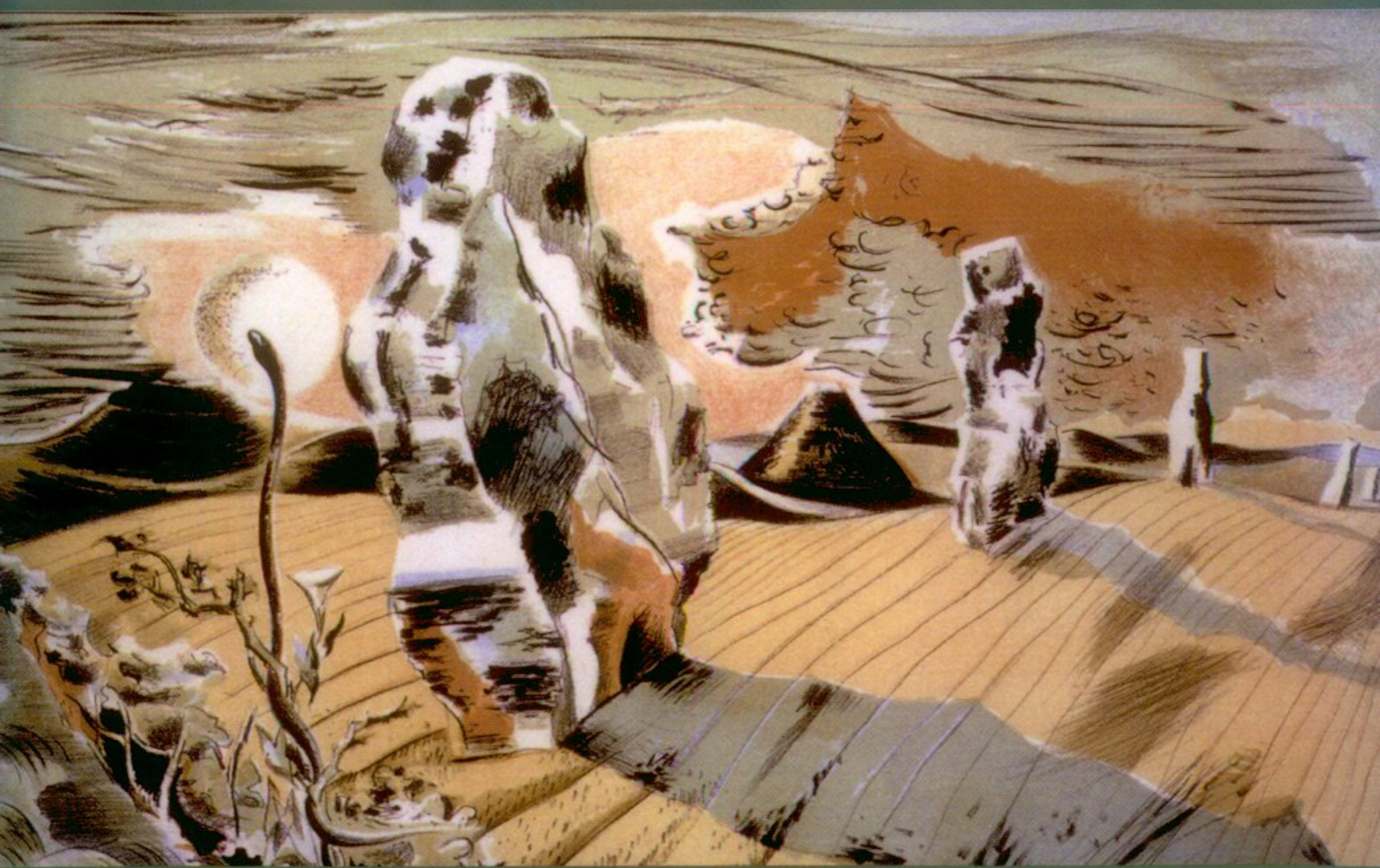


RICHARD BRADLEY

# ALTERING THE EARTH



THE 1992 RHIND LECTURES

SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES OF SCOTLAND MONOGRAPH SERIES NUMBER 8

For Felipe and Ramon

Front cover illustration: 'Landscape of the Megaliths' by Paul Nash. Reproduced by permission of the Nash Trustees.

Back cover illustration: Computer reconstruction of one section of the Dorset cursus. Reproduced by permission of Thames Television.

RICHARD BRADLEY

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# ALTERING THE EARTH

THE ORIGINS OF MONUMENTS  
IN BRITAIN AND CONTINENTAL EUROPE

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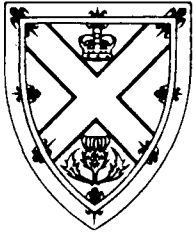
*The Rhind Lectures 1991–92*

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SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES OF SCOTLAND  
MONOGRAPH SERIES NUMBER 8

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EDINBURGH 1993



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OF SCOTLAND

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Chapter motifs drawn from sites mentioned in the text – in order: Thebes, Kilmartin, Nether Largie, Poltalloch, Newgrange, Pierowall, Dundurn.

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## FOREWORD

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Professor Richard Bradley was invited by the Council of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland to give the Rhind Lectures for the session 1991–2 and this volume is the result of those Lectures. In publishing them, we hope to bring them to a wider audience than the many who attended and enjoyed them in March 1992. We are grateful to Professor Bradley for all his work on the text and illustrations which has made this possible.

The Rhind Lectures are named after, and were endowed by, Alexander Henry Rhind, a prominent Fellow of the Society in the mid 19th century. He was born in Wick in 1833 and died tragically young in 1863, but in his 29 years he had achieved considerable success as an archaeologist, working both in his native Caithness, where, amongst other projects, he carried out a very competent excavation of the broch at Kettleburn, and further afield at Thebes in Egypt. He was deeply concerned with the wider issues of archaeology, including legislation on treasure trove and the recording of ancient monuments on Ordnance Survey maps, and his valued contribution to archaeology was recognised by his election as an Honorary Fellow at the early age of 24.

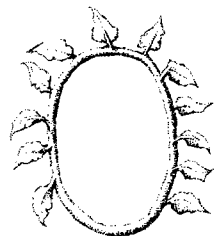
He bequeathed to the Society his library, funds for excavations in northern Scotland, the copyright of his book on Thebes and the residue of his estate of Sibster to endow a series of annual lectures, binding Council to appoint a Rhind Lecturer to deliver ‘a course of not less than six lectures on some branch of archaeology, ethnology, ethnography, or allied topic, in some suitable place’.

The first Rhind lecturer, Sir Arthur Mitchell, was appointed for three years in 1876, and his Lectures were published in 1880 as *The Past in the Present*. Since then there have been Lectures on a variety of subjects by some eminent scholars, those in the last few years ranging from war and society in Early medieval North Britain to the archaeology of the Slavs to 19th century architecture in Scotland.

Richard Bradley has a thought-provoking and individual approach to the past, questioning received doctrine and offering new ideas. We are pleased to present Professor Bradley’s Lectures as a volume in our Monograph Series – listening to them was a great pleasure, reading them will be a lasting satisfaction.

Anna Ritchie

President  
Society of Antiquaries of Scotland



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## PREFACE

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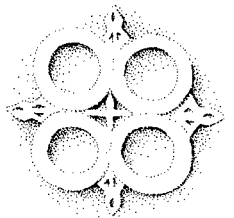
Alexander Henry Rhind was very much a student of monuments (Stuart 1864). He conducted fieldwork around his home in Caithness but also engaged in extensive research in Egypt. He was one of the first scholars to study the prehistoric temples of Malta, and he wrote about all three areas. Unlike some of his contemporaries, he did not feel compelled to trace these constructions to a common source. They were worth investigating in their own right.

He made the point himself in a letter to the Crystal Palace Company. They were planning to exhibit copies of ancient buildings from various parts of the world. Rhind urged them to include reproductions of the simpler monuments found in the British Isles:

‘It is true that we may search in vain among the rude antiquities of our own land for structures which have any artistic beauty to recommend them, or which could produce the dazzling effect of the restored antiquities of the East; but then the gentlemen interested in the Sydenham Palace have wisely shown . . . that it is their design, not merely to gratify or educate the eye, but also to supply suggestive materials for intellectual information. It will not . . . be an objection to British aboriginal remains, that in an ornamental point of view they would be deficient, since, as practical and really attractive instructors, their value would be undoubted.’

When he died 130 years ago, Rhind bequeathed the copyright of his book *Thebes, its Tombs and their Tenants* to the Society. He also left a sum of money to finance further fieldwork on the monuments of north-east Scotland. That would be reason enough for talking about monumental architecture in the lectures that bear his name, but there was another factor that influenced my choice of subject. A few years ago I covered some of the same ground in a Munro Lecture given in Edinburgh, and I had long been planning to revise and extend that paper. When I received the Society’s invitation, the opportunity could not have been more welcome. Without any hesitation I suggested that I return to the same topic. It was only later that I realised what a difficult task I had set myself. I could hardly have chosen a larger subject. Where should I begin?

From the start I was aware that I would be talking to a North British audience although most of my fieldwork had taken place in a marginal area far to the south. It was while I was thinking about my brief that I took a kind of working holiday, travelling along the west coast of Scotland with the Royal Commission’s Inventory of Argyll. I went there to look at prehistoric rock carvings, but the lectures were



always in my mind. It was an opportunity to immerse myself in the archaeology of one part of Scotland, but as I walked around the monuments in this area, I was confronted by a question which would not go away.

Working in southern England, I am not used to the idea that the land is tilting. Scotland is coming up and Wessex is going down and that means that I was surprised by the wealth of Mesolithic sites surviving along the old shoreline, much of the way from Oban to the Solway Firth. I knew that occupation also extended inland, but such a concentration of material seemed poorly matched by the settlement record of the Neolithic period. And yet that was the time when great stone tombs were built. How was it that in one phase we find evidence of a stable coastal economy, but no sign of monuments at all, while in the next the settlement record is meagre but monuments are widespread (illus 1)? It was not a question that was peculiar to the British Isles, but it was one that seemed worth discussing.

1  
Cairnholy Site 2,  
Dumfries and  
Galloway. One of  
the coastal  
distribution of  
megalithic tombs in  
southern Scotland.  
Photograph:  
RCAHMS.

As I visited some of these monuments, the questions multiplied, and with each fresh site I seemed to encounter more of them, until I realised that at last the lectures were taking shape. I have attempted to make those questions seem more immediate by explaining how each of them arose, in that way anchoring the ideas firmly in the Scottish landscape. Each lecture considers one aspect of prehistoric monuments and their interpretation and follows a train of thought suggested during the visit to Argyll. The lectures divide into two groups of three. The first group



considers the origins and workings of monuments, extending outwards from Scotland into Continental Europe before returning to a detailed study of some material from the British Isles. The last three lectures follow much the same plan but are concerned with the history of monuments, from the time of their original creation through to the post-Roman period. The final lecture was a little shorter than the rest as it was followed by a discussion, the point at which this English Bard, borrowing from Lord Byron, submitted himself to the Scotch Reviewers.

As far as possible, I have tried to retain the informal style of the lectures in the printed version and have added very little material. Each chapter begins with a summary of the lecture which follows and I have supplied enough references to allow the reader to pursue the issues in greater detail. These are not intended to be exhaustive: where I could do so, I selected sources with substantial bibliographies of their own. In making the transition into print I have been helped by many people, particularly the Editor, Alexandra Shepherd. I must thank John Barrett, Mark Edmonds and Mike Fulford for their comments on some or all of the original lectures and Sue Alcock, Lawrence Barfield and Sylvia Hallam for references that would never have come my way otherwise. None of these people is responsible for my mistakes. Most of the photographs were provided by Historic Scotland and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, and I must thank David Breeze and Roger Mercer for making this possible. Those who were kind enough to supply the remaining plates are acknowledged in the captions. I must also thank Sonia Hawkes, Bob Wilkins and the Oxford University Institute of Archaeology for providing a fine copy of Paul Nash's 'Landscape of the Megaliths'. My greatest debt is to Margaret Mathews. Apart from illustrations 32, 35, 49 and 50, which are the work of Tess Durden, Margaret prepared all the drawings and coped with a wayward author who could rarely make up his mind. She produced clarity where there was chaos before.

Lastly, I must thank the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland for inviting me to give these lectures and for offering to issue them in permanent form. At times the prospect of giving six lectures in one weekend seemed rather an ordeal, but in the event it was a happy occasion. I am extremely grateful to the officers of the Society for their kindness and efficiency, and, most especially, for the warmth of their welcome. I shall always remember their hospitality during my visit. It reminded me how much I enjoy archaeology. I offer the text in the same spirit.

