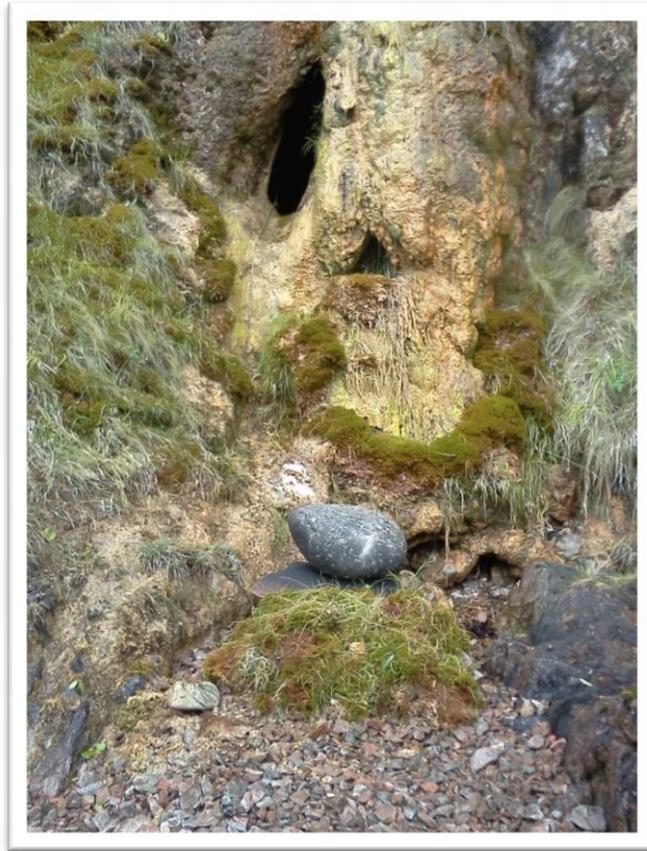


THE GREAT STONE OF THE DROPPING CAVE



The Great Stone of the Dropping Cave

In an analysis of traditional Scottish Stone Lifting, its origins and its cultural development, it is quite clear that there are indeed a large number of factors that result in variation, in not only the type of stone that was lifted, but also the actual location of a stone. The Great Stone of the Dropping Cave is certainly situated in the most unusual of locations and is unique for many other reasons.

This said, the Dropping Cave Stone or rather its history does not surround the stone itself but is in fact the story of a troubled genius who in the annals of Scottish history is revered amongst the greats who pushed the boundaries of scientific investigation.

Hugh Miller was born in Cromarty on the Black Isle in 1802. His school years showed that he had great promise as a writer however in later years he was to deride the harsh and repressive teaching methods that he was submitted to and it is from this experience we learn of the Great Stone of the Dropping Cave.

In his book *“My Schools and Schoolmasters”* 1854, he refers to his tutoring and to his frequent beatings at the hands of his schoolmaster by stating ***“I was mauled in a way that filled me with aches and bruises for a full month thereafter. I greatly fear that, had I met the fellow on a lonely road five years subsequent to our encounter, when I became strong enough to raise breast high the “Great stone of the Dropping Cave”, he would have caught as sound a thrashing as he ever gave a little boy or girl.....”***



After leaving school, Miller in essence self educated to a high academic level producing various books on the study of fossils as well as Geology and it was he that pioneered the theory of an ancient earth that was inhabited by species that had long been extinct.

Although he was a man of genius, his first job, given to him by a relative was that of an apprentice stone mason. This was an employment that he didn't altogether take to but he did acknowledge that it made him strong as stated in the following text.

Hugh Miller

“I was at the time of slender make and weak constitution; and I soon found I was ill fitted for such employments as the trundling of loaded wheelbarrows over a plank, or the raising of huge blocks of stone out of a quarry. My hands were soon fretted with large blisters.....”Taken from the Life and Letters of Hugh Miller by Peter Bayne 1871.

I am sure that the stone lifter who trains hard will be able to sympathise with the injuries sustained by Miller however it is the practicalities of living and earning sufficient to exist that made him strong.

Clearly, through time he gained in strength and was quite adept at showing it.

He speaks of “raising breast high the Great Stone of the Dropping Cave”, near Cromarty – a feat which those who have seen the stone will be able to appreciate better than we can; and he speaks also of being able, as a mason, being able to raise weights single handed which usually required two men” – The Eclectic Magazine 1854

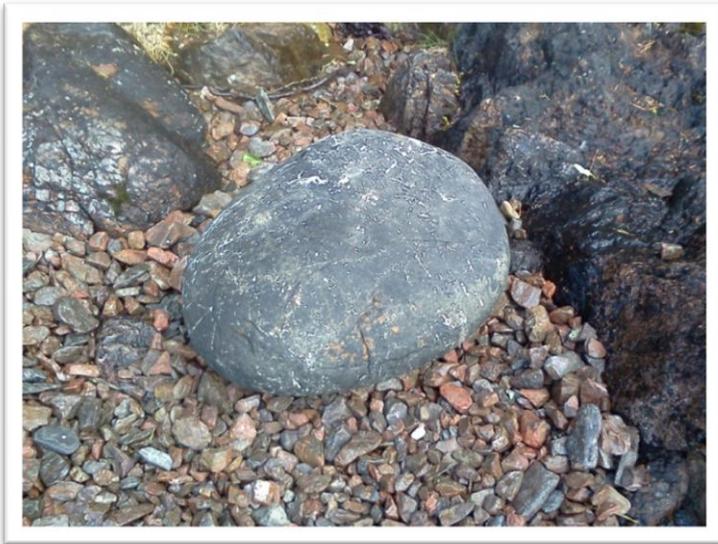
It is clear from this reference that there is indeed “a Great Stone of the Dropping Cave” however the knowledge of it has long been forgotten by the present community of Cromarty.

Hugh Miller himself gives us an indication of the whereabouts of the stone. In “***Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland***” published in 1834 a whole chapter is practically devoted to the infamous “Dropping Cave” where the legend and myths surrounding it are eloquently explained. The description given by Miller of the cave has changed little over the years and he explains how a stone can be dropped into the narrows of a stank in the deepest part of the cave. He makes no mention of the lifting stone as quite simply, the cave is dark and extremely wet with insufficient room to stand up let alone lift breast high a large stone.

From what evidence that is available, the Great Stone of the Dropping cave does not sit inside the cave but sits outside it.

Roger Davis and my-self made a visit to the Dropping Cave On 25th May 2012, a visit slightly hindered by a North Sea Haar which made locating the cave and the stone slightly more difficult than anticipated.

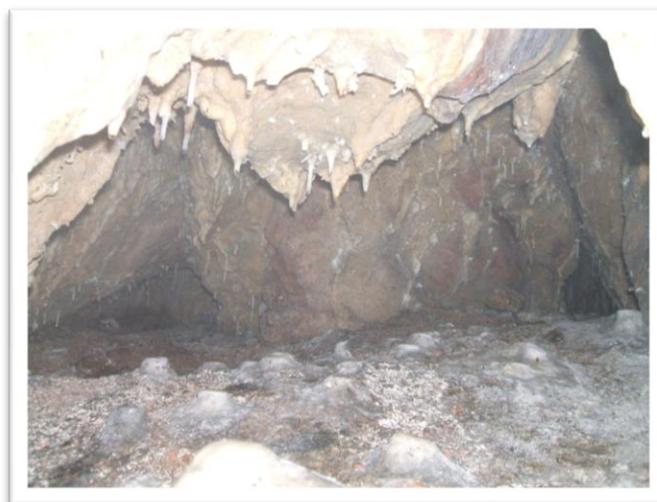
Perhaps overwhelmed by the unique Cave scenery and architecture and even in considering that the most likely location of the lifting stone would be outside the cave, like moths drawn to a light, the cave required to be explored. Before entering the cave, the obvious large roundish black stone situated near to the entrance was conveniently overlooked while the



prospect of the stone being found within the cave remained a possibility.

We both examined the immediate area outside the cave mouth and the obviousness of this large black stone was overwhelming but the allure of the cave itself was more so. Roger entered the cave, the entrance to which constantly seeps with water making its alternative name of “Dripping Cave” thoroughly apt and understandable. A rope of some

age allows someone to simply pull themselves in to the confines of the cave. Inside, it is dark, dank and extremely wet and certainly confining enough to ensure that “The Great Stone” was never lifted within its restricted space. One of the stank entrances mentioned by Miller is clearly obvious and with the allure of a secret chamber, Roger made a sustained effort to push himself inside with the only consequence being that he was becoming even more saturated with each attempt.



Inside the Dropping Cave

Roger Davis is arguably one of the World's most experienced of Stone Lifters having been privileged to lift the traditional stones of Iceland, Spain, Wales and indeed Scotland and when he says "*this is THE most atmospheric stone lifting site in the UK*", one can quite understand why in a certain manner that we both left the location without a full examination of the stone.



The eerie Dropping Cave

The site is surrounded in an incandescent eerie purple glow which is offset by the yellow and orange colouring of mineralised mud oozing from the cave mouth entrance. One would half expect one of the many fossils discovered by Hugh Miller in his research, to simply come alive such is the prehistoric feeling that this site emanates.

In the days of Hugh Miller, it is quite understandable that this area would have had a degree of prominence, a meeting place and perhaps "The Great Stone of the Dropping Cave" was, like so many other traditional Scottish Lifting Stones a local test of strength. A stone lifted by not only Miller but others of the locality as well as a release from the monotony of daily chores.

The area of the Black Isle does indeed have a culture of strength that was functional as well as competitive.

Donald Hossack a Chelsea Pensioner, was born in Cromarty in 1935. Donald recites tales as told to him by his father of local farm hands, in the early 1900's when time permitted, of

practicing and indulging in contests of strength by throwing the 56 pound weight for distance and height. The men required to be strong for their work, this was the practical nature of their strength but for amusement, almost on a daily basis they would apply that strength to test each other in competition.

This aspect of late Victorian culture permeates throughout all regions of Scotland of the time and many of these farm hands went onto participate in the emerging Highland Games Circuit.

It is perhaps a sad loss that the “Great Stone of the Dropping Cave” can no longer be formally identified by a Cromarty local as the stone lifted by Hugh Miller. Rest assured, what has been shown circumstantially certainly points to a conclusion that the stone lifted by Hugh Miller is the stone which sits outside the entrance to the Dropping Cave and only a visit to this site will allow the feeling of this to be truly appreciated.

Such is the allure of this site the stone was visited by Martin Jancsics of Elgin on 12th June 2012. Having been provided with scantest of details surrounding the stone, Martin himself noticed the obviousness of the lifting stone as it sat close to the entrance of the Dropping Cave.



Martin Jancsics lifting the Great Stone of the Dropping Cave

The stone is a smooth 320 lbs irregular shaped boulder that has a deceptive symmetry and despite its difficulties, Martin was able to shoulder the stone.

The Great Stone of the Dropping Cave will always be associated with Hugh Miller. There is an abundance of literature written regarding his life and work and in most of this, his “immense strength” is frequently highlighted but not expanded on, but perhaps the lifting of this stone will highlight the memory of the physical attributes of Miller himself.

The town of Cromarty itself has a rich history and is well worth visiting for a walk amongst the mix of Victorian and Georgian houses that give it an historical air. The town also houses the Hugh Miller Museum which is worth visiting to learn more of this remarkable man of words and strength.

Directions- Cromarty can be reached within 40 min of Inverness. From the city the A9 is followed northwards and the A832 road to Cromarty is clearly signposted. Follow the A832 through enjoyable rural countryside and arrive in Cromarty parking in the public car park near the shore at Forsyth Place. From the car park it is a pleasant walk along Shore Street. At the end of Shore Street there are sign posts for “South Sutor Viewpoint. Follow these signs into Miller Road and follow the signs for the “Sutor” path towards the shoreline. A pleasant, easy walk along this path which is on the level may reward the lifter with a view of the Bottle Nose Dolphin Pod which reside in these waters.

Along the path there are a number of benches however at the point where the path begins to go uphill, there is a bench dedicated to the memory of Mary Harvey. At this point strike off the path and enter the rocky shoreline.

From this point follow the shoreline for some 300 yards over extremely rough terrain. The shore consists of many rocks which require to be scrambled over and which are extremely slippery and dangerous. Care should be taken however the hard going will be rewarded when the view of the Dropping Cave becomes obvious. The great Stone of the Dropping Cave sits immediately outside the Cave entrance.

As a cautionary note one should be aware that this route should not be accessed at high tide.

The Hugh Miller Museum is situated in Church Street which runs parallel and close to Shore Street and is well worth a visit.

Bibliography –

“My Schools and Schoolmasters” by Hugh Miller. Published 1864 by William Nimmo, Edinburgh.

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Special thanks to Alan Napier of Elgin for the use of most of the photographs in this section.

