

The Big Beast of Loch Awe

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I HAVE had quite a bit to say in recent articles about loch spirits whose appearance in monstrous form was believed to presage the death of the loch's temporal guardian. By this token the beast encountered in the River Ness by Calum Cille would have had some spiritual connection with the saint's rival, King Brudei, and its successor, the creature whose name and fame has survived into the late twentieth century as the Loch Ness Monster, may well have been the spiritual doppelgänger of some such local grandee as Fraser of Lovat or Grant of Glenmoriston.

Traditions about such beasts seem to have survived better in the north than in the south. For example, in Elizabeth Campbell's book 'The Search for Morag' there's a map captioned "Map of the Highlands showing freshwater lochs from which sightings on the Loch Ness pattern have been reported", and the lochs marked on it are Ness, Morar, Oich, Canisp, Assynt, Arkaig, Shiel, Lochy and Quoich — nothing at all south of the Great Glen. But that doesn't mean that we can't look for older traditions south of there, or indeed for revealing names anywhere. Are there any traditions of a creature called Iùbhag in Loch Maree (Loch Ewe), for example, or Tathag in Loch Tay, or Obhag in Loch Awe, to name three of the biggest freshwater lochs in the Highlands?

This brings me to Hector Boece. For a distinguished Principal of Aberdeen University Boece was a credulous man, but then he lived in a credulous age — 1465 to 1536, to be exact. In 1527 he published a Latin 'History of Scotland' which is full of surprising things, his aim being to popularise his subject by presenting it in the most striking and attractive fashion possible. In 1536, the year of Boece's death, John Bellenden published a splendid Scots translation of his work, and it is from this that I take the following account, in a version published in P Hume Brown's 'Scotland before 1700 from Contemporary Documents'.

"It wes said be Schir Duncane Campbell to us, that out of Garloll, ane loch of Argyle, the yeir of God M.DX yeris, come ane terrible beist, als mekil as ane grewhound, futit lik ane ganar, and straik down gret treis with the dint of hir tail; and slew thre men quhilkis wer at thair hountis with thre straikis of hir tail: and wer not the remanent huntaris clam up in strang aikis, thay had bene all slane in the samin maner. Eftir the slauchter of thir men, scho fled speidlie to the loch. Sindry prudent men belevit gret trubill to follow in Scotland, be appering of this beist; for scho was sene afore, and ay trubil following thairefter."

I will try to put this into English before commenting on it. "It was said by Sir Duncan Campbell to us, that out of Gareloch, a loch of Argyll, the year of God 1510, came a terrible beast, as big as a greyhound, with feet like a gander, which struck down great trees with the thump of her tail, and slew three men who were hunting with three strokes of her tail; and if the remaining hunters had not climbed up into strong oaks, they would all have been slain in the same manner. After the slaughter of these men she fled speedily to the loch. Various wise men believed that great trouble would follow in Scotland, after the appearance of this beast; for she was seen before, always with trouble following thereafter."

Let's have a look at this then, and first "Garloll". Hume Brown understood this to be the Gareloch, and I have to say that I agree with him. Speakers of medieval Scots appear not to have been as comfortable with words and names ending in 'ch' as we are today, and tended to make 'w' or 'll' out of it. Much as I would like 'Garloll' to be a freshwater loch in Argyll, then, it is a saltwater loch in the neighbouring district of Lennox. My own hunch is that Sir Duncan actually said Lochawe (or, as Boece spells it, Lochquho), but that Boece, being ignorant of the location of the Gareloch, got the two lochs mixed up.

Next, one feels distinctly underwhelmed by the size of the beast: 'as big as a greyhound'. I can't really explain that one, except to say that it may allow it to be explained as a real animal rather than a mythical one. Clearly it is no water-horse or water-bull, otherwise it would have been described in terms of one of those creatures. It has webbed feet like a gander and a huge tail with which it knocks down trees and kills men.

Finally, its appearance is believed to presage disaster: not, according to Boece, the death of the loch's spiritual guardian, but 'great trouble in Scotland'. Given that he says that the beast appeared in 1510, it is very tempting to assume that its appearance was taken as a warning of the disastrous battle of Flodden, fought on 9 September 1513. It is curious that he does not say so. In fact, if the creature's appearance was a warning of Flodden, then it was equally a warning of the death of the loch's most probable spiritual guardian, for Archibald, Earl of Argyll, Chancellor of Scotland, was killed in the battle.

All in all the story has become very garbled, but it may be that, thanks to Archibald's prominence in the realm, a local legend has been turned by Boece into a national one: had Simon Fraser of Lovat been Chancellor of Scotland, the appearance of the Loch Ness Monster would have presaged 'great trouble in Scotland' in the same way. It makes sense.

It is difficult to take the historical implications further, so let's return to the zoological ones. In his book 'Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland' the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell, minister of Tیره, spoke of *Beathach Mór Loch Obha*, 'the Big Beast of Lochawe'. It had twelve legs, he said, and was to be heard in winter-time breaking the ice. He adds: "Some say it was like a horse, others, like a large eel."

I don't know of any other specific reference to this beast. An earlier book, John Graham Dalyell's 'Darker Superstitions of Scotland' of 1834, says that 'the water bull is still believed to reside in Loch Awe and Loch Rannoch, nor are witnesses wanting to give testimony to the fact'. I suppose what we can take from this is that Loch Awe is one of those places of which people said, "There is something in the loch."

Given its relatively modest size and troublesome reputation, Boece's monster is probably best compared to the King Otter, *Rìgh nan Dòbhran*, which, according to John Gregorson Campbell, 'goes at the head of

every band of seven, some say nine, otters, and is never killed without the death of a man, woman, or dog'. This is the doppelgänger again. The monster appears, its human 'twin' dies; the monster is killed, its human (or canine) 'twin' still dies.

The otter is in fact a creature whose activities have been taken very seriously indeed by those who have sought rational explanations for Nessie and her humps. It is noticeable that the humps are also a feature of what appear to be genuine traditional descriptions of other loch spirits, such as that of Loch Shiel. Campbell's description of the King Otter and his band provide a clue: it may be that the graceful movement of these creatures swimming in line through choppy water, led by the 'King' with his head held high, could indeed resemble a leviathan with seven or nine humps. And it is easy to see how such an extraordinary sight could be believed to signify something important in the affairs of man.

Mention of the beast of Lochawe, which Campbell said was to be heard in winter-time breaking the ice, and which Dalryell described as a water bull, brings me to a final point. Accounts of a monster rumoured to inhabit *Loch na Béiste*, 'the Monster's Loch' on Greenstone Point in Gairloch, say that it 'resembled in appearance a good-sized boat with the keel turned up', and name it variously as an *each-uisge* ('water-horse'), a water-cow, and a *tarbh-oire* — the last-named term being used by the celebrated Osgood Mackenzie in his book 'A Hundred Years in the Highlands'. What is a *tarbh-oire*?

Well, *tarbh* is a bull, certainly, but the other word is hard to nail down. In his dictionary Dwelly gives *tarbh-boidhre*, on the authority of Alexander Carmichael, as 'monster, demon', and adds, rather surprisingly: "God capable of changing himself into many forms — a man, a horse, a bull, &c., with supernatural powers." He gives *tarbh-aoidhre*, on the authority of Donald MacKenzie, Killimster, Wick, as 'Northern counties for *tarbh-boidhre*.' This is our link with *tarbh-oire*, which is clearly the same word.

Turning next to Alexander Carmichael's own work 'Carmina Gadelica', volume 2, we find confirmation of Dwelly's entry: "*Tarbh boidhre*, a monster, a demon, a god capable of changing himself into many forms — a man, a bull, a horse, or other animal with supernatural powers." But under *caim* we also find the following story, a variant of the common 'water-horse and woman' tale. Briefly, a girl tending her father's flocks meets a handsome stranger on the hillside. He asks her to lift some sheep droppings, and they become 'balls of glittering gold, shining and sparkling in the bright light of the sun, like the fireflies of night'. This is only a small part of what I can do for you, says the man, and he asks her to meet him again. She thinks she can see hooves on him instead of feet and fragments of water-reeds in his hair, which means that he may be the *each-uisge* of whom she has been warned, but she is afraid to say no, and agrees to meet him again.

When she gets home she tells her mother, her mother tells her father, and her father tells the clergyman. It is the devil with his lures, says the clergyman, and he and her father go with her that evening to where she is to meet the stranger, bringing a Bible. They draw a *caim* or sacred circle on the ground and stand inside it. The stranger appears, but try as he might he cannot get into the *caim* although he tries all night until the big cock crows, upon which he flees, 'flames of forkling fire more deadly than the fangs of the serpent issuing from his ears, eyes, nostrils, and heels, and showing his form anew'.

The girl, trembling like a leaf, looks in her hand. The pellets of glittering gold have turned back into filth. In disgust she throws them away, and the clergyman says: *Se 'n tarbh baoidhre bh' ann, a ghràidh mo chridhe, agus caim losa mhic Mhoire mhìn bhith eadar sinne agus e agus gach gnìomh gràineil agus gach bàir duaichnidh*. Which Carmichael translates: "It was the bull of lust, thou love of my heart, and may the sanctuary of Jesus the Son of the gentle Mary be between us and him and each unsightly thing and unseemly strife."

'The bull of lust'? This I think is Carmichael's imagination. The clergyman's term is *tarbh baoidhre*, but personally I think that the 'northern counties' version of the word is the original one, because *eighre* or *oighre* would make sense while *baoidhre* is no word at all. *Eighre* means 'ice', which would make an *tarbh eighre* the 'ice bull', like the great beast of Loch Awe. *Oighre* means 'heir', which would make an *tarbh oighre* the creature whose appearance marks the death of the chief and the accession of his heir.