

All my favourite Knock-and-bull stories

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

A FEW months ago I wrote here about a monster which was said to inhabit *Loch na Béiste*, ‘the Monster’s Loch’ on Rubha na Lic’ Uaine, Greenstone Point in Gairloch. It was said that it ‘resembled in appearance a good-sized boat with the keel turned up’, and it was variously described 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’ of 1921.

I considered the question, what is a *tarbh-oire*? And I came to the conclusion that it must be an ‘ice bull’ (*tarbh eighre*) or an ‘heir’s bull’ (*tarbh oighre*), on the grounds that Loch Awe in Argyll had a great beast that used to be heard breaking the ice, and that many other lochs boasted a creature whose appearance marked the death of the chief and the accession of his heir.

The second idea offers other possibilities. For example, the appearance of an ‘heir’s bull’ at the time of the conception, birth or baptism of a child to the reigning MacKenzie of Gairloch might be regarded as an omen not that the chief was about to die, but that the baby would eventually succeed him. It used to be considered entirely normal to assume that the birth of a great man or woman would be marked by supernatural manifestations, the more weird and wonderful the better. There’s no better time than just before Christmas to make that particular point.

As I tried to show in other articles during the summer, this idea of the spirit of the loch as an omen of human events is what seems to underlie the genuine Gaelic traditions of lake and river monsters such as Nessie. The Loch Ness Monster is a wonderful metaphor for different approaches to life. It was on 2 May 1933 that Alex Campbell, a local man steeped in tradition, reported to the ‘Inverness Courier’ from Fort Augustus that a monster had been seen in the loch, and so launched the whole modern Nessie phenomenon. (By the way, if my memory serves me right, the actor who played him in the Ted Danson movie ‘Loch Ness’ was Ian Bannen, who was killed in a car crash near Loch Ness just the other week.)

What was happening that year as the summer came in? Well, it was four years since the Wall Street Crash had ushered in the Great Depression. Unemployment in the UK had just reached 3 million for the first time ever. In July 1932 the Nazi Party had won a general election in Germany. After six months of street violence Adolf Hitler was made Chancellor on 30 January 1933. On 5 March the Nazis won another election with nearly 50 per cent of the votes. On 23 March the Reichstag gave Hitler the power to rule by decree. And as the first cuckoo sang that year on Loch Ness-side the SA and SS were running amok, destroying all popular opposition to the Nazis while Hitler and his thugs were busy dissolving the Communist, Social Democrat and Nationalist parties.

In hindsight, then, if ever there was a time in human affairs when the subconscious mind might be troubled enough to see an omen of great events spiralling out of control, and to see it as clearly and as repeatedly as Nessie was seen during the years down to 1939 (that is, hundreds of times), well, this was it. The beast that Alex Campbell had reported was a symptom of unease, a ruffling of still waters. But then, Alex Campbell’s mind was a pre-Darwinian one that believed in God and therefore also in the power of spirits, omens and prophecy.

That I can understand. What I find quite difficult to understand is the simple-minded Darwinian reaction of those who have poured into the Loch Ness area ever since with their pseudo-scientific theories about dinosaurs and plankton, clutching in their fist the nets and other junk with which they hope to catch a symbol of the human condition. Because Nessie was, and is, a metaphor for themselves, the outside world that has brought wave upon wave of disaster to the Highlands.

So that is the irony. The Gaelic mind saw an omen of looming disaster; the other sort of mind turned it into a *distraction* from looming disaster, and the hunt for Nessie has been a favourite ever since of editors looking for feel-good stories. At the risk of supplying some, what I want to do in the rest of this article is point out that there are at least two precedents to the hunt for Nessie. One was in Gairloch in the 1840s, the other was in Sleat in 1870.

The Gairloch hunt was for the monster of Loch na Béiste on Greenstone Point. The best account of it that I know is in J H Dixon’s book ‘Gairloch’, which was published in 1886 and reprinted by the Gairloch branch of the Ross and Cromarty Heritage Society in 1974. Apparently ‘Punch’ of the day got wind of it, too, so there is more to be said once its files have been searched.

According to Dixon, the proprietor of the Letterewe Estate, a man called Bankes, was pressed by his tenants about 1840 to get rid of the beast, and when he heard that two Free Church elders had seen it, he agreed to do so. What occurs to me straight away about this is that in the 1840s, as in the 1930s, the people of the West Highlands were facing the end of civilisation as they knew it — clearance had followed clearance, ecclesiastical turmoil led in 1843 to the Disruption and the founding of the Free Church, and three years later they suffered their worst famine since the 1780s.

That was the real reason for the beast’s appearance, I think, but Bankes pressed on regardless, and at least his enterprise provided employment. He had a yacht called the *Iris*, and he set the crew to drain the loch with a horse-powered pump. The pump was placed on the burn that led from the loch into the sea, with pipes drawing the water away, but after two years of work, on and off, the water level had only been reduced by six or seven inches.

The next idea was to send the *Iris* to Broadford for some lime. She came back with fourteen barrels of it. They were dragged up to the loch, as was the dinghy from the *Iris*. Bankes’s ground-officers were afraid to go

out on the loch for fear of the beast, so the dinghy was manned instead by two crew members, James and Allan Mackenzie. They plumbed the loch with the oars, and found that it was less than a fathom deep, except for one hole which went down to two-and-a-half fathoms. Into this hole they poured the fourteen barrels of lime.

Osgood Mackenzie told basically the same story, describing the creature variously as a water-kelpie, an *each-uisge*, a *tarbh-oire* and simply 'The Beast'. "It is needless to say," he concluded, "that the Beast was not discovered, nor has it been further disturbed up to the present time. There are rumours that the Beast was seen in 1884 in another loch on the Greenstone Point. There was one curious fact about this kelpie hunt — viz., that the eccentric English laird who started it was *cam* (one-eyed), the tinker who soldered the pipes together was *cam*, so was the old horse which worked the pumps, and it was altogether such a *gnothach cam* (one-eyed business) that people began to wonder whether, if the Each Uisge were ever captured, it might not prove to be *cam* also."

Mr Bankes had failed to get the joke, clearly seeing himself as a big-game hunter whose kaffirs had been unable to flush out any big game for him to hunt. "So angry was the laird at his failure to capture the kelpie that he was determined to avenge himself on something or someone," wrote Mackenzie. "At last he decided to wreak his vengeance on the unfortunate crofters whose townships were in the vicinity of the loch. Unlike the kelpie they, poor wretches, could not escape him, so he fined them all round a pound a head, which in those days, when money was so scarce, meant a great deal to them."

My evidence for the Sleat incident of 1870 is from a book called 'Somewhere in Scotland' first published in 1935 by Alasdair Alpin MacGregor. I know well that MacGregor is not an author to be relied on, but perhaps if I give his account it will provoke some reader or readers to tell me how much truth there is in it. Even MacGregor was willing to admit that he couldn't hear his informant, John MacRae, very well. MacRae, he said, was living in Glenelg when he interviewed him, and the burn was in spate at the end of his house, making conversation 'quite an arduous undertaking, even when the door was shut'. Nevertheless MacGregor claimed to have taken down the following account verbatim, so here it is, exactly as he published it.

"I was there myself at the loch between Isle Oronsay and Knock," said John MacRae, "when they trawled for the *each-uisge* — for the water-horse like — just in yon loch below the road. It's called Loch nan Dubhrachan. A cattleman and his wife came to cut rashes to thatch the house. They sat down to take a rest, and the man observed a small, black object on the shore of the loch. 'Look!' he said to the wife, 'that will be one of the farmer of Knock's cows washed ashore, and that was drowned in the loch, or maybe one of the sea-cows they would be seeing in olden times.'

"So he went down. As he neared, the beast swam out with his head below water, putting little waves ashore.

"You may be sure the people was terrified. They were certain it was the *each-uisge*. So Lord MacDonald said he would dredge the loch — trawl it like, for the monster. Well, he got all his gillies and gamekeepers out one day with a big net. And they started walking along opposite sides of the loch like, dragging the net after them.

"I saw the thing myself. I was a boy going to school. We got a holiday that day. Well, we were all watching carefully when the net got stuck, and all the gillies got the fear of death on them. So they just dropped the net, and ran back from the loch. I mind the day fine. A while after they commenced again; and after a while the net came away on a sudden. Well, then, they pulled it in like, afraid all the time what would be in the net.

"Is it pike you call them long things?" inquired MacRae, demonstrating an approximate length from the tip of the forefinger of his left hand by placing his right hand sideways on his left arm.

"Pike, I think you call them. Anyway," he concluded, "there was nothing in the net at the finish but some mud and two small pikes."

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