

Ancient Memories: Standing Stones and Ritual Landscapes *

E.J. Kent

ABSTRACT: Prompted by the Glenn Innes Standing Stones, this article considers the interpretive stories that have been told about standing stones through the ages. Its focus is on the great megalithic landscapes of Britain, and responses to these through early modern writers, through to the present. In this, the role of wicca is considered as a communal expression of response to the living, dynamic power of such stones. Finally, the Australian Standing Stones are presented as exemplifying anew the role of monoliths as sites of memory for all kinds of people.

I first visited the Standing Stone in Glen Innes some years ago and I have been thinking about them and their place in the Australian landscape ever since. The act of creating the stones is a monumental thing in itself and I can only feel respect for those whose diligence and commitment got that job done. And of course to marvel again at the powers of those ancient peoples who did the same thing without the benefit of blasting compound and forklifts. I also remember wondering, as I walked about the Glen Innes Stones, how use of this site would develop in years and centuries to come. In this presentation today I would like to consider the interpretive stories that have been told about standing stones through the ages. And in order to do this, we need to begin with the great megalithic landscapes of Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Britain.

Throughout their long history, people have told stories about standing stones and the landscapes they sit in. The great stones of Avebury, Stonehenge or Carnac, were not single monuments but part of wider landscapes shaped and designed for ritual purposes. As we now know, Avebury and Stonehenge are not just a single circle of stones, or even a single site, but a vast, interconnected landscape of standing stones, wood henges, barrows, embankments and trackways that form what archaeologists now term 'ritual landscapes'.¹

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¹ Francis Pryor, *Seahenge: A Quest for Life and Death in Bronze Age Britain* (London, UK: HarperCollins, 2012).

Archaeology has told us much about the construction, use, destruction and reconstruction of such sites, We know that they were significant as calendars, particularly solstice markers, as ritual and monumental spaces, that they catered to the dead as well as living, humans as well as animals, that they were inclusive and defensive, closed as well as open, inhabited and deserted, and that they hosted the sacred as well as the mundane. Artefacts and evidence pile up year on year, but nothing to date clearly indicates exactly what their builders were doing when they first constructed them. As the historian Ronald Hutton has explained ‘it is now apparent that the original purpose of the megaliths were lost within a few centuries of their construction...’² The more we come to know about these places, the less we understand them.

And because we don’t know exactly why they were built, people are free to create their own accounts of what megalithic ritual landscapes were created for. Standing stones and stone circles appeal to a very many people. For centuries they have been regarded, if not as sacred places, then certainly as places apart, places for purposes other than everyday life. The evidence and artefacts of the archaeologists has been stitched together so that old materials are formed into new stories, and through these stories generate new meanings about the purpose of the original builders and their sites. Many of these stories have been romances of origins, tales of marvellous ancestors, of supernatural beings, of gods, kings and giants, monsters and fairies, witches and saints. Because these sites are timeless and unchanging, yet plainly constructed by human hands, people can then construct stories that draw a line from where and who we are now, back into the deepest past. This process has also been going on for a very long time:

even by two thousand years ago, those living near the megalithic monuments had no accurate idea of when or why they had been originally created. Instead, they began to develop their own folkloric ideas about them, perhaps attributing their creation to gods, ancestors or other supernatural forces.³

For millennia, then, tourists have come to visit and wonder at these sites.

Some of the earliest recorded accounts of Stonehenge, for example, date from the very early medieval period. Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon noted Stonehenge as one of four wonders of Britain in his *Historia Anglorum* written around 1130. It was, he said, a marvel of

² Ethan Doyle White, ‘Devil’s Stones and Midnight Rites: Megaliths, Folklore, and Contemporary Pagan Witchcraft,’ *Folklore*, 125.1 (2014), 60-79, citing Hutton, p. 61.

³ White, ‘Devil’s Stones’, citing Hutton, p. 61.

stone doorways, and no one could imagine how they were made.⁴ Around the same time Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his *Historia Regnum Britanniae*, written around 1136, began the mystification of Stonehenge. Geoffrey made a glorious national monument out of Stonehenge that was constructed, he said, by the British King Aurielius Ambrosius to mark the murder of British nobles by the Saxons. Ambrosius was advised by the wizard Merlin to bring a marvellous stone structure from Mount Killaraus in Ireland. Merlin fetched the stones using his magic and erected them on Salisbury Plain near Amesbury where the murders had occurred. Geoffrey wrote that the great henge became the burial place of kings: including Ambrosius himself, but also Uther and Constantine.⁵ This story about Stonehenge is still current in popular culture today.

Scholarly consideration regarding the stones and circles that dotted the British landscape began in earnest between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries with the development of antiquarianism and archaeology as gentlemanly occupations. The Elizabethan topographer, William Camden published a description of Stonehenge in 1586, but lamented ‘with much grief, that the authors of so notable monument are buried in oblivion.’⁶ Into the seventeenth century, when in Wiltshire in 1620 James I visited Stonehenge and commissioned Inigo Jones, the early modern architect, to discover what he could about the site. Jones’s conclusions were published in 1655 as *The Most Notable Antiquity of Great Britain, Vulgarly Called Stonehenge...*, and in which Jones’ associated Stonehenge with the Romans. Unable to believe that the Celts or the Saxons had the necessary skill to build such a remarkable monument, Jones decided that the builders could only be Roman.

In 1663, Walter Charleton, who was Charles II’s personal physician, in a work titled *Chorea Gigantum, or ... Stonehenge ... Restored to the Danes*, rebutted Jones and announced that Stonehenge was Danish, built ‘to erect a Court Royal, for the Election and Inauguration of their Kings’. In 1666 John Webb, Inigo Jones’s son-in-law, published an emphatic rejoinder, stating again that Stonehenge was certainly a temple, and a Roman temple at that.⁷ In 1665 the antiquarian John Aubrey, in his

⁴ Samuel Fergusen, ‘On A Passage in the “Historian Anglorum” of Henry Huntingdom, Relative to Stonehenge,’ *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* (1836-1869), Vol 9 (1864-1866), 193-199 (p. 193).

⁵ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, transl Aaron Thompson, In parentheses Publications, Medieval Latin Series (Cambridge, Ontario: 1999). Available at http://www.yorku.ca/inpar/geoffrey_thompson.pdf

⁶ Henry Browne, *An Illustration of Stonehenge and Abury, in County of Wilts, Pointing out their Origin and Character, Through considerations hitherto unnoticed* (Salisbury: Brodie and Dowding, 1823), p. 4.

⁷ Inigo Jones, *The most notable Antiquity or Great Britain, vulgarly called Stoneheng on Salisbury Plain Restored...*, (London, 1655); Walter Charleton, *Chorea Gigantum: Or, The Most Famous Antiquity of Great Britain, Vulgarly called Stoneheng, Standing on Salisbury-Plain Restored to the Danes...*, Second Edition (London: 1725), pp. 79, 227.

Monumenta Britannica retained the idea of a temple, but returned Stonehenge to the British, arguing that both Stonehenge and Avebury were Druid temples. It was this version that was adopted by one renowned scholar after another well into the eighteenth century.⁸

But along the way interpretations of stone circles were many and varied. Aylett Sammes argued that Stonehenge was built by the Phoenicians after they re-opened Britain after the Flood.⁹ John Wood argued that circles at Stanton Drew, Avebury, Stonehenge and Wokey Hole were druid colleges; that Stonehenge was a druid temple devoted to the moon, but also the sun and other elements; that Mount Killaraus was not in Ireland but on the Marlborough Downs above Avebury. Wood embroidered this further saying the Phoenician Druids were led by Hercules, who worshipped Ogmios, and connected him with the village of Ogbourne near Stonehenge.¹⁰

William Stukeley, an ordained minister, Fellow of the Royal Society and first Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries, accurately mapped Stonehenge and discovered some of the subsidiary sites, but also believed the Druids were fond of mistletoe because it represented the Messiah, and that Avebury was symbol of the Trinity, a 'serpent temple in the form of a snake proceeding from the greater circle, which imaged the eternal procession of the Son from the first cause.' For him druids were not a barbarous priesthood sacrificing victims in wicker baskets, but a 'patriarchal hierarchy of Phoenician origin who were quasi-Christian before Christianity.'

Stukeley's two books on Stonehenge, published in the 1740s, greatly popularised the connection between megalithic monuments and the Druids. The idea of a connection between the ancient druids and the prehistoric megaliths spread throughout Britain, permeating many regions and most classes, entering into both folklore and print, and aided by the growth of domestic tourism. Across the islands of Britain, many sites became known as druidical circles: for example a circle at Birkrigg Common, Lancashire is still called 'Druid's Temple' and another at Kilmartin in Argyll known as 'Temple Wood Stones'.

The association of druids with Stonehenge continued into the nineteenth century, romanticized in literature and art. The great poet William Blake read Stukeley's books and wrote how 'stony druid

⁸ Aubrey Burl, *John Aubrey and Stone Circles: Britain's First Archaeologist From Avebury to Stonehenge* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2013 edition), Chapters 3-7.

⁹ Aylett Sammes, *Britannia Antiqua Illustrata: Or, The Antiquities of Ancient Britain, Derived from the Phoenicians...*, (London: 1697).

¹⁰ John Wood, *Choir Gaure, Vulgarly called Stonehenge, on Salisbury Plain, Described, Restored, and Explained...* (Oxford: 1647); Geoffrey Grigson, 'Stonehenge and the Imagination,' *History Today*, 1, 3, 1951 available at www.historytoday.com/geoffrey-grigson/stonehenge-and-imagination (no pagination).

temples overspread the island...’ Blake ‘profoundly transformed Druidic Stonehenge ... [filling it] with the cries of the dying’ making it a ‘wondrous rocky world of cruel destiny’, symbolic of the cold, rational approach to religion that Blake so opposed. The painters Turner and Constable both painted the sarsen stones. Writers used Stonehenge for gothic druidic purposes—Coventry Patmore had ‘Druid Rocks’ throwing their ‘chill gloom’ over lovers in *The Angel in the House*; Thomas Hardy had Tess arrested for murder among the sarsen stones in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. But around mid-nineteenth century, the scientific era dawned on Stonehenge. The idea of an Iron Age, preceded by a Bronze Age, had arrived, and the age of Stonehenge was pushed back from era of the Celts to the Bronze Age, and knowledge of stone circles, great and small, now came from excavation and analogy.¹¹

Throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, these antiquarian theories had little influence on the majority of the largely illiterate population, who instead developed folk beliefs about how these stone structures had come into existence. Several sites were said to be humans who had been turned to stone for dancing on Sundays—a story first recorded in 1602, but now associated with standing stones across Britain, for example with Long Meg and her Daughters in Cumbria,¹² and the Merry Maidens in Cornwall.¹³ The eighteenth century also saw a trend in both Britain and North America ‘in which notable features of the landscape, including megaliths, came to be associated with, and even named, after the Devil: ‘around Britain, older folktales about giants who fashioned the prominent dykes or ditches ... were revised, with the role played by the giant instead being transferred to the [Devil].’ At Avebury, for example, stones were renamed and became known as the Devil’s Chair and the Devil’s Branding Irons.¹⁴

During the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries movements for folkloric revival arose across Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Britain. Movements such as the Gaelic or Celtic Revival saw people such as William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory, A.E. Russell and many others with a growing interest in folklore, going out into the villages and byways to collect the old stories. These champions of folklore treated the material they collected as ‘that [which had] been passed down from time immemorial’, and regarded it as evidence of ‘fossilized folk memory’ that could indeed tell us something about the ancient past.¹⁵

¹¹ Geoffrey Grigson, ‘Stonehenge and the Imagination,’ n.p.

¹² www.stone-circles.org.uk/stone/longmeg.htm

¹³ www.historic-cornwall.org.uk/a2m/bronze_age/stone_circle/merry_maidens/merry_maidens.htm

¹⁴ White, ‘Devil’s Stones’, p. 62.

¹⁵ White, ‘Devil’s Stones’, p. 61.

For historians of witchcraft, such as myself, all this took a rather interesting turn around the outbreak of the First World War, when an Egyptologist named Margaret Murray, unable to get to her field area because of the war, took an interest in the history of witchcraft in Britain. Most of the established historians had seen the witch trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth century as the result of a number of economic and religious tensions, but Murray put forward a theory that there really ‘had been a religion which Christian authorities had tried to eradicate, but it was not Satanic in nature, but instead a survival of a pre-Christian fertility religion.’ This has become famous as Margaret Murray’s ‘witch cult theory.’ Murray argued that followers of these pre-Christian religions had survived since ancient times, practising their magical rites in megalithic sites across the islands of Britain. The entities identified as fairies, Murray argued, were the descendants of ancient Britons who had been displaced by the Celts, and who lived on in the wilderness and followed the fertility religion also. Murray published two books: the first was *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* which appeared in 1921; followed by *The God of the Witches* in 1933. Her theory was not new and had been proposed by scholars in Europe previously, but Murray elaborated it into its most highly developed form and brought it to wide public attention. She was regarded as the expert on the subject and invited to prepare an entry on witchcraft for the 1929 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Murray’s theories are certainly not supported by historical evidence, and a number of academics criticized her work at the time she released her findings, but most scholars simply chose to ignore her work, probably hoping that it would just disappear. If so this strategy backfired badly because it made it appear that Murray’s work was unchallenged.¹⁶

Murray herself believed in magic and was known to perform simple magical ceremonies, but there is no evidence that she ever attempted to revive the witch cult herself. But other occultists across Britain took an interest in her work and clearly did attempt to revive the witch cult from the 1930s onwards. I don’t have time to go into this in any detail here, so suffice to say that this interest must to be seen as part of the great interest in the occult, particularly spiritualism, which was evident in Victorian times, but which increased hugely as a response to the shock and grief over the tremendous death toll of World War I.

From out of this interest arose new groups who claimed to be modern adherents of ancient knowledge, passed down in secret from practitioner to practitioner over millennia and discovered by these early twentieth century occultists. There were a number of groups that formed around such claims—Aleister Crowley and the Golden Dawn were one of the most famous. But today the best known are the Wiccans, the followers of

¹⁶ White, ‘Devil’s Stones’, p. 63.

a fertility religion, like that described by Margaret Murray; and the new Druids, who believe they can trace their lineage back to the druids of ancient times.

What is important here is that Wiccans began looking at the recorded folkloric materials collected by Celtic revivalists, and they found many stories of megaliths associated with witches and the Devil. In these stories the adherents of these new movements found evidence of the demonization of pre-Christian religious sites, by a persecuting Christian church. It is clear from the writings of the founders of Wicca that they felt such associations were potentially over a millennia old, and dated back to the first Christianization of Britain. It was through the connection with the Devil and with ancient pagan druids that many megaliths came to be associated with witchcraft and magical rituals. They came to the conclusion that megalithic sites had been used for magical ceremonies for time immemorial. As Ethan White has noted this belief, and its associated practices, would have significant repercussions for the future of megalithic sites. To which we can add, I believe, repercussions for the Australian Standing Stones here in Glen Innes.¹⁷

To explain why, I am going to borrow heavily from Ethan White's case study of the Rollright Stones, a ring of megaliths on the Oxfordshire/ Warwickshire border, then return, finally, to the Australian Standing Stones. The Rollrights, also known as the King's Men, is a significant site for the practitioners of Wicca. Dated to the Late Neolithic, and similar to other circles found in the Lakes District, archaeological excavations at the Rollrights have suggested a ritual site where stone axes were bought for exchange.

By the sixteenth century a 'rich folklore had developed around the Rollrights.' William Camden described them in his 1586 work *Britannia*, recording a story told to him by local people. The stones were once humans, a king and his knights who had been turned to stone by a witch. Nearly three hundred years later this story was still being told. In 1879 the folklorist Thomas Wright, who in keeping with many of his contemporaries believed that the monument had originally been erected by the ancient druids, recorded that the old people of the district still believed the story about the King's men. In 1895 Arthur Evans, renowned for his Minoan excavations in Crete, published an account of the Rollright stones. Evans noted that 'it would be difficult to find any English site' where folklore 'is more living at the present day' and recorded more about the local story. The unnamed King and his army had met with a witch upon the hill. This witch was sometimes identified with Mother Shipton, or Ursula Southwell, an early Tudor prophetess whose prophecies became famous during the English Civil War of the 1640s.

¹⁷ White, 'Devil's Stones', pp. 62-63.

The witch had informed the king that he would never become monarch of England and turned them all to stone, and herself into an elder tree. One elderly female resident told Evans 'that her mother in law had told her how the locals would gather at an elder tree in the vicinity of the stones on Midsummer's Eve to cut and bleed the tree of its sap, illustrating how it had once been a living witch, with the blood still in it.' Evans recorded several other stories about the Rollright Stones: fairies were believed to dance around the King Stone at night, and members of the community told Evans that a local man, recently deceased, who had seen them. Another story was that the stones were alive and at night they moved down the hill to drink at a stream.

Contemporary Wiccans are most certainly aware of the association between this stone circle and witches. Doreen Valiente, one of the founders of Wicca, wrote about it in two of her studies of witchcraft published in 1960 and 1973. She identified the site as the 'traditional meeting place of witches', and said 'that witches had met there [un]till her day.' Valiente explained the connection between the folkloric stories of Knights being turned to stone by a witch and connected it to Margaret Murray's witch cult by suggesting that the inclusion of the legend

must have been very useful in keeping people away from the stones after dark. [Valiente wondered] whether the witches themselves aided the spread of this belief in order to scare people away from coming across any covens that were performing their midnight rites at the stones.

The Rollrights were of interest to other occultists. William G. Gray, a ceremonial magician born in 1913, underwent a series of nocturnal meditations at the site in order to commune with the spiritual energy he believed was contained by the stones, which he believed were 'storage agencies of human and possibly non-human energies of consciousness'. Gray claimed that the Rollrights 'came to stand for our purpose of life on this planet' outlining 'a permanent pattern leading to our ultimate perfection as people'. Gray published his findings in 1975 as *The Rollright Ritual*, and mentioned the folktale of the witch and the knights in his forward. Gray was influenced by a neo-pagan witch named Robert Cochrane (1931-1966) the leader of a group called the Clan of Tubal Cain. Cochrane committed ritual suicide in 1966 but his followers went on to found a group called The Regency that met at the Rollrights for over a decade. In 1972 a Halloween ceremony conducted by The Regency at the Rollrights attracted over one hundred people. Further ceremonies were planned at the site, as the group had good relationships with the site's owner, who nevertheless closed down their access to protect the stones from vandalism. Part of this vandalism can be blamed

on the occultists themselves, who took a piece of stone that had fallen from the Whispering Knight Stone, the dolmen of the Rollrights, and sent it to an American occultist. Rumours suggest that Wiccans continued to meet at the Rollrights until 1975 when the remains of a blood sacrifice were found at the site. This soured the 'psychic atmosphere' and no further rites were performed. But more recently, there is evidence that ritual activity has continued and intensified at the site since the 1990s. This is supported in that such ritual use of the site has been acknowledged by the Rollright Trust.¹⁸

So what is my point? My point here is that megaliths are not simply dead relics of long vanished peoples. Many, many people—and not just adherents of the modern neo-pagan religions—are moved by these sites: they feel through them an attachment to the deep past, and find in them an enduring truth about human existence. Further evidence that we feel deep attachment to these sites, is in the thousands of people who visit megalithic monuments across the northern hemisphere every year, and the many more thousands of people who are fascinated by stone circles and standing stones who conduct research projects, much aided by the internet, searching for their own version of the truth of these sites and their makers. Like people for three millennia, we continue to be fascinated by these sites, which speak to us on a very fundamental level.

What the Australian Stones show us is that these associations can occur, not only in the ancient settings of the northern hemisphere, but are starting to occur here in Glen Innes. Unlike the ancient antecedents we know exactly why the Australian Stones have been erected—as a monument to the Celtic peoples who came to Australia. But while this was the central reason for their construction and will remain the central purpose of activity at the site, it will not be the only activity. Already these stones are well known in neo-pagan communities throughout Australia and the southern hemisphere, and the presence of the stone circle will continue to attract these people to Glen Innes for years to come.

Because, like or not, and as the great and small megalithic monuments of Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Britain show us, these sites do not exist just as stone. They are part of ritual landscapes with connections to other places and other times, but overwhelmingly they have connections to people. What is fascinating from the point of view of a witchcraft historian is that this process appears to have begun here as well. Already I have been told stories of presences encountered among the Stones, of special energies and otherworldly moments. Some of these stories are about the solstice celebrations, and I do not think it is at all surprising that standing stones in the ancient pattern, surrounded by mist at dawn, to

¹⁸ White, 'Devil's Stones', pp. 68-71.

the sound of the pipes, can stir the human soul. It seems very likely that this is exactly what such ritual landscapes were for, and it is certainly how they have been used for centuries.

So while I can understand that there could be some concern about Wiccans, Druids and other neo-pagan groups' use of the Australian Standing Stones as a ritual site, I think it is not to be unexpected. But more than this I think it is a cause for celebration. As I hope have I have shown in this paper, the ancient megalithic sites are not silent, dead places of stone. They are living, dynamic sites which, existing as they do out of human time, become sites of memory for all kinds of people, who incorporate them into their religious and spiritual world and use them to represent things about themselves as individuals and as a people. And for those of us of Celtic ancestry, I think it is not actually possible to walk among standing stones and not feel something. For while the original builders and their purpose may be lost to us, our ancestors have lived so long with respect for these sites that I think they have become innate to our being. They speak to us of longevity, endurance and identity, all of which are important to the Celts of the diaspora. I think the fact that people of all kinds are coming to visit the stones, some just to look at them, others to hold religious observances, shows that this site is a great success. Not only does it stand as a monument to the Celtic peoples of Australia, past and present, it is become a living part of the fabric of history, myth, folklore and legend that have described such places through the ages.

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