

in Stone, a Life

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by Alan Counihan

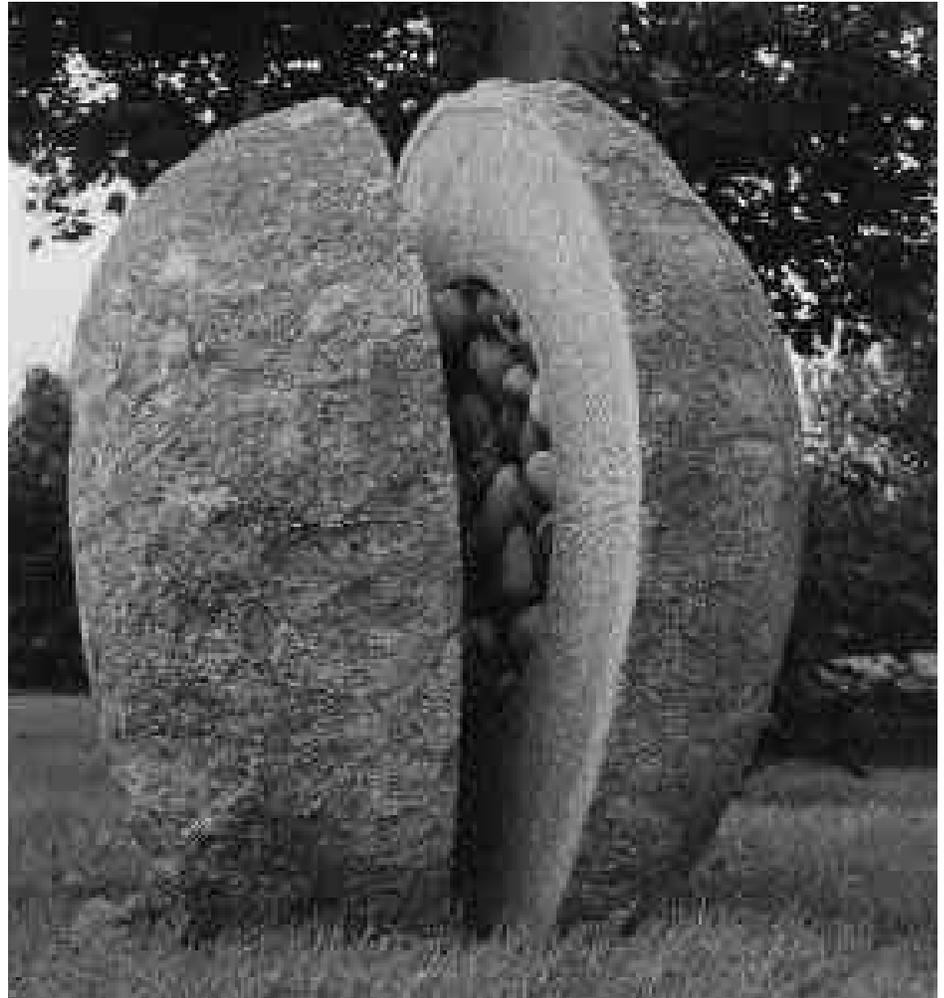
There is a stone

on the desk beside me as I write. I came across it some twenty-five years ago high on a hill in the southwest of Ireland. It had fallen from the wall of an ancient hill fort and when I picked it up from where it glowed on the slope, it fit my hand so perfectly that I kept it. Even as I hold it again now, the shape is perfectly moulded to my palm and I wonder, as I did years ago, whether the builder of the Iron Age fort who placed it in the rampart also felt it to be so remarkable. This piece of Old Red Sandstone is charged with more than a particular moment of my life but with its own condensed witness, its mute testimony, to the shape and passage of time, aeons long, which my imagination can only touch like a breeze.

“Silence packs itself into stone... ” wrote the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. But stone seems to contain the noise of its creation as well, the rise and fall of seas and the crush of continents. I remember a moment early in my life as a stoneworker when I split open a sandstone flag along its bed and there couched in the heart of it lay a small, black, egg-shaped stone, a meteorite, judging by its weight. Just to imagine its flight across the galaxies millions of years ago, the conflagration which might have accompanied its arrival, made the laying of a simple hearth stone a magical experience.

There have been many little epiphanies over the years such as when a hammer blow opened a window onto a forest fire by a dry riverbed in ancient times, or onto a school of fish left high on the shale. I wonder, as I write, whether the finger ring which I lost at sea will ever make its way into the light again.

I think this sense of universal process is what I have most enjoyed in my work with



IDIR CRUAICHE IS NA CARRAIGE Granite, beach stones. County Wicklow, Ireland 1997

stones over the years, as though time itself is incarnate in the grain and each one has a story to tell. Their passage through a mason's hands only adds to their history.

They absorb everything. The trace of the chisel's point will hold on their surface for centuries and any change I might make to a stone's shape will last as long as ever lasts.

No wonder we have used it for so many of our great religious and secular monuments or as markers for our dead. It is a remarkable material, the very stuff of the world and it seems that if in our work we give it the best of ourselves, it will absorb that, too.

An undeniable attraction of stonework has always been its unpredictable nature,

no two stones ever being the same. They are rather like people in that regard, some being slippery and hard to get hold of while others can be edgy and awkward, uncooperative and most reluctant to reveal anything of their inner nature. The best are true to themselves and responsive while the worst are downright nasty and best avoided. A good stoneworker will quickly recognise a stone with which he or she can work and each stone with which we work should help us work the next one. I have also long enjoyed stonework because it is a muscular and creative process which can engage all of one's being, whether that is building a dry stone wall for a farmer on a mountain-side or carving a sculpture in a studio.

Looking back over almost thirty years of work with stone, I realise that the practice of the former led me inevitably toward the latter

It was by mere chance that my hands discovered facility for stonework. As a boy born into the constrained world of middle-class privilege, where people who worked with their hands were perceived as being of a lesser social caste, I had few opportunities during my formative years to discover any latent ability I might have had for skillful work and, in fact, the only stones I ever touched would have been stones for skimming at the seashore. It was not until I was in my early twenties and on short holiday in the southwest of Ireland that I happened to meet someone who needed help in the building of his stone house. I was fortunate in that the wonderful man with whom I worked was a self-taught carver and mason who, while he took great pride in the work of his hands, was not so proud that he would long keep the tools of his trade from my own. One house led to another and another and the work seemed to grow more enjoyable as my confidence grew. The work came easily as though I already had it in the hands. I recall to this day being asked once to cut a chase down a wall with a maul and chisel. No sooner had I started the work than I had found the rhythm—one which I still use when carving to this day—and it felt so familiar that I was certain I had done this work before. In another life, perhaps? An

atavistic skill passed along the genes? No matter from whence it flowed, I knew I had found a work in the world, had been given a gift and the ability to shape my time with the work of my hands.

If my facility for stonework was intuitive, the discipline it required was not. Fortunately the landscape in which I lived at the time was as fine a place to learn as any, veined as it was with a myriad of walls through which coursed the personal and collective histories of our tribe. They crisscrossed the hills like the threading in a patchwork quilt, sewing lives and times tightly together. The walls of a new pasture might flow into those of a pre-Christian fort, although there was nothing in their lichened surfaces which might tell one from the other. With more experience, it became possible to read the story of the growth of a particular house or settlement in its walls and to recognise how, over the generations, the style of one mason knitted into another's, or not, like a careful script beside a hurried scrawl. It did not take me long to learn that the principles of good stonework have not changed for millennia, nor are they likely to, governed as they are by the laws of gravity. As many a ruin will testify, careless work does not last. Good work, however, endures and this is due as much to the character of the mason as of the stone he uses. In our work can be read our measure.

Hopefully also in our work can be read the joy and the pleasure of its doing, that

Lakeside pier, 1991

process which makes it all worthwhile. I have spoken to so many wallers over the years who speak of those wondrous days when the eye finds and the hand sets the right stone in the right place every time and, even if they are rare enough to be memorable, such times far outweigh those others of awkward struggle which can blacken a heart with frustration. For my own part, it was the enjoyment of the work which kept me at it and most especially in those times when I knew the play of shape and colour would be appreciated. The making of a wall can be artful work. It is the combination of care, skill and joy which can raise any work to the level of craft.

How many walls, or miles of wall, I have built over the years I could not estimate, although I have begun to feel them in the bone. I do know that the more I worked with stone, the more I came to realise my ignorance of the craft. I was shocked to learn that in other European countries there were guilds of stonemasons and years-long apprenticeships required for stonecutters and carvers, and that for all my short time as a stonewaller, I could probably not lay as much as a flagstone on the floor of Chartres Cathedral. It was only when I went to live in America that I really began to explore the many different ways of working with stone and their associated skills.

I had been living in California for a few years working for small masonry contractors and in the gardens of friends who indulged and encouraged my lithic tendencies when I was shown a photograph of a pair of stone pillars built by a couple of stonemasons from somewhere north of San Francisco. I was in awe of the skill embodied in the work which was executed in a polygonal style and which did not seem as if it would allow a blade of grass to be passed between each constituent stone. I was equally awed by the possibility that a living could be made creating work of such a standard and so I set about trying to improve my own skills.

It was pure happenstance and good fortune that led me to discover that those same two stonemasons whose work in that photograph I had so admired, Tomas Lipps and George Gonzalez, were at the time building something known as the Wave Organ, a remarkable sculptural work of stone and sound on the shores of San Francisco Bay, not far from where my wife

