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Film Review: Braveheart

Directed by Mel Gibson, 1995

Braveheart is a film depicting William Wallace as a man who becomes a reluctant hero. He wants only peace; to have a family and land to provide for them. But with the death of his one love he swears revenge on the English that have destroyed his home land and his way of life. He battles not only the English, but the self-serving Scottish nobles. After gaining knighthood for his triumphant battle at Stirling; he is betrayed by the Scottish nobles at his defeat in Falkirk. On the run he continues his request to free Scotland from England, only to be betrayed by those he believes will help him in his fight for Scottish freedom. Tried as a traitor to the English crown he is found guilty and tortured before being put to death. He becomes a hero and martyr to the Scottish cause, his strength and memory lead a nation to their eventual freedom.

To understand the actions of William Wallace, we can look back on the history of Scotland at the time of his birth around 1272. Scotland was both prosperous and peaceful, ruled by King Alexander III, from 1249, until his death in 1286. Scotland's trade during his time increased, new funding allowed for building, education, an increase of law and order and general wellbeing improvement of its citizens. He was married to Margaret, the daughter of the English King Henry III, thus securing peace with England during his reign. He out lived his son and daughter, and his first wife Margaret. He had recently remarried and had no children to inherit the throne at the time of his death due, to a riding accident in 1286. This left his young granddaughter, Margaret at age 6, as heir to the throne. Scotland leadership appointed six regency guardians to govern and protect Scotland for the young queen. Meanwhile Edward I, king of England was petitioning Pope Nicholas IV, to allow the marriage of his son Edward II,

then 5, to the young Queen Margaret to secure his quest for Scotland. A Treaty of Birgham was signed on, July 18th, 1290, by the guardian stating the conditions of Scotland's independence from England. The treaty stated they were able to manage their affairs with Scot's customs, to have no taxation issued but for the Scottish crown, church matters were to be governed by Scot's only, and no parliament was to be held outside Scotland regarding their affairs. The agreement was endorsed by King Edward I, but with an added clause that Scotland could be free and separate, "saving the rights of the King of England" (Source: Scott, pg. 21) On Margaret's trip from Norway to Scotland she became ill and died, leaving secession open to many claims. (Source: Scott, Pg.15-21) The strongest of these was Robert de Brus and John Bailleul (Balliol), both were descendants of King David I youngest son, David Earl of Huntingdon, having lands in England and Scotland, they had fought in King Edward army and both would go to Scottish auditors with their right to the Scottish throne. The auditors being of King Edward choosing, elected John Balliol as the King of Scotland, due to his weak nature; he would be noted as Toom Tabard (Empty Coat) by his country. Balliol would later form an alliance with France to invade England. In 1296, after a defeat in Dunbar by King Edward, supported by Robert Bruce, King John renounced his crown and was sentenced to imprisonment in the Tower of London, later to die in 1313. Edward continued his conquest of Scotland and in 1296, compelled Scottish nobles to sign the "Ragman Roll" recognizing him as king of Scotland. (Source: Maclean, pgs. 33-36)

During this time William Wallace, reputed son of a knight, along with Andrew Moray, son of a wealthy landowner, in 1297, lead outlaw revolts against the English. William was married to a woman in Lanark, stories varied by historians the actual accounting, but her death at the hands of the Sheriff enraged Wallace to revenge. He sacked Lanark, killing the Sheriff and continued attacks while gaining support from discouraged men. He advanced to Dunbar where his men were to meet up with an English Force at Stirling Bridge, in September 1297.

Stirling Bridge was a crossing over the Fourth River near the Abby Crag, below the north end of the bridge was a marshy area. On the Crag awaited the Scottish army of Wallace and Moray of about 36 horseman and 8,000 infantry, on the other side was the English 200-300 Cavalry and 10,000 infantry. Scot's noblemen, James Stewart and the Earl of Lennox sat on the outskirts with their cavalry waiting to determine their engagement. When seeing the numbers of English troops Stewart, Lennox and two Dominican Friars were sent as envoys to negotiate surrender. However Stewart and the Earl of Lennox were turned down by Wallace and Moray saying, "Tell your commanders, that we are not here to make peace but to do battle to defend ourselves and liberate our kingdom..." (Source: Scott pg. 46) The next day the infantry was sent over the bridge to engage the Scot's, however they were later recalled as the Earl of Surrey had over slept and was not there to lead them. Hugh de Cressingham, viceroy of Scotland, impatience sent his cavalry two by two across the bridge. Wallace and Moray taking advantage, waited until approximately 200 men had crossed to send their army to engage. The heavy laden horses and knights became bogged down in the marshes, the Scots cut down the bridge stopping more cavalry from engaging in battle. The infantry under the Earl of Surrey never crossed the river seeing the massacre that was happening, they retreated; the Scottish Earl of Lennox and James Stewart attacked the remaining forces and baggage train. This was a great victory for the Scottish, however Moray was mortally wounded. Wallace would become famous as both the common man and landowners would flock to him. He awarded a knighthood by Robert Bruce and became soul guardian of the kingdom. (Sources: www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Scotlandshistorywarsofindependence/battleofstirlingbridge, also Scott pgs. 45-47)

Wallace last great battle was at Falkirk in July of 1298, against King Edward himself leading his troops. Wallace was greatly outnumbered by the English, with Edwards 2,250 cavalry and nearly 13,000 infantry against Wallace's 500 cavalry and 9,500 infantry. Wallace placed four schiltrons (a long speared armed formation of infantry working as one unit) with his archers in between. When the English cavalry

attacked the schiltrons held their ground, it was not until Edwards released his archers with arrow penetrated longbow and crossbow that the schiltrons began to disband with the wounded falling away, the cavalry was then able to mount an attack. Edward took Falkirk and Stirling Castle and with the devastating loss, Wallace gave up his title as guardian of the kingdom. Robert the Bruce replaced him as guardian of the kingdom along with John Balliol nephew, John Comyn. (Sources: Nardo pgs. 40-45)

After the defeat of Falkirk, Wallace would for the next seven years lead small attacks against the English with outlawed men. Wallace would travel to France, Norway, and Italy arguing for the Scottish cause, meeting with local leaders, only to return to Scotland without others support. (Nardo)

Fighting among the nobles of Scotland continued and an attempt of a truce with England failed in 1299. Robert Bruce after surrender of his guardianship began to build up his forces in Carrick to fight against King Edward. Meanwhile in 1301, papal bull had over turned Edwards claim to the Scottish crown in favor of the Scot's King John, who was still in prison in London Tower, later to be released. Rumored threat was spread that King John would return Scotland with backing the French army. This news to Robert Bruce of King Johns return meant all he had, and was trying to gain for himself would be at risk. The return of King John for King Edward I was a threat to his quest for Scotland and a possible excommunication by the Pope. In 1302, an understanding was made between Edward and Bruce. Bruce would submit to King Edward in homage and Edward would name Bruce King of Scotland. (Source: Scott pgs. 57-61).

As Scot's nobles began to move to King Edwards side, Wallace, returned from Europe attacked the English in Pebbles 1304, and at the Bridge of Earn. In August 1305, Wallace was betrayed and captured in Glasgow and taken to London for trial. He admitted to his attacks against the English but the charge of treason, he denied as he has never sworn allegiance with the King of England. After the trial he was found guilty of treason and was tortured before his death. (sources: Nardo, Scott and Maclean)

Ironically the Scottish nobles had numerous times sworn allegiance to King Edward only to denounce him, fight against him, to then turn around and swear a truce in order to keep their lands and their life. Wallace however was sentenced to death for treason against the King and England. Wallace however became a national hero and martyr instead of the example Edward wanted him to be. Many stories and tales were written of him, yet his history is found only in the history of other great men and of Scotland itself.

Robert Bruce would denounce his truce with King Edward after killing his rival John Comyn for the crown, Bruce would now be next in line for the Scottish Crown. In 1306, he crowned himself King of the Scots. By 1307, King Edward I had died and his son Edward II took up the fight for Scotland. It was not until 1314, that Edward II after papal influence and the defeat at Bannockburn recognized Bruce's claim to the Scottish Crown.

In the history of civilization there have been numerous treaties' between countries that have had great or little impact. It is a marvel that the first noted treaty between countries was between Egypt and the Hittites in 1259 BC, and was labeled as "Eternal Treaty". Treaties suit those who sign them at the time they are signed only to be renounced once views or situations change. The Scottish and English numerous treaties were signed and renounced countless times in its war for independence. Alliances are formed and then cast aside. History will continue to repeat itself as men have agendas of their own.

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