

Braveheart: A Hollywood Hero



One of the most popular Scottish heroes and patriots is Sir William Wallace of Elerslie, who was depicted recently in the Hollywood film *Braveheart*. Wallace desired freedom for Scotland, and he united the clans and gained the loyalty of the people. He struck fear into the hearts of Scotland's enemies and defied the cruel hand of a warring and invading king. Today Wallace has been romanticized and portrayed with all the attributes of a chivalrous and courageous knight and as a leader of a divided and fractious land. For many, Wallace has become the personification of Scottish nationalism. As you read the following account of William Wallace's life, consider the following questions:

1. What, in your opinion, are the qualities of *national* heroes?
2. In what ways is Wallace a hero? A Scottish hero?
3. What are some of the problems of hero creation and hero worship?

William Wallace was born in 1272. Wallace carried a two-handed broad sword, approximately 168 cm in length, with the blade itself being about 132 cm long. Historians and military experts agree that for a man to carry such a sword, let alone wield it, he would have to have been of considerable physical stature. They estimate that Wallace must have been almost two metres tall. Today the sword is displayed in the New National Wallace Monument.

William Wallace witnessed Scotland's defeat at the hands of the English in 1292 and, like all Scots of the time, endured the humiliation of English occupation in Scotland. When William was a young man, he had an encounter with the English that changed the course of his life. Dundee Castle was under the control of the English and overseen by an English constable named Selby. Selby had a son who was just slightly older than William, and this son had the misfortune and bad judgment to pick a fight with young William Wallace. Young Selby, accompanied by a number of his English friends, made some remarks to Wallace about his Scottish attire. Selby and his friends apparently berated Wallace and demanded that he hand over some of his valuable possessions. William's response was swift and dramatic; grabbing the Englishman by the collar, he drew his blade and thrust it through his assailant's heart. At this point William became an outlaw hunted down by the English. He thus became a symbol of defiance against English tyranny and control and began to lead Scottish forces on raids against English outposts and garrisons. The movie *Braveheart*, which you may have seen, portrays Wallace and his men as a rampaging band constantly attacking and ambushing anything with an English insignia and with quite a brutal and unforgiving anger. To what extent this portrayal of Wallace is accurate is not well documented. Historically, it is accepted that Wallace was a product of the chivalrous age in which he lived, an age that valued courage, strength, and prowess on the battlefield, but also an age of lawlessness and revenge. Wallace and his men did indeed attack at will and without provocation from many different places within lower Scotland. This is what gained him the reputation as a great warrior with his own people and a feared enemy with the English garrisons. No one ever knew where he would strike next or when. The Grolier Encyclopedia documents

this historical figure in this way: “. . . Wallace led a group of men who killed the English sheriff of Lanark. In the same year [1297] he defeated John de Warenne, Earl of Surrey, the English governor of Scotland, near Stirling. Wallace went on to drive the English out of Scotland and invade southern England. He became guardian of the realm in the name of the imprisoned John Balliol. Many Scottish nobles did not support Wallace, however, and in 1298, Longshanks defeated him at Falkirk. Wallace went to France in an unsuccessful bid for assistance. After his return he was arrested, brought to London, and executed for treason.” Given the historical facts, one can understand why Wallace became a martyr to a cause and a national hero in the popular imagination.

Discussion

1. What is the lesson to be learned from the story of William Wallace? What is the role of individuals in the development of nationalism? Can you give some Canadian examples?
2. The day after the referendum a statue of William Wallace was unveiled in a town close to Edinburgh. *The New York Times* reported that the film *Braveheart* helped fan Scottish nationalism and a renewed fascination with Scotland’s culture and heritage. The statue is in the likeness of Mel Gibson. Do you think this is an accurate assessment of the film *Braveheart*? Have your own feelings of nationalism ever been affected by popular culture?