

*The Memory Code: The Traditional Aboriginal
Memory Technique that Unlocks the Secrets
of Stonehenge, Easter Island and Ancient
Monuments the World Over*

by Lynne Kelly

xviii + 318 pp., Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2016,
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Review by Denis Gojak
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The first impressions are certainly not encouraging. The pastel-dominated graphic design, the title itself and, not least, an image of Stonehenge above a gushing cover blurb offering 'groundbreaking insight' into the lives and minds of 'the ancients' all suggest that this book came from the New Age consciousness section of a bookstore. This is unfortunate as science writer Lynne Kelly is aiming to make a rather more interesting argument about the past.

The book is focused on understanding Britain's Stonehenge and, to a lesser extent, other enigmatic archaeological sites including Easter Island, the Nasca lines and Carnac. Her argument is that all can be understood by considering them not just as marvellous and unique places within their own cultural contexts, but as part of larger landscapes. No surprises there, except her landscapes are not matters of physical geography but are modelled on concepts borrowed from Australian Aboriginal songlines, which she terms memory spaces.

The description of Aboriginal songlines and, more broadly, traditional environmental knowledge sets the scene early in the book, mainly through a mix of anecdote and generalisation, interspersed with observations from anthropologists, explorers and others that fit her case. Kelly finds that Aboriginal people had prodigious memories and knew the names of everything they encountered and did this because knowledge meant survival in unpredictable environments. Songlines helped to ensure that traditional spatial knowledge

was structured, repeatable and decentralised, with individual places acting as mnemonic devices to entrench the narrative elements that carried information into an unchanging order. She does not dwell much on the connection of person and place in creating and affirming identity. Remember though that this is written for a niche audience and their focus is on obtaining the ancients' memory tricks.

Embedding memory in physical places allows her to springboard into a reanalysis of Stonehenge. Recent archaeological work on Stonehenge has revealed multiple connections – the transport of stone, the movement of goods and visitors in networks far more extensive than hitherto believed. By applying the memory space concept to describe the intertwining threads of different paths of knowledge, resources and movement that connect Stonehenge to a constellation of other places Kelly enriches our appreciation of its complexity. While her arguments, and the archaeological evidence, is not completely convincing, she offers an interesting and challenging view of the past that is certainly worth exploring in more detail. Note that she does not imply any parallels between Neolithic Britain and Aboriginal Australia, beyond a central role for knowledge managed through spatial mnemonics.

It is unfortunate that the book has been packaged as a new-age guide to developing memory power like 'the ancients'. Kelly has based this on a much more rigorous scholarly work (Kelly 2015), but much appears lost in its translation to a popular format. Nonetheless, it is well-written and provides a very readable introduction to the archaeology of some well-known ancient places. It will not, however, provide much for those seeking to understand how Aboriginal people connected place, knowledge and belief.

Reference

Kelly, Lynne 2015, *Knowledge and Power in Prehistoric Societies: Orality, Memory and the Transmission of Culture*, Cambridge University Press, New York.

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