

How important was the part played by William Wallace in the wars of independence between 1297 and 1305?

Introduction

After the defeat of the Scottish during the war of 1296 and Edward I's subsequent reinforcing of English dominance within the realm, resentment of English rule once again began to build within the Scottish people. It is here with the surprise murder of the Sheriff of Lanark that the famed William Wallace would first appear within History, building his group of supporters from around 100 peasants to an army in the thousands within only a short period of 4 months (with the help of prominent nobles such as Richard Lundie and Andrew Moray. A mysterious man in history, Wallace is believed to be of lesser nobility with his father Alan Wallace (most likely the same Alan Wallace who signed his name to the Ragman Roll) owning a small piece of land within Ayrshire, explaining as to how a man whom up until the resistance did not appear to be of any importance was able to become such a strategic and diplomatic genius, with Wallace even being Knighted by the Community of the realm and made Guardian of Scotland after his great military successes. With this information, it is clear that Wallace was clearly a prominent figure within the Scottish Rebellion, with Fisher commenting:

"Our knowledge of Wallace is limited, but such reliable evidence as we have points to a quite exceptional figure whose reputation is secure without the need for invention."¹ While the traditional view of Wallace that is backed by historians such as Fisher is certainly

¹ Andrew Fisher, Wallace, Sir William (d.1305), patriot and Guardian of Scotland, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004

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grounded and backed with evidence, with other historians such as Barrell stating that “William Wallace has rightly become a folk-hero”² There has recently been a rise in debate over whether or not the actions and praise credited to William Wallace is truly his to have. What adds credence to this is the fact that when Wallace is on his own and not with such high ranking nobles, he has a visible increase in difficulties when attempting to resist English control. This running debate has led to the question of if Wallace’s involvement within Scottish resistance toward Edward I was as significant as what was once believed.

For the purpose of simplicity, this dissertation will be split into the three areas that best show the importance played by William Wallace within the wars of independence, namely being his emergence as resistance fighter towards English control, the military operations conducted by William Wallace and the decisions made by Wallace during his time as the Guardian of Scotland. Overall, the evidence suggests that William Wallace played a very significant role within Scottish resistance towards the English during the first war of independence and that he deserves the reputation that he has earned.

² ADM Barrell, *Medieval Scotland*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000

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How important was William Wallace's emergence as a resistance leader to the first wars of independence?

To modern knowledge, Wallace is first known to emerge as a resistance fighter against the English with the murder of William Heselrig, the Sheriff of Lanark alongside co-organiser Richard of Lundie (who would later go on to join the English during the capitulation of Irving) . The action was conducted on the 3rd of May 1297 and according to the writing from Sir Thomas Grey's writing in the Scalacronica, the event was brutally and efficiently planned out and was executed accordingly.³ This is important as the attack from the resistance fighter clearly sent a message to the English government in charge of Scotland as well as allowing other Scottish nationalists to rise against English control, with most resistance to English occupation occurring after the rise of Wallace. This is because the date of the attack was on the day that Heselrig planned on holding an assize in order to symbolise English Authority, meaning that the murder of a powerful English representative during a day set to show English Dominance could effectively been transformed into a representation of Scottish resistance. This is backed by Fisher who suggests that: "An attempt on an English official on such an occasion was therefore an act of great and symbolic importance."⁴ During said event, William Wallace was effectively able to increase his number of supporters from a mere 30 men to around an estimated 100 people⁵, meaning that while there is evidence to suggest that some similar events had been happening within Scotland (such as

³ Sir Thomas Grey, Scalachronica, 1363

⁴ Andrew Fisher, Wallace, Sir William (d.1305), patriot and Guardian of Scotland, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004

⁵ Andrew Fisher, Wallace, Sir William(d.1305), patriot and Guardian of Scotland, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004

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Andrew Moray's proclamation of defiance to English rule at an unknown point in Early May) the murder of such an important figure in the administration of Scotland had resulted in said event possibly being viewed as more significant under the English authority.

Furthermore, Wallace's emergence as a resistance leader is made further impactful by his presence alongside the Scottish Noble Richard of Lundie who would almost certainly have been of a higher feudal class than William Wallace, suggesting that Wallace had some characteristics that made Richard of Lundie view him as an equal.

This presence is made evident in evidence gathered from the Schoyen chronicle by Professor Dauvit Broun. In his gathered information, he revealed that the chronicle did indeed name both Wallace and Lundie as the co-leaders of the operation.⁶ This suggests that there was at least an equal level of importance between the leaders for the event. However, it must be stated that the presence of a noble could be what truly allowed the event to be as impactful as what it truly was, such as the argument suggested by Broun who states "although Wallace was the common denominator in the attacks at Lanark and Scone and the battle of Stirling Bridge, it is unlikely that he was seen, or would have seen himself, as the main leader of Scottish resistance to Edward I."⁷ Overall therefore, the Murder of the Sheriff of Lanark is clearly an important event within the wars for independence and suggests that William Wallace played a large role in the rebellion.

⁶ Professor Dauvit Broun, Wallace's risings in 1297, 2011, www.breakingofbritain.ac.uk/blogs/feature-of-the-month/september-2011-the-guardians-in-1286-and-wallaces-uprising-in-1297/

⁷ Professor Dauvit Broun, Wallace's risings in 1297, 2011, www.breakingofbritain.ac.uk/blogs/feature-of-the-month/september-2011-the-guardians-in-1286-and-wallaces-uprising-in-1297/

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After Wallace's rise to prominence, he set eyes on following up his emergence with an equally powerful message. In this regard, he joined forces with nobleman William Douglas, a very powerful and intimidating man who commanded a lot of power, adding to the suggestion that Wallace had very powerful characteristics as if he were not to, there would be no such reason for noblemen such as Douglas to ally himself with lesser people such as Wallace. In this regard, even Guisborough found it difficult to criticise Wallace in any significant way, stating that: "the common folk of the land followed him as their leader and ruler; the retainers of the great lords adhered to him"⁸ Which suggests that between the commands of Wallace and Douglas, Wallace was at least viewed as an equal to the noble and not as a lesser. However, it must be stated that while Wallace and Douglas would effectively sack Scone, they would be unable to capture their target William Ormsby, with the Justiciar either being too quick to react to the attack or somehow acquiring knowledge of the attack and preparing for it before it happened. This suggests that while the raid of Scone was overall effective, the only lasting impact was to send a message to the English, resulting in little gain for the strike. However, the evidence suggests that Wallace's decision to ally himself with such important nobles such as Douglas was one out of strategy and is what allowed him to accumulate his resistance with his proving that he was effectively able to lead attacks as an equal to the nobles of Scotland. Overall, the evidence suggests that William Wallace's emergence as a resistance leader during the wars of independence was very important in the overall conflict as in his emergence, he was able to join forces with many more powerful nobles than he was, suggesting a great level of either diplomacy,

⁸Rothwell, H (ed.), the Chronicle of Walter of Guisborough, 1957

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strategy or effective characteristics. Therefore, Wallace's emergence as a resistance leader was significant.

How Important were the military strategies conducted by William Wallace to the first wars of independence?

Wallace was effectively able to implement his military strategies during the battle of Stirling Bridge. At the battle, which happened 11th September 1297, Wallace (who co-led alongside Andrew Moray) positioned his force of around 5,500 men on top of the Abby Craig hill across from the bridge itself (a bridge which was recorded to only allow 2 horsemen to cross abreast from one another) and ordered his troops to charge down the hill towards the English force of 9,000 as they crossed the bridge, forming 100 men wide schiltrons after enclosing the English forces⁹. Resulting in the deaths of 5,000 infantry and 100 cavalry¹⁰. This was effective as it allowed for the smaller Scottish force to effectively use the terrain to their advantage and make the larger English force fight the Scottish to their disadvantage. This plan suggests that Wallace was highly effective at opportunistic attacks and catching his enemies off guard. Furthermore, the battle left the English Kingdom humiliated with the English army, led by powerful English nobles, being defeated by a lesser Scottish force that was less equipped and made up almost entirely of peasants¹¹. This is important as it resulted in the English commander, John De Warrene being removed from his post as Lord

⁹ Pete Armstrong, Stirling Bridge & Falkirk 1297-97, Osprey publishing, 2003, East Sussex, pp 43

¹⁰ Rothwell, H (ed.), the Chronicle of Walter of Guisborough, 1957

¹¹ James Mackay, William Wallace: Brave Heart, mainstream publishing, Edinburgh, pp141

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protector of Scotland and Edward I personally taking command of the English army in order to try and crush the Scottish resistance, showing that Edward viewed the problem as one requiring of his personal command. Whilst Stirling Bridge was not a decisive victory for the Scots, its importance can be seen by Edward's aggressive reaction to the defeat. This is backed by historian Andrew Fisher who states "Stirling did not end the war but its significance was not lost on contemporaries."¹² Therefore, it can be suggested that William Wallace was successful in his military strategies during the battle of Stirling Bridge as he was effectively able to both humiliate the English forces to such an extent that the English king felt that he had to personally deal with the resistance.

Wallace was effectively able to show his skill in military strategies through his coordinated raids of northern England. Wallace employed his troops to launch surprise raids on the towns and villages within the lands of Northumberland, with the raids and attacks becoming so brutal that Guisborough said:

"The service of God totally ceased in all monasteries and churches between Newcastle and Carlisle, for all the canons, monks and priests fled before the face of the Scots, as did nearly all the people"¹³

It can be seen that the attacks conducted by the Scottish forces were so great that England was unable to hold church services within the lands which the Scottish attacked, suggesting that Wallace's raids were highly efficient in stopping most daily activities within the areas

¹² Wallace, Sir William (d.1305), patriot and Guardian of Scotland, Andrew Fisher, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004

¹³Rothwell, H (ed.), the Chronicle of Walter of Guisborough, 1957

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which he and his force assaulted. This was an effective form of resistance as it allowed for an effective delay tactic to be implemented with the English being forced to slow their assault due to northern resources being pillaged and stopping supply lines for the English army. To add to this, Fisher believes that the strikes on the lands of England were effective in increasing the resources and equipment of the Scottish as Scotland itself was under the effects of a famine and Wallace's army was growing far too big for Scottish resources alone to effectively supply. This effectively resulted in Wallace having more supplies overall at the end of the raids than at the beginning, allowing for his army to become better supplied and well equipped. However, it must be stated that while Wallace's raids were damaging to English lands, Wallace's army was nowhere near effective or strong enough to besiege any of the castles or towns that he had raided, resulting in Wallace's raids being damaging, but not crippling. Overall however, the evidence suggests that Wallace's raids of Northern England were effective as while the attacks did not do any serious damage to the English forces or territory¹⁴, it was an effective way to slow down the greater enemy¹⁵ as well as increase supply for an army that had become too big to rely on its own nation's resources at a time of crisis brought about through famine.

While William Wallace had shown himself to be an effective military leader, it is difficult to argue that the battle of Falkirk was not a military failure. At the battle, dated the 22nd of July 1298, Wallace and his forces were completely defeated by the superior English force, led by Edward I, resulting in Wallace effectively losing his Guardianship and support from

¹⁴ Pete Armstrong, *Stirling Bridge & Falkirk 1297-97*, Osprey publishing, 2003, East Sussex, pp58

¹⁵ James Mackay, *William Wallace: Brave Heart*, mainstream publishing, Edinburgh, pp165

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the Scottish community. Not only was Wallace ineffective in defeating the English archers at Falkirk, but the battle was one sprung on him by the English, meaning that his troop placements and strategy had to be rushed as it was a battle that he did not intend to fight. This suggests that Wallace was unprepared for such an assault, suggesting a level of poor leadership as Wallace fully knew that Edward was indeed mustering a military force nearby. As a result, many resistance fighters and leaders such as MacDuff of Fife were killed in combat. However, it must be stated that while the battle was indeed a failure for Wallace, the strategies employed by the leader such as the use of schiltrons would go on to inspire the strategies that Robert the Bruce would use to great effect during his battle for the throne, suggesting that while Wallace did indeed fail, his military strategies were indeed effective and left a lasting impact. Furthermore, while the battle was a crushing defeat for the Scottish, 111 English horses are recorded as killed, showing that Wallace's schiltrons were effective in defending against cavalry.¹⁶

Overall, it must be stated that the military strategies employed by Wallace during his time as resistance leader were effective in dealing large levels of damage to the English forces. However, while his strategies would be used again successfully after his death with Robert Bruce, this is more an example of Bruce's ability to adapt and learn from the past than Wallace's strategies alone, which were unable to deal a decisive blow from which the English could not recover from.

¹⁶ Pete Armstrong, *Stirling Bridge & Falkirk 1297-97*, Osprey publishing, 2003, East Sussex, pp77

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How Important was Wallace's role as Guardian in the first war for independence?

Firstly, Wallace showed his effectiveness as Guardian through his managing and focus on foreign relations. This can be seen with his writing and development of the Lubeck letter alongside Andrew Moray, who was co-Guardian with Wallace until his death mere months after his election. The letter was written with the intention of informing the large trade settlements of Europe that Scotland was once again open and ready for trade, with the letter being sent to the city regions of Lubeck and Hamburg (regions with a high concentration of steel and iron)¹⁷. This was an effective decision as it not only allowed for the Scottish to increase its overall resource and weapon supplies but also for the nation to forge trade relations with mainland Europe. As well as this, Wallace was effectively able to improve foreign relations through his use of emissary missions to other nations in the goal of gaining support for the Scottish cause. This can be seen with France which was visited by Wallace in aims of renewing the Franco-Scottish alliance signed under John Balliol. Here, Wallace was effectively able to change King Philippe's opinion of the Scottish leader. This suggests that Wallace was effective in his diplomatic missions and his goals to increase support for Scottish independence. This is supported by Andrew Fisher who states: Philippe, whose sister had married Edward in September, was at first hostile to Wallace... {But} with time, Phillippe's

¹⁷ William Wallace and Andrew Morray, The Lubeck Letter, 1297

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attitude to Wallace changed.”¹⁸ Overall, Wallace’s focus on foreign relations was effective in developing the nation’s trade. Effectively allowing for Scotland to maintain a supply of weapons and equipment in their war against the English.

As well as this, Wallace used his position of power in order to change Scotland’s military structure through his implementation of required military service of all men over the age of 16. This can be seen with Wallace building a Gallows within “every town, burgh village as a mute threat to those who failed to comply with the conscription regulations”¹⁹ This was effective as it allowed for an increased number of troops to be implemented by the Scottish in their fight against the far larger English, allowing for Wallace and Scotland as a whole to fight the English on more equal footing in the battles to come. Furthermore, Wallace was effective in his use of force against the nobles as well, with his treatment of lesser noble Michael Miggel being a key example of Wallace’s force. After the death of Wallace, the noble is known to have stated that he only fought alongside the resistance leader out of fear that Wallace would kill him if he refused.²⁰ This suggests that Wallace was effective in his use of fear tactics as he was able to rule over a large number of powerful nobles and build an effective military force against the English. This level of ruthlessness by Wallace was further shown through his apparent hanging of multiple Scottish citizens in Aberdeen, as a show of example to all those who would defy him.²¹ This suggests that Wallace’s military

¹⁸Andrew Fisher, Wallace, Sir William (d.1305), patriot and Guardian of Scotland, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004

¹⁹James Mackay, William Wallace: Brave Heart, 1995 mainstream publishing, Edinburgh, pp178
2004

²⁰ Gesta Annalia, C. In Skene, E.F(ed.) The Chronicle of John of Fordun... Vol II

²¹ Gesta Annalia, C. In Skene, E.F(ed.) The Chronicle of John of Fordun... Vol II

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may have supported him through fear, arguably resulting in more harm than good to the Scottish rebellion due to the ruthlessness causing many to view Wallace as brutal. This is supported by Andrew Fisher who states that: "Scottish tradition suggests that some at least were not reconciled to Wallace's rise to power...{and} Wallace did not hesitate to employ harsh measures against these recalcitrant."²² Overall however, the evidence suggests that Wallace's mandatory conscription was effective in allowing for a large army to be built very quickly and effectively.

Furthermore, Wallace was very effective in bolstering the rebellion's support from the Scottish church through the implementation of new Church officials. This can be seen with the appointing of William Lamberton to the position of Bishop of St Andrews on the 12th June 1298 who was known to be both a large supporter of Wallace as well as a very vocal Pro-Independence proponent.²³ This was effective as it allowed Wallace to have an increased level of support by the church as a result which effectively allowed for a greater level of support from the people, with the church spreading word of God being on Wallace's side. This is supported by Barrow who states: "The three main achievements of Wallace's regime were the invasion of Northumbria, the filling of the vacant see of St Andrews and the successful revival of the idea of Guardianship."²⁴ Secondly, Wallace was effectively able to garner support from the church through his own experiences with the process. This is because Wallace was most likely meant to go into a form of priesthood in the church due to

²² Andrew Fisher, Wallace, Sir William (d.1305), patriot and Guardian of Scotland, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004

²³ James Mackay William Wallace: Brave Heart, 1995 mainstream publishing, Edinburgh, pp180

²⁴ GWS Barrow, Robert Bruce and the community of the realm, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2005, pp121

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him being both the youngest brother of a family (as a result holding no real prospect of one day gaining any level of power) and the fact that he was most likely trained by his Uncles in diplomacy (people who were also most likely Priests). This is important as with Wallace having experience within how the church operates and works, he would certainly be far more able to bolster support for his ideas from within as well as form close allies within the group. As well as this, Wallace was effectively able to build support from the church through his purging and ejecting of English officials who were elected to the Scottish church under Edward I²⁵. This was effective as it resulted in the Scottish nobles of the church gaining an increased level of power over the situation, resulting in a clear increase in pro-independent sentiment within the church. Overall therefore, the evidence suggests that Wallace's links to the church were effective as well as important during his time as Guardian.

In conclusion, William Wallace's time as Guardian was very important in the first wars of independence as it resulted in Scotland having a large number of trade partners from mainland Europe. Furthermore, Wallace's military enforcements, while harsh, were effective in building a large army very quickly and allowing Scotland to have a greater chance in combating England as well as allowing for Wallace to have a greater level of control over the nobles of Scotland present, allowing the resistance fighter to directly control and build the Scottish forces. Finally, Wallace's links to the church as well as his employment of church officials sympathetic to independence resulted in a far larger level of support from the church and as a result, the people, due to the influence the church had on

²⁵ Gesta Annalia, C. In Skene, E.F(ed.) The Chronicle of John of Fordun...Vol II, pp 323

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everyday life. Overall therefore, Wallace's time as Guardian was a very important part of the first Scottish war of independence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evidence suggests that William Wallace played an important part within the first Scottish war of Independence due to his military strategies, his time as Guardian and his emergence as a resistance leader. His role was important because Wallace's sheer emergence as a leader of Scottish resistance was important with the murder of an important noble in the form of a sheriff as well as the well planned surprise strike at Scone and near capture of William Ormsby alongside William Douglas, employing "unchivalrous" strategies and tactics rarely seen within the medieval era, an idea supported by Michael Prestwich who states: "Wallace had not conducted his campaigns according of the chivalric code of the day, and there was no reason why Edward should have treated him with compassion or respect."²⁶ Overall therefore, this suggests that Wallace's emergence as a resistance leader was very important during the wars of independence.

His military strategies were also important. This is because of both the Battle of Stirling Bridge as well as the Battle of Falkirk being very major and important battles during the war as well as his raids into northern England proving very effective for increasing the number of resources at Scottish use. Through Stirling Bridge, Wallace showed his importance by

²⁶ Michael Prestwich, *Edward I*, Yale University Press, London, 1997, pp503

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effectively inspiring his smaller army into defeating the much larger English through effective troop placement and encircling the English at the bottom of the river bank, even killing the hated head treasurer Hugh Cressingham, resulting in Edward I personally taking up the battle against Wallace. However, Wallace's push for a victory at Falkirk against the English king resulted in a defeat that had large ramifications for the Scottish were the main resistance was once again split with Wallace being removed (or resigned) from the position of Guardian and leading his own band of resistance once again. This is supported by Archie Duncan who states: "Wallace's raison d'être was victory in warfare, and he was perhaps under pressure from all sides - from the reluctant nobility to his own men - to inflict defeat on the Hammer of the Scots himself."²⁷ Despite this failure, overall, William Wallace's military strategies were very important to the War of independence.

Finally, William Wallace's position of Guardian was very important to the wars of independence due to his boosting of foreign relations, his military enforcement as well as his links to the church. His re-opening of trade as well as his emissary missions to multiple powerful kingdoms and regions allowed Scotland to both increase the amount of equipment it had to defend itself.

Furthermore, his links to the church as well as the appointment of new Bishops sympathetic to the independence cause resulted in Wallace firmly linking the Scottish church to the resistance, allowing for the church's influence to be used by the rebellion. As well as this,

²⁷ Duncan, A.A.M, 'William, Son of Alan Wallace: The Documents' in The Wallace Book, Cowan, E.J (ed.), chapter 3, 2007

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Wallace's use of very harsh acts of force in order to increase his standing army resulted in a large increase in the overall size and strength of the Scottish army, giving them a better chance in their war with England. Overall however, William Wallace's rise to the position of Guardian was very important to the wars of independence.

Overall therefore, it is clear that William Wallace was very important to the first Scottish War of Independence.

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