

**SCOTLAND'S LIBERATOR:
THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF WILLIAM WALLACE 1297-1997**

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The celebrations for the anniversary of the Battle of Stirling Bridge, led by the Stirling Initiative Partners as part of the long term tourism strategy for the I own and funded through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), IVive the Smith Art Gallery and Museum a great opportunity to mount a popular exhibition to attract tourists and locals alike. The exhibition, *Scotland's Liberator* took three years to plan and realise. It has delivered visitors to the Smith in significant numbers for the first time since the building opened in 1874, completely overturning local prejudice that the Smith is "away from the centre of things" and "too far out of town for people to take the trouble to find it".

The exhibition has put the Smith on the visitor map of Stirling, and in its correct location - just beneath the Castle in the former royal hunting ground or King's Park, a short walk from the Stirling Highland Hotel and the Albert Hall, and in good place from which to explore the rest of the town. The visitor surveys conducted and correspondence received indicate a high percentage of satisfaction with the exhibition itself, and the curatorial rewards, in the form of additional material and information from visitors, have been good. The commercial sponsors, Maclays Thistle Brewery of Alloa, who have marketed the exhibition along with their William Wallace Ale, have been delighted with the year-long promotion. The programme of talks, concerts, plays and performances, managed by the Friends of the Smith, which has accompanied the exhibition, has been well attended and profitable. In short, this exhibition has proved the Smith to be a viable visitor attraction which, given good programming, adequate marketing and financial support, can operate as well as any other in Stirling and Scotland.

The purpose of this article is to describe how and why the exhibition and its programme was presented, what it signifies in terms of the story of William Wallace, and discuss how its success can be taken forward. The world-wide success of Randall Wallace's novel *Braveheart* and the Hollywood film of that name could not have provided a better starting point for an exhibition on William Wallace. Nevertheless, the task in hand was daunting, given that the Smith had only three small objects of direct relevance - the seal of the Burgh of Stirling, a medal struck for the foundation of the National Wallace Monument in 1861, and a small mid-19th century jug with a crude portrait of Wallace and the legend '*Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled*'. The main exhibition gallery in the Smith measures 97 x 40 feet, and priority was given to locating relevant exhibits.

At an early stage, we decided to cover the legacy of William Wallace over the last 700 years, looking at what his example has signified in the centuries

since his death. Most biographies or histories of William Wallace end with his death in 1305, or with a brief mention of Bruce and Bannockburn. A notable exception is Peter Reese's *Wallace* (Canongate, 1996). As the Wallace story has dominated the landscape of Stirling, occupied the minds and coloured the thoughts of its people, and has given powerful assistance to its tourism strategy for over a hundred years, we considered that story as worthy of examination.

One of the great strengths of the Smith is its own collection, most of which has been in store for the past thirty years. Although there were only three small objects directly pertaining to the Wallace story, we looked at other items which legitimately could be used in the exhibition. The material from the 1865 Cambuskenneth Abbey excavation is very important, but not visually exciting. There are shards of painted glass and original leadwork from the Abbey windows, masons' tools, and other fragments. The Trustees of Dunblane Cathedral Museum generously loaned the carved keystone which some of our tools may have been cut, and we were able to borrow from the National Museums of Scotland collection the decorated metal strongbox, pot, and gold ring from Cambuskenneth. Cambuskenneth was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, who according to Blind Harry, was a special protector of Wallace, and gave him victory at Stirling Bridge:

Apon the morn to Stirling passit rycht
Assumpcion day off Marye fell this cas Ay
lowyt be our lady off hir grace! Convoyar
offt scho was to gud Wallace And helpyt
him in mony syndry place.¹

With so little to illustrate the life of Cambuskenneth Abbey, we took the opportunity to commission a small stained glass panel, adapting the image from the Abbey seal, illustrating Our Lady of Cambuskenneth. This was designed and executed by stained glass artist Yvonne Smith of Glasgow. Thanks to the ERDF funding, we were also able to commission a scale model of Cambuskenneth, as well as a model of the Battle of Stirling Bridge.

The very graphic description which Blind Harry gives of how Wallace purchased the clothing, cart and stock of a potter, and went in disguise to spy out the English camp before the Battle of Biggar, gave us the opportunity of using some of our exceptional collection of green glazed medieval pottery. Wallace, unused to steering the cart, kept dropping and breaking his wares, much to the amusement of the potter and the English soldiers.² The story suited the purposes of our collection, much of which is broken and in shard form. Academic historians, who have been quick to dismiss Harry's account of the "so-called Battle of Biggar" and to point out how the same tales are told of Robin Hood and Hereward the Wake, have missed the value of this episode, which constitutes the earliest detailed description of a Scottish potter, dressed in threadbare gray '*gown and hois in clay that claggit was*'. The poem confirms for the first time what archaeologists have long since suspected: that earthenware pots did not travel well and were made in each locality.

In scripting the text for the exhibition, we decided at an early stage to use the extant, Scottish, pro-Wallace sources in dealing with his life and death. The

academic histories which deal with Wallace favour overwhelmingly the English sources, and the chronicles of Walter of Guisborough, Matthew of Westminster, Peter of Langtoft, Lanercost, Scalachronica, and William Rishanger are quoted repeatedly at the expense of Scottish sources. This is not a fair place to discuss *la trahison des clercs* and the academic politics which underpin the slaveheart mentality which inhibits historians from treating Scottish sources seriously. Suffice to say that in order to avoid the usual 'tilted picture' which more often signifies a balance in favour of the English viewpoint, we elected to use the *Scolichronicon* of Walter Bower (1385-1449) and the *Chronicle of Andrew Wyntoun*, and the *Acts and Deeds of Sir William Wallace* by Blind Harry (?1440-c1492). The first two were written by Augustinian clerics around the same time, one in Latin and the other in English, and both contain the diplomatic arguments of the War of Independence.

The most neglected of all the texts is Blind Harry's *Wallace*, and while he probably had knowledge of the work of Bower and Wyntoun, he claimed to base his work on a biography of Wallace, commissioned shortly after the hero's life by Bishop William Sinclair of Dunkeld from Wallace's own chaplain and boyhood friend, John Blair. Sinclair's stated intention was to send it to the Pope to appraise him of the situation. Possibly it was in part a hagiography of Wallace, to demonstrate the right of Scotland's cause and prepare the ground for a canonisation process. We shall never know until the book is found, and it is judged by many historians not to have existed.

While it is impossible to deny the existence of Blind Harry, the content of his epic history is mostly dismissed as elaborate literary fiction. The internal evidence of the text suggests that Harry was collecting and collating the traditional stories of Wallace from different parts of the country, and performing them, either through declamation or song, for a live audience. The most skilled contemporary interpreter of Blind Harry's work is Parag MacNeil of Dunblane, and the method by which he performs it is akin to that of the storytellers in the cafes of Alexandria, Egypt, who still recount the great battles and military feats of ancient times, beating the tables with sticks at appropriate intervals, and punctuating their narrative with song.

Impartial, factual history is difficult to write at the best of times. The situation in Wallace's Scotland must have been akin to that of present day Bosnia, where, even in the 20th century, atrocities can be covered up. Some of Blind Harry's stories are indicative of these atrocities. In Book Five for example, when Wallace is being pursued by the English with the aid of a bloodhound through the wilds of Perthshire, and his companion Fawdon, whom he suspects of treachery, starts to go slow, he beheads Fawdon with a single sword blow and flees. The hound, when she finds the body of Fawdon, refuses to go further and Wallace is saved. That night, he and his men reach Cask Hall and start to prepare their food. There is a sound of horns outside. Wallace sends two men to investigate. The noise gets louder. He sends out two more. The noise increases. Finally, he goes out alone, to be confronted by Fawdon, his head under his arm.³ The headless Fawdon pursues Wallace for

his life - the kind of bloody nightmare that soldiers, from the Romans to the Vietnam veterans, have experienced. Blind Harry holds up a mirror to the reality of war, and his work is an insight into how Scots managed to survive the attempted ethnic cleansing which shaped the nation.

The text of Blind Harry's poem is not readily accessible to the general public and for that reason, the opprobrium which is usually reserved for Harry's perceived "mistakes" fell with full force on the film *Braveheart*. The novel by Randall Wallace was inspired by and scripted with the assistance of a copy of the 1722 edition of *Blind Harry* by Hamilton of Gilbertfield, which was de-accessioned into his possession by the University of California Library at Los Angeles.

Sculptor Alexander Stoddart, in an effort to engender new respect, admiration, and an appreciative modern audience for Blind Harry, sculpted a new, classically-inspired portrait bust of him in 1996. This was purchased for the Smith's permanent collections with the aid of the National Fund for Acquisitions, administered with government funds by the National Museums of Scotland. The bust, subtitled with a line from the poem which an English soldier uses against Wallace - *Quham thowis thou, Scot?/Who are you calling thou, you Scot?* - is directed by Harry to the present day onlooker. Who are you dismissing in such familiar terms? Scot, who are you taking for granted? The working title of the piece, 'Blind Homer, Blind Ossian, Blind Milton, BLIND HARRY', was also aimed at persuading readers to re-assess Harry's place in the epic tradition. If Harry has a fault, it is that he has no surname, and the diminutive form of his name has blinded us to his importance, both as an epic poet and as an historian.

We were fortunate that artist Owain Kirby, who works in linocut and lives in Stirling, agreed to illustrate the main label panels for the Wallace exhibition.



Blind Harry



Wallace

He undertook an impressive amount of work in a short time, illustrating the battles of Stirling Bridge, Falkirk, the incidents at Biggar, the Cambuskenneth monks, the commissioning of the life of Wallace from John Blair, Blind Harry performing the stories of Wallace, James IV preserving the sword of Wallace and the iconography of Wallace on Reform Bill banners. His soldiers, spearmen and bowmen were also applied direct to the walls by way of decoration, and he undertook the artwork which enabled us to produce large templates of the Royal Burgh of Stirling Seal for use as brass rubbings in the children's activity

Gallery 3 is a huge space to fill, and as a focal point for the exhibition, we had considered reconstructing part of Stirling Bridge in the gallery. The logistics and the cost of this was just too great for a temporary exhibition. We took instead the symbol for Stirling from John Harding's map, prepared for invasion purposes around 1450.⁴ As on earlier maps, Scotland is shown as bisected by the Rivers Forth and Clyde, and only at Stirling - depicted as a pretty pink castle with blue turrets, and a bridge attached - is it possible to cross. The castle and bridge were realised in three-dimensional form, serving as a practical viewing platform for the rest of the exhibition. Our original intention was to clad the exhibition cases in the form of the other towns on Harding's map. In different colours they are depicted as towers, castles and hi lie churches, rather like chess pieces ready for the taking. In this form the exhibition would also have served as a walk around Scotland, looking at different aspects of the Wallace story. Unfortunately, resources and construction time did not allow this, but the presentation was done in a limited form.

During the preparation time for the exhibition and since, we have continued to collect information on every aspect of the history of Wallace. On occasion, the information has been on our own premises; we found for example, that the Wallace triptych painted by David Scott and now owned by Paisley Museum and Art Gallery, and the great painting of the Abbot of Inchaffray blessing the troops before Bannockburn, by John Phillip, now owned by Angus Council, were both exhibited at the Smith's inaugural exhibition of 1874. Some leads are unresolved. An engraving of a drawing by Alexander Nasmyth of the Torwood Wallace Oak in 1771, was located in a book, but so far, we have been unsuccessful in finding the original, which was probably commissioned by the Eleventh Earl of Buchan (1742-1829) who had a presentation box made for George Washington from the tree. It is hoped that we will continue to add to the information on Wallace kept at the Smith, as new material comes to light.⁵

The exhibition offered the opportunity of conserving items from the collections, some of which, like the masonic stone from Kippen, reputedly the earliest in Scotland, had never been on show. The costume of the Stirling Halberdiers was cleaned and conserved, J Harrison Watson's great Battle of Uannockburn painting (1904) was conserved, the Robert Burns painting was framed, and one of the North British Furniture Manufactory model

sideboards, built for the great demonstration and procession to the Wallace Monument in 1887, but broken into about thirty pieces by poor storage in the 1960s, was lovingly restored. European funding also enabled us to commission music for the exhibition from the group Aon Brach, and to issue the Smith's first CD. Other commissions included heraldic banners from Dr Patrick Barden, and a life size figure of Wallace, based on Blind Harry's detailed physical description of him.

We were fortunate enough to have Bob and Barbara McCutcheon as historical advisors to the exhibition. They worked tirelessly in setting up the exhibition, loaned their unrivalled collection of Wallace and Bruce memorabilia and publications, and invested their knowledge.

Much help came from other individuals and Friends of the Smith. The Jamieson family came as a wallpapering and floorstaining squad, while the Scotts were painters. John and Ann Scott also investigated and photographed Wallace place name sites in Dumfries and Galloway.

Requests for loans were met generously. A family who had once lived in Wallace Street, Stirling, brought in the Wallace and Bruce figures which had graced their mantelpiece there, and the story of how the family farm supplied the thatch for the roof of the National Wallace Monument when the construction was at a standstill in the 1860s. The Petrie family gave up their Wallace grandfather clock for a year. The Corrieri family donated a mug and cafe menu with the Wallace Monument, fittingly displayed with the Garibaldi memorabilia of the 1860s. Garibaldi, 'the Wallace of Italy', was a great supporter of the building of the National Wallace Monument. Ena Ramsay, responding to the appeal for a Wallace Monument tea cloth sold by Menzies in the 1920s, not only brought it in but joined the team of guides, set up by Peggy Roddan of the Friends, which has operated for the duration of the exhibition. Galleries throughout Scotland were equally generous with their loans, and in particular Biggar Museums, Paisley Museum and Art Gallery, Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museum, the McManus Gallery, Dundee, Perth Museum and Art Gallery, and the National Galleries and Museums of Scotland, recognised the importance of the occasion.

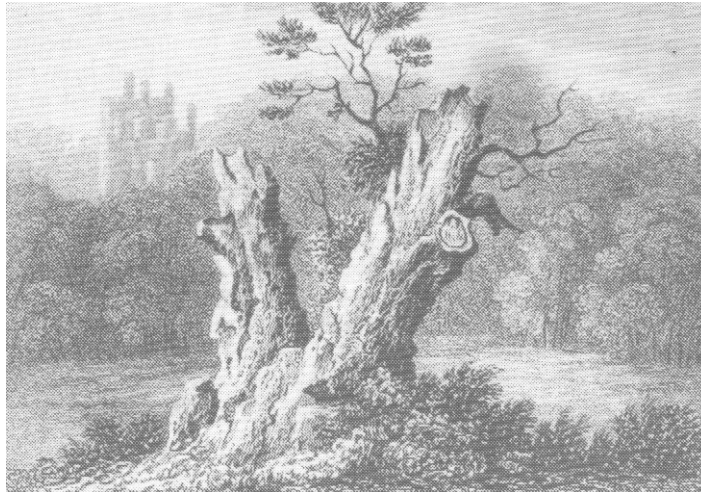
The Battle of Stirling Bridge offered a great opportunity of mounting a diverse, thematic exhibition of national and international interest on the subject of William Wallace. It was a theme which had never been tackled before, and brought together important objects and paintings from all over Scotland. We hope to record each item in detail, to produce a quality record for the Scottish Cultural Resources Access Network, which will provide a study resource and a 'virtual' exhibition which can be used by the public in an educational context in years to come.

With so much local help however, in essence, Scotland's Liberator is an exhibition by and for the people of Stirling, celebrating Stirling's very important place in Scottish history. In thanks for this, I adapted the last two lines of the *Scotichronicon* to place over the entrance to the exhibition -

Non Scotus est Christe
cui expositio non placet iste.
(*Christ! He is not a Scot who is not pleased with this 'exhibition.'*)

References

- 1 Harry's *Wallace*. Ed. by Matthew P. McDiarmid (Scottish Text Society Edinburgh 1968) vol 1 pp 175-176.
- 2 *ibid.* p122-123.
- 3 *ibid.* p76-79.
- 4 British Library, Lansdowne MS 204, f.226v. See PDA Harvey *Medieval Maps* (British Library 1991) pp70-73.
- 5 The exhibition brochure, *The Life and Legacy of Scotland's Liberator - Introducing William Wallace*, is published by Firtree (Fort William 1997), as part of their Scottish collection.



The Wallace Oak, Torwood - engraved from a drawing by Alexander Nasmyth,

BOOK REVIEWS

Rowing on the Forth at Stirling. The Early Years 1853 to 1906. Gordon Watson. Stirling Amateur Boating and Swimming Club. 36pp.

Scholarly interest in the history of sport, particularly that of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when modern forms of institutionalised and codified sport first extensively emerged, has increased greatly in recent years. As a result, our understanding of the broad nature, causes and consequences of the unprecedented transformation in Britain's sporting culture which occurred during the course of the Victorian and Edwardian periods is now reasonably well advanced. Much, however, still remains to be done not least at the local level of sporting activity and for the many sports like rowing whose appeal was both more ephemeral and less widespread than that of the major sporting recreations of the age such as football, cricket and athletics. To the extent that the present study focuses on these relatively neglected aspects of sport history it deserves a warm welcome. At the same time, the contribution it makes to the ongoing debate about the place of sport in Victorian and Edwardian society is more limited than it might have been. By adopting an essentially descriptive approach, the study pays insufficient attention to a number of issues which students of sport history would have been especially interested in. Why were patrons like MacFarlane so committed to rowing? Why did MacFarlane withdraw his support from the Stirling Boat Club? Why was the persistence of rowing at Stirling so patchy? A fuller treatment of the revived Stirling Amateur Boating and Swimming Club in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would also have been instructive. Who was its patrons? What were their objectives? From which social classes did its membership come and how many members did it have? Why was rowing more successful in the later 1890s and early 1900s than at any time since 1860? Most of these questions, it is true, can only be partially answered. But, in the local newspapers alone, there is sufficient material to allow something to be said. With a more judicious balance between narrative and analysis the author's work would have been more informative. Even as it is, however, it serves as a useful reminder that more research into the development of sport at the grass-roots level is urgently needed. Hopefully, it will encourage others to follow.

N.L.T.