

Stoned In America

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Bruce Gilley writes in the [*American Conservative*](#):



While there are many confluences of academic misconduct and racial anxiety in the contemporary West, few are so fun to read about as the phenomenon of “ceremonial stone landscape” activism in contemporary New England, especially in the gentle hands of Dr. Timothy Ives, principal archaeologist of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission.

He has written an elegant and scholarly work exposing the academic fraud and political larceny of a movement that seeks to have stone piles left behind by early American farmers redesignated as pre-European spiritual temples built by

Indians. It is a warning.

While there *are* a few well-recognized Indian ceremonial stone or cave sites in New England, most of the sites that would have existed before European settlement are long gone. Until the 1970s, the only people who thought otherwise were fantasists who attributed them to Vikings, Knights Templar, Irish monks, or the Lost Tribes of Israel.

Enter “disco-era America,” as Ives describes it. The founding myth of the ceremonial stone landscape (CSL) movement was handed down by two old white men, James Mavor, a retired oceanographer who claimed in a 1969 book to have discovered Atlantis, and Byron Dix, a retired engineer who believed there were secret codes in megalith sites in Great Britain. Mavor and Dix set about “discovering” the secrets of what we now know to be farmer rock piles throughout New England, reinterpreting them as sacred Indian sites that revealed magical kingdoms of the past. Irish monks were out, native Indians were in.

The overeager minds of Mavor and Dix “discovered no shortage of ‘standing stones,’ astronomically aligned ‘stone rows,’ and calendric ‘stone circles’ throughout New England’s forests,” Ives writes. Their 1989 book *Manitou: The Sacred Landscape of New England’s Native Civilization* let loose an army of white retirees who set out from their subdivisions into the newly enchanted forests of New England, there to reveal all manner of stone piles left by magical Indians that might, perhaps, extend their lives or cure their arthritis.

It was nonsense, “growing on an old compost of American Romanticism infused with the individualistic, exploratory spirit of the New Age.” *Manitou* was a case study, notes Ives, of “how two well-educated scientists cast off the shackles of disciplined rationality to indulge the pursuit of a consensus-based ideological vision.” He cites no fewer than ten websites promoting the CSL conspiracy theory today.

The movement could not have succeeded without the supporting roles played by four other groups. The first to join the movement were the academic archaeologists who by the 1980s saw their purpose not as advancing truth but as redressing perceived historical injustices. The academics were primarily focused on themselves, staring into the mirror wracked by guilt about their "colonial gaze" and determined to make restitution by "unmasking" systemic racism at the heart of their field with its "Eurocentric" reliance on facts and logic. That these academics were pandering to romanticism concocted by old white men who could not get a tee-off time did not devalue the cause.

Running closely behind the academics came local, state, and federal authorities who, being handmaids of the people, would do just about anything to avoid controversy. They also needed to get stuff done. "Federally regulated projects with broad public interest...present money trees worth shaking," Ives notes of the "mitigations" offered to local tribes and antiquarian groups to ease the pain of development.

Slower to recognize the bounty of the CSL movement came local NIMBYs looking for a politically powerful weapon to prevent land development. These residents discovered "the Indian Rock Defense." It is now a time-tested strategy for land-use lawyers in the region. Some rock or shell formations appear all of a sudden in lands slated for development. Proposed solar farms are a favorite target of NIMBYs who resort to the Indian Rock Defense, making the CSL movement an accessory to the fossil fuel industry.

Ives documents one triumph of NIMBYism now known as the Manitou Hassannash Preserve in Rhode Island. The site was slated for development when NIMBYs demanded a survey. Tribal leaders were bused in to declare, after a seemly pause for divination, that they had recovered the memories of the sacred stone sites. A consultancy of antiquarians and graduate students was hired to write an official report. Photos were

taken of rock piles at winter solstice, suggesting a celestial purpose. Even with contrary evidence staring the researchers in the face, they insisted on ancient origins. One large boulder had “rounded drill holes...typically the result of the ‘plug-and-feathers’ method of quarrying and splitting stone, a technique developed around 1830,” the report observed. “However, the documentation of this detail is not intended to suggest a date of construction of this feature.”

The clincher came at a public forum in 2017 with Paul Loether, then Keeper of the National Register of Historic Places. Loether delivered himself of the statement that “my ancestors were New England farmers and they didn’t build these structures.” As Ives notes, “If everyone knew what their ancestors did and did not do, the fields of archaeology and history would not exist.” Nonetheless, it was a watershed. The town and state rallied to the cause. Since then, many little old ladies have been making videos providing their own Indian spiritual interpretations of the rock piles in the preserve. Ives has no doubt these stones are field clearing debris from white farmers. “This is why I do not read fiction. Life provides enough surprises.”

The “network of middle class whites” that constitutes the CSL movement could not have succeeded without the moral warrant provided by the fourth group, self-identified Indians. At first, the Indians brushed off the claims. But timing is everything. Disco-era America was also a time when Indian revitalization was taking shape. “Parade float Indians” turned into angry Indians. The CSL movement presented an opportunity for cash, to be sure, but the main draw was cultural and political.

Culturally, the hard truth is, as Ives shows, that Indians are basically extinct as an identifiable genetic group. In the face of cultural loss brought about by the encounter with the modern world, and the increasingly bizarre reasons and ways that people claim Indian heritage, CSL activism provided a new

rallying point at a time of what he calls "Indian racial paranoia."

As life came to imitate art, the fanciful "sacred sites" discovered by old white men became actual sacred sites divined by Indian leaders. One old white man in Massachusetts claimed extrasensory powers as a result of training under a "Cherokee medicine woman." One of his discoveries was then "sacralized" by local Indians who put four clusters of quahog shells on the site, wampum money in today's terms. This "proved" that the site was still in use as a ceremonial place and thus must have been since time immemorial.

Keeping this cultural glue together requires a lot of obfuscation and tall tales from Indian participants. Attempts to solicit greater information from them are invariably met with the insistence that non-disclosure agreements were reached with their ancestors. Suggestions to excavate sites are denied because this would amount to desecration, not because it might reveal farm refuse from around 1830 rather than crystals or skeletons from 2000 BC. Ives refers to a "decolonial divorce settlement" that has left these sites and many others off-limits to professional inquiry.

CSL thus goes one step beyond the normal practice in contemporary archaeology whereby professional archaeologists discover an Indian site and its meaning before calling in Indians to announce that the Indians, using their decolonized methodologies, have discovered the site and used their ancient wisdom (if tribal rules allow) to fill in the clueless archaeologists hidebound in their "Western" methods. In the case of CSL, we have professional archaeologists consciously submitting to a false interpretation to avoid the serious charge of "taking a non-spiritual position." Thus "from the moral high ground of an indigenous warriors rebelling against the settler colonial state" the Indian activists "rally others to join their cause."

In one of this book's many shafts of light that one would never see on a contemporary college campus, Ives questions whether the Indian leaders know the harm they are inflicting on their communities. The lesson that money must be earned through productive work and interaction with others five days a week is a lesson that pertains also to "most of the Indian adults inhabiting New England," he reminds us. Whatever the feel-good effect of the gravy train of "mitigations," the CSL movement is devastating to the productive capacities of the Indians themselves.

Inevitably, the various factions in the CSL movement erupted into vicious division. One of the most volatile relationships was between the antiquarians and the Indians. Ives documents a fissure that erupted in 2018 when one of the antiquarians complained of the "fake history" being offered by the Indians about his own fake discoveries. It was "an ironic circularity." It was also "a rare, if not unique, political unicorn—a white settler colonist suggesting that a local Indian has appropriated his ideas and then erased him from history."

The CSL interpretations invariably contradict one another, setting off internal disputes of interpretation. Sites are called burial grounds, then memory piles, then ritual sites, then sacred sites. One was apparently located in a place that ancient Indian prognosticators predicted would be the future right-of-way for a high voltage transmission line, "so they could turbo-charge their visions using its electromagnetic field." A hilltop site declared on one interpretation to be an ancient Indian place of "vision quests" is made up of jagged boulders set in angular ridges that the ancients apparently dragged up the hill by unknown means. Noting the better scientific explanation of hilltop erosion patterns, Ives drily observes, "I believe the first things those Indians would have envisioned was a more comfortable place to sit."

An unmentioned but implicit theme in this book is the willful

erasure of the histories of early New England farmers by the CSL movement. Ives goes to great lengths to provide documentary evidence from contemporary newspapers, memoirs, and almanacs, as well as scientific site studies, about the common practice of heaping exposed stones in piles in the middle of fields in early America. In "old Yankee taxonomy," the heavier stones that framed the walls of so-called stone corrals were called "two-handers," while the smaller stones of the interior were "one-handers."

The practice of piling stones was a topic of raging debate in early America because the experts thought farmers should remove the stones altogether rather than just pushing them into piles. The farmers resisted calls to cart the stones away, often using stone-piling as a chore for children, other times hoping to cash in on stones when needed for nearby roads. They "embodied the pragmatism of hill farmers," Ives writes, citing must-read sources like the *Carlisle Mosquito* and the *Green Mountain Freeman*.

Other sites represent cellar holes from farmhouses long gone. The history of farm abandonment as new areas were opened up in the West is an important part of the American story. It explains why these cellar holes are mostly found in wooded areas: because the trees grew back after the farms were abandoned. When excavated by excitable graduate students hoping to find Indian ceremonial items, they instead reveal rusting barrel hoops, bricks, and farm detritus from "just beyond the edge of social memory."

Ives cites all this to establish the clear evidence that these are *not* Indian spiritual sites. In CSL circles, "the notion of historic farmers leaving heaps of stones in their fields is a white supremacist myth." One leading academic advocate calls the insistence that these really are just old farmsteads an ugly attempt to "purify the land" of Indian spirituality. The CSL movement directly mimics the supposed "violence" and "erasure" of those it assails, engaging in a terrible act of

cultural erasure.

Not all these farmers were white, either. Free blacks and many Indians took to the plough, and the finest stone piles invariably were those laid by Indian farmers who had been taught by nearby English stonemasons. Irony of irony, the Indian activists are erasing fellow Indians from memory.

All of parties to this betrayal of truth and fairness deserve a chapter of shame. The mostly old, white, male antiquarians with too much time on their hands should have thought more about the consequences of launching half-baked conspiracies into the Internet. The Indian tribes should have seen the long-term harms of perpetuating the victimhood narrative, especially when based on such gross abuses of history. The spirit-seeking white activists should have got woke to the narcissistic and demeaning nature of their “allyship,” using Indians as stage props for their white guilt Passion Play. The local politicians and state and federal authorities who rolled over in the name of “cultural sensitivity” should have remembered their duties as public servants. And of course the NIMBYs who pulled out the Indian Rock Defense as a last-gasp to preserve their wooded views might have reflected on the Kantian imperative.

But perhaps the greatest censure should be reserved for the academics who betrayed their professional duty. After all, in a free and pluralistic society, there is nothing wrong per se with participating in a delusion. If there were, there would be nobody attending Buffalo Sabres games. But the academic vocation is one that demands a rigorous pursuit of truth. The falsity of the academics is that they have quite openly eschewed their calling in favor of ideological activism.

☒ Ives, in his gentle humor, suspects he “will enjoy a special envelope of social distancing in many settings for years to come” as a result of this book. Even before it, he was already vaguely alluded to in the small community of New

England archaeology as a “redneck archaeologist.” Whatever the brickbats to come, Ives writes that he would rather face them than “feel complicit in a silence with far-reaching negative implications.”

How much easier would his life be, he muses, if he were to issue a gushing statement of white guilt and a soaring promise to “let the landscapes speak” unencumbered by fact or logic. He would also need to declare that he is “in a committed relationship with” a tribal historic preservation office. In time, he might find himself “secretly hallucinating below power lines.” At last, “redemption would be mine.” He would be able to “certify my reformation” by joining the moral panic over charges of belittling Indian heritage.

That he refuses makes him a hero in my book, all the more extraordinary because he lacks the protections of tenure. His praise for older Indian leaders who refuse to be stampeded into CSL nonsense might as well apply to him: “More power to them in an age when the simple act of declining to get on the racial rhetoric train presents a modest form of public heroism.”

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