**Declaration of Arbroath Learning Resource**

This resource is designed to provide a learning resource based on the Declaration of Arbroath. The theme is the role of the scribe in medieval times and how

they could change the sense of what they were writing by their interpretation.

The History of the Declaration

The Declaration of Arbroath was a letter written in Latin to the then pope, John XXII on the 6th of April 1320 It is believed to have been. People have guessed who wrote it, but no-one knows! The scribe who wrote out the ‘file copy’ that we can see today is one of the main royal scribes of the reign who was active between 1312 and 1320. We may guess that it took a few days or weeks to draft the text. The decision to send the letter to the pope seems to have been made by a meeting of the ‘general council’ (much the same as parliament, but not so official) at Newbattle in mid-March. It is likely (but cannot be proved, of course) that he would also have written the copy sent to the pope. It should be noted that the Declaration wasn’t ‘signed’, instead it was authenticated by seals, as documents at that time were not signed. Only 19 seals now remain of what might have been 50 originally, and many are in poor condition. It is unclear how many barons would have sealed it, but it would appear to have been around forty.

The Declaration was written during the long war of independence with England which started with Edward l's attempt to conquer Scotland in 1296. When the deaths of Alexander III and his granddaughter Margaret, Maid of Norway, left Scotland without a monarch, Edward used the invitation to help choose a successor as an excuse to revive English claims of overlordship. There were desperate negotiations between the Scottish leaders and Edward I between March and early June 1291, which resulted in the recognition of Edward I’s overlordship, the ‘Great Case’ (i.e. Great legal-case) and eventually the inauguration of John Balliol as king on 30 November 1292. Edward I only invaded after John and the Scottish leaders defied Edward I’s orders to them to fight in his army against the king of France.

Edward refused to allow William Wallace's victory at Stirling Bridge in 1297 to derail his campaign. In 1306 Robert the Bruce seized the throne and began a long struggle to secure his position against internal and external threat. His success at Bannockburn in 1314, when he defeated an English army under Edward II, was a major achievement but the English still did not recognise Scotland's independence or Bruce's position as king.

On the European front, by 1320 Scottish relations with the papacy were in crisis after they defied papal efforts to establish a truce with England. When the pope excommunicated the king and three of his bishops, the Scots sent the Declaration of Arbroath as part of a diplomatic counter-offensive. The original letter, delivered to the pope in Avignon, is lost, but we know it reached him. He wrote to Edward II urging him to make peace, but it was not until 1328 that Scotland's independence was acknowledged. Unfortunately the copy sent to the pope does not survive, however the ‘file copy’ kept by Robert I’s government does survive today in Edinburgh in the National Records of Scotland.

A number of copies were made in subsequent years . Apart from the ‘file copy’, another copy was kept in St Andrews and another was made by Alan of Montrose. Alan of Montrose’s copy was in turn copied into a history of Scotland in Latin, and as a result 24 further copies survive from Scotland in the Middle Ages. With no photocopiers or scanners available, the copies were made by hand, over time the text did change. It was the custom for scribes to make changes to the documents they copied. Changing punctuation, and sometimes even words.

**Resources**

<ultimatehistoryproject.com/the-medieval-scribe.html>

<https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2014/06/the-burden-of-writing-scribes-in-medieval-manuscripts.html>

<https://www.medievalists.net/2014/06/copycat-life-medieval-scribe/>

**Social Studies Es and Os**

By exploring places, investigating artefacts and locating them in time, I have developed an awareness of the ways in which we remember and preserve Scotland’s history. SOC 1-02a

I can investigate a Scottish historical theme to discover how past events or the actions of individuals or groups have shaped Scotland’s past. SOC 2-03a

I can discuss why people and events from a particular time in the past were important, placing them within an historical sequence. SOC 2-06a

I can discuss the motives of those involved in a significant turning point in the past and assess the consequences it had then and since. SOC 3-06a

**Topic 1 – The role of the scribe**

As we know there were no photocopiers in the 14th century, if documents were to be copied, they had to be done by a scribe, who wrote out copies by hand. At that time not many people could read and write. So there were limited number who could do this work. In order to get a copy made, you had to borrow the original from someone. These were very valuable documents and getting your hands on one could be very difficult.

Historians believe that many scribes were young teenagers, because their eyesight was good enough for the job. Also writing all day from morning until night took endurance and good fine motor skills. They often worked in very poor conditions, for as long as there was light. Often where they worked had neither air conditioning no heating, so they were roasting hot or bitterly cold. The scribe had no say in what they were to copy and it could be a boring and difficult job. The tools they worked with were often basic and they quality of them could affect the work they were able to do. Pens were very basic and the quality of the material they were writing on could be poor causing the ink to run. Scribes often marked in the margin of their work comments about how they were feeling, the poor conditions they were working with or the weather, sometimes they made reference to the poor quality of the tools they had to work with. One scribe in the 10th century wrote: ‘Because one who does not know how to write thinks it no labour, I will describe it for you, if you want to know how great is the burden of writing: it mists the eyes, it curves the back, it breaks the belly and the ribs, it fills the kidneys with pain, and the body with all kinds of suffering.’ Those who copied the illustrations in a text often drew themselves somewhere in the text too – the first ‘selfies’?

However, because of the importance of the document, more senior scribes were likely to have written it. The only scribe of a copy of the Declaration whose name we know was a certain Magnus MacCulloch, a notary and professional scribe in the 1480s who was a member of the household of the archbishop of St Andrews.

The materials used by scribes were all handmade. The ingredients for the ink had to be collected and then prepared, often by the scribes themselves. They sharpened their own quills with very sharp knives which they also used to scratch out mistakes they made.

Scribes, however did not always copy a document exactly as it stood. They made changes, sometimes to punctuation, but also to the words used in the text. Sometimes they were just tired or careless. Sometimes they came across words they were unfamiliar with, and would change it to a word they thought fitted better. Sometimes during a long day they would be distracted or tired and make errors. However there was another aspect to this. Many saw it as their job to make their copy better than the original. They might see a word which they thought didn’t fit so well so they would change it for another.

As a result the Declaration of Arbroath has changed from the original version sent to the pope in 1320.

Please see the example on the next page which shows changes which took place.

**A. Scribes copied the most widely available copy, and each of the three examples below are from this original:**

Example 1:

But if he should give up what he has begun, and wish to put us or our kingdom under the control of the English or their king, we would immediately do our best to get rid of him as our enemy and as someone who has undermined both his right as king and ours as a kingdom, and we would make someone else our king who would be able to defend us properly.

The versions below are the changes they made:

*Manuscript R: But if he should give up* ***those things*** *he has begun*

*Manuscript H: and wish to* ***hand*** *us or our kingdom* ***over*** *to the English or their king*

*Manuscript FC: we would immediately do our best to* ***seek him out*** *as our enemy*

*Manuscript R: as our enemy and as someone who has* ***destroyed*** *both his right as king and ours as a kingdom*

*Manuscript FC: we would make our king* ***whoever*** *would be able to defend us properly*

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Example 2:

Because as long as a hundred of us remain alive, we will never be put under English authority in any way.

*Manuscripts C + R: Because as long as a hundred of us remain alive, we will never be put under English* ***government*** *in any way.*

*Manuscript B: Because as long as a hundred of us remain alive, we will never be put under English authority.* [*in any way* **has been left out**]

*Manuscript FE: a hundred of us remain, we will never* [*alive* **has been left out**]

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Example 3

It is not, though, for glory in war, riches or fame that we fight, but only for the laws of our fathers and for freedom, which no respectable person lets go of except with their life.

*Manuscript R: It is not, though, for glory in war, riches or* ***honour*** *that we fight,*

*Manuscript H: which no respectable person* ***will let go of*** *except with their life*

**B. In around 1640, the author of ‘A History of Scotland’ included the Declaration in his work, twice in fact. Each time he wrote it, he made changes to it.**

Here is a reminder of the most widely copied version:

But if he should give up what he has begun, and wish to put us or our kingdom under the control of the English or their king, we would immediately (do our best to) get rid of him as our enemy and as someone who has undermined both his right as king and ours as a kingdom, and we would make someone else our king who would be able to defend us properly.

Because as long as a hundred of us remain alive, we will never be put under English authority in any way.

It is not, though, for glory in war, riches or fame that we fight, but only for the laws of our fathers and for freedom, which no respectable person lets go of except with their life.

The first time he wrote it out he made the following changes :

But if he should give up what he has begun, and wish to put us or our kingdom under the control of the English or their king **in any way**, we would immediately **( \* )** get rid of him as our enemy and as someone who has undermined both his right as king and ours as a kingdom, and we would **appoint** someone else our king who would be able to defend us **and the kingdom** properly.

**For** as long as a hundred of us remain alive, we will never be put under English authority in any way.

It is not, though, for glory in war, riches **nor for** fame that we fight, but only for **our** freedom and for the laws of our fathers, which no **rational** person **would agree to let go of** except with their life.

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**When he rewrote it, he made more changes!**

The most copied version of the passage again:

But if he should give up what he has begun, and wish to put us or our kingdom under the control of the English or their king, we would immediately do our best to get rid of him as our enemy and as someone who has undermined both his right as king and ours as a kingdom, and we would make someone else our king who would be able to defend us properly.

Because as long as a hundred of us remain alive, we will never be put under English authority in any way.

It is not, though, for glory in war, riches or fame that we fight, but only for the laws of our fathers and for freedom, which no respectable person lets go of except with their life.

His second rewrite:

But if he should give up what he has begun, and wish to put us or our kingdom under the control of the English or their king in any way, we would, united, immediately get rid of him as our chief enemy and as someone who has undermined both his right as king and ours as a kingdom, and we would elect someone else **in his place** who would defend our laws and rights.

For as long as a hundred of us are still living, we will for all time never be put under English authority.

It is not, though, self-seekingly for glory in war, or for riches or fame that we fight, but only for the rights and laws of our fathers a freedom which no-one noble ought to let go of except with their life.

Possible Activities

1. Pupils of all levels could do this task.  
   The declaration of Arbroath provided a snapshot of Scottish society as it was in medieval times. If your class were writing their own declaration for their school/town/country, what would it say? What right and freedoms would they want to include? Work in groups to agree a set of ten rights and freedoms. These could be made into poster form and then shared with others in the class.
2. The theme here is how the change of a word can change the whole meaning of a phrase, sentence or paragraph.  
   For first level pupils, play a game of ‘Broken telephone’. Start with the sentence: ‘I think to be queen you have to be clever, brave, strong and speak well’ See what you get at the end. Talk about what words changed and if that has changed the sense of the statement.
3. Second level pupils could write down a sentence such as:   
   The king is very important as they have to rule the country, look after all the people and make sure the government are doing a good job.  
   Work in pairs to change any or all of the word highlighted in yellow, to words they think are better.  
   When you are finished share with another pair and ask the following questions of each other?  
   - does the sentence still make sense?  
   - do you agree with our changes?  
   - does the sentence still mean the same, or have the changes altered the meaning?
4. Second Level pupils could look at the changes made by the author of ‘A History of Scotland’.  
   He changed the word respectable, twice.   
   - what words did he use instead?  
   - what is the definition of each of these words?  
   - do you think the different words change the meaning of the sentence?  
   - which word do you think is best?
5. Third level pupils could attempt this task.  
   Look at some of examples of the changes in the text in the Declaration of Arbroath. Take each one in turn. Consider the following questions?  
   - do the changes in the text affect the meaning?  
   - in what way do they affect the meaning?  
   - what reason do you think the scribe had for making the change?  
   - would you have made any of the changes the scribes made?