pen.

Bildhauer's third criterion, an anti-individualism that is "invoked in medieval film so often that it constitutes a genre characteristic" (Bildhauer 2011: 151), is also present in *The Bruce*, inasmuch as the film posits as the ideal solution to the tribulations besetting the Scots the complete identification of Bruce with the nation. His motivation throughout is proclaimed in the introductory voiceover, as we have seen. Later, when Wishart criticises Bruce for not considering the consequences of his murder of Comyn, it becomes apparent that Bruce must abandon personal interest and ambition just as Wishart must set aside his qualms about murder on sacred ground. Both must forget personal interests in the service of the undifferentiated, single interest of the Scottish people:

> Wishart: Perhaps you should think less about Bruce the king, more about Scotland the kingdom. Have you thought about the wrath of Edward? [...] I thank you for that, Bruce. The people of Scotland thank you.
>
> Bruce: I don't have to listen to this.
>
> Wishart: Oh yes you do. Your soul needs me. Your soul needs me very badly, I know. I'm the only one that can crown you king of Scotland.
>
> Bruce: You'd still do it?
>
> Wishart: There may be no other choice. I cannot condone what you have done, but for the sake of the country I will crown you king.

The unity of the Scottish nation behind Bruce's leadership is encapsulated during the climactic Battle of Bannockburn. With the fight in the balance, a group of women improvise a banner with the Scottish flag. They give it to two children, who in turn hand it to one of the Scottish soldiers. He brings it to Wishart who cries, "The nation fights! The whole nation must fight!" and leads the charge of the *sma fowk* that turns the battle in the Scots' favour, the women throwing stones and fighting with discarded weapons. Women, children, the young, the old, the warriors and the clergy all engage in the fight to secure Bruce's victory and thus, by the film's definition, justice, freedom and peace for the nation as such.

We can see that *The Bruce* demonstrates all three of Bildhauer's posited generic characteristics for medieval film, with the rejection of strict temporal linearity and chronological integrity, of the technology of writing and of the individual, autonomous subject all being key to how the film constructs the role, motivations and resonance of Bruce as an idealised patriotic hero incarnating the destiny of his nation.

OUTLAW KING, DIR. DAVID MACKENZIE (2018)

Outlaw King opens with the submission of Robert the Bruce (Chris Pine), John Comyn (Callan Mulvey) and the leading Scots nobility to Edward I (Stephen Dillane) in 1304, and follows Bruce's taking of the Scottish kingship and guerilla campaign to maintain it, culminating with the Battle of Loudoun Hill in 1307. It thus from the outset presents Bruce in a more complex light than does *The Bruce*. We see him initially as a reluctant pragmatist, a man who admires William Wallace but who recognises the futility of prolonging war in the face of Edward's obvious military superiority. In this sense *Outlaw King* displays a greater historical fidelity than *The Bruce*, it is willing to depict Robert and his family as political actors seeking to advance their own power in whatever way is practical. This also allows greater character development for Bruce himself, as seeing the popular anger against the English authorities after Wallace's execution provokes him to abandon the pragmatic submission which had been chafing him to pursue "justice" through a renewed campaign for national liberation.

Outlaw King does have its own departures from historicity, however, notably in its presentation of the final battle. The Battle of Loudoun Hill is the climax to the film, and is really a conflation of that historical battle with the Battle of Bannockburn. While following the outlines of the historical Battle of Loudoun Hill – including the Scots digging ditches to force the superior English cavalry into a narrow space where they can be contained and countered – certain features are more reminiscent of the later battle. Most clearly, the presence of Edward II as the leader of the defeated English army is something which has been transposed from Bannockburn to Loudoun Hill, as he was not present at Loudoun. The battle is presented as a decisive victory for Bruce, and is followed by a quick summary of subsequent events in the war via onscreen titles while Bruce is reunited with his wife Elizabeth (Florence Pugh). More subtly, the Scots forces marching to Loudoun are shown singing "Hey Tuttie Tatie", the tune for the Burns poem "Scots Wha Hae" and traditionally said to have been sung by the Scots before Bannockburn (Noble and Hogg 2003: 462). Bruce's victory at Loudoun Hill, his first victory in a pitched battle against the English forces, comes to stand for his more famous victory seven years later. The end of the battle sees a radical departure from the conclusion of Bannockburn, however, as Edward II is allowed to escape with no effort made to capture him. While the English king was hard-pressed in his flight from Bannockburn, as Bruce's forces knew that they could name their terms for his ransom, thus bringing an end to the war and recognition of Bruce's kingship, in *Outlaw King* he is allowed to crawl back to his own men through the mud and over the corpses, sobbing and retching. It is a deeply ahistorical conclusion, but one which in the film allows for the unpleasant antagonist to be utterly humiliated, and for Bruce to win a clear victory while being shown as magnanimous enough to allow Edward to escape rather than killing a defeated and helpless enemy. It also brings the film back to where it started, with

Edward's taunts during their duel at the film's beginning repaid as he is defeated by Bruce at its end.

The film is mostly in English, with a few Scots words used by the Scottish characters. The linguistic landscape of the film is more complex than that of *The Bruce*, with Latin prayers and liturgical chants, Bruce speaking in French to some freed French prisoners, and songs in Scots and Gaelic sung by characters in the film. Gaelic is notably missing from the film's dialogue, however, with Hebridean characters speaking in Highland-accented English (including to each other) and one of the Islay women singing, somewhat incongruously, the Scots song "The Blackbird". The recitation of Bruce's genealogy at his inauguration at Scone is also given in English and goes back only as far as David I, although in the only account we have of such a recitation from a Scottish royal inauguration, that of Alexander III in 1249, this was done in Gaelic and was traced back to the legendary Goídel Glas and Scota, daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh (Bannerman: 1989: 121).

Considering *Outlaw King* with respect to Bildhauer's model, we find that her first criterion, that of the use of non-linear narrative is not present. There are no flashbacks to earlier moments in the film or to events from before it started. There is an oblique reference to the famous late story about the spider, as there is a shot of a dewy web on a branch before the battle at Loudoun Hill. We do not see a spider spinning it, and neither is it clear that Bruce himself sees the web, but any viewer familiar with the story will recognise the significance of the image, even if it is not given the kind of extended, explicit treatment seen in *The Bruce*.

With respect to the suspicion that Bildhauer posits that medieval film displays towards writing, however, there are many examples in *Outlaw King*. She writes that "[medieval films] abound with written death sentences, intercepted and manipulated letters, forged contracts, treacherous invitations, eviction notices and arrest warrants, usually used unfairly by those in power." (Bildhauer 2011: 101). What we see in *Outlaw King* is very much in this line. Indeed, the written word is present almost exclusively in this film as an instrument of English domination. This is so in the bureaucratic apparatus of English authority, as Bruce is shown signing conscription orders for Aymer de Valence, the leader of the English administration in Scotland. Likewise, when Bruce goes to Berwick to bring taxes from his estates, he deposits the money with a clerk keeping written tax records. Both conscription and the burden of taxation had already been seen to be resented, and Bruce had been discomfited by seeing the impact of this imposition on the common people on his estates. Later, when he tries to convince the MacDougall chief to join him, he says his victory would mean "no more taxes to Edward, no more good men dying in wars not of their making" – two evils which relied on written records.

Writing is also used in the intimidating public display of English power. While in Berwick, Bruce sees the arm of the executed Wallace tied to the merkat cross for all to see, along with a sign reading (in English), "The Outlaw William Wallace".

It is seeing the immediate fury of the common people at this display that convinces Bruce of the need to renew the fight against Edward. Later, an identical inscription can be seen next to Wallace's decapitated head on London Bridge.

Renewing that fight means breaking oaths of fealty to Edward, oaths which Bruce acknowledges to his brothers were sworn on Edward's Bible. Here, it is the sacred written word that is instrumentalised for control, something Bruce can only counteract by having his own men swear on the same sacred word at his inauguration.

The attempt to break up the Bruce family by sundering Bruce's captured wife Elizabeth and daughter Marjorie from him also uses writing – Marjorie is taken by a nun "to our convent for religious training", which would presumably involve Latin literacy. Elizabeth is offered freedom by Prince Edward if she signs a document annulling her marriage, which she refuses to do when he inadvertedly reveals that Bruce is still at large.

In these instances writing is part of the apparatus of state power, as much an instrument of the domination of Scotland by England as the siege engines, warhorses and longbows which gave Edward victory at the start of the film. It is not so easily circumvented as in *The Bruce*. Though not part of the official structures of domination in the same way, the treacherous potential of the written word is revealed when Comyn and Bruce meet:

> Comyn: I confess I was surprised to read your letter. "I do urgently desire to discuss with you a matter most delicate." It's a bit cryptic, wouldn't you say?
>
> Bruce: It was intentional.
>
> Comyn: I see. And if I were to infer that your aim was in fact to reignite a rebellion...We already tried it. For eight bloody years, and we failed.
>
> [...]
>
> Comyn: You're not worthy of our country. And I swear I'll do whatever it takes to keep you from being its king. And once I explain to Edward the meaning of your furtive letter to me, he'll place a noose over your head and Scotland's crown upon mine.

Upon which Bruce, apparently in a panic, stabs Comyn and flees. While *Outlaw King* does not give the same narrative justification for the slaying of Comyn as *The Bruce* does – Comyn is unarmed, and has not tried to kill Bruce – his open declaration of his intention to betray Bruce clearly undercuts any sympathy for him, and relies explicitly on using Bruce's written words treacherously against him.

Indeed, the Scottish characters make little use of writing in *Outlaw King*. It seems significant in view of the repeated use of writing as an instrument of English domination that when the Scottish clergy debate what to do about Bruce's murder on holy ground, they do so sitting around a table on which there are packets of documents all unopened, a large book (? a Bible) which is closed, feather quills which lie idle. They can all read and write, of course, but while debating supporting Bruce's insurrection they do not do so. Likewise, a scene featuring the Scots nobles debating in a church has them standing by an altar on which are two large closed books. The

technology of the written word is not as actively present a part of the Scottish, or Bruce, side of the conflict as of the Comyn and English side. In this light it is not surprising that when depicting Bruce and his small force crossing a loch, that the film should omit what John Barbour's account shows him doing, keeping his men entertained by reading a chivalric romance to them:

> Swa with swymming and with rowyng
>
> Þai brocht þaim our land and all þar thing.
>
> Þe king þe quhile meryly
>
> Red to þaim þat war him by
>
> Romanys off worthi Ferambrace
>
> Þat worthily our-comyn was
>
> Throw þe rycht douchty Olywer...
>
> (McDiarmid and Stevenson 1980: Book III, ll. 433 – 439. *Ys* emended to þs)

Such use of the written word for leisure, for maintaining *esprit de corps*, would be out of keeping with how *Outlaw King*, in common with much medieval film, sees literacy as basically a tool of domination by the powerful.

Bildhauer's third criterion, that of the purportedly anti-individual nature of the medieval period is less in evidence in *Outlaw King* than in *The Bruce*, as while Bruce is shown to be inspired by a desire for justice for the people in general (and for Wallace's death in particular), and striving for the justice which they desire themselves, there is less of a straightforward identification of Bruce with the Scottish nation. *Outlaw King* is more willing than *The Bruce* to show divisions among the Scots, with reasons for not supporting Bruce (such as the MacDougall chief being a relative of the murdered Comyn) being shown as understandable. While these alienated factions do unite in time for the battle at Loudoun Hill, the film problematises the equation of Bruce's cause with Scottishness in a way that *The Bruce* does not. In *The Bruce*, Comyn is a willing English puppet from the beginning, while in *Outlaw King* he aspires to collaboration with Edward I only when he knows that Bruce is planning to renew a war which he sees as a hopeless waste of life. Indeed, in their meeting in the kirk, Comyn's argument that "the people are tired of war and suffering" and blaming the selfish ambition of the Bruces for the divisions that undermined the previous war effort are reasonable ones that are only undone by his sudden plan to betray Bruce to Edward.

In that same conversation, the following exchange takes place:

> Bruce: Wallace was tortured and slaughtered. The people aren't tired, they are desperate for justice.
>
> Comyn: Wallace got what he deserved. He wasn't a man, he was an idea. A dangerous and destructive idea, almost as dangerous as the idea you're proposing. You Bruces are all the same.

Here, Comyn denies Wallace a real identity as an individual, arguing metaphorically that his only real existence was as an idea in the minds of others, and likewise denies Bruce individuality by claiming that the Bruces "are all the same".

The anti-individual thesis, however, is complicated by James Douglas (Aaron Taylor-Johnson). His affiliation with Bruce and participation in his campaign is consistently

framed in terms of his struggle to assert his identity. His family's lands having been taken by Edward I's administration, he seeks to recover not only them, but his identity thereby, telling Bruce simply, "I want my name back." At the start of the film, he petitions Edward for his lands, which had been granted to Sir Richard de Clifford, and Edward sarcastically dismisses him, declaring, "Royal decree – I never want to hear the name Douglas again." James' subsequent use of "Douglas! Douglas!" as his war cry is thus an act of reclaiming the identity denied to him by Edward. Edward, despite his mockery, is obliged to hear the name again, when he hears a report of Douglas' success in retaking and then destroying his family's stronghold:

> Messenger: Sir Richard's castle in Scotland has also fallen. The man responsible may have been mad. He was heard screaming the same word over and over. "Douglas."

Finally, in the climactic battle at Loudoun Hill, Douglas himself confronts Clifford:

> Douglas: Clifford! You know who I am? [strikes Clifford to the ground] What's my fucking name?
>
> Clifford: Douglas!
>
> Douglas: [kills him] Yes!

In *Outlaw King*, Douglas' insistance on his name, his repeated assertion of an identity he forces others to recognise, does not sit easily within Bildhauer's generic schema for medieval film.

ROBERT THE BRUCE, DIR. RICHARD GRAY (2019)

The most recent film in our corpus saw Angus Macfadyen reprise the role of Robert the Bruce he had played in *Braveheart* in 1995. The film mostly takes place in the winter of 1313 – 1314, though it also includes scenes set in 1306 and at an unspecified point after the Battle of Bannockburn (1314). Most of the film follows Bruce during his lowest ebb. Having claimed the crown but failed to gain the kingdom, he dismisses the remnants of his army and heads into the wilderness alone. Attacked and wounded by traitors from his forces who seek the bounty on his head, he is taken in by a woman named Morag (Anna Hutchison) and her family in an isolated farm, and lives with them for some time, seeing the effect of the wars on the common people. Fighting alongside the family and their friends, he defeats a party of local clansmen allied with the Comyns and rejoins his men, who have continued their resistence in his absence, ready for him to lead them once more. The film closes with the following on-screen text:

> Through the sacrifice of thousands of Scottish families, Robert the Bruce united the nation by winning a decisive battle at Bannockburn. He drove the English army out of Scotland. After thirty years of fighting, England recognized Scotland's independence and Robert's uncontested position as King of Scots. Under his rule, Scotland flourished. As King, Robert the Bruce never owned a castle. Instead he made his home with the soldiers, and with the families of those he fought alongside.

This ahistorical, idealised portrait of Bruce's post-Bannockburn reign (which, as with *The Bruce*

erases such political disunity as demonstrated in the Soules Conspiracy) creates the paradoxical image of a demotic king. While entirely unmoored from historical reality, the notion of the king lodging with common folk and living the life of his subjects is a logical culmination of Bruce's character in the film. Comyn taunts him at the start of the film, "You want the one thing you cannot have. To be William Wallace. To be loved as he was," and the arc of Bruce's character throughout is of closer identification with the common people. Initially this led him to try to end the suffering of a prolonged and apparently unwinnable war, but the loyalty to him as king shown by Morag's family inspires him not only to renew the fight, but to rule as a different kind of king. In his speech to them before the climactic fight he tells them, "You've changed me. You've changed the king I'll be, and the land we'll live in." The concluding presentation of a king living among the people, not merely ruling over them, is congruent with the Bruce of the film as he becomes, if not the Bruce of history as he was.

This idealised portrait of Bruce as a hero truly of the nation aligns with the nationalist politics of the film more broadly. The strong identification of Bruce and his supporters with the Scottish nation as such will be discussed when we come to Bildhauer's criterion of the anti-individualism of medieval film, but two other points bear mention here. The first is that while the two other films discussed here, and especially *The Bruce*, show Comyn as an active or potential collaborator with the English authorities, only in *Robert the Bruce* is this linguistically marked. In the two other films, the actors playing Comyn spoke in Scottish-accented English, and were clearly part of the same linguistic and cultural community as Bruce himself, thus making his turning on Bruce an act of national betrayal. In *Robert the Bruce*, by contrast, Comyn's English affiliation is emphasised by having the actor, Jared Harris, speak in his native southern English dialect. As there is no mention of him being a Scottish noble, it appears that he is being portrayed as an English nobleman, and affiliation to him is clearly marked as affiliation to England. The second is outside the text of the film itself. Two years after the release of *Robert the Bruce*, Angus Macfadyen reprised the titular role for a third time, speaking in character as Bruce for a party political broadcast for the Alba Party, a minor Scottish nationalist party, during the campaign for the 2021 Scottish Parliamentary election (Alba Party 2021). While this broadcast was made after the film, it points to the nationalist political affiliations of Macfadyen (who co-wrote and produced *Robert the Bruce* as well as starring in it) and to his nationalist interpretation of the historical character of Robert the Bruce.

Regarding language, the film is in English. The use of an English accent for the character of Comyn has been noted already. The other characters speak in Scottish-accented English with occasional Scots words and phrases. However, many of the actors are not Scottish, and their attempts at speaking in Scottish accents are often very unconvincing (the American Chris Pine and Englishman Aaron Taylor-Johnson in *Outlaw King* did a much better job in this regard),

and to this Scot at any rate are distractingly bad[2]. A similar breaking of the illusion of medieval authenticity is brought about by characters bearing incongruous names like Carney, Ylfa and (for a young girl) Iver. Gaelic, Latin and French are entirely absent.

Of our three films, *Robert the Bruce* is the one that best exemplifies Bildhauer's criterion of the rejection of linear time as a generic characteristic of medieval film. As with the other films, this includes the use of the spider story as a familiar part of the Bruce legend as it has developed over the centuries, being part of the Bruce story viewers expect to see, even if it was not something that happened in his historical life. Here, it is given extended treatment. Bruce, wounded and delirious while hiding in a cave, sees the spider spinning its web. The film repeatedly cuts away to other scenes – his enemies trying to track him down, the domestic life of Morag's family – returning twice to Bruce watching the spider in silence. Finally, in the fourth scene featuring the spider, Bruce mutters, as he heaves himself to his feet and staggers out of the cave:

> I understand, I understand.
>
> The spider's web must be spun.
>
> Our soul's journey must be won.
>
> The king's delight must be undone.
>
> The song of justice must be sung.

Most of this verse is straightforward, but the line "The king's delight must be undone" is never explained. It could refer to Edward I, in which case his delight might be his domination of Scotland. Perhaps more likely, in view of Bruce's evolving understanding of himself as king over the course of the film, the king is himself, his delight is the selfish pursuit of power, and its undoing is governing for the good of the people. The spider legend is here developed from being a general lesson about perseverance in the face of adversity to being specifically about Bruce's situation at the time and the achievement of his political goals.

There are also what we might call artistic anachronisms. One such is a poem, attributed in the film to the late father of the family sheltering Bruce and recited by his daughter for Bruce:

> There's blood in the lochs
>
> there is blood in the house
>
> and our rocks
>
> and mountain peaks.
>
> And when we look up to our maker
>
> the sky burns
>
> brushed with the scarlet ink
>
> of those hearts we have loved.
>
> Do not lose hope.

2 One friend with whom I watched this film asked, "Why are they all talking like Groundskeeper Willie?" James Berardinelli's review (Berardinelli 2020) has the accents ranging "from passable to comically bad." In contrast Owen Gleiberman – himself an American – wrote that "the brogues are mostly fine. In fact, the two best brogues in the movie may be by American actors" (Gleiberman 2020). Thus, while viewers more familiar with Scottish speech may find – like Woods' assessment of Kevin Costner's accent in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (Woods 2004: 47) – that the illusion of immersion is compromised by the incongruous accents of the actors, others may have a different subjective standard for what they consider to be authentically Scottish. Whether this standard has been shaped more by Groundskeeper Willie than by listening to actual Scottish people is more than I can say, but if so it would provide a linguistic counterpart to the observation above that people know what feels fittingly authentic in a medieval film because of what they have seen in other medieval films.

> A bleeding sky will not succumb to the shadow that darkens this land.
>
> For it's just the sun rising above the dirty huts
>
> that is the dawn of a new day.

This is entirely alien in form and idiom to the Scottish poetry of the period, Scots, Gaelic or Latin. Its free verse form and sentiment belong to the present rather than the medieval past, an attempt to make this emotional expression – outlining key themes of the film – resonate with contemporary aesthetic sensibilities.

Similarly, the form of the sepulchral inscription at the end of film, "Scott MacFie/ 1303-1314/ Bannockburn", while clearly in strict historical terms out of place in the fourteenth century, is something viewers will recognise from modern memorials and war graves.

The use of flashbacks and intercutting with scenes taking place at different times is also a feature of this film. The film opens with the confrontation between Bruce and Comyn, presented as a story told by Morag to her children. It cuts back and forth between the events she describes (in 1306) and her telling the story in the "present" (1313). Enough time has elapsed for competing versions of the events to exist, and Scott disputes his mother's story, citing a version less flattering to Bruce which he has heard from his uncle, who is later revealed to be affiliated with the Comyns. She maintains that her brother in law may have his version but she has her own, and resumes the story, in which Comyn first attacks the unarmed Bruce. Her assertion of the validity of different versions of stories about historical events can be read as the film's own defence of its presentation of its idealised version of the Bruce in this fictionalised version of his story: other films may have their version of what happened, and professional historians may have theirs, but those are simply versions among many and this version has a right to exist and be told alongside them. Coming so early in the film, it seems like an upfront defence against critiques of the film's rather loose historicity.

She continues to tell the story, apparently resuming it the following day in the present of the film's main narrative, and we see the conclusion of the confrontation between Bruce and Comyn, a montage of Bruce's subsequent defeats, leaving off with the situation as it is when Bruce disbands his army, with Morag confident that he will raise a new one and resume the fight.

This is an example of the film moving between the past and the narrative present, but there are also instances of the blending of past and future together. When Morag goes to see a witch, they discuss a vision which the witch had told Morag about before Scott's birth (so before the time of the film) about his death in battle (not shown, but between the end of the main narrative and the film's epilogue). Similarly, as Bruce recovers in Morag's home, he dreams of his own past – his coronation, his wife, his former comrades – and also sees Scott, badly wounded, telling him that they have won and the English are gone, before reciting the spider verse. In these instances supernatural prophecy and feverish dreams allow for a temporal instability reaching beyond the film's main narrative.

Non-linear storytelling is also used as a

narrative shortcut, as the film also features a montage in which Bruce trains the young people in swordfighting and archery, intercut with scenes of music, dancing and domestic activities, over the course of which we see the young people improve as fighters and Bruce grow closer to the family. Montage is also used at the film's conclusion, as footage of Morag's life with Scott is intercut with her at his grave, her voiceover saying:

> And so that's our story, Scott. Your story. Your blood set us free at Bannockburn. I see you everywhere. You, in the morning mist. You, in all the wee beasties. You, in the river running free. You believed in laughter. You, in my dreams.

Opening that final monologue with "And so that's our story" ties the film's ending to its beginning, as though she is picking up from her previous storytelling, simply finishing off the story she had started telling Scott when he was alive, and continued telling him after his death.

Finally, we have another kind of intercutting at the end of Bruce's speech before the final fight. As he finishes the speech asking "Is that not worth fighting for?", one by one each member of the household replies "Aye", followed by a shot of each character in turn getting into position for the coming fight, following their affirmation with action as they prepare to put into practice what they have resolved to do.

In contrast to this extensive range of ways in which *Robert the Bruce* embraces non-linear narrative, writing is far less present in this film than in the two others. In one instance, during the montage of Bruce's defeats, we see an English soldier reading a proclamation of a reward for Bruce's capture. This aligns with Bildhauer's observation that writing is commonly shown in medieval film as a tool of oppression (Bildhauer 2011: 101), and we can see this being put into practice as traitors in Bruce's dismissed army are motivated by the reward to try to kill the king, leading to his being taken in by Morag.

The other instance is less straightforward in its relationship to Bildhauer's argument. As in *Outlaw King*, the contents of a letter are key to how Bruce's meeting with Comyn develops, but here from the opposite direction. In *Robert the Bruce*, Bruce intercepts a letter from Comyn to his men detailing plans to ambush Bruce, alerting Bruce to Comyn's treachery. This is an intercepted letter, which Bildhauer lists among the treacherous and manipulated documents which demonstrate medieval film's genre characteristic of the distrust of writing (Bildhauer 2011: 101), but in this case it is the film's protagonist who benefits. Writing is used as a tool for treachery and the subjegation of Scotland, but here it is writing's key weakness, that it can be read by anyone who finds it, which serves the protagonist – that is, which serves what the film positions as justice.

If the relationship of writing in *Robert the Bruce* to its role in Bildhauer's thesis is ambivalent, her argument about the anti-individuality of medieval film is much more clearly applicable. The loss of individual identity and merging of the individual character with the larger community, generally of the nation in this case, is present throughout this film.

The first instance comes at the beginning, at the meeting between Bruce and Comyn. Comyn

taunts Bruce:

> You want the one thing you cannot have. To be William Wallace. To be loved as he was. To be brave like him. Be free, like him. What a wretched wish that is for you to have. How it must coil in your gut! Is that what you want now? To throw yourself upon my sword and die today? To be, for a moment, a hollow, empty echo of the man William Wallace was?

Comyn mocks Bruce for insecurity in his own individual identity, wishing to have the genuine popular esteem of – and even to be – the now-dead Wallace. Here we see the prospect of one individual identity blending into another, but the process of lost individual identity does not end there. One of the men who sets out to betray Bruce later remarks, "Scotland died with the Wallace, if you ask me." In this framing, identification with Wallace is the same thing as identification with the nation as such, so Wallace himself loses his individual personhood and becomes the incarnate – and failed – nation. Similarly to Comyn's remark in *Outlaw King* that Wallace "wasn't a man, he was an idea", the dead freedom fighter and the cause of freedom he espoused merge.

There are instances in *Robert the Bruce* in which the individual is subordinated to their familial or clan affiliation. When the soldiers out to betray Bruce encounter Morag's family, the young Scott tells them of how Bruce had praised his late father's bravery. One of them rebukes him, saying, "We're with the Comyn clan, lad, as should you be. Your lords have pledged themselves to him." The preferences of individuals are unimportant, they are to be subordinated to affiliations decided on their behalf by their unaccountable leaders. Morag's family rejects this framing, and they later shelter and fight for Bruce against their own clansmen, but the authority of clan affiliations is the basic assumption, the norm against which they rebel in aligning themselves to a national loyalty through the person of the king.

The explicit identification of individuals with the nation, expressed in embodied terms, is made by Bruce in his speech to Morag's family as they await attack at the climax of the film:

> You've changed me. You've changed the king I'll be, and the land we'll live in. Now if it comes to a fight, some of us might not see the sunset, but that is the true nature of war. But know this, I see now in your eyes what Scotland can be. You've felt her fear and her rage, you've heard the roar of her soul. You've wept her tears and you've shed her blood and you have touched the cold, cruel skin of her death. We have known Scotland clutched in the grip of a mighty hand, and now we'll set her free. Is that not worth fighting for?

The individuals are here explicitly identified with the nation, their being merged into its being, their own emotions, shed tears, wounds and grief identified with those of the nation as such, and which are made the basis for action, for unity around a single political goal. This identification is strengthened by the fact that the secondary protagonist is after all named Scott. The character who initially resents but comes to support and ultimately die for Bruce and the nation is surely not so named by accident. Scott is the stand-in for the Scot, any Scot, his identity merged with and standing for that of the nation.

In conclusion, we can see that Bildhauer's

generic criteria for medieval film broadly hold up as applicable to this small corpus of films about Robert the Bruce. While not all of her posited characteristics of medieval film as a coherent object of study are equally present in all of the films, and without making any claims about medieval film *per se* beyond the scope of this discussion, her model is a useful one for comparing films within a corpus beyond the banal (they all feature bearded men with swords riding around on horses) or the merely pedantic (ranking them against each other by their fidelity to the historical record, and treating them as dramatic versions of what should really be "objective" documentaries). While the criticisms of her model cited above – chiefly that her criteria are common, but not sufficiently universal to be considered normative – are substantial and serious, I hope that the present study has shown it to be helpful for establishing points of comparison and for suggesting useful starting points for more interesting and substantial criticism of medieval film. Adopting a model such as Bildhauer's enables us to engage more usefully with filmmakers' choices about such things as narrative, characterisation, language, props, editing, costume, diagetic and non-diagetic music, and allusions to literary or other cultural artefacts outwith the film itself. It allows us to understand these as narrative and aesthetic choices, and assess them according to a logic of (purported) generic conventions, and being able to do so across a corpus of films enables us to interrogate those conventions *qua* genre conventions as well. In moving away from the more restrictive approach of assessing medieval films primarily by their fidelity to the historical record – though this is still a valuable element of medieval film criticism – the model enables better criticism of them as works of art.

APPENDIX: *EPISODE DES GUERRES DE L'INDEPENDENCE ECOSSAISE 1314*, DIR. ROMAIN COOLUS (1911)

The earliest film about Robert the Bruce known to me is this French production from the silent era, directed by Romain Coolus and starring Paul Capellani as Bruce. Unfortunately, just a minute and a half of this film is known to survive, and in its present fragmentary state it is not possible to undertake a proper analysis of the film with respect to Bildhauer's criteria. A copy of the surviving material taken from a Dutch release of the film, and with intertitles in Dutch, is the only known extant portion of the film, and a copy of this is held at the National Library of Scotland.[3] However, from what has been preserved in the film and from a short contemporary French synopsis cited in the NLS's catalogue (NLS, Reference number 4416) at least one and possibly two of her generic characteristics of medieval film can be identified.

The one we can actually see from the surviving footage is the suspicion of the written word because of its vulnerability to interception and manipulation. In the extant fragment, Bruce writes a letter to his queen, telling her to keep her courage and that he is gathering his forces to continue his war. He uses his dog as a messenger, sending it to the castle where Elizabeth is. She is

3 I am grateful to the staff of the NLS for facilitating my viewing of this film fragment.

finely dressed and does not appear to be a captive, but she is in the power of John of Lorne and his men, and while she initially greets the dog and the letter it bears with delight, she is interrupted by a soldier who summons his companions and their leader (presumably John of Lorne) leashes the dog, which he will use to track down Bruce.

The synopsis, translated in the NLS catalogue, includes the following:

> Robert Bruce, who has managed to flee to his rural refuge but is completely deserted and desperate, witnesses Comyn the Red in a hallucination and putting aside his resentment in order to save the common cause decides to do battle with Comyn [? recte: Edward] once again.

As Comyn has seemingly already been killed at this point, his appearance to Bruce in a hallucination would in a literal sense be out of linear time, but little more than that can be said in the absence of the footage itself.

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