

Sir William Wallace In Life And Literature: A Just War Perspective

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Abstract : Since the release of Mel Gibson's movie, *Braveheart*, in 1995, the world has come to know something of the life of Sir William Wallace and his part in the struggle of the Scottish people for independence from the monarchy of England. Observers have found many factual errors in the movie; these have been documented in the popular media and are briefly noted in this study. What appears to be absent, however, both in the movie and in its critical commentary, is a careful consideration of the justification for the invasion of the English army across its northern border. At root, one is compelled to ask, what gave Edward I the right to invade Scotland and move to annex an independent nation into his own kingdom? This study examines the conflict, which continues to this day, albeit in dialogue rather than on battlefields, through the lens of just war theory. The study finds that Edward I violated the ancient laws of war first noted by Socrates and Cicero and later articulated by Augustine and Aquinas, laws with which Edward and his advisors must have been familiar.

Keywords: Edward I, historical fiction, literature, Scottish independence, William Wallace.

I. Introduction

"All art is distortion" (Mitter, 1999; Regan, 1982). So it is with "historical fiction." The degree to which the art diverges from objective reality is the stuff of critical commentary, and that is especially true when historical figures are portrayed in literature, either as heroes or villains. In the case of Sir William Wallace (c. 1270–23 August 1305), the gulf is wide. Detailed research has the salutary effect of reducing the gap between the reality, as it is reliably recorded, e.g., in Schofield (1920), Watson (2006), Broun (1999), Webster (2000), and Prestwich (2000), or somewhat less reliably recorded, e.g., in Mackay (1995) and the fiction, which ranges from the illustrated children's book *William Wallace: The Battle to Free Scotland* (Martinez, 2020) to the Mel Gibson movie *Braveheart* (White, 2011). This study asks, What is true and what is fiction or myth? Beyond these foundational issues involving objective reality, the study examines the behavior of King Edward I in his opposition to the struggle of the Scottish people against English dominance through the lens of just war theory (Walzer, 2015; Lang, O'Driscoll, & Williams, 2013).

In the doctrine, or tradition, of just war, *jus ad bellum*, literally, the right to war, requires these criteria: just cause, comparative justice, competent authority, right intent, probability of success, last resort, and proportionality (BBC, 2020; Cole, 1999). In order to be considered "just," a war must be conducted in a just manner, *jus in bello*. This requires distinction, proportionality, military necessity, fair treatment of prisoners of war, and no evil means, such as torture or rape (BBC, 2020; Cole, 1999).

Writing in the first century before Christ, as the Roman Republic was about to collapse as a result of internecine wars, Cicero wrote the first exposition of what would become just war theory. While condemning war in the strongest terms, he wrote, "Rashly to engage in line of battle and hand to hand to fight with an enemy is somehow monstrous, and like the actions of wild beasts" (Harrer, 1918, p.26). Cicero, however, was not a pacifist. There are times, he wrote, when war is appropriate: "War was horrible and yet should be entered for cause" (p. 27); i.e., *jus ad bellum*. Cicero wrote in *De officiis*, "Those wars are unjust which are undertaken without cause" (p. 27). Who is to determine if the cause is just? Cicero proposes in *De legibus* "a very old and sacred college of priests, the *fetiales*" (p. 27).

In *De officiis*, Cicero takes on the obligations of the combatants: Once war is underway, "It should be waged properly and justly," (Harrer, 1918, p. 28), i.e., *jus in bello*. Finally, Cicero deals with the end of the war: *But when victory is gained those are to be preserved who have not been cruel or horrible in the war...And not only should you plan for the safety of those whom you have overcome by force; but those also who throw down their arms and trust themselves to the protection of our commanders are to be received in surrender [that is, not butchered by the soldiers], even though the battering ram is shaking their walls at the time* (Harrer, p. 28).

Cicero offers to us the foundational principles of what would become the three elements of just war theory: a just cause, just treatment of combatants, and mercy to the vanquished. His platform is clear: “to punish the guilty, but to save the majority...to hold to the upright and honorable” (Harrer, p. 29).

After the further articulation of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* by Augustine (354–430) and later expanded by Aquinas (1224/1225–1274) (Lang, O’Driscoll, & Williams, 2013) as constituting a just war, scholars saw the need for a conclusion of hostilities leading to a better peace than that which gave rise to the war, *jus post bellum*. We would expect a just conclusion to be characterized by a just cause for termination, right intention, public declaration and authority, discrimination between combatants and civilians and military vs. political leaders, and, again, proportionality (Bass, 2004; Iasiello, 2004; Orend, 2007; Williams, 2014). Lazar (2012) adds reconstruction and peacebuilding to the list (p. 204). Comparing and contrasting the conclusions of World War I and World War II, we might add “mercy to the vanquished” (Holmes, 2004, p. 7).

Any study of past military decisions will necessarily deal with the issue of evaluating those decisions using modern conventions. In the case of the Wars for Scottish Independence, this issue is informed by the fact that just war theory and its predecessor philosophical precepts had been in place for a millennium or more. The just war criteria were recognized by Socrates around 400 BCE, well before the admonitions of Jesus and the Christian era, as well as Augustine and Aquinas using Christian theology. We may assume that Edward I (1239-1307) and his retinue, as well as William Wallace and his leaders, were well aware of the just war precepts. In the planning for and conduct of war, however, passions too often prevail over principle.

1.1 Problem Statement

Some of the life of Sir William Wallace is documented in the historical record. Much of what we think we know about the man, however, is what we see in stories written about him hundreds of years after his death. The most notorious of these stories is told in the Mel Gibson movie, *Braveheart*. It remains for research to identify the factual errors in the modern literature and present, as much as is possible, the objective truth about the man.

1.2 Significance of Study

Sir William Wallace gave his life fighting for the independence of Scotland. With the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union, a substantial number of Scots may be reconsidering their decision in the 2014 Referendum, in which a majority voted to remain in the United Kingdom (Ashcroft, 2021). The Scottish National Party (SNP) is even now preparing for a second referendum (Brooks, 2021). This would seem a likely time to examine the life of one of the most noted figures in the struggle for Scottish independence.

1.3 Research Objectives

- i. Identify the differences between the life of Sir William Wallace and how he is portrayed in literature.
- ii. Draw conclusions regarding the effects of the William Wallace literature on those who will decide the question of Scotland’s independence.
- iii. Evaluate the decisions by the belligerents in terms of just war theory.

1.4 Research Questions

- i. How has the life of Sir William Wallace as portrayed in literature differed from objective reality? A premise of the study, based on preliminary research, is that there are deviations in the popular literature from the authoritative historical record, both trivial and significant, extending to the mythologizing of Sir William Wallace and according to his memory the position of Scottish legendary hero.
- ii. How might we better understand the justice and morality of the behavior of the belligerents in the war for Scottish independence? The study analyzes ways in which just war theory may be used as a lens to evaluate the battles that comprise the war (*jus in bello*) and the war itself (*jus ad bellum*).
- iii. How might revisiting the struggle of Sir William Wallace for Scottish independence affect the attitudes of Scottish voters regarding the secession of Scotland from the United Kingdom? A referendum on the matter was held in 2014 with 55 percent declining to secede. Given the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union, perhaps stoked by Scottish nationalism, will a second referendum likely yield a different result?

1.5 Delimitations

This research is restricted to the life of Sir William Wallace and his fight for Scottish independence with only relevant reference to other historical figures. The study covers the period from the 1296 invasion of Scotland by Edward I, King of England, to the victory of the Scots over the English army in 1314 at the Battle of Bannockburn.

II. Literature Review

Stories of the conflicts between Scotland and England are meticulously recorded and maintained through the centuries in the archives, but most of these were written by the English. “Anyone writing about Edward I and the Scots faces the problem of a feast of English sources, and a famine of Scottish ones” (Prestwich, 2000, p. 695). If history is written by the winners, we can begin our search for objective reality with that reminder. There are also, however, records of varying veracity that reflect the oral traditions, the mythologies, of a time past. We examine them in this study.

2.1. *Blind Harry (c. 1440-1492)*

Much of what we think we know about Sir William Wallace comes from *The Actes and Deidis of the Illustre and Vallyeant Campioun Schir William Wallace, The Acts and Deeds of the Illustrious and Valiant Champion Sir William Wallace, Knight of Elderslie*, or simply *The Wallace*, attributed to a 15th century writer variously called “Blind Harry,” “Hary,” or “Henry the Minstrel” (McKim, 2003). This is a lengthy poem recounting the life of William Wallace written 172 years after Wallace's death, giving rise to the question of authenticity. Armstrong (1952) has it “on the authority of Blind Harry that the patriot Wallace wore tartan” (p. 194). Blind Harry's Scottish historical romance is preserved in a manuscript dated 1488. Blind Harry's *Wallace* is a historical novel in verse of eleven books and some 12,000 lines based on the events of the Scottish wars of independence, popular legend about Wallace, and earlier romances. “Though Harry claims historicity for his work, he portrays Wallace on a superhuman scale, and many of the hero's astonishing feats actually take place long after the historical capture and execution of Wallace in 1305” (Britannica, 2019, p. 1).

Note, however, on the question of authenticity, that Blind Harry was born two centuries after the exploits of William Wallace, so he is likely repeating stories he heard all his life (McKim, 2003). As an example, after extensive research in the work of more contemporary writers, Armstrong (1952, p. 195) states, “We are therefore forced to conclude that Wallace did *not* wear the tartan.” What we see in the stories of Blind Harry is the stuff of mythology, stories told orally over generations and embellished in each of the tellings. It is the stuff of the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a demigod giant seventeen feet tall, and of the Bible's book of Genesis, with its story of Noah the flood survivor, and of Jonah, swallowed by a great sea creature and spit up to deliver the judgment of Jehovah on the city of Nineveh.

Balaban (1974) notes that one critic (James Moir in 1888) has suggested that the some 11,000 lines of Blind Harry's *Wallace* were written “at a white heat” of “perfidious patriotism produced by the aggressions of the English” (p. 241). Balaban, however, takes issue with such an assessment but concludes that, “*The Wallace* is not only inaccurate but fantastically inaccurate” (p. 242). As perhaps a side note, Balaban finds, “nowhere does the author refer to himself as blind, one-eyed, near-sighted, or otherwise deficient in sight” (p. 243) and concludes that, “*The Wallace* should be regarded as being inspired by a folk-literature tradition” (p. 247), with “a few aspects of *The Wallace* which seem to be the remains of a mythological tradition degenerated into folk narrative and reappearing as deliberate historical romance in *The Wallace*” (p. 248), with Wallace being endowed “with supernatural strength...and the gracious god of Scotland” (p. 249). In any event, Schofield (1920) believes that “Blind Harry” is a pseudonym and that the author of the *Wallace* was neither blind nor a minstrel (p. 12). Rather, Schofield believes, “To all extents and purposes the *Wallace* is an anonymous book” (p. 116), and that the author “was a clever, self-conscious artist who was fond of imitating Chaucer and who aimed at literary display” (p. 126). In closing his review of Schofield's book, Cross (1920) commends Schofield, who had recently died, for his having “never lost sight of the high and holy aim of learning” (p. 55).

2.2. *Sir William Wallace – The Reality*

What do we know that is true about William Wallace, the real man? Actually, we know very little about the young William. Some evidence indicates that he was born “around 1270 either at Elderslie in present-day Renfrewshire or at Ellerslie near Kilmarnock in Ayrshire” (Scotland.org, 2021). He was likely the son of a noble, but not wealthy, Sir Malcolm Wallace, “a knight and small landowner in Renfrew” (Scotland.org). Among the myths that arise from the life of William Wallace is that of Robin Hood (Scotland.org, 2021). As with other myths, this one is highly improbable, as Wallace was born around 1270, while the reign of King John, Robin Hood's nemesis, was 1199-1216 (Holt, 2021). It is, nevertheless, a charming bit of story-telling to imagine a hero of one's own, i.e., Scottish, having the best of a local sheriff, robbing the rich, and giving the spoils to the poor. It does appear in the record, though, “In one of the first acts of rebellion against English domination,” that William Wallace did kill a sheriff, the new Sheriff of Lanark, William Heselrig (Scotland's History, 2021).

2.3. Alexander III (1241-1286)

Scotland had been a fairly stable kingdom under Alexander II (1198-1249), having maintained peace with England and greatly strengthened the Scottish monarchy. When he died, his son became king at age seven. “Alexander left his kingdom independent, united, and prosperous, and his reign was viewed as a golden age by Scots caught up in the long, bloody conflict with England after his death” (Britannica, 2020). Leaving no heir to the throne, Alexander III opened the door to all sorts of ambitious men, not least of whom was Edward I.

2.4. Edward I

Scottish pretenders to the throne could not be reconciled. Edward I, King of England, was thought to be an honest broker. Honest he was not. In the guise of assisting the Scots to choose their new king, Edward seized the opportunity to grab Scotland for himself.

In 1286, when William was a boy, the Scots king Alexander III of Scotland, died. Many claimants to the throne arose, and the Scottish nobles foolishly requested Edward’s arbitration. He cleverly compelled them all to recognise his overlordship of Scotland before pronouncing John Balliol king in 1292 (Scotland.org, 2021, p. 1).

Although Balliol was crowned and did homage to Edward, his rule was subordinated to that of Edward, who held the ultimate power over all matters in Scotland. Edward’s insistence, however, on having the final say in Scottish cases eventually provoked the Scottish nobles to force Balliol to ally with France. In 1296, the alliance gave Edward the excuse to invade and conquer Scotland, taking the Stone of Destiny, on which Scottish kings were crowned, to Westminster. Balliol abdicated, and Edward decided to rule the Scots himself (Scotland.org, 2021, p. 1). It was this sequence of events that drove William Wallace to action. Wallace’s first major act of resistance came when he sacked Lanark in 1297 and killed the new sheriff in the process.

Does one man’s act of homicide, justified or not, merit going to war? This is the question to be answered by historians and dealt with summarily in this study. One answer was offered in 1301 by a panel of Scottish jurists, who found “Edward accused of peace-breaking, perjury, and sacrilegious acts” and other offenses against the church (Tebbit, 2013, p. 47).

2.5. Sir William Wallace – The Historical Fiction

The myth of the brave knight battling the forces of evil in a quest for freedom is persistent. In the canon of English literature, we find this story starting with *Beowulf*. The real life events of Sir William Wallace have given rise to many stories, some more flawed than others, and none have been so flawed as *Braveheart*, the 1995 film directed and co-produced by and starring Mel Gibson. Critics “praised the performances, directing, production values, battle sequences, and musical score, but criticized its historical inaccuracies, especially regarding Wallace’s title, love interests, and attire” (White, 2011). Elizabeth Ewan (1995) describes *Braveheart* as a film that “almost totally sacrifices historical accuracy for epic adventure...The film fails to portray accurately either the period or its people” (p. 1220). The errors in the film may be attributed first to the reliance of the writers on the historically dubious Blind Harry, whose *Wallace* is more orally derived myth than observed witness or contemporaneous records (Anderson, 2004, p. 27), and second to the proclivity of Gibson for action movies such as *Mad Max*, *Patriot*, and *Lethal Weapon*, in which brutal killing is a staple designed to shock rather than instruct. The battle scenes of Gibson’s *Braveheart* are among the bloodiest in modern cinema.

Sidney Dean (2016) takes a different approach, applying the sobriquet “Braveheart” to Wallace rather than to Robert the Bruce and describing him as a man of the wilderness, tall and strong, but also “headstrong, choleric, and violent” (p. 51), and killing “his first Englishman over a public humiliation” (p. 52). Dean also points out that, “Wallace tended to take no male prisoners,” in violation of the law of *jus in bello*, the morally defensible practice in the conduct of war.

The myth of Sir William Wallace has been told through the centuries in prose and in poetry. In 1810, a “Miss Holford” published an epic poem extolling the feats of the mythical freedom fighter. It consisted of 71 verses of iambic meter in five cantos, running over 250 pages in a recent reprint, and concluding with,

His name lives still, cherish’d and shrin’d
In every Scottish patriot’s mind!

2.5.1. The Clothing

The Greek hoplites (as well as Roman legionnaires) wore a garment that resembles what would much later become the kilt of Ireland and Scotland (Struck, 2020). For Mel Gibson the movie maker, facts are sometimes nuisances that get in the way of a good story. Such is the case with his portrayal of William Wallace in *Braveheart*. After all, who can argue with five Oscars? Reinforcing the stereotype of the kilted Scottish warrior is an instance of the triumph of fabrication over fact.

The facts may be found in the authoritative book by H. F. McClintock, *Old Irish and Highland Dress*. Here we encounter misconceptions of place and time. First, as to place, the kilt was worn by men in the highlands. William Wallace was not a highlander. He was likely born in Elderslie in the west central lowlands.

Time is also an issue. Newsome (2016) disproves the notion that the kilt was a form of medieval dress. "...nowhere is there to be found evidence to suggest the wearing of any form of kilt in Scotland in the time period before the 16th century" (p. 5). Wallace won the Battle of Stirling Bridge in 1297 and lost at Falkirk the following year.

Then there is the tartan, the plaid, belted around the body. "Despite what you saw in *Braveheart* the belted plaid was not worn in the 13th and 14th centuries" Newsome (p. 5). Indeed, the first mention of the belted plaid in the literature is found in 1578, in the writing of Bishop Lesley who, writing in Rome, notes such an item, "long and flowing, but capable of being neatly gathered up at pleasure into folds" (p. 6). As to the design, "Clan and families simply did not have any identifying tartans in this early period" (p. 11). Well after the time of Wallace, it is in the 16th century "when we begin to see the earliest type of kilted garment...characteristic of Highland Dress" (p. 12). Armstrong (1952) adds, "The *tradition* of a beplaided Wallace is a persistent one in Scotland, but it cannot be supported by an appeal to the early chroniclers" (p. 195).

2.5.2. The Beardless Painted Faces

The faces of Mel Gibson's Wallace and his soldiers are painted blue, a characteristic of the Picts of the 10th century, not the Scots of the 14th century. Moreover, all extant representations of the men of Wallace's time show beards, while Gibson is shown clean-shaven with only an occasional slight five o'clock shadow.

2.5.3. The Name

The title of the 1995 movie about the life of Sir William Wallace is catchy but historically inaccurate. The "Brave Heart" is a title used to describe Robert the Bruce, not William Wallace. It is also the name given to the disembodied heart of Robert the Bruce.

2.6. *Just War Theory*

In the first chapter of Plato's *Republic* (2019), Thrasymachus claims that "justice is nothing else than the interest of the stronger" (p. 16). While Socrates disputes that argument, the history of conflict offers grim testimony to its truth. Herein, along with Christian doctrine, lies the need to offer some rules, which we now call "just war theory."

In attacking Scotland in 1296, a highly educated Edward I must have been aware of the principles of just war theory articulated by Aristotle (384-322 BCE, Cicero (106-43 BCE; Harrer, 1918)), Augustine, and Aquinas (Lang, O'Driscoll, & Williams, 2013). Perhaps it is typical of those who commit war crimes to claim that their behavior is consistent with those principles, thus giving rise to the need for such institutions as the International Criminal Court (Bosco, 2014) to test those claims, in the same way that the Nuremberg and Tokyo tribunals held senior officials accountable for their behavior leading up to and during World War II.

Here, briefly, we recall the principles of just war theory noted above as it was first recognized by the ancients (Aristotle and Cicero) and expanded and applied to Christian doctrine by Augustine and Aquinas and examine the actions of Edward I and Sir William Wallace from that perspective. We do this analysis in the context primarily of Aquinas's distinction between a sinful war (*peccatum bellum*) and a just war (*bellum justum*), a term that in itself "conveys an affinity with the order of justice...*causa justa*" (Reichberg, 2011, p. 469).

2.6.1 *Jus ad bellum*. Did Edward I have just cause for his invasion of the sovereign kingdom of Scotland in 1296? From the perspective of just war theory, there are arguments on both sides. As to provocation, there were brief skirmishes by the Scots across the border. There was undeniably competent authority, as Edward was the monarch of his nation, England. He also thought he could reliably estimate a high probability of success; although the Battle of Sterling Bridge might at least temporarily raise some doubt; Falkirk removed the doubt. On the other hand, as Broun (1999) reminds, "Edward I mounted four full-scale campaigns to establish his claim to Scotland; he achieved success four times, but failed to extinguish Scottish independence" (p. 490).

Edward's position is weak, as well, when last resort and proportionality are considered. There is little evidence to support the contention that Edward engaged in extended discussion prior to his invasion. And a full-scale invasion in response to minor skirmishes is out of all proportion. Finally, Webster (2000) notes that Edward "grossly overestimated Scotland's readiness to collapse. He showed crass insensitivity to Scottish feelings and by 1297 his effort was in ruins" (p. 125). An objective accounting must conclude that the invasion was, all criteria considered, a violation of just war theory and, therefore, immoral.

2.6.2 *Jus in bello*. Did Edward's conduct during his war with Scotland comply with the criteria of a just war? Using the criteria previously identified, the answer must be a resounding refutation of any claim of moral conduct on his part. Edward's military forces slaughtered non-combatants, including men, women, and children. His campaign exceeded any military necessity required to restore peace, and his forces, unchecked by authority, engaged in barbarous behavior. A fair assessment concludes that Edward violated the rules of the conduct of war as summarized in just war theory.

2.6.3 *Jus post bellum*. Did Edward restore antebellum peace to Scotland, as required by just war theory? Did he show mercy to the vanquished? There was no effort to restore peace to a nation that had been at peace prior to the invasion. And just war theory specifically rejects cruelty and revenge against a defeated enemy. The grisly manner in which Edward treated the captured William Wallace leads to no other conclusion than that the victor flouted every rule of humanity. Edward I showed no mercy to the vanquished and, therefore, violated the well-established rule of the end of war, *jus post bellum*.

III. CONCLUSION

The objectives of the study were achieved by comparing and contrasting the historical record and the fictional representation of William Wallace, by drawing conclusions about the impact of the Wallace legacy, and by evaluating the decisions of those fighting for and against the independence of Scotland. There is sufficient evidence to indict Edward I on the legal charge of invasion of the sovereign nation of Scotland and to hold him morally accountable for violating the just war doctrine, which he must have known, of Cicero, Augustine, and Aquinas.

A consensus of scholars finds that much of what we think we know about Sir William Wallace is myth drawn from the accounts of Blind Harry and taken to be historically true. Even so, many Scottish people hold Wallace to be symbolic of their aspiration for independence, or as Mel Gibson screams in *Braveheart*, freedom!

Those who may be asked to vote on the matter of Scotland's independence from the United Kingdom may find this study helpful in forming their decision in a second referendum.

IV. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author acknowledges the assistance, suggestions, and encouragement of the members of the Society of William Wallace and of Professor Fiona Watson of the Centre for History of the University of the Highlands and Islands, Inverness, Scotland. Danna Vance Raupp, Gori State Teaching University, painstakingly edited the manuscript. Errors in form and substance are the author's.

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