ARTICLES

THE PEOPLE OF THE SUNSET. SOME RECENT PUBLICATIONS ON NEOLITHIC BRITAIN

He of the Sun,
She of the Moon,
Stood they
with arms outstretched
A moment
Silent.
Then, in the first shadow of evenfall,
They leaped into space;
Came to rest
on the new world of their love;
Thus: the first man and woman

\textit{Khalserten Sepass}
\textit{Chilliwack Chief}^1

At the end of his great novel Thomas Hardy has Tess of the D'Urbervilles and Angel Clare seek refuge in the ruins of Stonehenge — 'A Very Temple of the Winds' — in the middle of Salisbury Plain. Aware as we are of the inevitability of Tess's death she becomes a kind of sacrifice as the first rays of dawn break over the plain. Almost fifty years later and many miles to the north Chris Guthrie, heroine of Lewis Grassic Gibbon's \textit{Sunset Song}, uses the Standing Stones in her community as a private refuge. When her bullying, incestuous father catches her reading there, Chris realises, with some surprise, that he is actually afraid of the megaliths.

He glanced with a louring eye at the Standing Stones and then Chris had thought a foolish thing, that he kind of shivered, as though he were feared, him that was feared at nothing dead or alive.... he stood looking at the Stones a minute and said they were coarse, foul things, the folk that raised them were burning in Hell, skin-clad savages with never a skin to guard them now.\textsuperscript{2}
As with Hardy, so Gibbon's novel climaxes with the Great Stones as one of them becomes a memorial to those killed in World War I. Both stories, to some extent, share the idea that the stone circles are ancient, almost timeless, sinister sun-temples erected by bear-skin clad barbarians who intended them as places of human sacrifice. If such a view still persists it cannot be blamed upon the current generation of archaeologists and prehistorians.

The simultaneous appearance of two books, bearing the same title, *The Stonehenge People* on an identical theme affords an appropriate opportunity to review current knowledge of, and opinion about, neolithic Britain. The magical rings at Avebury, Stonehenge, Brogar and Callanish tantalise as much as they fascinate. What long forgotten conceptions lay behind the construction of such massive monuments as New Grange or Maes Howe, the earth barrows of southern England or the chambered tombs of Orkney? Aubrey Burl strikes an untypically arrogant note by introducing his new study with the statement.

> to begin a book about Stonehenge by writing about other British stone circles is like starting a book about the Hanging Gardens of Babylon by describing the vegetable patches of prehistoric farmers.

A few years ago he claimed that Avebury was 'the most spectacular prehistoric monument in the British Isles' and few have done more to unravel megalithic mysteries than he has himself. But if Stonehenge overwhelms by reason of its technological ingenuity, and Avebury by its massive scale, many other sites are no less intriguing; the sense of confronting a code to which we do not have the key is just as acute at such neolithic 'cluster sites' as Rousay in Orkney, Kilmartin in Argyll or the multi-circled landscape of Machrie Moor in Arran. Individual sites such as Torhouse Circle (Wigtown), Cairnholly (Kirkcudbright), Clava close by Culloden Moor, and in Caithness, Camster Cairns or the mysterious grid at Hill o' Many Stanes, remind us that the parish kirk can be as moving as the cathedral. Despite the barbed wire which now surrounds it, Stonehenge remains an undeniably stupendous monument; it is salutary to note that when it consisted only of a bank and ditch — the henge which gives it its name — Newgrange in Ireland and the Stones of Stenness in Orkney, as well as many of the magnificent Orcadian tombs, were already in existence. Although both Burl and Castleden are quite comfortable about
drawing on evidence from all over the British Isles (as well as, when it suits them, from the Continent) they remain emphatically Sarum-centric even while confessing the uniqueness of Stonehenge. They convey the impression, almost certainly without meaning to do so, that somehow social, technological and conceptual developments throughout the neolithic era were marching in linear progression towards the mega-monumentation of Salisbury Plain.

To accompany those gentlemen in their quest, ranging as they do from approximately 4700 to 1800 B.C. is a mind-expanding experience and a profound exercise in humility. Historians accustomed to paddling in the secure shallows of a few decades, or if they are truly bold spirits in the murky waters of an entire century, will perhaps be shocked by the sweeping and confident claims made by archaeological colleagues untrammelled as are the latter by the inconvenience of written sources. Modern rigorous reinterpreters of the prehistoric past operate in an exhilarating tradition created by such stalwarts as V. Gordon Childe and Stuart Piggott but even these masters tended to become less radical the closer they approach historical time. Ironically, written documentation can prove less of a boon than a handicap where the revisionists are concerned. Thanks to individuals such as Colin Renfrew, whose methodologies and speculations owe much to the marxist school, and to events such as the radio-carbon revolution which has pushed many cherished dates further back in time, the interpretation of the neolithic era has undergone drastic and almost unimaginable revision during the last two decades. Those in possession of archaeological texts more than twenty years old should prepare to shed them now!

The crankier suggestions about how Stonehenge came to be can be safely dismissed, particularly when the true purposes of the monument may be even more remarkable than the wildest fantasy. Thus Egyptian and Atlantean engineers, U.F.O. bases and levitating monoliths can be consigned to the same tip as energised stones and the as-yet-unproven claim that the monument is 'the first accurate sex machine and it still works'. Stonehenge was first mentioned by the chroniclers Henry of Huntingdon and Geoffrey of Monmouth in the twelfth century. Geoffrey's famous account of how Merlin transported the stones from Ireland to Salisbury Plain is convincingly explained by Burl as arising from reports of the great pillars near Naas in Kildare (pp. 131-34). John Aubrey (born 1626) was the first to systematically survey both Stonehenge and Avebury
and it was he who discovered the Aubrey Holes, fifty-six in number, now thought to be votive pits and paralleled at other sites. Interestingly Burl points to a passage in Homer in which Odysseus poured three libations into a pit which he had dug ‘before calling to the spirits of the spectral dead’ (p. 90). Such evidence is late; the holes were dug some two thousand years before the time of Homer.10 Aubrey was equally far out in suggesting that the megaliths had been erected by Ancient Britons, ‘almost as savage as the beasts whose skins were their only raiment and only 2 or 3 degrees less savage than the Americans’. In the eighteenth century William Stukely proclaimed himself an ancient druid, so initiating the era of the druidomaniacs. Druids were allegedly found under every rock on every blasted English heath. A druidical university was discerned at Stanton Drews. Links were established with Chaldeans, Hindoos and Brahmins. Welsh was equated with Hebrew thus affording sustenance to the British Israelites who, in turn, received additional ammunition from William Blake whose New Jerusalem was situated under a gigantic trilithon. The druids, alas, are as bogus as midsummer’s day is long.11

Equally absurd, though he now has vast numbers of disciples, were the misbegotten ideas of Alfred Watkins12 who in 1921 has a vision of a network of lines standing out like glowing wires all over the surface of the country intersecting at the sites of churches, old stones and other spots of traditional sanctity.

Belief in such ley-lines or force lines is of course harmless so long as no one gets hurt. As it is, the lines, as drawn by Watkins, manage to bypass some very conspicuous sites. Others of the Alternative Archaeology persuasion are the dowsers who claim that all kinds of underground streams meet under particularly prominent megaliths.

Astronomical archaeology, not to mention the astrological variety, has received much prominence in recent years. In fact the idea that circles, graves and monoliths were aligned towards the sun, the moon or other heavenly bodies was put forward long ago. Gerald Hawkins13 attempted to demonstrate that the Aubrey Holes were part of a giant computer for calculating the phases of the moon, though his calculations later proved erroneous. Fred Hoyle
supported the idea of lunar and solar observatories. Professor Alexander Thom has been the most forceful exponent arguing for very exact measurements at the hundreds of sites he has surveyed.\(^{14}\) He has discovered a megalithic yard of .829 metres as well as a megalithic inch in general use throughout the Neolithic world. Thom is no crank and some have taken his work very seriously but it has also been seriously challenged. As both Burl and Castleden emphasise, the popular notion that the midsummer sun rises over the Heel Stone at Stonehenge is erroneous (B. p 1; C. p 4). The problem is that circles or ellipses will obviously provide a number of sight lines (sometimes in competition with one another), stone on stone, or stone on horizon, but these may be fortuitous or coincidental. Also, since individual stones are of different widths and shapes, from which point should they be measured — edge to edge, mid-stone or what? On the other hand Thom and John Wood\(^{15}\) have demonstrated that the stone circles were constructed according to the principles of simple Pythagorean mathematics; what is significant is that these principles were understood in Prehistoric Britain some two and a half to three thousand years before the time of Pythagoras. Nor can it be denied that neolithic people were capable of some pretty sophisticated calculations. At Newgrange the rising sun on Mid-winter's day shines through a hole in the roof to hit the central chamber of the tomb. Similarly at Maes Howe in Orkney the setting sun at Mid-winter shines right along the entrance passage onto the lintel of the central chamber. Euan Mackie argued that a special caste of calendrical priests inhabited such sites as Skara Brae in Orkney and passed on their esoteric lore from generation to generation.\(^{16}\) The question is still open but both Burl and Castleden join what appears to be a growing majority of archaeologists who believe that while alignment and orientation remain important the measurements should not be expected to be as scrupulously exact as some have argued. The problem of the Heel-stone is still not resolved; the discovery of a stone hole in 1979 or 1981 (our two authors disagree) constitutes evidence that either the Heel-stone has been shifted, or that it once had a partner, in which case it would have provided a 'gungsight' through which to view the Mid-summer dawn (B. pp 75-80; C. pp. 101-2).

The two authors under review are both popularisers in the best sense of the term. Clearly both subscribe to the sentiments expressed by William Stukeley:

The writers on antiquities generally find more dif-
ficulty, in so handling the matter, as to render it agreeable to the reader, than in most other subjects. Tediousness in anything is a fault, more so in this than other sciences. 17

Both succeed admirably in communicating their ideas. Rodney Castleden is a geographer whose previous work is unknown to this reviewer; he professes to write as a prehistorian rather than an archaeologist (p. 8). His range is wider than that of Aubrey Burl but in the old manner of English imperialism his Stonehenge people include anyone who lived anywhere in the British Isles during the life-span of the monument, and so he allows himself to draw upon the fruits of much recent wide-ranging research which he puts to excellent use. Burl is more restrained, not unwilling to search further afield but always aware of the focus of his study. On diagrams, illustrations and plans Castleden wins hands down; if he tells, he shows, often with his own reconstructions. For example, in describing how the lintels may have been raised at Stonehenge, one figure (p. 109) is worth dozens of words; throughout, the illustrations and photographs nicely complement the text. By way of contrast Burl’s plans and tables are a little hard to digest at times. But Burl has probably seen, and certainly worked upon, more stone circles in the British Isles than anyone else. It is easy to empathise with one who has an equal respect and liking for his students and his beer. Who better to dismiss the notion that the people who erected the bluestones at Stonehenge used the beakers which give them their designation as urinals, and to point out with relish that the urns which accompanied them to the afterworld contained a fermented drink! (p. 106–7).

It should be of particular interest to North American audiences that in previous studies Dr. Burl has made excellent use of comparative anthropology, notably in the area of American Indian ethnology, to highlight possible neolithic practices; techniques of excarnation, for example, may have been similar - the practice of leaving bodies to decompose on platforms in the open air, before the remains were disarticulated prior to burial. He has suggested many other parallels which have the great virtue of stressing the possibility of spontaneous and parallel development in different cultures. Such approaches also imply that the native peoples have their own Stonehenges in monuments such as the Serpent Mounds and serve as a corrective to the ignorant disdain displayed towards native culture by many of the more recent immigrants to North
As Castleden puts it, 'by the device of substituting space for time, we can sometimes gain a privileged glimpse, as through a window, of the remotest past' (p. 79). The attempt, frequently made in the past, to attribute a culture's more spectacular achievements to intruders, or external influence, is as insulting to the native peoples of the Americas as it is to the inhabitants of prehistoric Britain. The fact that reconstructions of neolithic faces from Lanhill in Wiltshire resemble nothing so much as Amerindian physiognomy (B. plate 9) is pure coincidence and need not cause the dreaded diffusionists to phone their publishers.

It has to be said that radio-carbon dating is nothing like as precise as both authors (and doubtless everyone else in the field) would wish. Calendar-corrected dates for Orkney at present vary by as much as 190 to 110 years either side of that suggested, so theoretically generating discrepancies of close to 400 years. Compared to the previous state of knowledge this is wonderful, but future refinement, and consequently future revision, is to be expected. In 1966 three post holes were discovered in what is now the car park at Stonehenge. These contained pine trunks, but one hole was dated to 7100 B.C. and another to an almost incredible 8100 B.C. Burl confines himself to noting that they thus belong to the Mesolithic period (p. 144) when the whole area would be covered with pine forest, while Castleden interprets this evidence as indicative of 'ceremonial and astronomical activity even before the beginning of the neolithic' (C. p. 131), possibly an overly rash hypothesis.

Both authors agree that the origins of the great monuments on Salisbury Plain are to be sought in ancestor cults. The first structures were tombs in the form of earthen long barrows, corresponding to the construction of megalithic chambers in Orkney which have been described as being among the earliest standing stone structures in the world.\(^{19}\) Such tombs served as conspicuous and prestigious boundary markers, many of them sited at 'the upper margins of the farming territory, the wilderness edge' (C. p. 18). Strenuous and valiant efforts have been made to establish typologies for these tombs particularly in Scotland,\(^{20}\) but four famous examples from Rousay, situated within five kilometres of one another on the south side of the island overlooking Eynhallow Sound, show considerable diversity and variety.\(^{21}\) What seems clear is that complete skeletal remains are hardly ever found. The suggestion is that death was a lengthy process during the fourth millennium B.C.,

\(^{18}\) T.

\(^{19}\) A.

\(^{20}\) S.

\(^{21}\) H.
uncompleted until the flesh had totally disappeared and the bones dried out as a result of excarnation. Skeletons were then disarticulated before burial but even then only part of the remains was consigned to the tomb, perhaps those which best represented some particular quality or skill of the person in life. Some chambers or barrows contain very few remains which implies that only certain individuals merited such privileged treatment. While on Salisbury Plain the disposition of lesser mortals is not well understood, the tomb at Isbister in Orkney contained the partial relics of at least 341 individuals. Tombs clearly fulfilled somewhat different functions in different parts of neolithic Britain.

The evidence suggests that funerary feasts took place when the bones were deposited, possibly at closely prescribed times of the year. An attractive hypothesis is that such cults of the dead are the origins of Halloween, the day of the dead in many cultures at the present time, and an occasion when the spirits of the departed are associated with the living. Funerary monuments became ever more elaborate, the structures a direct reflection of present prosperity and status, the power of the ancestors reflected in rich harvests and successful trade practices almost reminiscent of a neolithic version of perverted Calvinist doctrine. Burl argues (pp. 43–48) that the Great Cursus at Stonehenge was used for impressive funeral processions. Stukely was mistaken in asserting that the cursus was used for horse races but there is no difficulty in assuming that games could have been part of the celebrations, a practice for which there are many cultural parallels. Burl also suggests that the causewayed enclosures of southern England were intended as cemeteries for the bulk of the population, with provision for a small permanent population to tend to the needs of the dead. Such enclosures would serve as refuges since even if the banks were not impressive in scale (though they may have been surmounted by a palisade) they would act as an effective psychological barrier. Enemies would be reluctant to tangle with the spirits of the departed (B. pp. 34–5; C. p. 50). Such places were additionally protected by buried ox-skulls, human sacrifice and other cult objects. The first Stonehenge had a similar function. Around 3200 B.C. a henge was constructed around a timber building, probably a mort–house, which in a sense became the model for the later stone structures on the site. A majority of the early barrows appear to be aligned on the rising moon, which is, in many cultures, the symbol of death, as
well as being regarded as a female entity (B. pp. 26–29). John Wood has suggested that the association of many neolithic monuments with water may point to a moon cult. All peoples living near the sea are aware of lunar influence upon the tides even if they do not understand it. Wood makes the fascinating speculation that a force which could affect such a mighty entity as the sea might be thought to exert an equivalent influence over mere human beings. The awareness of such ominous female influence may, in turn, have had some bearing upon a phenomenon noted by Burl. Between 4000 B.C. and 3500 B.C. the number of female burials in tombs declines. In other words men acquired greater social status — 'they appropriated to themselves the role of ensuring the social reproduction of the group'. It might also be added that the astronomical observers among them attempted some illusion of control over the moon by predicting its movements.

Over a period of some two thousand years the ancestor cult gave way to a belief in the gods, the appeasement and adulation of whom were orchestrated by a new breed of chieftains devising new mechanisms of worship through which they could bolster their own authority. By 2000 B.C. Stonehenge comprised the henge (interestingly reversed as inner bank/outer ditch instead of the normal henge order of inner ditch/outer bank), two stones marking the entrance, an outlier — the 'Heel Stone', 'corroded like worm-eaten wood by the harsh jaws of time' in our day as in Stukeley's (B. p. 173) — and the four 'station stones' marking a perfect rectangle within the circle. The second phase was inspired, at least in part by the Beaker People. Although current archaeological opinion is reluctant to attribute new cultural developments to new waves of immigrants Burl thinks they were just that; they do not appear in Castleden's index.

The existing stones had been brought from Marlborough Downs some 38 kilometres distant. Such an achievement pales to insignificance if the new materials — the bluestones — really did come from the Preseli Mountains in Wales. Burl (p. 130, 134) believes the stones arrived in Wiltshire as a result of glaciation but Castleden (p. 103) points out that there is no evidence of accompanying detritus, no bluestone fragments. The bluestone issue is one of those cherished phenomena which few would wish to see eclipsed. 217 kilometres as the crow flies and much further by water and overland, the transportation of the stones constitutes a mind-boggling achievement which is not about to be substituted by such
a mundane process as glaciation!

But why bluestones? Standing at the summit of Carn Meini it is not difficult to believe that it was regarded as the dwelling place of the gods. There are commanding views not only out over the Irish Sea, but also across South and North Wales, as well as eastwards far into England. Burl has tirelessly pursued his view that the stone circles evolved in association with an axe cult and the long-distance trade in such objects. There was an axe factory at Preseli (B. p. 130). The possession of a splendid axe laboriously pecked out of preselitel was compatible with the status of chieftains who were ambitious enough to co-ordinate the massive project of transporting the bluestones which, after all, were possessed of the same numinous qualities as the axes themselves.

Perhaps by collecting fragments of [blue-stone] from the hillsides and forging them into a magic ring in a distant land, the Stonehenge people were able to transport the gods themselves to Stonehenge (C. pp. 105-6).

At the same time they altered Stonehenge to give it a midsummer alignment. For some reason, however, the magical ring was never completed; the stones were taken down to be re-used in the final building phase around 1200 B.C.

The next stage was begun almost immediately, some 600 years before Moses led the Children of Israel across the Red Sea. Burl suggests that the individual behind the inspiration for the sarsen circle lies buried in the splendid tomb at Bush Barrow (B. p. 152). He also provides a possible corrective to the etymology of 'sarsen', usually thought to derive from 'saracen' and thus emphasising the heathenish notion behind the erection of the stones. Great stone slabs used in burial grounds on the Chotanagpur Plateau of India are called sasans, possibly indicating an Indo-European cognate of 'sarsen', pronounced 'sazzan' in Wiltshire and hence a survival of the word the Stonehenge people themselves applied to the megaliths (B. p. 175). Dr. Burl points out that some traces of neolithic language may be preserved in place-names, such as Avon (water), a sensible idea which would surely repay further investigation. Not to be outdone, Castleden argues the survival of neolithic writing notably from Newgrange and Skara Brae (C. pp. 252-3).
Long before the first henge was built at Stonehenge work had started on the massive complex at Avebury. Up in Orkney the stone-age villages of Knap of Howar and Skara Brae had long been occupied, the magnificent chambered tombs at Quanterness and Isbister had long been in use. When the first spadeful of Stonehenge chalk was removed the Stones of Stenness had already been erected, the enclosing ditch cut into solid bedrock. The digging of such ditches with antler picks, flint axes and animal bones was a much more difficult task in the north, though the excavation of a chalk ditch 10 metres deep and 9 metres wide at Avebury was no mean feat either. The only other circle in Orkney, the Ring of Brodgar, was in existence before the bluestone experiment on Salisbury Plain; the Brodgar ditch was 10 metres wide and 3.4 metres deep. Brodgar with Stenness and the astonishing Maes Howe, together with neighbouring tombs, monoliths and associated monuments in the vicinity of Loch of Harray and the Loch of Stenness, form what must be one of the earliest, and certainly one of the most elaborate, ritual sites in the whole of the British Isles, rivalled only by Newgrange in Ireland. It is not difficult to conclude that megalithic technology was pioneered in Orkney.

The labor involved is staggering. The ground had to be prepared, ditches dug, the stones quarried, dressed and hauled to the site. Orkney possibly presented fewer problems of distance than certain other places. The grand menhir brise in Brittany which fell down between 1659 and 1722 either due to lightning or earthquake, is reckoned to weigh 340 tons; it was quarried from the living rock 50 miles away from its present position. At Avebury the inner surfaces of the stones were smoothed even though the sarsens were three times harder than granite. The later stages at Stonehenge involved the use of entasis on the uprights (to increase the impression of bulk), the shaping of curved lintels and the working of mortice and tenon joints. The construction of Silbury Hill, the largest man-made mound in Europe and, so far as is known, quite empty save for a small conical mound at its heart, required some 1.3 million man hours (C. p. 136). It was built in the shape of a ziggurat, the seven tiered model also used in Sumer and at Wideford Hill Cairn in Orkney (C. p. 237), a design which may have been symbolic as well as functional.

In both Orkney and southern England the 'Stonehenge People' seem to have been intent upon the creation of ritual landscapes.
The spectacular situation of the Castlerigg Stone Circle in the Lake District, under the shadow of Skiddaw, might suggest that landscape was a factor from the beginning; as is Skiddaw to Castlerigg so is Goat Fell to Machrie Moor in Arran and Clisham to Callanish in Lewis. Both of the last mentioned sites contain an enigmatic complex of lesser or secondary circles. Callanish has not so far been satisfactorily dated. The recumbent stone circles of Aberdeenshire are oriented on the horizon. The Orcadian tombs with their long low entrance passages perhaps intended to signify the perilous boundary between life and death, almost a mirror image of the most dangerous journey which any of us ever undertakes — that from the womb to birth — were conspicuously situated to overlook the everlasting sea. We still know comparatively little about the everyday habitations of the living, even though more information is becoming available about the dead, but it is tempting to think of those ritual landscapes with their surrounding domestic sites almost as dispersed cities, if there are such things. Castleden is keen on the idea of ‘proto-urban communities’ at such places as Durrington Walls and Woodhenge, the former containing an estimated population of 900-1800 people.

Recent excavations at Quanterness and Isbister, the ‘tomb of the eagles’, both in Orkney, shed much light on the people who were involved in these extraordinary megalithic projects. The human remains at Isbister demonstrate that the average height of men was five feet seven inches, that of women five feet three and a half inches. What surprises most, perhaps, is life expectancy rates. Not surprisingly child mortality was high but for those who survived childhood the most common age of death was between 15 and 30. Only 1.5% were over 40; those under 20 would have outnumbered the rest of the population by a ratio of 3:1. Also women died younger than men. At Quanterness 40-50% were under 20; only 3% were between 40 and 60 years old.

The population was riddled with osteoarthritis, affecting the young as well as their seniors and found in one six year old child; the disease was caused by muscular stress associated with the movement of heavy weights. Women were more prone to spina bifida than men. Rheumatism, polio, tetanus and sinusitis have also been detected. Poor dental hygiene seems to have been a problem on Salisbury Plain, less so in Orkney where teeth were almost caries-free but did suffer from cracked enamel. A significant number of people sustained fractured bones in the course of their
lives (C. p. 193; B. p. 12, 107). Also recorded is the practice of trephination—the removal of a disc of bone from the skull. This horrendous operation, probably involving the use of anaesthetic drugs, is often thought to have been a cure for madness (B. pp. 118–9; C. p. 196). One wonders whether those practising lunar cults had already detected the lunatic syndrome, the extracted disc reflecting the shape of the moon itself. To one such speculation a second, probably even more idle may be added: lunar influence upon an individual may have been regarded as a mark of special favour among moon-worshippers; the idea may have been to attempt the harnessing of the force by performing this incredible operation.

Castleden, in an insightful chapter, depicts the megalith builders as being of slight frame with child-like faces. To describe them he borrows Sir Michael Tippett's startling and evocative appellation of 'the laughing children'. If we could somehow observe them 'we would ... experience the strange sensation that we were watching children — children playing some elaborate and perhaps rather sinister game of make-believe' (C. p. 195). Standing at Callanish in the gloaming it is not difficult to imagine their somewhat eerie laughter; they must shriek at the spectacle of the almost one million tourists who now annually visit Stonehenge.

At Isbister fragments of bones of sea-eagles were discovered in considerable quantities thus implying that the great birds were regarded as some kind of tribal totem. Song-birds were found at Quanterness, twenty-four dog skulls in the tomb at Cuween, some others at Burray and a dozen pairs of antlers at Holm of Papa Westray. The totemistic association perhaps reinforces the idea of the graves as cult centres corresponding to the henges, cursus and causewayed enclosures further south. The people would meet to feast and communicate with their ancestral spirits at certain festivals doubtless tied in with solar or lunar movements. Many tombs, notably Cairnholy in Galloway, have elaborate forecourts for just such a purpose. Unstan Cairn in Orkney actually sits in its own enclosure. Isbister too had an enclosure and forecourt, in use for some 800 years before the tomb on its superb cliff site above the Pentland Firth was finally closed.

A visit to the Tomb of the Eagles is an unforgettable experience. The site was excavated by Ronald Simison who farms the land as has his family for generations and who willfully
misunderstood why laws formulated in distant Edinburgh should forbid him to dig on his own property. Anyone who goes to Orkney looking for worthy yeomen is doomed to disappointment. The Orcadians are a litigious lot, left to themselves, and they understand the legal processes better than most. Ronald Simison was rapped by the authorities several times for persistently ignoring cautions to cease his investigations but his native determination and unquenchable curiosity drove him on. Self-tutored in archaeological techniques he carried out a sophisticated excavation, eventually with the grudging blessing of exasperated officialdom which assigned John Hedges to the task. Mrs. Morgan Simison provides an orientation to the site by introducing visitors to a couple of skulls from the dig and by handing round various artifacts from the tomb. She has no hesitation whatsoever in soundly reprimanding loud-mouthed tourists mistakenly under the impression they are attending some sort of Orcadian Disneyland. The man himself will lead you out to the site, nothing loath to talk about his experiences and his confrontations, in delightful and witty detail. Mr. Simison totally empathises with the people who worked the same land as he has himself. He knows how the neolithic people used their tools; he knows that these people enjoyed the sea and the birds and the seals basking in the waves below the cliffs, just as he enjoys them himself. He inescapably recalls Lewis Grassic Gibbon's character, Rob Galt of Pittaulds in the short story 'Clay', while in no sense, of course, possessing Galt's dementia. Rob is obsessively consumed by his farm and with opening up more land, and his obsession finally kills him. One night he calls his daughter to share his delight in confirming the certainty in his own mind that he was not the first to turn the sod up on the edge of the moor:

And Rachel looked at the hole in the clay and the chamber behind it, dim in the light, where there gleamed a rickle of stone-grey sticks, the bones of a man of antique times.

Amid the bones was a litter of flints and an crumbling stick in the shape of a heuch. She knew it was an eirde of olden time, an earth-house built by the early folk. Rob nodded, Ay, he was more than that. Look at that heuch, it once scythed Pittaulds. Losh, lass, I'd have liked to have kenned that childe, what a crack together we'd have had on the crops!
In a sense — and this statement is not intended in any way to patronise — Ronald and Morgan Simison have been engaged on that ‘crack’ about the crops for the last thirty years; they have participated in the on-going dialogue between the past and the present which can be stimulated by the best kind of history, and — as we are learning also — by the best archaeology. Because of their bonds, their sensitivities and their insights they have been privy to discussions denied to the rest of us and we are all the richer for it.

Rodney Castleden makes no secret of his debt to Aubrey Burl though he does not always agree with him. Both are full of insights which fascinate as much as they intrigue even though many archaeologists will probably want to ding them with their trowels. Castleden discusses the neolithic crisis in agriculture; overpopulation and wasteful agricultural practices were apparently as much of a problem then as they are now. There are traces of manuring at Links of Noltland in Orkney (C. p. 20). He believes that timbered structures at Woodhenge and Durrington Walls were huge houses, domestic sites that later became ceremonial centres because once occupied by distinguished ancestors (C. p. 43). There is some confusion about whether tomb designs are based on house plans — the most likely scenario — since he thinks that houses were modified at the comparatively neglected site at Staneydale in Shetland after the pattern of tombs (C. p. 160; B. pp. 16-17). Intriguingly, recycled house timbers have been claimed from the Somerset Levels, the oldest known man-made trackways in Europe (C. p. 36).

Castleden discusses the neolithic economy, following Burl on the axe-routes but also pointing to the importance of the flint mines at Grimes Graves where an antler pick preserves the hand-print of a neolithic miner (C. p. 195). Both writers discuss pottery whose rounded shape, Castleden suggests, may have had a symbolic value like the earth and stone circles. ‘It is almost as if the forms the potters chose to make required and conditioned the invention of the wheel’ (C. p. 80). By mixing in crushed volcanic rock the potter sometimes produced ‘a kind of prehistoric pyrex’ (C. p. 82). Grooved Ware appears to have been invented at Unstan in Orkney and very soon turned up on Salisbury Plain, possibly as a cult object (B. pp. 94-6). Furnishing styles at Skara Brae, stone dressers and the like, led to the invention of flat bottomed pots. At Rinyo,
cells in the stone age village have been tentatively identified as lavatories, complete with underfloor drains lined with birch-bark. Orkney around 2500 B.C. was apparently where it was at!

The culture was closely associated with Newgrange. Perhaps the Orcadians were revered for having conquered the sea in a way which mystified their land-locked brethren on Salisbury Plain. The northerners had, of course, also mastered tomb building techniques. One suggestion is that such structures were meant to replicate caves (C. p. 164), a convincing idea when one confronts the only rock-cut tomb so far discovered in Britain — the Dwarfie Stane in North Hoy, Orkney. This astonishing sand-stone block has been carefully hollowed out to the point of providing a kind of pillow or ledge for its contents and a massive block which, when in place, would invisibly seal the tomb making it indistinguishable from numerous other boulders strewn about at the foot of the cliffs. Castleden also believes that circles such as Avebury and Stenness contained, not caves but coves, in which magicians or priests would sit during the festivities (C. p. 146). This may be linked to a suggestion that the roof box at Newgrange was intended for oracular purposes, the direct communion with the spirits of the dead. Audrey Henshall has tentatively identified similar features at Maes Howe, Widefield Hill and Taversoe Tuick, the strange two-storey cairn on Rousay.

Aubrey Burl is equally insightful. He makes much of cult-objects which is courageous of him in view of the current archaeological disdain for such labelling. He finds figurines suggestively positioned in many sites. Symbolic phalli and testicles clearly had apotropaic functions (B. p. 14) as they continued to do throughout Roman and medieval times, such objects may have been associated with bull cults. The female equivalent has been discerned in little chalk cups recovered from, for example, Woodhenge (B. p. 126). He draws upon evidence from Bronze Age Denmark which produced the magnificent oak coffins of the Mound People in order to shed light upon the culture of southern England (B. pp. 154 ff.). Of the changing function of Stonehenge throughout the vast chasms of time he is describing he writes, 'like some musical heirloom on which any tune could be played [it] was used to show that nothing had changed, the instrument was still the same. But the melodies were different' (B. p. 166). The image is appropriate since musical instruments from the late Stonehenge period have been recovered (B. p. 166). But megalithic studies are not without their lighter side. He finds space to mention the full scale model of Stonehenge
in Seattle, which required two million pounds of concrete, as well as two Canadians who cycled round the top of the trilithons in 1900 (B. pp. 177, 186).

One topic about which the two disagree is violence. Castleden, despite some interesting sentences on the ancestor of the long-bow, plays down this aspect of neolithic existence (C. p. 92). For Burl life in the period was not necessarily brutish but it was short and it could certainly prove nasty. He finds evidence of human sacrifice everywhere (B. p. 214); Castleden is reluctant to accept it (C. p. 235) but his arguments do not convince. On a happier note, doubtless inserted for the British dog-loving public, both writers take pains to note that neolithic people kept labradors and fox terriers.

Stonehenge and other monuments lost their function some time after 1250 B.C. Climatic deterioration ruined the sight lines and may also have wreaked havoc with the festivals. It is noteworthy that most surviving celebrations where they still, or very recently, continued to exist—Imbolg (beginning of Spring) for example or Lammas, the harvest festival—occur too early for modern seasons, perhaps reinforcing the idea that they were invented, or created, during the climatic optimum of the neolithic era. Appropriately, water cults took over, avenues being half-heartedly built towards water from Stonehenge, Avebury and Callanish, but never completed.

Castleden believes Stonehenge to have been an omphalos, or great navel, fastening together the earth and the sky, the meeting-place of the sky god and the earth mother, and Burl, though less forthright, would see those entities as represented by the sun and the moon respectively, throughout the neolithic era. The monuments were concerned with both the sun and the moon; at ritual sites, such as that on Mainland Orkney, Brodgar was dedicated to the sun and Stenness to the moon. Both authors detect some echoes of neolithic belief in the ancient Celtic folk-tales of re-birth and renewal, in the stories of the barrows and chambers as the gateway to the underworld. For Castleden structures such as Silbury Hill, which required an estimated 18 million man hours to build, were harvest hills where the produce of the earth mother was offered to the sky god (C. p. 237).

What is extraordinary viewed from the chariot of the 1980s
which seems increasingly to be hurtling towards the abyss, is that neolithic people had a sense of the eternal utterly foreign to modern culture. They engaged upon projects which they could never hope to see completed in their own, or several lifetimes, and which would occupy generations of back-breaking toil, torn muscles and broken bones. Nor is there any indication that they were coerced; to participate may have been considered the privilege of a lifetime. These same people planned for conjunctures of heavenly bodies that they could have had no expectation of ever seeing. It was enough that their descendants would welcome their own dead spirits at some time in the future. In the Middle Ages the church calendars recognised an annum magnus, a 'big year' of 534 years, the time required to complete the cycle which would bring the sun and the moon back to exactly the same position in the sky at the same time in the same year. Although there were very many lesser conjunctures it is not totally inconceivable that the neolithic astronomers had some idea of the big year and that they could plan accordingly. The human electrical energy generated by the confident anticipation of such an event must have been unbelievable as they prepared to gather at Stonehenge or Brodgar or Callanish or whatever. If the spirits of the dead were also consciously involved in such celebrations then no-one ever actually died. Human beings were as eternal as the incredible monuments built in the most durable materials of which anyone could ever conceive.

This brief article has sought to pay due recognition to the overwhelming achievements of the current generation of archaeologists. Historians can only wonder at the chances they take, at the boldness of their hypotheses, at their willingness to slide over millennia and the confidence of their dating techniques, about which the one certainty is that they will shortly be revised. But historians, too, have an obligation to scrutinise every piece of information which will illuminate the lives of the 95% of people who never find their way into the history books. In that endeavour they share the same quest as the archaeologists.

Aubrey Burl and Rodney Castleden have both produced fine studies. Both take liberties with their material, both in synthesising minimise the complexities of their subject and both (by now) have doubtless been condemned to some megalithic mound reserved for popularisers by the sterners members of the archaeological profession. Their faults are far outweighed by the richness of their material, the profundity of their analyses and the ingenuity of their
interpretations. They have made admirable use of what is becoming a very rich scholarly literature and their methodologies inspire because they stress that the human experience is more alike than different. Dr. Burl's final conclusion is that the trilithons at Stonehenge was oriented on the midwinter sunset. Like the alignments at Maes Howe, and at Clava Cairns, and surely also at Callanish, they remind us that we are all the descendants of the people of the sunset.

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NOTES


2. Lewis Grassic Gibbon 2. A Scots Quair. A Trilogy of Novels (London, 1946) p. 43. The title of this article is borrowed from the minister's sermon at the end of Sunset Song. Ibid, pp 192-3.


5. One of the hits of the 1987 Christmas book season was the much publicised novel by Edward Rutherford Sarum (London, 1987) which runs out of steam by the time it reaches New Sarum but is interesting on Stonehenge.

6. Dates are necessarily imprecise. The Megalithic (Middle Stone Age) is deemed to have matured into the Neolithic (New Stone Age) around 4700 B.C. The Neolithic was in turn succeeded by the Bronze Age about 2000 B.C. This paper will use the term Neolithic throughout although the last phases of Stonehenge took place around 1250 B.C. well into the Bronze Age. For a recent survey see Timothy Darvill Prehistoric Britain (London, 1987).

7. A couple of classic works by Gordon Childe are still well worth reading -- V. Gordon Childe Prehistoric Communities of the British Isles (London, 1940) and Scotland Before the Scots (London, 1946) -- if only to study his approach. See also Stuart Piggott The Neolithic Cultures of the British Isles (Cambridge,
954) and *Ancient Europe from the beginnings of Agriculture to Classical Antiquity* (Edinburgh, 1965).


9. These are usefully collected in Christopher Chippindale *Stonehenge Complete* (London, 1983) and John Michell *Megalithomania. Artists, antiquarians and archaeologists at the old stone monuments* (London, 1982).


22. For an interesting later historical parallel on the central position of death and burial see Philippe Aries *The Hour of our Death* (New York, 1982). For some information on Scotland Anne Gordon *Death is For the Living* (Edinburgh, 1984).


28. This is a fascinating suggestion and by no means as outlandish as it may at first appear. See the various sections on ‘L’evolution des signes’ in the splendid Le Grand Atlas De L’Arche–ologie. Encyclopaedia Universalis (Paris, 1985).


30. Michell Megalithomania, p. 82.

31. On this see D.V. Clarke et al Symbols of Power, chapter 3.


33. Hedges Tomb of the Eagles passim.

34. Ibid., p. 155.


36. So far Shetland is rather poorly served by the archaeologists, at least for this period, but see Noel Fojut A Guide to Prehistoric Shetland (Lerwick, 1981). Also Brian Smith (ed) Shetland Archaeology. New Work in Shetland in the 1970s (Lerwick 1985).


39. There is a splendid display of Roman phallic symbols at the Vindolanda Museum in Northumberland. For illustrations of some other Roman phalli see Anthony Weir and James Jerman Images of Lust. Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches
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(London, 1986), pp. 145-6. The same authors report (pp. 147-8) Prof. Geoffry Webb’s view that phalli ‘could be found inside the altars of 90% of churches built up to the time of the Black Death’.


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