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## THE WHITE STONE

Charles Dodgson died of bronchitis on 14 January 1898. On May 10 and 11 of that year, at the Holywell Music Room, Oxford, most of his most precious possessions were auctioned. Professor York Powell, who had been a colleague at Christ Church, was so upset by the auction, writes Hudson<sup>1</sup>, that he was moved to write a poem about the event. The final verse is reproduced below.

*'Better by far the Northman's pyre,  
That burnt in one sky-soaring fire  
The man with all he held most dear.  
'He that hath ears, now let him hear.'*

Professor Powell's words, if he had but known it, already contained some truth. Many of Charles Dodgson's private papers were destroyed, some burned, almost immediately after his death. In following years, volumes of his Diaries were misplaced. In the fire died all but a shadow of the extraordinary writer and philosopher known as Charles Dodgson, from the ashes rose the beginnings of a myth that has endured for over 100 years - the myth of Lewis Carroll.

Fortunately that myth is now being challenged and as the shadow cast by its colossal form begins to waver, the first slivers of light are being cast upon the man so long obscured by this artefact. Yet very much more needs to be done, beginning with a close re-examination of the surviving evidence of his life. Of this evidence, one of the most abiding is Dodgson's 'white stone' ritual - his habit of marking those special days in his life with a white stone.

This paper, therefore, is an attempt to explain what is significant about the White Stone as metaphor and to examine and bring together some of the strands of Dodgson's life that impinged on his decision to adopt this symbol as his own. In doing this, it is hoped to shed further light on this complex and often elusive figure.

### THE WHITE STONE IN THE LANDSCAPE

In 1765, Charles Dodgson's great grandfather, the Reverend Dodgson of Elsdon, welcomed an appointment to a living as Bishop of Ossory, in Ireland. He held this position until 1775, when he was appointed to the Bishopric of Elphin and Ossory passed to William Newcome.

Elphin has an ancient history. Ono, one of the Druidic lords of Roscommon, presented to St Padraic (Patrick) his fortress Imlech-Ono, and Padraic established a bishopric there, on a pre-Christian site. In 1841, as a result of the earlier *Church Temporalities Act* of 1832, the bishopric of Elphin became part of Kilmore and Ardagh. The name itself, Elphin, derives from the Irish 'Aill Finn', meaning a 'white stone' - the white stone which was to feature so strongly in Dodgson's Diaries.

*. . . they pointed to the groves and holy wells. . . dedicated. . . marked by upright stones, chiselled on the upper part with a cross in relief. (The Ancient Stone Crosses of England, Alfred Rimmer.<sup>2</sup>)*

These stones marked sites where spiritual energy was particularly concentrated. Often, the stones marking a centre of pre-Christian worship were buried, and Christian churches were erected on the site. The ancient Greeks knew of such a centre, the Oracle at Delphi, and referred to it as the omphalos - the centre of the world. In Viking Norway, these stones in sacred places were known as *Hellige hvide stene* (holy white stones). Such stones, says Nigel Pennick<sup>3</sup>, were 'cylindrical pillars terminating with a hemisphere, made from white stone, either marble, quartzite or granite.' Pennick continues to say that it is likely that these stones were the object of worship of Yngvi-Frey, who was one of the ancient gods of the Norse pantheon. In Clackmannan, Scotland, for example, there is a similar stone which stands by the church, hallowing 'the centre-point of the land, where the spiritual essence is at its height.'<sup>4</sup>

In many cultures, the centre-point, or omphalos, was marked by a great tree or pole - Yggdrasil, the World Tree in Norse mythology being one example. It is the tree which gives us the symbol of the cross. Benson<sup>5</sup> refers to the following:

*The ancient Druids. . . took as the symbol of their god a living tree, a stately oak, cutting off all its branches except two on opposite sides, forming thereby a giant cross . . . The "accursed tree," as the early Christians designated the cross upon which Christ was crucified, a death of suffering and disgrace, has become the symbol of vicarious sacrifice and atonement. . . The meaning of the Christian Cross is clear and significant. It is the symbol of life eternal, of redemption and resurrection through faith. (p. 23)*

In Cumbria, Lutwidge country, there is a cross which illustrates this. The lower part of the Gosforth Cross, at St Mary's Church, depicts the Norse world-tree - Yggdrasil, which marked the centre of the world. The upper part of the cross shows the triquetra, the symbol of the Trinity. In Hoxne, Suffolk, there is a cross which was erected in 1870, which commemorates the execution of King Edmund of East Anglia on a tree which stood there until 1848.

The Celtic Cross stands in many Irish churches and churchyards, and the ancient sun wheel, which forms the background to the cross, describes well the nature of Christ, as the light of the world. The sun wheel is the circle which, '*entwining the cross has become a familiar Christian emblem symbolising eternal life, without beginning and without end.*'<sup>6</sup> The Celtic monks of the early Church had a simplicity and a love of nature that manifested itself in the joy of God's creation, and went a long way in converting a Druidic people to the new religion.

Throughout Great Britain and Ireland are many holy wells, also sites where the faithful could petition the divine. They are now dedicated to Saints, but long ago formed a part of pre-Christian belief, and far down lie countless small, white quartz stones thrown into the waters. The faithful visiting these early shrines would drop a white stone in to the well. It was a libation, and a private communion between the suppliant and the divine. The altar at St Trillo's Chapel at Llandrillo-yn-Rhos (Rhos-on-Sea), is sited over a holy well, and outside the chapel, the ground is littered with small white stones. The chapel itself was founded at the place where a saint bore testimony to a Celtic Cross of light which emanated from the ground.

*Alice in Wonderland* includes a reference to a holy well - during the Mad Hatter's Tea Party, the Dormouse, responding to Alice's query about why Elsie, Lacie and Tillie lived at the bottom of a well, says that it is a treacle well. Alice's immediate response is that there is no such thing, but later humbly concedes that "*There may be one.*" There is one, of course, the Treacle Well at Binsey - a well dedicated to St Frideswide, in Oxfordshire.

Dodgson enjoyed walking, even in old age he insisted on undertaking long walks through the countryside - a countryside steeped in history and the myths of diverse cultures. Wherever he turned place names evoked these myths, stirring an ever fertile imagination. In pre-Christian and early Christian society, each thing encountered by the people, and each feature of the landscape, had its own identity. To quote Pennick again, '*Each name reflected some inner*

*nature, a personal quality that had meaning. In the ensouled Celtic worldview, the personality of every place and artefact was recognised to be as real as the individual personalities of human beings. This is the case with seemingly inanimate objects such as stones and crosses. Such an ensouled world can only exist when there is intimate personal contact with existence.'*<sup>7</sup> Such an idea must have seemed particularly relevant to the Victorians, caught as they were in a world where increasing industrialisation was fast promising to remove the essential character of a hand-made artefact, and where the leisurely peace of the country was gradually being disturbed by the railway. To a man as filled with wonder and uncertainty as Charles Dodgson, Victorian Britain with its certainties, rationalities and its blinkered focus on progress, progress, progress, must have seemed as threatening as an onrushing, uncontrolled locomotive. Dodgson liked railways - and progress - but preferred knowing that there was a restraining and guiding presence in the cab!

## VIA CRUCIS - THE WAY OF THE CROSS

*Then do folk long to go on pilgrimage,  
And palmers to go seeking out strange strands,  
To distant shrines well known in sundry lands.*

*The Prologue: Canterbury Tales (Geoffrey Chaucer)*

The placement of these Crosses and stones was significant. In early Church history it was the custom of the Church to grant Plenary Indulgences to those who were able to undertake a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and walk in the footsteps of Christ. Some succeeded in making the pilgrimage, but many failed - old age, war, sickness, all took their toll. The Church at Rome recognised the difficulty facing many of the faithful, and permitted the Stations of the Cross to be erected, usually on a hill or mound - a decision which enabled worshippers to undertake a pilgrimage and meditate at each stopping place. Similarly, when the early Christian monks travelled about the countryside, it became their custom to erect a wooden marker, or sometimes a stone, to mark the place where they had preached to the faithful. These stones, then, became a place of worship and meditation, a stepping stone in the spiritual journey which drew one nearer to God. They can be found on the old pilgrimage roads and track ways, in churchyards, anywhere that the dead might be rested on their way to burial and their preparation for a new life within Christ; a place where prayers could be said or a weary traveller could become spiritually refreshed. Many pre-Christian monuments were re-dedicated with the Christian symbols, the fish or the Cross, sanctifying a holy place and presenting a silent testimony to the presence of God in everyone, despite differences in belief. Some were simply reconsecrated. In the early days of the Church, Masses were generally only said on a feast day, and it was customary to carry out the saying of the Mass at the tomb of the martyr or Saint, which once again explains the significance of the Cross on these sites. The altar stone is a reminder of those times.

These places are still commemorated in the place names of Britain - names such as Market Cross, Palmers Cross. Whitstone (White Stone). Through the city of Guildford runs an old footpath known as the Pilgrim's Way, which led from Winchester to Canterbury. Palmer's Cross, for example, derives its name from the custom of presenting those who had completed their pilgrimage with a palm branch, long a symbol of the victorious. Brewer's explains that:

*"To bear the palm" alludes to the Roman custom of giving the victorious gladiator a branch of the palm-tree.*<sup>8</sup>

When the triumphant Christ entered Jerusalem, the crowd strewed the way with palm branches and leaves (John xii 12-19). As a reminder of that day, a consecrated palm-branch was given to a palmer, the pilgrim who had reached the Holy Land. He carried the palm-branch back to his homeland, and laid it upon the altar of his parish church as a reminder of his victory. On Palm Sunday, faithful Catholics receive a palm, which is kept by the crucifix to inspire devotion until the following year.

*"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth [it]." (Revelation 2:17).*

The palm was the symbol of the final victory, the overcoming of the trials faced by the pilgrim on his difficult journey. The journey, as we have seen, was marked by stones or crosses, where the pilgrim could stop and rest, and become sufficiently renewed so that he could continue on his journey. In Roman times, invited guests were presented with tesseræ, which were small white stones which could be broken into two parts. Each party wrote his name upon his piece, and they were exchanged as a sign of hospitality, the name remaining secret, a pledge of friendship and hospitality between the two parties.

A pilgrim in later times had only to present a stone at certain houses, proclaiming that he was a pilgrim, and he would be taken in and given bread and drink. A successful Roman gladiator was awarded the *tessera*, which took the form of a white stone with the letters SP engraved upon it. It also served as an admission ticket to the feasting which followed, and was also a recognition of victory, and an outstanding performance in overcoming his opponents. A white stone day was just cause for celebration - providing both spiritual and physical sustenance, and rewarding the victorious. The Greeks also had their equivalent in the wreath of victory, presented to the winner in the races at the games.

The end of the journey could also be physically marked by a stone, or a cross, both also symbols of final victory and eternal life. Pennick explains that

*The ensemble of the burial mound with a standing stone or image on top of it is the forerunner of the Celtic high crosses. . . [also in] the shape of the leachta. (These are small, altar-like structures). On top of each leacht is a stone slab. . . set into this an upright stone cross. Leachta are holy stopping places at which prayers are offered by devout people.<sup>9</sup> (pp. 38-39)*

The Greeks also erected tombstones, a standing stone or *herma*, constructed from one large upright stone surrounded by smaller ones. The name of the god Hermes, the Greek god who later became known as the psychopomp and led the dead from this world to the next, is connected to this word *herma*, meaning stone heap. From very early times, the custom of also using these 'stone heaps' as markers for travellers, particularly at crossroads, existed in Crete and the Greek areas.

*"And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory: and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name. Thou shalt also be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God." (Isaiah 62:2-3)*

The white stone or cross, the palm branch and the crown, or wreath of victory, were interchangeable symbols of the victor, the pilgrim who has overcome adversity at the end of the journey, and gained spiritual sustenance along the way by stopping at the smaller markers which marked the spiritual and physical stages of the journey.

One can see, therefore, that to Dodgson, the White Stone harboured deep spiritual and emotional significances. It was a form of spiritual marker, a reminder that life is indeed a journey along which one passes just the once and that to succeed in this journey, one must divest oneself of such unnecessary and debilitating burdens as pride and sloth and, at all cost, remember that the quest requires adherence to a purity of spirit, an innocence which Dodgson, throughout his life, saw most vividly expressed in his relationships with children. He found within their presence that lack of artifice and that simplicity which the monks of old had sought - and found - and which suggested to him the presence of the sacred.

Many times in the Diaries of Charles Dodgson - Lewis Carroll - appear the reference to the white stone day, *albo lapillo notare diem*, as it was known in Latin. The first reference appears in his Diary of 4 September, 1855, and says simply "*Mark this day, o Annalist, with a white stone.*" The annotation to the Diary entry (p. 129) records this as being "*Dodgson's method of indicating a special day which had given him great personal pleasure.*" It was a common enough term in Victorian times, but to Dodgson it meant more than merely a 'red-letter day'.

On 4 September, 1855, Dodgson made his first reference to the white stone, and there are numerous similar entries in his published Diaries during the years 1855 to 1867. Some of these are listed here:

- 1855. Tu 4 Sept. (In Whitburn with the 'little Liddells'.)
- 1855. Fri 21 Sep. (Still in Whitburn 'fell in with my favourite little Liddells')
- 1856. Tu 18 Mar. (Exeter Hall to watch Jenny Lind perform in 'The Messiah')
- 1856. Fri Apr 25. (Liddells - in Deanery Garden)
- 1857. Tu June 2. ('but the two dear little girls Ina and Alice were with me all morning')
- 1857. Fri June 26. (Alice and Edith then Harry and Ina) ('I mark this day most especially with a White Stone')
- 1857. Fri Sep 18. (In Lakes, introduced himself to Mrs Tennyson, Hallam and Lionel)
- 1862. Thu Jul 3. (Called on Henry Taylor, photo of Sir Michael Beach afternoon at Deanery. Croquet (Liddell children and Duckworth)).
- 1863. Tu Mar 10. ('The wedding day of the Prince of Wales I mark with a white stone').
- 1863. Sat Dec 19. (Tyrwhitt - then pleasant evening with Liddells)
- 1864 (Morning at British Artists, evening at Drury Lane)
- 1864. Tu Dec 20. (Day with Terrys. (Sans Mrs Watts) - theatre (Haymarket 'School for Scandal', in evening. A further reference to the naturalness of children, Miss Terry, as Arthur, 'was much more easy and natural than is usually the case with juvenile performers.')
- 1865. Sat Jul 15. ('I mark these last three days with a white stone')
- 1867. Sat Mar 2. (One of Carroll's longest ever entries for a single day - if not THE longest - starts p. 199. Day spent, in the main, in the company of 'theatricals' - mainly children. He admires their generosity of spirit - they applauded one another's success 'without a particle of the jealousy that I daresay older performers feel.')

These white stone references occur on days when he was inspired or uplifted in some way, perhaps by art or music, as in the entry of 18 March, 1856, when he heard the beautiful words of Handel's *Messiah*, sung by Jenny Lind, the hymn he particularly admires being the verse from Isaiah - *He shall feed his flock like a shepherd (Isaiah 40.11)*. But by far the majority of references occur on day when he was in the company of children. He found that "*Their innocent unconsciousness is very beautiful, and gives one a feeling of reverence, as at the presence of something sacred.*"<sup>10</sup>

On July 10, 1866, Dodgson he wrote in his Diary, "*My heart is very heavy: I resolve to pray but seem to beat the air.*" . . .<sup>11</sup>

The phrase is from Paul (Corinthians, Chapter 9). *Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air.*"

*Corinthians 1, 9:24-26*

It is the need for the gladiator to prepare himself for his match in the arena, and the need for the runner to train his body for the victory. Those who allow themselves to indulge, rather than to deny, will be distracted by the things of the world, and cannot hope to conquer their adversaries. Neither can they receive the tessera, the white stone; the incorruptible crown. Those who hope to win must train, as Paul says. The quote from Corinthians uses the analogy of the boxer, who must learn to make each blow count, rather than flailing at the air. Just as the gladiator receives the tessera for his success against a physical opponent, the white stone is given to those who overcome challenges to spirituality and our hope of a life after death in Christ.

On his Diary entry of 22 July 1862, Dodgson pleads that "God grant that this may be the last such entry I may have to make! That so I may not, when I have preached to others, *be myself a castaway.*"<sup>12</sup> These words are also those of Paul: "But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway". (Corinthians 1, 9: 27)

In order to gain the new name, both body and soul must be kept as a temple, pure and undefiled.

*"Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem which cometh down out of heaven, from my God: and I will write upon him my new name." (Revelation 3:12)*

The need to overcome, and gain the tessera on which was written the name, and which was a reminder of the covenant which existed between each man and his God. It was a struggle to overcome earthly temptations, but along the way there was help, white stones which marked a day which had made the journey easier. In *Stolen Waters*, it is the pure and chaste child who provides salvation. *"And a little child shall lead them."* (Isaiah 11.6). It is she who provides the manna, the spiritual bread of the pilgrim, and reminds him of the garland still to be won, whose silent presence turns him away from the path of folly and inspires him to seek *"The garland waiting for my brow, That must be won with tears, With pain- with death- I care not how"*. For Dodgson, the presence of the childlike and innocent must have seemed like angelic intervention.

Corinthians 9 opens with the words "Am I not an apostle?" Dodgson was constantly concerned about his unworthiness to help, to work amongst those in need as an apostle would. Again on 22 July he records in his Diary that *'till I can rule myself better, preaching is but a solemn mockery.*" On 4 May 1871, he writes of a visit to a carpenter dying of tuberculosis. *"I hope that my visit may have been of some comfort to him, though I feel terribly unfit to comfort anyone in such a time."*<sup>13</sup> Jesus gave his deserving apostle, Simon, a new name - Peter, from the Greek *petra*, a rock or stone. *"And I say unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church."* The new name, then, also conveyed the right to represent God's Church.

So the need to live a pure life was paramount to Dodgson. At any time could come the call to fight the last fight, and the need to be constantly prepared was always there. Never, even for

a moment, could he cease to be vigilant. And vigilant he was. He ate and drank sparingly, and took long walks, through a countryside which was filled with constant reminders of the sacred.

*Be sure the safest rule is that we should not dare to live in any scene in which we dare not die.*

*But, once realise what the true object is in life - that it is not pleasure, not knowledge, not even fame itself, "that last infirmity of noble minds" - but that it is the development of character, the rising to a higher, nobler, purer standard, the building up of the perfect Man - and then, so long as we feel that this is going on, and will (we trust) go on forever more, death has for us no terror; it is not a shadow, but a light; not an end, but a beginning!*

*Sylvie and Bruno. Preface*<sup>14</sup>

This, then, is the significance of the white stone in the life of Charles Dodgson. Like the original white stones throughout Britain, which marked the presence of the sacred, the White Stone Day to Dodgson also marked a day when he had experienced the sacred, in children whose *"innocent unconsciousness is very beautiful, and gives one a feeling of reverence"*, in music, or in art, and in the words of the Bible. Like the white stones and crosses which marked the way of the pilgrim, Dodgson marked the shrines on his own road. They brought hope, that one day he would feel worthy to preach the words of Christ; and he was inspired by these moments, as he drew towards the end of the pilgrimage, when he would receive the new name and eternal life.

Charles Dodgson wrote a set of *Directions regarding my Funeral, etc*<sup>15</sup>, in which the last line requested that 'there be no expensive monument. I should prefer a small, plain head-stone, but will leave this detail to their judgement.' Even then, he disliked artifice. Charles Dodgson is buried now at St Michael's Church, Guildford. His monument is not the small, plain stone which he sought, but a white marble cross, on which are inscribed the words 'Thy Will be Done.' The pilgrimage was over, the white stone attained.

*A Nameless Epitaph*

*Ask not my name, O friend!  
That Being only, which hath known each man  
From the beginning, can  
Remember each unto the end*

*Matthew Arnold (1867)*

<sup>1</sup> Hudson, D. *Lewis Carroll An Illustrated Biography*. London: Constable. 1976 (1954) (p. 26)

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Pennick, N. *The Celtic Cross*. London: Blandford. 1977.

<sup>3</sup> Pennick, N. *The Celtic Cross*. London: Blandford. 1977. (p. 24)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. (p. 24)

<sup>5</sup> Benson, G. W. *The Cross: Its History and Symbolism*. New York: Hacker Art Books. 1976 (1935)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. (p. 17)

<sup>7</sup> Pennick, N. *The Celtic Cross*. London: Blandford. 1977. (p. 49)

<sup>8</sup> Evans, I. H. (Ed.) *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*. London: Cassell. 1988 (1870)

<sup>9</sup> Pennick, N. *The Celtic Cross*. London: Blandford. 1977. (pp. 38-39)

<sup>10</sup> Cohen, M. *Lewis Carroll. A Biography*. London: MacMillan. 1995. (p. 166)

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. (p. 212)

<sup>12</sup> Cohen, M. *Lewis Carroll. A Biography*. London: MacMillan. 1995. (p. 208)

<sup>13</sup> Cohen, M. *Lewis Carroll. A Biography*. London: MacMillan. 1995. (p. 214)

<sup>14</sup> Guiliano, E. *The Complete Illustrated Works of Lewis Carroll*. New York: Avenal Books. 1982

<sup>15</sup> Harvard College Library. Cited in Hudson, D. *Lewis Carroll An Illustrated Biography*. London: Constable. 1976 (1954) (p. 21)