

William Wallace in Scottish Literature

The life of William Wallace has been one of the great themes of Scottish Literature since the Middle Ages. No pretence is made of offering a comprehensive catalogue of works on him which would be both boring and incomplete. Instead, it is proposed to examine and compare how different writers at different times have developed and contributed to the theme. The relationship between Literature and History is like a difficult marriage: the two cannot agree, yet they cannot live apart. In earlier society there was no distinction between Literature and History: the bard was the singer and the chronicler, he wrote, or recited rather, with an immediate and practical purpose, the glorification of his patron and his family. The skills were those of rhetoric, versification, imagery, declamation and memory. Today the purposes of the literary writer and the historiographer are totally different. One wishes to ascertain facts and interpret them, the other is often reluctant to let the facts as they are known get in the way of a good story. A passage which demonstrates the relationship between the two is from Bush who writing of the early sixteenth century said:

For us the persistence of Medievalism is more of a virtue than a defect. Clio was still in possession of her throne. The historian was a man, often a man of action, with a temperament, not a cloistered and impersonal card-index. The conception of history as epic story and drama, not as scientific diagnosis, of individual men rather than social and economic forces as the causes of events, of God working His will in human and especially English affairs, all this meant that history had not yet been entirely robbed of its traditional poetry.¹

To the extent that it had a separate existence, history was a sub-division of literature. For this reason the earlier historical accounts as literature are particularly included.

It is perhaps surprising that for one who caused such a stir in his own time as William Wallace there should be no contemporary accounts of his life. There were references in documents which have survived. The charges on which he was arraigned for instance and the judgment of the Commission, and there are references in correspondence. These references give a reflective rather than a direct view. We learn of Wallace from the effect he had on others. It is not only the references to Wallace which are of interest, but the omissions where a reference might be expected, and our record commences with such an omission.

¹ Douglas Bush, *English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century 1600-1660* (Oxford London, 1945) p. 210.

There were two great Scottish epics written in the vernacular in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These were *The Brus* by John Barbour, dated about 1374, sixty-nine years after the execution of Wallace, and *Schir William Wallace* by Henry the Minstrel known better as Blind Harry which was probably completed about a hundred years later. The first is interesting not for what it says about Wallace, but for what it does not say. In fact Wallace is ignored in Barbour's epic. It is as though he had not existed. McDiarmid and Stevenson the editors of *Barbour's Bruce* comment:

For obvious reasons Fordun's notices of the achievements of the Comyn family are suppressed and nothing is said of Wallace, whose defeat at Falkirk had come to be attributed equally to Bruce and the Comyns. These tactful omissions allow Barbour to arrive quickly at the point where his hero can appear simply as rightful heir and patriot, the sole hope of his country.²

The editors doubt whether the work was specifically commissioned by Robert II who had acceded to the throne in 1371. Robert was anxious to secure the succession in his family. It has been related that his right had been contested by the Earl of Douglas,³ and there were serious questions about the legitimacy of his three elder sons, despite a papal dispensation.⁴ Fisher comments:

Bruce's whole relationship with Wallace was a strange one, but it may well be that the clue to the question of Wallace's reputation is to be found in certain of Bruce's actions once he became king. It must be remembered that prior to the murder of Caiman, Bruce's behaviour had always been dictated by a degree of self-interest absent in Wallace. His family had always stressed the strength and legitimacy of its claim to the throne. Bruce himself fought for years to establish that legitimacy against the claims of Edward II. It might not serve his purpose in this struggle to have his name linked with that of Wallace, a convicted traitor and outlaw. This question of legitimacy may explain the otherwise surprising omission of Wallace's name from Barbour's account of Bruce. Even in the famous speech at Bannockburn Barbour can find no place for a mention of Wallace. Uplifting though Bruce's address is, noble as its sentiments are, he does not in Barbour's report call upon the name of Wallace to inspire his army. It may not be irrelevant that after the completion of his work Barbour received first a gift of money and then a pension from Robert II.

² *Barbour's Bruce*, eds., Matthew P McDiarmid and James A C Stevenson, The Scottish Text Society (Edinburgh, 1985), Vol. I, p 38.

³ *Ibid*, p 32.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 10.

There was again war with England. Barbour would thus fulfil the role Blind Harry gave himself at the time of James III if with different motives: to produce a story which would stir and unite a people governed by a weak king in the face of the enemy. If this argument is correct, it makes Barbour's treatment of Wallace the more striking.⁵

The 'tactful omissions' were also no doubt instrumental in securing for Barbour the favour of King Robert II who granted him £10 pounds from the Aberdeen customs and an annual annuity of 20 shillings. Again history is used for an immediate and political purpose. Barbour's work, which is a magnificent epic, is not being disparaged here. Indeed, some flavour of it may be gained from this famous extract:

Fredome

A! FREDOME is a noble thing!
 Fredome mays man to haiff liking;
 Fredome all solace to man giffis:
 He levys at es that frely levys!
 A noble hart may haiff nane es
 Na ellys nocht that may him ples,
 Gyff fredome failyhe; for fre liking'
 Is yharnyt our all othir thing.
 Na he, that ay has levyt fre,
 May nocht knaw weill the propyrte,
 The angyr, na the wrechyt dome,
 That is couplyt to foule thyrdome.
 Bot gyff he had assayit it,
 Than all perquer he suld it wyt;
 And suld think fredome mar to prys
 Than all the gold in warld that is.⁶

One must wonder how the author of this passionate ode to freedom could have failed to recognise Wallace. Was there a choice? Had he the option of mentioning him and underrating his achievement or of vilifying him? Had he refused such an option and preferred not to mention him at all? We will never know. The failure to mention him was in itself a distortion of history.

The earliest account of the life of Wallace available to us today is by John of Fordun who died just 80 years after the execution of Wallace. It is written in Latin. Wallace is depicted as an heroic figure. This account suggests that if there was not a written record, there was an oral one. More

⁵ Andrew Fisher, *William Wallace* (Edinburgh, 1986) p. 130.

⁶ *The Oxford Book of Scottish Verse*, eds., John McQueen and Tom Scott (Oxford, 1989), p. 5.

probably there were both: some written records, now lost, supplemented by folk memory. A strong folk memory is suggested from the manner in which Wallace is introduced in Fordun's narrative. Here is a well known character ready to take his place in the annals at his appointed time. He begins:

The same year [1296] William Wallace lifted up his head from his den, as it were, and slew the English sheriff of Lanark, a doughty and powerful man, in the town of Lanark. From that time, therefore, there flocked to him all who were in bitterness of spirit, and weighed down beneath the burden of bondage under the unbearable domination of English despotism; and he became their leader. He was wondrously brave and bold of goodly mein, and boundless liberality; and, though, among the earls and lords of the kingdom, he was looked upon as low-born, yet his fathers rejoiced in the honour of knighthood. His elder brother, also, was girded with the knightly belt, and inherited a knightly estate which was large enough for his station, and which he bequeathed to his descendants. So Wallace overthrew the English on all sides; and gaining strength daily, he, in a short time, by force, and by dint of his prowess brought all of the magnates of Scotland under his sway, whether they would or not. Such of the magnates, moreover, as did not thankfully obey his commands, he took and browbeat, and handed over to custody, until they should utterly submit to his good pleasure. And when all had thus been subdued, he manfully betook himself to the storming of the castles and fortified towns in which the English ruled; for he aimed at quickly and thoroughly freeing his country and overthrowing the enemy.⁷

He told his story from an unashamedly Scottish viewpoint. There is a biblical ring to the style not lost by the translation. The arrangement is chronological. Wallace's story is told to the battle of Falkirk and his resignation as Governor of Scotland in six short numbered paragraphs (98 to 102). Other matters are dealt with until paragraph 116 where in one graphic sentence his betrayal and death are described.

In the year 1305, William Wallace was craftily and treacherously taken by John of Menteith, who handed him over to the king of England; and he was, in London, torn limb from limb, and, as a reproach to the Scots, his limbs were hung on towers in sundry places throughout England and Scotland.⁸

⁷ *John of Fordun's Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*, p. 321

⁸ *Ibid* 332.

John of Fordun's work was completed by Bower and the complete work was known as the *Scoticronicon*, but Fordun was responsible for the sections on Wallace.

Andrew of Wyntoun's *The Cronykil of Scotland* is a lengthy rhyming history of Scotland from the creation to his own time. It includes the first vernacular account of Wallace that has survived. The story of the rise of Wallace to the battle of Stirling Bridge and his governorship of Scotland is told in Book VIII Chapter XIII in 190 lines, and Chapter XX, a short chapter of sixteen lines, describes his betrayal by Sir John Mentieth and his execution. Wallace is first shown as a loud mouthed brawler, then as a great general and wise ruler, and finally as a martyr. The different roles are not always easily reconcilable. However the story is told with vigour and good strong dialogue. Wyntoun obviously drew on popular accounts which were still circulating:

Here next folowys off the dayis,
 Qwhen ras gud Willeyham Walys.
 Twelff hundyre nynty yhere and sewen
 Fra Cryst wes borne the Kyng of Hewyn,
 Willame Walays in Clyddysdale
 That saw hys kyn supprysyd hale
 Wyth Inglis men in gret dyspyte
 Sum of thare harmys he thought to qwyte.⁹

He encounters English soldiers in Lanark:

In till Lanark Inglis men,
 Quhare multitud war gaddryd then.
 Ane a tyt made at hys swerd
 Hald still thi hand, and spek thi worde.
 yth thi swerd thow mais gret bost.
 Tharefor this dame made lytill cost.
 Quhat caus, has thow for to were grene?
 Na caus bot to make the tene
 Thow suld noucht bere sa fare a knyff
 Swa sayd the preyst that swyved thi wyff.
 Swa lang he cald that woman fayre
 Quhill that his barne was made thi ayre.
 Me-think thou drywys me to scorne.
 The dame was swyvyd, or thou wes borne.
 Fra thaet kest they na more wordis:
 But was tyt owt mony swordys
 In to the market off Lanark,

⁹ David Laing, *Andrew of Wyntoun, The Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1872), p. 339.

Quhare Inlis men, bath stwre and stark
 Fawcht in till gret multytud
 Agayne Williame Walays gude.
 Thare he gave them dynt for dynt
 There was na strenth, hys strak mycht stynbt.
 As he wes in that stowre fectand,
 Fa ane he strak swne the rycht hand;
 And fra that carle mycht dono mare,
 The lefft hand held fast the bucklare,
 And he swa nankynd as brayne wode
 Kest fast with the stump the blode
 In till Williame Walays face
 Mare cumryd off that blode he was
 Than he was a welle lang qwhille
 Feychtand stad in that peryle.¹⁰

Like his predecessors, Wyntoun was strongly patriotic in his sentiments, but nevertheless he could acknowledge bravery in the English where it was due.

The most thorough and enduring portrayal of Wallace in literature is *The Actis and Deides of Schir William Wallace* written by a minstrel known as Blind Harry. We do not know much about Blind Harry, or as he sometimes called, Henry the Minstrel. We do not know for certain if he was blind from birth as is claimed or indeed if he was blind at all. We do not know if he accompanied himself with a harp or any other instrument. John Major who was born in 1446 wrote:

In the time of my infancy, Henry who was blind from birth, composed a book consisting entirely of the achievements of William Wallace. ... Particulars which he heard related by the vulgar he wrote in the vulgar verse in which he excelled. But I do not believe everything that I find in such writings. ... By reciting his histories before princes or great men he gained his food and raiment, of which he was worthy.¹¹

The poem is a major epic comprising twelve books and totalling 11,877 lines. While it drew on previous accounts and influenced all subsequent ones, it is not an accurate historical record. However, increasingly modern writers are finding justification for parts previously discounted. The verse is iambic pentameter in rhyming couplets, a form used by Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales*. It was a longer line than used by Barbour, and allowed much more flexibility. Earlier commentators found the measure rough, as early critics

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 340 ff.

¹¹ *The Metrical History of Sir William Wallace* (Perth, 1790), Preface.

did of Chaucer, it was not until the full value was given to syllables particularly the terminal 'e' that the quality and regularity of the verse became apparent. Blind Harry was well aware of Chaucer, and apart from the verse form, there are distinct echoes of his work. A passage like:

The mery day sprang fra the oryent,
 With bemys brycht enlumynt the occident.
 Efter Titan, Phebus wp ryst fayr,
 Heich in the sper the signes maid declayr.
 Zepherus began his morow cours,
 The swete wapour thus fra the ground resours
 The humyll breyth doun fra the hewyn awaill
 In euery meide, bathe fyrth, forrest and dail
 The cler rede amang the rochis rang
 Throuch greyn branchis quhar byrdis blythly sang
 With joyous woice in hewynly armony....¹²

bears comparison with:

Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote
 The droghte of March havth perced to the roote
 Of which vertu engedered is the flour;
 Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
 Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
 And smale foweles maken melodye
 That slepen al the nyght with open ye.¹³

But the greatness of the work lies in the character of its protagonist. Wallace develops from a headstrong and uncouth young man, more than ready to engage in fighting with the hated Southron to the leader of a band of outlaws than to the leader of an army, and to his country's ruler. He gains the respect and love of his followers, and instills fear into his enemies and waverers on his own side. He is single minded in the pursuit of his one aim: the removal of the Southrons from Scotland. He develops into a mature and wise leader, but always retains his prowess as a fighter. A pious man he dies a horrible death still proclaiming his independence and the independence of his country. It is a magnificent narrative focussed tightly on its hero, and it moves at a rapid pace.

Comparisons between Wallace and Robert the Bruce are inevitable. Barbour avoided them only by pretending Wallace did not exist. Harry is not afraid to make them. For example, Thomas the Rhymer has discovered the

¹² George Eyre-Todd, *Early Scottish Poetry* (Glasgow, 1891), Vol. I, p. 200.

¹³ F N Robinson ed., *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Cambridge, Massachusetts), p. 19.

convalescent Wallace recovering in his old foster nurse's home and prophesies:

In truth, ere his live he spend,
 many a thousand in the field shall end.
 Out of this region shell he the Southron send. ...
 And Scotland thrice shall he bring to peace.
 Such a one shall we never again see. ...
 All worthy listeners whose wits are whole
 Be sure not to mistake my tale.
 Perchance you say that the Bruce was no less a man-
 Yes, he was also good, and what deeds he took in hand,
 And he was bolder in battle.
 Bruce was known to all the world:
 He was virtuous: we can say no man was his equal.
 But thrice Wallace this kingdom conquered,
 And in England pursued the world, far and wide. ...
 I shall return to my story again.¹⁴

Harry has Bruce strongly criticised by Wallace for aligning himself with the English, and recounts the story of Bruce sitting down to eat his meat after battle without washing. He is jeered at by the English, 'Behald, yon Scot ettis his awn blud.' He is ashamed and remembers Wallace's remonstrance, 'Bot contrar Scottis he faucht nocht fra that day.'¹⁵ Harry also wrote for an immediate political purpose. Blind Harry claimed his account was based on a Latin manuscript compiled by John Blair, Wallace's friend and priest. Most commentators regard this as a common medieval device to gain a spurious authenticity. But some recent commentators are treating Harry's version of events more seriously. According to James Mackay:

The lengthy passages of the poem dealing with Wallace's early career and rise to fame have an air of verisimilitude and wealth of circumstantial detail which, confirmed by those shreds of documentary evidence still extant, lead me to suppose that this part at least of the minstrel's epic is a useful guide, despite some very obvious discrepancies in chronology. By contrast, there are glaring errors in the later sections, such as the great Battle of Biggar (which never took place) and the assertion that, on the eve of his betrayal, Wallace had virtually cleared Scotland of the hated Southron, when in fact he was a fugitive, on the run with a handful of men. This points to the fact of John Blair's lost account having terminated some time after 1298 but

¹⁴ Graham McLennan, ed., *The Wild Flower: Blind Harry's Life of Wallace the Outlaw*, (Canberra, 1993), p. 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

probably by 1303, the minstrel then filling in later detail from popular myths compounded by his own imagination.¹⁶

Blind Harry intrudes his own personality into the poem. Here he humorously disclaims knowledge of the details of carnal love.

Quhat at thai wrocht I can nocht graithly say;
Rycht wnpertyt I am of Venus play

The influence of Blind Harry's book was extended by several reprints and translations. Perhaps the most influential was the translation into modern English by William Hamilton of Gilbertfield published in 1722. It was this edition that was to inspire the young Robert Burns. Probably for most Scots the poem that leaps to mind at the thought of Wallace is the cryptically titled, *Scots wha hae*, which continues, *wi Wallace bled*. The song of course is not about Wallace but it invokes his name, and that is sufficient to stir Scottish national fervour. In his autobiographical sketch addressed to Dr John Moore, Robert Burns wrote:

The first two books I ever read in private, and which gave me more pleasure than any two books I ever read since, were the *Life of Hannibal*, and the *History of Sir William Wallace*. Hannibal gave my young ideas such a turn that I used to strut in raptures up and down after the recruiting drum and bagpipe, and wish myself tall enough to be a soldier, while the story of Wallace poured a Scottish prejudice into my veins, which will boil along there till the floodgates of life shut in eternal rest.¹⁷

When he was 27 years of age he wrote *The Vision* an important introspective poem in which he dedicated himself to Coila the Muse of his local Kyle and the service of poetry. In describing the pictures he saw in the mantle of Coila he writes:

Low, in a sandy valley spread,
An ancient borough rear'd her head:
Still as in Scottish story read,
She boasts a race
To every nobler virtue bred,
And polish'd grace.

By stately tow'r or palace fair,
Or ruins pendent in the air,
Bold stems of Heroes, here and there,

¹⁶ James Mackay, *William Wallace: Braveheart* (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 15.

¹⁷ *The Complete Works of Robert Burns*, ed., William P Nimmo (Edinburgh, 1872), p. li.

I could discern;
Some seem'd to muse, some seem' to dare,
With feature stern.

My heart did glowing transport feel,
To see a race heroic wheel,
And brandish round the deep-dy'd steel
In sturdy blows;
While back-recoiling seem'd to reel
Their Suthron foes.

His COUNTRY'S SAVIOUR mark him well!
Bold RICHARDTON'S heroic swell;
The chief on Sark who glorious fell,
In high command;
And He whom ruthless Fates his native land.¹⁸

The last two stanzas quoted commemorate the whole family of Wallace 'A race heroic' The verses are marked by Burns' own footnotes. His country's Saviour is of course William Wallace. Ricardton is William's cousin Adam Wallace 'The Chief on Sark' was Wallace Laird of Craigie, who was second in command, at the famous battle on the banks of Sark 1448. 'That glorious victory was principally owing to the judicious conduct and intrepid valour of the gallant Laird of Craigie, who died of wounds after the action.' The last reference was to Sir Thomas. The area was Burns' own homeland. The Stair manuscript gives as the next two lines:

With secret throes I mark'd that earth,
That cottage witness of my birth,¹⁹

Burns had grown up with the Wallace legend, not just from his reading, but from the relationship of Wallace with the district where he was born. Wallace is again mentioned in *The Cotter's Saturday Night* a remarkable poem which moves from an idealised description of a rural family to an impassioned patriotic declaration. From the last stanza:

O Thou who pour'd the patriotic tide,
That stream'd thro' great, unhappy WALLACE ' heart;
Who dar'd to, nobly stem tyrannic pride,
Or nobly die, the second glorious part:
(The Patriot's God, peculiarly thou art,
His friend, inspirer, guardian and reward!)

¹⁸ *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed., James Kinsley (Oxford, 1968), p. 106 ff.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 106, footnote.

O never, never SCOTIA'S realm desert,
 But still the Patriot and the Patriot-bard,
 In bright succession raise, her Ornament and Guard!²⁰

The two references in the *Vision* and *The Cotters Saturday Night* helped form another link between Burns and Wallace. Mrs Dunlop a member of the local gentry who claimed descent from a cousin of Wallace was greatly impressed by both *The Cotters Saturday Night* and *The Vision*. She ordered further copies of his book. They then developed a close friendship, and began a correspondence which lasted throughout his life. On 26 August 1787 Burns then on his tour of the Highlands, wrote from Stirling to Alexander Muir:

This morning I knelt at the tomb of Sir John the Graham, the gallant friend of the immortal Wallace; and two hours ago I said a fervent prayer for old Caledonia over the hole in a blue whinstone, where Robert the Bruce fixed his royal standard on the banks of Bannockburn; and just now from Stirling castle, I have seen by the setting sun the glorious prospect of the windings of Forth through the rich carse of Stirling, and skirting the equally rich carse of Falkirk.²¹

In August 1793 he wrote to George Thompson introducing him to the tune *Hey tutti taitie*:

There is a tradition which I have met with in many places in Scotland, that it was Robert Bruce's march at the battle of Bannockburn. This thought in my solitary wanderings, warmed me to a pitch of enthusiasm on the theme of liberty and independence, which I threw into a kind of Scottish ode fitted to the air that one might suppose to be the gallant Royal Scot's address to his heroic followers on that eventful morning. ... So may God ever defend the cause of truth and liberty, as he did that day. ... P.S. I showed the air to Urbani who begged me to make some verses for it, but I had no idea of giving myself any trouble on the subject, till 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 roused my rhyming mania.²²

Some commentators have suggested that the other struggles of the same nature refer to the French and the American Revolutions. This may be so, but I believe they had a more topical, and indeed for Robert Burns a more dangerous reference, and one with an interesting Australian link. On the 30th

²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 151-52.

²¹ *Robert Burns*, ed., Nimmo, p. 256.

²² *Ibid*, p. 364.

August 1793 in a case that had excited tremendous interest throughout the United Kingdom, Thomas Muir was brought to the bar of the High Court of Justiciary in Edinburgh, to answer charges of sedition. His crime was attending with 160 delegates a convention in Edinburgh called by the 'Friends of the Constitution of the People'. The jury were all members of an association which had previously expelled him, one man who had qualms of conscience about being a juror was compelled to remain a member of the jury by Lord Braxfield. The sentence of fourteen years transportation was greeted with outrage for its harshness. Muir was the first of the so-called 'Scottish Martyrs' to be sentenced. The others, all sentenced in Edinburgh, though not all Scots, were Fyshe, Palmer, Skirving, Gerrald and Margarot. It is impossible that Burns was insensible to the highly topical trials, and F.M. Bladen writing in the second volume of the *Historical Records of New South Wales* stated: 'There can be little doubt that the results of the trials of Muir on the 30th August, and Palmer, on the 12th September, was fresh in the mind of Burns when he composed the poem referred to; and it is more than probable that they were the "struggles, not quite so ancient," to which he refers.'²³ Again the name of Wallace had been evoked for an immediate political purpose.

One of the songs collected by Burns was an old ballad called *Gude Wallace*.²⁴ Although it is included in some editions of his works, Burns never claimed authorship. Indeed, he has not even attempted to supply two missing lines. The story which appeared in Blind Harry's work is also the subject of a similar ballad published in a chap book about 1750. However this could not be the source for the one collected by Burns as it includes the missing lines. Further, the metre is different. One can imagine Burn's excitement when he discovered the ballad. His purpose was primarily to preserve the music, which is printed in Johnson's Musical Museum. These ballads represented the original unwritten poetic accounts of Wallace. They were the survivors of what must have been a rich body of traditional song and story, spread at first by the survivors and passed down to their children and grandchildren.

The eighteenth century was a period of great antiquarian interest in the collection of old songs and ballads. Burns was probably the most significant of such collectors. But it was also the century which saw two revolutions mounted against the English government and the brutal suppression of the Highlands, Scottish dress language and culture. There is no doubt that many Scots other than Burns were inspired by the story of Wallace especially the translation by William Hammond, and it is not surprising that there were attempts to discredit Blind Harry and reduce the popular status of Wallace. Lord Hailes, David Dalrymple, was one such historian. He would not accept

²³ Frank Clune, *The Scottish Martyrs* (Sydney, 1969), p 14.

²⁴ *Robert Burns*, ed., Kinsley, Vol. II, p 584.

popular accounts unless they were corroborated by written evidence. The introduction to the 1790 edition of *Blind Harry* strongly condemns his approach. Three versions of this ballad, not including *Blind Harry's*, have been traced as part of the research for this essay.

Wallace was a life long obsession with Burns; yet he composed no single work commemorating him. He wrote to Mrs Dunlop in July 1786:

The first book I met with in my early years which I perused with pleasure was *The Life of Hannibal*; the next was *The History of William Wallace*: for several of my earlier years I had few other authors ; and many a solitary hour have I stole out, after the laborious vacations of the day, to shed a tear over their glorious but unfortunate stories. In those boyish days I remember in particular being struck with that part of Wallace's story where the lines occur:

“Syne to the Leglen wood when it was late
To make a silent and a safe retreat.”

I chose a fine summer Sunday, the only day my line of life allowed, and walked half -a-dozen of miles to pay my respects to the Leglin wood, with as much devout enthusiasm as ever pilgrim did to Loretto; and, as I explored every den and dell where I could suppose my heroic countryman to have lodged, I recollect (for even then I was a rhymer) that my heart glowed with a wish to be able to make a song on him in some measure equal to his merits.²⁵

Why was such a song never written? Possibly because such a subject would require an epic in which he would have to stand comparison with the divine Milton. He showed himself master of the mock heroic with *Tam O' Shanter* and satire with *Holy Willy's Prayer*, but the epic was a quantum leap.

There are other scattered references to Wallace in Burns' works. In the nineteenth century Wallace became a darling subject of the Romantic movement. Jane Porter wrote *The Scottish Chiefs* in 1805. When you consider that Jane Austen published her first novel in 1811, this was a remarkable achievement. The novel had an immense success: it coincided with the renewal of interest in and the romanticisation of Scotland. It was reprinted repeatedly throughout the nineteenth century, and must have provided for thousands of readers their image of Wallace and Bruce. In 1922 an edited and beautifully illustrated edition was published by Scribners in New York and has since been reprinted. It is an imaginative and fanciful work, notwithstanding the assurances of historical accuracy:

I assure the reader that I seldom lead him to any spot in Scotland whither some written or oral testimony respecting my hero had not previously

²⁵ Robert Burns, ed., Nimmo, p. 237.

conducted myself. In the same spirit, being careful to keep to the line of chronology, I have not strayed from it in any instance, until my chief personages return from France; and then, my history being intended to be within the bounds of modern romance rather than measured by the folios of Scudery, I found myself obliged to take some liberties with time and circumstance; for both of which offences and particularly for the management of my catastrophe, I hope the historical, if he be also a gentle reader, will find no difficulty in forgiving me.²⁶

The passage is also a representative sample of her prose.

William Wordsworth visited Scotland in 1814 with his sister. He was greatly impressed by the scenery and its romantic associations. In his *Prelude* he wrote

How Wallace fought for Scotland; left the name
Of Wallace to be found like a wild flower,
All over his dear Country: left the deeds
Of Wallace like a family of Ghosts,
To people the steep rocks and river banks,
Her natural sanctuaries with a local soul
Of independence and stern liberty.²⁷

In his *Memorials of a Tour in Scotland* is a verse entitled: *Composed at Cora Linn /In sight of Wallace's Tower:*

Along the banks at dead of night
Sweeps visibly the Wallace Wight
Or stands in warlike vest,
Aloft, beneath the moon's pale beam,
A Champion worthy of the stream
Yon grey tower's living crest!²⁸

It is possible that the success of *The Scottish Chiefs* influenced Sir Walter Scott in his decision to embark on a series of Scottish historical novels. Waverly the first of his series was published in 1814, and it is also perhaps the reason he did not chose to write a novel on the subject himself. He did however in 1827 five years before his death publish *Tales of a Grandfather* purported to be written for his five to six year old grandson, which included a chapter on Wallace. It is a short account recognising his status as a patriot. It

²⁶ Jane Porter, *The Scottish Chiefs* (London, 1805), p. vii.

²⁷ *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth* (Oxford, 1904), p. 635.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 299.

is intended for a child, who if he did in fact read it at that age must surely have been precocious.

Sydney Goodsir Smith published his verse play *The Wallace* in 1960. It was first produced at the Edinburgh Festival. The Scottish characters speak in strong Scots and the English in modern English. It is a tightly crafted, highly dramatic work, described by Smith as a 'Triumph in Five Acts'. The first act is set in Marion Braidfruit's house in Lanark, May 1297. In this act Heselrig kills Marion. Act II is set in Wallace's camp before Falkirk where the conflict is between Wallace, Bruce, Caiman and Menteith. Act III is at the court of Edward I Stirling 24 July 1304. This is Edward's act and he is depicted as harsh, vindictive, irascible and dangerously unpredictable in his old age. Act IV treats the betrayal of Wallace by Menteith, and Act V the trial of Wallace at Westminster. Smith has Wallace confront Edward at his trial to suit his dramatic purpose. It was broadcast on the B.B.C in 1959 and produced at the Edinburgh Festival in 1960. It reads well and deserves a revival on the stage.

There are probably dozens of biographies published in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most of which appear to lean heavily on invention and on Blind Harry and are not included here. Among the histories that of Patrick Fraser Tytler,²⁹ whose prose entitles his work to be considered as literature, is particularly recommended. Meticulously researched, his work is far from dispassionate, and he robustly rejects Lord Haile's attempt to absolve Sir John Mentieth. James Mackay's, *William Wallace: Braveheart*, was published in 1995. It is not the story of the film, but has taken advantage of the film's popularity. It is a well written and interesting account. *William Wallace* is a thoroughly researched and thoughtful interpretation of the known facts by Andrew Fisher published in 1986. He asks three questions:

First, how could a man untutored in the art of war and without experience in its practice emerge with such authority and ability as a military leader in the early months of 1297? Second, on the basis of the admittedly meagre information available to us, what role can we allocate to Wallace after Falkirk which fits our knowledge of his character, temperament, and talents? Third, given that the traditional link between the Wallace's execution in August 1305 and Bruce's murder of Caiman in February 1306 and his subsequent rebellion is now discredited, what was the relationship between Wallace and Bruce?

One of the most delightful stories of Wallace is, *William Wallace A Scots Life* by Glen Telfer published by Argyle in 1995. This is written in Scots for young Scots readers. It is refreshing and surprisingly easy to read.

²⁹ Patrick Fraser Tytler, *The History of Scotland* (Edinburgh 1872).

The English king, Edward I, did his work thoroughly. The trial and terrible death was intended to utterly destroy Wallace and discredit him forever. The charges of treason, sacrilege and outlawry, and the utter humiliation of his mutilation achieved this purpose in the short term, but Wallace was so revered by the common people that his memory remained and grew. Others including Simon Fraser, Alexander Bruce, Christopher Seton, John Wallace and the Earl of Atholl suffered similar horrible deaths at the hands of Edward, but they have been forgotten. Then Blind Harry gathered the stories and historical records available to him and gave his memory an impetus. Despite attempts to discredit it and the passage of time the legend continued to thrive. We can have no accurate image of Wallace today. The image carried in most Scot's minds is probably an amalgam of Blind Harry and Mel Gibson.

The trouble of course is that Wallace's public life extended only from a little before 1297 until 1305. We know virtually nothing of him before his public life, and very little detail has come down of his life between Falkirk and his capture in 1305. This has given poets, biographers, novelists, playwrights and script writers great scope for the exercise of their imagination. Most want the credibility that comes from verisimilitude. Blind Harry cited Master John Blair, Jane Porter cited Blind Harry. More recent writers have frankly asserted their independence of history where facts are not certain. So in a *Postscriptum Auctorial note for Pedants*, Sydney Goodsir Smith writes:

The historical materials for this period in Scotland are scant; and traditional or legendary material can never be discounted altogether. One of Blind Harry's 'wild romances' - Wallace's visit to France - was shown to be right in the nineteenth century, four hundred years after Harry sang, by a document found in the tower of London. ... I would point out some instances of poetic licence in the play to save the learned from the fash of bringing them to my notice.³⁰

Randall Wallace scriptwriter for *Braveheart* is reported to have said:

I'm a dramatist not an historian... History is impressionistic, and the legends Wallace inspired built a fire in my heart.³¹

Blind Harry could not have put it better.

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³⁰ Sydney Goodsir Smith, *The Wallace*, p. 179.

³¹ Reported in WALLACE / SCOTLAND'S BRAVEHEART, Special issue of *The Big Issue* in Scotland (undated) p. 8.