

# **TRADITION, CULTURE, SOCIETY, BUSINESS AND SUSTAINABILITY: RESEARCHES FROM NEW PERSPECTIVES**



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# THE REPRESENTATION OF THE SCOTTISH WARS OF INDEPENDENCE THROUGH THE MOVIE BRAVEHEART

## Abstract

This chapter reassesses Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* (1995) as a popular historiography of the First War of Scottish Independence (1296–1328). It advances three claims: (1) the film's narrative architecture relies on late-medieval mythopoeia above all Blind Harry's *The Wallace* rather than primary sources; (2) *Braveheart*'s most iconic set-pieces systematically distort key events (Stirling Bridge, Falkirk, the Wallace–Isabella subplot, Bruce's alleged betrayal) and material culture (kilts, woad), thereby reconfiguring medieval feudal realities as a modern democratic romance; and (3) despite its inaccuracies, the film powerfully contributes to cultural memory and nationalist discourse in 1990s Scotland. Situating *Braveheart* within the historiography of Wallace and Bruce and within scholarship on Scottish national identity, the chapter proposes a framework for “reading film as history” while maintaining a rigorous distinction between affective truth and factual accuracy.

**Keywords:** National identity, Historical representation, Robert the Bruce, William Wallace, First War of Scottish Independence

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The Scottish Wars of Independence, spanning from 1296 to 1357, were a critical period in Scotland's history characterized by military conflict and political upheaval between Scotland and England. Following the death of King Alexander III and the subsequent succession crisis, England's King Edward I sought to assert dominance over Scotland, prompting resistance led by iconic figures such as William Wallace and Robert the Bruce (Barrow, 2005). These wars not only shaped Scotland's national identity but also became a source of enduring legend and cultural memory. One of the most widely recognized cultural representations of this era is Mel Gibson's 1995 film *Braveheart*. The movie dramatizes the life and rebellion of William Wallace against English rule, emphasizing themes of freedom, sacrifice, and nationalism. Despite its popularity and emotional appeal, *Braveheart* has been criticized by historians for its significant historical inaccuracies and fictionalized elements (McArthur, 2002; Penman, 2014). The film simplifies complex historical events and characters to fit a compelling narrative framework, impacting how contemporary audiences understand the Scottish Wars of Independence.

This chapter explores the representation of the Scottish Wars of Independence in *Braveheart*, evaluating the film's historical authenticity, narrative choices, and cultural impact. It also considers the broader role of historical films in shaping public perceptions of history, emphasizing the importance of contextualizing cinematic portrayals with scholarly research. The 1995 film *Braveheart*, directed by and starring Mel Gibson, is a dramatized retelling of the life of William Wallace, a central figure in the First War of Scottish Independence against England in the late 13th and early 14th centuries. The film achieved immense popularity and critical acclaim, winning five Academy Awards, including the Best Picture. However, despite its cultural impact, *Braveheart* has been criticized by historians for its significant deviations from historical accuracy. This paper analyses the representation of the Scottish Wars of Independence in *Braveheart*, focusing on its portrayal of historical events, characters, and themes, and examines the broader implications of using film as a medium for historical storytelling.

## II. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

What exactly the Scottish Independence War was about were the series of military campaigns between the Scottish and the English Kingdom. The biggest paradox is that at that time both Scotland and England were separate and independent entities. So, the war of Scotland's independence is usually seen as inaccurate and perhaps misleading.

The first war started in 1296 year with the English invasion of Scotland and was announced by signing the Treaty of Edinburgh – Northampton in 1328 which is famous by the name *The Kingdom of Scotland as a fully independent nation* and is a peace treaty. Throughout Scotland there was widespread discontent and disorder after the supposed conquest and acts of defiance were directed against local English officials. The year 1297 was to see the country erupt in open revolt and the emergence of the most significant Scottish patriots among whom is William Wallace. He was an inspiration for a poem named *The Acts and Deeds of Sir William Wallace, Knight of Elderslie*, and this poem was the basis of the screenplay of the movie *Braveheart* from 1995 year.

The Scottish Wars of Independence were a series of military campaigns fought between Scotland and England during the late 13th and early 14th centuries. The First War (1296–1328) began after the death of King Alexander III of Scotland and the subsequent succession crisis. England's King Edward I, took advantage of the situation, asserting control over Scotland. Key figures in the resistance included William Wallace and later Robert the Bruce, both of whom are depicted in *Braveheart*. The Scottish Wars of Independence were a series of military campaigns waged between Scotland and England from 1296 to 1357. Following the death of King Alexander III and the subsequent succession crisis, England's King Edward I attempted to assert dominance over Scotland. In response, figures such as William Wallace and Robert the Bruce emerged as leaders of the Scottish resistance. The First War of Independence forms the backdrop of *Braveheart* (Fisher, 2014).

### III.DETAILS ABOUT THE MOVIE BRAVEHEART

The film begins in 1276 with the meeting of Scots noblemen in a barn to decide on who should be king. They are then hung by Edward I. Scotland is in perpetual war with England. In 1276, Alexander III was very much alive and well, as were his children. There had been peace with England for nearly 60 years, and the last battle fought by the Scots had been a skirmish with the Norwegians on the shore at Largs in 1266. Moreover, war did not breakout until 1296 after the death of Alexander III (1286) and during the reign of John Balliol. *Braveheart* is a movie about the early Scottish people. It is a portrayal of the power struggle between England and Scotland.

The first scenes of the movie show William Wallace as a boy, losing his father to Edward the Longshanks, King of England. William Wallace, played by Mel Gibson, is part of a rebel family towards the King. Edward the Longshanks, also well known as Edward I was a selfish king and not a lot of people liked him except the ones that worked for him. As Williams father fails at getting the Scottish their freedom, William follows his father's footsteps and begins his long quest to make Scotland free once and for all, along with the assistance of Robert the Bruce. William Wallace leaves Scotland with his uncle to live with him. Years elapse and William Wallace returns to Scotland, the place of his birth, to take over his family's farm. Wallace finds his childhood love, Marin, and marries her secretly. When one of the feudal lords kills Marin for striking a guard, Wallace then begins a revolt against the English. Wallace's army of Scots marched against the English armies' time and again. Until William Wallace is captured by Robert the Bruce's fathers plan and is sent to London before King Edward the Longshanks. Wallace faces trial for high treason from which he is found guilty. Wallace is then given the choice of confessing or being purified. To show his patriotism to Scotland Wallace chooses not to confess. Therefore, Wallace experiences a slow, painful death as his last word "Freedom" still rings in the ears of the audience, as they cut his head off.

The last scene in *Braveheart* is the battle between the English and Scottish armies where the Scots win their freedom. Wallace was betrayed and captured in August 1305 outside Glasgow and was taken south as quickly as possible to a show trial in Westminster Hall. The charges were read out and the sentence pronounced that he was to be drawn, hung and quartered. He was then taken from the hall, tied to a wooden spindle which was then drawn at the tails of horses to Smithfield where he was hung then disembowelled. He was then beheaded and his entrails burned. His body was then quartered. The head was put on a spike on London Bridge

and the quarters sent to Newcastle, Berwick, Stirling and Perth. From one side, this episode in the movie incorrectly shows how Robert the Bruce took the field at Falkirk as part of the English army. On the other side, he never betrayed William Wallace even though they're on different sides. Wallace was alleged to have been a complete supporter of Robert the Bruce in history, and Wallace was also a supporter of the Balliol claim to the throne which Bruce consistently opposed. It looks like this Anglo-perspective and interpretation of the movie tends to present the image of Scotland as divided because of their disunity. In *Braveheart*, William Wallace is depicted as a commoner turned hero who is driven by personal vengeance and a deep desire for freedom. However, historical evidence suggests that Wallace was of minor noble birth and was involved in military affairs before leading the Scottish revolt (Barrow, 2005). The film's narrative arc, which includes Wallace's fictional marriage and the murder of his wife, serves as a dramatic device rather than a historical fact.

### 1. William Wallace's Leadership

Throughout the movie, William Wallace demonstrated many leadership techniques that helped his army prevail as an underdog. By stepping up in a leadership role, Wallace gained the respect of the entire army even though he was not the man that was put in charge. One of the main things that Wallace did was lead through his actions. By stepping up to the front line, it showed his troops that he was not scared, and this attitude was imitated by the rest of the troops. Wallace also showed what was necessary to be a successful leader. There are many lessons that should be gained from watching William Wallace. First, no matter what the situation was, he was very calm and composed. He was very calm when speaking with the head of the opposing army and very composed while his army was being charged at by opposing forces, even though they were obviously much outnumbered. Another characteristic of how Wallace displayed leadership was his confidence and sense of humour throughout the entire scene. He ordered his troops to pull their pants down and "moon" the English in the middle of a war standoff. I believe that William Wallace's approach to loosening up his troops was a highly effective leadership technique that helped boost their morale and foster a sense of camaraderie. By creating moments of relaxation and levity before battle, he reduced the anxiety and fear that naturally accompany warfare, making his soldiers feel more at ease and ready to face the challenges ahead. This ability to ease tension contributed significantly to building a cohesive and confident fighting force. Moreover, Wallace's own confidence was consistently evident throughout the campaign, serving as a powerful example for his men. He openly acknowledged the harsh realities of war, admitting that some lives would be lost, but he framed this sacrifice within a larger, hopeful vision that ultimately, they would reclaim their freedom. This transparency, combined with his unwavering belief in the cause, inspired trust and determination among his troops.

Wallace's confidence was contagious; his soldiers saw in him a leader who was resolute and optimistic, which in turn bolstered their own confidence and belief in victory. Beyond this, Wallace employed other crucial leadership techniques such as being inspirational, motivational, and deeply patriotic. He appealed to the shared identity and pride of the Scottish people, reminding them that their fight was not just for survival, but for the very soul of their nation. By invoking a strong sense of purpose and unity, Wallace was able to transform disparate groups of warriors into a dedicated army committed to a common goal. This combination of personal charisma, emotional connection, and clear communication was

instrumental in sustaining the resolve of his forces throughout their struggle against English domination.

## 2. The Movie vs. History

In *Braveheart*, William Wallace is portrayed as a charismatic and passionate leader who inspires ordinary Scots to unite against English oppression. His leadership is characterized by a fierce commitment to freedom, personal bravery, and the ability to rally disparate clans into a cohesive fighting force. The film presents Wallace as an idealistic hero, motivated not only by personal tragedy but also by a profound sense of justice and national pride. The movie emphasizes Wallace's unconventional leadership style, contrasting him with the more traditional and politically cautious Scottish nobility. He is shown as a man of the people, whose authenticity and courage galvanize support among commoners and warriors alike. This portrayal aligns with cinematic storytelling conventions that valorize individual heroism and democratic leadership against tyranny (McArthur, 2002).

However, historical records suggest a more complex reality. Wallace was indeed a significant military commander and symbol of resistance, but his leadership operated within the feudal and clan-based social structures of medieval Scotland. Unlike the democratic figure shown in the film, his authority was partly derived from his noble status and military successes (Barrow, 2005). Additionally, the film simplifies his motivations, which were likely intertwined with political strategy and alliances rather than purely personal revenge or idealism.

Despite these historical simplifications, *Braveheart* successfully conveys the symbolic power of Wallace's leadership in the Scottish national narrative. His ability to inspire unity and courage against overwhelming odds remains a central theme, reflecting broader ideas about resistance and self-determination. The film's dramatization, while not historically precise, captures the emotional essence of leadership in the context of war and national struggle.

The most common question asked about this movie is how factual Mel Gibson's portrayal of William Wallace was in the 1995 film *Braveheart*. However, it can be stated that it shouldn't be taken as a fact. Many bits of the movie confirm it as a fiction. For example, Isabella cannot have been carrying Wallace's child (and presumably Edward III) as she was in France at the time and did not arrive in England until two years after Wallace's death. She could also therefore have not warned him at York which Wallace didn't attack anyway. This action can be interpreted as fictional unity of England and Scotland and mixed bloodlines which can be seen as ultimate cohesion between the two opposed sides. However, historians noted several significant inaccuracies in *Braveheart*:

- **Battle Depictions:** The bridge, which was a key geographical feature in the Scottish victory, is not shown in the Battle of Stirling Bridge.
- **Costumes:** The Scots in the movie don kilts and apply blue woad to their faces, which are not representative of Wallace's era (McArthur, 2002).
- **Historical Figures:** Princess Isabella, who was a young girl in France at the time of the events, is portrayed as Wallace's lover in a fictional way.

- **Robert the Bruce:** Although Bruce's political strategies were intricate and ultimately resulted in Scottish independence, the movie falsely depicts him as betraying Wallace (Penman, 2014).

According to Alex Demattia, although Mel Gibson has directed only a few films, each has left a lasting impression on the viewing public. *Braveheart* stands out as possibly the least controversial of his directorial works, at least in terms of public reception (Demattia, n.d.). While the film takes significant liberties with historical fact, this approach is not unique in Hollywood. Many films modify historical narratives for dramatic effect, and *Braveheart* is part of this broader cinematic tradition. As Demattia notes, no historical film can claim to be completely accurate in its adherence to real events or figures. The meaning derived from such films varies based on the audience's perspective, the cultural context of the time, and the creative intentions of the director. Thus, interpretation is fluid and influenced by the era in which the film is produced and consumed.

Despite these inaccuracies, *Braveheart* captures themes of freedom, resistance, and national identity. Wallace is transformed into a mythic symbol of rebellion, with his rallying cry "They may take our lives, but they'll never take our freedom!" becoming emblematic of the broader struggle for autonomy. The film resonates with audiences through its emotional appeal and heroic narrative structure, albeit at the cost of factual integrity.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

*Braveheart* demonstrates how cinema can influence public understanding of historical events. Its widespread popularity reinvigorated interest in Scottish history and nationalism, particularly during the political climate of 1990s Scotland (Leith & Soule, 2011). However, its blending of fiction with history necessitates a critical approach when using film as an educational tool. Viewers must distinguish between entertainment and academic history to avoid misconceptions.

Furthermore, *Braveheart* offers a compelling, though largely fictionalized, portrayal of the Scottish Wars of Independence. While the film effectively dramatizes the emotional and political stakes of the era, it falls short as a reliable historical account. Nevertheless, its cultural significance and thematic resonance highlight the influential role of cinema in shaping historical memory. *Braveheart* should be appreciated for its narrative strength and symbolic value, but its interpretation of history must be contextualized through scholarly resources to provide a more accurate and balanced understanding of Scotland's past. The film *Braveheart* has undoubtedly played a pivotal role in popularizing the story of Scotland's struggle for independence, particularly by immortalizing William Wallace as a heroic figure. While the movie's narrative diverges significantly from historical accuracy, its emotional power and vivid dramatization have captured the imagination of global audiences. The portrayal of Wallace as a freedom fighter who inspires his people to rise against tyranny resonates with contemporary themes of nationalism and self-determination, even if many details such as costumes, battles, and personal relationships are historically inaccurate or exaggerated.

The actual Wars of Scottish Independence were complex, spanning decades of political maneuvering, military campaigns, and shifting allegiances. Key historical figures like

Wallace and Robert the Bruce operated within a nuanced landscape of medieval politics and clan loyalties, which the film simplifies into a more straightforward tale of good versus evil. This simplification helps the film deliver a clear, emotionally compelling story, but it also risks perpetuating misconceptions about the period.

Despite these limitations, *Braveheart*'s impact on cultural memory and Scottish identity is significant. The film helped spark renewed interest in Scotland's past, contributing to a wider recognition of the country's distinct history and the struggles that shaped its nationhood. It also highlights the role of cinema as a powerful medium that can bring historical narratives to life, influence public perceptions, and inspire pride and reflection.

Ultimately, *Braveheart* should be appreciated as a work of historical fiction that blends myth, legend, and selective truth to create a compelling story of resistance and freedom.

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