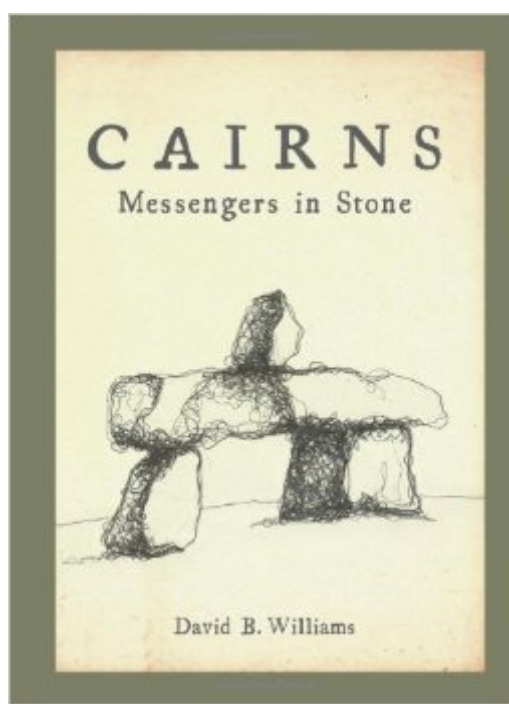


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# Cairns: Messengers In Stone



## Synopsis

From meadow trails to airy mountaintops and wide open desert, cairns those seemingly random stacks of rock are surprisingly rich with stories and meaning. For thousands of years cairns have been used the world over to connect to the landscape and communicate with others, and are an essential guide to travelers. These man-made 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 of the Arctic have more than two dozen terms to describe cairns and their uses! In *Cairns: Messengers in Stone*, geologist and acclaimed nature writer David 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 them, and more. Hikers, climbers, travelers, gardeners, and nature buffs alike will delight in this quirky, captivating collection of stories.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Guide travelers. Honor the dead. Find a safe place to park your sheep in a blizzard. All ways cairns have been put to good use, according to the latest from David Williams. Williams weaves in expert opinions, poetry by William Cullen Bryant, a reference from the Odyssey and his own wry insights. Cairns left by shepherders, for example, might have led them to protected bedding ground when snow storms hit. But David speculates other purposes as well. "I don't think we can rule out boredom. Living in isolated, desolate spots, they may have seen another person just once every

week or two. Their only companions were a dog and bands of unruly, often incredibly stupid sheep. Surely you would want a pastime." Or when considering the tiny stones some earthworms pile at the mouth of their burrows, Williams points out, "If I could equal an earthworm's strength I would be able to drag a 3,000-pound walrus, not that the opportunity has arisen." In considering why we feel compelled to stack stones, Williams writes that, in part, it's a way ". . .to leave a little part of ourselves in the landscape. The cairn becomes a tangible sign of the bond between people and place, an acknowledgement of a relationship that we value. Cairns are a sign of community - of hikers, of family, of humanity." "Not bad for a little pile of rocks," he writes. I echo that when I say "Cairns: Messengers in Stone" is not bad for a little book about piles of rock.

David Williams would make the world's best hiking partner because he seems to know everything about the natural world, especially its geology and history. The next best thing to having him along on a hike is reading his books. I loved his Street Smart Naturalist -- and Cairns is just as good if not better. Williams quotes a rock and ice climber saying "a well-placed cairn popping out of the mist" on a major descent "sparks the same feeling as a lit-up gas-station sign when my car has been running on empty for a half hour" - and that's pretty much how I thought about cairns. Then I read this book -- and discovered what cairns are really about. Communication; building; our evolving relationship with nature; history; altruism; even religion, politics and humor. Who knew? I read Cairns with a new sense of wonder for the world outside my window -- and even more wonder for the world awaiting me on my next hike. Maybe my dream will come true and Mr. Williams will miraculously materialize at my side? But if not, I'll have his handy, witty, supremely informative volume to light me on my way. Williams himself is a messenger in stone -- and definitely a writer/naturalist to watch.

David B. Williams's sparkling, sharp and intelligent writing makes Cairns: Messengers in Stone a surprisingly delightful read. Surprisingly, because one would not typically expect that historical, culture stories about piles of rocks would be so instantly engaging. Yet I found myself wholly absorbed in it from the very first pages. The chapters range from the geology and ecology of cairns to the historical and mystical. I found myself intrigued by stories such as cairn's role in helping rescuers learn of the final days of the John Franklin 1845 expedition to discover the Northwest Passage and their role as wayside shrines. Others will find instructions for building a proper cairn and dating older ones more to their liking. In telling this story about Messengers in Stone, Williams emphasizes that "cairns represent a cross between the realm of geology and the realm of

humans...and when they intersect--whether in the form of an earthquake, a volcano, or a cairn--it merits our attention, draws us in, and gives us a richer connection to the world around us." This is a book you will want to share with hikers, travelers, natural historians, really anyone who is interested in and spends time outdoors.~~~~~

As a frequent hiker, I found David B. Williams' "Cairns, Messengers in Stone" a great trail-side companion and an engaging guide to these geo-human features. Having encountered many cairns in my life, I was surprised by how little I knew about these common rock markers. The book's chapters helped me understand the origin of these features--their interwoven geologic and human history--and the distinct meaning they hold based on their location. Williams does this by describing the wide variety of cairns found in the world--including the bronze age burial cairns of Scotland, arctic expedition cairns, and the "art" cairns of stacked stones in the United States. Through interesting stories and compelling encounters, the book allows one to learn all facets of cairns from the ground up, through history and across the globe. I hold a special place in my heart for books that reveal and explain a feature of our planet. They add something to our experience of living here, helping us find our place. This book has made me appreciate cairns and given me a background and storyline to consider each time I find them in the landscape... no matter where in the world that is. Who knew a "heap of stones" could connect so many diverse stories and places?

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