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William Wallace, or The Wallace, is the world-famous Scottish knight and national hero who fought and gave his life to free Scotland from English rule. Most remembered for defeating the English army at the Battle of Stirling Bridge, Wallace's guerilla war tactics, cunning battle strategies, and brutal execution earned Wallace a permanent position among Scotland's greatest heroes.

Wallace was born circa 1270, near Paisley, Renfrew, Scotland to Scottish landowner Sir Malcolm Wallace. Very little has been documented about Wallace's childhood or the years of his life before the rebellion. In 1296, when Wallace was 26 years old, King Edward I of England deposed and imprisoned the Scottish king John de Balliol I and declared himself ruler of Scotland (Encyclopaedia Britannica). John de Balliol was known as a weak king, which made it relatively easy for Edward I to abdicate the throne and overthrow de Balliol. As a result, sporadic resistance against English rule began to occur throughout Scotland.

In May 1297, Wallace and a band of 30 men burned the town of Lanark in south-central Scotland and murdered its English sheriff. It is said that Wallace was in Lanark visiting his wife, the beautiful Marion Braidfute, who he had married in secret

(EducationScotland.gov.uk). Lanark Castle was held by English sheriff Sir William Heselrig. When Heselrig's soldiers learned that Wallace was visiting Marion, they surrounded them. Wallace escaped, but Marion was captured and executed. That night, Wallace and his men went back to Lanark Castle. Hidden by the darkness, Wallace broke into Heselrig's bedchamber and brutally hacked the English sheriff to death (EducationScotland.gov.uk). This marked the beginning of Wallace's role as one of the most respected leaders of the Scottish rebellion.

In the summer of 1297, Wallace organized a small army of commoners and small landowners- people with no previous fighting experience- and attacked the English troops stationed between the Rivers Forth and Tay using cunning guerilla warfare tactics. On September 11, 1297, an English army under John de Warrene, earl of Surrey, confronted Wallace and his army at the Forth near Stirling in the Battle of Stirling Bridge.

The English army had between 200 and 300 cavalry and 10,000 foot soldiers in comparison to the Scots' 36 horsemen and 8,000 foot soldiers. Wallace's forces were far outnumbered, but the English army had to cross a narrow wooden bridge over the Forth before they could reach the Scottish positions (Encyclopaedia Britannica). The bridge was the safest river crossing, as the Forth widened to the east and the treacherous marshland of Flanders Moss lay to the west (EducationScotland.gov.uk). Two Dominican friars were sent as envoys to negotiate the Scots' surrender with Wallace and Andrew Moray, another leader of the Rebellion and one of Wallace's closest friends. Wallace instructed the friars to return to de Warrene and to: "Tell your commander that we are not here to make peace but to do battle, defend ourselves, and liberate our kingdom. Let them come on, and we shall prove this in their very beards" (EducationScotland.gov.uk).

When the friars delivered their message, de Warrene called a Council of War, during which Scots knight Richard Lundle said, “My lords, if we go on to the bridge, we are dead men” (EducationScotland.gov.uk). However, de Warrene was urged by other advisors present to cross the bridge and quickly finish the Scots, as they were small in number and less experienced than the English army. Thus, he assembled his army and began his trip across the bridge, as Wallace and Moray watched and prepared their men for battle.

As the English neared the middle of the bridge, the Scots seized the moment by cutting off their escape route and storming the bridge to attack England’s trapped knights, bowmen, and foot soldiers. The mounted knights floundered into the marshy ground and England’s army was forced back to the deep waters of the Forth (EducationScotland.gov.uk). It took one hour for the Scots to slaughter the trapped English, with the exception of the few English knights who managed to fight their way back across the bridge or swim to the south bank of the river to safety. This gained Wallace and the Scots an unlikely, overwhelming victory. He captured Stirling Castle, and, for the moment, Scotland was nearly free of occupying forces.

In October 1297, he invaded northern England and ravaged the counties of Northumberland and Cumberland. Wallace was unconventionally brutal in his battle tactics. It is believed that, during this invasion, Wallace flayed an English soldier and fashioned himself a belt from his skin. These brutal tactics only served to further antagonize the English. In December 1297, Wallace returned to Scotland and was knighted and proclaimed guardian of the kingdom, ruling in Balliol’s name. Many nobles were opposed to his barbaric battle strategies, and lent him only grudging support. Three

months later, however, Edward returned to England, and on July 3, 1298, he invaded Scotland again.

The defeat of the English army at Stirling Bridge had enraged Edward and united English nobility against the Scots (EducationScotland.gov.uk). In summer 1298, Edward himself marched north at the head of a massive English army. Edward had over 1500 knights and mounted men-at-arms and more than 12,000 veteran foot soldiers. His army also brought a devastating new weapon- the English longbow- and a host of English and Welsh archers (Encyclopaedia Britannica). Their journey north, however, was a difficult one, as the Scots had executed a 'scorched-earth' policy and left nothing for Edward's army to eat or drink.

Edward eventually received word that the Scots were camped near Falkirk and led his army to face them. The Scots were vastly outnumbered once again, and they lacked the heavy cavalry of the English. On the morning of July 22, 1298, Wallace's men formed four massive schiltrons- compact bodies of troops forming battle arrays- and held their ground. Wallace is famously said to have called out to his men, "I have brought you to the ring- now dance if you can" (EducationScotland.gov.uk).

The Welsh refused to attack, so Edward sent in two groups of mounted knights, who rode around the schiltrons but could not break them. Knights fell as their horses were impaled on Scottish spears. At that moment, when they should have joined the fight, the Scottish nobles turned their horses and rode away from the battlefields. The English knights turned on the Scots bowmen, cutting them down and killing Sir John Stewart, their leader. Edward recalled his cavalry and ordered his archers to attack them using

their English longbows and iron-tipped arrows that could pierce chainmail and padded armor. The arrows rained down on the Scots, and the schiltrons finally began to break. Edward sent his knights to finish the Scots. Wallace managed to escape from the carnage, and he, along with the surviving Scots, fled into the woods as Edward's army exterminated the Scottish. Edward watched their retreat, but his army was too hungry and badly supplied to continue the campaign. Thus, Wallace's spearmen were defeated by Edward's archers and calvary in the Battle of Falkirk.

As a result, his military reputation was ruined and he resigned his guardianship in December. He was succeeded by Robert de Bruce and Sir John Comyn "The Red" (EducationScotland.gov). There is some evidence that Wallace went to France in 1299 and thereafter acted as a military guerilla leader in Scotland, but from the autumn of 1299, nothing is known of his activities for more than four years (Encyclopedia Britannica). In 1299, as a Scottish diplomat, Wallace attempted to gain French support for Scotland's rebellion. He was initially successful, but the French eventually turned against the Scots, and, in defeat, Scottish leaders surrendered to the English and recognized Edward as their king in 1304.

Wallace was unwilling to compromise and refused to surrender to English rule. He was outspoken in his disdain for the English and vowed to never recognize the English as Scotland's ruler. Edward's men relentlessly pursued Wallace until August 5, 1305, when they captured and arrested him near Glasgow. He was taken to London for a show trial, and condemned as an outlaw and a traitor to the king. The trial was not required, but Edward intended to destroy Wallace's reputation by publicly charging him as a traitor. At the trial, Wallace had no lawyers. There was no jury. Wallace was not

allowed to speak, but then he was accused of being a traitor, he denied it, insisting that he could not be condemned as a traitor to a king to whom he had never sworn allegiance. Inevitably, he was found guilty and sentenced to immediate execution in a manner designed to symbolize his crimes (bbc.co.uk).

Wrapped in ox hide to prevent him from being ripped apart, Wallace was dragged by horses four miles through London to Smithfield, where he was hanged as a murder and thief, cut down while he was still alive, disemboweled, mutilated, and, being accused of treason, probably castrated. For the crimes of sacrilege to English monasteries, his heart, liver, lungs and entrails were thrown in a fire, and, finally, he was beheaded. His body was then cut up into small pieces, and his head was set on a pole on London Bridge. Parts of his body were sent to Berwick, Perth, and Stirling as a warning to the Scots (bbc.co.uk).

Wallace became a martyr and the symbol of Scotland's struggle for independence. He became a legend and a Scottish folktale. His efforts to free Scotland from English rule were continued after his death, and 23 years after his execution, Scotland finally gained its independence.

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