

William Wallace and reinventing Scotland

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Each year on 23 August, a small cluster of people gathers in a quiet corner of London – beside the wall of St Bartholomew’s hospital, opposite Smithfield meat market – to mark the anniversary of the public execution on this spot in 1305 of Scotland’s most renowned national hero, William Wallace [1].

Today, the 700th anniversary of the event, the numbers will be higher than usual, the flowers and messages more elaborate. A service of commemoration will be held in nearby St Barthomolew the Great [2]’s church, which will include tributes from church minister Alan Sorensen, historian Fiona Watson, folk singer Ronnie Browne (performer of Scotland’s semi-official national anthem *Flower of Scotland*) and the London Gaelic Choir.

Such “memory work” is no longer innocent, if it ever was. Memory, perhaps national memory above all, is politically charged and can be toxic. The way peoples and communities choose to remember, memorialise and honour their past involves adopting a particular stance towards the present and future too. The choice is an intervention, the practice an appropriation and the consequence an exclusion.

In particular, any remembrance of a figure like Wallace – a man who employed, fought amidst and fell victim to brutal violence – raises questions of interest to all citizens, not just historians:

- what about the past is being remembered and celebrated, or forgotten and elided?
- how is the past being worked on in the present, what messages are being conveyed in the experience of commemoration?
- what doors to the future are being opened and closed?

The remembrance of William Wallace across the generations shows how different meanings can be found in his elusive life-story. It is not just that history does not stop; it is always changing. The Scots gathered at Smithfield today – and those attending the range of exhibitions, events and conferences held in Scotland to mark the anniversary – are also living a singular moment in their own history: one where the myths and truths of their nationhood are being reimagined [3] for an age where the connection between the national, the civic, the local and the global are being reconfigured.

What is the dialogue among Scots saying about William Wallace, 700 years on? And what does Wallace still have to say to them?

Life and death

William Wallace was born around 1270, either in Ayrshire or Renfrewshire [4] in western lowland Scotland, and achieved his esteem and notoriety through years of relentless, unbending struggle [5] against the English monarchy’s claim to rule Scotland.

An epic of resistance to England's King Edward I unfolded across fourteen years: from his first assassination of an English official in Dundee in 1291; local skirmishes with English militia; pitched battles in which Wallace led Scots forces to stunning victory (Stirling Bridge, 1297 [6]) and catastrophic defeat (Falkirk, 1298 [7]); a position as co-"guardian" of the kingdom of Scotland in the temporary absence of a legitimate monarch; years of guerrilla warfare and fugitive existence; to betrayal, capture, and gruesome execution.

All this made Wallace a key figure in what would come to be known as Scotland's "wars of independence" in the period 1291-1329 (although conflict with England would continue for decades after).

This crucial period had begun with the sudden death on a stormy night in 1286 of the country's king of thirty-seven years, Alexander III [8]. Alexander, swept away during a cliff-top ride homewards to his young French bride, left as heir only his 6-year-old granddaughter Margaret, and the council of guardians which assumed authority in Scotland arranged for her return from Norway (with the possibility of betrothal to Edward I's son, and thus the eventual royal unification of the two medieval kingdoms).

But the "maid of Norway" died during her journey across the North Sea. With no single legitimate ruler, but rather a series of claimants to the throne, Scotland was in trouble. In 1291, a process of selection was inaugurated at Norham [9] on the river Tweed to choose the new monarch, with Edward I as referee. He chose the candidate he considered might be the most pliable – John Balliol – and sought to extend his authority in Scotland to outright sovereignty over the northern territory, and to downgrade its status from realm to mere "land".

As Hugh Kearney writes (in *The British Isles – a history of four nations* [10]), Edward I "seemed to have shifted his position from that of feudal overlord to one of imperial dominance".

This was an era of changing alliances and fluctuating fortunes. The grand narrative that historical retrospective would cast – a painful, heroic struggle to defend and confirm Scotland's status as an independent kingdom – was far from established. This made Wallace's example of absolute, undeviating refusal to countenance any English claim of right whatsoever to rule in Scotland a leitmotif of his appeal to later generations of Scots.

Reality and myth

But the image of Wallace was neither fixed nor uncontested. It lived in history [11] and fed off the very uncertainties and gaps in evidence surrounding his life (his place and date of birth, the details of his European travels between 1298 and 1302). It was the product too of successive, major burnishings that served political needs and interests in Scotland's later history.

Those who personally remembered Wallace and inserted recollections of him into the oral national archive survived until perhaps the mid-14th century. Nor should they be forgotten, for the intimacy and familiarity that helps define Wallace in the eyes of generations of his compatriots must owe something to their "memory work".

By the 15th century in a still unsettled country, official chroniclers were concerned to establish sanctified versions that could cement national unity. The crucial episodes in the creation of the Wallace myth came both before and after the two-stage (monarchical in 1603, parliamentary in 1707) union between England and Scotland. First there was Walter Bower's epic *Scotochronicon* ("A History for Scots") of the 1440s, then Blind Hary's Wallace [12] of 1477, which William Hamilton of Gilbertfield translated into a modern idiom in 1722. Then came Robert

Burns's stirring songs [13] of the 1790s and Walter Scott's *Tales of a Grandfather* of 1828-29 [14].

Blind Hary's careering, relentless poem – collating stories and traditions of Wallace from across Scotland – was the template on which all later nationalist portraits of Wallace (including celluloid versions like the 1995 Hollywood film *Braveheart* [15]) were based. But in the mid-19th century, commerce, trade, political reform, imperial exploration and Protestantism were working together to help create and reinforce (as Linda Colley's influential *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* [2nd edition, 2005]) [16] argued) the sense of a stable, unifying “British” settlement. In this period, the Wallace image took a twist that is surprising by the standards of its earlier and later manifestations.

The twist is suggested in the intriguing title of Graeme Watson's study, *Unionist Nationalism* (1993). The first memorial [17] to Wallace (the result of private initiative and funds backed by public sentiment) was built at Dryburgh overlooking the river Tweed in 1814. The largest one, the seventy-metre gothic tower overlooking the town of Stirling [18] and the Bannockburn [19] battlefield (where the Scots had won their greatest military victory in 1314 under Wallace's kingly successor, Robert the Bruce) was built in the 1850s following a campaign where the National Association for the Vindication of Scottish Rights linked arms with conservative, unionist aristocrats.

The “National Wallace Monument's” ideological inspiration was the affirmation of a Scottish national identity not aching to be separate from, but to be recognised and respected as part of, the wider British state formation. Wallace's (and Bruce's) contribution to this was that by fighting to establish Scotland's distinct identity more than five centuries earlier, they had laid the grounds for a later partnership of equals. Scotland needed to be Scotland before it could realise its truer, deeper destiny: to be British. William Wallace was a proto-unionist [20].

This high-Victorian embodiment of Wallace recurs in the contemporary writings of Scots journalists like the centre-left John Lloyd and the centre-right Michael Fry [21]. In its more vulgar manifestations, it is as deterministic and anachronistic as the view of Wallace as the invariant icon of separatist, nationalist struggle. It is also an interesting current in present discussions of the meaning and legacy of Wallace.

The purity and absolutism of refusal; the simplicity of struggle and the complexity of power; the guerrilla fighter and the guardian of the realm; the über-macho military warrior and the calculating political strategist; pathbreaking nationalist and pioneer unionist – Wallace's life encompasses a host of characters and qualities. He is a protean figure.

Meaning and legacy

William Wallace's life was defined by the needs of the struggle that consumed him. But what was the character of this fight? What was the “Scotland” that Wallace believed in, defended, pledged himself to, died for?

These are historians' questions, and historians continue to provide some of the most provoking answers. GM Trevelyan, in *A History of England* [22] (1937), calls William Wallace “a guerrilla chief of genius ... (who) lit a fire which nothing since has ever put out ... a new ideology and tradition of wonderful potency was brought into the world – democratic patriotism. Theories of nationhood and theories of democracy would follow afterwards to justify and explain it. Meanwhile it stood up, a fact.”

The idea of Wallace as early exponent of “democratic patriotism” both jars and resonates.

It jars because it appears another form of anachronism, the ascription to a medieval man and mind of the sensibilities of a later, modern age. It jars because Wallace was a violent man in a violent age; even if the charge-sheet at his show trial on 23 August 1305 had elements of lurid fantasy, anyone researching the gleeful cross-border forays of Wallace's bands into Hexham Abbey [23] or the priory at Lanercost in Northumberland, England's far north, can register their devastating impact. It jars most of all because Wallace never fought for an abstract "people" or even "nation", but always in the name of a legitimate power of which he was but the temporary protector or "guardian".

It resonates [24] for not dissimilar reasons. It resonates because Wallace's violence was not arbitrary but in the service of an explicit cause that was larger than himself and to which he freely submitted. It resonates because his animating opposition was less to a power that was English than to a power that was arbitrary, oppressive, and invasive. It resonates because he fought on behalf of a crucial idea, and by fighting for it helped give it definite shape and meaning: the "community of the realm".

The long "wars of independence" in Scotland were also about the search for institutional forms of community that could bind a diverse, polyglot realm of unusually fractured geography, intense regionalism and ethnic diversity; that could, moreover, survive the absence or negligence of its monarch (a notion memorably embodied in the 1320 letter to the Pope, the "Declaration of Arbroath [25]", which affirmed that the reigning Robert the Bruce too was bound by obligation and responsibility to the "community of the realm").

In this light, Wallace's defence of the "community of the realm" implies mature recognition of what Neal Ascherson (in Stone Voices [26]) sees as definitive of the nature of power in Scotland: it is contractual.

It also makes Wallace a "democrat" in only very particular ways, as the historian Geoffrey Barrow [27] observes in the greatest scholarly work on this era, Robert the Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland (3rd edition, 1988) [28]:

"It makes sense to call Wallace a democrat only if we mean...that he possessed the common touch, that he could speak to ordinary men in their own language and a sense of common purpose to which they could not normally attain. Politically and constitutionally, Wallace was a conservative...thwarted and overthrown at last by the very same structure of society that he accepted without question."

The "conservative" Wallace - who rose in an intimate, conservative Scotland, and was concerned to defend its right - was pitted against the "revolutionary" (Hugh Kearney) Edward I, whose grandiose, disabling ambition in the northern kingdom would later be matched by others among his compatriots. The English conquest of Scotland, as of Wales and Ireland in this era, entailed (says RR Davies in Domination and Conquest [1990]) [29] "a conscious campaign for the obliteration of the native past and the creation of a new ideology of victorious unity." In face of this, Wallace's adamant refusal stood up, a fact, and changed the terms in which his country's history would be written.

Europe and the world

Scotland was, like every nation on the planet, once the centre of its people's universe; now, in an age of globalisation and shifting identities, it is just another country, even if for its people the most immediate and important. The stories Scotland is telling about itself are altering. But, again like every other nation, the process is slow, adaptive, accretive – a negotiation with past

interpretations rather than a radical departure from them, one that seeks new understandings, but also fresh ground on which to till familiar narratives.

William Wallace is still contributing to this process of reinvention. This was most clearly so in the 1980s and 1990s, when campaigns for self-government and a restored national parliament applied a rediscovered historical, popular and emotional vigour to the Wallace and Bruce era.

The establishment of the Scottish parliament at Holyrood, Edinburgh [30] after the decisive referendum of 1997 and the Scotland Act of 1998 opened a new phase in the country's history. The horizons of the new Scotland, amidst a constitutional settlement that may be uncompleted, seem in these years to be both shrinking and expanding: another way of saying that the Scots are still inside their history.

In the late 1990s, the raw material of William Wallace's life offered another layer for the reinterpretation of his meaning for Scots. A short letter signed by him and his fellow-guardian Andrew de Moray [31] in the briefly successful period after the battle of Stirling Bridge, in October 1297, was discovered in the archives of the north German city of Lübeck [32].

The text of the letter had long been known, but the recovery of this artefact was convincing testimony to another side of the multifaceted Wallace – one very far from the raucous, face-painted semi-savage of cinematic myth (and indeed, much popular sentiment).

In the letter, written in Latin and addressed from the eastern lowland town of Haddington [33] to the “prudent and discreet men and well beloved friends, the mayors and commonwealths of Lübeck and Hamburg”, Wallace and Moray (“commanders of the army of Scotland and the community of the same realm”) announce that Scotland's ports can grant safe access to merchants from these Hanseatic League ports, “as Scotland, thanks be to God has by war been recovered from the power of the English”.

A reading of Wallace that seeks in him not just nationalist passion, but a sophisticated awareness that national independence must be built on a foundation of economic prosperity, finds in the “Lübeck letter” [34] a potent resource (it was deposited for safety in the vaults during the second-world-war bombardments that incinerated its Hamburg equivalent). The letter suggests another, transnational measure of understanding: William Wallace as a European figure, whose life's effort was also concerned with the right of the Scots kingdom to exist and communicate with Europe on its own terms.

The Lübeck letter is one piece of evidence for the possibility of new perspectives [35] of William Wallace that draw on the history of 700 years ago to point forward to centuries to come. There are others that are only just beginning to be mined.

Wallace belonged to an era of comparable struggles for institutional forms of national community across Europe. The military tactics [36] he helped innovate (including the *schiltron* formation of tightly-packed spearmen capable of combating the cavalry of knightly states) was seen to astounding effect in the historic victory of Pieter de Coninck's Flemish weavers and other traders over Philip IV's France at Courtrai (Kortrijk) [37] in 1302, as it would be later at Bannockburn; the association of national independence and freedom of the realm was exemplified again in the battle of the Swiss confederation against the Habsburgs at Morgarten [38] in 1315.

Meanwhile, the many exhibitions [39] and tributes to Wallace in Scotland during this late summer in the north include one in Stirling that puts him alongside other noble, global freedom riders: from Nelson Mandela to Mahatma Gandhi and Aung San Suu Kyi.

This generation is finding new meanings and readings in this varied life, and in the process reinvigorating the old. Scotland's most revered poet, Edwin Morgan [40], has written for the 700th anniversary a strikingly passionate and affirmative work, Lines for Wallace [41]:

“Is it not better to forget?
It is better not to forget.

...

It was not only in the field
That Scots would follow this
man
With blades and war-horns
Sharp and shrill
But with brains and books
Where the idea of liberty
Is impregnated and
impregnates.”

The poem is a vivid illustration of Wallace's capacity to engender intimacy, to move, to remain alive and singular in the hearts of his compatriots. How much of this is owed to his intrinsic qualities, how much to his nobility in the face of a terrible death, how much to the fact that the ideas he grappled with – sovereignty, independence, power and its limits, lawful authority, resistance and submission, freedom and nationhood - still dominate the attention of citizens around the world?

The Scots who gather at William Wallace's execution site today (which happens to be five minutes' walk from **openDemocracy's** office in the Clerkenwell district of London) are paying tribute to their imperishable national hero. They may also reflect that the dialogue between them and the man whose life ended here, like the history of Scotland itself, is yet unfinished business.

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-vision_reflections/wallace_2774.jsp

Links:

[1] http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/scottishhistory/independence/features_independence_wallace.shtml

[2] <http://www.greatstbarts.com/>

[3] http://www.carleton.ca/ccph/shannon/lynch_abstract.htm

[4] http://members.tripod.com/bob_newcumnock/wallace_home/wallace1274.html

[5] <http://www.stirling.gov.uk/index/stirling/wallace/wallacelegacy.htm>

[6] http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/scottishhistory/independence/trails_independence_stirlingbridge.shtml

[7] <http://members.aol.com/skyewrites/falkirk2.html>

[8] <http://www.royal.gov.uk/output/Page115.asp>

[9] <http://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/berwick/norhamcastle/>

[10] <http://www.cambridge.org/aus/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=052148488X>

[11] <http://news.scotsman.com/features.cfm?id=1806372005>

[12] http://www.luath.co.uk/acatalog/Blind_Harrys_WallacePB.html

[13] <http://www.it-serve.co.uk/poetry/Burns/whahae.php>

[14] <http://www.walterscott.lib.ed.ac.uk/biography/chronology.html>

- [15] http://www.stirling.gov.uk/index/stirling/wallace/wallace_braveheart.htm
- [16] <http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/book.asp?isbn=0300107595>
- [17] http://www.electricscotland.com/history/wallace_monument.htm
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- [23] <http://www.hexhamabbey.org.uk/>
- [24] <http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=83>
- [25] http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/scottishhistory/independence/features_independence_arbroath.shtml
- [26] http://www.granta.com/shop/product?usca_p=t&product_id=980
- [27] <http://www.arts.ed.ac.uk/scothist/staff/gbarrow.html>
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- [31] http://www.bbc.co.uk/legacies/myths_legends/scotland/s_ne/
- [32] http://www.luebeck.de/kultur_bildung/archiv/index.html
- [33] <http://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/haddington/haddington/>
- [34] <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/nmCentre/news/news-05/pa05-069.htm>
- [35] <http://www.wallacebruce.stir.ac.uk/>
- [36] http://www.scottishhistory.com/articles/independence/csyst/dissertation/csystdiss_print.html
- [37] http://www.liebaart.org/gulden_e.htm
- [38] http://www.vakkur.com/hx/swiss_hx.htm
- [39] <http://www.stirling.gov.uk/index/stirling/wallace/wallaceevents/wallaceev2.htm>
- [40] <http://www.edwinmorgan.com/>
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