

Remembering William Wallace in Scotland during 1997

To the Scots William Wallace has always been a popular figure. Even those with a limited knowledge of Scottish history were aware of some of his deeds; an awareness which was for the most part hidden in the recesses of the mind. In recent years with the growing desire in Scotland for more control over their own affairs, there has been an upsurge in interest in Scotland's past. These two strands of the same cloth were ironically drawn together by a film; a film whose central character, William Wallace, was portrayed by an Australian actor,¹ was made mostly in Ireland,² and which became an instant success. It was a success not only for the film-makers and their backers, but also for that part of the Scottish psyche which was feeling battered and beaten after years of real or imagined neglect by the central government at Westminster. *Braveheart*, for that was the film, made the Scots laugh, made them feel a sense of pride and made them more determined than ever to have some say over their nation's affairs. Nobody, except the purists, worried that the film was not altogether historically correct.³

The real William Wallace, or what is known of him, was born in Elderslie in Renfrewshire. This locally accepted fact is announced by a plaque on entrance to the village and in the monument to Wallace which stands in the main street of Elderslie. The remains of a house which was believed to have been the house where Wallace was born, was found to be of a later date. According to David Ross, a current member of the William Wallace Society, the house probably occupied the same place where Sir Malcolm Wallace's house once stood. The land itself was granted to Sir Malcolm Wallace in the thirteenth century and remained in the Wallace family until 1729.⁴ There was a large oak tree which stood to the east of the house, which was known as the 'Wallace Oak', and was said to have afforded shelter to Wallace and his followers. It appears to have been a large tree and when it was measured in 1825 the branches covered 495 square yards. It stood 67 feet tall and was 21 feet round the base. Unfortunately, it gave way to the ravages of time and souvenir collectors. The importance of this tree to those who dispute the claims of modern writers is that anecdotal evidence says that during the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion Bonnie Prince Charlie's men used the phrase, 'Wallace's Oak' as a pass word; which David Ross claims gives the lie to those who claim that Elderslie as Wallace's birthplace is a recent assumption.⁵

¹ Mel Gibson.

² There was also some scenes shot in Lochaber in Scotland.

³ Alec Smart, writing in the *Big Issue* puts it quite succinctly: 'beware that this is the fiction brigade: their Scotland had killed Wallace a second time by burying him in the footnotes of history. *Braveheart* brought him back', *The Big Issue*, special edition (1997), p. 4.

⁴ David Ross, *In Wallace's Footsteps* (Stirling, 1997), p. 5; Duncan Jones, *A Wee Guide to William Wallace* (Edinburgh, 1997), p. 5.

⁵ Ross, *In Wallace's Footsteps*, p. 5; James Mackay, *William Wallace: Braveheart* (Glasgow, 1995), p. 14.

Wallace's monument in Elderslie is the centre of annual celebrations for the local populace. In 1997 the celebrations were a bit more widespread when surrounding communities turned out in force to celebrate their local hero,⁶ a liquor store in a neighbouring village entered into the spirit of the thing by inviting people to celebrate the 700th anniversary of the battle of Stirling Bridge (11 September 1997) by buying their necessary supplies from them.

In Paisley Abbey there is a stained-glass window, designed by James Ballantyne and Son of Edinburgh, donated to the Abbey by the St. Andrews Society of Glasgow, which is dedicated to Wallace. The inscription reads, 'To the memory of the Knight of Elderslie in this parish'. The Wallace family were vassals of the High Stewards of Scotland who were granted land in Renfrewshire by David I (1124-1153), which perhaps could be taken as further proof of Elderslie as Wallace's birthplace;⁷ it would certainly be a brave person who voiced opposition to this locally held belief.

In this year of celebrating the 700th anniversary of the Scottish victory over the English at the battle of Stirling Bridge, and the (not unwarranted) hero worship of William Wallace and his followers for their part in securing the continuance of Scotland's independence, there is one honour which I am sure Wallace himself would have appreciated above all else. This honour was the awarding of the title 'Sacred Blood Brother' to Wallace by a group of Amazonian Indians, the Shaur Federation, who equate Wallace's fight for the freedom of his country with their battle to save their homelands from the ravages of multi-national mining, petrol, and forestry interests. To quote the president of the Shaur Federation, Professor Luis Jimbiquiti: 'the Shaur nations, like your famous patriot William Wallace, have defended to the death our sacred lands, our freedom and the great spirits of the waterfalls, rivers and mountains. This honour was also conferred on John Muir of Dunbar, who was known as the father of conservation.'⁸

There are many places in Scotland associated with William Wallace for one reason or another; places he lived or hid, performed some dastardly deed, studied, was married or betrayed, and finally captured by the English. In this year of celebrations of the 700th anniversary of the battle of Stirling Bridge, there has also been a rash of publications. Old *Historys* have been reprinted for the general public, new editions of his life and times grace the shelves of

⁶ See articles in *Paisley Daily Express* on 27 August 1997, p. 8, and *Paisley Gazette* on 28 August 1997, p. 5.

⁷ *Paisley Abbey*, pamphlet (1985) pp. 19 and 29.

⁸ *Scottish Daily Express*, 5 May 1997, pp. 5 and 10. John Muir (1838-1914) was born in Dunbar in Scotland and emigrated to America with his parents at an early age. He fought for the preservation of forests and was instrumental in creating National Parks, the first of them at Yosemite in 1864, and in 1892 he founded the Sierra Club. G. Donaldson and R.S. Morpeth, eds., *A Dictionary of Scottish History* (Edinburgh, 1977). He also visited Australia in the 1920s.

most tourist centres, ranging from serious attempts at historical accuracy, to books about the film *Braveheart*. The latter can even be found at motor-way stops in England. It would appear that *Braveheart* not only re-invigorated the Scottish psyche but also the publishing industry.

It was, however, to Stirling that all eyes were turned, for here at the site of the Battle the real celebrations were in evidence. In Stirling itself is situated the imposing Wallace Monument, from the top of which is a panoramic view of the battle site. The monument was designed by J.T. Roehead of Glasgow in the form of a baronial tower mounted by a crown. It is 36 feet square at the base and rises to a height of 220 feet. The official opening was on the 25 June 1887, when a colossal statue of Wallace was unveiled by the Marquis of Bute. This statue was created in the studio of D.W. Stevenson, RSA, Edinburgh.⁹ The trek up the monument and stairs is quite daunting but worth the effort. There is a rather effective animated presentation inside the Monument where a figure of Wallace appears to speak. At the foot of the Monument there is a new information centre which opened in this anniversary year. Since the advent of the film, *Braveheart*, visitors to the Monument have risen by 150%, Stirling Castle has had an increase of 25% and the nearby Bannockburn Centre, 52%.¹⁰ (It looks as if Wallace is still doing his bit for his country.) There is a new, and a more controversial statue of Wallace (13 feet tall) which was unveiled on 11 September 1997, and which owes more to Mel Gibson in looks than Wallace. It could be said, however, that as there does not appear to be a surviving authentic portrait of Wallace, the sculptor's view is as good as any other. The sculptor himself justifies his creation by saying that he was inspired by the film; and for good or ill that is how millions of people will now visualise Wallace.¹¹ As an adjunct to this, the nineteenth-century statue of Wallace at the Monument in Stirling bears an uncanny resemblance to the popular present-day entertainer and comedian, Billy Connolly.

During 1997 local issues threatened to marr the 700th-anniversary celebrations. Apparently, Falkirk Local History Society wished to celebrate the defeat of the Scots under Wallace, at the battle of Falkirk on 22 July 1298,¹² by an English army commanded by Edward I. This has caused a bit of an outcry, those at Stirling claiming that Falkirk was just jumping on the bandwagon to cash in on the events at Stirling. But more level heads

⁹ Ross, *In Wallace's Footsteps*, pp. 22-23.

¹⁰ Headline of Robert's Scott's article in *Scotland on Sunday*, 23 March 1997: 'Scots who hae wi Wallace bled the tourist'. The Scottish victory under Robert I (the Bruce) at the battle of Bannockburn (23-24 June 1314) over the English under Edward II, is considered by most Scottish historians to have been the most significant Scottish victory in the five centuries of Anglo-Scottish wars.

¹¹ *Stirling Observer*, 10 Sept., 1997.

¹² Bonnie Prince Charlie and the Jacobites redressed the balance, however, at the 2nd battle of Falkirk on 17 Jan. 1747, by defeating the British government's troops under General Hawley.

prevailed, while acknowledging the historical facts, they stated that it was not a good idea to celebrate a defeat.¹³

Monuments to Wallace abound and can be found as far afield as Aberdeen. There are statues of both Wallace and Robert the Bruce at Edinburgh castle, Airth castle on the road between Stirling and Edinburgh has its Wallace Tower, which now houses a bar in its basement. Wallace is said to have stormed an earlier castle which stood here to free his uncle who had been captured by the English. This uncle was a priest at Dunipace (about 10 kilometers south of Stirling) and is said to have been his tutor. In Lanark there is a plaque which states that this was once the site of Wallace's house. Apparently the house belonged to the Braidfute family whose eldest daughter, Marion, Wallace married.¹⁴

On 11 September 1997, the exact 700th anniversary of the Scottish victory at the battle of Stirling Bridge, two unique events took place. The first, which was of great national and historical importance, was the day chosen by the government of Tony Blair to hold a referendum of the Scottish people in which they were asked to affirm or deny that:

- 1) I agree that there should be a Scottish Parliament.
This motion was carried by every electorate in Scotland by 74.3% to 25.7%.
- 2) I agree that a Scottish Parliament should have taxing powers.
This was carried by all Scottish electorates except two: Orkney and Dumfries & Galloway by 63.5% against 32.7%.¹⁵

The second, which was of local significance, was the march from Stirling bridge to the Wallace Monument by the Sir William Wallace Grand Lodge of Free Colliers, who were formed in the days before trade union membership was an option for miners. These men are known as the 'pinkie men'; a term which they find offensive but which stems from the need of miners to link their fingers for safety because only one miner was issued with a lamp. Their annual march is usually to the monument at Wallaceton in Falkirk as they mainly belonged to that district, but this year they decided to march to Stirling in honour of Wallace.¹⁶

¹³ *The Glasgow Herald*, 4 June 1997.

¹⁴ Ross, *In Wallace's Footsteps*, p. 9.

¹⁵ I am grateful to Peter Alexander, convenor of the Sydney branch of the Scottish Nationalist Party (one among many other of his titles and offices) for this information. One cannot help speculating that the choice of date for the referenda must have been made by a Scottish patriot employed at Whitehall. The fact that the English did not realise the significance of the date (for they would have surely changed it had they known) demonstrates not only their ignorance of, but also their lack of interest in, Scottish history.

¹⁶ *Stirling Observer*, Sept., 1997.

Returning to the general celebrations, Stirling certainly pulled out all the stops in this 700th anniversary year. There was an impressive calendar of events offered in which not only the local community could participate, but also visitors to the town. The Wallace Monument had an exhibition entitled, 'Scots wha hae', which opened in March 1997. The Smith Art Gallery and Museum presented an exhibition entitled, 'Scotland's Liberator', a comprehensive coverage of Wallace's exploits and sundry places and things associated with him. The exhibition was free, beginning in April and lasting through to December. Two conferences on the subject of Wallace were scheduled, one in May at the Smith, and one on 5th and 6th September which was divided between the Smith and the Albert Halls at Stirling. Unfortunately, the latter had to be held over until October because of the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, was held that weekend. Both these conferences were open to the general public and featured a number of prominent academics.¹⁷

During 1997 the streets of Stirling were festooned with banners, very interesting banners which challenged the imagination. They featured a crossword, various pithy sayings from Robert Burns and Robert Louis Stevenson, and specially commissioned poems by Don Patterson. The titles of the banners read as one poem:

Stand on the bend to read me straight
it takes the promise and the threat
the kosher and the counterfeit
the chance and the deliberate
the fiat and the free debate
the anvil and the etching-plate
to forge the nation state.¹⁸

This poem started at one end of the town centre and was quite a challenge to follow especially when it was windy. The novel use of the banners in this way provided a welcome difference.

Other celebrations ranged from ballet to battle re-enactments, the celebration of the old Scottish May Day Festival of Beltane based around the theme of the wolf, which is part of Stirling's heraldic identity.¹⁹ Music and theatre to suit the tastes of both adults and children, summer school programmes featuring Scotland in the days of Wallace, exploring historic Stirling, Highland Dance, European Heritage Day, the planting of an oak tree at the old Stirling bridge. The list goes on and on, with something for everyone. A veritable feast for visitors to Stirling as well as for the local

¹⁷ *Publicity Brochure*, Stirling Council, 1997. *The Scotsman*, 28 March 1997.

¹⁸ Robert's Scott's article in *Scotland on Sunday*, 23 March 1997.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* Beltane: (Gaelic 'Bealltuinn' = 'mouth of the beacon of fire'). Festival marking the beginning of summer, still observed especially at Peebles, with a 'Beltane Queen' and riding of the marches, G. Donaldson and R.S. Morpeth, eds., *A Dictionary of Scottish History*.

populace. The climax of the celebrations was the re-enactment of the battle of Stirling bridge on the esplanade of Stirling castle on 12th and 13th September; which spectacular event was mostly ignored by the media.²⁰ This is perhaps not to be wondered at for on that weekend the Scots were basking in the euphoria after exercising that desire for freedom for which Wallace had died.²¹

'Blind Harry's' account of Wallace is quite well known. It would appear that his use of a Latin manuscript written by Wallace's chaplain, John Blair, is also a known fact.²² Could it be kismet that Wallace's diarist was named Blair and the present incumbent at 10 Downing Street, who has so notably contributed to Scottish history, also has the same name?

The Scottish defeat at Falkirk put Wallace on the run once more, to betrayal by the Menteith, capture, humiliation and execution. Each step is marked in some way by a memorial, from the well at Robroyston where Wallace was captured, to the plaque at St. Bartholomew's hospital, London, which marks the spot where he was executed. Today, Wallace's memory continues to be revered not only in Scotland but throughout the world thanks in no small measure to the film *Braveheart*.

Ethel McKirdy-Walker
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²⁰ *Publicity Brochure*, Stirling Council, 1997.

²¹ The success of the Scottish referendum, *Stirling Observer*, 11 Sept., 1997, also see *supra*, p. 3 and n. 15.

²² James Mackay, *William Wallace: Braveheart*, p. 11.