



## THE MEGALITHIC BUILDERS

### I

**W**E crossed the loch, left our boat, and went up the glen. Passing the castle with its medley of new and old, we stopped at the little cemetery. A pair of tall standing stones, a linden avenue, then another pair of monoliths gave worthy entrance to the grove of rest, with its grassy mounds, its massive tombstones of a long dynasty of chiefs, and the many-stoned, almost cairn-built, tomb of their hereditary pipers. Castle and glen are empty now, and the pipes are silent; but here at least, after love and life, after labour and war, and the music of all these, the silence is of unsaddening peace.

We chose the right bank of the river (the road is on the left), and trudged on through pretty scenery of the familiar sort; hill in cloud and sunshine, river in ripple and race, birch and bracken, heather and pine, with every here and there a granite boulder among a group of stunted junipers. But a couple of hours up the stream a scene opened out, of which neither my painter friend nor myself had seen the like before. The trees grew less thickly, the heathery hill-side receded, and there lay before us broad park-like grassy levels with vast masses of evergreen, here in rounded masses, there rising into graceful spires. The first impression was almost that of park and

shrubbery laid out by a skilful landscape gardener of old for some unbuilt mansion, but as we came nearer, it was clearly a natural glade of gigantic junipers. Tall and massive, ancient and rugged, gnarled and broken, their green spirelets rose over deep caverns of shadow, filled with writhing arms breaking through vast lichenous growths, some of hoary dishevelled age, others in broad wrinkled overlappings of strange greens and lurid blues, a gorgeous ragged foulness like a witch's draperies. Outside these shadowed hollows the scene had the melancholy beauty of a cypress cemetery in the East. And who might not one of those boulders cover? As we went on the sky was grey, and a sobbing linn settled into black pools of sorrow; we had passed the place of sighing, but here seemed the wells of the river of tears.

Soon we came to a rotting bridge, and crossed to a ruined mill, with tumbled stone heaps that not so long ago were cottages and byres; for though dramatic evictions are out of fashion, it remains more than ever the interest of any practical-minded laird (chief no longer) quietly to depopulate his glen, and as the old folks die out, throw their crofts into the forest. For the fewer the people the more winged and four-footed people, and the more rent his shooting-lodger will be willing to pay.

Yet in this desolation we found a single child, a quiet wee lassie, I suppose the gamekeeper's, playing alone. It was useless speaking to her, for the education code practically works so that the children nowadays lose their Gaelic without really learning English. She did not even lift her head to look at us, but went steadily on with her playthings—a gathering of rough stones. We stepped nearer to see what she was doing with them. A shudder of astonishment ran through us—the child had traced out a ruined sheepfold, and was building beside it a funeral cairn.

We could scarcely believe our eyes or our interpretation, but the thing was unmistakable, indisputable; and so leaving hamlet and its monument builder, we went on to the narrowing

of the glen. There the explanation broke upon us; at the opening of a new labyrinth of junipers was standing or rather slipping down, a moss-grown cairn, another and another, a group, a score, a hundred; each a recorded sorrow of the glen. The bairn with her stones was not inventing her ghastly game, but only reproducing her near and familiar impressions: yet, child historian, child artist, she had combined for us the story of a passing race, a megalithic people, the utter winter of their disappearance seemingly nigh at hand.

Of these ancient builders and their work much has been written, though no one book fully figures, still less interprets. Turning to books, one is soon bewildered among Picts' houses and brochs, vitrified forts and duns, for here in the North we have in strange confusion most of the ancient types of Europe, and some of our own—and we must wait for the general progress of archæology before we can unriddle this crowded medley of architectural fossils. But as we dig below the Græco-Roman culture, below the recorded dynasties of Egypt, to discover below these the primitive megalithic builders, we cannot but ask, What are our standing-stones but unhewn obelisks, what our cairns but unshapen pyramids? Are they survivals or degenerations from that archaic world? At any rate it is clear that we have to do with one of the oldest phases of civilisation. But (as with China) what we call the oldest people is of course really the youngest; so to say it is the most dead, is to recognise it also the most undying. So may we not find these vanishing cairn-builders reappearing elsewhere throughout the land? May we not find our child-builder grown up to express these traditions, to give play to this instinct (perhaps all the more surely if unconsciously), within this modern civilisation which absorbs us all? In this way, for an everyday instance, may we not explain that aversion to brick, that love of grey stone, that profuse massiveness of wall-building in cottage and mansion alike, which strikes even the most unobservant tourist from England or America? Of course it is not by Cyclopean stones that we can always know the mega-

lithic builder ; neither the largest stones nor the means of moving them are always within his reach ; the question here, as for our child, as in life generally, is of aim, of tendency, of ideal ; does one do what in him lies ? Let us go on with our journey, and we shall see.

## II

As we return by the canal steamer to Inverness, the villas and shops, the hotels and railway stations promise no more than any other modern town to archæologist or interpreter. There seem no ancient buildings of interest, few modern ones of merit, yet on a second survey we had seen no small modern town in Scotland, hardly indeed in Britain or elsewhere, of more ambitiously monumental character. A modern castle crowns the hill ; a modern cathedral stands by the river, and the towers and spires of new churches rise every here and there. Besides the weak romanticisms and conventionalities of all these, the business quarters are crowded with costly Philistinisms which would be the pride of many a larger town. In the centre of the town we have a showy Town House and fountain, the latter built over the prehistoric palladium of the borough, that fountain stone, 'Clach-na-cuddain' which is not only the familiar fetish and watchword of Invernessians at home and abroad, but gives the unnoticed keynote of the town's architecture too. From minor megalith to minor Victorian architecture indeed is not an unmixed art-progress ; but this 'Capital of the Highlands' has still to become a capital : despite latent Highland elements, its realised ideals as yet are little more than those of the Scottish market burgh and the English garrison town.

Yet as the old language comes back to the dying, and as it is with our fathers we would sleep when dead, so the undeveloped and vulgarised megalithic city of the living is overlooked by the truer and nobler megalithic city of the dead—the Hill of Tomnahurich, crowded with cross and obelisk from base to

wooded crown. Here the ancient and latent art spirit is more developed, more emancipated, and so gives us one of the most characteristic, and in general effect one of the most beautiful cemeteries of Western Europe.

At this hill-foot again we found childhood at play; this time a group of merry boys, who, out of the rich variety of Northern games, which we were learning to decipher as survivals of past culture-phases, had fitly gone back to the megalithic game of Summer, as curling is obviously of Winter—'Putting the Stone.' As the girl in her silence, as the mourners in their sighing, so now the boys in their laughter. We are wont to say that only animals have instinct, and that man acts only by reason. Is there not sometimes a word to say for the opposite?

We are wont to receive and express our emotions for the most part audibly through music or words or tones, but the emotion of architecture is latent in us still; eye and hand can surely feel as well as tongue and ear. Emotion plays not with strings nor pipes only, but with things more massive and enduring also; to her Amphion-lute the very rocks range into order as sand-grains ripple to the violin-bow, and to her listening ear the Memnon statues sing. We speak of the rude stone ages as if they were ages of rude men, but how much is this because our tools, the machines, have mastered us, have dulled us to match their own finish? For elemental man, elemental feeling, elemental expression also; so youth, rejoicing in its strength, will ever toss the rugged stone, sorrow ever upheave her rude memorial. To feel the full depth of this ever primeval art, some modern instance must come home to us; and here by Inverness, is the spot of all Scotland. On Culloden Moor, there lies a gloom deeper than that of the Jacobite chronicles, a silence sadder than the songs; to these poor proud stones of the clans, landmarks of death and defeat, our heartstrings thrill as on no other stricken field.

Now up Strathspey and over Ben Mhicdhuì with its huge moraines, Cyclopean quarries waiting for giants; then down

Deeside, with its castles and modern cairn-capped hills, at length to Aberdeen, that most characteristic of our provincial capitals. Here as usual, progress and prosperity are plain and prosaic enough; yet one hears with wonder that the improving Town Council and University Court have decided to open their quiet College quad to the noise of the town, and give it a full view of the drapers' shops opposite, by knocking down their two main surviving historic treasures; one the Greyfriars Kirk, which might be so easily preserved and repaired as a local and concrete epitome of the history of university, city, and Northern Christendom alike; and the other the Byron house, the boyish home of the most notable European force of modern poetry and satire. Strange that this first of Celtic Bards should still have to suffer this crowning outrage of Saxon Reviewers! And where is the society for the protection of worthy buildings? Wandering onwards, the proud name of 'Granite City' is undeniably justified; and we see that the doomed relics are insufficiently megalithic. In the perspectives of Union Street is there not a suggestion of Thebes and of Carnac? Kirk and Market, Bank and Insurance Company, Town-house and Salvation Army, each shows its unconscious megalithic instinct under the varieties of Victorian fashion. Here is the true inwardness of the churchyard colonnade, or of that colossal statue upon the huge piled cairn (which some may think the best of it). Here of course also lies the origin of that staple industry, the tombstone trade. Unarchitectural and unsculpturesque as these machine-made monuments are, all turning and polish, their business-artists defend them as good enough for export, for selling to and piling upon the Philistines. Yet the prediction is safe that before long some sculptor must humanise this notable local industry into art by teaching the right use of its noble material. As for marble the sculptor goes back to Greece, so for granite he must go back to Egypt; and thus, in clear demonstration of the Immortality, the Resurrection of the Social Soul, we shall have after thirty centuries the definite renaissance of classic megalithic tradition.

Returning to Marischal College, we find that, despite the destructive orgie of the authorities, a true architect has already appeared. The tamely conventional modern perpendicular college has been reorganised as far as might be by a master hand. Porch and staircase, vestibule and ante-chamber, lead through long perspectives, as of a cathedral without transepts, say rather as of an Egyptian temple, into the noble Aula, walled with rose-coloured granite blocks and pointed with gold. And upon the former unambitious tower he has piled another hundred feet of four-square precipice, from which there leaps and crystallises a spiry fretted crown of glittering pinnacles.

Here is one of these rare points of the modern world, where we may see the beginnings of a fresh phase of architecture. For here, and perhaps for the first time, a neo-megalithic builder has struck a new note of emotion and risen from sternness or solemnity into hope and cheer. Yet the spiritual continuity is none the less complete: looking down now into the quadrangle we see below us the initial keynotes of tradition; a modern obelisk of red granite, an ancient ice-worn boulder.

Turning southward much might detain us, from the fanciful Frasersium of Arbroath to the sculptured stones of Meigle. As kindred outcrops of racial instinct, the quaint old Howff of Dundee, the ruins of St. Andrews, all lose their isolation, and gain fresh interest; nor here is it of small or unhappy augury, of merely local or individual sentiment, but a sign of the times, that the living Scotsman who most fully stands by the temporal and spiritual traditions of his ancient order, his university and church, should have begun not only deeply to investigate, but nobly to rebuild.

Nearer home the reader may easily follow up the clue. Thus Glasgow suffers from its smoke and rain, and from proximity to Edinburgh, yet is really one of the most well-built of British cities; while its cathedral with its uniquely vast crypt, its Necropolis bristling upon one hill, its university towering upon

another, are all in keeping ; new and imaginative developments of architecture as well as of painting are also beginning. Of Edinburgh, people are wont to say that it is the glorious site that compels it to be the most monumental among modern cities, but the megalithic influence, vulgarised though it too often is, has silently been at work. In castle and churches, in old and new town, in the register-house or the university, in schools and hospitals, in museums and libraries, galleries or observatories, despite their medley of styles, the same impulse thrills. Thus it is not merely the geographical resemblance of site to site, it is neither the affectations nor the genuine associations of culture, which have placed those would-be Athenian buildings where they stand, but kindred architectural sympathies also ; note in Glasgow as well as Edinburgh the preference for Doric, most massive and simple of the orders.

However as at Inverness, as everywhere, it is tomb and monument that express their builder's mind most clearly. A walk through old Greyfriars, another through the modern Dean, the briefest visit to St. Giles, will suffice for this ; the Esplanade with its monoliths, the Calton with its monuments are before every eye. Most obvious of all in the main panorama of the city after the contrast of the castled old town with the modern boulevard of the new, is what dominates this boulevard—the Scott Monument, a statued cenotaph, in which suggestions as of cairn and pyramid meet and mingle in the spire. Here sits the singer and tale-teller, our Northern Wizard (himself a builder), master and inspirer of magicians, alike of Past and Future, of those who as archæologists or historians rescue and treasure the tradition of the dead, and those who as artists in word or deed, renew these traditions in ways fitting for the living.

At present of course it is mostly plate-glass and railway-stations that are building ; well, even this is surely Cyclopean enough, even to its blindness. Even behind the plate-glass shop-windows, what best is there but old memories—old books, old tartans, old jewels (see how even the silversmiths are only

half Birmingham and half Celtic and Megalithic!). And what are these tourist stations for, but to bring people weary of the dulness of their present, eager to reach some fountains of the past?

### III

Of future building too, let a word be boldly said.

In criticism it is the way of most to fasten upon defects, of some wisely to enjoy what good they can, but of too few to watch the march of things, to search the streams of tendency. But in architecture this is peculiarly necessary, and as the bad tendencies are before all eyes, and the good less obvious even when not altogether latent, it is for the latter that we must mainly seek. As a first instance recall how in Ruskin's 'Lectures on Architecture and Painting' he figured a then recent Edinburgh tower as the meanest of mortal productions hitherto, side by side with the great Campanile of Venice, for him as yet the supreme one. Well, this bitter critique enraged the Edinburgh Cockney at the time, but now the very fellow (not reproduction) of the Campanile is well above ground already. On the Mound that clumsy Doric Temple has more in it than the futile Art-School of Kensington; side by side there is at work what is probably the most living school of art and design in Britain, where the architect of the Campanile himself is heading the most strenuous youth of his city. With these, a new generation will soon begin.

For divining the future, as for recalling the past, there is the same rare yet open secret—of Sympathy. But this spell, as in the old stories, needs recasting three times, and each time in the right way. The first sympathy is with the best actual work which the men just nearing maturity and power are beginning to do; the second is with what the able youths of the next wave, the immature aspirants to governing and leading of all kinds, are learning and discussing, are doing and dreaming. But the third and rarest, is with what is sought and

dreamed and felt among the people themselves. Hence the ballads of one generation give the art poetry of the next; hence, for instance, the dominant wave of Scottish Literature of Locality has no reason for shame of its humble kail-yard origin, its beginnings in the Forfarshire popular press; so Scott learned as Stevenson began, with stories for boys.

No spell is ever completely found, the last least of all: but let him who would really build for his generation, and not merely for his client and his wages, go perseveringly on the quest. He will find here and there a clue to the secret, one at least in this old town of ours; one here, one there, now at home, and now abroad; but so far as the main theme of this essay is concerned, let any one who cares for it see what he can make out for himself not only of the history of Scotland, but of the life and thought of its People, from the speaking stones of Stirling, which he that runs may read.

PATRICK GEDDES.

