

# Marshall Anderson

# Playing with Fire

Fire is a potent force. If we are to believe in genetic memory then fire transports us back to our prehistoric origin: to feel our primeval hairs stiffen as we are caught off balance between primitivism and contemporary science and technology. For the artist, fire is an element that can be immediately evocative and provocative. Its magic lies in the alchemic fusion between destruction and creation. To watch the unleashed force of destruction at work is thrilling. It is easy to understand, therefore, why Stirling Council's Department of Leisure and Cultural Services, when charged with the task of providing an appropriate millennial spectacular, opted conveniently for fire to entertain and thrill its citizens.

The *Stirling Observer's*: 'Blaze Of Glory For Millennium' (9/6/99) was the first public announcement of the Council's intentions that a 60 foot sculpture of Scottish hero Robert The Bruce would be set ablaze at Stirling Castle as part of a £1.2m programme of events. The idea had been commissioned from Regular Music, project manager for Stirling Council's millennium events. Writer Fiona Wilson explained that the origins of such hero worship-cum-sacrifice stem from a Spanish tradition of fire festivals. Barry Wright, Regular Music's impresario, said he hoped the idea would capture the imagination of the people of Stirling. The Council's Chief Executive, Keith Yates, said the festival is part of a two year programme aimed at involving everyone in the marking of a new millennium. Most significantly, he hopes the event will attract 20,000 visitors to Stirling and generate £2m.

Fire festivals are likely as old as our upright passage on the Earth and the true origins of many fire customs are long-since obscured. Such customs are believed to have their beginnings in heathen times when our ancestors worshipped Bael, the Sun-god and Ashtoreth (Astarte, Queen of heaven) with certain mystic observances chiefly connected with fire. In Druidic times, there were four great fire festivals: May day or Beltane deriving from Bel-tein: Bel in Gaelic signifying sun and tein, fire; Midsummer's eve; Hallowe'en, 1st of November when all fires were extinguished apart from those of the Druids, "from whose altars only the holy fire must be purchased by the householders for a certain price": and Yule. As soon as administrative hierarchies, whether Druid or town councils, come onto the scene some sort of finan-

cial implication is brought into play.<sup>1</sup>

But folklore and customs belong to the people who have developed them across the centuries. They are kept alive through practice and commitment. Many of these were founded on basic superstitions and beliefs that, with the rise of scientific knowledge, have become out-moded. Who today would pass their children and cattle through flames to protect them from disease, and who would kindle great bonfires near to cornfields to secure a blessing on their crops?

Although many such practices have died out some Scottish communities have kept their fire festivals blazing and appear not to have relied upon town councils and bureaucracies in order to do so. The potency of local customs is all the more intense when these observances are perpetuated by people-power and not imposed by a higher authority.

A rerun of the Fiona Wilson (11/6/99 *Stirling Observer County Issue*) piece printed a photograph of the two artists commissioned to design a sculpture of Robert The Bruce for incineration. Whatever the citizens of Stirling might have imagined a sculpture fit for burning might actually look like they were probably surprised to discover that the maquette for such a 60 ft structure was nothing more than a scale model of the heroic bronze statue by Pilkington Jackson, which stands proud on the site of The Battle of Bannockburn. The sculptors, Andrew Scott and Alison Bell, were possibly breaking copyright laws by so-doing.

Another *Observer* piece by Fiona Wilson (16/6/99 *Town Issue*) told us that there was, "concern amongst residents who don't agree with the idea of setting a hero on fire." Surprisingly, the first letters of disapproval did not appear within the *Observer's* pages, but in the the (Glasgow) *Herald*. It may well be the case that if the *Observer* is over-critical of Council policy it might lose the privilege of first option on press releases. The first published letter—demonstrating that *The Herald* might have an easier relationship with Stirling Council—came from Ian Scott, Director of The Saltire Society, who was not only writing on the behalf of incensed Society members but also personally: "At a time when we have recovered a measure of control over our own affairs we should be honouring those like the Bruce who helped create and sustain our identity as a nation throughout our long history rather than allowing an



ignorant 'mob' in Stirling to shame the rest of the country." Scott's prime objection was a cultural one he told me, not a debate about modern art. There was, he felt, a debate as to how The Burning should be handled. There is a fine line, he explained, as to whether a drawing or illuminated image or outline image created by fireworks might be more acceptable than a well-known embodiment of a much-loved hero.

The next letter to appear in *The Herald* of June 18th was from Alexander Stoddart of Paisley who is an established Scottish sculptor. His statue of David Hulme was unveiled on Edinburgh's Royal Mile earlier this year. Entitled, 'Revolting fiesta in Stirling', Stoddart's letter was a passionate and angry response that might have been improved by the writer taking more time to consider his argument and moderate his use of emotive language. For the better informed dilettantes and observers of the Scottish sculpture scene it is common knowledge that Stoddart had proposed a large scale sculpture for Stirling Castle esplanade which was vetoed by The Council in 1997. His letter could easily be interpreted as coming from someone with an axe to grind. However, it did close by

stating a valid point: “the Bruce statue is more than a logo, or a sodding ‘icon’, or any fun thing at all, and is rather a cherished component in a War Memorial, placed on or near some blood-soaked ground.”

The Battle of Bannockburn memorial stands on a raised area hemmed in on three sides by urban development. It was the threat of this encroaching housing that compelled a national committee led by the 10th Earl of Elgin and Kincardineshire, head of the Bruce family, to raise funds to purchase the 58 acre site in 1930. Arriving by car one is met by a hideous 1967 visitor centre with 1980s additions housing a shop of ‘tasteful’ souvenirs, the Bannockburn Cafe, and an interpretative display. One then walks a short distance up to the site itself. This is marked by a mish-mash of ill-placed shapes. The largest of these, a rotunda approximately 35m in diameter, is composed of a continuous wooden beam raised about 10 ft off the ground on steel pillars. Two sections of this circle contain curved walls of ugly, uncompromising concrete blocks cemented to a height of 8 ft. This 1962 rotunda encloses a flag pole (erected in 1870) flying The Saltire, and a dour-looking stone monument erected by public subscription and inaugurated by the Merchant Guild of Stirling in 1957. Dwarfed by this arena and standing some 100 meters away is Pilkington Jackson’s larger than life-size bronze of The Bruce on horseback. The statue is set valiantly high on a 12 ft plinth of granite blocks and stands about 25 ft in height. The whole being unveiled by the Queen on 24/6/64, the 650th anniversary of the battle.

A far more valid, and sustainable, investment of £1.2m would have been a millennium project to redesign the site of the Battle of Bannockburn retaining as its centre-piece Pilkington Jackson’s empowering, iconoclastic Bruce. What the sculptor would have thought about his work being copied in wood at two times original scale only to be set alight is anyone’s guess—he died in 1973.

Andrew Scott of Scott Associates, a business partnership of six sculptors based in Glasgow’s Maryhill, defended himself against Stoddart’s accusations of dishonour and treachery through *The Herald’s* Letters Page. As protest gathered the *Stirling Observer’s* editorial made no comment. The front page of 23/6/99 did notice that: ‘Outcry grows over burning of King Bob’. Inside ‘Feat of Flames’ by Fiona Wilson stated that the indifferent organisers are backing Bruce’s burning. Stirling Council’s leader, Corrie McChord, acknowledged that the project would be controversial but, “urged people not to be shy.” In a display of mock heroics he declared: “We are entering a new millennium. We have chosen this powerful figure from our past to lead us into the future. Let’s celebrate confidently.” McChord carried on in a more defensive tone. “The cost is certainly not the £50,000 suggested in the press.”

Andrew Scott informed me that his cost to make the replica Bruce was £45,000 and that once fabrication costs, labour, engineers’ fees etc. had been subtracted the company would be left with a ‘tiny’ profit. He implied that the project was being

undertaken for the fun of it and that his company had more important projects on its books. On the subject of copyright he believed it was The Council’s responsibility to check the legal position as regards copying Jackson’s work. In the *Observer* of 23/6/99 he said, “It will be created with respect to honour the life of Bruce and will be true to the original monument. It is a wonderful opportunity for Scottish art to be showcased and to see Stirling join the ranks of European cities like Barcelona and Paris famed for their bold public art projects and celebratory events.” A few lines further on Barry Wright was exercising hyperbole: “The model that artists Andy Scott and Alison Bell have created is breathtaking. What a tribute to Bruce, to the designer of the original monument and to Stirling—home of Scottish kings.” Maybe some of Scotland’s kings would have liked the symbolism, as for the citizens of Stirling, they were venting their ire. In the same issue the letters page was blazing.

A week later a letter from Bob McCutcheon, historian, archivist and antiquarian book dealer, appeared condemning The Council’s “crass stupidity and total lack of sensitivity towards the history of the area.” “Scots do not burn effigies of their heroes” declared McCutcheon. Had the Council taken pains to research the tradition of fire festivals and burnings in Scotland they might have reached the same conclusion. The Council’s chief spokesmen during the debacle were very keen to point out that they were emulating a Spanish tradition in Valencia where local heroes are torched as part of *Las Fallas*. This popular fire festival had been visited in March of the year by Barry Wright in the company of Alison Bell of Scott Associates. Obviously they were over-awed by the spectacle that they witnessed for, without cultural considerations, they automatically presumed that it would transport to Stirling. What they failed to recognise was *Las Fallas* had evolved as a folk art custom under particular cultural circumstances that could not be transported with the same meaning—especially to Scotland. It is a sad reflection that they did not think to develop strands within Scotland’s fire-rich tradition. Had they done so they might have come up with a less offensive and more culturally acceptable concept.

Under the banner, ‘Big Man, Big Sword, Big Fun’, Stirling Council had popularised history to mark the 700th anniversary of Wallace’s defeat of the English army at Stirling Bridge. Evidently the millennial event was an excuse to similarly celebrate The Bruce. The Council’s distinctive trivialisation of history and heroes attracted few supporters on this occasion. One letter only from an anonymous “working artist” thought that the project was “wonderful”.

By Wednesday July 7th Stirling Council and Regular Music were looking desperately for friendly support. The *Observer’s* front page announced, “Bruce Backlash Forces Council To Rethink Fire Stunt”. An ally of Regular Music in the form of Chris Kane, DJ with Central FM, who writes a weekly music review column in the

*Observer*, cantered lamely to the rescue. His attempt to place the Burning of Bruce in an historical context was shallow and feeble: “Robert The Bruce disliked the government of the day and decided to remove them. He was successful and today is our most popular hero.” Kane poses the question—were Guy Fawkes and Bruce all that different? His final flurry is a pathetic attempt at patriotic spin, “Bruce set the nation on fire 700 years ago. He lit a burning desire within us to be free of oppression and that fire may have smouldered over the years, but its never gone out. By setting fire to his image we are acknowledging that the fire Bruce started has now done its job. Symbolically the fire is healing the wounds of the last millennium and lighting the way forward to the future.” No one rallied to his cause, not even his teenage readership.

Next to attempt to turn the tide of public disapproval by placing a letter in the *Observer* was Councillor John Hendry, Deputy Leader of Stirling Council. He commenced thus, “When the council agreed to proceed with a spectacular millennium celebration centred on ancient Celtic traditions of fire festivals, we knew it would provoke debate and discussion, but we were confident that Stirling was mature enough to cope with it.” He was surprised that “no-one has come up with an alternative celebration.” However, The Council’s authoritarian role as purveyor and designer of culture via an extravagant spectacle was a clear, “we know best” message. Their arrogance being a declaration that no one could, or was more equipped, to do it better. Hendry said: “Officers have worked hard to provide the people of Stirling with the opportunity to celebrate the millennium in spectacular style... The £100,000 Community Chest is already opening up to provide local organisations with help to plan their own festivities.” In a cack-handed way the Council was trying to lavish money on the community and provide a service, but surely the history of celebration is a complex intertwining of spontaneity and custom brought about by community action and not through the agency of some bureaucracy.

Above Hendry’s somewhat superior letter appeared the first ‘Editorial Opinion’ on the subject by Colin Leslie, Chief Sub-Editor, who adopted a similar tone: “Let sensible alternatives now come forward from the public of the town, so that Stirling’s millennium party can give Scots something to be proud of—not ashamed of.” The pages of *The Observer* then went quiet in anticipation.

Monday 26th July: a critical day for the Council who had obviously rallied and put a plan of action into effect. That day a “planned” article by The (Glasgow) *Herald’s* Arts Editor, Keith Bruce, appeared adopting a matter-of-fact approach. He did little more than asked of him and we must conclude that his heart wasn’t really into the scam that had been arranged at a more senior level within *The Herald* and Stirling Council hierarchies. Bruce had been given ‘access’ to key players so one can assume that what he reported was not word-of-mouth rumour. There are “Other figures



under consideration as the potential local hero", he informed us. These being, "the legendary Wolf on the Craig, currently used as a marketing symbol by the MacRobert Arts Centre at Stirling University, and contemporary figures such as footballer Billy Bremner, rugby's Kenny Logan, and actor Robbie Coltraine and actress Diana Rigg, who both live locally." That same evening The Council held a 'private' meeting at their headquarters which, in conjunction with Keith Bruce's limp article and a 'briefed' interview by STV with Council Chief Executive Keith Yates afterwards, was designed to turn the tide of public opinion. The next day "Coltraine saves Robert the Bruce from fire" appeared in *The Herald*. It had been penned by a local freelance who door-stepped the 'private' meeting on the behalf of Central Scotland News Agency. It concluded, "A Stirling University spokesman said [Diana] Rigg was filming in England." He added: "It must be April 1st again."

Wednesday 28th July: The *Observer* declared, "No U-Turn On Burning Bruce". Journalist Clare Grant tells us, "Stirling Council are sticking to their guns". The indefatigable Keith Yates once again came to the fore, "We had people from the BBC up on Friday to discuss what we were doing here and they were delighted about it." Yates then went on to "refute" the story that the Bruce could be replaced with Diana Rigg, Kenny Logan etc. forgetting that he initiated the story in his interviews with Keith Bruce and STV.

Bob McCutcheon, also in attendance at the meeting was quoted, "Those who objected were more or less told that they were being parochially minded." The Council were now playing that tired old joker, the parochial card, setting themselves up as worldly sophisticates. Parochialism is all too often interpreted as being narrow-minded, whereas a more accurate meaning might be, defence of the parish. The *Observer's* editor, Alan Rennie issued a timely warning, "I would advise the council voluntarily to abandon their plan ...If they don't, public opinion will stop this proposal in its tracks."

The *Observer* held a telephone poll on Wednesday August 4th and a week later published the result: 32 were in favour of Burning Bruce, 1076 were against. The parishioners had defended well.

Monday 9th August: the heavy artillery arrives. The Saltire Society organises a 'public protest

meeting' in Stirling's Golden Lion Hotel to discuss the Council's decision to burn a wooden statue of King Robert the Bruce, King of Scotland from 1306 to 1329. Our Scottish hero could never be described as a paragon of virtue for on the 10th of February 1306 he arranged a meeting with John 'The Red' Comyn, his only rival to the throne, in Greyfriars' Church in Dumfries and, in circumstances which have never been fully explained, murdered him in front of the altar. Bruce's allegiance to Edward I likely cost William Wallace his life and his own self-arranged coronation at Scone further divided Scotland making it all the more vulnerable. The strong mix of hatred and love that The Bruce invoked in Scots demonstrably contributed to his hero status. It was this that the Saltire Society met together to protect. Although absent Scotland's historical novelist, Nigel Tranter, sent a message: greatly deploring the proposal. His sentiments were echoed by Dr Fiona Watson of Stirling University and Professor Geoffrey Barrow who addressed the assembly saying, "the burning of an effigy was meant to dishonour the name and reputation of the person involved."

Forces were now gathering on all fronts to discuss The Burning. Stirling Council held another 'private' meeting on Wednesday 11th August. This time sculptor, Andrew Scott was invited to assist Barry Wright in his presentation of the project and to explain the full extent of the entertainments package. According to Scott there was a very positive agreement to the overall event but a very negative disapproval of burning The Bruce. Every one of the thirty community council representatives present was against the action. Bob McCutcheon told me that a petition raised at the close of The Saltire Society meeting was signed by 100 people within 2 days at his bookshop alone and if the Council had not backed off they would have received 75,000 emails in protest from all over the world.

Friday 13th August: The *Stirling Observer*, banner headline, "WE'VE WON".

The Battle of The Burning had been a resounding victory for the democratic process or people power. Stirling Council had been backed into a corner but Andrew Scott told me that no formal contract to build a 60 ft copy of Pilkington Jackson's statue of The Bruce had ever been confirmed.

Wednesday 25th August: *Stirling Observer*, "Bruce Still Invited To Millennium Party!" Although it will definitely not be burnt, the Council, in a comic display of mock heroics, decide to go ahead with the construction anyway so that it can, "go on display at the Stirling Castle esplanade where it will be illuminated and seen for miles around." Astonishingly, Councillor John Hendry tells us that the wooden Bruce "could be a prototype for a permanent statue after the millennium celebrations."

Before the end of September Scott Associates had been officially appointed by Stirling Council to produce a large fire spectacular. The honour of replacing The Bruce was to go to The Wolf on The

Craig, an afore mentioned heraldic device. Local legend has it, "One night, long ago, when Viking raiders were sneaking up on Stirling they disturbed a wolf. The wolf howled, awoke the sleeping townspeople and saved Stirling from attack." Now in a defiant and resolute display of pyromania Stirling Council would thank that legendary guardian by burning it.

#### Notes

- 1 *Old Scottish Customs* by E. J. Guthrie, published in 1885. A Miss Gordon Cumming is quoted.