

Teaching Medieval National Identity: Opportunity or Problem?

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Chair: Andrew Roach (University of Glasgow)

Wallace, Bruce, and the Wars of National Identity as Fought by Contemporary Under-16s

Kim Esdaile

The success of this session lay in the varying approaches of the speakers. Kim Esdaile, a teacher at St. Ambrose School, Blairhill, a Catholic school in North Lanarkshire, not far from Glasgow had conducted sessions on national identity with her class and how this might relate to her teaching of the wars of independence. She revealed a multi-layered picture of modern Scottish identity among 11-12 year olds (Scottish S1) with being born in Scotland regarded as the pre-eminent qualification. 'Not being English' was also considered important, but the hybrid identity was revealed with some 20% of the class considering themselves Irish when prompted.

The class's vision of the middle ages was perhaps predictably bleak. Inhabitants would be bored by the lack of technology, endangered by the primitive knowledge of health and hygiene and exhausted through incessant walking and riding. Ignorance may be in fact be the teacher's great advantage. Pupils had few preconceptions about what it meant to be Scottish and could on one level understand how resistance to the political settlement imposed by Edward I instilled some type of collective consciousness. The many battles and the fact that the Scots eventually 'won' were seen as attractive features of the topic. However, when Scottish history becomes a compulsory part of the Scottish Higher grade in history in 2010 there are clearly considerable challenges ahead.

Who Are Those Scots?

Teaching about National Consciousness during the Wars of Independence

Sonja Cameron

Dr. Sonja Cameron, a tutor with the Open University took up the theme talking about teaching Scottish medieval history to mostly mature OU students. Here the challenge was breaking up the preconceptions of students often familiar with the stories of Bruce and the heroics of Mel Gibson's *Braveheart*. As Cameron pointed out, it was not just that 'the past is a different country'; in the past Scotland *was* a different country, with a different geographical and ethnic composition. She placed her own teaching upon the study of various 'clusters' looking in seminars or exercises, at topics such as

- 'Where on earth is Scotia?'
- David I
- Administration
- Kingship / Allegiance
- Edward I
- William Wallace and *Communitas Regni*
- Origins

In this way the tutor can look at broader aspects of medieval statecraft and also see the production of early Scots literature such as *Barbour's Bruce* as both a symptom and a cause of the creation of a national community.

The Middle Ages and Modern Polish Identity *Przemyslaw Urbanczyk*

Professor Urbanczyk of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences, provided a sobering European context for such discussions. His account of the archaeological research on the Polish-German border was by turns hilarious and heartbreaking. Taking the idea that a strong medieval identity had become an essential article of faith for a country which had had so many troubles in more recent times, Urbanczyk played with the idea that Poland too in the past was a different country. The discovery of a settlement at Biskupin in the interwar years were claimed as proof of early Slav occupation of the region by Polish scholars, only for the site to be re-dug after September 1939 by SS archaeological 'commandos', eager to prove its Germanic origins. Meanwhile Polish archaeologists were forced into changing their names and going into hiding.

Post 1945 Poland's shift westward was largely justified by reference to archaeological evidence from pre-Christian sites. The Communist government instigated the largest field archaeology programme the world had ever seen, only to curtail it drastically after the "jubilee" of Poland's conversion in 1000. Even after the fall of Communism, old disputes over 'national origins' have continued to bedevil Polish archaeology. While baldly stating that political agendas could not be simply disregarded, Professor Urbanczyk stressed the importance in the teaching of national identity of wide reading, particularly comparative studies from other areas and more interdisciplinary study.

A version of this paper will be published as P. Urbańczyk, 'Mediaeval archaeology in Polish historic-political discourse' in a book of essays edited by M. Strobel, (Dresden 2009).

The session was attended by over 20 people. There were good questions addressed to all three speakers and a lively discussion. The International Medieval Congress meets annually and is the largest gathering of medieval scholars in Europe consisting of some 400 sessions and attracting over 1500 delegates.