



Scottish Culture and History



The Stone of Destiny



King Edward I

On November 15, 1996, the Stone of Destiny, on which Scottish kings had been crowned since time immemorial, was brought back to Scotland — 700 years after the army of King Edward I of England carted it off to Westminster Abbey in London. Now safely ensconced in Edinburgh Castle, the 152 kg rock, popularly known outside Scotland as the "Stone of Scone", has joined the other

Scottish Royal Regalia — Crown, Sceptre, Sword and jewels — in a closely-guarded museum.

The origin of this famous Stone is shrouded in myth. According to legend, it came from the Holy Land, where Jacob supposedly used it as a pillow in Biblical times. Transported through Egypt, Sicily and Spain, it was taken to Ireland, where Saint Patrick himself blessed this rock for use in crowning the kings of the emerald isle. It is certainly possible that the Stone may have been used in the coronation ceremonies of the Irish Kingdom of Dalriada from roughly 400 AD until 850 AD, when Kenneth I, the 36th King of Dalriada, moved his capital of his expanding empire from Ireland to Scone (pronounced "scoon") in what is now Perthshire, Scotland. The Stone was moved several times after that, and used on the remote, western island of Iona, thence in Dunadd, in Dunstaffnage and finally in Scone again for the installation of Dalriadic monarchs.



The Coronation Throne with the Stone of Destiny underneath it

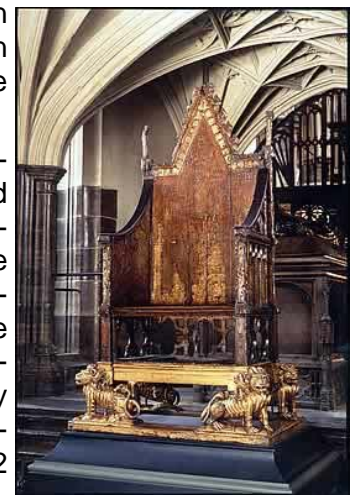
The Stone was last used in a coronation in Scotland in 1292, when John Balliol was proclaimed King. Four years later, in 1296, the English monarch, Edward I (infamous as the "hammer of the Scots," and nemesis of Scottish national hero William Wallace) invaded Scotland. Amongst the booty that Edward's army removed was the legendary Stone, which the English king apparently regarded as an important symbol of Scottish sovereignty.

The present English Coronation Throne was constructed in 1302 to house the Stone.

According to the treaty of Northampton of 1328, peace was restored between the warring neighbours, and King Edward III of England promised to return the Stone to its rightful owners forthwith. Somehow, the English never got around to fulfilling



The Stone of Destiny



King Edward's Chair without the Stone of Destiny

Somehow, the English never got around to fulfilling



Prince Andrew hands over the Royal Warrant in delivering the Stone of Destiny back to Scotland

their end of the bargain, and the Stone of Destiny remained in London until British Prime Minister John Major, with the approval of Her Majesty the Queen, arranged to right this persistent, historical oversight.

But is the stone that finally rests securely in Edinburgh Castle the real Stone of Destiny? After so many centuries, it is impossible to know. According to one legend, the Stone never left Ireland at all. One tale suggests that the original Stone of Destiny was white marble, carved with decorative figures — in no way resembling the plain slab of yellow sandstone with a single Latin cross carved on it that sat beneath the throne in Westminster Abbey for those past seven centuries. To make matters more confusing, there may have been several copies made down through the ages! It is entirely within the realm of possibility that some canny Scots fobbed off a fake on Edward I, seven hundred years ago, hiding the original coronation stone where it would never be found. One story, particularly satisfying to Scottish nationalists with long memories, claims that Edward actually took the rough rock used to hold down the cover of the cess-pit at Scone Castle, and that subsequent English monarchs have ceremoniously seated themselves on this medieval plumbing accessory for their coronations ever since 1308! At least one acknowledged copy of the "Westminster" Stone exists, on public

display at beautiful Scone Palace in Perthshire, where it serves as a favourite roost for the elegant peacocks and camera-toting tourists who stroll the grounds.

Are there additional copies? On Christmas Day, 1950, four Scottish students, inspired by nationalist sentiment and lead by Ian Hamilton, heisted the Stone from under the Coronation Throne in Westminster Abbey, dumped it in the boot of their car, and drove off with it. About four months later, the rock was recovered from Arbroath Abbey, where it had been deposited by the stone-nappers. Or was it? Rumours have always persisted that there was plenty of time for the students to fashion a replica to be "returned" to Westminster, while the original Stone was spirited north to a secret location in Scotland. One seemingly far-fetched theory even suggested that the actual stone was hiding in plain sight for decades — that the purported replica on public display at Scone Palace was in fact the real Stone of Destiny! Only the thieves would know for sure.



Ian R Hamilton QC today

The evidence that the Stone was in fact returned to Scotland and eventually left in Arbroath Abbey to be returned to the safe keeping of the Church of Scotland is to be found in Ian R. Hamilton's book, *No Stone Unturned*, (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1952). This is an autobiographical account of how, when and why the Stone was heisted.



The Honours of Scotland

Lingering doubts about the provenance of the Stone are unlikely to be resolved: fables are always much more fun than mere facts. But few would debate the symbolic significance of restoring what is at least presumed to be the original Stone of Destiny to Scotland. Most Scots were pleased, if somewhat bemused, by this unexpected turn of events, although some express reservations about the legal niceties surrounding the return of the pilfered artefact. Technically, under British law the Crown still "owns" the Stone — the assumption apparently being that, after seven centuries, possession is ten tenths of the law. However, Her Majesty has decided to lend it permanently to her Scottish subjects, on the understanding that it can be temporarily taken back to London whenever it might be required for future coronations.

The last time the Stone was used was in 1953 for the formal Coronation ceremony of Queen Elizabeth II who had succeeded to the throne in February the previous year on the death of her father, King George IV.