

## What does a water-horse look like?

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN my last article I described the Lowland kelpie, which dwells in rivers. Now it's the turn of the Highland water-horse, which dwells in lochs. But how would you know a water-horse if you saw one? What does it look like?

The best overall description is by the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell (1836-91), minister of Tiree, in his book 'Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands'. He says: "Almost every lonely freshwater lake was tenanted by one, sometimes by several, of these animals. In shape and colour it resembled an ordinary horse, and was often mistaken for one. It was seen passing from one lake to another, mixing with the farmers' horses in the adjoining pastures, and waylaid belated travellers who passed near its haunts."

He then describes its habits. "It was highly dangerous to touch or mount it. Those whom it decoyed into doing so were taken away to the loch in which it had its haunt, and there devoured. It was said to make its approaches also in other guises — as a young man, a boy, a ring, and even a tuft of wool (*ribeag clòimhe*); and any woman upon whom it set its mark was certain at last to become its victim. The cow-shackle round its neck, or a cap on its head, completely subdued it, and as long as either of these was kept on it, it could be as safely employed in farm labour as any other horse."

The cow-shackle (*buarach*) and the cap (*srian*, probably) are crucial to the water-horse's identity, so much so that I will leave them aside just now, and come back to them another time. Campbell goes on: "In Skye it was said to have a sharp bill (*gob biorach*), or, as others describe it, a narrow brown slippery snout. Accounts are uniform that it had a long flowing tail and mane. In colour it was sometimes grey, sometimes black, and sometimes black with a white spot on its forehead. This variation arose, some say, from the water horse being of any colour like other horses, and others say from its having the power of changing its colour as well as its shape."

The grey and the black seem to take us back to two of the oldest water-horses on record, the Liath Macha and the Dubh Saingleann which came to Cú Chulainn out of a lake, pulled his chariot heroically as long as he lived, and returned at his death to their watery homes. Campbell concludes: "When it came in the shape of a man, it was detected by its horse-hoofs and by the green water weeds or sand in its hair. It was then very amorous, but the end of those who were unfortunate enough to encounter it was to be taken to the loch and devoured. However much benefit the farmer might at first derive from securing one with the cap or cow-shackle he was ultimately involved by it in ruinous loss."

When in the form of a man, then, it may be 'detected by its horse-hoofs'. The most natural deduction from this is that it equally has horse-hooves when in the form of a horse, and of course this is what we would expect of the water-horse on land. An aquatic animal, however, might be expected to have limbs of a different kind, and I can't help suspecting that we should visualise it as having something between the hooves of a horse and the flippers of a dolphin or of a seal. Consider the following, told by Alexander MacDonald in his 'Story and Song from Loch Ness-Side': "It was related that once a certain workman was wearily making his way home after the day's labour; and, a considerable distance still from his house, the wish to get a lift on horseback took possession of him. Just then a beautiful black horse was noticed by him, feeding contentedly by the roadside. Why should he not mount, and have an easy journey home?"

"This he made up his mind to do; but just when about to take the leap, he noticed the horse coming towards him, very invitingly, and bending its back as if actually desirous to get the man there. This made our wayfarer suspicious, and, on closer examination, he observed that the animal's hide seemed polished, and that its hoofs were cloven! He blessed himself in the name of the Holy Trinity, and the horse disappeared into a loch at hand."

Here the water-horse is a beautiful black creature with polished hide and cloven hooves. The polished hide is to be expected in an aquatic animal; the cloven hooves suggest to me that its feet are the most metamorphic part of its body. Few sources refer to the size of the animal, so it can be assumed to be similar in size to any Highland pony. It's worth noting, however, that the Faroese water-horse (*nykur*), which is mainly connected with certain inland lakes, not to the open sea which is the haunt of other monsters, is about the size of a dog — that is, not so big as his Norwegian and Icelandic brothers.

There's no doubt at all about the characteristic habitat of the Highland water-horse: a small marshy lake, full of reeds, as in this story told by Campbell of *Loch an Àir* in Tiree (the 'Loch of Slaughter' or, less likely perhaps, 'Loch of Ploughing'). "A man working in the fields in Caolas, in the east end of the island, saw a Water-horse coming from *Loch an Air*, a small marshy lake, full of reeds. He ran off in terror, and left his coat behind. The Water-horse tore the coat into shreds and then made after the man. The dogs came out when it came near the house and drove it away."

Much less frequently encountered is a description of the creature's behaviour or motion in the water. The following account, also by Campbell, relates to Loch Quoich (Inverness-shire) in the mid-nineteenth century, and explicitly describes not a land animal thrashing horizontally through the water with horse's hooves, but a thoroughly aquatic beast gliding up and down, diving, turning sideways and creating a *sgleò* — 'vapour, mist', or as Campbell says, 'film' — in the manner of a dolphin. "Some thirty years ago, a small islet in this lake, of about an half an acre in extent, was tenanted by a strange specimen of the Highland freebooter, named Macphie . . . In his time a Water-horse was quite commonly seen in Loch Cuaich, floating on its side, or as it is called, 'making a film' (*deanadh sgleò*) and 'making a salmon of itself' (*deanadh bradain dheth fhein*), disporting itself and then disappearing."

Elsewhere, under the sub-title 'The Talking Horse at Cru-Loch', Campbell speaks of the creature's essentially spiritual character. "This is a lonely little lake above Ardachyle (*Aird-a-chaoil*, the height of the sound) in the north-east of Mull. A person passing it late at night, on his way home, saw a horse with a saddle on, quietly feeding at the loch side. He went towards it with the intention of riding it home, but in time he observed green-water herbs (*liaranaich*) about its feet and refrained from touching it. He walked on and before long was overtaken by a stranger, who said that unless he (the Water-horse, who was also the speaker) had been friendly and a well-wisher, he would have taken him to the loch. Among other supernatural information it told the man the day of his death."

The water-horse, then, possesses powers of good and evil, of metamorphosis, and of prophecy. Taken together, these are symptomatic of divinity. It has to be conceded that a water-horse can be killed; equally, however, as Hector MacDougall emphasised in an account published in Gaelic in Volume 35 of the transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, in death it is reduced not to flesh but to a more elemental type of matter. When a water-horse was killed, he said, "Nothing would remain but the filmy discharge of something slippery and viscous resembling a jellyfish or a fish's eye (*silteach streamhain de rud sleamhainn tiacte, mar gum biodh muir-tiac no sùil éisg*). In one account of this kind of the killing of a water-horse, when the dust had settled there was nothing to be seen but slivers of sods (*sgonnan phloc*) where the horse had dropped dead under the fatal blow."

Campbell's account, which is placed under the sub-title 'Killing the Raasay Water-Horse', corroborates MacDougall's. He begins by pointing out that 'The Woman's Loch' (*Loch na Mna*) near Dùn Cana, the highest hill in the island, derives its name from having been the scene of the abduction of a woman by the water-horse that haunted it. "The big Smith (*An Gobha Mòr*), who lived in the neighbourhood, resolved to kill the horse, and by his success he earned himself the title of 'Alastair na Béisde' (Alexander of the monster). He built a hut close by, with an opening like the syver of a drain, leading towards the loch. When he got the wind favourable, he killed and roasted a wether-sheep in the hut. The wind blew the savoury smell towards the loch, and the Water-horse, attracted by it, made its way into the hut by the entrance left for it. The smith had his irons ready in the fire, and rushing with them at the Water-horse killed it."

He concludes: "On examination the monster proved to be merely grey turves (*pluic ghlas*), or, as others say, a soft mass (*sgling*) like jelly-fish (*Muir-tiachd*)."

A version of this story had been told in Raasay to James Boswell on 10 September 1773 by Malcolm Macleod of the Macleods of Raasay. Unfortunately Boswell says nothing of the water-horse's appearance after death, but he remarks: "Malcolm shewed me the little hiding-place, and the rows of stones. He did not laugh when he told this story."

A Sutherland legend (written down in English) about how a 'kelpie' was captured at night, tied on the back of a horse, and violently pierced with an awl and a needle to keep her quiet, finishes when the rider reaches the clachan of Inveran. The story is published by John Francis Campbell of Islay in Volume 2 of his 'West Highland Tales'. "Then they came out with lights, but as the light fell upon her she dropt off, and fell to earth like the remains of a fallen star — a small lump of jelly." The collector, J. M., notes: "These jellies are often seen on the moors; dropt stars resembling the medusie on the shore."

Campbell, as editor, remarks: "They are white, do not seem to be attached to the ground, and are always attributed to the stars. They are common on moors, and I do not know what they are."