

Ashes and Stones: A Journey through Scotland in Search of Women Hunted as Witches

Allyson Shaw

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Allyson Shaw traverses Scotland, visiting historical sites and memorials, in her meaningful book *Ashes and Stones*.

Focused on the women who were accused of witchcraft in Scotland in the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, Shaw searches for the monuments erected in their honor. These monuments take many forms: they include simple, unadorned stones hidden in fields, as well as beautiful works of art that hold places of pride in the small towns in which they reside. The messaging surrounding each monument is centered: Shaw notes that there are often attempts to forget the horrors of the past or, conversely, to glorify the images of accused witches. In contrast, Shaw digs into historical records, looking for information on the actual individuals whom these monuments represent.

The history itself is gruesome: torture was used to extract people's confessions, with women forced to admit to outrageous crimes, including cursing their neighbors, turning themselves into animals, and having sex with the devil. As Shaw uncovers these repeating themes in each woman's story, she also recalls the traumas she survived in her own life, including ostracism and assault. Sexuality and violence, she notes, are connected to this day.

The intimacy of Shaw's musings, and the parallels that she draws between the victims of the witch trials and the realities that many modern women face, make this a consequential history text. It stands to change the ways that people view those who were killed. And it honors women who were neither supernatural nor evil, but who were human and deserving of remembrance as such.

Ashes and Stones is a powerful travelogue that revisits the history of the witch trials in Scotland.

CATHERINE THURESON (September / October 2023)

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