

The Declaration of Arbroath

One of the Treasures of the National Archives of Scotland, the Declaration of Arbroath was written to the pope in 1320, on behalf of the barons and community of the realm of Scotland. This eloquent letter, written in support of King Robert Bruce (Robert I) and an independent Scotland, is still regarded as a spirited statement of a nation's claim to freedom.



Image of the Declaration of Arbroath
National Archives of Scotland, state papers (SP13/7)

Translation of the Declaration of Arbroath – revised version (2005), based on Sir James Fergusson, The Declaration of Arbroath 1320 (1970) pp. 5-11, with reference to A A M Duncan, The Nation of Scots and the Declaration of Arbroath (Historical Association pamphlet, 1970), pp. 34-37 and D E R Watt (ed.) Scotichronicon Vol. 7 (1996), pp. 4-9.

Translation compiled by Alan Borthwick June 2005

To the most Holy Father and Lord in Christ, the Lord John, by divine providence Supreme Pontiff of the Holy Roman and Universal Church, his humble and devout sons Duncan, Earl of Fife, Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray, Lord of Man and of Annandale, Patrick Dunbar, Earl of March, Malise, Earl of Strathearn, Malcolm, Earl of Lennox, William, Earl of Ross, Magnus, Earl of Caithness and Orkney, and William, Earl of Sutherland; Walter, Steward of Scotland, William Soules, Butler of Scotland, James, Lord of Douglas, Roger Mowbray, David, Lord of Brechin, David Graham, Ingram Umfraville, John Menteith, guardian of the earldom of Menteith, Alexander Fraser, Gilbert Hay, Constable of Scotland, Robert Keith, Marischal of Scotland, Henry Sinclair, John Graham, David Lindsay, William Oliphant, Patrick Graham, John Fenton, William Abernethy, David Wemyss, William Mushet, Fergus of Ardrossan, Eustace Maxwell, William Ramsay, William Mowat, Alan Murray, Donald Campbell, John Cameron, Reginald Cheyne, Alexander Seton, Andrew Leslie and Alexander Straiton, and the other barons and freeholders and the whole community of the realm of Scotland send all manner of filial reverence, with devout kisses of his blessed feet.

Most Holy Father, we know and from the chronicles and books of the ancients we find that among other famous nations our own, the Scots, has been graced with widespread renown. It journeyed from Greater Scythia by way of the Tyrrhenian Sea and the Pillars of Hercules, and dwelt for a long course of time in Spain among the most savage peoples, but nowhere could it be subdued by any people, however barbarous. Thence it came, twelve hundred years after the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea, to its home in the west where it still lives today. The Britons it first drove out, the Picts it utterly destroyed, and, even though very often assailed by the Norwegians, the Danes and the English, it took possession of that home with many victories and untold efforts; and, as the histories of old time bear witness, they have held it free of all servitude ever since. In their kingdom there have reigned one hundred and thirteen kings of their own royal stock, the line unbroken by a single foreigner.

The high qualities and merits of these people, were they not otherwise manifest, shine forth clearly enough from this: that the King of kings and Lord of lords, our Lord Jesus Christ, after His Passion and Resurrection, called them, even though settled in the uttermost parts of the earth, almost the first to His most holy faith. Nor did He wish them to be confirmed in that faith by merely anyone but by the first of His Apostles - by calling, though second or third in rank - the most gentle Saint Andrew, the Blessed Peter's brother, and desired him to keep them under his protection as their patron for ever.

The Most Holy Fathers your predecessors gave careful heed to these things and strengthened this same kingdom and people with many favours and numerous privileges, as being the special charge of the Blessed Peter's brother. Thus our people under their protection did indeed live in freedom and peace up to the time when that mighty prince the King of the English, Edward, the father of the one who reigns today, when our kingdom had no head and our people harboured no malice or treachery and were then unused to wars or invasions, came in a guise of a friend and ally to harass them as an enemy. The deeds of cruelty, massacre, violence, pillage, arson, imprisoning prelates, burning down monasteries, robbing and killing monks and nuns and yet other outrages without number which he committed against our people, sparing neither age nor sex, religion nor rank, no-one could describe nor fully imagine unless he had seen them with his own eyes.

But from these countless evils we have been set free, by the help of Him who though He afflicts yet heals and restores, by our most tireless prince, King and lord, the lord Robert. He, that his people and his heritage might be delivered out of the hands of our enemies, bore cheerfully toil and fatigue, hunger and peril, like another Maccabaeus or Joshua. Him, too, divine providence, the succession to his right according to our laws and customs which we shall maintain to the death, and the due consent and assent of us all have made our prince and king. To him, as to the man by whom salvation has been wrought unto our people, we are bound both by his right and by his merits that our freedom may be still maintained, and by him, come what may, we mean to stand.

Yet if he should give up what he has begun, seeking to make us or our kingdom subject to the King of England or the English, we should exert ourselves at once to drive him out as our enemy and a subverter of his own right and ours, and make some other man who was well able to defend us our King; for, as long as a hundred of us remain alive, never will we on any conditions be subjected to the lordship of the English. It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we are fighting, but for freedom alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself.

Therefore it is, Reverend Father and Lord, that we beseech your Holiness with our most earnest prayers and suppliant hearts, inasmuch as you will in your sincerity and goodness consider all this, that, since with Him Whose vice-gerent on earth you are there is neither weighing nor distinction of Jew and Greek, Scotsman or Englishman, you will look with the eyes of a father on the troubles and privations brought by the English upon us and upon the Church of God. May it please you to admonish and exhort the King of the English, who ought to be satisfied with what belongs to him since England used once to be enough for seven kings or more, to leave us Scots in peace, who live in this poor little Scotland, beyond which there is no dwelling-place at all, and covet nothing but our own. We are sincerely willing to do anything for him, having regard to our condition, that we can, to win peace for ourselves.

This truly concerns you, Holy Father, since you see the savagery of the heathen raging against the Christians, as the sins of Christians have indeed deserved, and the frontiers of Christendom being pressed inward every day; and how much it will tarnish your Holiness's memory if (which God forbid) the Church suffers eclipse or scandal in any branch of it during your time, you must perceive. Then rouse the Christian princes who for false reasons pretend that they cannot go to the help of the Holy Land because of wars they have on hand with their neighbours. The real reason that prevents them is that in making war on their smaller neighbours they find a readier advantage and weaker resistance. But how cheerfully our lord the King and we too would go there if the King of the English would leave us in peace, He from Whom nothing is hidden well knows; and we profess and declare it to you as the Vicar of Christ and to all Christendom.

But if your Holiness puts too much faith in the tales the English tell and will not give sincere belief to all this, nor refrain from favouring them to our undoing, then the slaughter of bodies, the perdition of souls, and all the other misfortunes that will follow, inflicted by them on us and by us on them, will, we believe, be surely laid by the Most High to your charge.

To conclude, we are and shall ever be, as far as duty calls us, ready to do your will in all things, as obedient sons to you as His Vicar, and to Him as the Supreme King and Judge we commit the maintenance of our cause, casting our cares upon Him and firmly trusting that He will inspire us with courage and bring our enemies to nothing.

May the Most High preserve you to His Holy Church in holiness and health for many days to come.

Given at the monastery of Arbroath in Scotland on the sixth day of the month of April in the year of grace thirteen hundred and twenty and the fifteenth year of the reign of our King aforesaid.

Declaration of Arbroath: Latin text, according with text in Sir James Fergusson, The Declaration of Arbroath 1320 (1970) pp. 4-10

NB This text of the Declaration represent Sir James's view of the "nearest possible reconstruction of the final version of the Letter, no longer extant, that actually went to Pope John XXII at Avignon" (p. 2), rather than an absolutely accurate reading of the document held in NAS, SP13/7. He has a separate Latin text which he has reconstructed from the variant readings of the Declaration as found in later manuscripts – see his book, pp. 48-54

Sanctissimo Patri in Christo ac Domino, domino Johanni, diuina prouidencia Sacrosauacte Romane et Vniuersalis Ecclesie Summo Pontifici, Filii Sui Humiles et deuoti Duncanus Comes de Fyf, Thomas Ranulphi Comes Morauie Dominus Mannie et Vallis Anandie, Patricius de Dumbar Comes Marchie, Malisius Comes de Stratheryne, Malcolmus Comes de Leuenax, Willelmus Comes de Ross, Magnus Comes Cathanie et Orkadie et Willelmus Comes Suthirlandie; Walterus Senescallus Scocie, Willelmus de Soules Buttellarius Scocie, Jacobus Dominus de Duglas, Rogerus de Moubray, Daudid Dominus de Brechyn, Daudid de Graham, Ingeramus de Vmfrauille, Johannes de Menetethe Custos Comitatus de Menetethe, Alexander Fraser, Gilbertus de Haya Constabularius Scocie, Robertus de Keth Marescallus Scocie, Henricus de Sancto Claro, Johannes de Graham, Daudid de Lindesay, Willelmus Olifaunt, Patricius de Graham, Johannes de Fentoun, Willelmus de Abirnithy, Daudid de Wemys, Willelmus de Montefixo, Fergusius de Ardrossane, Eustachius de Maxwell, Willelmus de Ramesay, Willelmus de Montealto, Alanus de Morauia, Douenaldus Cambell, Johannes Cambrun, Reginaldus le chen, Alexander de Setoun, Andreas de Lescelyne, et Alexander de Stratoun, Ceterique Barones et Liberetenetes ac tota Communitas Regni Scocie, omnimodam Reuerenciam filialem cum deuotis Pedum oculis beatorum.

Scimus, Sanctissime Pater et Domine, et ex antiquorum gestis et libris Colligimus quod inter Ceteras naciones egregias nostra scilicet Scottorum nacio multis preconijs fuerit insignita, que de Maiori Schithia per Mare tirenum et Columpnas Herculis transiens et in Hispania inter ferocissimas gentes per multa temporum curricula Residens a nullis quantumcumque barbaricis poterat allicubi gentibus subiugari. Indeque veniens post mille et ducentos annos a transitu populi israelitici per mare rubrum sibi sedes in Occidente quas nunc optinet, expulsis primo Britonibus et Pictis omnino deletis, licet per Norwagienses, Dacos et Anglicos sepius inpugnata fuerit, multis cum victorijs et Laboribus quamplurimis adquisuit, ipsaque ab omni seruitute liberata, vt Priscorum testantur Historie, semper tenuit. In quorum Regno Centum et Tredescim Reges de ipsorum Regali prosapia, nullo alienigena interueniente, Regnauerunt.

Quorum Nobilitates et Merita, licet ex aliis non clarent, satis patenter effulgent ex eo quod Rex Regum et dominancium dominus Jhesus Christus post passionem suam et Resurreccionem ipsos in vltimis terre finibus constitutos quasi primos ad suam fidem sanctissimam conuocauit. Nec eos per quemlibet in dicta fide confirmari voluit set per suum primum apostolum uocatione quamuis ordine secundum vel tercium, sanctum Andream mitissimum beati Petri Germanum, quem semper ipsis preesse voluit vt Patronum.

Hec autem Sanctissimi Patres et Predecessores vestri sollicita mente pensantes ipsum Regnum et populum vt beati Petri germani peculium multis fauoribus et priuilegijs quamplurimis Munierunt, Ita quippe quod gens nostra sub ipsorum proteccione hactenus libera deguit et quieta donec ille Princeps Magnificus Rex Anglorum Edwardus, pater istius qui nunc est, Regnum nostrum acephalum populumque nullius mali aut doli conscium nec bellis aut insultibus tunc assuetum sub amici et confederati specie inimicabiliter infestauit. Cuius iniurias, Cedens, violencias, predaciones, incendia, prelatorum incarcerationes, Monasteriorum combustiones, Religiosorum spoliaciones et occisiones alia quoque enormia et innumera que in dicto populo exercuit, nulli parcens etati aut sexui, Religioni aut ordini, nullus scriberet nec ad plenum intelligeret nisi quem experientia informaret.

A quibus Malis innumeris, ipso Iuante qui post uulnera medetur et sanat, liberati sumus per strenuissimum Principem, Regem et Dominum nostrum, Dominum Robertum, qui pro populo et hereditate suis de manibus Inimicorum liberandis quasi alter Machabeus aut Josue labores et tedia, inedia et pericula, leto sustinuit animo. Quem etiam diuina dispositio et iuxta leges et Consuetudines nostra, quas vsque ad mortem sustinere volumus, Juris successio et debitus nostrorum omnium Consensus et Assensus nostrum fecerunt Principem atque Regem, cui tanquam illi per quem salus in populo nostro facta est pro nostra libertate tuenda tam Jure quam meritis tenemur et volumus in omnibus adherere.

Quem si ab inceptis desisteret, Regi Anglorum aut Anglicis nos aut Regnum nostrum volens subicere, tanquam Inimicum nostrum et sui nostrique Juris subuersorem statim expellere niteremur et alium Regem nostrum qui ad defensionem nostram sufficeret faceremus. Quia quamdiu Centum ex nobis uiui remanserint, nuncquam Anglorum dominio aliquatenus volumus subiugari. Non enim propter gloriam, diuicias aut honores pugnamus set propter libertatem solummodo quam Nemo bonus nisi simul cum vita amittit.

Hinc est, Reuerende Pater et Domine, quod sanctitatem vestram omni precum instancia genuflexis cordibus exoramus quatinus sincero corde Menteque pia recensentes quod apud eum cuius vices in terris geritis cum non sit Pondus nec distincio Judei et greci, Scoti aut Anglici, tribulationes et angustias nobis et Ecclesie dei illatas ab Anglicis paternis oculis intuentes, Regem Anglorum, cui sufficere debet quod possidet cum olim Anglia septem aut pluribus solebat sufficere Regibus, Monere et exhortari dignemini vt nos scotos, in exili degentes Scocia vltra quam habitacio non est nichilque nisi nostrum Cupientes, in pace dimittat. Cui pro nostra procuranda quiete quicquid possumus, ad statum nostrum Respectu habito, facere volumus cum effectum.

Vestra enim interest, sancte Pater, hoc facere qui paganorum feritatem, Christianorum culpis exigentibus, in Christianos seuientem aspicitis et Christianorum terminos arctari indies, quantumque vestre sanctitatis memorie derogat si (quod absit) Ecclesia in aliqua sui parte vestris temporibus patiatur eclipsim aut Scandalum, vos videritis. Excitet igitur Christianos Principes qui non causam vt causam ponentes se fingunt in subsidium terre sancte propter guerras quas habent cum proximis ire non posse. Cuius inpedimenti Causa est verior quod in Minoribus proximis debellandis vtilitas propior et resistencia debilior estimantur. Set quam leto corde dictus dominus Rex noster et Nos si Rex Anglorum nos in pace dimitteret illuc iremus qui nichil ignorat satis novit. Quod Christi vicario totique Christianitati ostendimus et testamur.

Quibus si sanctitas vestra Anglorum relatibus nimis credula fidem sinceram non adhibeat aut ipsis in nostram confusionem fauere non desinat, corporum excidia, animarum excicia, et cetera que sequuntur incomoda que ipsi in nobis et Nos in ipsis fecerimus vobis ab altissimo credimus inputanda.

Ex quo sumus et erimus in hiis que tenemur tanquam obediencie filii vobis tanquam ipsius vicario parati in omnibus complacere, ipsique tanquam Summo Regi et Judici causam nostram tuendam committimus, Cogitatum nostrum Jactantes in ipso sperantesque firmiter quod in nobis virtutem faciet et ad nichilum rediget hostes nostros.

Sanctitatem ac sanitatem vestram conseruet altissimus Ecclesie sue sancte per tempora diuturna.

Datum apud Monasterium de Abirbrothoc in Scocia sexto die mensis Aprilis Anno gracie Millesimo Trescentesimo vicesimo Anno vero Regni Regis nostri supradicti Quinto decimo.

Endorsed: Littere directe ad dominum Supremum Pontificem per communitatem Scocie.