

Kelpie the Lowland water-horse

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

WHAT'S the difference between a water-horse and a kelpie? The term 'water-horse' reflects the *each uisge* of Gaelic sources, while 'kelpie' and 'water-kelpie' reflect non-Gaelic ones. Yes, it matters, because the identity of the Highland creature is quite different from that of the Lowland one. The trouble is that many commentators on folklore, without meaning any harm, have used 'kelpie' as a translation of *each uisge*. Less frequently, but quite justifiably (as I will show), 'water-horse' has sometimes been used of the Lowland creature.

Fortunately, some commentators have taken pains to draw a distinction. One very reliable one, the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell of Tiree, says in his 'Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands' of 1900: "The Kelpie that swells torrents and devours women and children has no representative in Gaelic superstition. Some writers speak as if the Water-horse were to be identified with it, but the two animals are distinctly separate. The Water-horse haunts lochs, the Kelpie streams and torrents. The former is never accused of swelling torrents any more than of causing any other natural phenomenon."

The Rev. Alexander Stewart ('Nether Lochaber') takes this a stage further in his 'Twixt Ben Nevis and Glencoe' of 1885. Pointing out that the Gael has his own spirit of mountain streams and torrents, the *uruiscg*, and admitting that there is nothing particularly equine about the *uruiscg*, he uses 'kelpy' for both Lowland kelpie and Highland *uruiscg*, and 'water-horse' for *each uisge*. Beneath his inflated style lies accurate knowledge of custom and belief. "The reader must know that the *Water Kelpy* of the south of Scotland is also a prominent character in Highland superstition," he says. "The kelpy, or *uirisg*, is generally represented as of the male sex; of a form rude, indeed, and grotesque, but, upon the whole, of human shape; cross and ill-tempered, delighting in forboding and witnessing calamity, but to be propitiated and readily attached to such as have the courage to treat him with confidence and kindness.

"In the south the kelpy is an inhabitant indifferently of rivers and lakes, while in the Highlands he is almost always associated with solitary rivers, where they wind their murmuring way through wild and uninhabited glens, or with those deep, dark, eddying cauldron pools that mountain torrents so frequently scoop out for themselves as they plunge and roar adown the steep in their mad and headlong gallop to the sea. Thus the kelpy of the south and the *uirisg* of the north are, upon the whole, identical; half human, half demoniac, to be shunned and avoided if possible; but, if accidentally encountered, to be conciliated and caressed, never to be openly challenged or defied.

"But while the waters of the south can only boast of their kelpy, those of the north are the habitation not only of the *uirisg*, but of the water-horse and water-bull (*An t'Each Uisge, 'san Tarbh Uisge*) as well. These last are painted on that tablet of the popular mind consecrated to superstition, as, upon the whole, of the same shape and form as the more kindly quadrupeds after whom they have been named, but larger, fiercer, and with an amount of 'devilment' and cunning about them of which the latter fortunately manifest no trace. They are always fat and sleek, and so full of strength, and spirit, and life, that the neighing of the one and the bellowing of the other frequently awake the mountain echoes to their inmost recesses for miles and miles around.

"The habitation of the water-horse and water-bull is not the sluggish river or mountain torrent pool, which belong of right to the *uirisg* only, but the solitary inland lakes and dark mountain tarns rarely seen by other eyes than those of the red deer in his many wanderings, and of the eagle, as, on the lookout for prey, he gracefully circles round on tireless wings as far above the clouds as the clouds are above the mountain tops."

A less reliable as well as less elegant commentator, Isabel Cameron, in her 'Highland Chapbook' of 1928, draws some useful-sounding contrasts which must be carefully tested against the evidence. (She thinks of Highlands and Lowlands as west and east, while Stewart called them north and south, but we will just have to take that in our stride.) The west coast 'kelpie', she claims, is always dark in colour, either brown or black; the east coast one is golden or yellow, is often found in woods and forests, refuses to let himself be ridden or yoked to a plough, is never friendly, and does not change his shape.

An examination of the material provided in J M McPherson's 'Primitive Beliefs in the North-East of Scotland' (1929) demonstrates some of the difficulties of verifying this. For one thing, water-horses are frequently referred to there as kelpies. For another, the water-horse's home is a loch, the kelpie's a river — but not all stories mention the creature's habitat. For another, the Lowland Scots creature is a kelpie and the Gaelic one a water-horse, but areas such as Deeside, Upper Banffshire and Strathspey clearly draw on both traditions; in these cases other criteria must be applied, such as a connection with milling, a clear sign of Lowland origin. By this token a Braemar kelpie who lives by a mill is clearly a kelpie, and the fact that he takes human form and goes courting a woman would seem to suggest that two of Cameron's criteria ('is never friendly, and does not change his shape') are wrong — either that, or we must accept the existence of a distinct 'east Highland' creature which partakes of some of the characteristics of both Lowland kelpie and Highland water-horse.

Another of Cameron's criteria ('is often found in woods and forests') is well dented by a story from Badenoch, to my mind a thoroughly Highland area, in which a 'water kelpie' (i.e. water-horse) appears, harnessed for pulling logs, in a forest where a man is felling a tree for firewood. Finally two other criteria ('the east coast one is golden or yellow' and 'refuses to let himself be ridden or yoked to a plough') appear to be disposed of by the 'Scottish National Dictionary' definition of kelpie/kelby: "A water demon haunting rivers and fords, gen[erally] in the form of a black (or white) horse, which lured unwary human beings to death by drowning, but which might also be harnessed to drive a mill or perform other work."

The same dictionary also shows that the first appearance of the term is surprisingly late. The burgh records of Kirkcudbright refer in 1674 to 'umquhill John Lownes halfe skair [share] at the East of Kilpie hoall', and again to 'Kelpiehooll'. Its next recorded appearance is in the poem by William Collins usually referred to as 'An Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands of Scotland, considered as the Subject of Poetry' of 1749, in which a drowned mariner appears before his widow and says:

*Pursue, dear wife, thy daily toils pursue
At dawn or dusk, industrious as before;
Nor e'er of me one hapless thought renew,
While I lie welt'ring on the ozier'd shore,
Drown'd by the KAELPIE'S wrath, nor e'er shall aid thee more!*

The poem was apparently inspired by the republication in that year of Martin Martin's 'A Late Voyage to St Kilda' of 1698, but where Collins, an Englishman, got the word is not known. It may have been from his friend John Home. Anyway, it went on to be used by Burns and Scott, thus consolidating its entry into standard English. And thanks to being applied to a collie brought to Australia about 1870, it became a generic term in that country for a sheepdog.

Dictionaries trace it, with varying degrees of diffidence, from Gaelic *cailpeach*, *colp(th)a(ch)*, a bullock, heifer, colt. I just don't see how this can be right. The kelpie's equine nature is his distinguishing characteristic, while *cailpeach* etc., by contrast, is primarily a yearling heifer or bullock. 'Colt' and 'full-grown animal, whether cow or horse' are late and secondary developments. Nor is there any evidence whatever on the Gaelic side for the application of *cailpeach* etc. to a water-horse or any other mythical beast.

The derivation which I would propose is from P-Celtic (i.e. Strathclyde British and/or Pictish) *ceffyl-pol* 'river-horse'. If such a term existed, it would have become *ceffyl-pow*, then *cel-pow*, and finally *kelpie*. These are all known elements. *Ceffyl*, on record from the 13th century as a 'nag' or 'farm-horse', replaced *march* as the generic term for a horse in modern Welsh, and supplied the term *ceffyl dwr* used in Wales for the water-horse. *Cel*, on record from South Wales and Cardiganshire from 1732-3, is its abbreviated form. *Pol* is a P-Celtic word for 'stream, flowing water' which has survived as modern Scots *pow*, which often now refers to a sluggish stream. And the reduction of a final syllable to *-ie*, *William* becoming *Willie* for example, is particularly common in former Pictland.

So we can see 'kelpie' as a mere translation of Gaelic *each-uisge* (or, of course, *vice versa*). But while he owes the form of his name to Scotland's aboriginal inhabitants, I suspect that he owes something of his personality to all the peoples of the North Sea littoral: not merely Picts and Britons, but Anglo-Saxons, Norsemen, Gael and even perhaps Norman French and Flemings as well. A preliminary survey suggests that stories about him fall into two main types, just as the 'Scottish National Dictionary' suggests: (a) he may be harnessed to drive a mill or perform other work; (b) he lures unwary human beings to death by drowning.

Here is a typical example of (a), which I take from J M Mackinlay's 'Folklore of Scottish Lochs and Springs' (1893, now reprinted). "An Aberdeenshire farmer went with his own horse to a mill to fetch home some sacks of meal. He left the horse at the door of the mill and went in to bring out the sacks. The beast, finding itself free, started for home. When the farmer reappeared and found the creature gone he was much disconcerted, and uttered the wish that he might get any kind of horse to carry his sacks even though it were a water-kelpy. To his surprise, a water-horse immediately appeared! It quietly allowed itself to be loaded with the meal, and accompanied the farmer to his home. On reaching the house he tied the horse to an old harrow till he should get the sacks taken into the house. When he returned to stable the animal that had done him the good turn, horse and harrow were away, and he heard the beast plunging not far off in a deep pool in the Don."

And from a classic work by a Cromarty man, Donald A Mackenzie's *Scottish Folk-Lore and Folk Life* of 1935, comes an example of (b): "The kelpie resembled the water-horse, but was more associated with rivers than with lochs. It was heard yelling or calling by night like the urisk . . . and, in human form, was untidy and shaggy. Sometimes the kelpie in man shape attacked wayfarers, leaping up behind them as they rode on horses, gripping them in his arms and hurting as well as scaring them. The kelpie's commonest form was that of a young horse which scampered on a river and, striking the water three times with his tail so heavily that each splash sounded as loud as thunder, disappeared in a flash of fire in a deep pool."