

The True History of William Wallace

By Edward Grant Ries

of Clan Wallace

Do you want to know about William Wallace?

Look no further, these pages will not only inform you of the truth,
but also give you some surprises.

Chances are you have seen the film "Braveheart" that attempts to tell the story of Sir William Wallace. All credit to Mel Gibson and his film, "Braveheart" for it did tell many facts as best he could in a three hour movie - but even Mel Gibson would be first to admit that he did indeed use "artistic license" in the film. Applause too to Randall Wallace who wrote the screenplay. They brought Scotland's greatest hero and patriot to a worldwide audience and resurrected a spirit of patriotism and pride in Scots everywhere.

Randall Wallace was not the first to write of William Wallace. English writers vilified the man whom they considered a traitor and murderer. Many years after Wallace's gruesome execution, John Blair, who had accompanied Wallace as his chaplain, made a record of his adventures. Eventually, they came to the attention of a Scot we know today only as "Blind Harry". This man was a confirmed English-hater. He took Blair's eyewitness accounts, embellished them with other tales, and his own anti-English sentiments and recorded them as historical fact. He wrote *The Actes and Deidis of the Illustre and Vallyeant Campioun Schir William Wallace* around [1477](#). At twelve volumes, the work is also doubted to be solely his work.

Others have criticized Blind Harry's depiction of Wallace as full of inaccuracies. Some parts of it are clearly fanciful or at variance with contemporary sources (at one point Wallace leads an army to the outskirts of London). In Blind Harry's account of Wallace's years as a fugitive, he describes how Wallace adopted numerous disguises over the years: that of a monk, an old woman, and a potter. Blind Harry also relates that Wallace traveled to [France](#) to enlist support for the Scottish cause, and there defeated two French champions as well as a [lion](#). "Are there any more dogs you would have slain?" Wallace boastfully asks the French king.

Blind Harry's tales survived the centuries in many forms. In 1722, William Hamilton of Gilberton collected the versions of Blind Harry's tales and produced a book that was soon to be found in most Scottish households – standing next to the Bible in the reverence with which it was read.

Hamilton's transcription stimulated another Scottish writer – Robert Burns – to tell tales of William Wallace. Burns acknowledged his debt to Blind Harry, incorporating the following lines from Blind Harry's *Wallace* in his own poem [Robert Bruce's Address to his Army at Bannockburn](#) ("Scots, wha hae wi' Wallace bled"):

A false usurper sinks in every foe
And liberty returns with every blow

that Burns described as a "a [couplet](#) worthy of [Homer](#)".

From whence came the Wallaces? The Old English word "waelisc" and the Anglo-Norman word "waleis" meant 'foreign'. In Scotland, this term was typically applied to Britons who came north, especially in the service of [King David I](#) in the 11th century. The earliest record of a Wallace was of Sir Richard Walency from Shropshire (bordering Wales), who signed a charter in 1160. The name arises frequently in Ayrshire and Renfrewshire in the 12th century.

Richard's lands in Ayrshire were named after him and the family name survived in the town and parish of Riccarton (Richard's town). Richard's grandson Adam had two sons, Adam, 4th Laird of Riccarton and Malcolm, who received the lands of Eldershire and Auchinbothie in Elderslie, Renfrewshire. Malcolm was knighted and is commonly accepted as the father of William Wallace – the patriot. Recent research has revealed records that imply that William Wallace's father's name was Alan, but controversy surrounds these records.

Malcolm Wallace held significant lands in and around Riccarton. He married Margaret - a daughter of Ranald Craufurd – knight and sheriff. Malcolm and his wife had at least three sons – Malcolm, William, and John. Blind Harry alludes to sisters, but we do not know their names. William was born sometime between 1272 and 1276 and lived a peaceful childhood – undoubtedly spent in a spacious house and not in a crofter's hovel. He was uncommonly big and boisterous – which did not fit well with the family's plans for the youth. As a landless younger son, he was destined for the priesthood. In the film 'Braveheart', Randall Wallace and Mel Gibson have William's mother already dead. They also do not mention his younger brother John, and in the first half hour they kill off his father and older brother when William was just a small boy. This is not true. Sir Malcolm and his oldest son died at Irvine in one of the many skirmishes between English soldiers and Scots. This was the start of William's personal resentment of the English that would later develop into utter hatred.

The Ragman Roll of 1296, wherein King Edward I of England attempted to bend all of Scotland to his will, started the troubles that made William Wallace an outlaw. Responsibility for administering the oath for Ayrshire fell to Sir Ranald Craufurd, William's grandfather and Sheriff of Ayrshire. Anyone not paying homage to Longshanks was in for severe penalties, and when Sir Ranald noticed that Sir Malcolm Wallace's name was not on the list, and realizing that retribution from the English garrisons that now governed Ayr and Irvine, was about to descend on Malcolm, he took his daughter and her younger sons under his care.

Sir Malcolm and his oldest son Malcolm fled north - leaving his wife Margaret and sons William and John behind. Later, Sir Ranald sent them all to Kilspindie in the Carse of

Gowrie where they were kept by another uncle of William's - probably his mother's brother. The uncle was a priest of the district and it was here, at the age of seventeen or eighteen that William continued his education in Dundee. It was here that William met John Blair, who soon became a Benedictine monk. He eventually left the monastery to attend his friend William and become his chaplain and comrade in arms. In this church school, William also became friends with Duncan of Lorn and Sir Neil Campbell of Lochawe, both young men who were to take a major part in William's first exploits.

It was not long before William ran afoul of English authority. He was challenged by the son of the English governor of the castle in Dundee – one Selby. William killed him with one blow and fled into hiding. His grandfather could not conceal him, but sent him to his uncle Richard Wallace in Riccarton.

It wasn't until he met with Marion Braidfute, the eighteen year old daughter and heiress of Hugh Braidfute of Lamington that he fell in love. William and Marion never married as William believed that romance and war did not mix, however, he did see Marion as much as possible secretly at her home. The movie Braveheart has us believe that the English invoked the doctrine of “Prima Nocte” and that was the reason for the secrecy. The English never did use such a tactic in Scotland, though the feudal privilege did exist throughout much of the Middle Ages.

It is recorded that Sheriff Heselrig killed Marion or had her killed, to lure Wallace. William Wallace, accompanied by 40 or so of his companions, revenged her death by killing Heselrig and burning the English camp. They then fled into Torwood forest – from which Wallace and his men fought a guerrilla campaign against the English and recruited more Scots to their cause. According to Blind Harry, these guerrilla tactics led King Edward to eliminate most of the Council of Barons by murdering them one by one in the Barns of Ayr (June 1297), an incident speculated to have been invented by Blind Harry. A similar hanging party simultaneously convened in Renfrewshire. Sir Ranald Crauford was the first to be hanged, motivating William Wallace, who arrived at the location late after running an errand for his uncle, into killing the English garrison in Ayr in a traditional Scottish method, barring the doors as the garrison slept, burning the wooden structures, and slaying any who attempted to escape the flames. Wallace and his men retired to Selkirk Forest for safety. When word reached the Crauford family that Sir Ranald had been killed, Sir Ranald's son, William, joined Wallace in the forest.

As Wallace's ranks swelled, information obtained by [John Graham](#) prompted Wallace to move his force from Selkirk Forest to the Highlands north of Stirling. But on the way, Wallace met up with Andrew Murray. Between them, they formed an army to oppose the English. They got their chance at the craig north of the brig (bridge) over the Forth at Stirling. The battle actually fought around the bridge was not the same as in the movie Braveheart. Mel Gibson believed that he could not find a place authentic enough to stage that battle and that surely, someone would get killed in the reenactment.

James Stewart parlayed with the English before the battle, while Wallace's army lay hidden on the Abbey craig (where the Wallace monument now stands). The Earl of

Surrey dispatched two Dominican friars to parley with Wallace at Cambuskenneth Abbey. The friars suggested that Wallace submit. Blind Harry recorded Wallace's reply: "Return to thy friends, and tell them that we come here with no peaceful intent, but ready for battle, determined to avenge our wrongs and to set our country free. Let thy masters come and attack us; we are ready to meet them beard to beard!"

When told of Wallace's challenge, the enraged English army, led by the arrogant and impulsive Hugh de Cressingham (who refused to look for a fordable place across the river, although a Scottish spy told him that there was a fordable spot only a few miles away where sixty could cross the river at once), moved two abreast across the narrow wooden bridge onto the marshy haws north of the river. When half of the English host was across, the Scots charged down the hill to slaughter them. The knights bogged down in the soft ground and were easy targets for the lightly-armed Scots. How were they dressed for the battle? Perhaps Murray's Highlanders wore kilts, but Wallace and his men would have worn helmets and light chain mail under a yellow jerkin). The Scots killed the knights and their horses, and then pulled down the bridge. Many English soldiers, attempting to flee, drowned in the Forth.

The shocked English troops on the south side of the fallen bridge lost the will to fight and fled. Cressingham (grossly fat and immobile) died under his horse and Wallace sent forces across the river (by a ford) to chase the English. William Crawford led four hundred Scottish heavy cavalry to complete the action of running the English out of Scotland. Blind Harry claims that Wallace tanned Cressingham's skin and used it to make trophy belts and sporrans.

The movie Braveheart shows Wallace as the sole leader during the battle. However, much of the credit for the success at Stirling Bridge belonged to Andrew Murray, who suffered a wound that cost him his life three months later. Scotland lost most, for Murray was as great a strategist as Wallace – who now had to go on alone.

On his return from the Battle of Stirling Bridge, Wallace was knighted along with his second-in-command John Graham and third-in-command [William Crawford](#), possibly by Robert the Bruce personally but no one knows for certain, and Wallace was named "Guardian of Scotland and Leader of its armies", now Sir William Wallace. The Scottish nobility, so quick to sign the Ragman Roll swearing loyalty to Edward, swung into alignment behind Wallace – but only for a time before they fell out into competing parties.

In the six months following the Battle of Stirling Bridge, Wallace invaded England. He led a force to York (the greatest city in north England), at first clearing the countryside of opposition, then laying siege to the city. His intent was to take the battle to English soil to demonstrate to Edward that Scotland also had the power to inflict the same sort of damage south of the border. Naturally, Edward was infuriated and refused to be intimidated. Contrary to the movie Braveheart, where he sent his son Edward's young French princess to lure Wallace (she was only a child of five at the time and safely with her parents in France), Edward's Queen Eleanor (according to Blind Harry) went north to

negotiate with Wallace. Although William Wallace was impressed with the beauty and intelligence of the English Queen, he refused to be moved from his purpose.

A year later, the tables turned at the [Battle of Falkirk](#). On [1 April 1298](#), a reconstituted English army invaded Scotland at [Roxburgh](#). They plundered [Lothian](#) and regained some castles, but failed to bring a wily Wallace to combat. The Scots adopted a [scorched-earth policy](#) to deprive the English, and English suppliers' mistakes left morale and food low. In spite of these frustrations, King Edward's search for Wallace ended at [Falkirk](#).

The English outnumbered the Scots in men, weapons, and cavalry. The resourceful Wallace arranged his spearmen in four "[schiltrons](#)" — circular, hedgehog formations surrounded by a defensive wall of wooden stakes. The English gained the upper hand by attacking first with [cavalry](#), and wreaking havoc through the Scottish [archers](#). Contrary to Braveheart, there was no wholesale defection by Scots bought off by Edward. The Scottish knights pulled back by command, and Edward's men began to attack the schiltrons. It remains unclear whether the infantry by throwing bolts, arrows and stones at the spearmen proved the deciding factor. It is very likely that it was the arrows of Edward's bowmen — wielding the soon-to-be decisive long bow — capable of penetrating armor at distances of more than a hundred yards — that caused the Scottish formations to disintegrate. Longbowmen — typically Welsh — could maintain a rate of fire of four or more arrows a minute — a rate of fire not equaled until the American Civil War.

Either way, gaps in the schiltrons soon appeared. The English exploited these gaps to crush the remaining resistance. Wallace escaped north, though his military reputation suffered badly. John Graham was killed and William Crawford became Wallace's second in command. According to one account, during his flight, Wallace fought and killed a knight. It was not Robert Bruce, as shown in Braveheart. It was [Brian de Jay](#), master of the English [Templars](#), whom Wallace slew in a thicket at Callendar, north of Stirling.

By September 1298, Wallace had decided to resign as Guardian of Scotland in favor of Robert Bruce, [Earl of Carrick](#), and [John Comyn](#) of [Badenoch](#), ex-King John Balliol's brother-in-law, because of the discouraging lack of commitment and support from the Scottish nobility. In this respect, the disaffection and squabbling shown in the movie were accurate. Bruce became reconciled with King Edward in [1302](#), while Wallace spurned any such moves towards peace. Robert Bruce's father — the Competitor — was not a leper, nor the malevolent influence in his son's vacillation between English and Scottish interests depicted in the film. Unfortunately, it was Robert Bruce the son who may have suffered this terrible malady later in life, once he was already king.

According to Blind Harry, Wallace left the country with William Crawford in late 1298 on a mission to the court of King [Philip IV of France](#) to plead for French help in the Scottish struggle for independence. On their trip down the English coast, the small convoy ran into the infamous pirate Richard Longville, also known as the Red Reiver for his red sails and ruthless raids. Hiding in the hold while Crawford and a small contingent of men sailed the ship, Wallace surprised the pirates as they boarded the ship.

Longoville was captured and taken to Paris where the Scots convinced Phillip to grant amnesty so that Longoville could wreak havoc on English ships.

After serving with the Scots Guard in France in two military victories over the English, as well as a side trip to Rome to plead for Scotland with an unsympathetic Pope, in 1303 Wallace and his men returned to Scotland. They slipped in under the cover of darkness to hide on the farm of William Crawford, near Elcho Wood. Having heard rumors of Wallace's appearance in the area, the English moved in on the farm. A chase ensued and the band of men slipped away after being completely surrounded. It is at this point in the chase where Wallace took the life of one of his men whom he suspected of treachery, in order to divert the English from the trail. Blind Harry credits Stephen of Ireland (portrayed in Braveheart as brave and resourceful, but looney) as being one of Wallace's most faithful guards, who saved him from the assassin.

William Wallace evaded capture by the English until [5 August 1305](#), when Sir [John de Menteith](#), a Scottish knight loyal to Edward, betrayed Wallace to English soldiers at [Robroyston](#), near [Glasgow](#). Contrary to the movie, it is doubtful that Robert Bruce was at the site where Wallace was captured. He was not trapped in the street. Accounts have it that Wallace was surrounded and overwhelmed while in bed with an unidentified young woman.

The English transported Wallace to London and quickly tried him for treason at [Westminster Hall](#) on [23 August 1305](#). In a scene eerily reminiscent of Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin, they crowned him with a garland of oak to mock him as the king of [outlaws](#). Wallace responded to the charge of treason thusly, "I could not be a traitor to Edward, for I was never his subject." He averred that the absent John Balliol was officially his king. Wallace had no legal representation and the English were not interested in the niceties of English law, under which it would have been impossible to convict William of treason. No matter - for Wallace was declared guilty within minutes.

Following the trial, Wallace was removed from the courtroom, stripped naked, and dragged at the heels of a horse to [Smithfield Market](#). This was a trying ordeal that left him battered and bruised. There he suffered the fate decreed by the English justiciar. As a convicted traitor, church defiler, and murderer, he suffered the penalties of hanging, drawing, beheading, and quartering at the Elms in [Smithfield](#). His tarred head was placed on a pike atop London Bridge, later joined by the heads of his brother, John (who fought with Robert The Bruce), and Sir [Simon Fraser](#). His tarred four quarters were displayed, separately, in prominent places in [Newcastle](#), [Berwick](#), [Stirling](#), and [Aberdeen](#) to intimidate the populace. There is a commemorative plaque mounted in a wall of [St. Bartholomew's Hospital](#) near the site of Wallace's execution at Smithfield. Many people visit the site every year, and flowers often appear.

William Wallace died a martyr's death – honored by only his small band of faithful followers. Longshanks was convinced that he was finally rid of William Wallace, yet he had created an implacable enemy willing to finally risk his fortune, title, and his family – Robert The Bruce. Contrary to the movie, Wallace did not prefer Bruce. His loyalty was

to a free Scotland. On the few occasions on which he demonstrated loyalty to a king, it was to Balliol, not to Comyn and not to Bruce.

Edward the First died on the road north to punish the rebellious Bruce. It would take eight years of grueling guerrilla warfare before the victory at Bannockburn established Scotland as militarily free of England, and over twenty years before Edward the Second formally recognized that freedom by treaty.

William Wallace lit the flame of nationalism that infected not only the Scottish nation, but many patriots down the centuries. Wallace's renown was not limited to his own country. The Hungarian revolutionary, Lajos Kossuth, whose freedom for his country was thwarted by Russian intervention, admired him. Giuseppe Garibaldi and Giuseppe Mazzini, leading figures in the quest to form an Italian nation shared in that admiration. Mazzini described Wallace as "one of the high prophets of nationality to us all" and called upon people everywhere to "honor him, worship his memory, and teach his name and deeds to your children." In an age when statues to Wallace were being raised all over Scotland, these men all wrote letters to support a Wallace National Monument at Stirling.

We have no picture of William Wallace, or even an adequate description. Was he truly six feet seven inches in height with powerful physique, as the lengthy sword discovered at Dumbarton would indicate? Blind Harry says so, but we have no contemporary accounts. Was he bearded or smooth shaven? Did he have short hair or a shaggy mane as wild as Mel Gibson's wig? We will never know. Without a sure description, we must let Wallace's deeds provide the picture of the man. Wallace can be found everywhere a Scot has trod his ancestral homeland, challenging the English – "picking a fight" in order to drive them from the land – his land – our land. The great English poet William Wordsworth yearned to tell the tale of Wallace, who unlike other men who observe and endure misdeeds in silence, fought back. He told us:

"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 national sanctuaries, with a local soul

Of independence and stern liberty."

With William Wallace, the words and deeds define the man and his unconquerable heart. The real William Wallace was true – to his people, to his land, and to the spirit of freedom that he sparked into a flame that burns still.

