

Deciphering the Past: Learning through the Medieval Land Charters of Scotland

By Dr. Susannah Ferreira

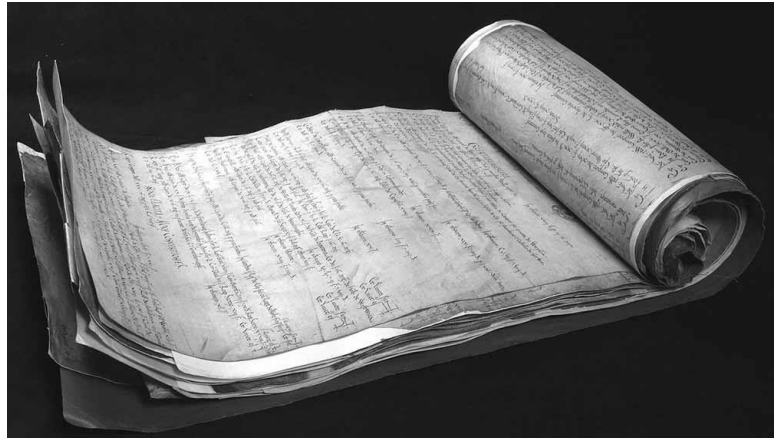
A year ago, I participated in what was (at least for me) an extraordinary teaching experiment. Melissa McAfee, a Special Collections librarian at the University of Guelph, had secured a spot in a unique program, “Manuscripts in the Curriculum,” sponsored by a rare book and manuscript dealer in Chicago, aimed to expose university students to the joys and challenges of working with original medieval manuscripts.

Thus, nine original medieval manuscripts were loaned to Archival and Special Collections and over the course of the semester, I witnessed the power that physical manuscripts had to inspire young adults to learn about medieval history.

In March, after our semester was curtailed by the pandemic and the treasures were packed away, Melissa and I began to feverishly discuss how we could recreate this exhilarating experience in future semesters.

As an historian of the late middle ages, I was vaguely aware that the McLaughlin Library housed a collection of medieval Scottish land charters. My colleague, Elizabeth Ewan, had regularly used them to teach her graduate students the rudiments of medieval paleography and familiarize them with the handwriting and cryptic abbreviations.

But as a specialist in fifteenth century Portuguese history, I knew little of the



Medieval Land Charter documents circa 1420

Scottish collections and was unaware of the extent of Guelph’s holdings and its potential for both teaching and research. But I soon learned that the twelve land charters found in the Campbell of Monzie collection and which date from 1332 to 1585 are perfectly suited for teaching at the undergraduate level. They have thus become the focus of a new course: “The Land Charters of Scotland.”

Ironically, the mission to have students connect with physical manuscripts has been hampered by the global pandemic. And yet remote teaching has brought some new opportunities. Over the summer, staff from Archival and Special Collections digitized a number of the land charters so that students can access them from home.

Although working with digital copies is far less satisfying than handling the ‘real thing’, digital transcription tools allow students to transcribe directly onto the image that they are working with—which is something like writing directly on top of a precious manuscript with a magic pencil.

Digital copies also allow for enlargement and image enhancement which can help with the process of deciphering the handwriting, especially where the ink has faded or where the parchment has been damaged.

Online dictionaries that can help students to translate the Latin and Scots are also only a click away. Additionally, the ability for guest speakers to ‘zoom’ into the class, will allow Professor Cynthia Neville, a leading authority on medieval Scottish land charters, to walk the students through the sections of the Campbell of Monzie charters in detail.

An exciting feature of our Scottish land charter project is that it marks the University of Guelph’s entry into the emerging field of biocodicology (the biological analysis of manuscripts).

Using non-destructive techniques, developed at the University of North Carolina State, we plan to analyze the DNA of the parchment in hopes of learning more

about the cows or sheep who roamed the medieval Scottish countryside, and whose skins were used to make the parchment.

This research has the potential to tell us something about livestock diversity, disease and the environmental history of Scotland in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

In February, Dr. Timothy Stinson and Dr. Kelly Meiklejohn from the University of North Carolina State will speak to our students about their biocodicological research.

Later in the semester, we will send samples from eight charters to N. C. State for analysis. Partnering with faculty in the Ontario Agricultural College and other departments and centres on campus, we hope to be soon joining a handful of other universities involved in this line of research.

Though DNA analysis is an alluring part of the project, the results will only be meaningful if matched with standard historical research into the agricultural history of Scotland and the parchment-making industry.

Thanks to the ongoing generosity of the St. Andrew’s Society of Toronto and the St. Andrew’s Society of Montreal, the Centre for Scottish Studies has been able to offer internships and scholarships to seven different students engaged directly in this research.

It is anticipated that their findings will be shared at the annual Scottish Studies Colloquium in the fall of 2021, where we hope to have the medieval land charters on display. Although we will have by then completed a digital online exhibit, it is our sincerest hope that members of the Scottish Studies Foundation and other enthusiasts will be able to see these veritable treasures in real life. ■



Dr. Susannah Ferreira
Associate Professor,
University of Guelph