



Cairns: Messengers in Stone

David B. Williams

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Praise for author David B. Williams:

“Makes stones sing” --Kirkus Reviews

“Williams’s lively mixture of hard science and piquant lore is sure to fire the readers’ curiosity” --
Publisher’s Weekly

*Part history, part folklore, part geology

* Features charming black-and-white illustrations

From meadow trails to airy mountaintops and wide open desert, cairns -- those seemingly random stacks of rocks -- are surprisingly rich in stories and meaning. For thousands of years cairns have been used by people to connect to the landscape and communicate with others, and are often an essential guide to travelers. Cairns, manmade rock piles can indicate a trail, mark a grave, serve as an altar or shrine, reveal property boundaries or sacred hunting grounds, and even predict astronomical activity. The Inuit have more than two dozen terms to describe cairns and their uses!

In Cairns: Messengers in Stone, geologist and acclaimed nature writer David B. Williams (Stories in Stone: Travels through Urban Geology) explores the history of cairns from the moors of Scotland to the peaks of the Himalaya -- where they come from, what they mean, why they’re used, how to make cairns, and more. Cairns are so much more than a random pile of rocks, knowing how to make cairns can drastically alter the meaning of the formation. Hikers, climbers, travelers, gardeners, and nature buffs alike will delight in this quirky, captivating collection of stories about cairns.

Cairns: Messengers in Stone Details

Date : Published October 1st 2012 by Mountaineers Books (first published January 1st 2012)

ISBN : 9781594856

Author : David B. Williams

Format : Paperback 192 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, History, Environment, Nature, Science, Outdoors, Geology, Anthropology

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From Reader Review Cairns: Messengers in Stone for online ebook

Michelle says

In *Cairns: Messengers in Stone*, naturalist and geologist David B. Williams talks not only about the history of these manmade stone path markers, but the variety of styles, materials used (here's where the geology comes in handy), and several specific cairns that have interesting anecdotes with them. There are also personal confessions of cairn busting (when working for the park services, they really hate it when hikers build their own cairns leading off the trails), and instructions on how to build your own cairns (Williams no longer works for the park services).

My favorite chapter was "Expedition Cairns" which was about the search for Sir John Franklin and the crews of his ships *Erebus* and *Terror* (Dan Simmons apparently has a horror novel about the crew of the second) after they disappeared in search of the Northwest Passage. A number of cairns dotted islands along Franklin's probable route. Some made by his crew, some made by other crews attempting to find him. I also enjoyed the chapter about burial cairns, because I've been to Newgrange, and have a personal fascination with neolithic burial structures.

I probably wouldn't have read this book if I hadn't won it from firstreads (I entered because of the previously mentioned fascination with burial mounds), but it was a quick and interesting read, and I finished it while Hurricane Sandy was pouring outside, so I guess it held my attention (full disclosure: Sandy didn't hit my area very hard). If I hadn't given up hiking as a pastime when I finished my k-12 run as a girl scout, this book might be more applicable to my everyday life. As it is, I've already thought of a friend who I think will enjoy it.

Ginny says

Interesting facts about cairns, cairns in history, cairns' effect on different environments, the author's experiences with cairns. But no real coherent viewpoint--just a collection of facts.

Threesillyrabbits says

It's not uncommon to find stone cairns used as trail markers; without such guides to mark the trail, a hiker might easily become lost in a strange and unfamiliar landscape. But cairns have also been used throughout the world as more than just trail markers. They offer a tangible space to pause and get our bearings. They hint for us to stop and listen to the wind. We may stand at a cairn and remember or turn within to ponder the meaning in this pile of stones. What does this place mean? What are its secrets? What are we meant to find here?

Author David B. Williams seeks to answer some of these questions for us in this book. Part geology and part cultural study and with a healthy dose of humor, this is an enjoyable read for anyone with an interest in rocks. It's delightfully illustrated by John Barnett and covers topics as broad-ranging as age-dating cairns, cairn ecology (which I found particularly interesting), and a tour of cairns across the world. I just wish a bit more folklore had been included.

Judy Beaudette says

I've always thought of cairns as relatively benign little rock piles that point the way. After reading Williams' book *Cairns: Messengers in Stone*, I won't make that mistake again! He gives the reader an exhaustive tour of dozens of cairns all over the world -- including one that contains over 50,000 stones and a group of cairns that featured prominently in a 1800's "missing persons" case that reeks of cannibalism. Who knew that cairns have served as post offices, poetry depots, public art, shrines to deities, burial sites, monuments to people, or as a tool for transferring traveler's fatigue? Williams' stories and explanations are carefully researched and cited, giving the book an almost academic feel, although it never crosses entirely into the stuffy side of academic writing. He tells interesting stories, offers cultural perspectives, explains science when necessary, and even throws in humor (the geeky kind) as he explores the history of cairn building -- from man's early beginnings to our modern existence, which in all its technological glory, offers a downloadable app for how to balance stones. Go figure!

Michael Brady says

David Williams has a very special way of looking at the world...starting with just a pile of rocks.

Cairns: Messengers in Stone, is one seriously clever, entertaining, and informative book. As author David B. Williams examines the natural and unnatural history of cairns, the people who make and use them, the stones they're made of and how they age, and what grows upon and around them, he treats the reader to a rich and involving story that in less capable hands might have been merely a disordered midden of cocktail party trivia.

Across nine chapters, a variety of brief guest essays, and a collection of simple illustrations, Williams touches in useful detail upon topics as varied as anthropology, archeology, astronomy, biology, burial practices, cannibalism, carbon dating and other dating techniques, chemistry, communication, cosmology, ecology, engineering, ethnology, folklore, geocaching, geography, geology, governments, history, language, lead poisoning, legend, lichenometry, linguistics, mountaineering, mythology, Neolithic hunting practices, paleoanthropology, physics, polar exploration, political history, religion, shamanism, sheep herding, sociology, tool making, tourism, and volcanology. Along the way, Williams makes a powerful yet credible supposition: that cairns - being deliberately assembled way-finding aids - represent not only human tool-making, but also a very early example of human symbolic communication.

If any of these many perspectives on the natural world and human history interest you then you will enjoy this book.

My copy of *Cairns: Messengers in Stone*, was a Goodreads First Reads Giveaway.

Phillip says

Interesting somewhat obscure topic. Author does not do much to enliven it.

Sara says

There was some interesting information here--I used this book for some research for a novel I'm writing--but overall, the author's voice made it hard to enjoy.

Julie says

Over the past couple years, as I have become more of a hiker, I have been fascinated with the cairns that I have occasionally seen by the side of the trail. I have often wondered why they were there and who built them. This book answered those questions and others that I didn't even know I had. I found the chapters on dating the age of cairns and expedition cairns the most intriguing.

Ron Mcfarland says

Sometime ago someone said "if you are not spending time trying to find the trail - you are not spending enough time outside" not sure who or where the quote came from but it motivated me to read David Williams little book Cairns.

Turns out it is not so little and goes into great detail and depth about the history of Cairns, the environmental aspect, dating of cairns and much more.

So much, that the next time I see one, it will automatically trigger questions like who made it, how long ago and is it appropriate for the area.

Cairns is a good read for not only backcountry travelers but also those with a sense of curiosuty about the past.

Congratulations to David Williams for taking what looks like a pile of rocks and making and interesting read.

Tony says

Very early in this book the author wonders out loud whether it was a male or a female who built "that first cairn." He answers this really besides-the-point question with an equally silly answer: *I tend to think it was some guy*. He comes to this conclusion based, he says, on "circumstantial evidence", because "guys like to play with rocks, to build and engineer things, and to throw rocks." The direct evidence is that the author prefers rocks to logic. "Not that there aren't gals out there who do all of the above," he offers. *Gals???* Really? He suspects men carry a rock-throwing, cairn-building gene. I have at least three female Goodreads 'friends', who live a stone's throw from the author in Seattle, who build and engineer and most definitely 'play with rocks'. (Feel free to add a 'yo, asshole'). So, first I stopped and turned to the front of the book to see when it was published, assuming maybe a copyright date in the 1950s. But, no, this first edition said

2012. Then I looked in the back and found the author's picture. Looks like the hiker, former park ranger he is alleged to be. Mr. Williams had dug himself a very deep hole which I doubted he could climb out of. I worried if this whole, short book would be inane. It wasn't. He had additional moments of glib but nothing that insulting.

I was hoping this book would be quirky and cool, maybe even in the manner of John McPhee's writing. But that's an unrealistic standard. This book was actually and surprisingly dry. But I learned a lot, and eventually there were stories to entertain. I liked reading about the cairn very near Thoreau's long-gone cabin (it includes rocks taken from the Berlin Wall). And I especially liked learning about *beinakerling*, a tradition of ribald poems placed or etched in ancient Icelandic cairns.

Interspersed throughout the book are bits of writing from other writers. These are uniformly good and a bit more of what I was looking for. One such story begins with this paragraph:

A year after my father and stepmother were killed by a grizzly bear along the Hulahula River in Alaska's Artic, I traveled the same river to find their final campground. I brought communion from my priest in Seattle. I knelt and prayed.

The author of that piece found rocks that had obviously been used to secure their tent, and they would make a fitting memorial cairn. *"I love you," I whispered to the cairn. I heard the wind moving over the tundra and out to the sea.*

A good story; a nice moment. And, oh. The writer of that story was a woman.

Casea Peterson says

Right away you can tell that Williams enjoyed writing this book. His experience traveling around the world and working as a park ranger really beefed up the chapters of his book. He simply loves cairns. He loves every little thing about them! From a scientific viewpoint to tales of legends and lore, Williams makes you care a little bit more about those small (or LARGE) piles of rock that can be found all around the globe or right in your backyard. Now I will probably never build a cairn unless I know for a fact it is worthy of being built.

Tom says

Perhaps a bit too esoteric. My preference would have been that it concentrated more heavily on cairns and their role in exploration. Still, for a book about piles of rocks, an enjoyable read.

Rose says

Very interesting read, though dry at some parts. Not a read in one sitting kind of book.

Toren Johnson says

Love.

Devoting my life to the mountains, I always have found comfort in cairns. "At the most basic level, you can define a carin as a pile of rocks. But this definition doesn't do justice to the myriad shapes and sizes of carins found around the globe. Nor does it convey the many reasons that people have build carins for thousands of years. Yet, when you see a cairn, whether lovingly built and maintained or slapped up for a single use, you know what you are looking at. You know that someone has taken the time to gather rocks and assemble them into a recognizable shape that carries a specific message. That message is explained in *Cairns: Messenger in Stone*, where David B. Williams, not only explains the history of carin building, but excites the reader to build their own.

Sue says

The author has something of a love-hate relationship with piles of rocks that people have placed in the landscape for various reasons. As a National Park Service ranger, he knocked them down, and he rails here against their casual use and potential to mislead hikers. On the other hand, he admires and has collected fascinating examples of their use in many cultures, not just as waystations, but as other markers in the landscape. "Maybe that is one of the appeals of cairns", he writes, "that someone has taken a bunch of rocks and humanized them by placing them in a pile. We intuitively sense that a cairn represents a cross between the realm of geology and the realm of humans."
