Secrets of the
STONE of
DESTINY
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Legend, History, and Prophecy

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To His Royal Highness Prince Charles, Prince of Wales,
Duke of Cornwall and Lord of the Isles.

May your seed sit forever on Jacob’s Pillow,
in fulfillment of Prophecy and Destiny.
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The Stone and the Spear

Unless the fates be faulty grown
And prophet’s voice be vain
Where’er is found this sacred stone
The Scottish race shall reign.

(Sir Walter Scott’s translation of a verse once attached to the Stone of Destiny.)

On November 30, 1996, to the accompaniment of bagpipes, a strange ceremony unfolded in Edinburgh Castle. The venerable walls of this imposing edifice have, over the centuries, witnessed the comings and goings of many kings and princes. It was, for example, the home of Mary, Queen of Scots and the birthplace of her son James VI of Scotland who was later to become James I of England. Yet, even for this castle, the ceremony about to be enacted was historic. For what was
being celebrated was the return from England of a symbol of kingship against which all other tokens of royalty pale in comparison—the **Stone of Destiny**.

About ten thousand people watched in carnival mood as a Land Rover bearing this curious relic slowly inched its way up the Royal Mile. Half way along, at St. Giles’ Cathedral, it was received by the Reverend John McIndoe, the moderator of the Church of Scotland. Greeting the stone on behalf of the Church, he said it would “strengthen the proud distinctiveness of the people of Scotland.” Once inside the Great Hall of the castle it was carefully placed on a low oaken table. There was no sword poking out of it for a would-be “King Arthur” to pull free, but all the same Michael Forsyth, the secretary of state for Scotland, received it with thanks from Prince Andrew, the Queen’s representative. This strange, almost Masonic ritual completed, a twenty-one gun salute was fired from the Half-Moon Battery on the castle walls to be answered by another from HMS Newcastle lying at anchor in the Firth of Forth.

The handover of the stone had gone smoothly enough, yet not everybody was happy with the situation. Back in London the Dean and Chapter of Westminster Abbey were deeply upset at losing such a prized relic. Some two weeks earlier, on November 13, they had had to stand by in impotent silence as workmen prized the stone out from its long-time resting place in the coronation throne. To these clergymen, if not to the largely oblivious public, the return of the stone to Scotland was a mistake of grand proportions. At the very least it was portentous of bad luck. Worse still, separating it from the coronation seat seemed like a harbinger of further change—the unleashing of forces that threatened not just the survival of the monarchy but the sovereignty of the United Kingdom itself.

A block of sandstone with two rusted handles protruding from its ends, the Stone of Destiny is quite unspectacular. Yet, much older than the Crown Jewels, it is of enormous cultural and symbolic significance. Known variously as “Jacob’s Pillow,” “Lia-fail,” and the “Stone of Scone,” it had been brought to London from Scotland in 1296 by Edward I (1239–1307), who was himself of partly Scottish descent. It was he who gave it pride of place in Westminster Abbey and there—apart from a brief interlude of a few months in 1950, when it was stolen and taken back to Scotland by a group of students—it had rested ever since. Housed in its purpose-made throne, it has witnessed the coronations of nearly all of England’s subsequent monarchs and from 1605, following the uniting
of the two thrones under James VI and I, those of Scotland, too.

Sending the stone back to Scotland on the seven hundredth anniversary of its removal was the idea of Michael Forsyth, then MP [Member of Parliament] for Stirling and secretary of state for Scotland. He had seen cabinet papers dating from 1950 (the last time the stone had been in the news) in which it was promised that it would eventually be transferred back to Scotland. Under the fifty-year rule these papers would soon be released and, he believed, cause embarrassment to Scottish MPs of the Conservative Government. He warned Prime Minister John Major that Alex Salmond (the leader of the Scottish National Party or “SNP”) could be relied upon to harness any feelings of grievance over the issue in his campaign for an independent Scotland.

Though the secretary of state had maybe exaggerated the case, as a committed unionist he had good reason to be concerned. The release in the previous year of Mel Gibson’s film *Braveheart* had already fanned the flames of Scottish nationalism to unexpected heights, and the unity of the kingdom was indeed being questioned. Major knew he needed to do something to counterbalance the view that the English Conservative establishment was out of touch with Scottish opinion. Returning the Stone of Destiny to Scotland would be a gesture well worth making if it garnered a few more votes and helped to maintain the union between Scotland and the rest of Great Britain. Accordingly, acting in the name of the Queen, he instructed that the stone be returned to Scotland forthwith. He agreed with Michael Forsyth that it should arrive there in time for the St. Andrew’s Day celebrations of 1996 (November 30)—seven hundred years almost to the day since its removal from Scone.

If Major had expected gratitude for his magnanimity, he was to be sorely disappointed. As Sir David Steel (former leader of the Liberal Party and now Lord Steel of Aikwood) remarked, “The majority of the people of Scotland . . . want not just the symbol but the substance, the substance of the return of democratic control over our internal affairs in Scotland.” This view was put more bluntly by John Maxton, then Labour MP for Glasgow Cathcart: “Those of us who believe in the establishment of a Scottish Parliament . . . do not believe that the return of a feudal medieval symbol of tyranny is any more than a total irrelevance.”

In the event Major’s gesture proved pointless, for in the landslide election of 1997 the Conservatives went on to lose their last few parliamentary seats in Scotland. Almost immediately, the “New Labour” Government of Tony Blair set about answering the growing demand for
Scottish independence with a radical solution of its own—a new Scottish Parliament that was subordinate to Westminster but with control over internal affairs such as health and education.

This Parliament was duly set up in 1999. At first it met in the General Assembly Hall of the Church of Scotland, but since 2004 it has been sitting in a new modernistic building in the Holyrood area of Edinburgh. Meanwhile the Stone of Destiny, the ancient symbol of Scottish sovereignty, has remained in Edinburgh Castle on permanent display alongside other symbols of royalty such as the crown once worn by Mary, Queen of Scots.

Regarded as irrelevant by the new establishment, the stone’s very authenticity was called into question in 2008 by none other than the SNP leader Alex Salmond himself, who was by then First Minister of the Scottish Parliament. In June of that year he went on record as saying that he believed the stone now residing in Edinburgh Castle to be at best a medieval fake that was palmed off on Edward I by the wily Abbott of Scone. He was not the only person to cast doubt on the stone’s authenticity. Other commentators, while agreeing with Salmond that it must be a fake, were of the opinion that it was made much more recently than this, that the students who took the stone from Westminster Abbey in 1950 had made copies of their own, and that it was one of these that was subsequently returned in time for the Queen’s coronation in 1953. The real Stone of Destiny, or so they claimed, had remained in Scotland and was hidden there still. Such rumors notwithstanding, most experts are of the opinion that the stone which Edward took back to Westminster was considered genuine at the time (1296) and that it was the self same stone that was transferred from London to Edinburgh in 1996.

For reasons that will become clear later and having long had a personal interest in the stone, I followed these events closely. I had first seen it in 1973—shortly after returning to England from Israel. There, after a short stint working on a kibbutz in Upper Galilee, I’d spent several months working in a youth hostel in Tel Aviv. It was while working there and not in my native London that I had first heard mention of it.

The hostel was a busy place, and while there I met many people. Most were young backpackers, either on their way to or from a kibbutz. A few (and I would count myself in this group) were more serious travelers—pilgrims you might say—ever hopeful that they might find clues
to their own destinies while walking among the ruins of this once Holy Land. These people, many of them older than the grapefruit pickers, were recognizably different. Quieter than the others, they would often sit for hours in the corner of the canteen, either reading books or scribbling notes. Often the book that so occupied their attention was the Bible, but this was not always so. Such people tended to have a wide taste when it came to literature, and American imports like The Tibetan Book of the Dead and Remember, Be Here Now (which could be purchased in "The Third Eye"—then Israel’s only alternative bookshop) were also on their reading lists. There would be debates that went on long into the night as they discussed the pros and cons of a belief in reincarnation versus the allure of living for the moment. Are we, as westerners are wont to believe, endowed by God with our own free will, or are we, as the Tibetan Buddhists teach, bound to the wheel of karma and therefore doomed to an inevitable suffering? There seemed no immediate answers to these questions, but that was no bar to their being discussed. The core concept that united both views was destiny about which, at the time, I had only a hazy understanding.

The subject of destiny is linked with the concept of prophecy, and this, as it lay at the core of two books that were much discussed at the time, was another subject then very much on my mind. Both books were in their own ways concerned with destiny, and both were major best sellers. The first (later to be turned into a movie narrated by Orson Welles) was The Late Great Planet Earth by Hal Lindsey. Probably the only fundamentalist Christian book ever to have made it onto the New York Times bestseller lists, it presented a scary hypothesis that certain biblical prophecies—notably those contained in the Books of Daniel and Ezekiel—were being fulfilled in our own times. Using the date for the refounding of the modern state of Israel (May 14, 1948) as a marker in time on which to hang his predictions, Lindsey interpreted biblical prophecies for the “end-of-days” as referring to the 1970s and ’80s. He predicted that a coalition of nations would soon attempt to crush the state of Israel. These forces, he said, would include armies from a reinte- grated Roman Empire (by which he meant the countries that now comprise the European Union) but be under the leadership of “Gog from the land of Magog”—a reference, he believed, to the USSR. However, the invasion would prove to be unsuccessful when, through divine intervention, the massive army sent by Gog was destroyed by angels in the great battle of Armageddon. In the immediate aftermath of this apoca-