

Two Declarations With A Common Purpose: The Link Between 1320 and 1776

[This article appeared in abbreviated form in *Scots Heritage Magazine*, the official publication of the Standing Council of Scottish Chiefs, in April 2017.]

By John King Bellasai*

Here in the USA, we've just wrapped up another annual celebration of Tartan Day (observed each year on 6th April, the anniversary of the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath). Parties and parades behind us for yet another year, it is only natural that we reflect on the significance of it all for those of us in the Scottish-American Ancestral Diaspora. This is especially timely, given that next year we will celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Tartan Day holiday, which has now firmly taken root in communities all across our land. (As I've pointed out before in this column, the real meaning of Tartan Day is contained in the plain wording of the standing resolutions of both houses of the U.S. Congress that authorize its observance: To recognize and celebrate the many contributions of Scots, and Scottish-Americans, to the founding and subsequent development of the United States.)

Many of our Scottish cousins love to come over and help us celebrate Tartan Day, this year including the First Minister. But they still tend to wince at the name (which we actually borrowed from the Canadians), as being quaint at best, maybe even brigadoonish. That is short-sighted. Even more than the thistle or the saltire, the tartan is a universally recognized symbol of the Scottish 'brand'—not just something highland, but something quintessentially Scottish. After all, it is well-documented that lowland ladies widely wore tartan shawls and wraps to protest the Union in the earliest days of the 18th century—a sentiment that many in modern Scotland seem to be embracing once more. And a piece of simple tartan has even been found stuffed inside a clay pot, buried at the base of Hadrian's Wall, wrapped around a hoard of 1st century Roman coins (the so-called "Falkirk fragment", now on display in the Scottish National Museum). So tartan has been a commonly recognized symbol of "things Scottish" for a long, long time. And here in America, 32 of our 50 states—typically states with heavy Scottish immigration in their respective histories—now have officially adopted their own tartans, registering them with the Scottish Tartans Authority.

The romance of the name ("Tartan Day") aside, most in Scotland and many in America still pooh-pooh the claimed inspiration for our Tartan Day holiday being found in the Declaration of Arbroath. But should we so quickly dismiss the link? I think not. Much recent scholarship supports it, albeit circumstantially, and an actual analysis of the structure of the two documents, even some striking similarities in phrasing, suggest that 1320 was indeed a powerful inspiration for 1776. Not the only one, to be sure, but an important one, nonetheless.

Critical to understanding the link between the two "declarations" lies in the fact that the American Revolution came right on the heels of the Scottish Enlightenment and that the works of many Scottish philosophers and academicians were being widely read, and deeply appreciated, in the American colonies in the decades immediately preceding our break with Britain. Though all estimates tell us that Scots immigrants to the American colonies prior to 1776 made up less than 10 percent of the general population, their influence on the worldview held by the educated segment of the population was far out of proportion to their numbers. Why so?

The answer lies in the fact that 18th century Scots immigrants included many well-educated clergymen and graduates of Scottish universities—Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Aberdeen—the seats of the Enlightenment. These two classes of immigrants were well-acquainted with the works of Adam Ferguson, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Lord Kames and others who espoused the so-called “Common Sense Philosophy” then prevalent among the educated in Scotland. Both at the grammar school level and in the majority of the six universities in the American colonies (four of which were founded by Scots), Scottish immigrants predominated in the teaching ranks; as a result, these Scottish Enlightenment works were widely read and debated among both faculty and students in America.

We know that far from being an obscure document, the Declaration of Arbroath was well known in Scotland in the years immediately preceding the adoption of the Treaty of Union in 1707, because it featured in the so-called “pamphlet wars” that swirled around that event. Moreover, we know the Declaration of Arbroath itself went through at least four mass printings in Scotland in the decades between 1707 and 1776—showing that it was widely read and its sentiments appreciated. But did this knowledge really cross the Atlantic?

In many ways, the key to understanding how the Scottish Declaration of Arbroath came to influence the American Declaration of Independence is to understand the relationship between William Small and Thomas Jefferson. Small was born in Scotland in 1734 and emigrated to America in 1758, settling in Virginia, where he became a professor of rhetoric at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburgh. But prior to emigrating, Small had attended Mariscal College in Aberdeen, graduating in 1755. And while a student there, he studied under William Duncan, Professor of Natural Philosophy, whose 1748 work, *The Elements of Logick*--the dominant logical treatise of its time--was widely read, both in Scotland and in America. Jefferson studied under Small at William & Mary, graduating in 1761; through Small he became well acquainted with the work of Duncan. The two men, Jefferson and Small, remained life-long friends. In his autobiography, Jefferson described Small as his mentor.

In March of 1764, shortly after graduating university, Jefferson purchased a copy of William Robertson’s *The History of Scotland*, which addressed in great detail the events of the Scottish wars of independence, culminating in the Declaration of Arbroath. We also know that Jefferson’s mother’s family, the Randolphs, who numbered among the Virginia gentry, claimed descent from Thomas Randolph, Early of Moray, nephew of King Robert the Bruce and Regent of Scotland after King Robert’s death. Randolph was himself a signer of the Declaration of Arbroath—his seal appears prominently attached to it, right after that of King Robert himself.

We know that Jefferson was aware of this claimed descent on his mother’s side from Earl Thomas, though the young Jefferson is known to have said “as to whether it’s true, none can say.” [NOTE: The claimed descent of the Virginia Randolphs from Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray at the time of the Scottish wars of independence is most certainly *not* true—Earl Thomas died early and was followed in the earldom by his two adult sons, each of whom died in quick succession without leaving any male heirs. Earl Thomas’s two daughters each married Dunbars, and in time the earldom of Moray went to the Dunbars.] The point here is not whether the descent was true, but that Jefferson knew the family story, thus knew who Thomas Randolph was, and hence knew of the Declaration of Arbroath.

Doubtless this possible connection with a signer of the Declaration of Arbroath affected Jefferson’s appreciation of the events of 1320. A review of the catalog of his library at Monticello shows that

Jefferson later owned works by almost all the great thinkers and writers of the Scottish Enlightenment, including Hutcheson, Hume, Ferguson, Kames, Adam Smith, and others—a life-long interest he kept.

The structural organization of the American Declaration of Independence is a logical syllogism and this suggests Jefferson was inspired by the logician and rhetorician Duncan, whose work was taught to Jefferson by Small. Jefferson’s document conforms to the structure recommended by Duncan for conveying the maximum degree of conviction and certainty—a series of five propositions—(1) that all men are created equal; (2) that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; (3) that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; (4) that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men; and (5) that when any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it. This is followed in the Declaration of Independence by a self-evident major premise: That when government becomes tyranny, men have a right to rebel against it. This structure conforms carefully with Duncan’s rhetorical standards for proving any proposition, as contained in his 1748 treatise.

These facts aside, did the 1320 Declaration directly influence the 1776 Declaration? We do not know for sure, but there is strong circumstantial evidence that it was one—certainly not the only one—but one source of inspiration and possibly a structural model: Apart from both declarations being of similar length and signed by approximately the same number of “worthies” (39 bishops and nobles at Arbroath, 56 delegates at Philadelphia, appointed by the 13 colonies), many of the clauses in Jefferson’s declaration closely echo sentiments in the Declaration of Arbroath, even down to a similarity in many of the words used: For example, both summon God to be their witness as to the rightness of their cause (the Scots calling him “the Supreme King and Judge”, the Americans calling him “the Supreme Judge of the World”). Each contains a list of grievances against the tyrannical actions of an English king as justification for them to take up arms. Each declares that the assent of the governed is a key ingredient in the new political order it is advocating—for the Scottish people in 1320, to throw off the English yoke and choose their own king (The Bruce), from among their own citizens; for the Americans in 1776, to throw off the English yoke and set up a new form of self-government (a constitutional republic). And each says that if the new government does not meet the peoples’ expectations, they may change it, yet again. Each says the freedoms for which they fight are meant to apply to all their citizens (the Scots listing “Jew and gentile alike”). In each instance, the signers pledge to support and defend each other. And in each instance, the signers say they enter into this written compact for freedom alone, to which cause they pledged their lives and their sacred honor.

* * * * *

**** John King Bellasai is President of the Council of Scottish Clans & Associations (COSCA) and Vice President of the National Capital Tartan Day Committee. (His maternal grandfather, John King, after whom he is named, emigrated from Killearn, in Stirlingshire, to America in 1910.)***