

The loch that never freezes

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

A COUPLE of articles ago I wrote about Captain Edmund Burt's visit in (or about) 1725 to the notorious Simon Fraser of Lovat. I want to come back to the Inverness area now and deal with what the old ethnographers (including Burt) had to say about Loch Ness. A consistent theme runs through published accounts of the Loch for two and a half centuries, demonstrating nicely the tendency of travel writers to have an eye and a half cocked to what the previous scribbler had to say.

That theme is not, repeat not, the Loch Ness Monster. It is that *Loch Ness never freezes*.

Now to the best of my knowledge this is perfectly true. For example I have read somewhere that there was a winter in the early nineteenth century when Loch Lomond froze hard enough for a coach to be driven across, but Loch Ness never froze at all.

This theme became a bit of an obsession with writers on Loch Ness, and it is difficult to know to what extent they are copying each other and to what extent they are checking with informants around them. A bit of both, I think.

It all seems to have started with Hector Boece (or Boethius, c. 1465-1536), Principal of King's College Aberdeen, who published his 'History of Scotland' in 1527. Despite his sober-sounding job, he had a taste for the sensational, and was ultimately responsible for (among other things) the witches in Shakespeare's 'Macbeth'. His 'History' exists in Latin and in Scots, but I will put the relevant bit into English. The River Ness, he says, "rises from a loch under the same name, not eight miles from the same loch that Lochy comes from [Loch Lochy], and runs into the Ireland seas. There neither freezes the water of Lochy, nor yet the loch that it comes from, in any storm of winter; and, a thing even more remarkable, any frozen thing that is cast into it melts and dissolves hastily; it is, therefore, extremely beneficial to all frozen beasts."

Now wait a minute. It is quite clear from this that the water which never freezes, according to Boece, is that of Loch Lochy and the River Lochy, at the other end of the Great Glen. He is fairly accurate in saying that Loch Ness and Loch Lochy are eight miles apart, and we need not criticise him for failing to mention little Loch Oich which lies between them. But it is very peculiar that he has the River Ness running into "the Ireland seas". What does he mean? Does he think Inverness stands on the west coast? Or does he include the Moray Firth among "the Ireland seas", perhaps because of the Gaelic spoken along some of its shores?

I will come back to Boece, but first I will turn quickly to John Leslie (1527-96). Leslie knew Boece's work very well, but he must also have known the Inverness area, because he had been Bishop of Ross for a few years before he began writing his own version of the 'History of Scotland' in 1570. In Leslie's hands, Boece's Loch Lochy passage turns into this: "The water of the Ness flows out of the loch of the same name, and both have this nature, that be the frost ever so great, they never freeze; but if any frozen thing be put either in the loch or in the river, it thaws immediately. Therefore when horsemen come to Ennirness in a great and horrible frost, before they turn in to their lodging, they first ride into this river to wash their horses and to thaw the pipes and shockles (icicles) of ice frozen upon them."

A vivid picture, which we will meet again when we come to Captain Burt. Leslie has firmly identified the loch that never freezes as Loch Ness. But let's go back to Boece for a moment and see what he says about the town itself. "In the mouth of Nes stands the town of Innernes, where at one time there was great plenty and taking of herring; however they have now vanished, for offence that is made against some saint. Truth is, when any avaricious and unhappy men fight for the fish that God sends by His infinite goodness for the sustentation of the people and foul the sea by their blood, for many years after no fish swim in that place. Beside Lochnes, which is 24 miles of length, and 12 of breadth, are many wild horses."

Twelve miles broad? Had Boece ever *been* to Loch Ness? Let's see what the discreet Bishop Leslie does to this passage. "At the mouth of the Ness," he says, "is a town of no small reputation named Ennirness, where in former times there was a great taking and a shoal of herring, of which benefit we have now for a long time been deprived, for which no man can imagine any cause except the cause aforesaid, and this is commonly thought. In this town is the King's castle both large and strong."

So Leslie avoids the issue of how broad the Loch is, but it is taken up with a vengeance by Dr Johnson, who travelled its entire length in 1773. "Lough Ness is about twenty-four miles long, and from one mile to two miles broad," says Johnson. "It is remarkable that Boethius, in his description of Scotland, gives it twelve miles of breadth. When historians or geographers exhibit false accounts of places far distant, they may be forgiven, because they can tell but what they are told; and that their accounts exceed the truth may be justly supposed, because most men exaggerate to others, if not to themselves: but Boethius lived at no great distance; if he never saw the lake, he must have been very incurious, and if he had seen it, his veracity yielded to very slight temptations."

Let's go back now, as promised, to Captain Burt, the Englishman who got to know Inverness and district so well in the years around 1725. Not only does he echo Leslie's words, he also ventures an explanation for the phenomenon. He says: "The River Ness, like the lake from whence it comes, never freezes, from the great quantity of sulphur with which it is impregnated; but, on the contrary, will dissolve the icicles, contracted from other waters, at the horses' heels, in a very short space of time."

So we have entered the Age of Reason, but the reasons turn out to differ. It emerges from the account of the Welsh traveller Thomas Pennant, who visited the area in 1769, that Burt has combined two separate issues: (1) the Loch never freezes; (2) its water is believed to have medicinal properties.

Pennant attributed the Loch's failure to freeze to its depth. "Loch-Ness is twenty-two miles in length," he reports; "the breadth from one to two miles, except near Castle Urquhart, where it swells out to three. The depth is very great; opposite to the rock called the Horse-shoe, near the West end, it has been found to be 140 fathoms . . . This lake, by reason of its great depth, never freezes, and during cold weather a violent steam rises from it as from a furnace."

The steam that rises from the loch — and the river — in cold weather certainly serves to draw attention to the whole phenomenon. In his 'Highways and Byways in the Central Highlands', for example, the late Seton Gordon remarked of the river that "its waters never freeze, even at the margins, and on a morning of hard frost it is interesting to see the majestic Ness flowing seaward, with waters steaming like those of a hot spring in Iceland". But back to Pennant.

"Ice brought from other parts, and put into Loch-Ness, instantly thaws; but no water freezes sooner than that of the lake when brought into a house. Its water is esteemed very salubrious; so that people come or send thirty miles for it: old Lord Lovat in particular made constant use of it. But it is certain, whether it be owing to the water, or to the air of that neighborhood, that for seven years the garrison of Fort Augustus had not lost a single man."

Modern soundings of the depth of Loch Ness (not unconnected with the Monster) vindicate Pennant's figure. The depth given in the notes to the Penguin edition of Johnson's 'Journey' is 700 feet, or 117 fathoms; more recent studies offer figures closer to 1,000 feet (167 fathoms). However, Johnson was sceptical. "Loch Ness, though not twelve miles broad, is a very remarkable diffusion of water without islands. It fills a large hollow between two ridges of high rocks, being supplied partly by the torrents which fall into it on either side, and partly, as is supposed, by springs at the bottom. Its water is remarkably clear and pleasant, and is imagined by the natives to be medicinal. We were told, that it is in some places a hundred and forty fathom deep, a profundity scarcely credible, and which probably those that relate it have never sounded."

In any case, Johnson did not believe that the depth of the loch had anything to do with it. He wrote: "It was said at Fort Augustus, that Lough Ness is open in the hardest winters, though a lake not far from it is covered with ice. In discussing these exceptions from the course of nature, the first question is, whether the fact be justly stated. That which is strange is delightful, and a pleasing error is not willingly detected. Accuracy of narration is not very common, and there are few so rigidly philosophical, as not to represent as perpetual, what is only frequent, or as constant, what is really casual. If it be true that Lough Ness never freezes, it is either sheltered by its high banks from the cold blasts, and exposed only to those winds which have more power to agitate than congeal; or it is kept in perpetual motion by the rush of streams from the rocks that inclose it. Its profundity, though it should be such as is represented, can have little part in this exemption; for though deep wells are not frozen, because their water is secluded from the external air, yet where a wide surface is exposed to the full influence of a freezing atmosphere, I know not why the depth should keep it open. Natural philosophy is now one of the favourite studies of the Scottish nation, and Lough Ness well deserves to be diligently examined."

Well, so it has been, but for a reason that would have astounded the good doctor, who does not make mention of so much as a water-horse from start to finish of the 'Journey'. The reasons he suggests for the Loch not freezing seem pretty good to me, and I will finish with a snatch of a poem by the late Donald Grant from Skye which nicely reflects Johnson's picture of high banks that shelter the loch from the cold blasts, of south-westerlies which have more power to agitate than congeal, and of rushing streams which keep the water in perpetual motion.

*Bu chiuin Loch Nis ré iomadh linn
 Gun ghoil no gàirich thonn,
 Bha neart nam beann ga dìon bho stoirm,
 Cha b' ionann 's cuan le greann;
 A dh'ainneoin sin bu tric a' ghaoth
 A' greasad nuas gach gleann
 A mhilleadh sgàthan réidh an uisg'
 Le cuairteig nach bu ghann.*

(Loch Ness was calm for many an age / Without churning or roaring of waves, / The mountains served as a shield from storm, / Avoiding the ocean's rage; / Nevertheless the bustling wind / Often hurried down each glen / To break that surface as smooth as glass / Into eddies from shore to shore.)

*Cha b' ainneamh breac a' leum le plub
 Air feasgar ciuìn an àird,
 Cha b' ainneamh eala bhàn le céil'
 Bho thaobh gu taobh a' snàmh;
 Cha b' ainneamh fear an geòla chaoil
 A' sìneadh air dà ràmh,
 Cha b' ainneamh eadhan bàt' na smùid'
 Sna làithean seo a chàidh.*

(Not infrequent the trout that leapt on high / In the evening calm with a plop, / Not infrequent the white-downed swan with her mate / Swimming across the loch; / Not infrequent the man in a slender boat / Pulling upon two oars, / Not even infrequent the steam-powered ship / In days not so long ago.)

*Bha uair nach robh ach sin san loch
Cho fads a b' fhiosrach leò,
Cha robh ri fhaotainn air Loch Nis
Ach sàmhchair mar bu nòs;
Ach thàinig beothach mòr ro threun
'S na fìr seo air a thòir —
An t-Ollamh Caol, an t-Uasal Maol
'S an Dotair Mac Iain Ghròt.*

(Once that was all there was in the loch / As far as the people knew, / All that there was to be found on Loch Ness / Was peace and quiet all day through; / But there came a great and valiant beast / With these men in hot pursuit — / Professor Thin, the Hon. Mr Bald / And Dr McJohn o' Groats.)

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