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## REVIEWS

*Dougie Strang*

*The Bone Cave: A Journey  
through Myth and Memory*

Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2023.

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IN THE Acknowledgements section of his book, Dougie Strang explains that its first chapters were published by Dark Mountain, a project begun in 2004 designed to bring together writers who wished to share stories that bear witness to the ecological, social, and cultural environment present in the UK today.<sup>1</sup> The sources of the narrative itself are the journal entries Strang made during an autumn walking tour of the Highlands. His intention was to trace the origins of some popular Scottish folktales and myths and blend these with his own travel experiences and memories, describing the landscape he passed through and the impressions he formed. By doing so, he said in an interview with the Scottish Book Trust during his year-long tenure as New Writer of 2022, “I hope I’ve created a book that will allow the reader to fully immerse themselves in the depth-culture of a Highland landscape.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the chapters of *The Bone Cave* do read like journal entries in that they are apt to jump quickly from the author recounting one event or myth to another. These vignettes are frequently interspersed with memories about earlier times that have been sparked by the particular experience Strang is relating. This quixotic writing style, rather than making the reader feel unsettled or confused, creates a lightness that both entertains and informs.

Strang not only talks about the stories which lie behind the folklore that is part of Scotland’s ancient landscape which he journeys through; he always returns to the present, sharing anecdotes of the people he meets thumbing for lifts along the country’s highways and byways. These are diverse folk, from

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1 The Dark Mountain Project. <https://dark-mountain.net/about> (accessed: 10 January 2024)

2 Scottish Book Trust New Writer 2022: Dougie Strang. <https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/writing-and-authors/new-writers-awards/dougie-strang> (accessed: 10 January 2024)

a drug user who has come to realise his life is a mess and he needs help, to a plumber, a lumberjack, and a lonely widow. In true journalling style Strang writes about how buying second-hand hiking boots on eBay proves false economy since they turn out to be too tight, giving him blisters and sore feet. The author's hardships and various camping experiences lend the book a charmingly vivacious 'real' quality through which the readers can feel themselves vicariously walking beside him.

Setting out from Corroir (near Fort William), the UK's highest railway station, Strang navigates mountain routes from Beinn a' Bhric in the south to as far north as Cranstackie and west to Loch Bà on the Isle of Mull. Unsurprisingly, since this book is about Scottish folklore, the *Cailleach* is a major preoccupation. Associated with the myths of landscape and weather, especially winter storms, *Cailleach*, meaning old woman or hag in English, is a kind of mythical spirit capable of shapeshifting and performing both good and evil deeds. Another of Strang's interests are deer - the sightings of them and describing their mating rituals. A myth he relates embodies his fascination with deer and a folklore story of the most traditional kind - that involving shapeshifting (p. 65):

Dòmhnall Mòr Òg has been up since dawn, and after a fruitless morning's stalk, he is resting on a ridge through the heat of the afternoon. His yew tree bow and sheath of arrows lie by his side. A soft voice asks if he is asleep. "Not now," he says, jumping to his feet. Before him is a red deer hind with chestnut flanks. He stoops to gather and draw his bow, fixing an arrow in one fluid move. When he raises the bow, the deer takes the form of a woman, her chestnut hair flowing down her back, her cheeks pale as bog cotton. "It grieves me, young Donald," she says, "that you are bent on shooting hinds."

"I have never fired at a hind when I could find a stag," Dòmhnall Mòr Òg replies.

The story continues with the stag woman telling Donald she is pleased to hear it. Suddenly the land becomes shrouded in thick mist. When it lifts the figure is gone and Donald never sees her again.

Strang overnights in various mountain bothies or in his tent close to lakes, lochs or wooded areas where he collects fallen branches and twigs for firewood. Describing every site he stops at, its natural habitat, the birdsong he hears and views he enjoys from there, the author is a conscientious wilderness dweller, always ensuring his campfires are properly extinguished and leaving bothies as he found them. There is a certain sense of déjà vu each time he talks about

finding a suitable camping spot, putting up his tent and unpacking and packing up his gear. After the second occasion the reader is familiar with his ritual and the repetition becomes a little tiresome.

Some locations are special, though. One night, Strang finds a bothy on the summit of Cranstackie mountain (802 metres / 2,631 ft) in Sutherland, at the north-western tip of the Scottish Highlands. "The wind bellowed in my ears and the mountain glinted like gun metal," Strang writes (p. 92). Going outside, just before midnight, he sees bands of pale green light rippling across the sky - the Aurora Borealis or, in Gaelic, *Na Fir-chlis*, translating as The Nimble Men (p. 92).

In the Northern Isles there are many popular myths surrounding the Northern Lights. Strang explains (pp. 92-93):

The beings who brighten the night sky above Scotland do not do so in dance – despite being called 'The Merry Dancers' in Orkney and Shetland – but in battle. "When the mirrie dancers play, they are like to slay," the saying goes. The word *mirrie* has been corrupted to 'merry' and actually means shimmering.

Strang also talks about an important part of Scottish history - indeed, in a narrative about the Highlands it would be remiss of him not to. During the early eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries the Highland Clearances evicted tenant farmers from their crofts, depriving them of their livelihoods, with the land they tended given over to sheep grazing. In response to petitions by desperate farmers, the Napier Commission was set up in 1883 to investigate the plight of the crofters who were not only concerned about their own welfare and that of their families, but also worried for the land and how it would be affected after the sheep had left. Strang writes about how, when in the 1990s the North Assynt Estate was being sold, the local crofters established a trust to buy back the land their ancestors had lost. "It was a revolutionary moment," Strang says (p. 111). The success of the Assynt Crofters' Trust led to similar trusts being set up on the Island of Eigg, the Isle of Ulva, off Mull and other places that had suffered population decline following the Clearances.

Perhaps this quote best sums up both the book's premise and Strang's own feelings about his native land and his journey through it. They are sentiments which will undoubtedly be shared by many Scottish readers (p. 74):

Walking amidst silence and spaciousness, I was absorbed in the landscape and was consciously grateful that I lived in a country where undisturbed engagement with the natural world is possible. It's something I have never taken for granted.

*The Bone Cave* is a book for readers who enjoy nature writing, memoir, and occasional forays into some of Scotland's history. There *are* brief sections about the country's myths and folklore, but Strang's exploration of them is not as in-depth as the book's tagline *A Journey through Myth and Memory*, or the blurb on the inside of the dust jacket, might suggest.

Carola Huttmann  
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