

BRAVEHEART

History or Myth?

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The public career of Sir William Wallace covered a mere two years of the First Scottish War of Independence, a conflict that lasted thirty-two years, from 1296 to 1328. Admittedly Wallace continued to resist the English occupation until his capture and execution in 1305. But Scotland would experience over twenty more years of fighting before the war was brought to a successful conclusion. It is all the more remarkable then that Wallace, a man whose career was so short and who was not even present to witness the achievement of Scottish independence, much less achieve it himself, should loom so large in the popular imagination. This legendary figure was brought to the big screen in 1995 by the famous Australian actor, Mel Gibson, who co-produced, directed, and starred in the film *Braveheart*. Given Wallace's brief and ultimately unsuccessful career, we are forced to ask why he should be chosen as the subject of a major motion picture.

Clearly the same factors that made him a legend in his own time make Wallace attractive as the central character of a film in our own age. At a time when Scotland's fortunes were at their lowest ebb and her natural leaders, the feudal nobility, had given up, William Wallace was one of the few individuals willing to resist English domination. In an age of nationalism, Wallace is a particularly admirable figure from a pre-nationalist age. Indeed, the tenacity of his apparent patriotism seems remarkably modern. Moreover, in a time when Post-War national liberation movements in the Third World are a not too distant memory, it is not difficult to see in *Braveheart* the English as the technologically superior European power attempting to retain their colony in primitive (read 'Third World') Scotland against a dedicated guerrilla army - the Viet Cong in kilts if you like. In this respect, is it merely a coincidence that the man behind the film, Mel Gibson, grew up in a former British colony Australia?

Another, related factor that has both sustained the memory of William Wallace and made it an attractive subject for a late-twentieth century film, is his role as the leader and defender of the underdog. Wallace drew most of his support from the commoners of Scotland,

rather than the nobility. The story of a champion of the common people is certainly one that is attractive well beyond the confines of Medieval Scotland. However, in our politically correct times, this story of a leader of a proletariat uprising against a foreign bourgeois (at a time when the native bourgeois was too wrapped up in their own greedy little interests to care about the fate of the country) was made to order. In short, Marx would have loved *Braveheart*.

Thus, the attraction of William Wallace is that he was a patriot and a social revolutionary. But was he? This paper will compare the motion picture *Braveheart* with what little we know about the historic William Wallace to determine how much of the film is based on history, and how much is based on myth (as well as what *Braveheart* itself adds on to the legend of Wallace). Perhaps more importantly, it will attempt to explain the reasons behind the film's particular portrayal of Wallace and his Scotland. To do so, the paper has been divided into four sections: origins of the First War of Independence, the Battle of Stirling Bridge, the invasion of Northern England, and the Battle of Falkirk.

The Origins of the First War of Independence

The movie begins with panoramic scenes of Scotland, identified by the label on the screen reading 'Scotland 1280 AD.' The narrator then explains:

"I shall tell you of William Wallace. Historians from England will say I'm a liar. But history is written by those who have hanged heroes. The King of Scotland had died without a son, and the King of England, a cruel pagan known as Edward the 'Long Shanks', claimed the throne of Scotland for himself. Scotland's nobles fought him and fought each other over the crown. So Long Shanks invited them to talk at a truce; no weapons, one page only. Among the farms of that shire was Malcolm Wallace: a commoner with his own lands. He had two sons: John and William."

The scene opens with Malcolm and his elder son John riding off to the location where the meeting was held, and telling the boy William not to follow (which, of course, he

does anyway). At the barn where the meeting took place Malcolm finds the nobles, along with their pages, hanging from the rafters, a sight also witnessed by the horrified William. Obviously the audience is meant to understand that William Wallace was acquainted with English treachery at a very young age.

The beginning of the film displays a number of problems that are present throughout the movie: gross over simplifications, critical omissions of information, a complete disregard for the chronology of events, and a vilification of the English, particularly the 'cruel pagan' King Edward I.¹ All of this is neatly justified by the narrator's opening remarks concerning historians. Because of their complicity with the crimes against 'heroes' such as Wallace, their version of the events cannot be trusted and, therefore, can be dismissed out of hand without a second thought (a philosophy that Mel Gibson seems to take to heart).

In reality, Scotland and England were not at war in the year 1280, primarily because King Alexander III of Scotland did not die until the year 1286, and even then it was ten

years before the two Kingdoms fell into open conflict. It is true that Alexander III died without a son and that, in the absence of an obvious heir to the throne, many Scottish nobles struggled to obtain the crown. But, with a few minor exceptions, these struggles were confined to legal arguments rather than combat. It was, however, the *threat* of civil war that led the Scots to request that King Edward I serve as the arbitrator of the opposing claims².

Needless to say Edward I, who had only recently conquered what was left of independent Wales, was hardly a disinterested party. England's relations with her northern neighbour had been one of occasional superiority, though largely in theory rather than fact. In the Treaty of Falaise in 1174, for instance, King William the Lion of Scotland did homage for his Kingdom to King Henry II of England. However, England never enforced its theoretical control over Scotland and fifteen years later, when Henry II's son, Richard the Lion Heart, needed to finance his crusade, he cancelled the treaty in return for a huge payment from the King of Scotland.³



Not surprisingly, Edward I took advantage of this golden opportunity by demanding that the candidates for the throne acknowledge him as their feudal superior before he would judge their claims. Obviously, anyone refusing to acknowledge Edward I as their superior could not expect a fair hearing of their case, so the thirteen claimants complied. The strongest claimants were from the heads of two Anglo-Norman families that had settled in Scotland: Robert Bruce of Annandale (the grandfather of the future King Robert Bruce II), and John Balliol of Galloway. Edward I judged John Balliol to have the strongest claim, so that he was crowned King of Scotland in 30 November, 1292. However, Edward I undermined John Balliol's authority by treating him as an ordinary feudal subordinate. The final straw was Edward I's demand of military service from John Balliol and his Kingdom when he went to war with France in 1294. Balliol responded by signing mutual defense treaties with France and Norway. Needless to say, Edward I was outraged, so that in 1296 he invaded Scotland and defeated the Scottish army at the Battle of Dunbar. John Balliol surrendered and was dismissed from his throne by Edward I, who annexed Scotland, garrisoning its castles with English troops.

The complete absence of King John Balliol from *Braveheart* may be the most significant omission of the entire film. Throughout the movie William Wallace is portrayed as fighting for the country of Scotland. When Wallace joins the Earl of Moray just before the Battle of Stirling Bridge, Moray demands homage as Wallace's superior, to which Wallace replies, "I give homage to Scotland." Thus, Wallace is portrayed as a patriot, something with which a modern audience can easily relate.

More importantly, Wallace is portrayed as a champion of the ideal of freedom. During the same scene preceding the Battle of Stirling Bridge, Wallace addresses the troops. "I see a whole army of my countrymen here in defiance of tyranny. You've come to fight as free men, and free you are." Later, Wallace, rebuking Scotland's squabbling nobles in the wake of his victory at Stirling Bridge, stated, "There's a difference between us. You think the people of this country exist to provide you with position. I think your positions exist to provide those people with freedom..." The contrast between Wallace's idealism and the base greed of the nobility is acknowledged later on by the future King of Scotland, Robert Bruce, in the wake of the defeat at the Battle of Falkirk: "Men fight for me because if they do not I throw them off my lands and I starve their wives and their children. Those men who bled the ground red at Falkirk, they fought for William Wallace and he fights for something I've never had."

Clearly, with its emphasis on Wallace as a champion of the cause of freedom, the film links together the themes of freedom with that of patriotism, further enabling the film audience to relate to the motives of the central character. In addition, by linking together the theme of freedom with a repeated criticism of the contemporary social order, Wallace is depicted as a social revolutionary, thus furthering his image as a man who was ahead of his time.

It is the absence of any mention of King John Balliol that allows these anachronistic distortions to stand unchallenged. Throughout his public career, Wallace repeatedly declared that his resistance to the English was in the name of his sovereign lord, King John Balliol.⁴ Granted, Balliol had surrendered his crown to Edward I after his defeat in 1296 and was kept under house arrest at Hertford by the King during Wallace's public career. In addition, most of the support Wallace received was from the common people, rather than the nobility. Nonetheless, Wallace was a tenacious supporter of John Balliol's monarchy and, thus, by implication, a supporter of the whole of the feudal order by which that monarchy was supported. This is not surprising since, contrary to the narrator's statements, William's father, Malcolm Wallace, was himself a minor knight and, thus, a member of the lowest order of nobility.⁵ Following his victory at the Battle of Stirling Bridge, William Wallace was knighted, an event that is included in the film.⁶ Wallace doubtlessly cared a great deal about the Kingdom of Scotland, but not as a patriot in the modern, nationalistic manner with which we are familiar. Similarly, he may have resented the inequities of his society, but there is nothing in his career or background to suggest that he was a social revolutionary.⁷

The absence of King John Balliol also serves to distort the relationship between William Wallace and the future King of Scotland, Robert Bruce, in *Braveheart*.⁸ Only by understanding that John Balliol represented the main obstacle to the Bruce dynasty occupying the throne of Scotland can we then understand the nature of the relationship between Robert Bruce and William Wallace. By extension, Wallace, as a staunch supporter of John Balliol, also represented an obstacle to the Bruces' winning of the crown.⁹ Thus, the Bruces were willing to side with anyone, including King Edward I, who opposed John Balliol and his supporters.

The self interest of the Bruce dynasty is effectively conveyed in the film through the character of Robert Bruce's father, who is portrayed (symbolically perhaps?) as having leprosy (something for which I have been unable to find confirmation). But the character of the son, the future King Robert Bruce I, a national hero in his own right, presents the film makers with a problem. They cannot vilify him, but they must find a way of reconciling his status as a Scottish hero with his occasional opposition to Wallace. Their solution is to portray Robert Bruce as a confused young man who is torn between joining Wallace for the sake of Scotland and obeying his father for the sake of the family's interests. In the film it is Wallace's example of unflinching patriotism that ultimately inspires Robert Bruce to lead the Scottish army to victory at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314, an event that serves as the conclusion of the film. Given the historic relationship between Wallace and Bruce, the notion of Wallace serving as Robert Bruce's inspiration is entirely anachronistic. No less than his grandfather and father, the historic Robert Bruce was a hard headed pragmatist who could be ruthless when necessary.¹⁰ By portraying him as a confused youth the film avoids this unpleasant reality and

ultimately reconciles the national hero figure of Wallace with the national hero figure of Bruce.

Lastly, it should be noted that the event concerning the hanging of a group of Scottish nobles and their pages in a barn is a good example of the film makers' complete disregard for the historical chronology of events. This incident, known as 'The Barns of Ayr' (Ayr being the shire in which it occurred), is described in both Blind Harry's epic poem of William Wallace, *The Wallace*, and John Barbour's epic poem of Robert Bruce, *The Brus*.¹¹ According to these works, the event did indeed occur in Ayrshire, Wallace's place of birth. But it occurred in the year 1297, the year of Wallace's victory at Stirling Bridge. Assuming that Wallace was born in 1272 (estimates vary between 1260 and 1278), he would have been twenty-five years old when this atrocity was committed, rather than ten years old, as depicted in the film.¹² Thus it could not have had any impact on his childhood.

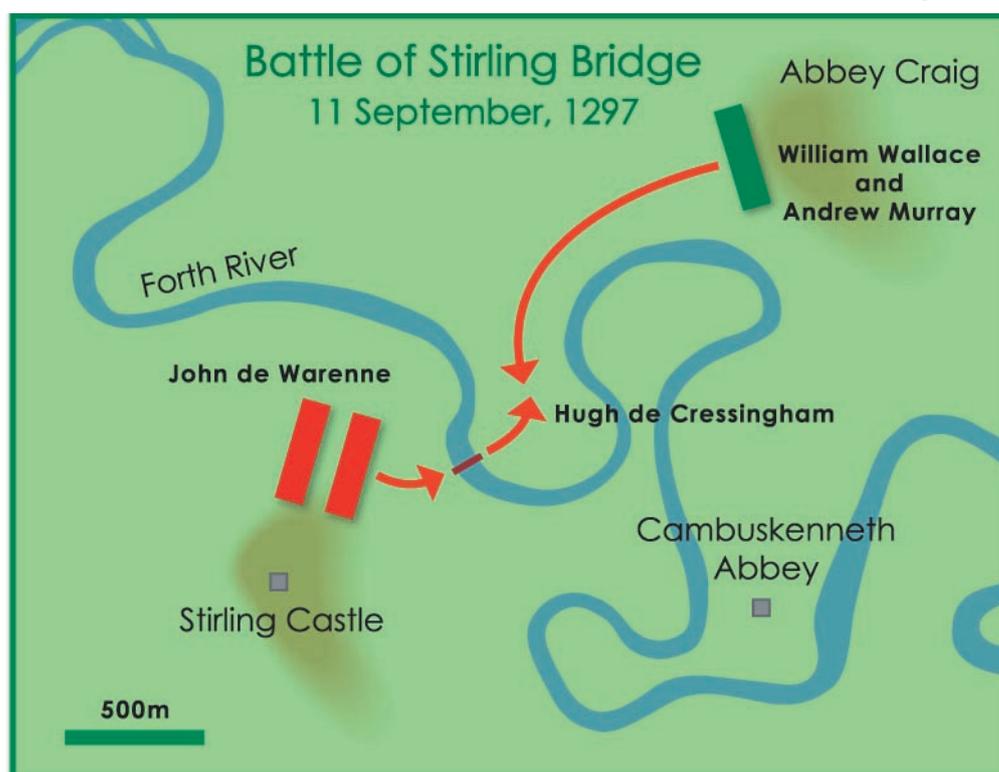
The Battle of Stirling Bridge, 1297

The Battle of Stirling Bridge is depicted on the screen with an opening scene showing the Scottish Army arrayed in a field, waiting to meet the English forces, which march into view and halt opposite the Scottish lines. The Scottish nobles, particularly Andrew Murray, the Earl of Moray, attempt to sue for terms with the commanders of the English army, John de Warenne and Hugh de Cressingham, but the latter are put off by Wallace's taunting. Having decided to stand and fight, Wallace now instructs Murray that on his signal he is to take his cavalry to the rear in order to make a surprise attack on the English flank. Meanwhile, it is hoped that the apparent withdrawal of the Scottish cavalry will encourage the English to advance, in the belief that the Scots are attempting to escape. The English begin the battle with volleys of arrows from their archers. Wallace signals Murray to lead his cavalry away,

which has the desired effect of convincing the English that the Scots are in retreat, so that the archers move aside to allow the cavalry to deliver a charge. Just before the English cavalry collides with the Scottish line, the Scots drop their swords and axes, and pick up long poles with sharpened points, upon which the cavalry horses are impaled. Their cavalry repulsed, the English now send forward their infantry, which the Scots charge forward to meet. As the opposing foot soldiers are grappling in the centre of the field, Murray's cavalry launches its attack on the flank of the remaining English troops, the archers, who are easily slaughtered, precipitating the rout of the entire English army.

Unfortunately, this version of the Battle of Stirling Bridge bears absolutely no relation to contemporary descriptions of the engagement. The central feature, indeed, the reason for the battle, was the Forth River, an obstacle that cut across the main north-south route along the Eastern coast of Scotland. The bridge at Stirling provided access across the Forth. North of the Forth Wallace's revolt had met with great success, having managed to overcome most of the English garrisons. Edward I assigned John de Warenne and Hugh de Cressingham the task of crushing this rebellion and reimposing English rule north of the Forth. In order to do so they would have to cross the bridge at Stirling and, conversely, in order to defend the territory north of the Forth, Wallace would have to prevent them from getting across.¹³ The combined forces of William Wallace and Andrew Murray (who was leading his own rebellion against the English in the north of Scotland) were assembled in the wooded slopes on the northern side of the Forth, above the location of the bridge.¹⁴ When John de Warenne and Hugh de Cressingham arrived, they found a bridge so narrow that it could only accommodate two knights abreast, which meant that it would take a considerable amount of time to bring the entire English army across. A Scottish

knight in the English army (one of many), Richard Lundy, suggested that they use a much wider ford located upriver, but Warenne and Cressingham turned down this option, as they were concerned that any delay would allow the Scots to escape.¹⁵ Once the vanguard of the English army had crossed the bridge, the Scots came streaming down the slope. Outnumbered, the English were quickly hemmed in by the mass of Scottish spearmen. With no room to manoeuvre, much less deliver a charge, the English cavalry was rendered helpless. As the English attempted to retreat, the bridge, either through stress or a Scottish stratagem, collapsed, dooming the rest of the vanguard to certain slaughter.¹⁶



It is unclear why Mel Gibson chose to replace the features of the historic Battle of Stirling Bridge with those of a wholly fictitious engagement. The cost and the mechanics of filming Medieval battle scenes may have played a role. But the difficulties in filming the scenes of battle in the film were themselves overcome and, in fact, the depiction of the engagement that was used seems far more complicated than the course of events that made up the actual battle. While aesthetics may have played a role as well, would not the collapse of a wooden bridge with English cavalry and foot soldiers spilling off of it have made for an equally, if not more dramatic scene? One is left to conclude that the producer/director chose to throw accuracy to the wind and indulge his own fantasies.

One of the most interesting features of the film's version of the battle is its depiction of William Wallace's invention of a tactical formation known as the 'schiltrom.' Talking with his compatriots around a camp fire in their forest refuge, the following conversation unfolds:

Wallace, "You know eventually Long Shanks [Edward I] will send his whole northern army against us."

Hamish's Father, "Heavy cavalry, armored horse, shake the very ground."

Hamish, "They'll ride right over us."

Wallace, "Uncle Argyll used to talk about it, how no army had ever stood up to the charge of heavy horse."

Hamish, "So what do we do?"

Hamish's Father, "Let's run and hide, the highland way."

Wallace, glancing up at the tall, straight trees around them, "Or make spears, hundreds of them. Long spears, twice as long as a man."

The concerns of Wallace's men are echoed by the English commander at the Battle of Stirling Bridge who, when Murray and the other nobles are trying to sue for terms, states, "You are outmatched; you have no heavy cavalry. In two centuries no army has won without it" (clearly a man who knows his military history!). This statement of the superiority of heavy cavalry, that is, mounted knights, is an oversimplification. As recent studies have demonstrated, medieval armies generally won when their commanders effectively coordinated the efforts of their knights and their foot soldiers (something which, ironically, is suggested in the battle scenes of *Braveheart*). In addition, there are numerous examples of infantry succeeding in repulsing the charge of knights in the centuries before Wallace's victory at Stirling Bridge.¹⁷ The 'schiltrom', primarily a defensive formation, was not used at the actual Battle of Stirling Bridge, an engagement that had more features in common with an ambush than with the type of formal battle depicted in the movie. The first recorded appearance of the 'schiltrom' is at Wallace's next major engagement, the Battle of Falkirk in 1298, though there is good reason to believe that such a formation, or something very like it, had been in use in Scotland centuries before the birth of William Wallace.

Because of the poverty of Scotland, the traditional weapon of Scottish commoners throughout the Middle Ages was the spear. Long before Wallace there is evidence to suggest that the Scots, and their predecessors, the Picts, employed unusually long spears. The eighth century Aberlemno stone, which is now believed to depict the Picts' victory over the Anglo-Saxons at the Battle of Nechtanesmere in 685, shows a group of Pictish warriors in 'close' formation.¹⁸ The second and third figure from the front are armed with spears, the second man's spear projecting beyond, and thus protecting, the first man (who is armed with a sword) from a mounted Anglo-Saxon warrior. Contemporary accounts of Scottish troops from



a much later period (thus closer to the time of Wallace) relate the unusual length of Scottish spears. At the Battle of Northallerton (also known as the Battle of the Standard) in 1138, the Scots are described as being armed with 'lances of extraordinary length', while an account of troops from Galloway in 1173 mentions them, "holding their long spears aloft like a standard when advancing to battle."¹⁹

At the risk of committing my own oversimplification, it is safe to say that weapons generally dictate tactics. Long spears would not have been of much use on the defensive in an 'open' formation, because the space between individual soldiers would allow enemy troops to get around one's spearpoint and some to grips with the individual holding the spear. Rather, their strength is in numbers, used in 'close' formation, so that the enemy is presented with an impassable wall of spearpoints. Thus, given that the Scots appear to have traditionally used long spears and that a tight formation is the most obvious choice for their effective use, it seems probable that something like the 'schiltrom' was employed long before William Wallace.

The Invasion of Northern England, 1297

In the wake of his impressive victory at Stirling Bridge, William Wallace decided to bring the war to the enemy's country and launched an invasion (perhaps 'raid' would be a more accurate term) of Northern England. When examining the depiction of Wallace's invasion of Northern England in *Braveheart*, we move from the realm of distortion to that of pure fantasy. Wallace besieges the

'greatest city in Northern England', which we eventually learn is York. Using a battering ram, he manages to break through the doors and capture the city, sending the head of its commander back to Edward I in a basket. The night-time scenes of the Scots pushing their battering ram, partially set alight by burning oil poured upon it by the defenders, against the huge wooden doors of York are undeniably spectacular. Unfortunately, they are also a complete fiction.

Wallace actually did raid England after Stirling Bridge, but he went nowhere near the city of York, much less capturing what was indeed the 'greatest city of Northern England.' It is precisely because of York's greatness that the Scots would not have attempted to capture it. Wallace's army was, at best, capable of storming poorly defended towns. They lacked the capacity to conduct the sort of siege that York would have required; specifically, heavy siege engines and, more importantly, the experience to use them. This is shown by Wallace's inability to capture the city of Carlisle, located on the western end of the Anglo-Scottish border, or the city of Newcastle on the east coast.²⁰ Those towns whose defenses he was able to overcome, however, Wallace's army did capture and sack, putting many of the civilians to the sword.

This raises the question of the depiction of brutality in the film. In one incident during his career as a guerrilla leader before his victory at Stirling Bridge, Wallace and his men, disguised as English troops, capture a small enemy fortress. Wallace kills the garrison commander for his crimes against the people, but he spares the rest of the garrison, telling them to return to England. This is contrary to the actual accounts of William Wallace's treatment of the English. To be sure, the English chroniclers naturally paint him as a pitiless monster, the author of a thousand atrocities; "He was an ogre of unspeakable depravity who skinned his prisoners alive, burned babies and forced the nuns to dance naked for him."²¹ Nonetheless, even those works that praise him state that Wallace routinely slaughtered the garrisons of English strongholds, though he allowed the women and children to leave in peace.²² During his raid into Northern England his troops must have committed numerous atrocities of the same sort that had been inflicted upon Scotland by the English.

Mel Gibson does not flinch from the brutality of medieval combat (indeed, judging by how frequently and graphically it is depicted upon the screen, one might say that he revels in it!), so why is Wallace depicted as such a merciful figure? The answer is obvious; there must be something to distinguish the Scots from their English foes to demonstrate to the audience who is in the right and who are the villains. This is why Wallace, who kills innumerable Englishmen in battle, is not shown slaughtering them in cold blood, as was his practice. The mass killing of men in cold blood is simply beyond the pale of what a late-twentieth century audience will accept from their heroes. Similarly, this is probably why the actual sacking of the city of York is not depicted in the film.

This portion of the movie involves a fiction that is even

more outrageous than the capture of York. Upon learning of the sack of York, Edward I decides to send his son's wife, Princess Isabella from France, to meet with Wallace in an effort to buy him off. Edward I would have sent his son, the future King Edward II, but he is depicted in the film as a homosexual weakling, incapable of managing anything. It is the presumed homosexuality of Prince Edward that leads Isabella to become enchanted with the figure of Wallace, through tales of his struggle to avenge his wife's murder by the English (the wife of the historic Wallace actually does seem to have been killed by the English).²³ In their meeting, Isabella finds Wallace an intriguing figure, a 'real' man, as opposed to her effeminate husband. Later in the film they meet again and make love, so that we are led to believe that the future King Edward III was actually the illegitimate son of William Wallace! Among the countless problems with such a story is the simple fact that this Princess who was sent to negotiate with Wallace did not set foot in England until three years after Wallace's execution and, in the year 1297, when Wallace is supposed to have captured York, she would have been only one year old! Isabella did indeed marry Prince Edward, as depicted in the film, but at the age of twelve in the year 1308, three years after Wallace's death.²⁴ Again, the motives on the part of the producer/director are obvious. A romantic interest is needed to take the place of Wallace's wife after her murder. In addition, the relationship between Wallace and Isabella is yet another means by which the film seeks to contrast the basic goodness of Scotland, in the form of Wallace's healthy sexual relations with women, with the basic evil of England, in the guise of Prince Edward's homosexuality. Patriotism and Queer-bashing all rolled into one.

The Battle of Falkirk, 1298

After Isabella returns to tell Edward I that Wallace had refused the bribes he had offered him, the audience is informed that Isabella's diplomatic mission was a ploy to buy time for the King to send various forces into Scotland in order to trap Wallace in the south. Welsh archers have marched around his flank northwards, Irish troops have arrived on the southwest coast of Scotland, and English troops from France have landed near Edinburgh, where these forces plan to converge. Angered at having been used to trick Wallace, with whom she has fallen in love, Isabella sends a messenger to inform him of Edward I's plans.

As with Stirling Bridge, the opening scene for the Battle of Falkirk displays the opposing armies arrayed in line upon a field, facing one another. One of his subordinates suggests the King begin by using his archers. Edward I coldly replies, "Arrows cost money. Use up the Irish, the dead cost nothing." The English Infantry move forward with the Irish in front, followed by the English cavalry. The opposing lines of Irish and Scottish infantry rush towards one another, only to halt and exchange greetings, the Irish deserting to fight alongside the Scots. The Scots then shoot fire arrows at the English troops, which sets the previously oil soaked ground on fire. Wallace signals the

nobles to launch their cavalry in an attack that, hopefully, will serve as a fatal blow to the English army. Instead the nobles desert, taking their cavalry with them, Edward I having bribed them ahead of time. Edward I then orders his archers to fire on the Scots who are locked in combat with his infantry, heedless of the safety of his own troops. This is followed by his commitment of the reserves, which overwhelm the Scottish army.

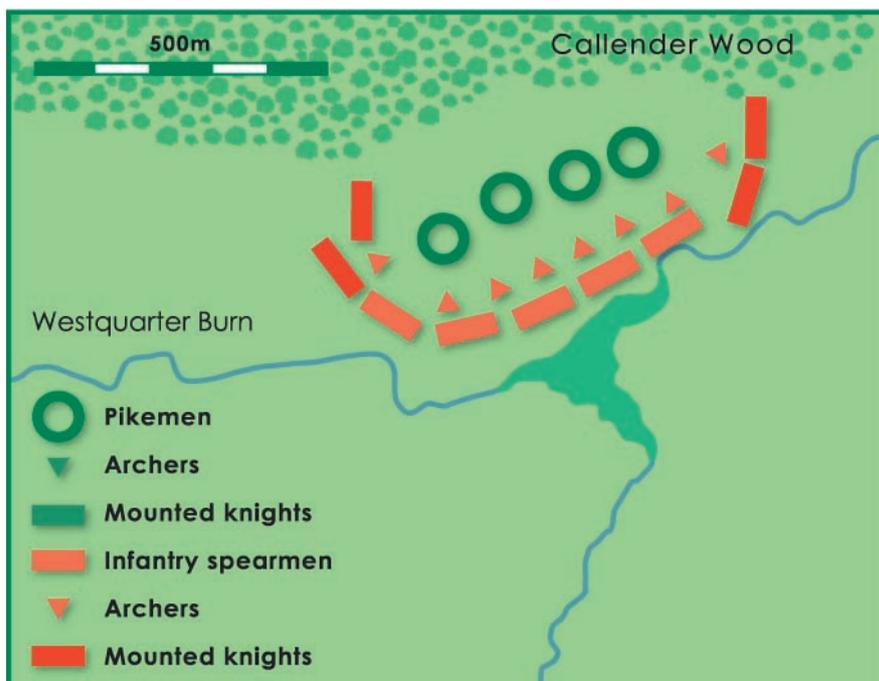
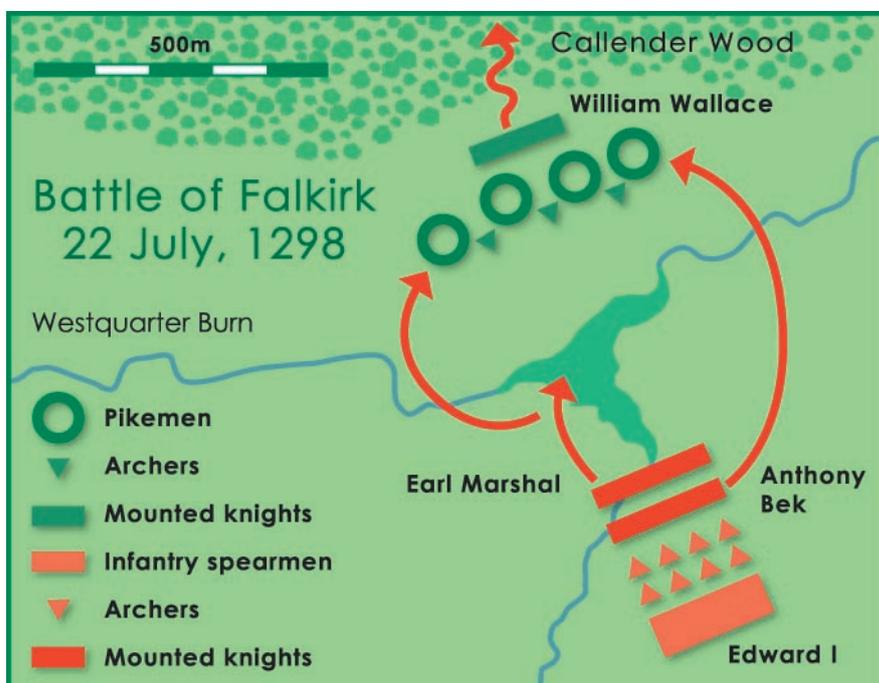
Once again, the depiction of the battle on the screen bears little resemblance to the actual engagement as described by contemporary sources. There is good reason to believe that, given half the chance, William Wallace would not have fought at Falkirk. Edward I had come north with a strong army in search of Wallace, but Wallace remained elusive, shadowing the English army to cut off foraging parties and stragglers. Faced with a scorched earth strategy, Edward I's army was in dire straits by the time it reached the outskirts of Linlithgow. Upon learning from his scouts of the location of Wallace's forces, however, Edward I executed a night march and appears to have caught Wallace by surprise, forcing him to stand and fight.²⁵

Wallace positioned his troops behind a marshy area along a small creek, arranged in four large 'schiltroms', between which he stationed his archers, with the noble cavalry held in reserve.²⁶ The English chronicler Walter de Guisborough provides an excellent description of the 'schiltroms' at Falkirk, "[they were] circular in shape...[with the men] standing shoulder to shoulder in deep ranks and facing towards the circumference of the circle, with their spears slanted outward at an oblique angle."²⁷ Edward I's army was arranged in three bodies of knights, one behind the other, with Edward I commanding the contingent in the rear. Unaware of the presence of the marshy ground, the first detachment of cavalry under the Earl Marshal, charged straight ahead, only to become mired in the swamp. Extracting themselves, they rode to the left to cross the creek and attack Wallace's right flank. Simultaneously, the second body of knights under Antony Bek, the Bishop of Durham, having learned from the first contingent's mistake, moved off to the right, crossing the creek in order to attack Wallace's left flank.²⁸ The 'schiltroms' held fast against these assaults, though the archers between the 'schiltroms' were slaughtered, and the Scottish cavalry fled. Seeing that his knights were making little progress against the Scottish spearmen, Edward I ordered his infantry forward, including archers and Irish troops skilled in the throwing of stones. The fire from the infantry caused casualties and confusion in the ranks of the 'schiltroms', opening up gaps for the cavalry to exploit. In

this way the 'schiltroms' were worn down until they broke and the remains of the Scottish army were routed.²⁹

It is remarkable that in Mel Gibson's depiction of a battle in which the 'schiltrom' formation, attributed to the lead character, played such a central role, the formation is absent. Indeed, one wonders if the producer/director didn't confuse the details of Stirling Bridge with that of Falkirk. Of course, a more likely explanation is that he did not want to associate the lead character's tactical innovation with a Scottish defeat.

Unlike the depiction of the Battle of Stirling Bridge, the film's version of the Battle of Falkirk contains a few (very few) features that correspond with the actual engagement. Irish troops were indeed present in Edward I's army, though, of course, they did not desert to the Scots.³⁰ However, at the time of the battle the Welsh troops in the King's army were on very poor terms with the English, having engaged in a substantial brawl with



them earlier during the campaign that involved not a few fatalities. Most accounts state that the Welsh refused to participate in the battle and one account even asserts that they deserted to the Scots, though this seems rather unlikely.³¹ Nonetheless, what does seem likely is that the latter account of the Welsh joining the Scots served as the movie's inspiration for the incident involving the desertion of Edward I's Irish troops. But why the Irish instead of the Welsh? Could it be because the movie was filmed in Ireland and the battle scenes employed troops from the Irish Army Reserves? Is there any doubt?!

Another, more important feature of the film's depiction of Falkirk that corresponds with historic accounts is the desertion of the Scottish nobles. Some sources state that the cavalry fled the field without striking a blow (others, however, record the death of forty Scottish horsemen in the battle).³² This has led even contemporary writers to suggest that treachery played a role in the nobles' actions.³³ In the film, of course, Edward I comments that their departure was the result of bribery in titles and lands.

This is a recurring theme throughout the movie, the self interest of the Scottish nobility, which is contrasted with Wallace's selfless idealism. In a scene from the beginning of the film, Edward I explains, "Nobles are the key to the door of Scotland. Grant our nobles lands in the north, give their nobles estates here in England and make them too greedy to oppose us." In fact, Edward I did not have to grant lands in England to the members of Scotland's feudal nobility, as they had possessed estates in England, in some cases, for centuries. The feudal nobility of Scotland, such as the families of Bruce, Balliol, and possibly even Wallace, were, for the most part, descended from Normans in England who had been invited to settle in Scotland by earlier Scottish Kings who needed knights to consolidate and defend their Kingdom.³⁴ Initially Scottish Kings employed Norman mercenaries. But it was King Alexander I who, in the early twelfth century, first offered estates to young, landless knights in England (as well Normandy, Picardy, and Flanders), a policy upheld by his brother and successor, David I.³⁵ Naturally, many of these transplanted Normans obtained lands in England through family inheritance or marriage. Even the Kings of Scotland had hereditary estates in England, notably the 'Honour of Huntingdon.'³⁶

While the movie implies that Edward I's use of land and titles to manipulate the Scottish nobility was an innovation on his part, the reality is that the nobility of Sootland were part of a common feudal nobility of Western Europe in general, among which there was a great deal of horizontal mobility. As such, it was far from unusual for individuals to own estates simultaneously in Ireland, Wales, Scotland, England, and France. No wonder the notion of 'nationalism', if such existed at all, took a poor second to the interests of one's family, In this respect, it would be foolish to support the cause of Scottish freedom from England to the detriment of one's family interests, as was the case when Scotland seemed to have completely

succumbed to Edward I in 1296. For the nobility, winning Scotland's freedom might prove more costly than simply waiting for Edward I to pass away. In this light, the advice given to Robert Bruce by his father makes a good deal of sense:

Father, "Call a meeting of the nobles."

Robert Bruce, "All they do is talk."

Father, "Rightly so, they are as rich in English lands and titles as they are in Scottish, just as we are. You admire this man, this William Wallace. Uncompromising men are easy to admire... But it is exactly the ability to compromise that makes a man noble. And understand this: Edward Long Shanks is the most ruthless King ever to sit on the throne of England, and none of us, and nothing of Scotland will remain unless we are as ruthless."

Conclusion

Directly related to the issue of the identity of the Scottish nobility is the matter of appearances that runs throughout the entire film. The appearance of the Scots, in dress, arms and armour, homes, and lifestyles in general, contrasts strongly with the English. Even the common soldiers of the English garrisons in Scotland and the English armies at Stirling Bridge and Falkirk are dressed in brightly coloured clothes and protected by well kept, finely made (but largely inaccurate) metal armour. The Scots on the other hand, including the nobles, appear in darkly coloured clothes that are usually dirty and ragged, with few exceptions they live in near hovels, and the minority who are equipped with armour wear a primitive assortment of dark coloured, leather helmets and shirts.

In reality, as the previous discussion of the origins and composition of the Scottish nobility might suggest, the military (or civilian) appearance of Scottish knights and feudal lords, including Wallace himself, would be little different from their English counterparts. They would be mounted on specially bred war-horses, wearing mail stockings to protect the legs and a long sleeve mail shirt, over which would be worn a surcoat displaying the individual's coat of arms. This would be topped off by a 'great helm'; a large, cylindrical helmet that covered one's entire head, with eye slits provided for one's vision.³⁷ As for the common peoples of Scotland, though there were certainly regional variations, the commoners from the Lowlands, who made up a great proportion of Wallace's army, would not have dressed all that differently from the English, from whom many of them were descended.

Clearly the appearance of the Scots was determined by the popular image of traditional Scottish dress, which in reality corresponds only to the traditional dress of the Highlands. Unfortunately, much of the traditional dress of the Highlands was actually invented in the nineteenth century,³⁸ in the wake of Queen Victoria's fascination with that part of her realm, and the popularity of the works of Sir Walter Scott. While the kilt, for instance, did exist at least as early as the sixteenth century, the more popular form of dress was 'trews', that is, tight fitting

trousers.³⁹ Plaid was also used before the nineteenth century as a part of Highland dress, but, contrary to later interpretations, there was no correspondence between particular patterns and specific clans.⁴⁰ However, because the popular imagination of the appearance of the Scots is based on the creations of the nineteenth century, rather than the actual dress worn by the Scots in the thirteenth century, the producer/director must employ this anachronistic appearance so that the audience can correctly distinguish between the contending ethnic groups in the film. The same is true for the distortions in the appearance of the Scottish nobility; if they were identical to the English knights, then how could the audience distinguish between the good guys and the bad guys?

These inaccuracies could be dismissed if they were mere antiquarian details. But their importance is contained in the message they send. As noted at the beginning of this paper, the Scots play the role of an oppressed, Third World people conquered by the wealthier, technologically superior English. According to the rules of political correctness, the very victimization of the Scots places them in the moral high ground. As such, they must look like helpless victims: primitive, poor, and weak. This is accomplished in part through the contrasting appearances of the opposing sides.

Another message transmitted to the audience by appearance is the notion of freedom in the personification of the Highland hippies versus the pretentious and morally bankrupt English. Wearing long hair, living close to nature, even free love, in the form of Wallace's first wedding night with his wife spent in the forest, all serve to associate the Scots with the flower children of the sixties in the minds of a late-twentieth century audience.

It is appropriate to conclude this paper with a discussion of the manipulation of appearances in the film, as this relates directly to the underlying reasons why *Braveheart* is more myth than history. The study of history and the making of movies do not have the same goals. Historians attempt to uncover what happened in the past and why. Motion pictures, on the other hand, are made with two goals: to create a work of art and, often the more important of the two, to make money. Like most movie makers, Mel Gibson seems to have viewed the historic facts of William Wallace's career as a collection of parts that could be used, disposed of, and rearranged, according to his own wishes, to suit his personal view point, a view point which had little or nothing to do with creating an accurate depiction of the past. In all fairness, this is the right of the artist.

In addition, and perhaps most important of all, the movie *Braveheart* had to earn money for its investors. Rather than confuse the audience with complex and contradictory facts, most movie makers opt to create a world that, while bearing little or no resemblance to the reality of the past, is at least comprehensible to the viewing audience and, at best, compelling. In short, a confused audience is not a satisfied audience, and an unsatisfying film does not do well at the box office. A patriot and champion of the common

people may not be an accurate depiction of William Wallace, but it does provide a hero for our times, and, thus, a very satisfying experience for late-twentieth century audiences. Ultimately the answer to the question of why *Braveheart*, like most other 'historical' films, is more myth than history is that, rightly or wrongly, the film industry believes that myth is a better money maker than history.



Notes to text

1. For the best biography of King Edward I, see: Michael Prestwich. *Edward I*. English Monarchs Series (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1938).
2. For a full account of the events leading up to the First Scottish War of independence, see: G.W.S. Barrow. *Kingship and Unity: Scotland 1000-1306*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981); G.W.S. Barrow. *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland*. Third Edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988); James Mackay. *William Wallace: Brave Heart*. (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1995); Raymond Campbell Paterson. *For the Lion: A History of the Scottish Wars of Independence 1296-1357*. (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1996).
3. Barrow. *Kingship and Unity*. p.54; Charles Kightly. *Folk Heroes of Britain* (London: Thames and Hudson. 1982), p.154; James Mackay. *William Wallace: Brave Heart* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing. 1995). p.25.
4. Barrow. *Kingship and Unity*, p.164; Kightly. pp.170, 171-2; Barrow. *Robert Bruce*, p.91; Mackay. pp.164-5. Wallace's diplomatic efforts on the continent in 1301 may have even led to Balliol's release from custody in England to King Philip of France (Kightly, pp. 182-3).
5. Kightly, pp.157; Mackay. pp.19-20.
6. Barrow, *Kingship and Unity*. p.164; Kightly, pp.171-2; Barrow, *Robert Bruce*. p.96; Mackay, pp.169-170.
7. It should be noted, however, that Wallace may have followed a policy of promoting men according to ability rather than birth (Kightly. p. 175).
8. For an examination of this relationship, see: Andrew Fisher, "Wallace and Bruce: Scotland's Uneasy Heroes" *History Today* (February 1989). pp.18-23.
9. Mackay, however, disagrees with this interpretation (p. 127).
10. The best biographies of King Robert Bruce I are: G.W.S. Barrow. *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland*. Third Edition (Berkeley, CA; University of California Press, 1988); Ronald McNair Scott. *Robert the Bruce: King of the Scots* (New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1982; 1989).
11. Mackay. *William Wallace*, p. 124.
12. *Ibid.*, pp.13, 22. Other sources identify 'The Barns of Ayr' with an atrocity committed by Wallace himself, the burning alive of 300 English soldiers sleeping in a barn (Kightly, p.160; Mackay, pp.124-5).
13. *Ibid.*, p.139.
14. J.D. Forbes. "Strategy and Tactics in Medieval Scotland." Doctoral Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1927; Ian Heath. *Armies of Feudal Europe 1066-1300*. (Poole, Dorset: Wargames Research Group Publication. 1978), p.51; Kightly, p.164.

15. Forbes; Heath. p.51; William Seymour. *Battles in Britain 1066-1746*. (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1979), pp.73-74; Kightly, p.165; Barrow, Robert Bruce. pp.86-88.
16. Forbes; Heath. p.51; Seymour, pp.73-74; Charles Kightly. *Folk Heroes of Britain*, p. 166.
17. For some important revisionist studies of Medieval warfare, see: Philippe Contamine. *War in the Middle Ages*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell. 1984) pp.208-209; Sean McGlynn, "The Myths of Medieval Warfare". *History Today*, Vol.44, No.1 (January 1994), pp.28-34; Matthew Bennett. "The Knight Unmasked". *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History*. Vol.7. No.4 (Summer 1995). pp.9-19.
18. John Marsdon. "Fight at the Pool of Herons: Pictish Victory, AD 685". *Military Illustrated: Past and Present*. No.71 (April 1994), pp.29-31.
19. Heath. p.94; Matthew Strickland, "Securing the North: Invasion and the Strategy of Defence in Twelfth-Century Anglo-Scottish Warfare" pp.208-229. in *Anglo-Norman Warfare: Studies in Late Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman Military Organization and Warfare*, edited by Matthew Strickland (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1992). p.222, fn.23; G.W.S. Barrow, "The Army of Alexander III's Scotland", pp.132-147, in *Scotland in the Reign of Alexander III*. edited by Norman H. Reid (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1990), pp.134. 136, Ftn.23.
20. Kightly, p.168; Barrow, *Robert Bruce*, p.92; Mackay, pp.162-5.
21. Mackay, p.187. See also: Kightly, p.151, 169-170.
22. Kightly, pp.160, 162; Mackay, pp.97. 99. 109, 114, 136-7. For a general discussion of the issue of Wallace and brutality, see: Mackay, pp.84-5.
23. Kightly, p.159; Mackay, p.113.
24. Elizabeth Longford (Ed.). *The Oxford Book of Royal Anecdotes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 109.
25. Kightly, pp.176-7; Barrow, *Robert Bruce*, p.100; Mackay. pp.190.
26. Seymour, pp.76-7; Kightly, pp.178-9; Mackay, pp. 195.
27. Kightly, p.178.
28. Kightly, p.179; Mackay, pp.196-7.
29. Kightly, pp.179; Barrow, *Robert Bruce*, pp.100-103; Mackay. pp.198-9.
30. Kightly, pp.173, 176.
31. Kightly, pp.176; Barrow, *Robert Bruce*, p.100; Mackay, pp.188-9.
32. Seymour, pp.179-180; Heath, p.51; Kightly, pp.180-1.
33. Barrow, *Robert Bruce*, p.102; Mackay, pp.197-8. For a discussion of Wallace's relationship with Scotland's nobles. see: Kightly, pp.173-4.
34. The best account of the Norman settlement in Scotland, see: R.L. Graem Ritchie. *The Normans in Scotland*. (Edinburgh: At the University Press, 1954); G.W.S. Barrow. *Kingship and Unity: Scotland 1000-1306*. The New History of Scotland Vol.II (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).
35. Barrow, *Kingship and Unity*, pp.34, 40; Kightly, p.154.
36. *Ibid.*, p.36.
37. Heath. p.73.
38. For a discussion of the creation of 'Traditional Highland Costume', see: Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland", pp.15-41. in *The Invention of Tradition*. edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983; 1996).
39. Trevor-Roper, pp.18—22.
40. *Ibid.*, pp.23, 30-1.

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