

James B. Manson (?1820-68)

1 *Robert the Bruce, a Ballad of Bannockburn*

O for a gush of Castaly
 To undulate my song,
 Ye goddess muses unto whom
 The springs of verse belong! —
 No matter, there are streams enow
 Between the hill and sea,
 And every Scots foot on their banks,
 Thanks to King Bruce, is free.

The English King has sworn an oath
That ere the Baptist's day, 10
Near Stirling's towers shall England's host
And Scotland's meet in fray;
Such fray as, if it lifts us not
Above all fear and praise,
Shall be the last and bloodiest 15
Of Scotland's fighting days.

To cot, to castle spread the news,
O'er hill, dale, everywhere;
It found Godspeed in Liddesdale,
It found Godspeed in Ayr; 20
Among the mosses of Dumfries
The Maxwells caught the omen;
Buchanan passed it to Colquhoun
In the shadow of Ben Lomond;
'Twas heard at Ebba's Kirk, and heard 25
By them that hear the din
Of Corryvreckan and Cape Wrath,
And Foyers and Corra Linn;
It spread, it sprang through isle to isle,
From Harris to Tyree; 30
It roused the red-legged clans of Ross
And the Dane-mixed men of Dee;
It pierced beyond the springs of Clyde

And the virgin rill of Spey;
 It woke the country of St. Clair 35
 And the country of Mackay;
 It coursed the sheilings of the Tay
 From Gowrie to Glenlyon;
 It reached the shaggy clans whose boats
 Were rocking on Lock Ryan. 40
 Till every heady chief blazed up
 In wildest Galloway,
 Where the relics of St. Ninian sleep
 And the monks of Balliol pray.
 Our misty glens became like hives 45
 When swarming-time is come,
 And the grim glensmen felt their blood
 Too hot to stay at home.
 The fasting huntsman left the track
 Of deer already stricken, 50
 Even in the lazy bedesman's veins
 It made the new life quicken.
 Proud mothers ceased to sing, I trow,
 And maidens to be coy;
 But the warrior heard, and ground his teeth, 55
 And cut the air for joy!

On Bannock's banks there lies a fen,
 The nurse of cold and fog;
 The orchis blows, the mire-snipe goes
 At will o'er Milton Bog. 60
 To cross this faithless fen thou may'st
 Man's foot for years defy;
 But now — so hot the breath of June —
 The faithless fen was dry;
 Though happily the northern bank 65
 Rose rugged, steep, and high.
 King Bruce looked round and chose his ground;
 "Now let the foe," said he,
 "But meet me here, I shall not fear
 To face him one to three." 70

'Twas now full tide of summer-shine,
 And near the Baptist's Day,

But nearer yet the stately stretch
Of Edward's proud array.
Already he had cooled his steed 75
In Carron's fatal flood;
Already had his trumpet broke
The silence of Torwood;
From Camelon on to Dunipace,
And further on to Plean, 80
Few were the hinds he found at home
To bid him hail, I ween.

And sooth it was a proud array
Came rolling o'er the heights,
With all the bravest of his realm 85
And knightliest of his knights:
Such lords as Pembroke's baron bold,
Such knights as D'Argentine,
And Gloster's earl, and Hereford's,
Who led the foremost line. 90
Their burnished mail and twinkling blades
Made all the land ablaze,
And all the sky was fringed with flags
For two long summer days.

The men-at-arms came prancing up 95
With loud and saucy jeers;
Few men-at-arms had we, but showed
A hedge of trusty spears.
That hedge of ashen spears, 'twas said,
Made even De Valence pause; 100
"Perdie!" he said, "yon catamount
Hath little lack of claws."

In battles four the Scots are ranked,
Their King the guiding soul,
That gives to each its fit behest 105
And oneness to the whole.
Lord Randolph shakes his border spear
All in the m[i]ddle fight,
And James the Douglas holds the left,
And Edward Bruce the right, 110

While Keith the Marshal hangs in wait
Behind on Bannock's bank,
With good five hundred horse to take
The English bows in flank.

The day that makes each week arise 115
With the blue eye of heaven,
It found us on the battlefield,
But not to arms was given;
Yet not to rest, or hope of rest,
With the broad sun blazing o'er us, 120
And a hundred thousand English swords
Gathering before us.
That day the sun went down like blood,
And, e'en when rose the moon,
All the night air palpitated 125
With the fiery breath of June.

That day, 'twas said, the sky had signs
Which none but sages see,
But on the earth were omens too
Filled all our hearts with glee. 130
We saw our good King's battleaxe
Crash through De Bohun's brain,
We saw the English braggart's corpse
Fall to the ground in twain;
And the proud sound of mastery 135
Rose swelling on our rear,
Where gallant D'Aynecourt gave his blood
To Randolph's border spear.

Sir Mowbray stood in chafing mood
On Stirling's old gray wall, 140
For nought on earth had he do
But watch our movements all.
And well he noted every sign —
"The time," quoth he, "is brief
When yonder nodding flags, my boys, 145
Shall bring us all relief.
Another day, one bloody fray,"
Quoth he, "and I am free;

The mouse may cheep in Stirling keep,
But not, please God, for me.” 150

Sir Mowbray was a gallant knight,
And raised to high command
By the great soul that left his clay
At Borough-on-the-Sand.
And, give the old knight his wonted place 155
Among the Southrons hot,
And let him tread the living sward,
In teeth of the proud Scot,
That arm of his hath pith enough
To show you lion’s play 160
Where the fire flies from flashing eyes,
The blue eyes and the grey!

Next morn arose as peaceful
As if war had never been,
Though nations twain in battle-gear 165
Were standing in its sheen,
With gilded flags like Beltane fires
All gleaming in the sun,
And men on both sides muttering, “Thus
Shall battlefields be won.” 170

Like waters fed by numerous springs
The Northern ranks are thronged
With vassal leal and bold outlaw,
The wronger and the wronged;
Grim greybeards that have swung their swords 175
Around the Wallace wight;
Brave striplings that have fled from home,
But will not flee from fight;
And some who have aforetime fought
Against the leal and true 180
Will this day stand in Scotland’s van,
And soldier penance do.
Yea, even the knave whose caitiff life
Has hardly one proud day,
Who comes for plunder — he for once 185
Has come in time to slay.

King Bruce surveyed his motley host
With no unhopeful eye:
“Let every soldier make his bed
As he would wish to lie! 190
I give old Scotland’s flag in charge
To this gray rock,” said he —
“A standard bearer that shall fly,
Good friends, as soon as we!”

Our gracious King! Right well we knew 195
How he had played the man,
How he had lived an outlaw’s life,
And borne the Church’s ban,
And how he kept his fame so well
In flight, when doomed to flee, 200
And how he nursed a heart of ruth
In the breast of victory!

Ho for the men that loved their King
When loyal men were few!
Ho for the King that knew his men, 205
And trusted whom he knew!
And, Scotsmen, sacred keep that stone
Till Bannock’s burn run dry,
For from that stone our stainless flag,
And not one Scot, did fly. 210

Old Maurice of Inchaffray —
Save his grey head from harm! —
Had brought to bless our battle-field
Saint Fillan’s relic-arm;
But how our hearts beat in us 215
When we heard the good man say
That living arms and laymen nerves
Were all required to-day!
And when he raised the Cross, and bade
Us cry unto the Lord, 220
And seek the grace of every saint
That ever drew a sword,
And pardoned fight and pardoned fall,

Scarce was the counsel given
When hand to heart, and knee to earth, 225
And every eye to Heaven!
Ye could have heard the Abbot tread,
Unsandalled though he trod,
So breathlessly the Scottish host
Were crying to their God! 230
“They kneel!” exclaimed the Southern King,
“For grace the traitors sue.”
“They sue for grace,” said Umfraville,
“But not, my liege, from you!”

Now came proud England’s battleburst — 235
O ladies, ’twere a sight
On which the fairest ladye-eye
With joyaunce would alight,
To see such gallant gentlemen,
At tourney, dance, or play; 240
But this was not the time of feast,
Or joust, or holiday,
And first the cloud of archery
Threw out its arrowy sleet;
God help the doomed but dauntless breasts 245
On whom that shower did beat!
But Keith has rounded Milton bog,
On Bannock’s farthest bank,
And with a fair five hundred horse
Dashed right into their flank. 250
Ten thousand strong the bowmen stood,
All trained to bend the yew,
But with his fair five hundred
The Keith has bit them through.
Then Scotland bared her good broadsword 255
And baptised it in blood,
And Bannock Burn was swoll’n and red,
But not with rain or mud.
And when the men-at-arms assayed
Our bristling hedge of ash, 260
’Twas such a crash of spears that men
For miles could hear the crash.

Even the base followers of the camp,
Debarred the grace of fight,
No sooner heard the crash of spears 265
Than they, too, came in sight;
Came trooping up the weather-gleam
And fringed the Gillies' Hill,
Arriving like a fresher force
To chase, if not to kill. 270
"A second host!" King Edward cried,
"And mine is almost gone."
"Nay, sire," De Valence said, "The Scots
To-day will need but one."

For each man fought as boors might work 275
In harvest-time or spring —
'Twas the spring-time of liberty,
But hate's ingathering —
Till on the uneven and pitted ground
With calthrops thickly sown, 280
A crop of staggering cavaliers
And plunging steeds was mown;
Till Hereford had turned his rein,
Till Gloster's heart was cold —
Brave Gloster's deathbed shall be called 285
For aye the Bloody Fold —
Till knightly D'Argentine had urged
The Southern King away,
Brave D'Argentine whose one good sword
Almost renewed the fray! 290
Till home-fast boys and screaming girls
Beheld, at Ingram's Crook,
Balls of red foam and trunkless heads
Slow sailing down the brook!
The very winds were vocal, 295
The dumb hills seemed to cry,
"Your bairns are sleeping at our feet,
Ho! save your homes or die."
And saved they were and safe they are,
And shall be safe and free, 300
For Right was Might at Bannock Burn, —
To God all Glory be!

That night by Ninian's sleepless monks
 Many a prayer was said;
 That night the trophied tidings brought 305
 Sweet dreams to wife and maid;
 That night we bound the wounded up,
 To-morrow hid the slain;
 One short hour reckoned up our loss,
 All time shall count the gain. 310
 For 'tis a story to be held
 In memory for aye,
 How lord and vassal knelt and prayed —
 Though not as bedesmen pray,
 How lord and vassal rose and fought 315
 As ne'er was fought before,
 And how the burn was choked with knights,
 And the marsh half-filled with gore,
 And how the Northern Star arose
 And sank the Southern Star, 320
 And how the braggart Southern King
 Did ride to reach Dunbar!

Oh, luckless, luckless King, that broke
 The barb of Edward's name!
 Oh, starless breast that came so far 325
 And found so little fame!
 Ah, well for thee hadst thou been left
 With Gloster on the plain!
 Thou goest to gall a noble steed,
 A steed thou canst not rein. 330
 Thou goest, O luckless, luckless King,
 To Favouritism's foul breath,
 To trust a courtier's puny arm,
 To Berkeley's horrid death!
 And England's wide and motley realm 335
 Holds not so poor a thing
 As thine anointed, witless head,
 O luckless, luckless King!

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