

## **REVIEW: BRAVEHEART AND BRIGADOON**

*Tony McKibbin*

Colin McArthur, **Brigadoon, Braveheart and the Scots**, London: I. B. Taurus, 2003, 224 pp, hb, £29.95, ISBN: 1860649270.

Colin McArthur is one of those film critics who always comes at you with a perspective. Their tone might be abrasive, their argument sometimes suspect, but their need to invigorate thought with passion, their desire to stimulate debate at the expense of a cosy place in journalism or academia, gives a curious credence even to the most absurd of thoughts. And often these arguments come from a more grounded place than that of most critics.

After all, when (in)famously writing in defence of what he called 'Poor Cinema' in **Sight and Sound** a decade or so ago, there were the mainstream critics and filmmakers who told him, in the letters pages of that magazine, that he was not living in the real world. And this is of course ironic, because one of the things McArthur has focused upon in Scottish cinema is this notion *of* the real world. Does not mainstream cinema sacrifice the exploration of the real world for commercial necessity; by making films that are larger than life and just about the right size for the multiplex screen? McArthur's argument might have seemed absurd initially – why should filmmakers constrain themselves with small budgets – but we could hardly say he was not dealing with reality: that was his very point.

In his new book **Brigadoon, Braveheart and the Scots**, McArthur explores the abiding mythic significance of Vincente Minelli's classic, *Brigadoon*, and the spuriously mythic megahit *Braveheart*. It's a book of two halves: the first on *Brigadoon*; the latter on *Braveheart*, and it is in keeping with McArthur's polemical enthusiasm that the back half of the book is more engaged than the

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former. As McArthur admits in his introduction, ‘this book is in part highly contestatory, but its writer’s historical polemic against aspects of *Brigadoon* has eased to the point where he now better appreciates its charm and far from negligible aesthetic qualities ...’.

This does not mean there are no good insights in the first section, but sometimes they lie in the digression. In one deviation McArthur talks about Preston Sturges’ *Sullivan’s Travels*, and the fact that one character says to another ‘Always reading books, Sir,’ which leads McArthur to observe how ‘this suspicion of people who read books has a long history in Anglo-American popular culture’, where ‘intellectuals and artists have often been represented as crazed or effeminate as in, for example, the first *film noir* cycle of the 1940s and 1950s’, citing examples from *Laura*, *Phantom Lady*, *Crack-Up* and *The Big Sleep*. McArthur does then move onto the musical of which *Brigadoon* is obviously one, mentioning artists as figures of fun in *The Barkleys of Broadway* and *The Band Wagon*, but you feel McArthur’s contestatory tone leads him into territory that suggests irrelevancy or barrel-scraping no matter the quality of the perception. As he says at the end of this digression, as he tries to link it back to *Brigadoon*: ‘If this seems to put an untoward weight on a figure who is not the most major character in *Brigadoon*, it indicates that there are massive hidden icebergs of ideology lurking underneath the seemingly most throwaway characterisations in Broadway musicals.’

But there is still plenty useful information here, especially in the chapter ‘Marketing, Using and Abusing *Brigadoon*’. Especially amusing is the way ‘MGM prevailed upon the inhabitants of Saratoga Village, Maryland to change the name of their village to ‘*Brigadoon*’ with the two Scots lassies and MGM officials in attendance at the formal ceremony’. Then there were other aspects of the advertising campaign. The campaign book *for* the film contained a headline, MacArthur observes, that said ‘Och, aye! These are the thriftiest bargains for many a day!’ – which ‘slots into another trope of the Scottish Discursive Unconscious, the legendary stinginess of the Scots’. This would perhaps fall under the casual category of harmless fun, but McArthur turns to historian Kenneth Cameron who believes we need a concept for ‘harmful fun’ to describe statements such as the aforementioned. Now of course there is always the danger here of over-sensitivity, but this idea of harmful fun is a useful avenue of exploration in relation to racism and racial

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stereotyping. Again we could say McArthur is offering the absurd thought, but we could again say it is to get at a deeper truth.

And obviously this need not just be harmful fun aimed at the Scots. McArthur is actually very good on the harmful fun **Braveheart** pokes at the English. Hence, **Braveheart** suggests, it would have been enough for the Scots to play a waiting game: that eventually the English race would have died out through lack of manliness. It is of course Wallace himself who finally impregnates the princess, with Edward I's son, the princess's husband, too interested in boys to do the necessary deed of progenerating a child. We could see this coming: as McArthur says, the homosexuality of Edward's son is conveyed in the *mise-en-scène* through a series of exchanged looks among Edward, his son, and his son's lover. The film's construction of the son as weak and effete is generally in accord with the obsessive masculinism of the son as a whole and its transmission of the dominant societal view of homosexuality.'

But McArthur is at his best in the chapter titled 'No' a Fuckin' Dry Eye in the Hoose: **Braveheart**'s "Gift of a Thistle" Sequence', where the writer works through the specifics of James Horner's score for the film and concludes: 'there is substantial agreement, then, that Horner's music is designed wholly to produce emotion in the audience, which inevitably means that much of it will be coldly calculated to elicit *tears*'. McArthur even quotes one source where teenagers would explain that central to the *pleasure* of seeing another Horner-scored film, **Titanic**, was this tearfulness. Here one girl states: 'It's so much better to cry because it makes the movie so much more enjoyable.' Now, in the gift of the thistle scene in **Braveheart**, where McArthur contrasts the 'warmth' (i.e. sentimentality) of the scene, with 'the cold calculation ... this is heightened if it is recalled – as everyone is, of course, aware – that film music is added at the post-production stage.' 'That is, he says, 'at some point in the post-production of **Braveheart**, director Mel Gibson and composer James Horner met in a sound studio and decided not only that the "Gift of a Thistle" theme be added to this scene, but at what point it would enter and at what decibel level.' Were they basically interested here in nothing more than 'jump-starting tears' McArthur wonders, adopting writer Tom Lutz's phrase?

This is the core of the book, where McArthur goes on to contrast **Braveheart** with, surely David Lynch's most conventional film, **The Elephant Man**. But McArthur believes Lynch's film is very different in its viewer expectation.

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‘Though this scene from **The Elephant Man** [which focuses on the titular character’s death] is liable to have the same tear-inducing effect as “The Gift of a Thistle” scene, there is no compulsion to bring a charge of sentimentality against it for a number of reasons: the greater emotional complexity of the Lynch scene, the greater formal and emotional complexity of [Samuel] Barber’s (as opposed to Horner’s) music and, not least, the ideological relationship between the event and the tears it induces.’

What McArthur is suggesting here is that **Braveheart** is not interested in historical complexity, or even character complexity. What counts is the tears extracted, no matter the underlying problematic. If Hollywood has to simplify a complex situation to arrive at a singular response, then so be it. What McArthur is asking for is tears that come out of the very complexity. Having illustrated why this complexity is missing, McArthur goes on to list all the historical inaccuracies that allow **Braveheart** to arrive at a simple-minded narrative throughline.

Now, of course there are many critics who will say film has no obligation to be true to history, and others who will say cinema is a craft, and part of that ‘craftiness’ is manipulating audiences. But as McArthur shows, **Braveheart** works wonderfully well for propaganda groups Stateside not too far away from Nazism. As McArthur says in his epilogue, while, ‘to be sure, **Brigadoon**’s relaying of the Scottish Discursive Unconscious needs to be understood and countered, as does **Braveheart**’s ... what must be most immediately grappled with is the latter’s proto-fascist elements’. What McArthur proves good on here is taking the aesthetic questions and couching them in political terms. This allows us to see **Braveheart** not just as a manipulative film, but as a *dangerously* manipulative film, a film that functions in so mythologically abstract a way that it proves useful for anyone with a grievance who is looking for a bit of aggro through a nationalist mindset.

In the chapter ‘Scotland and the **Braveheart** Effect’ there is a picture that serves as the cover of a Scottish Tourist Board Brochure. It does not show us Loch Lomond, or Edinburgh Castle, or Ben Nevis. No, it is a shot from the film, of Mel Gibson’s mouth wide open as if he is in the middle of a war cry. If this is the image Scots want to send out to the rest of the world, that is bad enough, but to have the war cry coming out of the mouth of an Australian/American actor, and coming from a film that was mainly shot in Ireland rather than Scotland to take advantage of tax breaks, should at least

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demand a sense of irony. The Tourist Board and the Scottish National Party, in adopting **Braveheart** as a long lost son, showed a pretty lethal combination of jingoism and lack of perspective. Critics may have accused McArthur of passionate absurdity in the past, but better his analytic polemics than **Braveheart**'s lazy, blind patriotism, and also the lazy blind patriotism of those who should know better.

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