

An odyssey of myth, philosophy, stonemasonry and endeavour

Dragging a 40kg slab of siltstone from Orkney carved with footprints on a 1,300-mile pilgrimage to Trondheim Cathedral is the unlikely setting of a story that everyone can relate to because it is a metaphor for life.

The image of a stonemason to many is still probably a hairy-arsed, muscular man. *Stone Will Answer* is a book that challenges that image. It is written by a 5ft 4in tall stonemason who is a woman.

Published in hardback on 9 February by Harvill Secker (part of Penguin, no less), this is a story of an epic 1,300-mile pilgrimage with a 40kg 'stone boat' from Caithness to Trondheim via Orkney. Into the surface of the stone the author, stonemason Beatrice Searle, has carved two footprints, which she invites people to stand in during the course of her pilgrimage.

The idea might sound superficially like comedian Tony Hawkes' *Round Ireland with a Fridge*, and the 500,000+ sales of that book might cynically be suggested as one reason for Beatrice Searle's book, although the cynicism of that suggestion quickly dissipates once you start to read it. You are unlikely to doubt the authenticity of her motivation, which is more high-minded than the drunken £100 bet that set Tony Hawkes on his month-long journey.

Stone Will Answer is, perhaps, a romanticised version of what people might think of as a stonemason's life, although there certainly are stonemasons who invest stone with more meaning than simply the material they happen to work with. There are also those who work wood and metal and clay and glass and many other materials who do the same because, to some, the product of mind, hand and material can lead to the transcendence of craft to art.

For some stonemasons and carvers it is not putting too fine a point on it to call stone their spiritual connection with the planet and even the universe, and certainly Beatrice's stone, which she calls 'Orkney Boat', with its footprints carved in it, takes on that role.

Stone is more than just minerals to society in general. It carries messages. Its symbolism of permanence is reflected in the saying 'written in stone'. In the book, Beatrice recounts a meeting with a German who tells

Beatrice Searle on her way to Trondheim with her 'Orkney Boat'.



Stone Will Answer

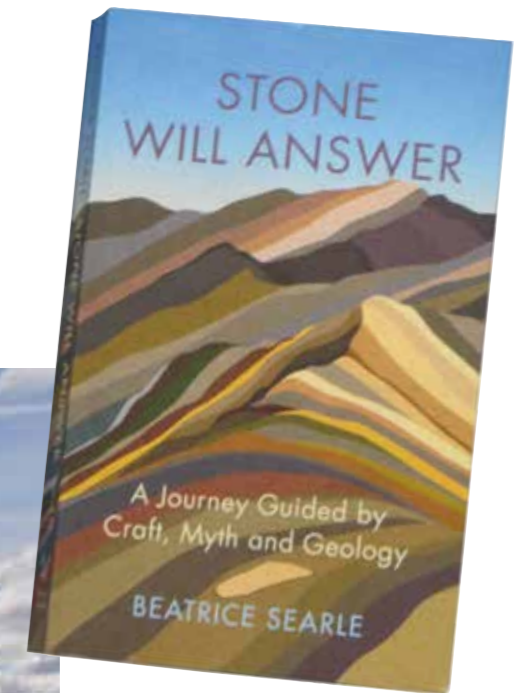
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her the Orkney Boat might be exactly the sort of boat that can sail its way into hearts and provide the groundedness and solidity that people need in order to be able to speak up or find their way. The German stands in the footprints she has carved on the stone and laughs, his heart filled with joy.

This book is inevitably going to take its place alongside Alex Woodcock's *King of Dust*, published in 2019, and Andrew Ziminski's *The Stonemason*, published in 2020... and, indeed, Seamus Murphy's *Stone Mad* published in Ireland in 1949 and later in London.

And there are similarities, particularly among the most recent three, in the tone and the rather spiritual presentation of stone and the journey it represents for these stonemasons, although of all the journeys none is quite so self-inflictedly arduous as Beatrice's as she drags her heavy stone over sometimes uncompromising terrain.

All of the books reflect a certain mystical element to stone, of permanence and solidity but also of fluidity and transcendence, of unending history recorded in the stone. As Beatrice says in *Stone Will Answer*, stone buildings are really a palimpsest – a medium written upon by successive generations as masons keep them standing, replacing stones as they wear and weather to retain the architectural integrity of the original design.

Like the replacement of cells in a body during the course of a lifetime, they raise the same question: if, in the end, all the cells

Stone Will Answer

or stones have been replaced, is what exists today only a memory of the original? If you find such contemplations fascinating, you will probably enjoy this book.

Standing in the footprints she has carved in her Orkney Boat, Beatrice tells her own story of the stone and the pilgrimage she is making to those who will listen as she makes her journey. And she invites her audience to stand in the footprints themselves and connect with whatever the experience evokes from “a place of anchorage and strength”.

She resents the intrusion of journalists filming her final kilometres as she approaches Trondheim Cathedral to complete her pilgrimage across Norway, robbing her, she feels, of the moment. “Why not just let me go, please,” she writes. “Moving with a stone is not newsworthy – I should know, I’ve been doing it for two months – nothing could be easier or more instinctive. It has become my whole life, please – it is just my life – not so very momentous, only...” The ellipsis is hers.

Beatrice was 26 when she made the journey in 2017. She had intended to go on her own, but her boyfriend, referred to in the book as ‘T’, offered to accompany her and did so, for which she had many occasions to be grateful.

At Trondheim she and ‘T’ pull the stone the last few metres into the stonemasons’ yard at the cathedral and are welcomed by the masons, although considerably, as they do not want to overwhelm her.

The news crew filming her arrival ask her if she is ‘proud’ of her accomplishment and she says she is ‘happy’. It takes a week of eating for ‘T’ to stop feeling ravenous after the monumental journey hauling a stone over what is sometimes almost impassable terrain on the converted sack truck that Beatrice has named Marianne, because the brand name on the truck is ‘Faithful’. If you do not know who Marianne Faithful is, check the internet.

As it turned out, the adapted sack-truck was not entirely faithful and needed repairing several times on the journey, adding to the drama. Nevertheless, it was still carrying the stone by the time it arrived in Trondheim.

A week after arriving, as Beatrice carved soapstone as part of the unending maintenance of the Cathedral, built of soapstone along with greenschist, she says her head caught up with where her feet had brought her “and I found that I deeply, mirthfully knew I had arrived, without the knowledge having particularly announced itself”. But she misses pulling the stone: “walking without the stone at my back I felt half dressed”.

It is a story of determination and soul-searching; of geology, stonemasonry and philosophy. It is a metaphor for life, of the

achievement resulting from a monumental struggle for those prepared to embark on the struggle with enough conviction, determination and luck to succeed. “By the stones the boat stays upright on the water; it can sail on,” writes Beatrice.

There is also humour in the adversity faced on the journey and the book carries stories from the mythology that inspired her to make the journey in the first place.

It was a trip to Orkney instigated by stories told by her tutor while she was studying stonemasonry at “a college in Northampton” (presumably Moulton, although it does not get a mention) that began her pilgrimage to Trondheim.

“Orkney is stone from nose to tail,” she writes in *Stone Will Answer*. “These disparate islands are unified by stone above ground, below ground and out to sea and, as such, respect for the rocks of both land and sea are equally ingrained.”

The unifying rock of the region is Devonian Old Red sandstone, laid down about 400million years ago. It is red as a result of being continental in origin rather than marine. There is also Pre-Cambrian gneiss, twice as old as the sandstone and pushed to the surface by the collision of land masses about 500million years ago.

Beatrice was fascinated by the legends of Magnus Erlendsson, the patron saint of Orkney, who gives his name to Magnus Cathedral in Kirkstone, built from the island’s red sandstone 900 years ago.

She was also fascinated by Scotland’s petrosomatoglyphs, stones supposedly carrying the imprints of saints (or others) who touched them. Such rocks appear in various parts of the world, often functioning as symbolism for events such as the crowning of kings, as they did in Scotland.

One that particularly fascinated Beatrice was the Orcadian stone known as The Ladykirk Stone, or St Magnus’ Boat. She says legend has it that Magnus sailed the stone across the Pentland Firth, separating Orkney from Caithness, leaving his footprints on the stone.

The idea of sailing on stones is not necessarily quite as miraculous as it at first appears, as stones were commonly used as ballast on sailing boats to keep them upright in treacherous, stormy seas, and as sea anchors to tow behind vessels to keep them facing into the waves. Beatrice explains, too, that neolithic shipwrights might have made stone keels for their boats to keep them upright.

The stone Magnus is said to have sailed can still be seen in Orkney, his footprints etched on it, although these days a glass fibre replica protects the original from the soles that still want to stand in those footprints.

This is what inspired Beatrice Searle’s journey with her ‘Orkney Boat’, into which she had carved footprints of her own.



Above. Beatrice honing her skills in Lincoln Cathedral's masonry workshop.

Below. Beatrice on the road to Trondheim. Most of the journey was not as easy as this.



The stone would be her territory, over which she could reign as she took the 1,300-mile pilgrimage to Norway to follow the ancient Gudbrandsdalen pilgrim path to Trondheim Cathedral.

The journey included 800 miles by boat to Norway and 500 pulling the 40kg rock on the adapted sack-truck named Marianne.

Beatrice’s timing was good. As she embarked on her pilgrimage, Orkney was marking 900 years since the death of Magnus with a year-long programme of cultural events and the opening of a 55-mile pilgrim route of its own on the Scottish mainland. The route is called the Magnus Way. It gave Beatrice the first of several opportunities she has taken to tell her story to a wider audience.

She walked 12 miles of the Magnus Way

with her stone, with BBC Wales joining her to interview her about her pilgrimage to Trondheim. It was BBC Wales because at that time Beatrice lived in Cardiff, although she has since moved to Scotland. The publicity helped her raise the funds she needed for the marathon journey by gaining the support of 42 donations.

In *Stone Will Answer* Beatrice evokes some powerful images with her prose. Just one of many examples comes from her search for a stone for the journey. Led by John Brown, “Orkney’s most esteemed geologist”, and accompanied by two friends, they visit a beach to look for an appropriate stone. John Brown had had a leg amputated and was on crutches so stayed in his van. Beatrice and her two friends braved a storm to search the beach. She writes: “The wind pinned

the three of us to the sea as we tried to fight our way up the beach manoeuvring stones towards John’s waiting verdict, backs bent, faces low against the wind for his driver’s seat analysis. Cindy’s scarf flew at ninety degrees to her neck and so did the beach grass from its roots. The distant land withstood, as strongly stitched as a sail with big, white risen fence seams, and Kitchener’s crenelated memorial, like an oversized rock piece, squatted unshaken on the hill above. The bay was a swift, wind-daubed flick of land, a terrahook caught on the ocean, and on its shores something waited.”

What was waiting was the stone she was looking for. “A slim piece of flattish rock, three, four inches high in places, diamond shaped, billowing out to east and west and beamy in the hips like a true Yole, Orkney’s traditional clinker-built fishing boat. Its diagonal sides revealed the process that had released it along its natural stress fractures, as occurs often in the flagstone of the West Coast. It was Devonian siltstone, ripple marked by water, edges crimped and softened by the repeated movement of the sea, and in its pools it was a matt, bronzed colour. It looked exactly like a wedge of petrified, ruptured sand.”

Orkney Museum invited her to fashion her Orkney Boat footprint stone in its courtyard. She was surprised at how hard the stone was. Her first cut to carve the footprints knocked the corner off her tungsten carbide chisel as she hit it.

You have to wait until chapter four before Beatrice continues the explanation of how she came to be working in stone. The chapter concludes with her fashioning masonry for the maintenance of Lincoln Cathedral, using stone from the cathedral’s own quarry in Lincoln, which, as she explains in the final chapter, was worked out and closed in 2021.

It suits her narrative to say the cathedral is made entirely of stone from the cathedral’s own quarry, but even before the quarry closed, geographically similar French limestone had been used in order to achieve the bed heights required for some of the masonry, such as the Dean’s Eye window frame that was replaced in 2006.

Chapter four begins with Beatrice at art school in Newcastle, where she taught herself to work stone because “bestowing material knowledge had long since ceased to be the foremost goal of an art institution”.

She writes: “I was made to feel foolish and presumptuous for assuming that I could have both my powers of critical reasoning and my material understanding expanded. This, unfortunately, only made me stone’s more ardent pursuer.”

Having graduated, she went to work for an architectural stone company in County Durham, where she was duly mocked by the

masons for her art degree but was nevertheless taught some of the skills and humility of the mason before her boss suggested she take an apprenticeship at Lincoln Cathedral.

“They had taught me well. No more than the basics, and those without much refinement, but enough to hand me on, to a place of exacting zinc templates and one-millimetre tolerances.”

She writes: “My jump over to stonemasonry had been full of idealism. To be skilful and to apply that skill to something useful seemed to me the highest pursuit. I was engaged in necessary work that produced tangible results: stone made functional by the process of cutting, for the purpose of keeping a medieval building standing. I was peaceful and secure within that team, satisfied to be needed by the Cathedral. The sense of the usefulness of my work triumphed. Simple to comprehend, honest and inviting, my task was to preserve a medieval feat of engineering and dedication.”

After six months at the Cathedral she started attending the stonemasonry college where the seeds of the idea of the pilgrimage to Trondheim were sown.

Then, in *Stone Will Answer*, back to the pilgrimage itself until chapter six, where Beatrice’s three-year apprenticeship at Lincoln Cathedral is coming to an end and she is starting to wonder about the nature of stone, seen as practically eternal but always changing, weathering, decaying, which is what was keeping the masons busy at the cathedral. She also considers that masons once travelled as journeymen following their apprenticeships, learning as they travelled.

She says a medieval banker mark had been found at Lincoln Cathedral that was the same as one found at Nidaros Domkirke. An exchange began between the masons of the two cathedrals, with occasional lunchtime Skype conversations. Beatrice’s Lincoln colleagues introduced her to their Norwegian friends, who told her about the pilgrim path to Trondheim’s Nidaros Cathedral, used for more than 500 years.

Beatrice read a book about the long haul pilgrims who walk the route in a single journey. “I determined to walk the six hundred and forty-three kilometres of the pilgrim road to Trondheim, even before I had selected my companion stone, and to finish at Lincoln’s sister cathedral, after our medieval journey mason archetype.”

And so the odyssey begins. The story is compellingly narrated, entertaining and thought-provoking, even if the idea of dragging a 40kg slab of stone across an unforgiving landscape sounds faintly crazy. But then, many of the journeys most worth making in life start out seeming faintly crazy. So treat yourself to a copy of this book and enjoy the journey. ■