This little book is designed for a generalist audience—those who have visited, plan to visit, or wish they could visit the neolithic passage tomb of Newgrange, County Meath. Its authors make no pretence that it is other than a ‘personal’ interpretation of this much-discussed monument. It is a beautifully illustrated book, its many high-quality colour photographs and drawings alone making it a valuable acquisition for anyone interested in Newgrange.

One of the more interesting aspects of the book is its detailed and sometimes frankly critical discussion of the work carried out on the site under the supervision of Michael O’Kelly, the archaeologist responsible for the 1960s excavation and ‘conservation’ of the site. As the Stouts are quick to point out, the approach favoured then would scarcely rate description as conservation now: the extensive structural use of concrete and steel, for example, would simply not be countenanced under present best practice guidelines. O’Kelly is also responsible for the vast height of the impressive quartz wall which now greets the visitor to Newgrange. As this book points out, were it not for the modern concrete and steel, the wall would have collapsed soon after its erection at this improbable height and angle, and is therefore highly unlikely to resemble closely the original arrangement of the quartz. Still grander ideas were bandied about: the dark granite stones which now dot the wall ‘like currants in a quartz scone’ might have been formed into patterns like those on the kerbstones, but as the Stouts put it ‘happily this notion was not expressed in the final reconstruction’.

There is a tendency in this book to adopt old-fashioned ethnographic explanations of the magico-religious variety for what is observed at Newgrange. For example, the paucity of grave goods is attributed to a ‘strict code of religious practice’, when we are also informed that the site has been subject to the depredations of treasure hunters for the past 200 years. It is asserted, without evidence, that stone lamps found near the entrance were used by ‘pilgrims’ lighting their way to the tomb in the dark winter mornings, when it is equally likely that they were used by caretakers or artisans working at the monument, particularly since there seem to have been residential structures also on the site. We are told authoritatively that ‘the religion of the passage tomb builders was grounded in the landscape and seasonal changes’, which may well be true, but which can never rise above the level of speculation. Similarly,
the ‘opening out of religious ceremony’ on the cusp of the neolithic and
bronze ages is said to represent a ‘drive towards greater inclusivity’,
although there can be no possible way of knowing this as a matter of
fact: even if greater numbers of participants can be evidenced (which it
is not convincingly), this says nothing about intention. This overstating
of theories extends also to archaeology: it is asserted ‘with certainty’
that megaliths were carried considerable distances by sea on the basis of
a large piece of a decorated stone found on an island some four
kilometres distant from the location of the other pieces on mainland
Brittany. Although direct carriage by sea is the most likely explanation,
it cannot be claimed ‘with certainty’ that the stone was not transported
by land to the shore opposite the island, which is hardly a ‘considerable
distance’ away.

There are also inconsistencies that are mildly annoying. In some
places, references are to the ‘south-west’ and ‘north-east’ and in others
to the ‘left’ and ‘right’ sides of the passage, necessitating constant
reference to the excellent map provided in the book, to correlate the
information. On one page (p. 56) conjoined spheres of chalk are referred
to as a ‘dumb-bell shaped object’ and on the next as ‘representations of
testicles’. Some readers (particularly male ones) might not quite be able
to envisage how a single shape can be described both ways. The maps
of Brittany are supplied with distance scales which are not only
inaccurate in absolute terms, but also entirely incompatible with each
other.

Much of the book is given over to comparison of Newgrange with
the neolithic monuments of Brittany. This is very interesting and
informative, but the case for the transmission of the decorated passage
tomb phenomenon from Brittany to Ireland is not convincingly made,
based as it is on imprecise dating and an apparent belief that Ireland
could not possibly transmit such ideas to the Continent. There are some
slightly dubious comparisons here, too, as an undecorated vertical zone
on a megalith is described as ‘immediately reminiscent’ of the
deliberate vertical grooves on the entrance and rear kerbstones at
Newgrange, which are none too similar even to each other.

This is a nice little book, and perhaps it is a little unfair to quibble
over such academic niceties as the distinction between speculation and
accepted fact. Nonetheless, to assume that the reading public is
incapable of appreciating such distinctions smacks of intellectual
snobbery. The occasional qualifying word or phrase might have raised
this book above the level of nice but untrustworthy.

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