

## The Geography of Strathallan, Scotland

Jane E. Paterson\*

*Bristol, England*

Strathallan consists of the drainage basin of the Allan, a small tributary of the River Forth in the Central Lowlands of Scotland. The valley is fourteen miles in length and twelve miles in width and is drained westwards to the Forth. It is bounded by hills rising to 3000 feet above mean sea-level: on the north the Braes (or Hills) of Doune part of the Scottish Highlands and on the south the Ochil Hills. Strathallan's position is very important for it is the central section of a corridor of lowland which links East and West coasts of Scotland. Though the word Strath signifies a wide valley, Strathallan is narrower and more upland in character than the Vale of the Forth to the West, or Strathmore to the East; but it is continuous with both. The highest portion of the corridor is the divide, 430 feet above mean sea-level, which separates Strathallan and Strathmore.

In many ways Strathallan may be regarded as typical of rural Scotland. It illustrates very clearly the effect of such geographic factors as accessibility, relief, soil and climate on man's activities.

Structurally, Strathallan is a synclinal trough composed of Old red sandstone rock which is deeply buried under glacial deposits. The hill slopes above the 700 feet contour are covered with boulder clay or "till." Below this level glacial melt waters have sorted out the drift into heaps of gravel and sand, providing very light and infertile soils. The uneven surface adds to the difficulties of agriculture. "The riddlings of creation" a local farmer described his land.

The farms and wayside villages of Strathallan are very old. Many of them have descriptive names. The prefix "drum" meaning a ridge, is very common as are other names suggesting the hummocky surface. "Hungry Hill" is the name of a farm on a glacial knoll. On a bleak, exposed portion of the Braes of Doune is an isolated sheep farm, "Cauld Hame" meaning Cold Home.

The climate of Strathallan is maritime. The average temperature for July is 57° Fahrenheit, and for January 34°. Except for the Southwestern regions Strathallan does not receive much sunshine. The ripening season for crops is late and there is a possibility of frost in June.

The valley lies open to the prevailing West winds. The landscape is bare and treeless except in a few sheltered tributary valleys. Rain occurs at all seasons. The average annual total is 48 inches.

The conditions of soil and climate are such that grain cannot be raised as a money crop. Oats, potatoes, turnips, hay, are raised chiefly as fodder for livestock. The cultivated area is confined to a narrow strip of land along the valley floor. Since in recent years sheep farming has been more profitable than arable farming, most farmers have some of their land in permanent pasture. The Blackface Sheep, a hardy breed, valuable for the quality

\* On the Bloomington, Illinois, High School faculty, 1936-37.

of its mutton, lives successfully on the heather moorlands to the North and South. The pasture of Strathallan, however, is not of a quality suitable for dairy cattle.

In two respects the lateness of the season in Strathallan has been put to good account. The rather rigorous conditions make the cattle raised here hardy and healthy and therefore desirable for fattening purposes. Farmers in more favoured localities in Britain also get their supplies of seed potatoes from Strathallan because the late maturing varieties are free from degeneration diseases, and the sandy soil of the valley is very suitable for them.

Strathallan's location has always been of fundamental importance to its prosperity. It is in close contact with the Highlands to the North and with all parts of the Central Lowlands. Main highways and railways pass through it. In early days when domestic economy prevailed the accessibility of Strathallan was a disadvantage since farms and villages were at the mercy of pillagers and invaders. The Romans built a permanent camp in the Strath. Other reminders of past conflict are Tumuli, Celtic Forts and place names. The Battle of Sheriffmuir was fought in 1715 on the North-West of the Ochils in the first of the Highland Rebellions. "Tighnabhair", the name of a farm signifies the "House on the Battlefield", and another "Blairmore" means the Great Battle.

When peace was established the inhabitants of Strathallan became interested in maintaining good roads. Tolls were levied for this purpose. Local industries flourished such as the tanning of leather, weaving, brewing, the manufacture of ink and potato starch, since there was abundance of water power from the Allan tributaries and good communications. But Strathallan's industrial prosperity did not survive the Industrial Revolution. Population after 1861 drifted towards the newly created factory towns on the coalfields to the South. Many mills and hamlets of the Strath have been deserted. The stage coach with its multiplicity of needs, disappeared. Today some 150 trains pass through Strathallan. Only 10 of these stop at the wayside stations. On the roads "petrol" stations replace changing houses and hotels. Only two of the villages in Strathallan have been able to profit by the new industrialism by becoming holiday resorts, owing to their situation in the most picturesque and sheltered portion of the Strath. The remaining villages cater chiefly to the none-too-prosperous farming communities around. Good game and fishing have attracted wealthy industrialists to become landowners. Farmers have security of tenure and the freedom to use their land as they wish, but they are restricted in their efforts by difficulties of climate, soil and a fluctuating market. As in many other parts of Scotland farmers can only hope to prosper so long as they maintain the fertility of their land by careful husbandry and at the same time concentrate on the production of those things which are least affected by foreign competition as for instance poultry, cattle, sheep, potatoes and fodder crops.