

# ROBERT THE BRUCE

SCULPTURE BY BENJAMIN VICTOR



The many virtues of the heroic Robert Bruce are revived in my sculpture: courage and patience, strength and dignity, foresight and resolve. I envision him on the battlefield, mounted on horseback in the full regalia of war. He is on the front line, rousing the united Scottish army with words full of fate and fire. As his horse walks alongside the men, he speaks

of liberation under the restored Scottish crown. He invokes the will of God, the memory of Scottish heroes, and the protection of Scottish saints. It is a moment of leadership and destiny. His speech concludes, and, with a grave demeanour and eyes burning with justice and wrath, he turns and readies his axe. The Highland wind descends like a blessing, rippling through the barding on the horse: these are the winds of change; this is the turn toward a new era of Scottish independence.

My portrait of Robert Bruce emphasizes action and vitality. He is a warrior in motion, an elemental force of kingliness and muscular power. He is both iconic and intensely real. As an idealized figure, this statue is a worthy representation of his colossal deeds and his mythic status in the national pantheon. At the same time, I have spared no detail in the reconstruction of historical elements and in the expression of human features.



Although it is sometimes fashionable in figure sculpture to leave a surface of unfinished clay, Robert Bruce deserves the full regalia of sculptural detail. The armour replicates features seen in effigies of the great king and his contemporaries. The chain mail, for example, is not an etched surface, but in fact thousands of rings meticulously

joined together. The crown, the pieces of armour, and the weaponry are all individually constructed, a feature that both magnifies the realism of the whole and creates a more buoyant and lifelike figure. Details like the notches in the shield are testament to the many battles fought by the warrior-king.<sup>1</sup>



Both rider and horse were sculpted from the bones up to the musculature, flesh, armour, and heraldic splendour. The horse is a beast worthy of a king and an example of the renowned breeding stock of Scotland. The lion rampant is emblazoned on shield and armour with boldness befitting the true King of Scots: there can be no question of his divinely ordained right to bear the Royal Standard. At full height, the realistic detail and heroic bearing would cause the viewer would stand in awe and even dread.

The pose and the lines of the wind-blown barding create a system of curves that unifies the piece and generates movement and tension from every vantage point. The varying textures and lines excite the eye as visual counterparts of the vigour and vibrancy of the subject. Facing Robert, we are caught in his grim and penetrating gaze, transfixed before the imminent onslaught. The powerful neck of the horse twists as he is led into combat. The violent start and

1. In the words of Colm McNamee, Robert Bruce was the 'antithesis of an armchair general who sends others into dangers which he does not himself share, Bruce led from the front, risking everything in pursuit of his goal. His skull, exhumed five hundred years after his death, still bears the marks of the serious head injuries he sustained.' *Robert the Bruce: Our Most Valiant Prince, King and Lord* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2006), p. 2.





the brisk winds cause the heavy double-layered fabric to play, as though it were brought to life by the excitement of the battle.

Looking up at the statue from the front, a single line shoots forth from the hind legs of the horse, alongside

the body and axe of Robert, and up the powerful neck of the horse. Viewed from behind, the twisting anatomy harmonizes the wind-blown tail and barding in a single energetic curve. From every angle, diagonal and curving lines transmit the supernatural force of Robert Bruce and his campaign.

The sculpture offers a bold and innovative representation of Robert Bruce, yet it also draws on classical models of equestrian sculpture. Like the locus classicus of such work, the Roman monument of Marcus Aurelius, it presents a larger-than-life image of a godlike leader. The equestrian statue of Bartolomeo Colleoni by Andrea del Verrocchio is the closest Renaissance counterpart, especially in the daring contrapposto pose of the rider, warlike countenance, and sheer vitality. Among statues of Robert Bruce, my sculpture contrasts and complements the great monument at Bannockburn by Pilkington Jackson. Whereas Pilkington has created a work that references medieval figure sculpture in the static pose, abstracted lines, and embossed detail, I have sought to emphasize the dynamic qualities of the subject, to show the vitality of a great hero among men.

I have positioned my sculpture carefully within classical and modern global contexts, because I believe that the fight for Scottish independence was a milestone in world history. It was for good reason that medieval writers compared Robert Bruce to biblical and classical heroes, among them Joshua and Aeneas: the king not only claimed Scotland for the Scots, he asserted the sovereignty of Scotland on the world stage.<sup>2</sup> John of Fordun, writing around 1363, went as far as to state: 'But God in His mercy, as is the wont of his fatherly goodness, had compassions . . . ; So He raised up a saviour and champion unto them—one of their own fellows to wit, named Robert Bruce. The man . . . putting forth his hand unto force, underwent the countless and unbearable toils of the heat of the day . . . for the sake of freeing his brethren.'<sup>3</sup>

2. 'His adventures were a match for any of them. . . . In the history of the British Isles, Robert I stands for more than just a brief Scottish hegemony: he represents one of history's great "What ifs?", an alternative path of development, an alternative to English domination not just for Scotland, but for Ireland and Wales as well.' Ibid., pp. 3-4.  
3. Quoted and translated by McNamee in *ibid.*, pp. 6-7.







Robert Bruce also stands as a global model for individual behaviour. Whether seen through the lens of legend (such as the tale of the king and the spider-web) or milled from the grist of modern historiography, 'his life serves to illustrate that resolute action, determination and perseverance, even in the face of overwhelming odds, can

reverse great injustice'.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the many motives and elements of chance in his biography, Robert Bruce remains a shining example of fortitude in the service of justice.

Robert Bruce is especially inspiring to me as an American artist. It was a similar moment of historical culmination when the American colonies declared their independence from English rule. In such times, and for oppressed peoples all over the world, Robert Bruce and his country are models of national self-determination. Then as now, Scotland is the quintessence of the independent nation state.<sup>5</sup> The regional, cultural, and racial diversity of thirteenth-century Scotland make it all the more pertinent as an example of nationhood for our time.<sup>6</sup> I

have sought to capture this symbolic magnanimity in my sculpture. The grandeur of the equestrian figure is, for me, a visual translation of the great lines of John Barbour: 'Ah! Freedom is a noble thing, / Freedom makes a man content, / Freedom all solace



4. Ibid., 293–294.

5. G. W. S. Barrow famously expounds on the 'the community of the realm', an ancient term denoting 'a sense of political nationhood' in Scotland. According to Barrow, it is 'employed over and over again in a great variety of contexts, yet almost always with the same meaning'. G. W. S. Barrow, *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland*, 4th ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 417.

6. In reference to the 'sense of political nationhood' captured by the phrase 'the community of the realm', Barrow writes, 'This does not seem to have been a monopoly of any distinctive element in Scotland, whether regional, cultural or racial. In truth, thirteenth-century Scotland formed a society too complex to allow us to project into it sharp division of race and culture possibly appropriate to the country a thousand years earlier'. Ibid., pp. 417–418. Elsewhere, Barrow reminds us that it was recognized in the Middle Ages, and it remains true, that 'no other kingdom of Europe could claim with equal conviction to be governed by a royal house enjoying an unbroken existence of seven centuries.' See *Robert the Bruce and the Scottish Identity* (Edinburgh: Saltire Society, 1984), p. 3.

to man gives, / He lives at ease that freely lives'.<sup>7</sup> These lines may stir the hearts of human beings everywhere and at all times; so would I hope that universal values of courage and honour inspire all who encounter my sculpture of Robert Bruce.

In recent decades, Scottish historians have taken increasing interest in separating fact from fiction in the history of Robert Bruce, yet the spate of documentary studies has not diminished his greatness, his heroic status. Far from it: the humanizing detail, the complications of character that have materialized in the documentary sources—these make the man all the more fascinating, admirable, and daunting.<sup>8</sup> My Robert Bruce stands at this juncture of modern clarity and post-modern re-enchantment. His image is real in every detail, and it is also reverentially idealistic. It is a statue for our time, an age of science and wonderment, when even the most scrupulous scholar can look without flinching at the intermingling of legend and history and say, 'Aye, he was a man—and yet more like a god than any we have known'.

Colm McNamee epitomizes this duality in his stirring introduction to the life of Robert Bruce, another testament to the range of the subject:

How many times, and in how many ways can a man be a hero? For Robert Bruce was at once a valiant knight and a great lord, a clever politician, ... a fugitive, and inspirational charismatic guerrilla chief, a military genius, a wise statesman, a self-declared hero and finally, in the eyes of Scots through the ages, the saviour of a nation. Tricks, ruses and hair-raising escapes; high politics, grim sieges and bloody battles; assassination plots; single combat to the death, Bruce lived it all. Hollywood could not begin to produce such script! ... He was a colossus among men, and even now Scotland lives deep in his shadow.<sup>9</sup>

No generation will ever grasp Robert Bruce completely; the man and the events he precipitated will continue to burn and grow in the collective memory. As a vessel of the

7. 'A, fredome is a noble thing, / Fredome mays man to haiff liking, / Fredome all solace to man giffis, / He levys at es yat frely levys.' John Barbour, edited and translated by Matthew P. McDiarmid and James A. C. Stevenson, *Barbour's Bruce: A fredome is a noble thing!* (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1980), pp. 9–10 (lines 225–228).

8. As Barrow says, 'It is easy to strip away the legend surrounding some notable figure from the distant past, but clearing away the legend does not necessarily reveal the man.' *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland*, p. 403.

9. Robert the Bruce: Our Most Valiant Prince, King and Lord, pp. 2–3.



Scottish national memory, I would be proudly humbled to pay tribute to the greatest king, to build a monument true to the past, true to our times, and true to future generations.

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