Two reasons prompted the choice of my subject this evening. The invitation to address this learned Society—an honour I deeply appreciate—arose out of a recently published paper on Old-time Leprosy in these islands, therefore some development of this theme seemed appropriate; and the particular point for discussion was determined when several persons, interested in the said paper, expressed regret that Bruce's alleged leprosy had received no notice there. Consequently I propose to consider the evidence on which, from the fourteenth century until to-day, this great monarch has been adjudged a leper.

For several years before his death Bruce is known to have been in failing health, attributed to continued exposure, fatigue and privation endured when a hunted fugitive, and which certainly were severe enough to undermine the health of any man. Even as early as the winter of 1307 he lay grievously sick from some malady ascribed at the time to the hardships he had undergone. However this may be, so far as I know there is no imputation of leprosy by any Scottish historical writer of the fourteenth century.

When an old chronicler treats of events of his own times, naturally he deserves a respectful hearing, and if his account is found to be confirmed by State papers, or by some independent contemporary writer, the historical

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1 An address delivered to the Section of the History of Medicine, Royal Society of Medicine, and printed by permission.
2 Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps, xliv, 6.
value of his record is enhanced accordingly. But it is well to remember that in Bruce's day—and indeed for three hundred years afterwards—State archives were impenetrably guarded, and were inaccessible for consultation by historians. Consequently the materials for reconstructing past history were lacking, even if the method had been understood, and an honest chronicler writing of times gone by was reduced to copying what someone else had left on record, and so cannot be reckoned an independent authority on events lying beyond his own ken.

There were three original writers who had ample opportunity for collecting accurate information regarding Robert Bruce from his comrades and others who had lived and served with him, and who rank as historical authorities for this period. They are: John of Fordun; John Barbour; and Andrew of Wyntoun.

John of Fordun, author of the Scotichronicon, makes no mention of any disease, and so may be dismissed at once.

John Barbour composed that immortal and heart-stirring epic, The Brus, where he preserves so many details of King Robert's wars and adventures which otherwise would be unknown. In the earlier portion of the poem Barbour takes deliberate advantage of poetic license, but from the beginning of the War of Independence, and onwards, the work becomes a valuable record, and, in Bain's words, "in all essential points stands the test of historical criticism." ¹ Barbour does not mention leprosy. He says the fatal illness began as a "founder" caused by the King's "cold lying" in his time of trouble.² Which may, or may not, be true; oracular status, it appears, is reserved for mediæval historians who wrote in Latin.

In his rhymed Orygynale Cronykil, Andrew of Wyntoun merely relates that the King "lay in lang seckness," and that "hys lattyr day he closyd in gratyous state".

If King Robert had suffered from leprosy, or from any ill which then would have been regarded as leprosy, the fact would have been common knowledge throughout Scotland—where Bruce had many enemies—and it is difficult to see what Barbour and Wyntoun could gain by suppressing

¹ Bain, J., Calendar of Documents relating to Scotland preserved in H.M. Public Record Office, III, Introduction.
² Maxwell points out an interesting example of Barbour's singular accuracy. Barbour says that John of Lorn led "800 men and more" to aid the English Viceroy, De Valence. De Valence's warrant, discovered in the State records, authorizes payment to John of Lorn for 822 men. Robert the Bruce, 152.
³ "For ane male efs tuk hym so sare, That he on na vifs mycht be thar. [i.e., the Prince's wedding.]
   His mail efs of ane fundying
   Begouth; for, throu his cald lying,
   Qheten in his gret myschef wes he,
   Him fell that herd perplexite." [i.e., his mortal sickness].

The Brus. Skeat's ed., Bk. XX, 74.
the name of his malady. There seems to have been no deliberate avoidance of the subject from reasons of national pride, for the story is freely repeated by later Scottish writers in their adaptations of earlier records, native or foreign.

Bruce's leprosy is found recorded in two connexions only. First, to explain his action in appointing Moray and Douglas to command the Weardale expedition (1327) in his stead; and, second, as the cause of the monarch's death, some two years later.

The earliest mention of the disease, which I have been able to trace, occurs in the Chronicon de Lanercost. This general history of England and Scotland, from 1201-1346, is attributed to an unknown Franciscan monk of Carlisle. In spite of some natural bias against the Scots, the chronicle is a valued contemporary authority and throws much light on the War of Independence, more especially as in some instances the author was an eye-witness of the events he describes.

According to the Chronicon, Bruce deputed the command of the army during the Weardale campaign "because he had become leprous" (Dominus autem Robertus de Brus, quia factus fuerat leprosus, illa vice cum eis Angliam non intravit); and the assertion of leprosy is repeated in the notice of the king's death (Mortuus est dominus Robertus de Brus, rex Scotiae, leprosus). One may point out in passing that the clerk of Lanercost would have written "rex Scotorum," and not "rex Scotiae," if he had possessed any knowledge of Scottish state affairs.

The delightful old French chronicler Froissart—who travelled for six months in Scotland some thirty-odd years after Bruce's death—follows the account given above. He explains that King Robert, "who had been most valiant," nominated Moray and Douglas to command the Scottish army in this campaign, because he "was then very old and stricken with leprosy" (qui etoit mout preux etoit adonc mout vieux et charge de la grosse maladie). He too attributes Bruce's death to this disease, incidentally misdating the king's decease by a year.

There is no chronicle which tells us anything more than the two just quoted, and most relate less. As already mentioned, the Scottish authors authoritative for the period are silent. I have encountered only one other contemporary original record of Bruce's leprosy; this occurs in the Chronicon of Walter de Hemingburgh, a cleric of Gisborougb, Yorkshire. Like the clerk of Lanercost, he too lived in an enemy country where

1 Chronicon de Lanercost; Maitland Club; 259.
2 Ibid., 264.
3 Chroniques de Froissart; Buchon; I, 79. "La grosse maladie" does not appear to have been a current French phrase. Presumably it is intended to translate "Elephantia," a term for leprosy and mange. See "Old-time Leprosy," loc. cit., 416, footnote.
4 Froissart, ibid., 113.
accurate information regarding this devil incarnate—as these good monks regarded Bruce—was not easily come by. The grotesque stories recorded of the German Emperor during the late war will not be cited as evidence by serious writers of the future; at least we trust not.

I do not propose to quote from the later chroniclers, for a multiplicity of such accounts adds nothing to the weight of evidence. These scribes had no personal knowledge of the matter, and were content, with the pathetic faith of their kind, to copy without question whatever their predecessors had written down.¹

It seems advisable to give a short descriptive note on the Weardale campaign before going on to explain the true reason for Bruce’s absence.

Some days before June 15, 1327, the Scottish forces under the Earl of Moray and Sir James of Douglas crossed the Border. They harried and wasted in Northumberland and Westmoreland, and finally established contact with the main English army in Weardale, Durham. Here it was that Douglas carried out a famous exploit, one night in August. At the head of 200 picked horsemen, one half carrying swords, and the remainder spears, he approached the enemy lines. He went on alone, passing the outposts by impersonating an English officer, and then, followed by the cavalry, charged the camp at a gallop. The swordsmen cut the tent ropes as they passed, and the spearmen stabbed through the fallen tents. Douglas rode straight for King Edward’s pavilion, and almost succeeded in capturing the king, but in the darkness and uproar Edward made good his escape, and the Scots withdrew to their lines with small loss. Later in the month the Scottish armies returned across the Border, in John of Fordun’s words, safe and sound.

Bruce was absent from the Weardale expedition not through leprosy, or any other disease, but because he had gone to Ireland in an attempt to

¹ In this connexion we find Walsingham’s Historia Anglicana and the Ypodigma Neustriae (early 15th century texts) cited as independent witnesses in support of Hemingburgh. But throughout the period that interests us the Historia is copied from Hemingburgh, paragraph by paragraph, usually without alteration of a single word. The Ypodigma, too, borrows from Hemingburgh, though in a less whole-hearted fashion. But, apart from this, the Ypodigma is discredited as an independent witness, because Walsingham wrote both the Historia Anglicana and the Ypodigma. But this is not the most extreme development of the literalist conception of proof, for the imaginative Hector Boece (born about 1465), is quoted as confirmatory evidence, although his historical fabrications excited derision even in his own credulous age. Leland, a contemporary, writes of him:—

"Hectoris historici tot quot mendacia scripsit,
Si vis ut numerem, lector amice, tibi,
Me jubeas etiam fluctus numerare marinos,
Et liquidi stellas connumbare poit."

And to this goodly fellowship of witnesses is added William Stewart, whose Buch of the Chroniklis of Scotland is merely a translation of the egregious Hector Boece.
create a diversion there. Two documents discovered by Bain amongst the State papers in the Public Record Office put this beyond question. The first is an Indenture between Robert, King of Scotland, and Henry de Maundeville, Seneschal of Ulster, whereby the King grants a truce to the Ulstermen for a year in return for 100 cendres of wheat and 100 cendres of barley, Scottish measure, to be delivered free in the haven of Ulringfrith, one half at Martinmas, and the other at Whitsunday following. The Irish of Ulster who adhere to the said King being included in the truce. The seals of the said King and the said Henry appended. This is dated at Glendouyn [Glendun, co. Antrim], July 12, 1327.

Clearly Bruce’s enterprise came to naught, or more would be known of it, and for the same reason there can have been little or no fighting...

The second of these documents confirms the first, and shows further that some bargain unfulfilled by the Ulstermen caused the failure. This paper is a petition to Edward III by John le fitz William Jordan of Ireland, showing how he was promised £100 of land in Ireland for his good service to the King in 1327, when Sir Robert de Bruys was balked of his design on arriving in Ireland, by breach of agreement (par faux covine), as shown in a return before the King in 1332 when £50 was granted him for life. The petition is endorsed: “Let him have letters patent for £50 for life and the £13 in Ireland to their best judgment.”

However Bruce’s scheme may have been frustrated, the English authorities clearly rated the petitioner’s services very highly when they awarded him this large pension, translated into present-day values.

So much for the “leprosy” which detained Bruce in Scotland.

The assertion of leprosy in connexion with the monarch’s death is not as easily disposed of as the Weardale fable, but I believe it is no better founded. King Robert returned home after his fruitless Irish mission, and later in the same year the Scots crossed the Border again in three armies. One of these, led by Bruce himself, carried fire and sword far into Northumberland and Durham until the terror-stricken inhabitants offered an indemnity if the Scots would only refrain from harrying their districts for one year. Truly a notable military ascendancy for a force captained by a leper within some eighteen months of his death!

The events of Bruce’s declining years, and the circumstances of his last illness and moving end, lend no support to the belief that he was afflicted either with leprosy or with any of the dozen ailments, more or less, which

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1 The “King of Scotland” shows that the Indenture was engrossed by some clerk not of Bruce’s party.
2 Larne, co. Antrim.
3 Bain, op. cit., III, 167, and introduction.
Some Notes on Old-time Leprosy

then were confused with that disease. King Robert's health was broken, but he still continued to direct affairs of state. At last peace had been made with England, and in confirmation thereof a marriage took place between the Scottish heir, aged four, and Princess Joan, aged six, sister of Edward III. Bruce was too ill to undertake the trying journey to Berwick, where the marriage was solemnized on July 12, 1328, but the quaint bridal pair visited him at Cardross after the ceremony. Later in the year King Robert was well enough to journey to Edinburgh, where he attended Parliament, and in great state crowned, with his own hands, says Barbour; his son and Princess Joan. Such an act on the part of a leper—spreading infection, as was believed, by his breath and touch—would have been an infamous outrage in the 14th century.

Although the King made Cardross his headquarters he did not live in retirement there, but travelled about his country as necessity required. He visited Galloway within nine weeks of his death, staying at Glenluce on March 29. Returning to Cardross Castle Bruce transacted public business there as late as May 11. When the end was near, "all the lords of the country" were summoned to Cardross, and there, surrounded by his nobles, Robert de Brus, King of Scots, passed peacefully away, on June 7, 1329, one month before his fifty-fifth birthday.

The death-bed scene, the charge to bear the royal heart to the Holy-land—"Since therefore that my body cannot go to achieve what my heart desires, I will send my heart in the stead of my body to accomplish my vow"—and Douglas's valiant attempt to fulfil the dying request, have become a fireside story. There is no hint here of the abhorred death-

There is a very significant paragraph in an Act of the Scottish Parliament, dated June 10, 1344, where King David (son of Robert the Bruce) speaks of the infant-body (offa) of John, his true brother (frater nostri germannus), as having been buried in Rostenot (Restennet). David was five years old when his father died, and if the words in the Act mean what they say, there was a still younger child, born therefore at a time when Bruce's supposed infection would have been far advanced. This is some evidence, of a medical nature, against the theory that Bruce suffered from true leprosy. It is strong evidence that in his own day he was not even believed to be leprous. Leprosy was not a valid cause for divorce in Scotland, but in those times the disease was held to be, amongst other modes of transmission, a lues venerea.

I know of no other record of this John, but the omission of any reference in the chronicles is quite intelligible. The child was not the heir, and his existence, very brief from the wording of the Act, would not merit an entry.

Maxwell, op. cit., 354, writing in quite another connexion, accepts the fact of this child's birth without question. He says: "Subsequently a younger son, John, was born, but he died in infancy, and was buried in Restennet."

The curious will find the above-mentioned reference in Acts of the Parliament of Scotland, I, 514.

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2 Maxwell, op. cit., 354.

3 Maxwell; op. cit., 338.

4 Froissart.
chamber of one smitten with what the age called, that abominable blemish, the foul contagion of leprosy.

An inquiry into the long feud between Bruce and the Vatican discloses evidence which to my mind disproves the leprosy legend.

The awful sentence of the major excommunication was first pronounced on Robert Bruce as early as 1306, on account of his rebellion and for his sacrilegious stabbing of Red John Comyn—a rival claimant to the crown—in the church of the Grey Friars, Dumfries. To the idea of the fourteenth century, the sacrilege was infinitely the most reprehensible part of this fatal encounter.

On the grounds that he treated this sentence with contempt, and "damnably persevered in iniquity," the following year a bull issued by Pope Clement V was promulgated "with candles lighted, and bells rung" excommunicating "most fearfully, Robert de Brus, with his adherents, as a man perjured and a wicked disturber of the common peace." This was grave enough in all conscience, but there was infinitely worse to come. Edward II, having been heavily defeated and desiring peace, in 1317 besought the assistance of the then Pope, John XXII, to bring the Scots to reason. But in his laudable desire to prevent further bloodshed, the Pope attempted the impossible. The English would not suffer the humiliation of according royal dignity to "the rebel, Robert de Brus, late Earl of Carrick," and the Scots would not make peace until his sovereignty was acknowledged. The Pope tried to bridge this impassable gulf by addressing himself to "Robert de Brus, governing in Scotland." But Bruce would not compromise. He was King of Scots, or nothing; and refused to publish the papal bull decreeing a truce, brought to England by the Cardinals Luke and Guacelin armed with absolute powers of excommunication against all who might deserve it. Representives of the Papal Legates waited on Bruce in the hope of winning him over from his obduracy—a triumph of hope over experience not justified in the event. Bruce received them graciously but refused to open the sealed letters from the Pope, pointing out, with assumed ingenuousness, that they were not addressed to "The King of Scots," and so it would ill become him to open letters possibly intended for some other Robert de Brus, a name common in Scotland. After further fruitless discussion, the papal deputies returned to England.

The Cardinals then unwisely decided to have the bull proclaimed in Scotland without Bruce's authority, and dispatched a cleric named Andrew Newton on this hazardous enterprise. Newton attempted to obtain an audience with Bruce, then near the Border. This was denied him. Becoming alarmed, he then asked for a safe-conduct back to Berwick. This, too, Bruce refused, and ordered the papal agent to leave Scotland.

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1 Walter de Hemingburgh; Chronicon, Hamilton, II, 253.
Some Notes on Old-time Leprosy

forthwith. On the road to Berwick, Newton was attacked, stripped of his clothing, and the Pope’s missives torn in pieces.

The consequences of this outrage are set out in the following passage translated from the Chronicon de Lanercost: "The Cardinals ... wrote to all the prelates of England that in every mass, both on ordinary days and holy days, they should thrice denounce Robert de Bruse with all his counsellors and adherents as excommunicate; and on the Pope’s behalf they proclaimed him detestable and bereft of all honour, and placed all his lands and the lands of all his adherents under ecclesiastical interdict, and decreed the children of all his adherents to the second generation incapable of holding any ecclesiastical office or benefice. Also against all prelates of Scotland, and all clerics, whether exempt or non-exempt, adhering to the said Robert or showing him favour, they promulgated sentence of excommunication and interdict. Howbeit the Scots, stubborn in pertinacity, cared for no excommunication, neither would they give any heed to the interdict." ¹

The dread sentences decreed by the Papal Legates were confirmed by the Pope himself; "nevertheless," says the clerk of Lanercost despairingly, "Robert de Bruse, caring nothing for this, continued in his contumacity, just as before."

In 1320 the Pope summoned Bruce to appear before his court at Avignon. He refused. Another mandate was launched against him, and this time the sentence of excommunication included the direction that in no circumstances was the ban to be lifted until Robert de Brus should be at the point of death.

The wax candles were lighted and extinguished, as ritual demanded, and the dread penalties recited in due form, but the outward and visible results amounted to exactly nothing. I assume that the ecclesiastics proclaiming these awful sentences dealt only with matters spiritual, and had no thought of the affairs of this world. But certainly that was not the view of the English laity, nor of the lesser sort of clerics, who confidently watched for some material sign of the divine displeasure.² But the louder the denunciations, and the fiercer the execrations, the more did Bruce’s temporal fortunes advance, and his cause flourish. And the English, who shed rivers of blood for twenty-two years rather than grant him the simple style of “King of Scots,” were forced to withdraw all pretention to the suzerainty of Scotland in a letter addressed by Edward III to, “The Magnificent Prince, Lord Robert de Broys, by the grace of God, Illustrious

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² In this connexion the Lanercost Chronicle has the reflection—obviously recorded between the advent of Edward Balliol and his overthrow—“Therefore it is not to be wondered at, that afterwards the heavy vengeance of God, in the appearance of a true heir of the realm, visited so rebellious a people whose head (I will not call him king but usurper) showed such contempt for the Keys of Holy Mother Church.”
King of Scots, our Ally and our most cherished Friend"! What a triumph to have pointed at this sacrilegious murderer, this contumacious rebel against Christ's Vice-gerent on earth, smitten with leprosy by the hand of God! It seems incredible that such a chance would not have been seized, and this judgment on Bruce proclaimed to all Europe.

King Robert's enemies—English and Scots—called him by every ill-name they could lay a tongue to—de Brus the Murderer, de Brus the Usurper, de Brus the Scottish Felon. And when they had exhausted their store of vituperation against the King, they turned on the infant prince—only five years old when his father died—and vilified the child in language so infamous and foul that even in the Latin one dare not repeat it. But in all this spate of calumny there is no word of de Brus the Leper. That alone would have been worth all the other epithets added together and multiplied to seventy times seven.  

Robert the Bruce's alleged leprosy is recorded in modern writings, first, as a point of pure historical interest; and second, in medical texts to illustrate the contemporary prevalence of that disease, then, and now, grossly exaggerated. The evidence for this contention is of the merest literalist nature, based solely on the employment of the word leprosus, and its equivalents, by lay writers in a hostile or foreign country. Even if it could be shown that those in contact with Bruce deemed him a leper—and there is no ascertainable evidence of any such belief—this alone would prove nothing, for psoriasis, pityriasis, tubercular lesions of the skin, and so forth, were then regarded as leprosy.

It seems likely that this story—repeated without challenge for six hundred years—originated in some attempt to explain Bruce's strange absence from the field of Weardale. The King of Scots was known to be ailing, yet in no peril of death. There may even have been some rumour of his mysterious disappearance from the Scottish Court. Leprosy—always a mediæval obsession—and a consequent retirement, would explain everything. The English authorities were well aware of Bruce's mission to Ireland, but this information, as we know, never reached these retired chroniclers. And the mortal leprosy legend when once written down in a

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2 An English state paper, dated as late as December 13, 1328—after the peace, and subsequent to the "Magnificent Prince" letter given above—confirms Hugh de Templiton, of Ireland, in possession of the estates forfeited by William de Say for his rebellion "in company of Robert de Bruys, Edward de Bruys and other Scottish felons in Ireland." Bain, op. cit., III, 173.
3 At this period feeling against lepers was running high, and nothing more is heard of "Christ's poor." It was solemnly asserted and believed that lepers on the Continent had leagued themselves with the Saracens, and were actively engaged in poisoning the Christians' wells. As a result of this grotesque libel some of these afflicted wretches were actually burned alive. See, inter alia, the Chronicon de Lanercost.
book put on immortality, and no power on earth could ever extirpate it—not though backed by candles lighted and bells rung. And so our modern text-books, in the direct line of this apostolic succession, make the bold assertion, "Robert Bruce died of leprosy in 1329."

The nameless clerk of Lanercost notes the death of King Robert the Bruce in these words: Mortuus est dominus Robertus de Brus, rex Scotiae, leprosus. A mean epitaph, wrong in setting out the deceased monarch's style, and mistaken, as I believe, in the disease recorded. We can see him penning "leprosus" with a malignant smirk, well content at the foul death of one who had been Anglorum Malleus.

Contrast the brave ring of John of Fordun; exact in the minor point of style he assigns no cause of death in the manner of Latin chroniclers who had nothing strange or untoward to relate: Obit piae memoriae Robertus de Brusse, rex Scotorum illustris, ultra omnes viventes suis diebus strenuus—"Robert de Brus, of pious memory, illustrious King of Scots, beyond all men living in his time a valiant knight."

1 Scotichronicon, Hist. Scot., series I, exliii.