

# William Wallace: Scotland's National Hero [B2]

Oltre 700 anni fa, William Wallace divenne uno degli eroi più coraggiosi e amati della storia scozzese. Nato in un ambiente modesto, si fece protagonista della sanguinosa lotta per l'indipendenza del Paese.

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William Wallace was one of Scotland's greatest national heroes. He inspired his **countrymen** in their fight for freedom against England in the First War of Scottish Independence at the end of the 13th century. His brutal execution at the hands of England's king, Edward I, made him a martyr, and his importance in Scottish history has only grown in the seven centuries since his death.

## UNCERTAIN ORIGINS

Little is known about Wallace's early years. He was born around 1270, probably near Paisley, Renfrew, and his father may have been a minor **landowner** called Sir Malcolm Wallace. His family roots were possibly Welsh or even Norman French. The 13th century was a period of relative calm between England and Scotland, after tempestuous times. The situation in Scotland became confused, however, when King Alexander III died after falling from his horse in 1286. No less than thirteen people **claimed** the Scottish throne, so the nobility asked Edward I to arbitrate. The English king **appointed** John Balliol, as he believed him easy **to keep in check**. However, when Edward began behaving like a feudal **overlord**, the Scottish nobles and **men of rank**, including Wallace, finally rebelled. This initial rebellion in 1296 was quickly **crushed** by Edward's forces. However, the First War of Scottish Independence did not end there.

## THE WAR CONTINUES

At first, Edward I humiliated the Scots. He introduced English laws and punitive taxes, and forced nobles and **men of rank to pledge allegiance** to him. Wallace refused, which made him an **outlaw**. The Scots rebelled again,

but were defeated again. Wallace, though, refused to surrender. Edward then sent an enormous army north to attack Wallace and his followers. On 11 September 1297, the English army began to cross a narrow bridge over the Forth River near Stirling. Hugely **outnumbered**, Wallace waited until half the army had crossed and then attacked, killing thousands of English soldiers. He gave Scotland its first victory against the English for centuries. Legend says that Wallace used the skin of one much-hated English **knight** as a **sheath** for his sword.

## GUARDING SCOTLAND

Wallace was **knighted** (by one of three Scottish **earls**: Carrick [also known as Robert the Bruce], Strathearn or Lennox) and made Guardian of the Kingdom of Scotland. The nobles were divided, however, some **distrusting** Wallace's **humble** origins and worrying about their lands. Angry and humiliated, Edward himself came north in 1298, with 2,500 mounted **knight**s, 12,500 infantry and hundreds of archers. Edward met Wallace's much smaller forces at Falkirk and in the massacre that followed, Wallace lost one third of his men.

## A HERO IN DEATH

Wallace spent the next seven years as a guerrilla warrior. In 1304, most nobles submitted to Edward. One year later, Wallace was **betrayed** and arrested and sent to London for trial. Accused of **treachery**, he famously said that he had never **sworn** allegiance to the king. Condemned to death, he was **stripped naked, dragged** six miles behind two horses, hanged until nearly dead, and then taken down to have his genitals cut off, and his internal organs removed and burnt in front of his eyes. He was then **beheaded** and **quartered**. However, this undignified death only turned Wallace into a hero. The Scots rebelled again in 1306 and finally, after years of fighting, gained independence in 1328. Wallace had shown them the way. By his victory in 1297 against the army of the most feared monarch in Europe, Wallace had proved to his **countrymen** "that in life one is defeated only if one admits defeat."

We come here with no peaceful intent, but ready for battle,  
determined to avenge ourwrongs and set our country free.

## A SCOTTISH LEGEND

In 1956, a plaque was unveiled on a wall of St. Bartholomew's Hospital near the site of Wallace's execution at Smithfield. It included, in Latin, the words "I tell you the truth: Freedom is what is best. Son, never live your life like a slave." The plaque continued, in Gaelic, "Death and Victory", an old Scottish battle cry. Almost ninety years before, the enormous Wallace Monument had been erected close to the site of his famous victory at Stirling Bridge. The monument contained, in theory, the famous 'Wallace sword'. Wallace had died more than five hundred years earlier, but his character, courage and brutal death had quickly made him into a legend and the figurehead of Scottish resistance to the English. Yet for the English, he was an outlaw and murderer, a perpetrator of atrocities and a traitor. Much of Wallace's legendary status came from a romanticised biographical poem called The Wallace, written in the 1470s by a wandering minstrel known as Blind Harry. It depicts Wallace, in Old Scots, as a superhuman patriot: "Wallace his way through them did cut so clean/As if he had more than a mortal been." The Wallace has never been out of print and is the second bestselling book of all time in Scotland, beaten only by the Bible. Robert Burns, Scotland's favourite poet, cites the poem as the greatest influence on his own sense of national pride. The famous Scottish writer Sir Walter Scott included "The Story of Sir William Wallace" in his Tales of a Grandfather. Wallace also lived on in English literature, especially poetry. In 1720, Alexander Pope wrote that "the Scots will fight for Wallace as for God." And in 1814, William Wordsworth wrote that "Wallace left his name, like a wild flower, all over his dear country."

## BRAVEHEART?

William Wallace's legendary status convinced the actor and director Mel Gibson that the Scotsman's life was a story worth telling on the big screen. Braveheart (1995), Gibson's version of the Scotsman's life, would, in fact, become a global blockbuster, making Wallace famous around the world.

Membership of the nationalist Scottish National Party jumped dramatically after the film, and people at football matches painted their faces blue as in Gibson's movie. However, Mel Gibson's epic (Oscars for Best Picture and Best Director) is now famous as one of the most inaccurate historical movies of all time. Wallace was shown as a poor villager, whereas in reality he was a **landowner** and minor **knight**. His love interest, Queen Isabella, would have been just two at the time. The kilt was not actually invented for another three hundred years. And Robert the Bruce, who finally defeated the English, certainly did not betray Wallace. The film's battle scenes were widely **praised**, but Gibson actually recreated the Battle of Bannockburn of 1314, which ultimately pushed Scotland towards independence. And, finally, the title 'Braveheart' actually belonged to King Robert I (the Bruce), the victor at Bannockburn! A true case of 'artistic licence'...

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# Glossary

- **crushed** = reprimere
- **outlaw** = fuorilegge
- **betrayed** = tradire
- **quartered** = squartare
- **worth** = degna di
- **countrymen** = compatrioti
- **to keep in check** = tenere sotto controllo
- **sworn** = giurare
- **dragged** = trascinare
- **Old Scots** = scozzese antico
- **blockbuster** = successo al botteghino
- **overlord** = padrone, signore supremo
- **outnumbered** = superare in numero
- **wrongs** = ingiustizie
- **men of rank** = uomini di rango
- **earls** = conti
- **praised** = elogiare, lodare
- **sheath** = fodero
- **out of print** = fuori catalogo
- **claimed** = reclamare
- **to pledge allegiance** = giurare fedeltà
- **treachery** = tradimento
- **figurehead** = figura di spicco
- **wandering** = errante, ambulante
- **landowner** = proprietario terreno
- **humble** = umili
- **stripped naked** = denudare
- **beheaded** = decapitare
- **unveiled** = svelare
- **appointed** = nominare
- **distrusting** = diffidare
- **knight** = cavaliere
- **minstrel** = menestrello