



Bernard Cornwell

Stonehenge
ISBN13: 9780060956851

Q: PW has called *STONEHENGE* your "most ambitious fiction yet." Do you agree?

A: It probably is, in the sense that the research was the most difficult, and more difficulties arrived in the writing — which were to do with staying true to the research while, hopefully, concocting a tale that would entertain. Most of my books are intended to be pure entertainment, but so much nonsense had been written about Stonehenge that I wanted the novel to give the reader an accurate, comprehensible and credible account of one of the world's most mysterious and prominent monuments.

Q: *STONEHENGE* is part historical novel, part ancient legend and part human drama about one of the most mysterious monuments in the world. What was it exactly that inspired you to write about it?

A: Because when you visit Stonehenge there's nothing there that really tells you what it is. English Heritage (who manage the site) 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, and virtually nothing about why. The same is true of many books. The best ones, by serious historians or archaeologists, can only surmise — it's best summed up by Professor R.J.C. Atkinson in his book 'Stonehenge' where, in answer to the question, what is it? he says 'there is one short, simple and perfectly correct answer: we do not know, and we shall probably never know.' To an historical novelist that's like a red rag to a bull and perhaps the question can only be answered by fiction. Whatever — I'd love people to see the monument in a new (and, I hope, sane) light after reading the novel.

Q: Do you remember how you felt the very first time you visited Stonehenge? How would you describe it for someone who never has?

A: I was a child and I can remember being awed. Those were the happy days when there were no fences and you could wander about as you wished. I also grew up in England and there was always the sense that Stonehenge lay at the dark taproot of British history; something obviously important, but inexplicable. For someone who's never seen it? I'd tell them to read my book!

Q: There's been a lot of speculation about the origins of Stonehenge, involving UFOs, Druids, Red Indians... How do you feel about this modern day buzz around the monument? And what do you think is the reason for such abundant conjecture?

A: I don't believe it was native Americans who built it. That theory was advanced by a splendid crank in the 1880's. Nor did the Druids have anything to do with it — they came much later, when the monument was already decaying. I suppose the wild conjectures (ancient Greeks, men from outer space, the temple as a Neolithic sex toy, etc., etc.) all arise from the fact that we simply don't know what it is and so people feel free to impose their own interpretation on the stones. Those interpretations are nourished by 'new-age' mysticism which claims, among other things, that the monument is placed on several prominent ley-lines (ley-lines are mystically significant straight connections between archaic landmarks and were 'discovered' by an early 20th century enthusiast who was also a brewery representative and, as Aubrey Burl remarks, his profession might have had a great deal to do with his 'discoveries'). There is a strange modern belief that the ancient religions (wicca is an example) are repositories of lost truths, and Stonehenge is an obvious focus for adherents of that theory. The current most fashionable and unscientific belief is that the henge monuments were temples to a peace-loving 'mother-earth' goddess who ruled over a society not yet tainted by male ambitions. It's a beguiling idea, but almost certainly plain wrong (it ignores the evidence of human sacrifice, let alone the orientation on the sun which, in almost all mythologies, is inconveniently male), but until we can say exactly what the temples were, and how they were used, which we can't, then we have to endure the nonsense.

Q: One imagines that *STONEHENGE* required extensive historical research. How did you approach the material? Was researching this novel difficult?

A: The novel involved a vast amount of research and some of it was horribly difficult, especially all the technical stuff about the astronomical framework which demanded a comprehension of some fairly complicated math, and what made that worse was the knowledge that almost none of that research would ever be used in the novel. It was necessary to do it so that I understood what the best scholars were saying about the monument, and thereafter it was a question of reduction and simplification. Some of the theory was barely comprehensible, so I ended up building a 33:1 scale model from archaeologist's plans and lighting it at night with flashlights simulating the rising and setting of the sun and the moon. I was surprised, in the end, by how much we do know about the physical side of Stonehenge. The exact date of the monument is in a state of constant revision (being pushed backwards) because radiocarbon evidence from the site is very slight indeed, but it was plainly made during the last half of the third millennium BC and there is very little controversy about how it was made, or where the materials came from. There is also a mass of useful material on the living conditions of the society that constructed Stonehenge, much of it unpublished, but surprisingly comprehensive. What there is not, of course, is any information about their cosmology, theology or mythology, and the best starting point for remedying that lack was to read anthropological accounts of other pre-literate societies. The other great source of material was the academic work on the other henge monuments of Britain. There are over a thousand such monuments, some little more than ploughed-in shadows on the ground, but others are substantial works like Avebury, Stanton Drew or the Stones of Callanish. Stonehenge was not built in a cultural vacuum, but is a product of a very old temple-building tradition — so that background had to be explored as well.

Q: Previous to *STONEHENGE*, you wrote a series of books set in Arthurian England. Can readers look forward to you expanding to still other times and places in history?

A: I expect so, yes — I'm working now on a new series on the Hundred Years War, but I haven't thought beyond that.

Q: And what about Richard Sharpe? Can we look forward to more Sharpe adventures?

A: Certainly. There are still more Sharpe stories to come.