

THE FOREST LAIRD – a brief summary and review

Presented by Ron Budd at the February 2011 meeting of the Calgary Burns Club as a Bob Carnie Group paper.

Two boys, not yet in their teens, William Wallace and his cousin Jamie Wallace, escape from English soldiers who, during a foray, have killed William's sister, his mother and his father Sir Alan Wallace. They flee on foot overland to the Paisley area where they reach sanctuary with their uncle, Sir Malcolm Wallace. From the monks in the nearby Paisley Abbey they receive a good education and from an archer they met during their escape they learn skill in the art of the quarterstaff and the long bow.

As they matured , Jamie enters the priesthood at the abbey as Father James and William worked for his uncle as a forester. After meeting her, William becomes an ardent admirer of Mirren Braidfoot, the daughter of a Lanarkshire sheep farmer. Mirren already had a young suitor, wealthy and titled.

In the course of the events during which William tangles with his rival, even though he succeeds in winning Mirren, he is declared an outlaw on a setup charge of poaching, punishable by death on capture. With Mirren he is forced to flee and they seek refuge in Selkirk Forest, a very large woodland area stretching across much of the Scottish border lands, from Auchencruive in the west to east of Jedburgh.

The date is in the early 1290s and at this time John Balliol has been made king of Scotland, following the accidental death of Alexander III at Kinghorn. While he had a legitimate claim it was ultimately with the support of King Edward I of England that King John gained the throne over his principal opponent Robert Bruce.

English soldiery had already become a presence in Lowland Scotland as a means of maintaining order in the absence of a national Scottish force, but also as an indication of Edward's determination to secure greater control.

With John unable to provide any opposition, Edward ordered a steady increase to his military force in Scotland until all the lowland castles and towns were garrisoned by English soldiers. While the occupation was itself for the most part peaceful, once installed the English were guilty of the most brutal conduct toward the local residents. Resentment and bitter hatred grew rapidly in the general population but they were helpless to retaliate.

Meantime William and Mirren, now married, have established a well-hidden home in the forest and over time have been joined by others seeking to escape from the murdering occupiers of their lands.

The situation in lowland Scotland finally overheats and small bands from William's hidden village ride out to seek successful reprisals against the perpetrators of particular atrocities. William organises these reprisal raids but does not participate as he has sworn to devote his life to his wife Mirren and young son. During an unfortunate encounter Mirren and their son are captured by an English force and killed.

As had always been what the patriotic Bishop Robert Wishart of Glasgow had been encouraging, Wallace now leaves the forest with his men to join with a force, largely from the common folk, led by his friend Sir Andrew Murray coming south from northeastern Scotland, in a combined effort to remove forcibly the English from Scotland.

Earlier, Scottish nobility had been slow to rally to the cause since a great many of them also held estates in England, by the grace of King Edward. The loss of such property would be a hefty price to pay in what seemed to them like a fight which would be unlikely to end well. Still, some were brave enough eventually now to stand with the rebels Murray and Wallace. The Wars for Scottish Independence were about to begin.

My Comments:

Historical detail on Scottish hero William Wallace is extremely sparse. Jack Whyte imaginatively presents his story in this historical novel as told by cousin Jamie, who in effect is William's priest, a position which, in reality, was held by Hugh Blair. This change makes it possible for the narrator to be closer to William. Strangely, though it also left me feeling that perhaps I knew the character of Father James a little better than I did that of his cousin. The style is flowing, crammed with detail and the theme is established easily and convincingly.

The setting in the closing years of the 13th century is one where the various representatives of the church have powerful participation in events and the fact that partial control of Scotland was never going to satisfy Edward brings suspense.

As each of the well-drawn major characters seeks to retain or gain what he deems to be his right, Scotland moves ever closer to war. Description of events in the story is always colourful and eloquent, as usual in Jack's writing, though perhaps this time the pace is a little

slow. With 477 pages of fascinating buildup to find William Wallace leaving Selkirk to head for Stirling means that I am now eagerly awaiting the next book.

Ron Budd

February, 2011

Note: A brief biography of Jack Whyte and his published literary works is appended below.

JACK WHYTE

Jack Whyte is a member of our Burns Club. He is a founding member and a life member.

Jack was born in the town of Johnstone, in Renfrewshire, Scotland, in 1940. He grew up there and he had his basic schooling in Scotland before finishing his higher education in England and France.

Emigrating to Canada in 1967, Jack worked as a teacher of English to Senior High School students for about a year before making a major career change when he became an entertainer. Music, song, poetry and acting were his interests and he gained national recognition as a writer. This in turn led to his employment with advertising agencies and the CBC. In 1970 he toured Canada with his one-man show, *Rantin' Rovin' Robin – a Night with Robert Burns*. His early fascination with the Roman occupation times in Britain, the Dark Ages and the romance tales of Camelot, King Arthur and the sword-in-the-stone were stirring his own ideas of how these stories might be told.

In 1976, he and the other six original members founded the Calgary Burns Club, and in the club's early years Jack performed much of the entertainment, singing songs and reciting poems. In 1977 the club produced a long-play 33^{1/3} record of Jack doing *A Night with Robert Burns*. This performance also became available in cassette form. In the late 1980s Jack moved to Vancouver and some years later to Kelowna. His vast research and the right environment allowed him to begin another career change. Beginning in 1992 with *The Skystone* and ending in 2006 with *The Eagle*, Jack became the renowned author of what eventually became a nine-book set of volumes centring on King Arthur and his times. In addition Jack found time to write numerous poems, some nostalgic, some on Canadian patriotic themes and some about current concerns such as *The Faceless* about the Exxon Valdez oil disaster. He also penned a musical play based on the story of Jack the Ripper.

Following the success of the Arthur novels, his “Templar” trilogy began with the *Knights of the Black and White* in 2006 and confirmed Jack's place on the best-seller list. *Order in Chaos* finished that series in 2009 and his next and current trilogy “The Guardians” about the Wars for Scottish Independence has just been introduced in August 2010 with the release of *The Forest Laird*.