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Written by Maureen Younger

ARTS

Rated or dated: Braveheart

Ahead of the Holyrood elections, we revisit *Braveheart*. Is it historically accurate? Hell no! It's a Hollywood movie, says Scot-in-exile *Maureen Younger*.

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Mad Macs? Mel Gibson as a not-entirely-true-to-life William Wallace. Photos: Paramount.

Admittedly, I have a rather romantic view of Scottish history. This is because you won't find a more patriotic Scot than those among the Scottish diaspora. My parents would do anything for Scotland. I mean ANYTHING – apart from go back and live there. (Christ, my dad even has a bagpipe clock!)

As a result, I grew up gorging myself on Scottish history as a child. Names of battles and their often bloody aftermath were drummed into me – Culloden, Stirling Bridge, Bannockburn, Killiecrankie – as well as the great figures from Scottish history: the Black Douglas, Montrose, Bonnie Dundee, Robert The Bruce, Bonnie Prince Charlie, Flora MacDonald and, last but not least, William Wallace, Scotland's national hero. I'm even old enough to remember when *Scots Wha Hae (wi' Wallace bled)* was Scotland's unofficial national anthem.

Going to school in England, however, I soon realised that these names and battles meant nothing to my classmates. This is because England's often fractious and bloody history with its Celtic neighbours was studiously ignored. I learned more at school about crop rotation than I did about England's past with Scotland, Ireland or Wales.

Therefore I shouldn't have been that surprised while sitting down to watch *Braveheart* at a packed cinema in Brighton and mentioning to my date about Wallace's death that the woman next to me was indignant. "You've spoil the ending!" she screamed.

As Wallace had lived in the Middle Ages, I was surprised she thought he could still be alive. Maybe she thought she was coming to watch *Highlander*? Then it dawned on me. Out of everyone in that packed English cinema, I was probably the only one who knew who the hell he was.

Who was Wallace? Well, living, as he did, in medieval Scotland – a long time before the curse of selfies and Facebook updates – little is actually known. He became a legend in his own lifetime; and as the first stories about him were spread orally, you only have to have played Chinese Whispers to know how stories can mutate in their telling. As a man we know little but we do know his deeds.

"From time immemorial people have used stories from history to propagate their own worldview, customising and editing along the way, tailoring history to the tastes and prejudices of their time."

At the time, England's King Edward I was planning to do to the Scottish what he'd already done to the Welsh and make Scotland part of his realm. Both ruthless and able, Edward made the most of the political vacuum in Scotland following King Alexander III's sudden death, a situation exacerbated further thanks to the numerous claimants now vying for the Scottish throne. Instead of leading effective resistance against the English, these Scottish nobles were too busy fighting themselves. Moreover, as many also had lands in England, they were keen to keep on the right side of Edward.

Then Wallace – a commoner with nothing to lose but his life – appears and starts the fight back. Ordinary Scots flock to his side and along with Sir Andrew Murray they do the unthinkable at Stirling Bridge and beat the English army. Wallace is made Guardian of Scotland but later loses to the English at Falkirk. Betrayed to the English, he undergoes a show trial and dies an excruciating traitor's death, despite the small technicality of never having sworn allegiance to Edward in the first place.

Now is *Braveheart* historically accurate? No, it's a Hollywood movie. Of course it isn't. But you could castigate Shakespeare's history plays for the very same reason. From time immemorial people have used stories from history to propagate their own worldview, customising and editing along the way, tailoring history to the tastes and prejudices of their time.

So yes, the love story with Queen Isabella (Sophie Marceau) is ludicrous and I, personally, could have done with less of the love story with Murron (Catherine McCormack). But then when you are making a Hollywood movie, I'm guessing romance is more of a winner than an in-depth look at medieval Scottish politics. I could also have done without the supposedly loveable Irish rogue, Stephen (David O'Hara) and have some mention of Sir Andrew Murray instead.

As for the Battle of Stirling Bridge, firstly there is no bridge! However, the battle scene depicted in *Braveheart* does make for great cinema and gives you an idea of how brutal such hand-to-hand fighting must have been. Moreover, if you did depict how tactically stupid the English commanders were that day, there is a chance that no one would believe it.



Nor was Wallace (Mel Gibson) as supportive of Bruce (an intensely watchable Angus Macfadyen) as the film makes out. In fact, Wallace always made clear that he was fighting on behalf of John Balliol, Bruce's main rival to the Scottish throne.

And whereas in the film, it's Bruce's father (Ian Bannen) who makes all the hard choices for Bruce (i.e. siding with the English and being complicit in Wallace's capture), let's not forget, Bruce was ruthless enough to stab his rival Red Comyn to death in a church at a time when people believed in God, their immortal souls and the sanctuary of the church, which is presumably why both men had met there in the first place!

As for Bannockburn, in reality Bruce was never intending to pay homage to the English, as depicted in the film, nor did Bannockburn lead directly to Scottish independence. That finally happened 14 long years later in 1328 with the signing of the Treaty of Edinburgh.

"For me, Wallace's ability to stand up and face seemingly overwhelming odds and fight against English oppression represents Scottish bravery, Scottish intransigence and Scottish sheer bloody-mindedness."

What does ring true in the film is that Wallace was not only a great warrior but a brilliant strategist and guerrilla leader, using his sharp intelligence to often get the better of a much stronger enemy.

However, not even Wallace could overcome the blow of the Scottish cavalry suddenly fleeing the battlefield at Falkirk. The reasons behind this betrayal are still a subject for conjecture, even if they are not portrayed as such in the film.

In *Braveheart* the nobles turn tail out of pure self-interest. This is a feasible explanation given, as *Braveheart* points out, that in the feudal society that then existed, the nobles were less than happy that a commoner was doing a better job at leading the fight back than his supposed betters. That said, there is no proof that Bruce himself was involved – inadvertently or otherwise – in Wallace's capture.

So yes, the film is inaccurate but ever since the Middle Ages people have been shaping the story of Wallace to suit their own needs. Because with someone like Wallace it's less about who he was but what he represents that is important: and he will invariably represent different things to different people.

For me, Wallace's ability to stand up and face seemingly overwhelming odds and fight against English oppression represents Scottish bravery, Scottish intransigence and Scottish sheer bloody-mindedness. And whether I'm right in that belief or not is a moot point. I took strength from that as I totted off to school where I was being routinely bullied. (Standup comic bullied as a child? What are the chances?) And that is because, as a national hero, Wallace is a metaphor for how we would like to see ourselves.

Though the details and historical accuracy in *Braveheart* may be wanting, the essence of what Wallace stood for is there. Its best expression, written in the *Declaration of Arbroath* 15 years after Wallace's death but nonetheless surely inspired by his uncompromising stand against would-be English dominance:

...for, as long as but a hundred of us remain alive, never will we on any conditions be brought under English rule. It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we are fighting, but for freedom alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself.

Bas Agus Buaidh!

Rated or dated? RATED.

[@maureenyounger](#)

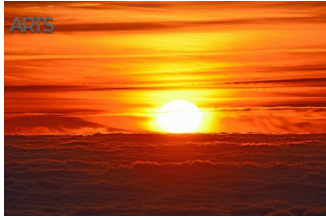
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WRITTEN BY MAUREEN YOUNGER

A London-Scottish, multi-lingual, much-travelled stand up comic working on the mainstream, urban and gay comedy circuits, actor and writer. www.maureenyounger.com @MaureenYounger

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