

## **Arms and the Man: how the Scots who bled with Wallace fought in *Braveheart* and in History**

Scotland's war of independence was, like most wars, decided militarily i.e. by the military success of Scots armies. The ability to raise armies to drive out the English was therefore crucial. In feudal times in most of Europe armies were normally raised and centred on the feudal landholding nobility. In Scotland in the abnormal period of Wallace's career many or most of the nobility were not strongly, if at all, committed to the cause that Wallace championed. This fact greatly affected the composition and armament of the Scots forces in Wallace's battles. In consequence two things were necessary — popular support and making do without the normal contingent of mounted nobles, often the most important and sometimes even the largest part of a medieval army.

In all ages before modern times, the only two basic types of soldier were the mounted (in medieval times nobles and their personal followers) and those on foot; and virtually the only subdivisions were between heavy-armed men and light-armed. Because so few Scots nobles took Wallace's side, his armies were basically of infantry. By contrast, Edward I's armies in Scotland always had a strong cavalry element. The whole Scots nobility mounted and armoured for battle would have been relatively few against even that part of the English chivalry that Edward I could spare from his affairs in France.

The infantry in medieval Western Europe was divided into two types — those who could fight only at close quarters and hand-to-hand and those who could shoot (or hurl) missiles at opponents, at least for part of the conflict, for distances up to 200 or 300 paces. The Scots, for no doubt sufficient social, economic, cultural or traditional reasons, had relatively few missile-men and those armed with the relatively short Scots bow. Crossbowmen apparently were not present in significant numbers.

Neither the few Scots mounted men nor the more numerous English cavalry included any missile-men. However, Edward I's foot troops included relatively large numbers of very skilled archers armed with longbows. These may have been already on the way to becoming professionals. Some historians assume or assert that all these bowmen serving the King of England were Welsh, and certainly the six-foot bow, so long associated with England, originated in Wales. But by the early fourteenth century and the beginning of the Hundred Years War in the Crecy campaign many, if not most of the 'English' archers were in fact Englishmen, and men of a group rising in status, freemen in a society full of villeins and serfs, with self-respect and a degree of independence.

The opposing armies in Wallace's first pitched battle — Stirling Bridge — differed greatly and the same difference was more or less seen in the second and last of his great battles, Falkirk. On the Scots side was an army of essentially infantry overwhelmingly non-archer, and thus able to fight (only) hand-to-hand and on the English side cavalry and two kinds of infantry — the archers and the rest. Since there were no obvious differences in training, discipline and experience in the Scots infantry (e.g. no regulars or professionals as against raw recruits and untrained levies; no fully-armoured heavy foot as against light-moving Highlanders) it is impossible to say that any one section of the Scots army was more important or more useful inherently than any other part — all were equally useful or useless depending on the circumstances and how they were led or commanded.

In the English armies, the three major divisions — mounted, archers and the rest — were of very different value and use. The cavalry were basically heavy-armoured men-at-arms or knights, on chargers bred for war. The men also were in theory, and often in practice, bred for war. They relied on shock tactics, charging home at best speed with levelled spears ('couched' lances) and, theoretically, were virtually irresistible by any targeted enemies in an open field. (When two such charges met one another, according to some old chronicles, men's thighs and horses' necks and backs could be broken in the shock.) Knightly heavy cavalry traditionally from the time the Middle Ages emerged from the Dark Ages had ruled the battlefields of Europe. In the earlier centuries, the spear was a stabbing weapon held often above the rider's head, but by about 1100 AD the couched lance, with its butt tucked under the rider's right (spear) arm, his shield hung round his neck and his left hand free for the reins, produced a united force of man, horse and spear in a single unswerving guided missile powered by the momentum of the horse's weight and speed.

This development not only greatly enhanced the power of the knight's charge but also somewhat limited the adaptability and versatility of the knight's activity, at least in the first onset. A contemporary described the charge of a knight as follows: 'It is indispensable for anyone who wants to give a blow with a lance to press his hand and his forearm against his side on his lance, and let his horse guide itself as best it can at the moment of impact. For if a man moves his hand, or attempts to guide his lance, the blow does no damage.'<sup>1</sup> Those who have watched tent-pegging contests will appreciate the skilled aim that a lancer can develop at full gallop.

Naturally after the first charge, knights could and did combat with weapons other than spears, especially swords, axes and maces. But the greatest reliance was placed on jousting as training for the charge with the levelled lance. Within limits, these knightly men-at-arms had discipline and

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<sup>1</sup> Usamah, a Saracen historian.

even used simple formations, especially that called *en haie*, i.e a long single or double rank for the charge. Their courage was formidable. Based on pride and *noblesse oblige*, it consisted of an overwhelming fear of showing fear, and thus betraying their class, belying their birth and forfeiting, morally if not legally, their rights and privileges.

Heavy cavalry were of limited use for the guerilla warfare mostly practised by Wallace's men and in all very mountainous, heavily-wooded or boggy terrain. They were also less useful in attacking or even defending castles and other fortifications, for which purpose they would have to dismount, than were the next great division of English soldiery, the longbowmen. These were fully adapted to broken or difficult terrain and to skirmishing and especially to sieges and, as well, were often decisive in a pitched battle where, however, they needed adequate protection from sudden attack by close combat troops. The longbowmen early gained and long preserved a reputation for deadly shooting, courage and discipline.

The remaining English infantry would be armed, no doubt, with various types of polearms — spears of various lengths, axes, the occasional grisly 'holy water sprinkler' with its numerous steel points and protrusions, and the bill, the weapon which became by the 1400s so characteristic of non-archer English infantry that the phrase 'Bows and bills!' was a frequent battle shout. The bill was the English version of the halberd (halbert) — that eight-foot polearm so popular with and deadly in the hands of Swiss mountaineers.<sup>2</sup> The later (and shorter) English poleaxe, which had spike and hook, was less an infantry arm than a weapon for knights fighting on foot. In any case, thirteenth to fourteenth century non-archer English infantry, however they were armed, have left no mark on history. They gained no great reputation for discipline or for valiant or lethal or decisive deeds on the battlefield. They were, no doubt useful to help hold or besiege fortifications and on a stricken field, perhaps to guard archers or to scuffle with similarly armed opponents. But unlike archers and knights they played no leading roles and decided no decisive battles.

Many or most of the Scots infantry may have been similarly and as variously armed as that third estate of the English army. Some few may have wielded the original claymore (great sword), the two-handed weapon which Wallace and such giants could no doubt handle with ease. But most Scottish swordsmen probably had shields or targes, and swords of any kind (being fairly expensive) were probably relatively few compared with spears, axes and other weapons, many converted from agricultural implements. Certainly the Scots infantry needed no better equipment than that of Wallace's men in the

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<sup>2</sup> The bill had a slightly concave axe-like blade, curved forward, slightly hook-like, unlike the halberd's straight or slightly convex blade. The bill before the 15th century was not furnished with the spear point or spike and back hook (beak) which were part of the Swiss and German halberds.

*Braveheart* film, if they could charge home on the English infantry. And, in historical fact, a (no doubt furious) charge of the Scots did play the major, almost the only, Scots part in their victory in the historical battle of Stirling Bridge.<sup>3</sup>

Whoever planned the Scots response to the English advance, it was a classic ploy to nullify the advantage one side had in numbers and equipment. The trick was seen often, both long before and long after Wallace's lifetime whenever a smaller army attacked by surprise a larger army. It consisted in ensuring that half of the larger army could not easily, or even at all, get into action to help those of their comrades suddenly in danger. In the case of Stirling Bridge, the river was deep and fast and the bridge narrow. The Scots, by their sudden onslaught after only half the English had crossed seized control of the north end of the bridge, simultaneously preventing more English from crossing to aid their hard-pressed comrades already on the north bank, and preventing those (or most of them) who had crossed from retreating or fleeing to safety. The English were in the strategic sense the aggressors, advancing on the Scots who were behind the river, but not too close to it. However, the Scots were tactically attacking, initiating the combat with utmost speed to effectively come to close quarters before either a cavalry charge could be launched against them or a barrage of archery used to decimate and perhaps demoralise them.

Instead, the first half of the English army which crossed the bridge was disordered and probably demoralised, trapped north of the bridge, in sight of their comrades on the south bank. They were apparently penned in an increasingly crowded space in a bend of the river and there destroyed without the possibility of help and with little hope of flight. The remainder of the English, were not only materially weakened by the destruction north of the bridge, but also must have been quite discouraged by the sight of that slaughter. The battle of Stirling Bridge provides no clue to the value of English archery. The bowmen, whether north or south of the river, would not have been able to affect the result of the battle, any who had crossed the bridge would have been almost at once fighting hand-to-hand against, or recoiling from Scots as well armed as themselves or more so for close quarters combat. Those on the south bank could have shot only their own comrades who were between themselves and the attacking Scots.

Nor was the course of the battle any reflection on the worth as fighting men or the effectiveness in open battle of heavy-armed medieval cavalry, the armed knightly men-at-arms. Their favourite and most effective weapon, the lance, an increasingly lengthy spear, was only effective when couched and borne at speed against the opponent. Stationary horsemen were at no great

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<sup>3</sup> For infantry weapons, and the rank of those possessing swords and spears, see E. Tunis, *Weapons* (London, 1954), pp. 71-2 and 84-5; and P. Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1986), p. 179 and *passim*.

advantage, if any, against attacking infantry. Probably the advantage of morale was with the excited and soon exultant Scots, far more numerous than the English cavalry (even if outnumbered by the English foot, which in this instance would be almost irrelevant). At best, if the knights dropped their spears and lashed out with sword or mace they might be at even odds with their attackers who would, however, be also attacking the unarmoured and thus vulnerable horses. And whenever a horse fell — well, as Spaniards put it, *'Muerto el caballo, perdido el caballero.'* — 'Dead the horse, lost the horseman'.

Did the Scots at Stirling Bridge use spears? Almost certainly. In the first place, spears had been either chosen weapons or the arm *faute de mieux* of most infantry in most ages before the age of firearms. Homeric heroes threw their spears and/or thrust and stabbed with them. Even the great exceptions, the Roman legionaries who conquered the Mediterranean world basically with short swords, reverted to spear-carrying long before the decline and fall in the west. And it is hard to imagine how they could have coped with a stirrups-using lance-carrying medieval heavy cavalry when the unstirrups heavy cavalry plus archery of the Parthians stopped the Romans at the height of their military prowess. Throughout the Dark Ages and in the rise and heyday of the feudal Middle Ages, the commonest infantry figure was a spearman. When infantry of the communal militias of Belgium and northern Italy began to do more than defend their walls, and fought in the open, they used long spears (pikes) and with these they could, sometimes, defeat the feudal chivalry in pitched battles. The great users and popularisers of the halberd, the Swiss, also adopted the pike, and their terrifyingly mobile and ruthless squares of halberdeers which, for centuries, so rapidly attacked and often routed armies in northern Italy and eastern France came to have skirts or edges of pikemen holding sixteen- to eighteen-foot spears and able to beat off or drive back the mounted men at arms and drive back or rout or destroy most opposing infantry. There is no reason to doubt that Scots could have done the same if they had acquired the skill and experience which the Swiss acquired from practice and frequent service abroad as mercenaries. But the histories of Flodden and Pinkie show dogged courage more than the consummate competence and elan of the Swiss in their prime.<sup>4</sup>

Putting aside recollections of what the Swiss did and speculations on what Scots might have done or become able to do, let us consider what the film *Braveheart* showed of the Scots and of William Wallace in their military activities. In the minor actions before Stirling Bridge, Wallace is shown as the resourceful and successful guerilla leader, which he undoubtedly was. No doubt the conventions of Hollywood film-making dictated that as 'baddies'

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<sup>4</sup> For comparisons between Scots and Swiss peasantry and their aptness for war, see, Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages*, p. 73 and *passim*. For two ways of using spears on foot, Tunis, *Weapons*, pp. 25-26.

English soldiers who in fact wore no kind of uniform, let alone those shown, had to act invariably stupid, clumsy and slow to be invariably overcome, even by attackers in the senior citizen age-group. The sentries of 'baddies' do not see, their archers never think (in time) of loosing their arrows.

Wallace is shown as a doughty swordsman, which the historical leader undoubtedly was, but it is unfortunate that, instead of a Schwarzenegger in built-up shoes, a relatively short actor had to play the role of a warrior of whom one of the few certainties is that he was of gigantic size and strength. Mel Gibson tries to disarm criticism by asserting that any claims of the greatness of Wallace's person must be an accretion of fictional legend, attracted to a successful fighting man.

For the appearance of the Scots of *Braveheart*, little needs to be said, except that they are all shown wearing kilts, whereas in fact none would have; there is no suggestion that any Highlanders were involved in either of Wallace's major campaigns and his whole military career was in the Lowlands. Even nobles on horseback insist on wearing kilts, but in compensation most Scots wear no headgear. Presumably it never rains in Scotland. Even nobles fighting in a pitched battle, where in fact they would have been in full armour, have no protection for their head, the most vulnerable part of the human body, and the one which was the last to be guarded with a helmet when soldiers' armour went out of fashion, and the first part to be re-armoured in World War I.

The Scots army at Stirling Bridge was not (as in the film) one raised by vacillating nobles and hi-jacked by Wallace, who inexplicably becomes able to command it. It was a combination of two insurgent forces which had come together in central Scotland from opposite directions after parallel careers of successfully overcoming English occupation forces and garrisons. The more southern force was led by Wallace, the northern by Sir Andrew Moray or Murray, a personage obviously of great historical importance in Wallace's career, but unmentioned in *Braveheart*. How the armies were raised or gathered is not clear either in the film or in history. No doubt a lot of volunteering occurred as indignant and xenophobic Scots, resenting the insolence of the English who acted as masters after Edward I's brutal extension of his power, joined those daring souls who gave a lead to resistance. Almost certainly neither of the two leaders would have been above pressuring men to join them, and quite possibly there was a degree of covert support for their recruiting by one or more of the great nobles, most likely including the Steward of Scotland, whose descendants within a century succeeded the Bruces as the royal house of Scotland.

*Braveheart* gives no suggestion of the truth of the provenance of the Scots army at Stirling Bridge. According to its own story, Wallace was unknown except from hearsay to most of the men in that army until a few

minutes before the fighting. Yet Wallace is able to command the loyalty and obedience of the men and is able to get them to perform some novel drills with long spears, which are miscalled shiltrons.<sup>5</sup> The shiltron was actually a formation, the dense hedgehog of spearmen, secure from close combat attack so long as the men kept their nerve.

At the beginning of Wallace's first pitched battle in *Braveheart* the English commander gives the sensible order for his archers to begin the action with a relatively long-range arrow bombardment of the ranks of the Scots, no doubt expecting this to reduce both their numbers and their courage before any attack with hand-held weapons. This was a normal procedure for not just an English, but any medieval army from 1066 at Hastings, if not earlier. Even the usually overconfident French at least set out to do the same at Crecy. In the next campaign after Stirling Bridge, Edward I used these very tactics to gain his victory at Falkirk and had they been used at Stirling Bridge they would have been very likely to have produced a victory there. *Braveheart* shows the English archers at Stirling Bridge shooting volleys to order on several occasions. It is true that bowmen would usually be restrained by their discipline from shooting until the command or permission to loose was given, which would be only when the archers were at what the commander thought was the right distance from the enemy, and would then all begin shooting together. But what *Braveheart* showed was a parody of an archery barrage which, in fact, would be fairly continuous until most of the arrows available, about forty to each Bowman, had been shot. Nor would there be longish pauses between single flights of arrows, in perhaps a sporting spirit in order to give the Scots time to recover their spirits and dress their ranks in time for the next hail of missiles, or, in the film, to bare their arses in vulgar mockery of their enemies. Instead, an unceasing and lethal hail of arrows would torment the stationary army (unless it had its own counterforce of archers) until perhaps 100,000 to 200,000 shot had fallen in the space occupied by the archers' targets. And this was not a random storm of lead bullets fired merely in the general direction of the enemy, such as graced (or disgraced) battlefields from the late 1600s to recent years when, according to optimists, it took 100 bullets to kill one man while realists put the number at 1000 and pessimists at 10,000. Longbowmen were marksmen, shooting in their own time and under no pressure to outdo the enemy in volume of fire; undefended by the noise of thousands of firings and with their eyes not impeded by clouds of smoke. Their weapons were weapons of precision which could produce great accuracy in the hands of practised men. It took years of practice to make such an archer and all the practice consisted of firing at targets. The musketeers in following centuries were not practised in target firing and could

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<sup>5</sup> It is also spelled schiltron.

always blame the poor quality of their weapons for misses, even if they did attempt to aim.<sup>6</sup>

It is perfectly ridiculous for *Braveheart* to suggest that the Scots received the lethal archery by baring their buttocks, both because they would be wearing the normal hose or trews of Lowland peasants and also because they would be very concerned to avoid making themselves more vulnerable targets in the unceasing rain of arrows. There is, of course, no suggestion in any records to give grounds for Mel Gibson's assertion that the Scots habitually 'mooned' their opponents. On the contrary, many accounts of battles including Falkirk, refer to the misery produced by the arrow storm, especially if it could not be answered in kind. The desperation it produced often led to a trickle of fugitives and deserters from the rear and occasionally a furious attack on the tormenters, which would break the ranks of the defenders and lead to their defeat at the hands of watchful cavalry.

Just as there was no barrage of archery at the real Stirling Bridge, nor was there a massed cavalry charge. *Braveheart* does show what could happen in the way of a bloody check to a cavalry charge if a steady infantry, with long spears whose butts were firmly planted on the ground received the horsemen with courage and cohesion. All cavalry commanders, however, were fully aware of the danger of charging steady and well-formed spearmen before an arrow storm had done its work of disintegrating the shiltrons as it did at Falkirk. What is incredible is the manoeuvre shown in *Braveheart* of the infantry at Stirling Bridge tricking or ambushing a cavalry charge by picking up at the last moment the long, sharpened poles which acted as pikes and suddenly presenting a well-ordered hedgehog formation. Probably no such trick was ever attempted, even by well-trained and veteran professionals, let alone the peasant levies of an insurgent people's army. Any spears held by the Scots infantry at Stirling Bridge or Falkirk or anywhere else, would be their principal or only weapons throughout any battle they fought and probably separated from them only in death or flight. The other tricks in *Braveheart* are equally baseless. The idea of fire arrows setting the battlefield alight is perhaps pleasing, but it never happened at Falkirk or anywhere else.

What is not clear, either from *Braveheart* or from historical records that I have seen, is how long the spears were that the Scots infantry used. Since very long spears would not be easily carried, at speed anyway, or easily used in attack except by trained soldiers, it seems most likely that at Stirling Bridge Wallace's and Moray's men carried only relatively short spears plus axes etc. At Falkirk, where Wallace stood on the defensive, his shiltrons may

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<sup>6</sup> For accuracy of the English archer hitting a man-size target 12 out of 12 at 240 yards see, Tunis, *Weapons*, pp. 61-62; also see K. Toman, *Military Uniforms and Weapons* (London, 1964), pp. 51, 57 and 59. For contrasting lack of accuracy of firearms, see Tunis, *Weapons*, and B. Nosworthy, *Battle Tactics of Napoleon and his Enemies* (Bury St. Edmunds, 1997) p. 188 *et seq.*

have had longer weapons, but probably not of the length of pikes, which themselves had not yet reached their sixteenth and seventeenth century maximum of eighteen feet. It may be that the Scots infantry spears were ca. 1300 and remained for centuries shorter than those of continental armies: there is a claim that the French government sent to James IV in time for Flodden a considerable quantity of pikes, which in the fatal battle, the English countered not only by archery but also by using bills to chop the long pike handles. The importance of the difference between shorter spears (up to eight or nine feet) and longer spears (up to eighteen feet) was that the shorter could be used with one hand by a man who also held a shield; the longer needed two hands and the spearman could not manage a shield.

If the Scots spears at Falkirk were in fact longer than those they carried at Stirling Bridge, it could have been a defensive move, perhaps because of Edward I's own reputation as one of the most successful war leaders of his time or because of the size and quality of Edward's army or even possibly because of the loss of Andrew Moray, Wallace's co-general at Stirling Bridge, well before the battle of Falkirk. It is also just possible that Wallace and his men may have become aware of the need for serious defence against heavy English cavalry as a result of that minor episode of the real battle of Stirling Bridge, in which an English knight extricated his own mounted following from the disaster by cutting his way to the bridge and recrossing it. This was a notable example of what could be done by even a small force of men-at-arms which kept its courage and cohesion and was well led by an undismayed commander.<sup>7</sup>

*Braveheart* conveys the essence of what was at stake in the Scots war of independence, but unfortunately contrives to be wrong on almost all the facts about most of the prominent persons involved. It gives a reasonable impression of how a largely infantry melee could have appeared, such as did occur at the real Stirling Bridge, and again of how a cavalry charge could have looked before and after its failure: but such a charge was not made at Stirling Bridge and at Falkirk the cavalry did not fail. Most of the rest of the scenes of fighting throw little light on the weapons used and the manner in which they were used. Unfortunately, a great deal of unhistorical disinformation is given, as Hollywood 'effects' are produced to thrill and entertain.

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<sup>7</sup> For Edward I's major contributions to 'progress' in war (a professional army, and the greater exploitation of the long bow) see Feild Marshal Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, *A History of Warfare* (London, 1968), pp. 196-98.