

## Nessie: water-horse, *Cirean Cròin* and loch spirit

### The Quern-Dust Calendar: Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN 1933 the world learned that a creature variously described as a ‘water kelpie’ and a fearsome-looking monster’ had been seen at Loch Ness.

Loch Ness had been named now and again by writers on Highland subjects as a haunt of the water-horse, as indeed had Loch Lomond and almost every other major Highland loch. But as a large, deep, navigable stretch of water, it is the very antithesis of the habitat of either *each uisge* or kelpie.

The *each uisge* of Highland tradition comes out from beyond the reeds and water-lilies of shallow upland lochans to wheedle young women and children into the otherworld, sometimes helping men with their ploughing before turning nasty. As a seducer of young women, it changes shape into a handsome young man. When abducting children, it is an affectionate Highland pony whose back gets longer and longer as more and more children climb aboard.

The ‘kelpie’ of Lowland tradition probably derives from a Pictish or Strathclyde-British word meaning, again, ‘water-horse’. It lives in great tumbling rivers, plagues millers, drowns people in the dark, and is never friendly.

In terms of folklore, it seems to me that the Loch Ness Monster is actually an amalgamation of three strands of belief — the *each uisge*, the sea-serpent and the spirit of the loch. By sea-serpent I mean the *Cirean Cròin* or ‘Hell’s Crest’ which was the subject of my last article, ‘The Biggest Animal in the World’. That leaves the *each uisge* and the spirit of the loch.

One feature of the *each uisge* that applies to ‘Nessie’ is the long neck. The poet Kenneth MacKenzie, who came from Cantray near Inverness, spoke in 1792 of *amhaich fhad’ an eich uisge*, ‘the long neck of the water horse’. But there’s also the body which elongates itself. And an alleged sighting of a camel-like creature by children at the edge of Loch Ness in 1919 (described in Constance Whyte’s book ‘More than a Legend: The Story of the Loch Ness Monster’ of 1957) involves another motif from the ‘water-horse and children’ story, namely, that the children’s fate is the consequence of playing outdoors on the Sabbath. “The parents realised from the state [the children] were in that this was no cock-and-bull story and scolded the youngsters, telling them that ‘Old Nick was after them for gathering nuts on the Sabbath’.”

It was a report in the ‘Inverness Courier’ of 2 May 1933 by Alex Campbell — a man steeped in Gaelic tradition who happened to be the Loch Ness water-bailiff and the paper’s Fort Augustus correspondent — that launched the Loch Ness Monster legend, provoking around 400 recorded sightings to date. And he begins with the *each uisge*. “Loch Ness has for generations been credited with being the home of a fearsome-looking monster, but, somehow or other, the ‘water-kelpie’, as this legendary creature is called, has always been regarded as a myth, if not a joke,” he writes.

“Now, however, comes the news that the beast has been seen once more, for, on Friday of last week, a well-known business man, who lives near Inverness, and his wife (a University graduate), when motoring along the north shore of the loch, not far from Abriachan Pier, were startled to see a tremendous upheaval on the loch, which, previously, had been as calm as the proverbial mill-pond. The lady was the first to notice the disturbance, which occurred fully three-quarters of a mile from the shore, and it was her sudden cries to stop that drew her husband’s attention to the water. There, the creature disported itself, rolling and plunging for fully a minute, its body resembling that of a whale, and the water cascading and churning like a simmering cauldron. Soon, however, it disappeared in a boiling mass of foam.”

Subsequent witnesses frequently described the Monster’s head as ‘horse-like’, and an account by Mrs Marjory Moir, Inverness, in Tim Dinsdale’s book ‘Loch Ness Monster’ provides a particularly clear line of transmission from legend to sighting. Her father as a boy, growing up on a farm high on the hills above Loch Ness, was often frightened by servants who said that the water kelpie would get him; as a small child she herself was frightened by the noise of the river rushing over the boulders at the Islands in Inverness and the ‘quick flashing lights on it’, which to her were a water horse; and finally in 1936 she saw the monster in the Loch — “three humps, head and neck . . . my ‘Water Horse’ in truth at last”.

Mrs Moir drew a picture of the creature she had seen. It is by no means horse-like, but fits the ‘Nessie’ stereotype. And the *each-uisge* went on to become an important point of terminological reference, but little more. Whyte describes in one anecdote how ‘the head and long neck of the Water Horse reared high, as if seeking out the disturber of the night’. Another writer, F W Holiday — the very first line of whose book, ‘The Great Orm of Loch Ness’ of 1968, is a water-horse quote from Sir Walter Scott — described the sighting by a local man, John Cameron, of ‘a maned water-horse or Orm’, and pointed out that ‘the water-horse is frighteningly real to people living today in Scotland’s Great Glen’. A third, Dinsdale, simply named his boat ‘Water Horse’ and from it his third book ‘Project Water Horse’ (1975).

Willie Macdonald, keeper of the lighthouse at the northern end of the loch, was asked in 1939 if he had ever seen the Monster. “I have seen no monster in Loch Ness,” he replied, “but I have more than once seen the Water Horse.” Compared to the *each uisge*, then, what I am calling ‘the spirit of the loch’ is a pretty nebulous concept. It appears to have an ancestor in the creature famously met by Calum Cille in the River Ness (according to Adomnán’s 7th-century Life of the saint), and to have cousins in a’ *Mhòrag* of Loch Morar and an *t-Seileag* of Loch Shiel. Its own name is an *Niseag*, hence ‘Nessie’.

The principal evidence I have for these creatures is a diary kept by Dom Cyril Dieckhoff OSB, Fort Augustus, recording a pastoral visit to Moidart from December 1933 to February 1934, and published as an appendix to Whyte’s book. Fr Dieckhoff’s interest was clearly provoked by Campbell’s report in the

'Courier' and the many subsequent sightings in summer 1933. He asked the Gaelic-speaking people of the district about the creatures, and received replies which confirmed their names and appearance. He tells us that 'the people round there speak of the Loch Shiel, Loch Ness, Loch Morar monsters as *an Seileag*, *an Niseag*, and *Morag* respectively'.

Ann Macdonald, Mingarry, told him that when Lord Howard died in 1926 her brother Ronald, Lord Howard's gamekeeper, saw the *Seileag* coming out of the water at the *Rubha Gainmheach* or Sandy Point on Loch Shiel between 3 and 4 p.m. It was bigger, she said, than the steamship 'Clanranald' which plied the loch. Dieckhoff noted, in Gaelic: "Very long neck; broad head, and big mouth. The creature (*beathach*) had 7 'sails' (*siùil*); biggest 'sails' on the highest ridge (*druim*); smaller sails on the neck and tail. Other times it had 3 ridges (*drumanan*); and the middle one was the highest."

He got a comparable account of a sighting in 1905, seemingly from Ewan Macintosh, gamekeeper on Mrs Cameron-Head's estate of Inverailort. "John saw 3 ridges (*drumanan*) and did not know what it was. Loch Shiel up Garstanvorran, i.e. by Loch Shiel, opposite Gasgan. There was no head to be seen and there was water between each hump (*crot*). They were looking at it with a telescope." The man in question was nicknamed *Iain Crotach*, 'Humpy John', presumably from this incident.

Dieckhoff was also told of a woman at Gasgan who had seen the *Seileag* and said: "She had 3 lumps (*cnaip*); it was going very fast." There was also a sighting of *béist Loch Seile* (the beast of Loch Sheil) near Dalilea. Mr MacKellaig of the Glenfinnan Hotel had heard that 'the monster came on land occasionally', and that his uncle was once giving two tinker women a lift in his boat when he saw the *Seileag*. He raised his gun to shoot it but the women protested. "Do not interfere with it, it has not done you any harm." One of these sightings was in 1874.

Finally, Dieckhoff was told that a similar creature was observed in the open sea near Smerisary in 1932, and had also been seen in Loch nan Uamh.

Pre-1933 evidence for a *Mhórag* seems to be less substantial. According to Dinsdale, John MacVarish, a Morar man who saw a head and neck in Loch Morar in 1968 and three humps in 1969, remarked that 'he had known of the existence of these creatures since he was a child'. An anonymous Morar man wrote to Constance Whyte in 1955: "Some of the old people of Morar say that there used to be a creature seen on Loch Morar when a Macdonell or Gillies died, they called it *Vorag*, one of the last McDonells of Brinogary died three weeks after we had seen it so there is something there."

This links with the 1926 sighting of *an t-Seileag*, which was regarded as an omen of the death of Lord Howard, and helps us understand the nature of the 'spirit of the loch': a monster in the literal sense of the term — 'evil omen', from Latin *monere* 'to warn' — visible to those afflicted with the second sight. Such beasts are not water-horses but, possessing no generic name, have begun to be confused with them. A good example of this confusion is a statement by Francis Cameron-Head, quoted by Whyte: "I have been told by two eye-witnesses (Ronald MacLeod and Sandy MacKellar) now deceased, of the Loch Shiel *Each Uisge*, and Sir Theodore Brinkman told me of his seeing a similar creature in Loch Morar. Both he and Ronald MacLeod described the 'upturned boat' appearance, and the *Each Uisge* of Loch Morar was seen in 1946 or 1947 by the whole of the *Comunn na h-oigridh* camp children from Inverailort."

If we leave aside Calum Cille's river monster, *an Niseag* is the least well authenticated of the three 'loch spirits'. Crucially, Alexander Macdonald's definitive study 'Story and Song from Loch Ness-side' (1914) makes no reference whatever to such a creature. Literature on the Loch Ness Monster since 1933 refers variously to 'leviathans' disturbed by the making of Wade's roads, to 'a cross between a horse and a camel with its mouth in its throat' described to one Patrick Rose in 1771 as having recently been seen in Loch Ness, and to nineteenth-century traditions of 'a strange beast in Loch Ness'.

Such literature has to be put through a strainer to separate fact from fiction. The book that does this best is Ronald Binns' unfortunately-named 'The Loch Ness Mystery Solved' of 1983, and Binns shows that these three references are probably spurious. Yet what is not in doubt is that there is a long-standing belief in the district that there is 'something in the loch'. As Calum Maclean, Sorley's folklorist brother, wrote in 'The Highlands' in 1959, "Local opinion supports the belief that the monster is really there and that it has been there for a very long time."

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