Reading the runes
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Sacred Land
by Martin Palmer,
with a foreword by Melvyn Bragg
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Martin Palmer is without doubt one of our leading authorities on the subject of Nature and sacred writing today — among his previous publications being Sacred Gardens and The Sacred History of Britain. One of the primary aims of his latest book is to teach us how to ‘read’ our surroundings; for, he believes, like all sacred art, Nature can be read as a book, if only one understands the language. Thus, through ‘decoding’ the towns, villages and countryside of Britain, we may come to see that ‘we are caught up in a part of something much greater and grander than ourselves’.

The first half of the book covers the beliefs and stories that have shaped the landscape of Britain, in which Palmer explains what he means by the sacred and why it is important for us to be aware of it. He guides us from pre-history to the present through long barrows, standing stones, caves, groves, wells, battlefields and hills, taking in prevailing winds, the evolving shape of fields, the significance of place names and the orientation of villages and towns, with their festivals, crossroads and burial grounds.

The second half of the book, with its useful gazetteers, is more of a guide to specific sites and how to interpret them from a spiritual perspective. Palmer discusses, among many others, Bardsley Island, St Winifred’s Well, the Anglo-Saxon church at Bradford-on-Avon, with its sunken, rather than raised, altar, and the ancient yew in Fortingall churchyard (Perth and Kinross), which pre-dates by hundreds of years the medieval church built beside it.

As always, he is a mine of knowledge and inspiration. We learn that the names Thames and Tamar derive from the Sanskrit word tamaśar, meaning ‘dark river’ (the river Tamasar itself being a tributary of the Ganges, India’s most sacred river); that Stonehenge, though popularly associated with the Druids, almost certainly predates them, and in its scale and grandeur was the exact antithesis of what they believed in; and even that keepers of taverns called ‘The Bull’, post-