

1-1-1970

Matthew P. McDiarmid (ed.) Harry's WALLACE (Vita Nobilissimi Defensoris Scotie Wilelmi Wallace Militis). Edinburgh and London. Scottish Text Society, 4th ser., vols. 4, 5. William Blackwood & Sons Ltd. 1968. 671 pp.

Florence H. Ridley
U.C.L.A.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ridley, Florence H. (2014) "Matthew P. McDiarmid (ed.) Harry's WALLACE (Vita Nobilissimi Defensoris Scotie Wilelmi Wallace Militis). Edinburgh and London. Scottish Text Society, 4th ser., vols. 4, 5. William Blackwood & Sons Ltd. 1968. 671 pp.," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 7: Iss. 3, 195–199.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol7/iss3/10>

This Book Reviews is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Matthew P. McDiarmid (ed.) *Hary's WALLACE (Vita Nobilissimi Defensoris Scotie Wilelmi Wallace Militis)*. Edinburgh and London. Scottish Text Society, 4th ser., vols. 4, 5. William Blackwood & Sons Ltd. 1968. 671 pp.

This latest publication of the Scottish Text Society is a welcome addition to the series, for it provides the first sensibly edited text of the *Wallace*, demolishes a traditional concept of the author as an illiterate minstrel, and makes a perceptive analysis of his use of sources, the architectonics of his poem, and the portrayal of his hero. However, the editor attempts somewhat more than he accomplishes.

McDiarmid bases his edition upon John Ramsay's 1488 MS of the poem (Nat. Lib. Scot. Adv. 19.2.2), emending the text by reference to fragments printed with the Chepman and Myllar types in 1509 (STC 13148), and Robert Lekpreuik's edition of the *Wallace*, 1570 (STC 13149). Variant readings are printed in footnotes; and judging from them the emendations, made largely on the basis of the editor's familiarity with the usual causes of scribal error, Hary's subject matter, his linguistic and metrical habits, and his sources, are generally sound.

The "Introduction" discusses but does not describe the unique MS and earlier editions of the poem. McDiarmid justifiably censures the previous STS editor, James Moir (cf., *The Actis and Deidis of the Illustere and Vailzeand Campioun Schir William Wallace*, Scottish Text Society, vols. 6-7, 17 [Edinburgh and London: 1889]), for not finding "it convenient to examine the manuscript that he claimed to edit," but substantiates his further charge, "Moir merely repeats Jamieson, retaining all his errors and differing from him . . . only to add more," by citing only two such errors and concluding, "I have not thought it worthwhile to note more than a few of his errors and irrelevancies."

Nor does this editor offer sufficient evidence for his dating of the *Wallace*. Earlier commentators—Neilson, Brie, Schofield, Bennett—accept 1482 and 1483 as the date of composition, reasoning that England's invasion of Scotland, her seizure of Berwick, and attempt to establish the Duke of Albany on the Scottish throne which occurred during that period, would most readily have occasioned the poem's violent anti-English sentiment. But McDiarmid advocates 1478 when, he says, Scottish hostility toward the English had been brought to a height by James III's policy of seeking matrimonial alliances with England. The only passages in the poem which might support this conjecture are ". . . gret kyndnes thar has beyne kyth thaim till" (I.10), possibly a reference to

the alliances, and a reference to Sir William Wallace of Craigie (XII.1443) who died in 1479. Yet both the "kindnesses" and Sir William might well have been remembered three or four years and so could have been mentioned by a poet in 1482 as well as in 1478; moreover, armed invasion is always a readier producer of patriotic virulence than proposals of marriage. Thus despite McDiarmid's rather detailed argument, the matter of the poem's date still remains in question. Even less adequately supported are his conclusions regarding the date of Hary's birth and death: since Dunbar, in "Lament for the Makaris," refers to Blind Hary in a context with Patrik Johnston who died in 1494-5, Hary's death must have occurred in the same period, at some time between 1492 and 1495; and since he was perhaps in his fifties at the time, "his birth about 1440."

It is quite possible that, as McDiarmid asserts, the author of the *Wallace* belonged to a family surnamed "Hare," "Hary," "Henry," or "Henrison"; but it is no more probable than that, as Schofield believed, "Blind Hary" was a pseudonym derived from a traditional epithet for a minstrel (cf., W. H. Schofield, *Mythical Bards and the Life of William Wallace*, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, vol. 5 [Cambridge, Mass.: 1920], pp. 4-31). McDiarmid discounts Schofield's theory, saying, ". . . the Blind Hary of the king's *Accounts* and Dunbar's *Lament* and Mair's *Historia* is stubbornly with us Since it is most unlikely that these early authorities would have been content to record a nickname where the actual name was known . . . we can accept that their poet was blind . . . and that his name was Hary." But it is difficult to reconcile this rejection of "Blind Hary" as a nickname with McDiarmid's subsequent admissions that "Blind" was a familiar, invariable epithet which replaced the poet's Christian name; that "The 'Blynd Hary' already noticed as a name in popular myth and tradition would . . . help the epithet to stick"; and that John Major, knowing nothing of the real man, "states only what might have been plausibly deduced from the name by which the poet had come to be popularly known." It is also difficult to see why the king's *Accounts* and Dunbar's *Lament* should not have recorded a well-known nickname for a famous poet just as Major's *Historia* did. Schofield suggests as remote but plausible parallels the widespread use of "Buffalo Bill" and "Mark Twain" for "William Cody" and "Samuel Clemens" (p. 113).

It is when McDiarmid turns his attention to the poem itself that his discussion becomes lucid, convincing, and valuable. He first disposes of John Major's traditional caricature of a blind, indigent minstrel—the result apparently of a historian's desire to accept part, reject part of the *Wallace*—by showing the author to have been a man of

education judging from his sources, and judging from allusions within his poem, a soldier of considerable military experience in France and an intimate of minor landed gentry, particularly in a region near the firths of Forth and Tay. The editor effectively demonstrates what seems indeed to have been Hary's main purpose, to produce a dramatic, propagandist account of the rise and fall of a national hero. Had the poet confined himself to historical fact, the depiction of Wallace, as McDiarmid says, would perforce have consisted of generalship at Stirling and bravery in defeat at Falkirk. But Hary chose instead to augment, modify, and reshape history, ordering events to focus upon the three rescues of Scotland which Thomas Rhymer had foretold Wallace would accomplish, and in this way produced a balanced tragedy, with a beginning, middle, and end—a hero's dramatic rise and his fall from Fortune's wheel to martyrdom. McDiarmid analyzes the poem's structure to show its relation to this purpose and discusses devices whereby the poet wins acceptance for what is essentially romance. Thus he points out the consistently maintained time scheme, which utilizes only one year date in the source, Wyntoun's *Chronicle*, since introduction of more of Wyntoun's dates would have prevented the dates in Hary's fictional scheme from coinciding. He shows how the poet assigns Wallace deeds designed to demonstrate the quality of the martyr-hero, a man possessed by fury for vengeance, never young, becoming ultimately an embodiment of irresistible force, the fire which St. Andrew had revealed sweeping the English from his land.

McDiarmid's explication fully justifies his contention that it is Hary's hero rather than the historical Wallace who has captured the imagination of Scotland. The creation of such a national hero is indeed a great achievement, and one can readily sympathize with a Scotsman's enthusiasm for it. But when this particular Scotsman appraises the *Wallace* as a greater poetic achievement than Douglas' *Eneados*, the *Bruce*, *Marmion*, and the poems of Henryson and Dunbar, one can only conclude that patriotism has led him astray. Of course any detailed comparison of this poem with the other works would have revealed that McDiarmid's critical appraisal is an exaggerated one, but he makes no such comparison.

Nor does he offer sufficient grounds for his attempted enlargement of Hary's canon. The attribution to this poet of "The Ballet of the Nine Nobles" seems reasonable enough since there is no more likely candidate and a line from "The Ballet" occurs three times in the *Wallace*. Moreover, as F. J. Amours long ago suggested, it does seem likely that *Rauf Coilyear* and *Golagros and Gawain* were written by the same man (*Scottish Alliterative Poems*, Scottish Text Society, vol.

XXVII [Edinburgh and London: 1897], p. xxxvi). But the *Wallace's* dissimilarity from these two poems in versification and subject matter renders commonality of authorship for all three most unlikely. Nevertheless, Mr. McDiarmid attributes them to Hary, partially because of asserted similarity in style, theme, form, and sources. True enough, the poems are somewhat similar in style, with much clearly visualized description, humor, energetic plainness, and drive. But there is little striking similarity of theme between an Arthurian romance, a comic tale of a charcoal burner, and a national epic, even if each does depict a "manly man"—respectively a devout, ruthless soldier, "a sturdy householder," and "a fresh, attractive cavalier." And while the form of both *Rauf Coilyear* and *Golagros and Gawain* is indeed the tail rime stanza, that of the *Wallace* is the heroic couplet. As additional evidence derived from form, McDiarmid finds a "characteristic feature of [all three] . . . poems [to be] . . . their writer's readiness to abandon the strict formulae of alliterative metrics . . ." But is a practice significantly characteristic of three poems when it is, as this editor points out, "Almost complete" in one, "plain enough" in another, but merely "illustrated in quite a number of lines" in a third? Moreover the discussion of sources, while it does establish the fact that the *Wallace*, *Rauf Coilyear*, and *Golagros and Gawain* all reflect familiarity with certain material—*Sir Ferumbras*, *The Romance of Duke Rowlands and of Sir Otuell of Spayne*, *The Buik of the Howlat*, and some of the Charlemagne material—does not establish that they were written by the same poet.

McDiarmid's most convincing proof of common authorship is, he says, the poems' "array of shared phrases or slightly varied lines"; but of the thirty-six such passages he cites only about half contain similarities which seem other than accidental. For example, there is surely no indicative resemblance in his twenty-sixth passage:

Gret harm I thocht his gud deid suld be smord.

Wallace, XII. 1434

It was syn but recure

The knyghtis honour suld smure. *Golagros and Gawain*, 1203-4

As a matter of fact, only four noticeably similar expressions appear in all three poems, and even these could as readily represent one poet's remembrance of another's work as the creative impulse of a single poet. A technical analysis of the language of the poems in question might have provided valuable evidence as to their authorship; but McDiarmid makes no such linguistic analysis, confining himself to a discussion of diction and phraseology merely to strengthen his argument for stylistic

resemblance. Thus we are forced to conclude that his linguistic proof is not particularly convincing.

The editor deals competently with a number of controversies which have been occasioned by the *Wallace*: its supposed source, the Latin book of John Blair; the identity of John Ramsay, scribe of its 1488 MS; John Major's use of the poem and its use of both Major's *Scotichronicon* and of popular gestes. But he glosses over the poem's dependence upon Barber's *Bruce*, saying only that a comparison between the *Bruce* and the *Wallace* "is of surprisingly little relevance" because Barber merely gave "a sympathetic report" of happenings which Hary dramatizes. In reality Hary's borrowing from Barber was extensive, so extensive that George Neilson could characterize it as "literary pillage" ("Blind Harry's Wallace," *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*, Vol. I [Oxford: 1910], p. 93).

There are occasional lapses of diction in this edition, "different . . . than," "a more strong impression," etc.; a number of careless errors such as incorrect line references ("VI.12," instead of "VI.15," in vol. 2, p. 284, XI.763 instead of XI.762 in vol. 1, p. cxvi, etc.), undocumented references (in vol. 1, pp. x, xi, xiii, xvi, xvii, xlvii, etc.), inaccurately cited evidence ("Wallace is joined more than once by companies of thirty men," vol. 1, p. 160, supported by reference to two passages in the poem which mention thirty men, V.909 and VII.1011, but one which mentions twenty, VII.722); and certain troublesome omissions: no bibliography, no etymological information in the glossary, no running heads to distinguish the different books of the poem, which makes reference between text and notes unnecessarily difficult. But these are minor weaknesses, and despite them, and despite his failure to establish a new date for the *Wallace* or to extend the canon of its author, McDiar-mid has made a valuable contribution to the study of old Scottish literature with his edition, for herein he presents a generally sound text of the poem and a persuasive appraisal of Blind Hary's purpose, methods, and achievement.

FLORENCE H. RIDLEY

U.C.L.A.