

Letter from Scotland

There's nothing like climbing a hill to get things in perspective.

I recently climbed Traprain Law, one of those “volcanic plugs” that run from the Bass Rock and Berwick Law to the Edinburgh hills. They are 350 million years old, so there is a sense of deep time up here, as well as a panoramic view of the world below, stretching out across the rich farmland to the blue sea.

The experts say there's been a burial site on Traprain Law since 1500BC and an Iron Age hill fort right up to the Roman occupation in the second century. The Romans called the local Celtic tribe, the Votadini, an appropriate word thesedays, given our attachment to voting and a people's democracy. Of which more in a moment.



Hill with a view. Traprain Law, East Lothian.

I can't leave Traprain Law without mentioning the famous "Roman Hoard", a pile of silverware found during excavations in 1919, which is thought to have been buried around 400 AD. It's now on display in the National Museum in Edinburgh. And one final fact about Traprain Law, well not quite a fact. The Law is supposed to be a favourite place for spotting UFOs. Perhaps that's how the fairies, who are supposed to haunt the hill, got there.

Seeing things in these historical and mythical dimensions, gives us, as I say, a sense of perspective on the issues of our day. This week the SNP published its plan for a national assembly to draw up a written constitution for an independent Scotland. It would, the SNP suggests, include protection for the NHS as a free health service, a ban on nuclear weapons and a referendum on the monarchy.



MAY 1999. WINNIE EWING IS SWORN IN ON OPENING DAY OF THE NEW SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT IN THE CHAMBER OF THE ASSEMBLY BUILDING ON THE MOUND, EDINBURGH. PHOTOGRAPHS © 1999 SCOTTISH

PARLIAMENTARY CORPORATE BODY.



MAY 1999. WINNIE EWING IS HANDS OVER THE CHAIR OF THE CHAMBER TO NEWLY ELECTED PRESIDING OFFICER SIR DAVID STEEL ON OPENING DAY OF THE NEW SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT IN THE CHAMBER OF THE ASSEMBLY BUILDING ON THE MOUND, EDINBURGH. PHOTOGRAPH(C) 1999 SCOTTISH PARLIAMENTARY CORPORATE BODY.



May 1999

Winnie Ewing MSP is sworn in the temporary chamber accommodation of the General Assembly of the Church of

Scotland on the Mound, Edinburgh.



12 May 2009

Former MSP and first person to chair the new Scottish Parliament, Winnie Ewing is pictured during the unveiling of a portrait of Winnie lent to the Parliament by her son Fergus Ewing MSP. Pic – Andrew Cowan / Scottish Parliament

It's ironic that the queen of the independence movement, Winnie Ewing, has died this very week at the age of 93. Who can forget her words on devolution day 1999, just after she was elected Presiding Officer, "I hereby reconvene the Scottish Parliament." It had not met since 1707. She was a charismatic woman who sprang onto the political stage in 1967 with a shock victory over Labour in the Hamilton by-election. It was the first sign that the SNP and independence would become the huge political force it is today.

Two of her children have gone on to serve as members of the Scottish Parliament, Fergus and Annabelle. Fergus got into trouble this week for being the only SNP member to defy the party whip and vote to remove the "circular economy" minister, the Green MSP Lorna Slater. He is critical of her "deposit return scheme" for drinks containers and this week the company set up to run it fell into administration. He also doesn't much like the Greens being in coalition with his mother's SNP.

Which brings us back to another millennial issue, climate change. Official figures out this week show a rise in greenhouse gas emissions of 2.4 per cent in 2021, which means Scotland has missed its target in four out of the last five years – the exception being 2020, the year of severe Covid lockdowns. The worst offenders were, in order: transport, agriculture, business, homes and energy supply.

The Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer was in Scotland this week to announce Labour's plans for the environment. The central pledge was an end to new licences for oil and gas fields and instead a promise of 50,000 jobs in green industries. He didn't spell out which industries but he said

Labour's new state-owned energy company would be based in Scotland.



Royal Highland Show. Photo © 2023 Martin McAdam

It's fitting then that this weekend's Royal Highland Show in Edinburgh has a green theme, everything from sustainable food production to displays of electric vehicles. The "Royal Highland" is one of the biggest agricultural shows on earth. It's been going since 1822 and has grown to include a thousand exhibitors, 900 competitions, 6,500 animals and tens of thousands of visitors. The sheep-shearing competition, for example, has attracted competitors from 30 countries from around the woolly world.

The agriculture industry is going through yet another of its revolutions in the never-ending effort to make it "sustainable". State subsidies are slowly shifting away from maximising production and towards environmental goals. This revolution seems even more critical than the previous ones – the 18th century enclosures, the 19th century scientific developments, the 20th century advances in machinery and the

replacement of manpower. But somehow, through the centuries, we have managed to feed ourselves – at least in the West.

The Highland Show may be a long way from Glastonbury but both are forms of “county fairs” which have been held in Britain for centuries. This weekend, it looks like both will be festivals for sun-worshippers.

As was the solstice, on Wednesday. Sun-worshippers gathered to watch the rising sun strike the magic stones at Stonehenge, just as it struck, a few moments later, the standing stones at Callanish in the Western Isles and the Ring of Brodgar in Orkney. We are back in the world of deep time and broad perspective.



Royal Highland Show. Photo © 2023 Martin McAdam