

Imagining and Re-imagining Scottish Independence through the Bannockburn Lens.

Amy Clarke (University of Queensland)

A review of

Robert Crawford, *Bannockburns: Scottish Independence and Literary Imagination, 1314-2014*.

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Robert Crawford's *Bannockburns: Scottish Independence and Literary Imagination, 1314-2014* offers a timely perspective on the Scottish independence debate, as seen through the lens of various literary portrayals of the battle of Bannockburn (23-24 June, 1314). Bannockburn has just passed its 700th anniversary, and Scotland is soon to meet another historical milestone with the independence referendum set for 18 September 2014. It is clear that *Bannockburns* was written with both of these events in mind, and at times Crawford's prose has an anticipatory edge, almost as if the author was holding his breath in expectation of the next, as yet unwritten, chapter in Scotland's independence narrative. Crawford acknowledges that *Bannockburns* is intended for general consumption and that the tone and content were kept intentionally simplistic in order to be accessible to more than one audience. With this in mind, as well as the fortuitous date of release, it is tempting to dismiss *Bannockburns* as a persuasive, yet undeniably politicised, opportunist exercise. Viewed from another angle, however, the text is itself a contribution to the very narrative it sets out to survey, and Crawford is the latest in a long line of chroniclers, poets, playwrights, novelists and historians to use Bannockburn as a vehicle to navigate the contemporary politics of their own times.

Bannockburns follows a vaguely chronological order, opening with medieval and early modern accounts of the battle, and proceeding through to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to conclude with the 2013 inscription of a Kathleen Jamie poem around the rotunda beam at Bannockburn battlefield. At times the narrative wanders off the path and out of sight of the fourteenth-century battle, concerning itself instead with the pursuit of literary expressions of Scottish independence in its various guises. This is particularly true of chapter four, which charts the works of 'difficult modern Scots' such as Hugh MacDiarmid, the contributions of Hamish Henderson and the Scottish folk revival, and the impact of publications such as *The Modern Scot* magazine (helmed by James H. Whyte), amongst other things. Scottish nationalism in the early twentieth century was eccentric, Crawford notes, and while this period saw the rise of organised nationalist politics, it also saw the emergence of a 'Modernist literary spikiness' (p. 133) that captured the Scottish independence movement in abstract, avant-garde forms. Far more overt in content and intention are the medieval and early modern accounts, which Crawford considers in chapter one and two, and it is here that readers expecting a

straight-forward assessment of literary portrayals of Bannockburn will find satisfaction.

There are several overarching themes interspersed throughout *Bannockburns*, and Crawford considers issues of gender and religion alongside that of politics and literary genre. One of the most interesting of these analytical threads is Crawford's observation that literary accounts of Bannockburn have consistently been informed by the contemporary issues of the day. The Battle of Flodden (1513) occurred almost two hundred years after Bannockburn and it resulted in a dramatically different outcome, for instance, and Crawford ponders how this event might have impacted the reception of Blind Hary's *Wallace* (1470s) or the composition of John Mair's *Historia majoris Britanniae tam Angliae quam Scotiae* (1521). This thread emerges again with events such as the unification of the crowns under James VI and I in 1603 and the union of the parliaments in 1707; and Crawford notes that the portrayal of Bannockburn began to shift towards the tastes of an increasingly 'British' audience. The influence of Jacobitism on the Bannockburn narrative is observed through eighteenth-century works of men such as Robert Fergusson, William Hamilton and, of course, Robert Burns, whom Crawford suggests was careful in the concealment of the more 'dangerous' elements of his patriotic tendencies. Burns was also influenced by contemporary events outside Scotland's borders, Crawford notes, such as the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 and the French Revolution, and both of these events may well have contributed to Burns' well-known Bannockburn composition *Scots Wha Hae* (alternatively *Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn*) of 1793. Crawford's text demonstrates the frequency with which Bannockburn is repurposed for modern audiences and events, and in doing so it invites the reader to question whether the battle's real victory is one that is realised with every subsequent retelling and new audience.

One of the strengths of *Bannockburns* is its consideration of the position of poets and authors within the broader discourse on Scottish independence, and it is this theme above all others that unites Crawford's text. This is an interesting question, and one that perhaps Crawford is not best placed to answer given his closeness to the subject himself. Chapter five, which incorporates figures such as Edwin Morgan, Gregory Burke, James Robertson and Liz Lochhead, places this issue in its contemporary context. How might works such as Lochhead's *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (1987) and Morgan's *Lines for Wallace* (2004) contribute to this debate, and what role, if any, do these writers play in generating discussion? Crawford does not offer any definitive answer, though in the final pages of the chapter he notes that *Bannockburns* was not written with the intention of insisting 'that all a country's writers should engage with one specific political issue', but instead that 'over the centuries authors from Scotland and beyond have engaged with Scottish independence [...and] designedly or not, all have played a part in constructing a resilient and adaptable "political imaginary"' (p. 232). *Bannockburns* walks a fine line between these two aims, and at times the distinction becomes clouded, perhaps, in part, because the narrative terminates

while several contributing factors remain unclear (the battle's 700th anniversary had not occurred when the book was published, the new Bannockburn Battlefield Visitor Centre had not yet opened, and the independence referendum not yet been held). *Bannockburns* achieves Crawford's aim of being accessible, and it certainly draws attention to the intersections between Scottish nationalism, literary works and politics. In publishing *Bannockburns* before the 2014 referendum rather than after, however, Crawford has inevitably contributed to the same landscape of literary imaginings that his book set out to survey. If the plural 'Bannockburns' of the book's title are any indication, it is possible Crawford foresaw this outcome and the impossibility of his position in the midst of the debate, and proceeded in the expectation that there will be future versions of the Bannockburn story in addition to his own.