

## TEACHERS NOTES



The 'Braveheart' study guide is aimed at students of GCSE Media Studies, A' Level Film and Communication and GNVQ Media, Communication and Production, offering teachers of these courses a means of working with mainstream film. Areas of examination within the guide are narrative structure, representation, the Star, the production, and the use of special effects. These areas are essential in the study of film and media and the guide can also be used as an example for teachers of how to approach film generally.

### SYNOPSIS

In the late 13th century, William Wallace (Mel Gibson) returns to Scotland after living away from his homeland for many years. The King of Scotland has died without an heir and the King of England, a ruthless pagan known as Edward the Longshanks, has seized the

throne. Wallace becomes the leader of a ramshackle yet courageous army determined to vanquish the greater English forces. Wallace's courage and passion unite his people in 'Braveheart'.

Following his directorial debut, 'The Man Without a Face', Mel Gibson is directing, producing and starring in a film combining action, intrigue and romance to tell the story of legendary Scottish knight Sir William Wallace and the love that inspired him to fight for his country's freedom.

'Braveheart', dir. Mel Gibson, Twentieth Century Fox, UK release 8 September, 1995.

## BACKGROUND

The period from about 1150 to 1350 is often called the High Middle Ages because it was in this era when medieval civilization took its fullest form. In 1066 William the Conqueror brought feudalism to England, but the early castles of that time were only wooden stockades and looked more like a Western frontier fort than our common image of a castle. The most famous wars of the Middle Ages, the Crusades, began in 1095. From about 1189 the Crusades were in retreat and the last Christian outpost in the Holy Land fell in 1291, just a few years before the events in Braveheart'.

The Europe of William Wallace and King Edward I (Longshanks) was still quite a backward part of the world. In Italy the Renaissance was only just beginning to appear; the Muslim civilization of the Middle East was still much wealthier and more sophisticated than the West's. China, under Kubla Khan, was even wealthier and more sophisticated. The Middle Ages is often regarded as a period of darkness, superstition and ignorance. The poor lived in squalor, their lives subject to the whims of their overlords. As history, the 13th century is predominantly legend; it was the golden age of chivalry, of tournaments and castles, of minstrels singing ballads and of knights tying their ladies' favours' to their sleeves. The legend of King Arthur spread across Europe at this time, and though the 'historical Arthur' lived many centuries earlier, if he ever existed at all, the image that is shared today of Camelot is an image of the 13th century.

This was also a time when the common man was beginning to demand his rights and defend them with arms. William Wallace is a significant historical figure not because he was a high-born commander of knights, but because he was an ordinary Scotsman, a free farmer who rallied thousands of other ordinary Scotsmen to fight for their country. In England, legends began to spread of an outlaw hero named Robin Hood, who robbed the lords and the wealthy abbots, and gave the money to the poor. He is commonly associated with the era of Richard the Lionheart and Prince John about a hundred years before William Wallace, but some historians believe that Robin Hood may have been a real man who lived in the forests with his band at about the time William Wallace was a boy. William Wallace was a man of his times in an age full of cruelty and violence, but it was also a time of heroism and splendour; the ideal of freedom was beginning to thrive.

What do you already know about this period? Can you name any other heroes or villains that belong to this time? Our knowledge of this time, as has been suggested, is a mixture of some historical fact and of familiarity with the mythology of the medieval period, e.g. Excalibur, King Arthur. What might be the challenges that face the filmmaker dealing with the medieval period? Should he or she separate history and myth? Is this possible? Find out what else was happening in this period.

### TASK

Carry out your own research into medieval myths and legends and select one that you might use as the subject of a film. Who would be your audience? How would you capture their imagination? Would it be through plot, location, star theme? Write a treatment for your film.

# HEROES AND LEGENDS

In ancient myths and legends there are many prototypes of modern heroes and heroines. They are adventurous, resourceful and often subjected to difficult journeys or tasks. They often stand for good against evil, or one man against the odds. Popular literature and stories contain elements of these mythic heroes.

William Wallace is a folk hero, a man of the people. He belongs to that category of men who are driven by passion, idealism and an heroic impulse which is in direct contrast to their opponents who are self seeking, mean and merciless.

He is, perhaps, the greatest hero of the Scottish people. Born around the year 1297, he was the second son of Malcolm Wallace, a middle class landowner, who was educated and spoke three languages. He was educated at Paisley Abbey by his uncle but little is recorded of his day to day life. Material wealth was of no interest to him and while the Scottish nobles around him were accepting lands and titles from the English King, Wallace remained committed to freedom and honour for Scotland. The main source of his legends is 300 pages of rhyming verse attributed to a blind poet known as Blind Harry, who could neither read nor write. The legends of Wallace are more of an indication of the passion that his story is able to arouse than hard fact. It was these exciting tales that inspired Randall Wallace to write the screenplay for 'Braveheart'.

Adam of Usk's Chronicle: 'The Scots, when they fled to places to hide, laid waste and stripped their fields and houses and farms, to stop them supplying our kind. They lurked in thick forests and the hiding places of secret caves and woods . . . Yet they did often come out from these lairs and in lonely deserts and cut-off places they slew and took very many of our men prisoner, doing us more harm than them.'

## TASK

What do you think of Wallace's representation on film as a hero and inspiration? Can you think of any other examples of this kind of hero? What other film genres do they appear in? What do you consider to be the universality of their appeal? Write down a list of heroes and the film genres they appear in. Identify their common characteristics.

## THE NARRATIVE

In the late 13th century William Wallace returns to Scotland after living away from his homeland for many years. The king of Scotland has died without an heir and the king of England, a ruthless pagan known as Edward the Longshanks, has seized the throne. Wallace becomes the leader of a ramshackle yet courageous army determined to vanquish the greater English forces. Wallace's courage and passion unite his people in 'Braveheart'. Mel Gibson, director and star, comments, "William Wallace is one of the people who have changed the course of history. His is an incredible story about courage, loyalty, honour and the brutality of war. The film is also an inspiring love story." When Wallace returns to his village in Scotland he is reacquainted with Murron, they fall in love and secretly marry. It is Wallace's deep and lasting love for Murron that spurs him to fight for Scotland's freedom. At the historic battle of Stirling, Wallace leads his army to a stunning victory against the English. He is knighted by the grateful Scottish nobles and extends the conflict south of the border and storms the city of York. King Edward I is astonished by the unexpected turn of events and sends his daughter-in-law, Princess Isabelle, to discuss a truce with Wallace because he is unable to rely on his ineffectual son Prince Edward. King Edward is seen today as the founder of the houses of Parliament and the first king to allow the commoners to be represented. The other side to him is the monstrous tales of appalling brutality against the Scots and the Welsh.

Mel Gibson's comments on the screenplay reflect his enthusiasm for the story: "I couldn't wait to turn each page and was surprised at every turn. The screenplay had everything - heroic battles, a powerful love story and the passion of one man's strength which fires a whole country against its aggressors."

Most feature films consist of a narrative which follows a plot structure based on the equilibrium / disequilibrium / new equilibrium model, in other words, the establishment of a 'happy ending' fulfilling the audience's expectations.

### TASK

How can a filmmaker attempt to excite and satisfy filmgoers and still remain historically accurate? How is the ending of 'Braveheart' constructed in order to satisfy the audience and convey historical truth? Rewrite the last few scenes to provide an alternative ending. Storyboard your ideas.

## THE NARRATIVE

Randall Wallace's research brought to light the preponderance of legends about William Wallace but very few facts. His work on the screenplay began after reading a 1740 English translation of rhyming Scottish verse presenting legends about Wallace.

*"History is impressionistic", says Randall Wallace, "What William Wallace did can be inferred from the passion of his supporters and hatred of his enemies. The great legends about him built afire in my heart. His life communicated that you will prevail if you are faithful to what you believe in and if those you love believe in you. Your body can be broken but not your spirit."*

Filming began in Scotland at the base of Ben Nevis, Britain's highest mountain, on June 6, 1994. Production designer Tom Sanders supervised the creation of the medieval Scottish village. The source for the design of the rounded pod-like dwellings of Lanark had been found during a helicopter ride to the tiny isle of St. Kilda off the coast of Scotland.

Mel Gibson wanted to show the Braveheart' battle sequences to an audience as if they were at the centre of the action. For scenes of the savage battles of Stirling and Falkirk 1,700 of the Irish Army's reserve forces acted as the infantry, archery and cavalry divisions of the Scottish and English armies of the late 13th and early 14th centuries. The expanses required for the battle scenes were found in Ireland. With both the major battle sequences of Stirling and Falkirk, time was taken to choreograph each move during rehearsals to make certain no one was injured. *"We wanted to make it very real",* says stunt coordinator Simon Crane. *"They were bloody times, so what we were shooting was very brutal. We had JO or so English stuntmen and they trained the extras for two weeks before filming".* The two major battles seen in the film consist of hand-to-hand combat, 40 foot flames and the use of real as well as mechanical horses, to depict the desperate fight of the Scottish people to rid their country of the English tyrant King Edward I.

The Battle of Stirling was filmed during two weeks with a company that reached 3,000. The battle was choreographed by Gibson and stunt coordinators. 150 horses were used for the English in their charge; shields, lances, weapons, bows and arrows were provided by armourers; costume designers recreated chain mail for the English and metres of plaid for the Scots. Thousands of wigs and beards were also provided.

### TASK

Comment on the two statements underlined in the text. Is it important to get as much historical accuracy on film as possible or is it more important to convey the feel' of the times?

Why do you think the director wanted the audience to 'experience' the battle sequences? What did he do to effect this?

What in the opening sequences, gives you the impression that the film is set in the medieval period? Is it location, buildings, costume, style of filming?.

# AUTHENTICITY

“I wanted the film to look realistic and gritty,” said Mel Gibson. “The colours are earth colours - dark, brooding muddy. Tom (production designer) remained accurate to history, hypothesising about what might have been from looking at old ruins”

The filmmaker often has to concentrate on surface realities to capture the ‘actuality’ of the period, e.g. the village of Lanark was built in seven weeks. The three foot high walls of the simple dwellings were made of plaster . they were then painted and aged, while thatchers wove a basic roof scattered with sods of earth and seeded with grass. Much attention was paid to the detail of the costumes and a valuable source of information for the costume designer was late 13th century carvings and tombstones. The Highlanders’ need for camouflage while hunting and for territorial warfare meant natural colours were essential. The Scots were provided in the film with the most basic leather boots and sack binding. Scottish women wore plain straight dresses with a tunic over the top and a shawl made of wool or hide. In comparison, the court of Edward I provided a stark contrast to this basic dress. Luxurious materials such as silk, damask, velvet and fine wool had been introduced by the Crusaders returning from the east. In medieval times wealth was stored in jewellery which was worn in abundance as necklaces or laid into collars and belts.

## TASK

What details of medieval life are depicted in this film? What did people eat and wear?  
Can you remember anything about the weapons they used, their rituals and ceremonies?

What language did they speak?

What differentiated the commoner from the nobles?

What did you learn about this period that you did not already know?

## SPECIAL EFFECTS

Two mechanical horses designed by special effects supervisor Nick Alder were driven along a track by a nitrogen cylinder. When fired, a horse would accelerate from zero to 30 miles an hour on 20 feet of track. Reaching the end, a piston automatically kicked in between the back legs. 10,000 arrows with rubber tips were created for the film which were shot by an arrow launcher - this consisted of five compressed air tanks with multiple barrels firing into the air as many as 360 arrows at a time in quick succession.

At one point in the action flaming arrows ignite oil that had been spread on the ground by the Scots. This meant placing steel tubing under the surface of the grass into which propane gas was pumped. If there had been the slightest problem with any of the horses or soldiers, the 40 foot flames could have been extinguished at the turn of a switch.

### TASK

What other special effects can you identify in this film? How did the special effects enhance your enjoyment of the film? Which particular effects impressed you?

What special effects in other films can you remember which have particularly struck you? Why, do you think?

## REPRESENTATION

Every filmmaker and storyteller has a viewpoint. Characters, heroes and heroines are presented in certain ways and represent particular values. Certain qualities of a character may be omitted in order to emphasise others, e.g., Edward I admired architecture and created some magnificent buildings; he was also the first king to allow Commoners to be represented with clerics and nobles, voicing their problems through a speaker. We are not given this information in 'Braveheart'.

### TASK

What is the director's purpose in selecting and omitting information? What is the resulting picture we get of Edward I?

What information are we given about the following characters? Write your answers in Chart A on the last page.

The Leper  
Robert the Bruce  
Hamish  
Argyle Wallace  
Murrion  
Princess Isabella

How are the heroes and villains differentiated in 'Braveheart'? Look at the language they use, the way they are dressed, their attitudes to other people, their actions and what is said about them by other characters in the film. What about the music in the film? Is different music associated with different types of character?

When you have thought about this, complete Chart B on the last page.

How are the English and Scots represented? Do they fit clearly into the headings you have already made? Are there any characters which contain elements of good and evil?

What might we conclude is the viewpoint of the filmmaker? Take two characters and describe how they might be represented if the film had another viewpoint.

### TASK

The costume designs are important in creating an immediate impression of the characters. The rough, shaggy kilts of the Scots were in dramatic contrast to the sumptuous velvets, silks and fine jewellery of the English Court. What immediate effect does this have on us? Can you pinpoint any particular examples in the film? What other aspects of the design of the film create an immediate impression on the audience?



# REPRESENTATION

Director/Producer Mel Gibson, who also plays William Wallace, was born in New York and moved with his family to Australia when he was twelve.

He attended the National Institute of Dramatic Arts at the University of New South Wales in Sydney. The film role that brought him worldwide recognition was 'Mad Max'. This was followed by the title role in 'Hacksaw Ridge', his portrayal of a handicapped young man won him an Australian Film Institute Best Actor Award. There were two hit sequels to 'Mad Max' and a second Australian Best Actor Award for his role in 'Gallipoli', directed by Peter Weir. American successes include the popular 'Lethal Weapon' trilogy. 'Hamlet', starring Gibson and directed by Franco Zeffirelli, was the first film to be produced by Gibson's production company Icon Productions. His directorial debut was for another Icon Production 'The Man Without a Face'.

'Braveheart' is an Icon Productions/Ladd Company Production produced by Mel Gibson, Alan Ladd Jr. and Bruce Davey.

## TASK

What do you think about the casting of Mel Gibson as William Wallace?

What do you know about the roles he has played in other films? What elements of these does he bring to the character?

What does the audience expect of him do you think, in terms of bravery, adventure, resolution, integrity?

How would you market this film? Identify the audience and think about poster design, trailers, advertising on the radio and in the press. Where would you pitch your advertising? What would you put in the trailer and in the various adverts?

Pick one of these marketing strategies and produce it, i.e. storyboard the trailer design the poster write the press advert, and script and storyboard the advert for radio and TV

## CHART A

Characters	Information given about them
The Leper	
Robert the Bruce	
Hamish	
Argyle Wallace	
Murron	
Princess Isabelle	

## CHART B

	Heroes	Villains
The language they use		
The way they are dressed		
Their attitudes to other people		
Their actions		
What is said about them by other characters		
Music associated with them		