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The real reason Yes Scotland avoids Braveheart nostalgia

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‘Yes Scotland’ wise to avoid appeals to history

In 1998 Alex Salmond [dismissed](#) doubts over Scotland’s Celtic lineage as ‘ignorance bordering on silliness’. In 2007 he expounded a vision of the country as a ‘[Celtic Lion](#)’ economy. In 2005 an SNP [press release](#) on the anniversary of William Wallace’s execution stated that he ‘saved the nation from surrender and annihilation’. More recently, Salmond’s [impassioned speeches](#) have channelled Mel Gibson’s Wallace from the Hollywood blockbuster *Braveheart* (1995).

On one level this is just rhetorical fluff. Yet there is an underlying assumption here that the Scots are a distinct people with a unique history. As [MSP John Swinney](#) put it in 2003, ‘the roots of our national movement [...] stretch back to even before the time of Bannockburn in 1314’. Moreover, since 2011 SNP moves to beef up the Scottish history curriculum have been met with accusations of [propaganda](#) and [brain-washing](#). State-directed schooling has long been a tool of nation-building; the parallels here are obvious.

Nevertheless, history has been largely absent from the recent debate over independence. For the ‘Yes Scotland’ campaign, historical arguments are secondary to political and economic ones. This may be because Salmond, himself a History graduate, is aware that such contentions rest on shaky ground. Indeed the deployment of Scottish history in the pursuit of self-determination is a relatively recent phenomenon. During the Victorian era the standard interpretation of Scotland’s past was firmly unionist.

This is hard to believe given the brash tartanry and *Braveheart* sentimentalism with which Scotland is often associated today, especially when we remember that it was in the 1800s that nationalism really took off on the continent. Nonetheless, 150 years ago any Scot urging secession from the union would have been seen by his compatriots as a deluded crank. That is not to say that Victorian Scots had no sense of their pre-union history. On the contrary, there was a major resurgence of interest in the national past during the nineteenth century. Yet the vast majority of it was directed at justifying the union rather than regaining lost independence.

Most nineteenth-century historians argued that the Scots were a Germanic rather than a Celtic people. They emphasised a Saxon kinship between lowland Scots and the northern English dating back to the early Middle Ages. This allowed them to present the 1707 union as ethnic re-unification rather than national disgrace. As a result, the Wars of Independence were depicted as a kind of civil war between sister peoples. Wallace was still a heroic defender of Scottish liberty against English oppression. However the ultimate result of his sacrifice was an equitable union in 1707 instead of a tyrannical conquest in 1297.

Scotland’s Celtic lineage was held to have survived only in the Highlands, whose Gaelic denizens were regarded as racially predisposed to resist the tide of civilisation. As early as 1789 one Scottish antiquary wrote ‘The Celts [...] were and are a savage race, incapable of labour or even rude arts’.

So what changed? The answer is complicated but a few things stand out. Firstly, the enormous influence of Walter Scott leant a romantic sheen to Highland life. In an

1822 ceremony orchestrated by Scott, George II proceeded through Edinburgh wearing a tartan kilt and accompanied by bagpipes. Secondly, Highland regiments with kilts and claymores played a prominent role in empire-building throughout the nineteenth century. The savagery of the Celt was in this way gradually recast as martial prowess in the service of the empire. Finally, in the late 1800s archaeological discoveries on the continent helped to revamp the image of the ancient Celts as intellectually sophisticated and artistically gifted.

It was on the back of these changes that a Celtic connection became in the twentieth century desirable rather than shameful. Admittedly the nationalism of recent decades has appealed primarily to shared values rather than common descent. However, the belief that the Scots are a distinct Celtic people with a shared independent history was undoubtedly one precondition for the growth of the movement.

That belief is exemplified in Mel Gibson's *Braveheart*. In [one scene](#) Wallace gives an inspiring address to his fellow Scots. He wears a kilt, shouts Gaelic battle cries, and paints his face blue just as the Celts of antiquity are supposed to have done. Of course the film is a product of the Hollywood imagination rather than an authentic expression of Scottish national sentiment. Nevertheless, the SNP were quick to [capitalise on it](#) when it was released.

Clearly Scottish history is amenable to a number of interpretations. In fact the unionist version of the past has a longer pedigree than the nationalist one. Whilst the mythic view of a Celtic history populated by heroes like Wallace has become ideologically potent, it best serves the 'Yes Scotland' campaign by remaining in the background. All claims about the supposed antiquity of nations are highly dubious. But the recent inception of nationalist history in Scotland, compared to the rest of Europe, makes it particularly vulnerable

Placing such claims front and centre in the 'Yes' movement would therefore subject them to scrutiny which they could not withstand. The SNP have been wise to avoid doing so. Instead they have let '*Braveheart* history' lie in the popular consciousness as a powerful but largely unarticulated argument for independence.