

Poet's Passion Keeps Spirit of Wallace Alive

Scots Makar Marks Hero's Anniversary

LESLEY DUNCAN

The national poet of Scotland has written a work to mark the 700th anniversary of William Wallace's death. Edwin Morgan was asked to contribute a poem to an anthology marking the anniversary of the hero's execution in London on August 23, 1305. When first approached, the laureate, or maker, was polite but non-committal. However, the remarkable lines for Wallace were then sent to the compilers almost immediately. This latest by the 85 year-old may surprise readers with its eloquence and passion. When the question in the first line of the new poem - "Is it not better to forget?" - is countered by a negative, it is clear that Wallace is not going to be consigned to the resting ground of old unhappy far-off things and battles long ago. "Betrawal never to be forgotten, vndictiveness never to be forgotten, triumphalism never to be forgotten.

The poet himself was a 'bit surprised' at how strongly the poem emerged. He said "It's a very touchy subject...with all sorts of pitfalls."

However Morgan, who recently handed over his post as Glasgow's Poet Laureate to Liz Lochhead, said he believed he had negotiated them. He said that as soon as he started writing, "he got very, very involved", adding that everything about Wallace made it hard not to feel strongly moved. However the poet denied he could be fanning anti-English sentiment. "I don't think so." He responded mildly.

The poem goes on to consider the positive implications of Wallace's life as seen by Burns who identified him with ideals of liberty and freedom.

Morgan tilts at those who "fizzed with disgust at the crudities" of the film *Braveheart*, saying "The power of Wallace/Cuts through art/ but art calls attention to it/ Badly or well."

Despite being diagnosed with cancer six years ago, Morgan remains immensely productive. He continued writing more poems on public subjects in the last couple of years, and said there was a "Kind of obligation to make yourself a sort of spokesperson."¹

LINES FOR WALLACE

BY EDWIN MORGAN

Is it not better to forget?
It is better not to forget.
Betrayal never to be
forgotten,
Vindictiveness never to be
forgotten,
Triumphalism never to be
forgotten.
Body parts displayed at
different points of the
compass,
Between hanging and hacking.
The worst, the
disembowelling.
Blood raised in him, fervent.
Blood raced in him, fervent.
Blood razed in him, for ever
fervent in its death.
Far Burns was right to see it
was, not only in the field
That Scots would follow this
man,
With blades and war-horns
Sharp and shrill,
But with brains and books
Where the idea of liberty

Is impregnated and
impregnates.
Oh that too is sharp and shrill
And some cannot stand it
And some would never allow it
And some would rather die
For the regulated music
Of Zamyatin's Polyhymnia
Where nothing can go wrong.
Cinema sophisticates
Fizzed with disgust at the
crudities
Braveheart held out to them.
Over the cheeks of some
[Were they less sophisticated?]
A tear slipped unbidden.
Oh yes it did. I saw it.
The power of Wallace
Cuts through art
But art calls attention to it
Badly or well
In your room, in the street
Even by god if it came to it,
On a battlefield,
Think about it.
Remember him.

He has two new books on the way. The first, a play based on the Gilgamesh Legend, is due to be published by Carcanet in November.

The other, a new collection of poems, is called *A Book of Lives*, although it is unlikely to be as autobiographical as his 2003 volume, *Love and a Life*.

¹ Edwin Morgan passed away in 2010 at the age of 90.

The Wallace Muse: Poems and Artwork Inspired by the Life and Legend of William Wallace is compiled by Lesley Duncan and Elspeth King and published by Luath Press at £7.99.