

Standing Stones Down Under *

J.S. Ryan

ABSTRACT: This paper is a recapitulation of the events, decisions, and personalities and purposeful decisions leading to the erection of the Standing Stones in Glen Innes, in northern New South Wales. In essence, the processes involved, and the actual actions taken constitute the idea, process, and actuality of a decision to be made, proper processes followed, and then for a magnificent memorial to be erected in Northern New South Wales to all the Celtic peoples. This is a quiet statement of what was envisioned, pursued, duly carried through, and so to the quite splendid achievement of the dream.

I. Introduction

In the autumn of 1992, I was privileged to be researching and working here with the late John Tregurtha, as we created together a celebratory and scholarly paper of record, it then being entitled ‘Standing of the Array: A Celtic Tradition Re-enacted at Glen Innes, New South Wales’.¹ This report was perhaps the first Glen Innes-set scholarly paper in a humanities field to appear almost immediately in one international bibliography of world scholarship status, thus further publicising a remarkable and focused inter-disciplinary achievement that had taken place here because of a pride in the heritage of this region. For, by that time, Glen Innes had, most appropriately—and for a range of interconnected reasons that will become clear—then offered itself, and then been duly selected, as the location for a unique henge raising, one deliberately selected from Glen Innes’ several possible and northern Celtic region’s models, and inspired by the ancient one at the Bridge of Brodgar in the Orkney Isles. As was well known throughout the world, the ancient Celts had there raised aligned stones as mnemonic calendars to mark the season—when to sow, and when to harvest—and they later developed a complex religious significance for all these activities.

Great Britain, as an ancient country/ land mass, has surviving several hundreds of such mysterious stone circles, and they are found, too in Brittany, in coastal France, and in Galacua in Northern Spain. Thus the recently-erected New South Wales assemblage of standing stones has already become a regular and multi-stranded celebratory focus for the

* This is a distillation of a more wide-ranging, address given in Glen Innes on the Winter solstice day, June 2013.

¹ *Australian Folklore*, No. 7 (September 1992), 69-76.

diaspora of the Celtic peoples of north and north west Europe, both to Australia, and, potentially, variously of such people both around the Southern Hemisphere and even, perhaps, from all the new lands for the Celts far beyond Europe, quite apart from their persistent attraction to the curious coming to, or through, New England, from Asia and from both the Americas.

The formal dedication of the several stones raised in such a circle—as was well known in Glen Innes, where these had then been very carefully aligned there for proper astronomic reasons, and with several dedicated individually to the separate Celtic peoples—was an outstanding event, and one claimed, with almost certain truth, to be the first creation of a henge anywhere in the world in the last four thousand years or more. And that work had been most properly and culturally approved of in Scotland by the clans, where that formal sanction and benison were indeed received from the descendants of original/long-surviving Celtic groups in their earliest locations before their several diasporas, both in and from Europe.

In a very short time those Glen Innes area persons involved in this commemorative project became much enthused by this task and aroused by their emotions of involvement with the transmitted and intuited meaning of the past, one not unlike that which regularly inspires almost all members of carefully planned archaeological excavating parties, even the most lowly and youthful and their inexperienced helpers. For both the types of work constitute a form of high adventure in ancient places, and what has justly been styled their actively laying their ‘hands on the past’.

However, there were soon to be various complex dimensions to this action and its significance, the topographic, touristic, the cultural demographic, and the comparative and history, recalling, even as there will often be very personal memories and reflections on human mortality for those who come to see and to experience this place, and then begin to probe into its already ever accumulating associations and lore. And I am not at all sure that these responses can, or should, be disentangled too much, since they are nicely interwoven, and becoming richer as the pondering viewer becomes older and more reflective of mortality and the meaning of all human existence. In addition, the stones, and the tales that accrete around them, will, alike, assist with the advancing of a complex of racial sympathies on this continent and far further afield, even as they will long remain as a marker of the inevitable passage of the human timespan, and of the greater significance of this ancient land as a linguistic and cultural melting pot, and timeless observer of the business and the pattern of enacted human purposes.

Certainly the stones themselves will remain a powerful magnet for those who seek here a remarkable encounter with their own much earlier mortal antecedents, as well as with the cultures, the thought, faiths and

the beliefs of their more immediate Celtic forefathers; these being the first Scots and Irish, in particular, arriving in the immediate region in 1838. And they will similarly reflect on all humankind, and on its somehow living in ponderous memorials from earlier ages.

II. The Earlier Glen Innes Quest and its Fruit

David Donnelly, he with the resoundingly Celtic name, had been the one who, on behalf of the then Glen Innes Council, and of the people of this then region, when it was already somewhat faltering economically had previously made a most formal and appropriate journey to the hereditary leaders of the Highlands and of the Isles, to the heart of the 'traditional Scotland'. And it was, so far away from the Romans, and, later, the English, for both were long attacking their places and so their racial identity.

In the Isles themselves, David and so the people acting with him had achieved the almost ritually granted permission of the various Scottish Clan Chiefs, to attempt the erection of the New World's Celtic Henge, on the Northern Tablelands of New South Wales, at Glen Innes, in close vicinity of the place where we are meeting today.

Of course, the efforts in Glen Innes were in an ancient tradition that is not confined to Scotland, or, indeed, to the reflections of poets, philosophers, and antiquarians. Indeed, a quiet evidence of the ongoing fascination here experienced is/was similarly evidenced for Great Britain generally by the founding in 1924 of the Ancient Monuments Society, it formally dedicated to the study and conservation of ancient monuments, of historic buildings and of the related fine old memorials and of their craftsmanship. That body has long been recognised as one of the fine British national amenity societies, and is concerned with the study and conservation of buildings of all periods and styles in all parts of the United Kingdom. In many ways it was/is a precursor of many more recent Heritage groups and campaigns, much as will be familiar from both the United Kingdom and Australia.

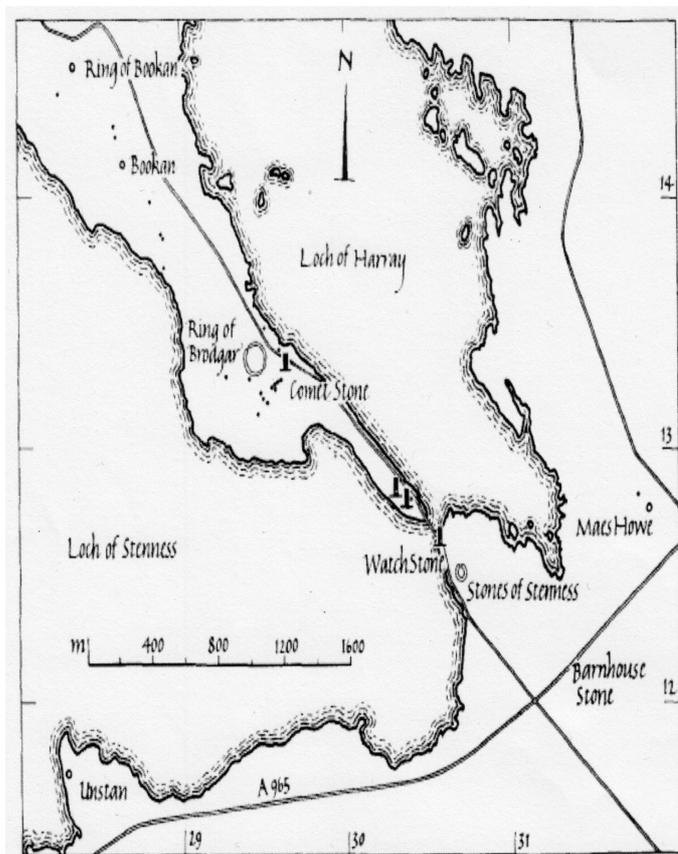
To Birsay and to the Fascinating Orcadian Scene

Interestingly, there has long been available an enormously popular book on the Orkney Islands, *Orkney: The Magnetic North*, 1932, revised in 1937, and with some 15 reprints to 1946 alone. From the last, and in pocket version, we may quote:

We see in front another bridge, the Bridge of Brodgar, over the channel which joins the Loch of Stenness with that of Harray. The current is mostly outwards, and only in very dry weather is there any considerable

inflow of salt water. On the promontory which separates the two lochs we notice the famous circle of standing Stones, with an advance guard of more isolated monoliths between us and the water... We enter the mound by a low and what seems a very long passage, at first barely 2 1/2 feet high, but for the second half over 4 feet, and are glad to reach the central chamber, where we can stand upright once more. The floor of this chamber is 15 feet square.

This is helpful as a statement of the image for the informed of the site until more recent and long standard approach to the site at the 'Bridge or Ness of Brodgar'.



For the model selected in 1991 for the permitted/solemnly approved 'Raising of the selected and transported New World Stones' near Glen Innes had been that same Ring of Brodgar, a Neolithic henge and stone circle on the 'Mainland', the largest island in Orkney, and on the North Sea, on the eastern seaward side of Scotland. It has attracted much interest in the last hundred years, and even more in the last decade. It is part of the designated UNESCO World Heritage site now known as 'the

Heart of Neolithic Orkney'. Of that same area, we may now note the words of more than forty years ago in another classic account of the site, that of Patrick Bailey as he described the seventy Orkney Islands, some twenty of which are still inhabited, in careful detail, noting their scenery, atmosphere, and weather, observing reflectively that –

Hardly any part of Orkney is out of sight of the sea. The main exception is the low central plain of west mainland, mainly in the parish of Harray. [between] the shallow lochs of Harray, which is fresh, and Stenness which is tidal. The central plain is a mysterious place, especially when the cloud lies on the hills there are tracts of moor and bog which are sombre even on sunny days... The plain has an air of remoteness, inaccessibility, independence, and poverty. The air of mystery is enhanced by the splendid prehistoric monuments which stand there, relics of a culture totally forgotten, stranded among modern fields. Maeshowe is a mighty neolithic burial ground; we cannot tell who raised it, or for whom it was prepared.

. . . The henge monuments of Stenness and Brodgar with their attendant standing stones suggest that the principal centre of a Bronze Age religious ceremonial site lay here; but of the nature of that religion or the purpose of the great stone circles we know almost nothing, and it seems unlikely that we ever shall. That Scottish site has resisted attempts at scientific dating, but it is usually thought to have been erected between 2500 BP and 2000 BP.²

Subsequent researches as to possible excavations there—and to a series of exciting revelations within the last decade—are in the charge of Nick Card (pictured nearby in 2012)—and these are now recorded on the web. And they are anticipated for you, and suggested in very dramatic fashion in this shot of the last day of the 2012 dig at the open and uncovered main site of the Ness of Brodgar.



The standing Stones at Glen Innes are a tribute to those on Stenness in Orkney.

² Patrick Bailey, *Orkney*, in *The Islands Series* (Newton Abbott: David and Charles, 1970), pp. 20, 22.

And so to a General Reflection on the Last

Indeed, it is quite astonishing, and ever more confronting, that the dynamic archaeology and the wealth of finds here have the ability to thrust away so many of our earlier preconceptions as to the primitive nature of the memorials apparently indicated by the long standing and unexcavated great mound there. The particular location of these original and long visible major henge monuments occurs in the central bowl of West Mainland, Orkney, a site encircled by low rolling hills between the adjoining Lochs of Harray and Stenness; one separated by the promontories of Stenness to the SE and Brodgar to the NW, the lochs meeting only at the Bridge of Brodgar which spans the narrows and so links two of the most important assemblages of these long visible at the surface and clearly pre-historic monuments. But to return to the scholarly account of Brodgar, to Maeshowe, to its Pictish Symbol stones, and so then to the designated ancient Scottish and adjacent megaliths—

The first settlers are anonymous, dark shadows on the moor; yet some of their houses and burial places survive. There [later] followed an ingenious folk from the south, possibly surrounding from the Mediterranean, driven outwards by who knows what economic or population pressures. They were mighty hewers of stone; they built the stone circle at Brodgar between the two lochs, and more impressively still, the burial chamber at Maes Howe.³

Technically the circle-surrounding ditch does/did not constitute a true henge, as there is no sign of an encircling bank of rock. Thus the fine scholar, and earlier archaeologist, Aubrey Burl (b. 1926), had classified it as a Class II henge, one that has two opposing entrances—in this case on the north – west and on the south-east.⁴

III. The Already Established Australian Continuity for Formal Ceremonial in Glen Innes and Appropriate for all the Evolving Celtic Australian Observances Here

At the same time as the erection in Australia of these New England commemorative stones, there had been established a group of committed representative Guardians for the separate and especially designated stones, these so signifying their spiritual presence there, and symbolic of the distinct cultural heritage of all the peoples of Celtic descent. The

³ 'Orkney', in *The Observer Island Britain*, ed. by Peter Crookston (London and Sydney, Macdonald, 1981), p. 47.

⁴ *The Stone Circles of the British Isles* (London: Yale University, Press, 1976).

Glen Innes Stones and their individual Guardians were to represent the several sections of the Celtic regions which branched off from the Italo-Celtic peoples, in the grand western and north-western movement of that major section of the Indo-European peoples, from the great Europe-Asia land mass in the great Migration Age.

Of course, some of the Celts had impinged on/interbred with Germanic peoples, as, for example, in the common and seemingly ‘Irish’ surname *Ryan*, one purportedly given to the Rhineland captives of the Celts, and one accorded those women and children used for breeding purposes, and/or held in slavery, as the waves of ‘Celts’ went northwest, by the then barely submerged land bridges across the North Sea; and they would, duly, move further still, to duly mingle again with other Germanic peoples in Iceland, and also in Greenland, especially on its long much warmer and more habitable west coast.

But let us return to the post- World War II scene in Australia, to reflect on the proud, assertive, and then perhaps re-activated, Celticism being progressively identified with the Irish, and the Scots, in various regions of eastern Australia, particularly aroused again in the face of the enormous waves of other British, Asian and European migrants arriving here after World War II.

The Celtic Council of Australia

Since that post-war time of such considerable national population growth in this country, there have been the active and its various quietly affirming groups such as the Celtic Council of Australia—that body formed on 24th March, 1982 as a peak body for Celtic/Celtic-descended and/or Celtic-studying community organisations and for the deliberate encouragement of state celebrations around the calendar year, as well as its assertive issuing of its fine publication, *The Australian Celtic Journal*. And it would soon be involved in the organising of many appropriate Celtic activities, including more firmly establishing the significance of the Standing Stones at Glen Innes, along with maintaining the several regional and more markedly Celtic communities throughout Australia.

Of that journal itself, we may quote from the ‘Editorial’ (p. vii) to Vol. 9 (2010), that ‘its aim is to publish scholarly research as well as news, the research pieces to be subject to scholarly review, with the third a chronicle of events of interest.’ That same ‘Editorial’ text continues,

This issue of the Journal comes as Celtic Studies have been given a significant boost in the academic world, by virtue of the Sydney [University] Chair being established and filled... . It is perhaps no coincidence that the chair was founded at a time when the importance of the discipline was getting increased attention globally.’ Not only in the

Celtic countries, but in a number of prestigious universities all over the northern hemisphere. (p. vii),

it then going on to refer, very helpfully, to the [1868] Scotland-founded University of Otago, in Dunedin, New Zealand, which, significantly, has now two chairs in Celtic Studies, and a further one in Scottish Studies and then continuing its predictions:

Thus we believe that there is ample scope for Celtic Studies as such to develop far beyond Sydney, not least in certain parts of Australia and New Zealand, for instance in New England, and (very obviously so in Otago), ‘where the ethnic mix is such as to give Celtic Studies very particular importance.’ As the frequently used term ‘Anglo-Celtic’ reveals, the Celtic heritage of a major part of the Australian population is acknowledged to be a most significant contribution to the proud and defiant national psyche.

We also note with interest that the proposed new National Schools English Curriculum for Australia includes, for Year 10, and under the heading ‘History of English’, a brief history of how aspects of spoken and written English have evolved. Thus there is likelihood of an early comprehensive recognition of both a range of Celtic nouns, and, more intriguingly, of the ‘borrowed’ Celtic place names/place name elements, surnames to be found in directories and electoral rolls, the last with many personal names, the etymology of which will always fascinate.

But Back to 1992 in Glen Innes

Further, from that year we must also acknowledge, the inspiring contribution of the late Peter Alexander, the initial convenor of the Celtic Council of Australia, formed 1982, as a peak group for the nation’s various Celtic communities, and for its state and national cultural and heritage-rich organisations and activities.

In a relatively short time after the Australian Stones’ erection and dedication, the various existing New South Wales/national Scottish and/or Celtic rallying places/centres, became involved in the derived anew Celticism, one focussed on the Glen Innes region. And these last would, alike, acknowledge the primacy of the obvious and more central location, Glen Innes, in this matter of particular ceremonies recognising and celebrating the Scottish/Celtic presence on this continent. Thus, amongst many other tokens of this new responsible and representational identity, the ongoing pattern of appropriate and public mnemonic/remembering and commemorating would sponsor such ceremonials, such as –

- the civic reception at the Glen Innes Town Hall on 4th April 1996, for the British-based Cornish Rotary Study Group, during their trip ‘down under’;
- a letter of 13 May, 1996 from the Mossman Mayor, it making the Mayor of Glen Innes a Warden of the Scotland-Australia Cairn at Rawson Park, he duly to be installed as a Warden at the Annual Mosman Highland and Celtic Festival;
- the Mayor of Glen Innes being an invited attendee at the annual celebration of the birth of a significant Scot, Admiral John Hunter at Hunter Park, the Esplanade, Balmoral, on 29th August, 1996;
- the presentation of a range of Celtic awards; or
- the annual NSW Highland gatherings;⁵ etc., etc.

Further, in the years since, the National Celtic Council has given its total endorsement to the Standing Stones site, to its official pageantry/ceremonials organised for performance here, and to the annual festivals of their several groups. This has been further supported by the representation and presence of the various state and national societies, Cornish, Welsh, Manx, Scottish, Irish, etc.

Indeed, in this embracing and respecting of ethnic linkages to our Australian place—one that ultimately goes back to the migration age in the west of Europe—was determined/designated as the Year of Brittany and Galacia (acknowledging Asturias), and it was celebrated in Glen Innes from 3rd to 7th May 2012, with as special guest the Spanish Consul-General Senor Gerardo Bugalio Otona.

And, as we now record for you, in recent years the pattern of activities has continued, as with—

- various Celtic awards which have been bestowed at the Celtic New Year, towards the end of October, as on Friday 28 October 2011, at Ryde, in the Eastwood Leagues Club;
- similarly, there are the Celtic Studies Foundation open and challenging lunch-time lectures series, regularly on the last Friday of the month, at the University of Sydney ; etc.

⁵ These are variously located, with most in eastern Australia. The 144th was held in 2014.

V. Celtic Scholarship and Studies more Generally in Australia

In Australia, we are also well aware that a powerful and reflective wave of scholarship concerning the Celts in Australia has resulted in more and more publications of significance in this multi-stranded demographic and cultural area, particularly since 1945, and with the subsequent increase in the number of universities in this country, as with the Australian Catholic University in Canberra, and with Edith Cowan University in Western Australia, each having an obvious interest in the Irish/Scottish Catholic culture to be found persisting within Australia. And this scholarship and often very witty and insightful material spends much time treating of the steady emergence of Celts/the Celtic-descended, from the lower rungs of the national society to equality with the other groups from the British Isles in particular. Perhaps the most significant and reflective early reporter here is the range of fine and field-charting studies by the late Bill Wannan (1914-1995).

And so we may cite/ select such helpful pioneering studies of matters Celtic in Australia as are to be found in:

- Hogan, James Francis, *The Irish in Australia* (1888);
- Wannan, Bill, (ed.), *The Wearing of the Green: The Lore, Literature, Legend and Balladry of the Irish in Australia* (1965);
- Wannan, Bill, (ed.) *The Australian: Yarns, Ballads, and Songs* (1954, and with many subsequent editions);
- Graham Seal, *Tell 'Em I Died Game: The Stark Story of Australian Bushranging* (2002);

or large parts of other classic folkloric texts like:

- Wannan, Bill, *The Heather in the South* (1966, etc.); or his
- *Legendary Australians: A Colonial Cavalcade... Showmen, Pirates, and Pioneers* (1966, etc.); and his compendious
- *A Dictionary of Australian Folklore: Lore, Legends and Popular Allusions*, etc. (1970, etc.); or the more recent
- *Hidden Ireland in Victoria* (2012) by Val Noone (as issued by the Ballarat Heritage Services in 2012).

And we should scrutinise closely the often specific like issues addressed regularly in the *Victorian Historical Magazine*, for its numerous pieces concerned with the Celtic strand in the settler/goldfields' population there; but the classic Celtic-Australia volume is still *The Irish in*

Australia: 1798 to the Present, O'Farrell, Patrick, (3rd ed., Cork University Press, 2001); while other helpful related studies include—

- Jupp, James, [a New Zealand-born and insightful demographer of Australia] in especially, *The Australian People: An Encyclopaedia of the Nation, its People and their Origins* (2001); 2nd ed., 2002;
- Keneally, Thomas, *Now and in Time to Be: Ireland and the Irish* (1992); and his
- *Australians: Origins to Eureka* (2009); and see also:
- Wells, Andrew, and Theresa Martinez, eds., *Australia's Diverse Peoples: A Reference Sourcebook* (ABC-CLIO, 2004).

*

*

But to Return to Glen Innes and to the Clearly Remembered and Continuing Celtic Presence in this Very Region

Further to the matter of the texts celebrating/associated with Glen Innes and its larger surrounding region, as at the end of the twentieth century, there have already been published:

- A. the historical researchings of the curious young Englishman from Liverpool, then doing his early teaching at the University of New England, the late Professor Robin B. Walker, as in his pioneering research for *Old New England* (1966);
- B. the more socio-political researches and publications of the long time Glen Innes-based historian of convictism—and especially of the convicts' attitude to religion—Allan Matthew Grocott, M.A. (Hons), his several works imbued with a considerable amount of sympathy for convicts and for all the displaced Celts;
- C. the pioneering regional research work of the late A. William Cameron, often with his daughter Eve Cameron/E. Chappell: e.g.
 - 1) *A Short History of Glen Innes*/ A.W. Cameron. Glen Innes: McMahan Graphics. 1980.
 - 2) *Scottish Pioneers of the Glen Innes District: Including Some Extract From the Yearly Return of the Licensed Occupants of the Waste Lands of the Crown in the District of New England ... in the year ending 30th June 1853*. Glen Innes, NSW: A.W. Cameron & Eve Chappell, c. 1996.
 - 3) *The Cameron Memorial Uniting Church & Its Origins, 1854-2000*, Glen Innes/research & compilation A.W. Campbell; editor

Campbell Egan. Publisher, as at: Glen Innes, NSW: Cameron Memorial Uniting Church, 2000.

. . . and the sequent collections of research publications from the Land of the Beardies' organisation, at the History House Museum and Research Centre in Glen Innes, a window on which is afforded by the fine 'Index' of its *Bulletin* articles, published/on the web, as at June 2011; and

- D. the thought and research into the Celtic pride and defiance to be detected in two of its regional and Celtic-descended and tempered writers, Col Newsome (1916–2006), and Keith Garvey (1922–1997).

The following is a typical defiant image: part of a Col Newsome cover to a recension of locally remembered, and often told, legends of colonial defiance of tyrannical pastoral 'authority', both in the region of 'New Caledonia', and also further north;



- E. the annual festivals of the winter solstice which have taken place on a regular basis, as have those early summer (November) and indoor ones for folk poetry and in the similar bush poetry competitions, with a strong Celtic/Bush flavour, its sessions associated with story-telling, with new ballad renditions—often of traditional events of the soon acclimatised Celts in New England—and so also the many original bush ballads and yarn spinning sessions, often Celtic in their inspiration, as held in competition in early November in more recent years; and
- F. there have been held here in Glen Innes and over many years, the richly musical and dance annual Celtic Festivals, as with, in recent weeks, the 21st Annual Celtic Festival, from 2nd to 5th May 2013,

with music, games and dancing, as well as the inevitable caber-tossing.

And so to the Celtic National Days as Celebrated in Glen Innes

Equally significant to identifying the Celtic groups in this country are the small ceremonies at the Standing Stones on the afternoon of each of the Celtic Nations' National Days, as by the Standing Stones Management Board. As their website puts it,

there is a small but very appropriate ceremony—'After the relevant nation's flag is lowered, the national anthem sung and there is a short speech concerning the saint and the nation. We usually finish this off with a toast to the patron saint. The ceremony is held at the flag-pole outside the later erected Crofter's Cottage'.

These regular dates, of course, are:

- Wales - St David's, 1st March;
- Cornwall - St Piran's Day, 5th March;
- Ireland - St. Patrick's Day, 17th March;
- Brittany - St. Yve's Day, 19th May;
- Isle of Man - Tynwald Day, 5th July;
- Galacia - St James' Day, 25th July;
- Scotland - St Andrew's Day, 30th November.

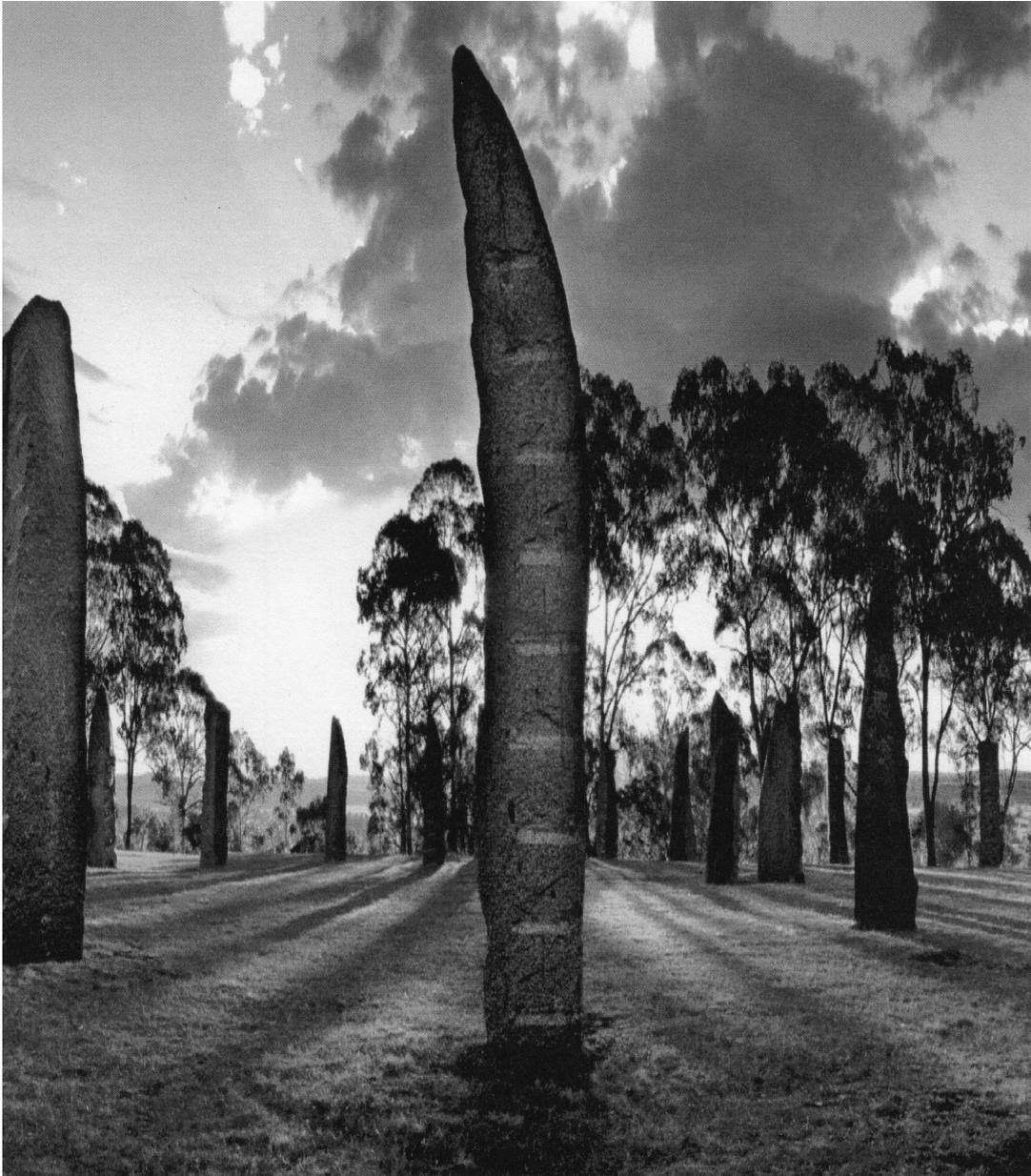
Like seasonal gatherings are held in the other states, as at Beechworth, Victoria (with touches of an immortal Australia-nurtured Irish and secular 'Saint' there), and at the various National Celtic (Folk) Festivals, as with the one at Portarlinton, Victoria, in early June 2012.

This very summary account of both academic and proud publicly practised Celticism in many forms is a type of formal 'acknowledgement of country', these listed before my further reflections as to what may be embraced within the more general title of 'The Standing Stones Down Under'.

*

*

*



Standing Stones, Glen Innes.