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Stonehenge
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Visiting Stonehenge

Constructed four millennia ago, Stonehenge is among the world's greatest historic monuments, a creation that still provokes awe and wonder, and perhaps some frustration for today's tourist. Bernard Cornwell explains why...

Visiting Stonehenge can be a somewhat disappointing experience. The car park is likely to be full and the pathway about the monument is invariably crowded. Worse still, the stones themselves, seen from the pathway, are oddly diminished. To stand directly under the great trilithon is awe-inspiring, but from seventy feet away it does not look particularly impressive. All this is going to change in the next few years as the site is redeveloped, allowing closer access and a much larger visitor center, but even so, many people are still likely to be disappointed.

Why the disappointment? There are probably two reasons. The first is that most visitors, quite naturally, do not understand the context of the monument. The surviving pillar of the great trilithon weighs nearly forty tons and stands twenty-two feet tall. It originally had a twin, while a third stone bridged their summits to make an arch. Nothing so tall or complex had been built in northern Europe before. It is a technological marvel over four thousand years old, but even if that is comprehended, it still leaves the question of why it was built.

Nothing at the site really tells you why it was built. English Heritage (who manage Stonehenge) are very scrupulous and don't go beyond the evidence, which is scanty. There's a good deal of information about how it was done, but virtually nothing about why. Professor R.J.C. Atkinson, in his book *Stonehenge*, answers the question thus; "there is one short, simple and perfectly correct answer: we do not know, and we shall probably never know." This is very frustrating, and any search for a sensible answer is liable to lead to even more confusion. Some say it was a druid temple (it was not) while others claim it was built by the ancient Greeks (wrong again). The claims get wilder, involving crop-circles, the great goddess or even flying saucers. One theory even postulates that American Indians built it. The people who might best answer the question are the archaeologists and pre-historians, but they shy away from a definitive answer. There are no written records, only the stones themselves, and trying to recreate a complete theology and cosmology from a heap of rocks is, to say the least, difficult, and most scholars prefer not to make the attempt. But fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

I have always been intrigued by the monument. I grew up in England and was always aware of Stonehenge as an enigma at the taproot of an island's history. Yet, like many other folk, I was frustrated by the mystery. What is it? Why was it built? I set out to answer those questions in fictional form, taking as my starting point the best current research on neolithic Britain. I make no claim to a definitive answer, only that I hope that anyone who reads the novel will come away with an understanding of the people who lived in southern Britain around 2000 B.C. and the impulses that made them construct a great temple to the sun on a bare green hillside. For that, almost certainly, is what Stonehenge is; a sun temple, and a monument to a religion that failed, but still a stunning and wondrous achievement.