

The Brooch of Lorn

by *Ronnie Black*

The editor has invited me to tell another of the stories that are being transcribed and translated from the original Gaelic in the Dewar MSS. These historical tales were collected by an Arrochar man called John Dewar in the 1860s. This time I've picked the story of the Brooch of Lorn, partly because it's a good one, partly because it's important, because we can use it for assessing the historical value of the collection.

The brooch belonged, it's said, to Robert Bruce, about half a dozen biographies of whom have appeared in the past few decades. These all lean heavily on John Barbour's epic poem in Scots, *The Bruce*, which has existed in manuscript since about 1380, and in print since 1571. Barbour, an Aberdeen man, didn't actually know the great king, but he was born shortly after his death, and seems to have spoken to people who'd met him. It isn't hard to get stories about your grandfather's generation. But for all that, it's folklore, it's poetry, and it's propaganda for the reigning Stewart dynasty, so there will be exaggerations and poetic licence to it.

What does Barbour say about the brooch? Nothing, actually! But he describes the scuffle that resulted in Bruce losing it, according to Argyllshire tradition. So our focus is the scuffle.

Following the battle of Dail Righ near Tyndrum in summer 1306, at which Bruce was defeated by MacDougall of Lorn, Barbour tells us that Bruce is riding along when he's set upon by two men called Makyne Drosser (clearly Mac an Dorsair, 'the Doorman's Son') and an accomplice. It happens in an unnamed place, on a path between a loch and a steep hillside, so narrow that Bruce can't turn his horse. One of them seizes his bridle, but Bruce strikes him 'sic a dynt / That arme and schuldyr flaw him fra'.

The second man gets his hand in between Bruce's foot and his stirrup, so Bruce presses down hard into his horse's flanks with his stirrups, trapping the hand and making his horse leap forward. Meanwhile the third man jumps from the brae above and lands behind him on the horse, but before he can get his balance Bruce twists around, throws him flat on the ground and 'with the swerd sic dynt hym gave / That he the heid till the harnys clave', that is, he split his skull to the brains. Finally he deals with the man whom he's been dragging along by his trapped hand – he strikes him and kills him at the first blow. All this he does with the sword, apparently.

It's good Hollywood stuff, all action – our hero dispatches three ferocious assailants, unaided. There isn't much detail to back it up. Typical Highland scenery, no place-names, but one personal name, Mac an Dorsair, which suggests someone associated with a castle, like the Scots surname Durward ('Door Ward'). MacDougall's castle of Dunstaffnage, presumably.



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Now let's see what Dewar has to say. In fact he tells the story three times. Here's a full translation of the first version. After the battle: "Bruce's forces were scattered far and wide. One of MacDougall's men seized him by the cloak, and Bruce killed him. The dead man didn't release his grip on the cloak, however, and in order to get rid of him, Bruce had to unclasp his brooch and sacrifice both the brooch and the cloak, for three more men were now upon him. One of them grasped the reins of his horse, another grabbed his foot, and the third jumped up behind him on the back of the horse he was riding. Bruce was so skilful with the battle-axe that he wounded all three, but he had to abandon his horse and flee on foot."

There are some differences: the extra man, the brooch, the cloak, the battle-axe. And Barbour's three men are wounded, not killed. But essentially it's Barbour's story. The second version is longer: "Bruce and a small number of his men fled towards Glenfalloch, chased by MacNab's men. When they'd reached a place called Allt nan Saor ('the Carpenters' Burn'), about a mile from where the battle had been fought, a weaver and his two sons were standing at their own door watching the pursuit. MacNab called out to the weaver, 'Catch that man wearing the cloak, and you'll be well rewarded.'

"It was MacNab's land they were on, and although the weaver and his sons hadn't been at the battle, they were MacNab's men. They ran to try and catch the man wearing the cloak, and being fresh, it wasn't long before they caught up with him. The weaver came up

behind Bruce, leaving his two sons to take him from the front. While Bruce was struggling with the two sons, the weaver seized his cloak from behind and MacNab shouted to him, 'Keep your grip! You have the King himself.'

"But Bruce produced a small battle-axe that he had under his cloak. First he felled the weaver's two sons, then he slashed over his shoulder at the weaver himself and knocked him down too. However, the weaver kept his grip of the cloak, so Robert undid the brooch and let the cloak stay in the weaver's hand. In that way, MacNab got Robert Bruce's cloak and brooch."

So the location is pinpointed, the men are MacNab's (a weaver and his sons), again we have the cloak, the brooch and battle-axe, and it's not entirely clear that Bruce is on horseback.

The third version is longer still: "When Bruce was going past a place called Allt an t-Saoir ('the Carpenter's Burn') near Fiodhaich, a weaver and two of his sons were watching the pursuit. They hadn't been at the battle at all, and had no weapons. One of the pursuers shouted to them, 'Catch that man wearing the cloak and you'll have a big reward from MacDougall of Lorn!'

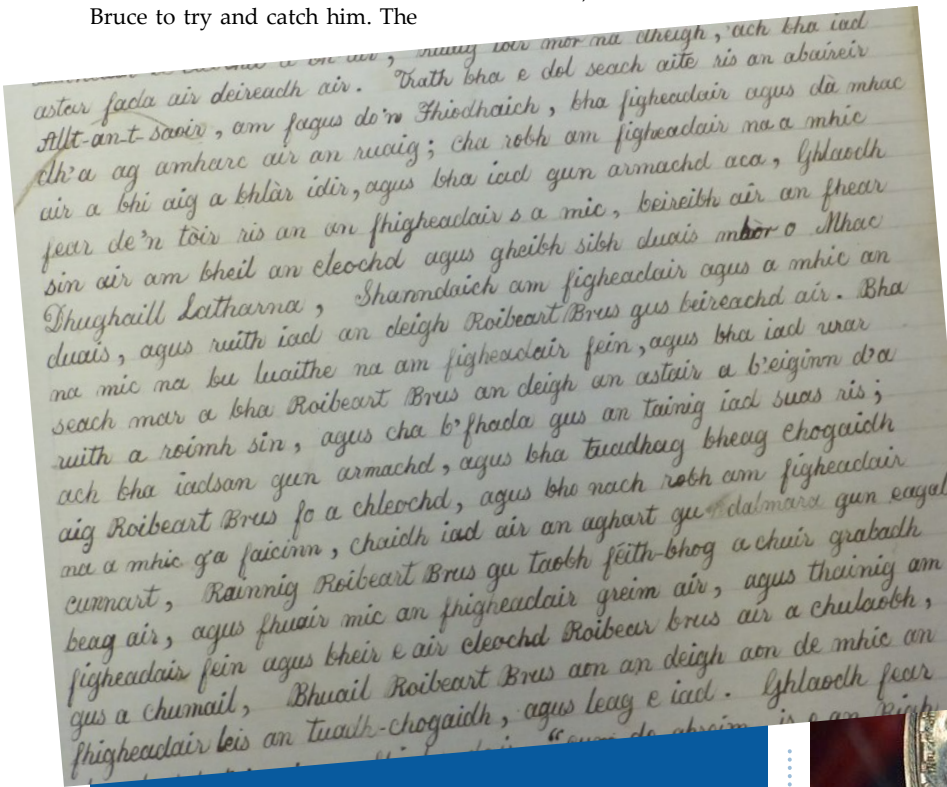
"The weaver and his sons fancied the reward, and ran after Bruce to try and catch him. The

the pursuers shouted at the weaver, 'Keep your grip, it's the king himself you've got.'

"The weaver was angry at seeing his two sons knocked down, and was desperate to get the reward for catching Robert Bruce, so he pulled the cloak tight behind him to try and prevent him wielding the battle-axe. The weaver was strong, and maintained his grip so tightly that Bruce was unable to use his hands. But Bruce unclasped the brooch that held his cloak on, left the garment in the weaver's hand, tore himself free, turned swiftly towards the weaver, struck him with the battle-axe and killed him. The pursuers had got so close to him at that point that he didn't have time to pause and rescue his cloak – he left the cloak and the brooch in the weaver's hand, found a place in the bog-channel where it was narrow, jumped over it, and escaped."

So the location is the same, though pinpointed this time by mention of Fiodhaich. MacNab has disappeared, MacDougall comes back, and the weavers remain, as do the cloak, brooch and battle-axe. It's clearly stated that Bruce was not mounted ('given the distance he'd already had to run'), and for the first time, the action takes place in a bog.

Two things are clear. One is that Barbour's poem influenced Gaelic oral tradition – not surprisingly, as it was reprinted six times between 1571 and 1790. The other is that this Gaelic tradition had a life of its own. The question is: was it all embroidered on Barbour, or did some of it represent independent historical fact? After all, Dewar got the stories from the descendants of those who lived in the same area in 1306, in the same language which they spoke.



One of Dewar's three versions of the story

sons were faster than the father, and were also fresher than Bruce, given the distance he'd already had to run, and it wasn't long before they came up with him; but they were unarmed, while he had a small battle-axe under his cloak, and as neither the weaver nor his sons could see it, they advanced boldly and with no fear of danger.

"Bruce reached the side of a sinew in the bog that made him hesitate briefly. The weaver's sons got a hold of him, and the weaver himself came up and grasped Bruce's cloak from behind to try and hold him back. Bruce struck each of the weaver's sons with the battle-axe, one after the other, and knocked them down. One of

