

**STIRLING BEFORE PYLONS**

**acting with**

**FRIENDS OF THE OCHILS**

**as a Relevant Person Group**

**for the purposes of the**

**STIRLING SESSION**

**of the Public Inquiry into  
Scottish and Southern Energy's proposals for the  
Beauly to Denny 400 KV Steel Tower Double Circuit  
Overhead Electricity Transmission Line**

**PRECOGNITION**

**Dr Fiona Watson**

**Stirling and the Ochils:  
A historic landscape at the heart of the nation**

## **My background**

My name is Fiona Jane Watson

I am currently a freelance historian and writer. I was formerly a senior lecturer in History and Director of the Centre for Environmental History at the University of Stirling. I have a Ph.D. in Medieval Scottish History from the University of Glasgow and a degree in Medieval History from the University of St Andrews. I have published numerous articles on Scottish History and three books - *Under the Hammer: Edward I and Scotland, 1296-1305* (Birlinn Press, 2005); *Scotland: A History* (Tempus Publishing Ltd., 2001, 2002, 2003); with T.C. Smout and Alan R. MacDonald, *The Native Woodlands of Scotland: An Environmental History, 1500-1900* (Edinburgh University Press, 2005). I also presented a 10-part television series on Scottish History on BBC Scotland – *In Search of Scotland* – in 2001, as well as contributing to numerous programmes for both UK and US audiences on medieval Scottish history.

## **Introduction**

As Magnus Magnusson states in his introduction to Stirling Council's (successful) bid for city status (StBP/6/10):

“Stirling has a unique niche in the story of Scotland. For centuries it was the cockpit of our nationhood. Its marvellous royal castle dominated the nation's destiny. Today the gleamingly restored Great Hall shines like a beacon over the landscape of the heart of Scotland, past and present.”

Despite seeing it everyday, the residents of the Stirling area do not take the ancient and beautiful landscape in which they live for granted. This is as true for those in Fallin and Denny as it is for Sheriffmuir and Bridge of Allan; indeed, individuals from these villages were among the most vocal when they perceived a risk to what they thought might be a part of the site of the battle of Bannockburn through house-building in 2000. We can be sure, too, that the

tourists who throng there certainly do not take it for granted.<sup>1</sup> I intend in this submission to show why this landscape is so important at a local, national and international level, what it has meant – as a place of beauty and of historic value – for such a long time, and to argue that the benefits of placing pylons within it are negligible when compared to the potential damage to the tourist industry, including film and television interest, and the less quantifiable, but equally important, well-being of the nation.

### **Stirling, the nation's theatre of war**

The town of Stirling, made a burgh by David I around 1124, was one of the original Four Burghs of Scotland (along with Edinburgh, Roxburgh and Berwick) which regulated trade and town affairs across the country through their regular conventions. The castle comes into the historic record slightly earlier in 1110, when King Alexander I dedicated a chapel within the castle walls; 14 years later he died there. Indeed, numerous kings and queens have lived in the castle as it was a favourite place to hunt after King William the Lion established a park in the area in 1170. Many, including Mary, Queen of Scots and her son, James VI, were born, baptised, and/or crowned in and around Stirling.

However, the castle rock's history extends far back into prehistoric times, almost certainly housing a Bronze Age fort now lost beneath the current fortification. The castle itself has been attacked and/or besieged at least 16 times in its long history, a testament to its vital strategic role in guarding the lowest crossing point across the River Forth, the main north-south route through which Scotland could be controlled. It should therefore come as no surprise that so many crucial events have taken place within this theatre of war, encompassing the rock of Stirling itself, the floodplain of the meandering Forth, and the dramatic backdrop of the Ochils – Stirling Bridge (1297), Bannockburn (1314), Sauchieburn (1488) and Sheriffmuir (1715). As Richard Fawcett, one of Scotland's leading experts on historic buildings, argues:

“It would be hard to think of a site anywhere else in Scotland that was a better candidate for fortification than

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the page on ‘Aspiring’ in the city-status document.

that of Stirling castle. The combination of a superbly strong rock summit and a position at the physical centre of the nation, overlooking the junction of several of the principal lines of communication across the country gave Stirling a unique strategic value. Whoever commanded this site was well placed to control traffic both across the Midland valley and between the Lowlands and the Highlands, and this was amply reflected in the prominent role that Stirling came to occupy in Scotland's history.”  
 [Stirling Castle, Historic Scotland/Batsford, 1995, p.13.  
 (StBP/5/5)]

In other words, the prominent rocky outcrop on which Stirling castle sits impregably, like Edinburgh, is only a part of the story. At least as important is its strategic location, which places it physically at the centre of Scotland. This propensity for hosting battles was already noted by the reign of James VI (1566-1625) when a viewing platform was planned for the king and his court to survey the ‘brooch’ (ie. the place where Scotland is held together) at the centre of his historic kingdom [‘Stirling Castle’, *The Oxford Companion to Scottish History*, ed. Michael Lynch (Oxford University Press, 2001), p.592. (StBP/5/16)].

This historic environment has thus invoked a sense of pride among many generations of Scots and admiration from those who have lived in, or visited, the area. In essence, it provides a sense of being not just at the physical heart of Scotland, but at the very heart of Scottish history.

### **The historic environment**

Definitions of, and, equally importantly, policies towards the historic environment are still far from clear-cut, for the obvious reason that, in contrast to individual historic sites or buildings, it is much more difficult to describe and legislate to protect large areas which may encompass many different types of existing landuse. However, it is certainly now recognised that Scotland's historic environment requires official consideration, over and above that which exists in, for example, the protection given by legislation to Listed Buildings, Scheduled Ancient Monuments, and Designed Landscapes. To that end, Historic Scotland is currently engaged in Scotland's Historic Environment Audit, “an ongoing project which provides an assessment of the extent and condition of Scotland's historic environment ... and how they are changing over

time”. This has been undertaken because: “The value of and potential of Scotland’s historic environment has not been properly measured or explored. As well as its vast economic value, it also represents an imprint of past generations, one that forges connections between people and the places they live and visit”. [<http://www.heritageaudit.org.uk/>] Given the embryonic nature of this intended protection of the historic environment, it is surely essential that we apply the precautionary principle to any scheme likely to have a significant effect. This is particularly true when the historic environment in question is, as I would argue, of such national and international significance as Stirling and the Ochils; the construction of a line of 46+ metre high pylons through its heart would surely qualify as having a significant effect.

The term ‘historic environment’, combining a sense of place and a sense of the past, is both hard to put a finger on and highly evocative. Renowned historian, Simon Schama, found it first, aged eight, on reading Rudyard Kipling’s *Pook of Pook’s Hill*:

“For a small boy with his head in the past, Kipling’s fantasy was potent magic. Apparently there were some places in England where, if you were a child (in this case Dan or Una), people who had stood on the same spot centuries before would suddenly and inexplicably materialize. With Puck’s help you could time-travel by standing still. On Pook’s Hill, lucky Dan and Una got to chat with Viking warriors, Roman centurions, Norman knights, and then went home for tea.” [*Landscape and Memory*, Harper Collins, London, 1995, p.3. (StBP/5/7)]

Pook’s Hill is fictional and designed to inspire children. The Ochils, on the other hand, are very real and have long inspired grown ups to wax lyrical about this unique landscape, which combines the naturally beautiful with the historically resonant. Many writers have also sought to underline the dramatic coherence of this historic landscape, as well as the unique beauty of the Ochils in particular. The following extracts are merely examples.

“The situation of Stirling is romantic. Raised on a rock in the middle of an extensive plain, in the near neighbourhood of a winding river, which seems unwilling

to part from it, and, having the full view of finely cultivated fields, bounded on the south by rising woodlands, and on the north by the Ochil hills, it is scarcely possible to imagine any landscape more beautiful or picturesque.”

[*The Statistical Account of Scotland*, ed. Sir John Sinclair, Vol. VIII, No. XIV, Parish of Stirling (London, 1826?, 1792, p.274. (StBP/5/8)]

“Their [the Ochils’] lofty and precipitous front, stretching in one long unbroken chain from west to east, clothed with rich pasture, interrupted by rugged precipices and bare rocks, presents to the eye one of the most picturesque and beautiful mountain ranges to be found in Scotland. The most remarkable peak in this parish [Logie] is Dumyat ... The well known windings of the Forth and the more humble, but hardly less picturesque meanderings of the Devon, “Stirling’s ancient tower and town”, the ruins of Cambuskenneth Abbey, and the beautiful domain of Airthrey castle, form the most striking objects in the immediate foreground.”

[*The New Statistical Account of Scotland*, vol. VIII Dumbarton, Stirling, Clackmannan (Blackwood & sons, 1845), 1841 Parish of Logie, p.215 (StBP/5/9)]

“The sloping eminence on which the upper part of Stirling and its citadel are built, in combination with the River Forth, the rich vale through which it flows, and the magnificent scenery formed by an extended plain and the fine ranges of hills and mountains beyond, give it great picturesque beauty. On the highest part of it ... stands the ancient castle of Stirling, which, when seen from the south or west, itself forms, with its solemn gray battlements and tower, and the sheer precipice beneath, an object of great and striking beauty, and it commands all around a panorama of almost unrivalled loveliness and grandeur ... “

[*The New Statistical Account of Scotland*, vol. VIII, Dumbarton, Stirling, Clackmannan (Blackwood & sons, 1845), 1841 Parish of Stirling, p.391. (StBP/5/10)]

It should be noted that the view from the south mentioned above places the castle within the scenic context of the Ochils and would certainly be affected by the proposed route of the pylons. This particular author also took the trouble to return to the subject of the historical importance of the Abbey Craig, as well as

the Wallace monument, writing, as he did, within a decade or so of its construction.

“In an aesthetic point of view there is no more beautiful range of hills ... Certainly the world contains far loftier peaks and sublimer adjuncts of scenery but nowhere can it show mountains with a more beautiful contour of outline, or such a charming succession of those wavy and rounded curves – those lines of grace and beauty – which delight the eye of the artist. ....

“The view from Dumyat well recompenses any trouble or fatigue that may have been incurred. ... it presents a most magnificent prospect of alpine and champaign country combined taking in all the county between Stirling castle and Ben Lomond in the upper basin of the Forth, and all the windings of the river with its shores and estuary from Stirling to the Bass. ... The whole of Sheriffmuir, with its battlefield, lies at our feet on one side; on the other we can look on the Abbey Craig and the Wallace monument to the plain of Stirling, while a little further off, away to the south, is the field of Bannockburn.

“Here, too, [the Abbey Craig] had been in former times an ancient vitrified fort, which has in great measure been obliterated in the course of the erection of the Wallace monument, the lofty baronial tower, 220 feet in height, which has been built here in commemoration of the great national hero of Scotland.”

[David Beveridge, *Beyond the Ochils and Forth*, (Blackwood, Edinburgh and London, 1888), pp.248-9; p.253; p.316. (StBP/5/11)]

The writer of the Logie Parish entry in the first Statistical Account (1790-1) states that the archaeological remains on the Abbey Craig were “said to be erected in Oliver Cromwell’s time, when he laid siege to the castle of Stirling, but without effect”. [p.288] The previous reference to a vitrified fort is more likely, given that there are a number of such ancient establishments in the vicinity; however, the essential point is the perception of long-standing human activity upon the Abbey Craig, the most potent of which is commemorated by the current Monument.

This perception of the area's ancient and dramatic human history is a common theme. R. Menzies Fergusson, in his book, *Logie. A Parish History* (1905, StBP/5/12), looks into origins of local placenames, stating that:

“The name Aithrey, or Airthrey, is supposed to be a corruption of Ard-rathad, “high or ascending road” and an old and very steep road leads through it to Sheriffmuir or, which is more likely, from Gaelic Aithrinn, “a sharp point” or “a conflict”.” [p.41]

In fact, according to Angus Watson, the name comes from the Gaelic ‘Aithre’, which means place of cows [*The Ochils. Placenames, History, Tradition*, (Perth and Kinross District Libraries, 1995), p.17]. However, all of these meanings (including the fact that it must have been coined before 1300 when Gaelic began to retreat in the face of Scots-English) underline the antiquity of the human presence there. It is striking, too, that Mr Fergusson above finds it ‘more likely’ that the meaning should refer to a conflict.

The New Statistical Account (StBP/5/10) contains, in addition to the parish entries, some ‘General Observations on the County of Stirling. In it the author remarks – in a sentiment echoed over a century later by Richard Fawcett [see above] – that:

“The position of Stirling Castle, amidst extensive marshes, and near to the banks of the river Forth, puts it into so peculiar a position that it became, in a great measure, the key between the north and south of Scotland; and it became difficult for moving armies to pass from the one to the other, without approaching this, the most noted of Scotland's battlefields.” [p.453]

### **The Battle of Stirling Bridge and the Wallace Monument**

The author referring above to ‘the most noted of Scotland's battlefields’ is not thinking of one particular conflict, but the fact that so many have taken place within the Stirling theatre of war. However, there is one battle that is particularly commemorated and again underlines the coherence of the Ochils/Stirling historic environment.

The battle of Stirling Bridge is the reason why the National Wallace Monument is situated on the Abbey Craig. Traditionally, this is the spot from where, in September 1297, the Scottish army, having come south over the Sheriffmuir road, watched the manoeuvrings of the English army on the southern bank of the Forth. The English commander, the Earl of Surrey, was more comfortably ensconced in Stirling Castle. Once the English army began finally to cross the old wooden bridge over the Forth, the Scots then proceeded up the causeway to barricade the northern end of the bridge, around Cornton. The resulting Scottish victory served to undo the military and other humiliations they had suffered at English hands over the previous eighteen months and gave them the confidence to continue to attempt to regain Scotland's independence. The architect of that victory was an unknown member of the lesser nobility, William Wallace, along with Sir Andrew Murray who died in the battle and whose role is thus largely forgotten.

We take it for granted today that the National Wallace Monument should preside over Stirling's historic landscape in commemoration of that important victory over 700 years ago. But when the idea of constructing a national monument to mark the achievements of William Wallace was first mooted in the early 1800s, it was presumed that it would be in Edinburgh, the capital. However, Glasgow – by then regarded as the second city (to London) of the British Empire – contested Edinburgh's right to represent the nation in commemorating the hero and other towns also pitched in. In the end, Stirling took the initiative and persuaded everyone else that the site of Wallace's finest hour was the most appropriate place to build the monument. John T Rothead's Gothic tower design to be placed on the Abbey Craig was agreed at a great meeting in the King's Park at Stirling, another component of the wider historic environment, in 1856. The building, funded by public subscription, was finished and handed over in 1869 on the 572<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the battle. There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that this is the *national* Wallace monument. It should also be noted that the official visitor numbers, which have increased significantly since the film *Braveheart* came out in 1996, is a minimum figure since, as Graeme Morton points out, they do not "include those who climbed the Abbey Craig for free to admire the view – the tourist-pulling power of the

monument can only be underestimated” [*William Wallace: Man and Myth*, Sutton Publishing, Stroud, 2001, p.80. (StBP/5/15)].

The National Wallace Monument is also a significant building in its own right. As David Beveridge noted in 1888 “... It both forms a prominent object in the landscape, and commands a fine and far-extended prospect”. [Beveridge, *Beyond the Ochils*, p.316] This prospect is now directly under threat. Richard Fawcett, in his book on Stirling Castle, also praises the intrinsic merits of the monument, in addition to its commemorative purpose, describing it as ‘magnificent’. It should be noted that Picture 5 in his book underlines the importance of the view towards the Wallace Monument overlooking the site of the medieval bridge from Stirling Castle. Indeed, there are a plethora of illustrations – from Scottish history books to postcards and prints - which make use of this iconic vista, looking across from the Castle over the Monument to the hills behind. Indeed, the front cover of the most recent major history of Scotland – *The New Penguin History of Scotland* (2001) – is precisely this view. In the future, if the pylons go ahead, a camera might be able to restrict sight of the pylons; the eye will not.

It has been argued by Historic Scotland that the view looking west from Stirling Castle is the most precious one, an opinion formed by the fact that that view is explicitly mentioned as the best from all the royal lodgings in Scotland in an entry in the *Accounts of the Masters of Works* in May 1583. However, this singular reference should not be taken to preclude there being other superlative views from the Castle. The royal lodgings look west. However, the Great Hall, which was constructed even earlier, takes explicit advantage of the view along the Ochils. Indeed, if you sit on the King’s Chair and look through the enormous window to the right of the royal dais, you are looking straight across (albeit through the restrictive medium of bubbly medieval-type glass) to the Wallace Monument and the Ochils, a view that will be fundamentally altered by the addition of these higher pylons. This evidence in itself suggests that previous kings of Scotland were entirely appreciative of the aesthetic qualities of the Ochils so eloquently described by later writers and wished to share it with their honoured guests. This is also the view that so many tourists and visitors to

the Castle see today from the esplanade. It is, indeed, the main view that they enjoy throughout their visit to this popular site since comparatively few visitors get as far as the western end of the ramparts, to appreciate the view to the west. We might also consider the notion that Historic Scotland's archaeologists, with a primary concern and responsibility for the built environment and a focus on material culture, have slightly different priorities than historians like myself, who not only work out what happened, but deal with human motivation and the meanings of events. This is in no sense intended as a criticism; I merely wish to suggest that professionals engaged in looking at the past do not necessarily all think the same way.

Finally, I would like to point to the number of occasions that film crews have taken advantage of the dramatic sweep of the Ochils, the lofty eminence of the Wallace monument and the noble vista of the castle perched on its rock as evidence for the importance of the area historically and aesthetically. These include BBC's *A History of Britain* (2000), BBC Scotland's *In Search of Scotland* (2001), National Geographic's documentary to accompany *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* (2003), History Channel's *Lost World's: Braveheart's Scotland* (2006), BBC Scotland's *William Wallace* (2005) and *King of Scots* (2006). I myself have even been involved in filming from a helicopter along the Ochils and then across to Stirling Castle. It has therefore proved entirely possible so far to film Stirling's historic environment without having to worry about the intrusion of the paraphernalia of twentieth century life. Are we sure that these much larger pylons would not be visible alongside any shot of the Wallace Monument, jeopardising the potential to film in the future? We cannot tell the history of Scotland without mentioning – on many, many occasions – the Stirling area; how terrible it would be if we were unable to show as well as tell.

### **Conclusions**

I have aimed here to underline and complement the evidence presented by Elspeth Smith and Virginia Wills, to show the coherent and long-standing nature of the Stirling/Ochils historic environment and the importance, both aesthetically and historically, of the view both to and from the western

extremity of the Ochils in general, and to and from the Castle/Abbey Craig in particular. This area is uniquely important to the national psyche, presiding as it does over some of the most crucial moments in the nation's past. This is not merely my own personal opinion reading history in a certain way to argue a particular case; the images of the area used time and again on television, in books and on postcards and prints are testament to the general truth of that opinion. In particular, the battle of Stirling Bridge, which arguably changed the course of Scottish history, encompasses within its story both Stirling Castle *and* the Ochils/Abbey Craig, as well as the Bridge over which the battle was actually fought. Its commemoration in the National Wallace Monument was meant to be the highest honour that Scotland could conceive to the memory of its victor, Sir William Wallace. As the Rt. Hon. George Reid (then MSP for Ochil constituency, and the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament) says:

“I cannot think of any other country which would permit such a blight so close to a landmark which symbolises the right of the people to be a nation.”  
(*The Herald*, December 13, 2005; StBP/4/7)

To return to Simon Schama's poignant evocation of a historic environment, I would argue that visitor and resident alike experience something similar to Pook's Hill when standing on the battlements of Stirling castle or at the top of the Wallace monument. The imprint of the modern world fades away under our gaze as we imagine Wallace's men marching down the Sheriffmuir road, taking up position to watch the English across the Forth, before gathering up their courage to go out and meet them. Over five hundred years later, two other armies met on the Ochils; this time it was British government forces that marched up the Sheriffmuir road to meet a Jacobite army. This is precisely the area that will be affected most heavily by the pylons, which would, by their size, fundamentally alter the scale of the landscape, drawing the eye away from that to which it is, and has for so long been, attracted, the aesthetic and historic nature of the area. The paraphernalia of the twenty-first century must not, for the sake of both Scotland's economy and Scotland's sense of self, be allowed to change our ability to reach back into the past, a past that sells Scotland to tourists and filmmakers, and teaches us who we are. Undergrounding the pylons would lead to the removal of the existing power line, resulting in a significant

improvement in landscape quality. Though the costs will certainly be much higher than overhead pylons, it is more than worth it for the sake of preserving – indeed enhancing - this unique and iconic landscape.