

REVIEW: SIR WILLIAM WALLACE AND OTHER TALL STORIES (UNLIKELY MOSTLY)

Graeme Morton

James Mackay **William Wallace: Brave Heart**, Mainstream, Edinburgh,
1995, ISBN 1851587055, hb, £14.99, 288pp.

Hugh Douglas **Bonnie Prince Charlie in Love: the Private Passions of
Prince Charles Edward Stuart**, Alan Sutton Publishing,
Gloucestershire, 1995, ISBN 0750906057, hb, £17.99, xiv + 242pp.

The 1745 Association **A Jacobite Anthology. To Commemorate the 250th
Anniversary of the Rising of 1745**, Scottish Cultural Press, Aberdeen,
1995, ISBN 1898218307, pb, £6.95, xii + 98pp.

W. H. Murray **Rob Roy MacGregor: his Life and Times**, Canongate,
Edinburgh, 1982, reprinted 1995, ISBN 0862415391, pb, £5.99, xiii +
301pp.

Mel Gibson (b.1956, Peekskill, New York, emigrated to Australia in 1968, five feet and ten inches in height) to play Sir William Wallace (b.1270?, Elderslie, Scotland, six feet and seven inches in height) in a film financed from institutional investors in America and shot on location primarily in Ireland. At last Scottish cultural nationalism has left the kailyard behind, embracing fully the post-industrial world and the globalisation of ethnicity! James Mackay's book has no formal connection with the Hollywood blockbuster 'Braveheart', and yet the timing of its appearance and its subtitle belies a keen sense of commercial opportunism. Billed as the 'definitive biography' (a moniker which encourages the stage whisper 'a legend in its own dust-jacket, more like'), Mackay has produced a very readable story with a verve befitting a previous Saltire 'Scottish Book of the Year' Award winner

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(for his biography **Burns**). The declared approach has been to re-examine the chronicle of Wyntoun (c1420) and the epic books of verse by Blind Harry the Minstrel, transcribed in the fifteenth century and reputedly based on the Latin account by Wallace's friend and chaplain John Blair. Mackay accepts the problems of inaccuracies, falsehoods and poetic licence inherent in these accounts closest to Wallace's day yet, in defence of his approach, states that we cannot trust authors who rely solely on corroboration of contemporary records in their writing of history; we must accept that Wyntoun and Harry were not out to deceive (pp.10-15).

How definitive, then, is this re-presentation of five-centuries-old verse? Indeed, as an intellectual approach to Scottish history Mackay's book is rooted quite firmly in the late-nineteenth century. Mackay's method mirrors that most closely of Rev. Dr. Charles Rogers, Secretary to the National Wallace Monument Committee in the 1860s, and writer of a previous 'definitive' account entitled **The Book of Wallace**, published in two volumes by the Grampian Club in 1879. Reading the works in tandem, written over a century apart, it is remarkable how in their different ways they follow the same conventions: both tell the story of Wallace's exploits in the sort of emotive language Harry would have been proud of (Wallace 'braining' the English) while employing some contemporary records to make sense of the clearest discrepancies in Harry and Wyntoun.

However the greatest similarity with Mackay's work is not so much of approach, but of content, and in this case it is not with Rogers but with James Fergusson. Sir James Fergusson of Kilkerran was the author of 15 books including the influential **Lowland Lairds** (1949) and the **Declaration of Arbroath** (1970), but also **William Wallace: Guardian of Scotland** (1938). Similarity of content does not mean an identical text, but there are distinct overlaps between Mackay's and Fergusson's **William Wallace** which - to this reader at least - merits a little detective work. With thanks to the Editor of **Scottish Affairs** for granting the space for comparison, I would like to demonstrate my concerns by way of five pairs of extracts from the two authors. I have deliberately chosen the most decisive moments in Wallace's story - his victory at Stirling Bridge, his Guardianship of Scotland, his defeat at Falkirk, and his death.

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EXTRACT ONE

Stirling Bridge

Fergusson, pp.57-59

Surrey's first move was to send two friars across the green plain to offer Wallace terms of surrender. The only result, apparently, was a report from the friars that Wallace had a hundred and eighty mounted men and a force of foot which they wildly estimated at forty thousand. To their message itself Wallace's reply was direct and implacable:

Tell your people, he said, that we have not come here to gain peace, but are prepared for battle, to avenge and deliver our country. Let them come up [ascendant] when they like, and they will find us ready to meet their beards.

Besides defiance, there was policy in Wallace's words. They indicated that the Scots were standing on the defensive, waiting to be attacked in their position of vantage on the hill-slopes. The message had all the effect he could have wished, and more. It set dissension afoot among the English command. The cooler heads

Mackay, pp.146-7

Still Warenne hesitated uneasily and, playing for time, he now dispatched two Dominican friars across the bridge and up the causeway to offer the Scots terms for surrender. This parley was inconclusive, and the friars returned to Warenne with the news that Wallace appeared to have about 180 horseman and a vast army of foot soldiers which they wildly estimated at forty thousand. Wallace's answer to Warenne was unequivocal and uncompromising:

Tell your people that we have not come here to gain peace, but are prepared for battle, to avenge and deliver our country. Let them come up when they like, and they will find us ready to meet them to their beards.

Wallace's defiant answer took the English commanders by surprise. Far from seeking a way out, as the Scottish magnates had done two months earlier, this upstart brigand was, in effect, inviting the English to attack him. This, and the obvious strong defensive position adopted by the Scots, unnerved the English and spread

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advised against attack, and recommended a council of war to deliberate on the next move.

And to Lord Hailes's advice that 'if we go on to the bridge we are dead men':

This excellent advice was not accepted. The reason given by the other commanders was that it would not be safe to dive the army. More probably their minds were on the recent unreliable offers of help they had had from Lennox and the Steward, and they were in no mood now to trust any Scottish ally.

The council of commanders seems at this point to have become a confused babble of voices, some urging that they should cross the bridge at once, others that they should not. Cressingham now threw his weight into the former scale.

dissension among the general staff. Some hot heads urged an immediate attack to call the robber's bluff, but saner council prevailed and, in time honoured fashion, Warenne called a council of war to debate the issue.

And to Lord Hailes's advice that 'if we go on to the bridge we are dead men':

This was sound advice but, incredibly, Lundie was overruled. Some field commanders probably did not repose too much trust in the turncoat knight anyway, mindful of the behaviour of Lennox and the Steward, but the general feeling was that it would be unwise to split the army. There were some who vociferously argued Lundie's case, but the council degenerated into chaos at this point, everyone squabbling with his neighbour. At this juncture, Cressingham spoke up.

EXTRACT TWO

Guardian of Scotland

Fergusson, pp104-5

Fordun's narrative contains a passage which probably applies to the weeks following Wallace's return from England, and which, if it is accurate in

Mackay, pp.174-5

Fordun has a most revealing passage which probably explains why only the most altruistic of the magnates gave him their support:

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detail as it is in substance, may explain why only the most unselfish and patriotic of the barons made common cause with him:

So Wallace overthrew the English on all sides; and gaining strength daily, he in short time, by force and dint of his prowess, brought all 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.

Even if this account of Wallace's behaviour to the barons were only partially true, it would well explain why not one of the Scottish Earls was ever wholeheartedly associated with him. Jealousy alone estranged them from him.

His elevation wounded their pride; his great services reproached their inactivity in the public cause [Hailes]

So Wallace overthrew the English on all sides; and gaining strength daily, he in short time, by force and dint of his prowess, brought all 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.

Even if this account of Wallace's treatment of the magnates were only partly correct, it would well explain why not one of the Scottish earls ever gave him whole hearted support. Jealousy alone estranged them from him. In Lord Hailes's words, 'His elevation wounded their pride; his great service reproached their inactivity in the public cause.'

EXTRACT THREE

Falkirk

Fergusson, pp.144-5

King Edward, who seems temporarily to have lost his grip on the situation through the shock and pain of his injury - he was, after all, an elderly man - allowed himself to be overruled, and with the words *In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost* agreed to the importunity of his barons. He apparently felt less confidence than they did in the chances of the cavalry on the uncertain and uphill ground ahead, and accordingly gave orders that the Welsh infantry should begin the attack. The Welsh however, still sullen from their grievance of two nights ago, and moved by no feeling of loyalty to Edward but rather the reverse, declined to stir. There was no alternative but for the cavalry to go forward, which the first line, commanded by the Earl Marshal and the Earls of Hereford and Lincoln, did with enthusiasm. Their ardour suffered a check when they arrived at the broad stretch of the moss which no one had noticed; and in some confusion they wheeled off westwards to the left to find a way round.

Mackay, p.196

For once Edward allowed himself to be swayed against his better judgement. In mitigation, he was now fifty-eight years of age, quite elderly in medieval terms, and we must suppose that the shock and pain of his broken ribs were taking their toll. With a pious invocation to the Holy Trinity he gave way to his barons, although instead of ordering the cavalry to charge he sent the unreliable Welshmen forward first. The Welsh, still resentful over their rough handling less than forty-eight hours earlier, flatly refused to be treated as spear fodder. All the threats and promises in the world could not budge the sullen archers. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to send in the cavalry after all. The first wave, commanded by the Earl of Marshall and the earls of Hereford and Lincoln, charged with considerable panache - straight into the marsh which had hitherto been undetected. The lush greenery of the meadow concealed a viscous swamp which brought the clattering knights to an unseemly halt. In a state of confusion bordering on farce, which must have given

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grim amusement to the Scottish schiltroms on the opposing slope, the heavy cavalry extricated itself from the bog and wheeled off westwards to the left to seek a way round.

EXTRACT FOUR

Final Analysis of Falkirk

Fergusson, pp.152-53

Among them had fallen Sir John Stewart, Sir John Graham and Macduff, fighting among the gentlemen of Fife. Both Graham and Stewart were afterwards buried in the churchyard of Falkirk, where their graves may be seen to this day. Graham's was marked with two epitaphs, one in Latin and one, of later date, in the vernacular, which was twice restored in the eighteenth century when time obliterated it:

Heir lyes Sir John the Grame,
baith wight and wise,

Ane of the chiefs who
rescewit Scotland thrise.

Ane better knight not to the
world was lent,

Nor was gude Graham of
truth and hardiment.

[Source: **Statistical Account
of Scotland** (Falkirk), xix,

Mackay, pp.199-200

Among them were Sir John Stewart, Sir John Graham and Macduff of Fife. Graham and Stewart were subsequently interred in the churchyard of Falkirk where their tombs may be seen to this day. Graham's is marked with two epitaphs, the earlier in Latin and the other, of much later vintage, in the vernacular which was twice restored in the eighteenth century when the stone weathered badly:

Heir lyes Sir John the Grame,
baith wight and wise,

Ane of the chiefs who rescewit
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Ane better knight not to the
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Nor was gude Graham of truth
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[No Source].

His memory was perpetuated by one of the most moving passages in Blind Harry's epic, the verses

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100].

His memory is further preserved by a famous passage in Harry's poem enumerating his virtues from the mouth of Wallace.

Falkirk was a worse blow to Scotland than Spottsmuir. Its loss of men was greater, and it followed and ended a period of continual success and rising hopes. Wallace's career declined from that hour. He left on the field not only the flower of his army but his reputation as a leader and all hope of the continuance of his influence in the turbulent counsels of Scotland. He won no credit from the fact that the victory of Falkirk was King Edward's only success in the campaign of 1298.

being rendered in the form of a panegyric by Wallace lamenting his fallen comrade.

The battle of Falkirk was a much more devastating blow than Dunbar. The loss of men was far greater and there must have been few families in southern Scotland which did not suffer as a consequence. More importantly, this defeat brought to an end the three hundred days of Wallace's government, and with it the hopes of ridding Scotland of the foreign yoke. Wallace's career declined from that day; he left on the battlefield not only the flower of his army but his reputation as a leader. A quarter of his life yet lay before him, but never again was he to exercise any meaningful influence on the course of affairs.

EXTRACT FIVE

The End

Fergusson, pp.217-8

The dead eyes stared down upon the ships in the Thames, the tall wooden houses, the hurrying, many coloured crowds, and the sea gulls wheeling about the piers of the great bridge. Seven years before, sea gulls had wheeled

Mackay, p.268

The sightless eyes gazed down upon the wherries and barges going up and down the Thames, the jumble of warehouses and booths, the hustle and bustle of Londoners going about their daily business. The pitch-filled ears were deaf to the plaintive

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with the same grace, the same indifference to the bloody deeds of men, about the bridge of Stirling. Seven months later, Robert Bruce, Earl of Carrick, was crowned King of Scots at Scone.

cries of the seabirds soaring and wheeling about his lofty spike, high above the massive wooden bridge. Eight years previously, seagulls had wheeled with the same artless grace, the same indifference to the bloody deeds of men, above the flimsy, narrow bulwarks of Stirling Bridge.

Exactly seven months later, Robert Bruce, Earl of Carrick, was crowned King of Scots at Scone.

Mackay does reference specific points from Fergusson, such as where Wallace was dug-in on Abbey Craig awaiting the battle of Stirling Bridge, or in the quote from Hailes given in the first extract produced here. But my worry, hence the length of the extracts, is that thereafter, without quotation or reference, Mackay's narrative bears an uncanny resemblance to that of Fergusson. Mackay appears to offer a pastiche of the late historian's book.

Perhaps any similarity is inevitable, simply because of common sources; evidence is after all limited? Perhaps there is no other way to describe each battle than to follow Harry, Hemingburgh and Wyntoun, and thus the nature of the narrative is so dictated? This, in itself, would be a fair defence, although there is more than one source here, so should we not expect a little more variety in the battle accounts? Indeed should we not be surprised that Fordun, Hailes and the **Statistical Account of Scotland** are quoted at the same time in each author's narrative, with the same extract given? The coincidence of recurring phrases, often used a sentence or two later (sometimes the same sentence), remains remarkable and prevalent: the friars 'wildly estimated' 140,000 foot soldiers; Wallace's words to the English were 'defiant' in contrast to the 'cool heads' and 'hot heads' of the English (extract one); in extract three, the Welsh archers at Falkirk were 'sullen', and we are told of the 'panache' and 'enthusiasm' of the English cavalry leading to 'confusion' before 'wheeling off westwards to the left to find/seek a way round'.

It remains possible that this could be the product of two people translating the same text from its original Latin or old vernacular Scots. Maybe this is so,

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yet there is no such overlap with the last comparable biographies of Wallace by Andrew Fisher (1986) and D.J.Gray (1991). Equally, should we not wonder why the hand-drawn line diagram by Fergusson (p.55) of the battle positions around Stirling Bridge is apparently reproduced in almost identical scale, aspect and detail by Mackay (p.140, no acknowledgement), differentiated only by a few embellishments? Perhaps most worrying of all, and where the defence of the scarce corroborative evidence falls down, is the remarkable similarity in the analysis - that is, in the originality of the thinking and the interpretation of what has been described. Thus, in extract two - in their respective chapters entitled 'Guardian of Scotland' - we are provided almost word-for-word with the same critique of Fordun's views and the reaction of the barons to Wallace's status as Guardian (Mackay's chapter carries no reference to Fergusson at all); both use Edward's 'age and infirmity' to explain his decision-making at Falkirk (extract three); and both end their respective chapters on the implications of Falkirk (extract four) with the same story of Sir John Graham's 'epitaphs', then the same passage from Harry stating Wallace's eulogy for Graham, and then almost identical analyses of Wallace's fortunes after that defeat: 'He left on the (battle) field not only the flower of his army but his reputation as a leader' and 'Wallace's career declined from that hour/day'.

No more obvious is such overlap of language and of analytical construction than in the final extract. Excluding an appendix in Fergusson, these words are the final summation by each historian of the death of Wallace and his importance both as an historical and a national figure. This is how two books finish, the latter written twenty-five years after the death of the author of the former. Plainly one man's seabirds are another man's seagulls, but these lines by Mackay, without quotation marks or reference, seem to be a gross liberty with the work of another. Such, indeed, are 'the bloody deeds of men'.

Intellectual borrowing is not new to the published histories of Wallace. For example, George Grant's (1849) **The Life and Adventures of Sir William Wallace, the Liberator of Scotland**, repeated, at times verbatim, from J. D. Carrick's (1840) **Life of Sir William Wallace**, with only the briefest acknowledgement for a particular point in the appendix. The dubiety of such an approach to biographical writing was apparent for nineteenth century chap-books; it should not be given credibility a century and a half later. Bandwagons are there to be jumped upon, and - I suppose - we should not be surprised if a few loose pebbles are thrown up along the way.

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A loose pebble is probably a good description of Charles Edward Stuart, Bonnie Prince Charlie (or BPC to his more recent commentators), who with the 250th anniversary of the 1745 uprising has received a considerable amount of attention of late. Perhaps thankfully for any prince known as Bonnie, his reputation as a lady's man is stuff of legend and it is this which takes the particular focus of Hugh Douglas's **Bonnie Prince Charlie in Love**. (The suggestions concerning BPC's preference for men was not, apparently, as strong as for his younger brother Henry, the priest (p.4).)

Douglas has researched a number of different sources and has put together some interesting new detail on BPC's life in Europe. His chapter on the Sobieski Stuart dynasty is particularly well done, and in many ways Douglas has written a valuable counterpoint to the usual overemphasis upon BPC's short time on Scottish soil. The nature of this story, however, remains rather odd, and the analysis is often a little surprising. In effect, Douglas's argument is simple: the family makes the child. BPC's mother, Clementina, obsessively religious and constantly at prayer, is blamed for never teaching her sons the meaning of love and 'has much to answer for' (pp.10, 30). BPC's failure to know how to love is the core of this book, blamed (amazingly) for the downfall of the Jacobite cause. It is accused of facilitating a loss of support more than any political or military defeat or BPC's heavy drinking: his 'supporters began to leave in disgust when they saw how he treated the women for whom he professed to care. Love always proved another Culloden for Prince Charlie' (p.5). A similar line of rather shaky analysis of royal family life and its importance over the wider political world was applied to Charles II who 'grew up within a happy contended family, passing an idyllic childhood which was only shattered by the outbreak of the Civil War, followed by exile, and his father's execution'. Charles II is also reputed to have become a father when aged sixteen (p.16). Oh to be the child of a single parent on state benefit and to be living in an EC-designated Objective One area!

Certainly when the issue of love is to the fore, Douglas's narrative has a tendency towards Victorian melodrama. Thus, 'when love struck it did so with all the force of one of the claymores his Highland soldiers had wielded in battle in Scotland. When Charles Stuart fell for Cousin Louise, there was no mistaking he was in love!' (pp.2-3). Nor is the flow of the narrative advanced by the use of one-sentence paragraphs - tabloid newspaper style - encouraging the packing-in of historical asides, and so producing some lumpy passages of text as well as superficial analysis.

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Indeed, the reader remains unsure why a Prince supposedly so inept in love, so uninterested in women until the Jacobite cause was derailed at Culloden, a serial monogamist at best, and then so repulsive in his later years when drink dominated his health, personal hygiene and temper, as well as his performance in the bedroom, has a reputation as a great lover at all. His disastrous liaisons probably were strong enough to undermine the Jacobite movement, but his behaviour was more likely to be an effect of powerlessness rather than a cause. Perhaps, it is fair to suggest, the focus here is too limited.

Yet **Bonnie Prince Charlie in Love** has much to commend it, even if it is unsure which market it is aimed for. Its sensationalist approach and eye for life between the sheets suggests the mass market, as does the high quality of its production which does credit to its publishers. Indeed, it probably works best as a 'coffee-table read', and on those terms it complements well the straightforward, no pretence attempted, antiquarianism of the 1745 Association's **A Jacobite Anthology**.

This collection is selected from the Association's periodical **The Jacobite** (formerly **Quarterly Notes**), and prefaced by Sir Donald Cameron of Lochiel. Lochiel's father spoke at the 200th Anniversary of BPC's raising of the standard at Glenfinnan in 1945, a celebration organised by the National Trust for Scotland, and after which the 1745 Association was formed. This anthology is antiquarianism at its simplest and best, and the collection contains a veritable gold-mine of fascinating stories of events, personalities and artefacts which marked the fourteen months of BPC's march upon the British Crown. This is a book to dip into and to beguile (or bore) your friends and family with, especially as you stand in the queue at the cinema waiting to see the latest 'kilt movie'. One man responsible more than most for Hollywood's interest in all that is Scottish is W.H. Murray whose **Rob Roy: his Life and Times** has been reissued as 'The book that inspired the film'.

The problem of paucity of primary evidence which appears to have unhinged John Mackay's biography of Wallace has also been a problem for Murray and his subject matter. Murray's approach has been to describe in detail the typical life of the highland clan, and that of the sons of a chief, with the transparent implication that this is how it really was for Rob Roy. Thus we are told that it was 'typical' for the Highland chief to send his eldest son to University, most likely Glasgow, although there is no evidence that Rob's elder brother Iain actually went, but it is implied (p.42). We are told that Rob 'probably' went to a school provided by his parents, that he 'probably' learned

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French and Latin', that he 'never skimmed on his schooling' (p.42); but did he? We are told that Rob 'had to suffer the universal child-affliction, a perpetually running nose' and that 'towards the end of his first year, when he was crawling, his mother would dress him in two shirts, linen and woollen, with nothing under him' (p.10).

Yet there is no evidence for any of this detail applying to Rob Roy, and this precarious analytical method is displayed throughout the first half of the book. We have Rob on a notional visit to Glasgow for no other reason than to provide the author with an opportunity to describe the sights and sounds of that town (p.49); the same technique is used to describe what Rob would have seen if he had attended a cattle market with his father in Edinburgh (pp.70-74), or how his life on the land would have changed with the seasons (ch.3). We are told that Rob and his wife Mary 'probably produced at least ten children', the only explanation being that 'five boys survived' (p.126). Thus while providing a delightful insight into highland life in the second half of the seventeenth century, and a well written one at that, much of this text provides nothing more than circumstantial evidence pertaining to the life of Rob Roy. In fact, while reading it, I was easily able to forget that this was a biography at all rather than a piece of general social and agricultural history.

Quite noticeably this approach is set aside in the second half of the book, once Rob has reached about 40 years of age. Murray has then employed some primary material to shed light on Rob's rieving and black mailing, as well as his role in Clan negotiations in the years immediately following the Union of Parliaments. For the final twenty years or so of Rob Roy's life we actually have a biography, and one that places its hero much more clearly in his socio-political world than the previous books that have been reviewed here. Yet why this book is so imbalanced is a mystery.

What can be made of this glut of heroic biographies both written and celluloid? Why there is the Scottish fascination with pre-modern champions of whom so little is documented is unclear, although the power of myth is well known. While there is no right or wrong story to tell, historians must continue to bring fresh insights, fresh interpretations, and not just reproduce what has gone before. The danger is blunt if credibility is lost: the Hollywood histories will become Scotland's histories. The video is, after all, often cheaper than the book.

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