

The Taking of the Stone of Destiny

Eilis Mattoon

Research Paper

Junior Division

2,117 Words

The History

The Stone of Destiny, Stone of Scone, Stone of Scotland, Jacob's Pillow, Stone of Bethel; the stone has many different names. Although no one knows when it started, over the course of hundreds of years 110 Scottish kings were crowned upon it, not a single foreign among them. The last one crowned in 1292 was named John Balliol.¹ No one knows exactly where the stone came from either, but some theories suggest it was the biblical stone that Jacob had visions of the angels on. Others suggest that the daughter of an Egyptian pharaoh brought the stone with her to Ireland after eloping with a Celtic Prince.²

It was in 1296, during the first war of Scottish independence that King Edward I managed to invade, take the stone as a sign of victory, and carry it to England in triumph. The stone would be put under the coronation chair of English royalty and named the Stone of Coronation. The stone remained at Westminster for 650 years, until in 1950, when Ian Hamilton and three friends of university took back the stone to Scotland. The stone was moved back again to England before the next coronation, but oddly enough, the book *Coronation: from the 8th to 21st century*

¹ Hamilton, Ian R. *Stone of Destiny*. Birlinn, 2010. *Ian R. Hamilton, the man who stole the Stone, writes down his exhilarating adventure.*

² "Did Edward I Steal the Real Stone of Destiny?" *Wars of Independence: Historical Oddities*, www.bbc.co.uk/history/scottishhistory/independence/oddities_independence.shtml. *Minor historical information about the stone.*

/Roy Strong, specifically presents the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953, and the stone wasn't even mentioned. In fact, any pictures of that day, the stone had been hidden (either under a cloth or the queen's dress)³.

Ian R. Hamilton was right to take the Stone of Destiny back from the British. The Stone is the symbol of Scotland, and it belongs to Scotland. It is a symbol of independence and national pride. It was stolen from the Scots to show them they were conquered. Scotland was [and still is] fighting for independence, when King Edward I stole the stone and carried it to London. Centuries later, Ian and his three friends of university decided to take back the stone and restore the glory of Scotland. Many had dreamed of it, and some tried. Ian Hamilton and his friends were the only ones who were successful in taking back the stone. And, in typical Scottish fashion; they raided the church of England. They became known to anyone who had pride in being Scottish.

The Plan

The Stone is a sandstone block that weighs approximately 152 kg (336 lbs) that was blessed as the coronation stone for the Scottish kings. The blessing wasn't from a specific event, but more of an overall blessing as a religious relic. During their very first war for independence the English King carried it away in triumph and

³ Strong, Roy. *Coronation: from the 8th to the 21st Century*. Harper Perennial, 2006. *A book of coronations from the 8th to 21st century and other information about coronations and royal novelties in general.*

¹ Hamilton, Ian R. *Stone of Destiny*. Birlinn, 2010. *Ian R. Hamilton, the man who stole the Stone, writes down his exhilarating adventure.*

used it as the coronation stone in England. For hundreds of years the Scottish wanted it back and asked for it, individuals even planned taking the stone themselves, but never managed to succeed. Wendy Wood, Compton MacKenzie, John MacCormick, and Bertie Gray¹ are a few of the nationalists who thought about taking back the Stone. As most Scots will say, “Any Nationalist with their right mind has thought about it”, but only Ian Hamilton followed through.

Ian Hamilton couldn't take the Stone of Destiny alone, he needed to recruit willing people. Many, *many*, people turned him down immediately. Their concerns ranged from jail time to dishonor for failing. Ian Hamilton thought he wouldn't be able to find people. Then he told Kay Matheson about his big plan, already aware she shared almost identical views with him. He seemed to think she would be a spectacular candidate. A woman would never be suspected of such crimes and could only assist in the raid. She agreed to be the driver, knowing the risks she was taking.¹

Hamilton then approached his friend by the name Gavin Vernon, who jumped with elation at the idea. Gavin Vernon was a 24-year-old engineer who was short and stocky, but built for the job, as he was known for showing his strength in public. He was of like mind, a burly lowlander who, like most Scots appreciated the risk of such an adventure.⁴

“Opening beer bottles with his teeth made him a useful man at a party.”

-Ian R. Hamilton, Stone of Destiny, page 40-

⁴ “Gavin Vernon.” *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 26 Mar. 2004, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1457731/Gavin-Vernon.html. *A tribute to the deceased who had a large part in bringing back the stone.*

John MacCormick was one of the Nationalist who planned to take the stone previously. Ian Hamilton consulted him and another couple of Nationalists to question their own plan. MacCormick was the biggest help to Hamilton in planning the stone-taking and gave wise advice. Though MacCormick considered Ian to be a young and impatient boy, he must have found merit in the plan, as he funded the raid; especially when he discovered they only wanted £50 not the thousands he had expected them to ask.

Three became four on the afternoon of December 22nd, 1950. Alan Stuart, another fellow student, was eager for the job going as far as *pleading* for it. He even offered one of his own vehicles as secondary transportation just to be a part of Ian's plan.⁵ Alan had contributed his Ford Anglia to the group and his own reliability as well. Initially, Ian wasn't convinced Alan would be a solid addition, as he appeared young and inexperienced. But the simplicity and tenacity of the boyish figure won Ian over.

Their plan was to pay admission into the Abbey and wait until closing hours. Then Gavin would meet up with Hamilton at the doors of the Abbey and be let in. There they would jimmy the stone from the chair and bring it to the car Kay drove. Alan was an addition that would eventually help drag the stone out.

The four students were more impatient than ever before. Ian had the intention to take the Stone on a very inconspicuous night: Christmas Eve. The group

⁵ "Gavin Vernon Engineer Who Helped Return the Stone of Destiny to Scotland." *HeraldScotland*, 31 Mar. 2004, www.heraldscotland.com/news/12511703.Gavin_Vernon_Engineer_who_helped_return_the_Stone_of_Destiny_to_Scotland/. Mainly referring to Gavin, the muscle in the taking of the Stone of Destiny, but some other information about the other recruits.

started their long drive from Glasgow to London in two Ford Anglias. The roads were slushy and they helped many people out of ditches and helped themselves out of ditches also.¹ They arrived in London after a 400 mile stretch with tired eyes and restless faces, it was almost raid day and Hamilton was very ready.

The Taking

Time was closing in and they needed to get into the abbey for reconnaissance. After paying admission, they walked through the front door and scouted the abbey for the stone's location and planned exit routes. They regathered and discussed the timing of the raid. Hamilton was nervous. What if they got caught? It'd be bad enough to be caught now, but to be caught before they even got their hands on the Stone would be a disgrace. After determining that there was no time like the present, Ian walked back through the front doors of Westminster Abbey, and waited, hiding in a cleaning trolley, until closing time. He took off his shoes to step quietly and turned the corner to a flashlight in his face. The watchman caught him and he had to think fast. He managed to play himself off as a poor man who was shut in. The watchman lead him outside and Hamilton was back to the beginning! Hamilton needed to stop his friends from meeting up with him before they got caught as well.

Hamilton and his lads found each other and made the decision to sleep in their cars overnight, to save money, and try again the next night - Christmas Eve. The lack of

sleep, the stress of the raid and the extreme cold did nothing to ease their minds, nor aid in their rather contentious discussion on what they should do.

After a frigid night, they met at an inn for a meal and discovered that Kay was ill, having contracted influenza and it worsening overnight. Kay requested a few hours sleep in a hotel, but refused their suggestions for her to return home. She had made it this far - she would stay.

Reconvening late that night, they made their way back into the abbey undetected through a single pine door called the poet's entrance. Kay, still ill but recovered a bit from her nap, waited in the car while the boys worked on prying the Stone out of the chair with a crowbar. As soon as they broke the stone free Hamilton laid down his coat, claiming it was the strongest. It'd be easier to spread out the weight and drag it along. Ian pulled on one of the embedded rings, and the stone broke into two. Now there was not just one stone to move but two. This made moving one stone easier (which Ian was able to carry to the car), but the remaining sandstone was heavier than they thought and Ian's watch had slipped off without notice. (This would be significant in the English investigation into the stone-taking.) Ian had also dropped the car keys and considering how dark it was, he couldn't find them and ultimately lost them. Hamilton took the smaller piece of broken stone to Alan's car and covered it with a wool blanket.¹

Kay drove with the smaller piece Stone and was stopped by the boot of the trunk popping open. Part of the stone fell out and Kay had to lift the stone of her own weight back into the car and carry on.

Hamilton went back for the rest of the stone, only to find Gavin and Alan had gone missing and assumed they must've gone looking for him to get the keys. Hamilton didn't have the time to wait, he didn't have the keys and he retraced his steps to find them. Armed with only a match, he searched on his hands and knees, and miraculously found them. After dragging the stone to the car on his coat, he managed with a mighty lift to get the stone in the boot of Alan's car and sped off with the watchman dialing 999.⁶

The Getaway

The whole border was shut down during the investigation. Anything going into Scotland would be searched. They needed to bring the Stone somewhere unexpected. Instead of bringing the stone to Scotland, the stone went into hiding. The larger stone was taken south of London and left in a field deep within the countryside. The smaller, went with Kay through a wandering route to a friends' in Birmingham. They all bluffed their way through police pullovers and by nightfall made it back to Scotland.¹ In the ensuing days, Hamilton realized they were not found out, and made arrangements with some lads to get the larger stone from the field. They found that a caravan of gypsies had camped around it and they needed to convince them to let them take the stone. The stone represented liberty and

⁶ Craig, Olga. "Ian Hamilton on Stone of Destiny: I Felt I Was Holding Scotland's Soul." *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 14 Dec. 2008, www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/3743946/Ian-Hamilton-on-Stone-of-Destiny-I-felt-I-was-holding-Scotlands-soul.html. A newer interview with Ian Hamilton and his ambitious acts the night of the raid or courageous heist.

freedom. Appealing to the gypsies in utmost sincerity on these qualities, Hamilton and his men, aided by the gypsies themselves, loaded the stone into the car and headed to Scotland. After a 500 mile journey, they uncovered the stone to Scottish air for the first time in over 600 years.

After three months the Stone was found outside of Arbroath Abbey, specifically chosen as this was the site where the Scots signed a declaration to fight for freedom in 1320. The police took back the stone and found those who were in charge of the heist. They decided not to press charges, afraid of an even worse public outcry. The Stone of Destiny went back to England for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth, but remained in the hearts of the Scots because of the tenacity of a small group of spirited men and women.¹

The Compromise

The Stone was a symbol of freedom, liberty and pride. It united the people of Scotland unlike anything else. In 1996, England agreed to a compromise and delivered the Stone of Destiny back to Scotland on a loan. Their condition was that when another queen is to be coronated they would take back the stone. Scotland and their Nationalists reluctantly agreed, knowing that this was their best offer. Of course, the people and Nationalists of Scotland wanted more, they wanted to have the Stone for themselves (considering it was blessed for *Scottish* kings). But following years of conflict, the Stone was finally prepared to be brought back to

Scotland on St. Andrews Day. Over 10,000 people of Scotland lined up and watched as the stone was brought to Edinburgh Castle.⁷ Perhaps freedom, liberty and pride are the best qualities on which to build a United Kingdom. As the lads told the gypsies, *"Freedom could be preserved, not in caravans or in houses, but only in people's hearts. And as soon as they stopped valuing it it disappeared... We're not like that."*¹

*"A returning of a relic to its rightful ownership."*⁶

⁷ Press, The Associated. "Stolen Coronation Stone Rolls Home to Scotland." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 1 Dec. 1996, www.nytimes.com/1996/12/01/world/stolen-coronation-stone-rolls-home-to-scotland.html. News article of 1996, the day the stone was returned.

⁶Craig, Olga. "Ian Hamilton on Stone of Destiny: I Felt I Was Holding Scotland's Soul." *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 14 Dec. 2008, www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/3743946/Ian-Hamilton-on-Stone-of-Destiny-I-felt-I-was-holding-Scotlands-soul.html. A newer interview with Ian Hamilton and his ambitious acts the night of the raid or courageous heist.

Annotated Bibliography MLA8 Format

Primary

Hamilton, Ian R. *Stone of Destiny*. Birlinn, 2010. *Ian R. Hamilton, the man who stole the Stone, writes down his exhilarating adventure.*

The majority of my research came from this book and helped me from the very smallest of detail I needed.

Secondary

Craig, Olga. "Ian Hamilton on Stone of Destiny: I Felt I Was Holding Scotland's Soul." *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 14 Dec. 2008, www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/3743946/Ian-Hamilton-on-Stone-of-Destiny-I-felt-I-was-holding-Scotlands-soul.html. *A newer interview with Ian Hamilton and his ambitious acts the night of the raid or courageous heist.*

"Gavin Vernon." *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 26 Mar. 2004, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1457731/Gavin-Vernon.html.

Johnson, Ben. "The Stone of Destiny | Stone of Scone | Scottish Coronation Stone." Historic UK, www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofScotland/The-Stone-of-Destiny/.

Press, The Associated. "Stolen Coronation Stone Rolls Home to Scotland." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 1 Dec. 1996, www.nytimes.com/1996/12/01/world/stolen-coronation-stone-rolls-home-to-scotland.html. *News article of 1996, the day the stone was returned.*

"Wars of Independence." Historical Oddities, BBC, www.bbc.co.uk/history/scottishhistory/independence/oddities_independence.shtml.

Where the Stone of Destiny might have come from. Information of the Wars of Independence.

“60 Fascinating Facts About The Queen’s Coronation.” *Royal Central*, 1 June 2013, royalcentral.co.uk/uk/thequeen/coronationfacts-8604<http://royalcentral.co.uk/uk/thequeen/coronationfacts-8604><http://royalcentral.co.uk/uk/thequeen/coronationfacts-8604>.
Facts about Queen Elizabeth II coronation.