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Rachel D. Brewer

“We will drain our dearest veins, but we shall be free!”: The Legend and Legacy of Sir William Wallace, Warrior, Martyr, and National Icon

“It is regrettable but typical that Scotland should choose a loser, albeit a glorious one, as its hero. One hundred years ago, Scots admired success but now they admire failure: just look at our national football team.”¹ This was the reaction of Michael Fry, author of *Wild Scots: 400 Years of Highland History*, to a 2006 poll conducted around the Edinburgh area. The poll asked readers of *Scotland on Sunday*, a local newspaper, to vote for their choice of “Greatest Scot Ever” from a list of ten choices, among which were Robert Bruce, Robert Burns, Sir Walter Scott, and David Livingston. After two weeks of online voting, more than a third of those 1,300 polled agreed that Sir William Wallace, “defender of Scottish freedom,” was most worthy of the title “Greatest.” Contrary to Fry’s assertion that Scots a century ago would have chosen a more admirable figure as Scotland’s champion, hero-worship of the “loser” Wallace is far from a recent development.

In the 700 years since his death at the hands of the English, the famed Scot has served as a martyr-like icon for every generation, a pillar of remembrance to the ferocity and persistence of Scotland’s seemingly eternal fight for independence. There have been four chief phases during which the Wallace legend has been most widely invoked: the early Wars of Independence (1296-1357), the Scottish Renaissance and Revolution (1600-1746), the Age of Romanticism (1780-1860), and the current Scottish freedom movement (1960-present). Though the hero has remained important to each rise in the country’s nationalism, the way in which his legend is considered and employed by the Scots has evolved with each phase.

Many historians today view descriptions of the life of William Wallace as legend rather than fact, and this is due mainly to the nonexistence of conclusive evidence to support a thorough biography. By 1296, when Wallace is believed to have still been a young man living in the Lowlands, Scotland found itself under

the forced rule of the English king, Edward I (also known as Longshanks), a fact that caused widespread resentment and threats of revolt. In 1297, William Wallace's first known act of rebellion occurred when he killed the English sheriff of Lanark, William Heselrig. This action gained him a reputation as an outlaw among the English, as well as an impressive following of other dissatisfied Scottish commoners, churchmen, and nobles alike.

Wallace fought only two real battles against the English, the first of which was a miraculous victory for the Scots at the Battle of Stirling Bridge in 1297, followed by their defeat at the Battle of Falkirk that same year. In 1305, Sir John de Menteith betrayed Wallace, forcing him into the hands of the English who tried him for treason, then hanged, drew, quartered, and beheaded him.² Since that time, many Scots have viewed Wallace as the inspiration for later revolts against English rule, such as Robert the Bruce's famous victory at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1328 and the succeeding 300 years of war between the two countries. Many others have regarded him as a failure, however; but this is an accurate assessment only in regard to his failure to permanently expel the English from Scotland. Moreover, after seven centuries, it is clear that his successes lie elsewhere.

In order to understand how the Wallace myth has persisted for 700 years, one must look at the primary vehicle by which the myth has been carried through the centuries. The story of William Wallace probably would not have reached such mythic proportions, nor have survived as such a powerful national memory, if not for the writings of the English minstrel Blind Harry (1440-1492.) Though the exact identity of Blind Harry or Hary — also known as Henry the Minstrel — remains something of a conundrum for historians, he is credited with the epic poem titled *The Actis and Deidis of Schir William Wallace*, also known simply as *The Wallace*, which is thought to have been written around 1477.³ Historians believe that "*The Wallace* had passed through more editions than any other Scottish book before the times of Burns and Scott — it was the book next to the Bible most frequently found in Scottish households."⁴

The Wallace is comprised completely of heroic couplets, 11,853 lines in length, relating stories about the life of William Wallace, "augmenting the known facts with tales and traditions preserved in folk-memory."⁵ One excellent example of the influence of oral tradition on the minstrel's writing appears in his physical description of Wallace: "*Nyne quartaris large he was in lenth indeed,*

Thyrd part lenth in schuldrys braid was he...Woundis he had in many diuerss place, Bot fayer and weill kepyt was his face."⁶ The minstrel, born more than a century after Wallace's death, never actually saw the hero and therefore must have relied completely on folktale, if not a little bit on his own imagination. The lines between fact, fiction, and wishful thinking are often obscured throughout the poem, though Harry would certainly not be the first author guilty of this type of historical writing. Blind Harry's Wallace is portrayed as nearly super-human, capable of fantastic and impossible feats, much in the model of classical heroes. According to the poem, for example, "no one but Wallace was strong enough to draw his great bow"—an ability by which he proves his "superiority to the English archers at their own skill" by "killing fifteen Englishmen with his bow and arrows."⁷ Like the famed archer Robin Hood, Wallace became an "honorable outlaw" and champion of the people.

The pervasive influence that the supposedly blind minstrel has had through each succeeding generation is apparent, though it should be pointed out that evidence of this influence has been apparent during some periods more so than others. When compared to other great works of history, *The Wallace* does not stand out as an example of reliable reference—a fact that has caused the book to be the target of much criticism and denigration in just the last 150 years. It is not the historical accuracy, however, that one must examine when attempting to explain the importance of Harry's work as it relates to the history of the Wallace myth. In 1920, author William Henry Schofield responded to its critics by writing:

Let the critical modern historian dissect and reject as he may the stories here and there interposed in the narrative of Blind Harry, it shows but a purblind imagination not to realize the effects of these, and of the whole record implicitly received, on the hearts, the impulses, and the bent of character of the Scottish people, all through the centuries down to the union of the crowns.⁸

Here, Schofield captures the essence of the power that Blind Harry's writings have had on the formation of Scottish identity and nationalism. A minor flaw appears in his statement, however, in the line that reads "all through the centuries down to the union of the crowns," as though the influence of the Wallace story ended

with the suspension of Scottish independence in 1707. This is most assuredly not the case, as the following pages will reveal.

The early Scottish Wars for Independence (1296-1357) set the stage for William Wallace's sudden appearance in historical records. It would not be accurate to say that the legend of Wallace began when Blind Harry turned him into a literary hero, for he was a legend in his own time. By the end of the thirteenth century, the Scots were already discontent and ready for a fight. Weary as they were of the forced submission to the tyrant Edward [I] Longshanks—the English king widely considered a usurper of the Scottish throne—it appears that little persuasion was necessary to convince men to take up arms behind Wallace. The impressive following of Scots that Wallace gained in his lifetime provided the original foundation upon which succeeding myth was able to build over time.

Scottish historian and member of the Scottish National Party, Professor Christopher Harvie, believes that a combination of “English invasion, resistance by William Wallace and later Robert Bruce made patriots of the mass of the population.”⁹ While it is difficult to determine just how much of the Scottish population Wallace was able to rally to arms or even in sympathy for his cause, it took only a matter of months for a substantial army of both Highlanders and Lowlanders to join him in his fight. The fantastic stories surrounding Wallace's exploits and acts of bloody warfare sprung up almost as quickly as his army—one no doubt influencing the other to a certain degree—gaining him national fame, and bringing him to the attention of the power-hungry monarch, Edward I, who was content with nothing less than total control of Britain.

Wallace was not the first or only man to stand up against English tyranny. To Edward I, however, “Wallace symbolized the spirit of Scotland's resistance which could only be finally broken if the Scots themselves turned in the already legendary folk-hero to face the king's punishment.”¹⁰ According to tradition, it was in fact a Scot—a man loyal to English authority—who betrayed Wallace into English hands, but the death of their hero did not break the spirit of the Scottish rebels as King Edward had hoped. Harvie points out that it was Wallace's martyr-like death that now seemed to “give point and pride to popular resistance against English dominion. . . . It was greatly strengthened—and now the nobles who had failed to rally to Wallace would lead the resistance for the next six years.”¹¹ The foremost of these nobles was Robert Bruce who famously led

the Scots to victory against the English at the Battle of Bannockburn only nine years after Wallace's death. Though Bruce finished what Wallace had begun, American author and specialist in medieval literature Stefan T. Hall maintains that "it is Wallace who will always be the nation's first voice, the chief spokesman, and Bruce's inspiration."¹²

The second period in which the story of Wallace increased in significance was the period which, for the purposes of this study, shall be referred to as the Scottish Renaissance and Revolution (1600-1746). After the reign of Robert Bruce, Scotland remained under the control of its own independent parliament until 1707. At this time, Scotland and England signed an agreement called the Acts of Union—a contract which, in its first three articles, disintegrated the Scottish Parliament and placed all Scottish governmental representation under English control.¹³ The act was supported by many Scottish nobles who saw the economic benefits of allying themselves with England, but was despised by many of the common Scots who "resented the loss of sovereign independence" and the opportunity to return the throne to the Scottish House of Stuart.¹⁴ Outraged, a cluster of Scots loyal to the House of Stuart, known as Jacobites, began a crusade which ended only with the defeat of the Stuart claimant to the throne, Bonnie Prince Charlie, at the Battle of Culloden in 1746. One modern writer bitingly remarked that the Acts of Union in 1707 caused "the deaths of thousands of Scots [to] fade into history as pointless sacrifice"—a comment which reveals just how deeply the feelings of betrayal run for some Scots even today.¹⁵

During the height of the Scottish Revolution, or Jacobite Rebellion, the Wallace myth took a back-seat to heroic tales about Bonnie Prince Charlie and the famous Rob Roy. However, throughout a pre-Revolution period covering most of the seventeenth century, Wallace's name appeared frequently in various works of literature and history. For example, an English translation of George Buchanan's *Rerum Scotticarum Historia* (*History of Scotland*) first appeared in 1690, in which Buchanan described Wallace as "the most flourishing Persons amongst the Scots...for the glory of his former Exploits."¹⁶ In 1638, Scottish poet Henry Adamson also included many passages about Wallace in his *Muses Threnodie*, in which he likened Wallace to classical heroes by writing, "What braver Hector, or more brave Achilles, In Greece, or Phrygia, than Sir William Wallace?"¹⁷ In addition, just ten years later, historian and political theorist David Hume of

Godscroft in his "*A General History of Scotland*" (1648) included a tribute to Wallace in poem form. He wrote: "*Of Wallace, and no more remains, Of him, then what an Urn contains. . . . His soul death had no power to kill, His noble deeds the world doth fill, With lasting Trophies of his name. His end crownes him with glorious bayes, And stains the brightest of thy praise.*"¹⁸

Other writers described the early wars and Wallace in a religious light—a not uncommon historical method for interpreting events. In 1627, a passage by Peter Hay went so far as to indicate that Wallace's rebellion was the will of God when he wrote: "*When wee reade of... VVilliam VVallace, what Miracles were done by small numbers against worlds of Men? It is the LORD, who stirreth vp the Heart, to persecute Pryde, and punish Tyrants.*"¹⁹ In such troubled times, one can only imagine that Hay meant more with his talk about "small numbers" and "tyrants" than just repeating well-worn folk-tales. Feelings against English oppression were on the rise, so dissatisfied Scots looked to the past for guidance and inspiration while looking to their faith for validation and encouragement.

As these literary references indicate, Wallace's name and myth were not completely abandoned in the years preceding and throughout the Revolution, but no better evidence of this fact exists than the appearance of a new translation of Blind Harry's *Life of Sir William Wallace* in 1722. This new edition by poet William Hamilton translated the antiquated phrasing of Blind Harry's original work into the vernacular of the ordinary person. Additionally, Hamilton's edition paraphrased the original, making it a more reasonable length for casual reading. The great advantage of these changes was that Wallace's story was able to evolve and adapt in order to remain relevant to the needs, situations, and attitudes of post-Union Scots. That this sudden concern with an updated edition of the story of Scotland's favorite freedom-fighter fell directly at the height of the Jacobite fight against English domination is almost certainly more than mere coincidence. Even after the rebellion was put down in 1747 and Scotland began to settle into a compliant partnership with England, the Hamilton edition of *The Wallace* continued to inspire people well into the next century.

The late eighteenth century ushered in a philosophic, artistic, and literary movement known as the Age of Romanticism (1780-1860). This movement was "characterized by reliance on the imagination and subjectivity of approach, freedom of thought and expression, and an idealization of nature" in which creative vision "was praised over reason, emotions over logic, and intuition

over science—making way for a vast body of literature of great sensibility and passion.”²⁰ Charles Baudelaire, a nineteenth century French poet and critic, defined this phase of ideology as “precisely situated neither in choice of subject nor exact truth, but in the way of feeling.”²¹ Though his words were intended to explain a broader mindset, they were also amazingly appropriate for explaining the phenomenon that occurred during the nineteenth century in regard to Scottish nationalism and the Wallace myth.

The years of the Enlightenment—the period roughly between 1650 and 1750—and its focus on scientific fact and stark, academic reality had “reduced romance to childish ignorance,” but the desire for something more than scientific fact became a Europe-wide craze by the late eighteenth century.²² One of the areas in which Romanticism thrived was literature, both poetry and prose; that is, this was the era of the fictional novel and romantic verse. Moreover, according to writer James Kerr, “Historical romance becomes a field in which perceived contradictions in history can be recreated and resolved. It is a...verbal realm apart from history...where the ugly facts history throws in the way of the writer can be made into appealing, or at least consoling, stories about the past.”²³ It was this newfound freedom to admire a more creative version of history that gave rise to a cult-like treatment of Wallace, a trend which has been given the title “Wallaciana” by modern historians such as Graeme Morton.²⁴ To understand this time period is to understand the notable surge in Wallace’s appearance in both art and literature.

After Blind Harry, the writer whose name is most often linked to the romanticized figure of Wallace is the famous Scottish poet Robert Burns. Burns, born in 1759, wrote during the initial phase of the Age of Romanticism, and the influence of the movement is evident in much of his work. For his skill as a romantic writer, and also for his fierce nationalism, he became one of Scotland’s best loved poets. According to author Arthur Herman, “The first books [Burns] read were a biography of Hannibal and [the Hamilton edition of] *The Life of William Wallace*, lent to him by the local blacksmith. ‘The story of Wallace poured a Scottish prejudice in my veins,’ Burns recalled, ‘which will boil along there till the flood gates of life shut in eternal rest.’”²⁵ The most famous of his patriotic poems, “Scots, Wha Hae,” written as an imagined speech by Robert Bruce to his troops at Bannockburn, opens with these lines: “*Scots, wha hae wi’ Wallace bled, Scots, wham Bruce has after led, Welcome to your gory bed, Or to victorie!*”²⁶ The poem begins

with descriptions and language specific to the stories of Wallace and Bruce. As it progresses, though, the language becomes less era-specific and more applicable to any situation of perceived tyranny. Much of Burns' patriotic poetry was inspired by the tales of William Wallace as told by Blind Harry, and he was able to translate the Wallace story into something that would be relevant to his fellow Jacobites. Several lines of the poem are taken directly from one of Harry's couplets:

Burns: Lay the proud usurpers low! Tyrants fall in every foe! Liberty's in every blow!²⁷

Blind Harry: A false usurper sinks in every foe; And liberty returns with every blow.²⁸

Burns wrote to his publisher of this particular poem, saying that he had been inspired by "the accidental recollection of that glorious struggle for Freedom, associated with the glowing ideas of *some other struggles of the same nature, not quite so ancient,*" in reference to the existing power struggle.²⁹ The poem was set to a traditional Scottish tune and became what remains one of Scotland's best loved anthems.

However, in regard to the political significance of Burns's poems in the late 1700s, most Unionists did not consider his writings to have any importance at all. Jacobitism was all but dead and the two rival countries were, at least at the upper levels, getting along. The idea that Scotland had been better off on its own was considered by Unionists to be ignorant, divisive, anti-progressive, and essentially lower-class sentiment. Professor and author Richard Zumkhawala-Cook believes that by this point, "the working-class 'people's poetry' of Robert Burns and the anthems of the Jacobins [were] celebrated publicly for their Scottish character because, for the most part, they had become politically harmless to Scottish and English landowners."³⁰ Evidently, Unionists were able to overlook Burns's seemingly archaic political convictions to simply appreciate the lovingly beautiful descriptions of Scotland and its historical characters which dominated most of his work.

Not all Scots who idolized Wallace were anti-Union, however, and their influence helped to counter-balance the opposition. Well-loved Scottish writer and contemporary of Burns, Sir Walter Scott, was a firm believer that Scots could maintain their own identity, independent spirit, and national pride while

working as England's partner within the larger institution of Great Britain.³¹ His writings, such as *The Waverly Novels*, "romanticized Highland life and its clan system, exoticizing its members as primitively passionate, melodic, at times even heroic, but ultimately as too provincial to be aligned with modern modes of political and cultural progress."³² Thus, historical figures like William Wallace and their anti-English, anti-tyranny rhetoric took on an even more distant, fictional, nostalgic – and ultimately safe – quality.

The most popular form of Romantic artwork pertaining to the nineteenth-century Wallace cult came in the form of monuments and statues. As Scotland settled not-so-easily into unionization with England, it found itself at this time facing an identity crisis. This crisis resulted in patriotic over-compensation in an effort towards national self-preservation. At the same time, however, England was beginning to embrace certain aspects of Scottish culture for political reasons. As Scottish nationalism appeared to largely die out during the nineteenth century, perhaps England felt less threatened by certain aspects of Scottish culture – especially those aspects which could be useful to Romanticism, such as folklore and legend. Ironically, one of the Scottish traditions which evidently suited certain Unionist agendas was the Wallace myth, a fact perfectly illustrated by the sudden appearance of numerous tributes to the Scottish champion. However, Unionists never attempted to turn Wallace "English" – he remained primarily a Scottish hero, thus tributes to him remained largely within Scottish borders.

Throughout the nineteenth century, monuments dedicated to William Wallace sprang up around Scotland. One of the first statues to be unveiled was a twenty-two foot tall, red sandstone statue of the medieval hero in Dryburgh [Figure 1].³³ Erected in 1814 by David Stuart, the Earl of Buchan, Wallace is portrayed as a large, bearded warrior with armor, shield, and helmet. From his place aside a cliff, he gazes over the River Tweed, leaning on a sword as tall as him. This representation seems to be of "Wallace the Warrior:" the costuming – a plain kilt and cloak – is unremarkable, while the broadsword and shield seem to be the important features, emphasizing the militaristic rather than the romantic. At thirty-one feet including its base, the sheer size of the statue may put the viewer in mind of the ancient Colossus, demanding both fear and respect for the nation it represents.



Figure 1

In Aberdeen, a large iron Wallace in medieval chain mail strikes a dramatic pose with arm outstretched atop a stone base [Figure 2].³⁴ Erected seventy-four years after the Dryburgh statue, the effects of Romanticism on the design of the Aberdeen statue are immediately apparent when the two are compared. With arm outstretched, Wallace's gesture is almost theatrical, his clothing is twelfth-century English chain-mail, and his sword is small and manageable; these features differ greatly from the descriptions written by Blind Harry. In keeping with the trends of the time, the artist seems to portray "Wallace the Medieval Knight," whose noble quest was to rescue his people as an Arthurian knight might rescue a damsel in distress. Creating a medieval-knight persona for Wallace was simply another way in which the myth was re-created and adapted to fit the culture and concerns of the late-Romantic period.



Figure 2

The crowning glory of this so-called Wallaciana was completed in 1869 after eight years of construction, and remains a very popular center of nationalism: the Wallace Monument at Stirling [Figure 3].³⁵ Interestingly, the men responsible for the building of the Monument were English and Scottish Unionists who supported the unification of Great Britain under English control. During the Monument's 1861 dedication ceremony, the Earl of Elgin pronounced, "If the Scottish people have been able to form an intimate union [with the English] without sacrificing one jot of their neutral independence and liberty—these great results are due to the glorious struggle which was commenced on the plain of Stirling and consummated on that of Bannockburn."³⁶ With a few carefully chosen words, the Earl recreated the story of Wallace's rebellion as a tale of Scottish triumph in retaining its identity—completely dismissing the real object of Wallace's anger: English tyranny. In theory at least, Wallace could now be a *British* hero—uniting all Scots and English in a brotherhood of distinctive cultures. The Scottish Unionists used the Wallace myth for its effectualness in rallying Scottish pride, not Scottish rebellion—an example of how ambiguous historical figures can be used outside their original context to further individual agendas.



Figure 3

This use of Wallace's legend changed, perhaps in style but not in value, in the twentieth century. The alterations occurred especially as a result of the release of Mel Gibson's movie *Braveheart*—a romanticized and highly inaccurate version of Wallace's life—in 1995, and the subsequent campaigning methods of the Scottish National Party (SNP). Even as the world becomes much more global in the twenty-first century, many countries have been able to retain their own distinct cultures and traditions (real or imagined), though, in some respects, they are being forced to fight tooth and nail for them. The release of *Braveheart*, if nothing else, has certainly had an impact on popular culture and the portrayal of Scottish nationalism, both in Scotland and abroad. One has only to type "William Wallace" into any major internet search-engine and they will find numerous websites dedicated to both the historical Wallace figure and the *Braveheart* Wallace character. Online British newspapers and magazines include article after article on him, clan websites of any family name may include a piece on him, thousands of individual sites and blogs appear in the search results list, and everyone has a different opinion. Even in the "serious" writings to be found in reputable newspapers, journals, and databases, there remains a plethora of opinions on William Wallace as a national figure.

On 11 September 1997, after an almost 300 year absence, Scotland re-established its own Parliament. The late author and chancellor of Glasgow Caledonian University, Magnus Magnusson, pointed out what he saw as a meaningful detail by stating, "It can hardly be coincidence that...the referendum which would ratify a new Scottish Parliament was held...seven hundred years to the day since Wallace's spectacular victory over the English army at Stirling Bridge."³⁷ If his suspicion was true, then it is a clear indication that certain significant aspects of history have not been lost on twenty-first century Scots. The Scottish freedom movement gained worldwide attention primarily after the release of *Braveheart* and the following reinstatement of the Scottish Parliament, causing some to speculate that the movie must have been the inspiration behind it.³⁸ There may be validity in saying that the movie was responsible for heightening the awareness of the nation to the issue of Scottish independence, but it would be simplistic to think that it was the only motivating factor in the decisions of Parliament.

Movies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries serve much the same function as Romantic literature did in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As unfortunate of a fact as it may be, movies

are the new books, and *Braveheart* has acted as a preservation of the Wallace myth in much the same way that Robert Burns's poetry did in its time. For a number of years, the SNP – the foremost advocate for the de-unionization of England and Scotland since the early 1900s – has attempted to keep the Wallace myth in the forefront of Scottish identity. The Party has used the movie *Braveheart* quite successfully as a publicity campaign tool. For example, in 1996, the SNP produced a campaign bill which featured the “familiar movie-poster figure of a dramatically tartaned and battle-wearied Mel Gibson in a campaign bill that read, ‘We Need Independence Now More Than Ever!’”³⁹ During his term as SNP leader, Alex Salmond defended this utilization with the opinion that “the message is relevant today in that it is the Scots who are fighting for their independence the same way they are at the moment. . . . The allure of his supposed concern for civil rights, equity and self-determination fit snugly into contemporary political discourse.”⁴⁰

In 1998 the National Museum of Scotland opened its doors to an almost immediate complaint by SNP leaders: not a single artifact or reference to Wallace was to be found. Salmond responded to this apparent snub of Scotland's freedom-fighter by protesting that “for centuries, members of the establishment have been attempting to eradicate all traces of Wallace from Scottish history.”⁴¹ This accusation may be a bit overarching, but it is true that the Wallace cult faces its share of non-believers, and much of the derision focuses on Mel Gibson's movie. In an article for the newspaper *Scotland on Sunday*, Audrey Gillan voiced her fear that “*Braveheart* has encouraged Scotland's lack of knowledge about itself. Greedy for confirmation...our gluttony for feeding on myth and heathery legend reaches worrying proportions when it effects the entire socio-consciousness of a nation.”⁴²

Recently, the controversy over a thirteen-foot tall sandstone statue of William Wallace, carved in the likeness of Mel Gibson and bearing the inscriptions “Freedom” and “Braveheart” in bold letters, has been another source of publicity for the legend [Figure 4].⁴³ Said to be one of the most “loathed pieces of public art in Scotland,” the statue was placed in the parking lot of the Wallace Monument in Stirling in 1997.⁴⁴ The sculpture is a high relief stone carving which portrays Wallace with the same hair, costuming, and weaponry as in the movie *Braveheart*. The decision by tourist officials to include the Hollywood portrayal of Wallace at the well-loved Scottish site has been considered by many to be “an act of almost unbelievable crassness and bad taste. . . . trivializing and kitschifying the memory

of Wallace.”⁴⁵ However, the statue was enjoyed by as many people who hated it: Tom Church, the artist, acknowledged in an interview that “the purists didn’t think too much of it but the tourists absolutely loved it.”⁴⁶ In 2008, after it had suffered several thousand pounds worth of damage by vandalism, the “Freedom” statue was removed from the grounds of the Wallace Monument to make way for a new visitor’s center. Despite numerous attempts to sell it and donate it, apparently the statue remains in the possession of its creator.⁴⁷



Figure 4

Critics and even supporters of the freedom movement have condemned the use of the Wallace image by nationalists. Some consider the employment of archaic myths in modern politics to be “inappropriate and irrelevant” and “an example of how Scots tended to celebrate failure.”⁴⁸ If these statements appear harsh and undeserved, it is only because they are. History of every kind, whether all the facts are ironed out or not, is never irrelevant. Americans do not say to Texas, “you celebrate failure” simply because they hold the Battle of the Alamo to be one of the greatest moments in Texan history. The Battle of Falkirk was Scotland’s “Alamo,” and William Wallace the Highlander’s “Davy Crockett.” This is not a celebration of failure or a sign of defeatism—it is a way that people honor courage, determination, and principle as a standard to live up to.

Much of the opposition focuses on the cruelty and violence of Wallace's campaign, questioning whether it is wise to "identify as our national hero a man who, however brave and honorable he may have been, has his hands red with English blood."⁴⁹ In this instance, *Braveheart* did nothing to help the cause of Wallace followers or to quiet naysayers. As only Hollywood can do, the directors of *Braveheart* brought out the bloodiness of Wallace's crusade in vivid and brutal fashion. As a result, attention turned to the graphic violence present in the original *Wallace* poem. Blind Harry made no effort to cover up the realities of Wallace's brutal campaign, causing an author in the early twentieth century, William Henry Schofield, to comment:

The only spirit that quickens one in the *Wallace* is the spirit of patriotism; but so malignant is that spirit, so stimulating to cruelty and barbarity, that it seems like the spirit not of God but of the Devil. The spirit of hate animates the *Wallace* throughout, and no power on earth can cast it out, so as to make its body wholly clean.⁵⁰

In direct contrast to the earlier passage by Peter Hay, here Schofield questions the very heart of the Wallace myth. He seems to believe that Blind Harry's poem, if not Wallace himself, was tainted by such a thirst for English blood that no amount of time or poetic license could justify or redeem it. Perhaps he views Harry's *Wallace* as the driving force behind a continuing cycle of anti-Anglo sentiment. No matter the facts of the story, however, as an ambiguous historical figure, Wallace has made it easy for certain aspects of his legend to be glossed over with time. This has allowed Scots to remember him not as a violent murderer, but as a determined man who inspired the country he loved to freedom, however temporary that freedom may have been. Despite the negative feedback Wallace has received from certain groups in recent years, the legend is still wildly popular in everyday culture and in regard to the current Scottish freedom movement.⁵¹

In conclusion, the Wallace myth has been employed by many groups at many times, but none so obviously as during the early Wars of Independence, the Scottish Revolution, the Age of Romanticism, and the current Scottish freedom movement. Preserved through the writings of Blind Harry, the story of William Wallace has proven consistently important and inspirational to every generation throughout the last 700 years, even though the

way in which the legend is regarded and used to further the cause of Scottish freedom has evolved. During Wallace's life, his fame aided in rallying an army against England, whereas, during the 1600's, the re-appearance of the legend may have revealed the pride that Scots found in the Stuart's short-lived reign over England. Even after the unionization of the two countries, Scotland continued to raise up a Romanticized image of Wallace's bravery as a means of reaffirming national identity, while during the twentieth century the movie *Braveheart* and its exploitation by nationalist groups reacquainted a new generation with Wallace's timeless fight for Scottish independence. Like any legend, the life of Sir William Wallace—traitor, brute, warrior, martyr, freedom fighter, protector, and national hero—has become subject to the interpretation of time, culture, and political agendas. The story's success lies in its appeal: real or imagined, people love a hero.

Modern historians seem to feel the need to scrape away the dust-layers of the centuries, the layers that might cause people to look back at a particular figure with more respect in death than that person deserved in life. In their obsession with revealing the stark, ugly realities of the past, perhaps they have destroyed a part of what makes history beautiful. Nevertheless, centuries of tradition are not always so vulnerable, and even in the face of scrutiny, some well-loved legends will refuse to give in. In fact, "almost as fast as old myths are disposed of new ones seem to appear. . . It is [however] heartening to know that, in an age of hi-tech brainwashing and processing, people remain human enough to dream and to fantasize—one of the few traces of individuality left to them."⁵² Cultures from the beginning of time have established myth and legend for one simple reason: humans need heroes, and as long as they are needed, the legends will survive. On the tower of the Barnweill Monument—another nineteenth-century tribute to William Wallace—is written this inscription:

Centuries have not diminished the luster of his heroic achievements; and the memory of this most disinterested of patriots shall, through all ages, be honoured and revered by his countrymen. . . . Ever honoured by the memory of the matchless Sir William Wallace. . . . From Greece arose Leonidas, from America Washington, and from Scotland Wallace, names which shall remain through all time the watchwords and beacons of liberty.⁵³

Notes

- (Title) Robert Burns, *Poems and Songs* (New York: Cassell and Co., 1908).
The inspiration for this poem was derived from a speech given supposedly by Robert Bruce to his troops before the Battle of Bannockburn against the English in 1314.
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