

<https://doi.org/10.18778/2353-6098.3.02>

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Of Monsters, Myths and Marketing: The Case of the Loch Ness Monster

This paper examines the status of the Loch Ness Monster within a diverse body of literature relating to Scotland. Within cryptozoology this creature is considered as a source of investigation, something to be taken seriously as a scientific or quasi-scientific object to be studied and known, particularly in light of its elusive nature. In terms of mythology the creature is bound up with Scottish cultural identifications through references to a rugged wilderness landscape and to iconic, if stereotypical, images of tartanry, bygone castles, and folklore. Both sets of ideas have been used with great effect to generate a diversity of literature: from books and scientific papers that chronicle the sightings and “hunt” for the creature as well the possible case for it being a line of long-surviving plesiosaurs, through to children’s literature that deals with the mythic element that is so often used to appeal to childhood imagination, and on to a plethora of tourist marketing booklets and brochures.

key words: Loch Ness, monster, Scotland, myth, marketing

It has been suggested that creatures such as the Loch Ness Monster provide a liminal space for folkloric beliefs to maintain their presence in the world in a way that is empowering, and that can provide a sense of culture and community. Moreover, it is argued that the presence of such creatures speaks contrary to a modern world that leaves little space for engagement with nature and wonder and that has become over-explored and explained. This resistance is said to go some way to explain the appeal of these cryptid creatures, a way of recapturing wonder and mysticism in the world, and of rallying against culturally accepted bounds and beliefs in rational scientific discourse. This also extends to a globalised world where cultural boundaries are being eroded and where stereotypical and mythic icons serve as a means of preserving notions of heritage, and of exploiting it in the production of literature and tourism. These elements are explored over the course of the paper in arguing that the Loch Ness Monster serves as a paradoxical means of both suspending belief and well as engaging in belief.

Introduction

The press are always interested in a Loch Ness monster story and these seem to pop up every now and again even in the absence of current claimed sightings. These newspaper stories range from more serious pieces on the latest scientific evidence gathering to truly bizarre speculations or instances of “Nessie hunting.” For example, the UK *Daily Mail* on 24 April 2014 reported that Charlie Sheen, the sometimes notorious American actor, was visiting Loch Ness to engage in trying to find the elusive creature, while the UK *Independent* on 12 August 2014 reported that a high level university-led business seminar was being set up on how to exploit the

marketing potential of the monster for the region. Furthermore, the latter story reported that Nessie is worth around £30 million pounds to the local economy and that this figure is constantly rising due to increasing tourist numbers. There is also a burgeoning literature in the area with over sixty titles covering every aspect of the search for the creature, what it might be, speculations about, and deconstructions of photographic evidence, and historical accounts of the sightings as part of mythology and folklore. If we add to this a host of websites dedicated to the monster specifically, as well as such mythical creatures generally, then it would be fair to claim that the Loch Ness monster has attracted, and still continues to attract considerable interest that does not look like it is going to be on the wane any time soon.

Cryptozoology, the pursuit of hidden creatures often regarded as monsters by virtue of their mythical and unnatural hideous or menacing form, has been largely ignored or discounted by mainstream zoology (Newton xvi). The field emerged in 1955 with the publication of Bernard Heuvalmans' book *On the Track of Unknown Animals*. Although he formed the International Society of Cryptozoology in 1982, which indeed for a period between 1982 and 1996 had its own journal (*Cryptozoology*), the field is commonly regarded as something of a pseudoscience. The hunt for Nessie is part of the enterprise and involves a spectrum of serious, semi-serious and perhaps charlatan investigators engaged in seeking evidence for the existence of the creature. These cryptid creatures have long played a central part in folklore and mythology with tales of lake monsters common to many cultures (Nickell and Radford 1). However, the search for Nessie has taken on a pseudoscientific quality through a mixture of mythic, marketing and scientific materialist discourses. By exploring from a sociological perspective the interplay of these discourses, the appeal of the search for Nessie will become apparent.

For a starting point for a discussion of the mythology surrounding the Loch Ness monster, one can turn to Barthes (1957) as an analytical framework for understanding the ways in which the discourses surrounding the creature are weaved together to create and solidify an ideology that conceals its own historical and political antecedents as it circulates within society. In the case of the monster, the mythological elements come together to construct "Scottishness" through the notion of a desolate, wild and remote landscape being associated with a wild mythic creature. Indeed, this parallels the mythological notion of the Scottish people being defined by the rugged and wild terrain of their land – something in turn that binds together people, culture, animals and land. However, while this is an appealing reading, I am less inclined to accept the position that this represents a solidified discourse that, much like the monster, is concealed from view. The mythological quality of the monster is not something that is static but rather is in a dynamic relationship with other discourses that ebb and flow together and, at times, are opened up for examination, or may fade or yield to other discourses. The juxtaposition of a hidden mythic creature with open scientific rationalism is also perhaps overplayed but, as will be argued in the next section, one that also creates a dynamic for raising to the fore, and engaging with, issues of belief.

The mythic discourse

Loch Ness is the largest freshwater lake within Britain: twenty four miles long and, at one point, one and a half miles wide. It has an average depth of one hundred and thirty seven meters and there are places where it plunges over three hundred and four meters. It is also known for being cold and murky with dangerous currents in places. It is surrounded by mountains and therefore its topography provides a wilderness that can easily be associated with mythic

creatures. Indeed, there are many bodies of water in northern Scotland that have ancient legends about monsters. One of these is a legend that supposedly occurred in 565 A.D. that tells of Saint Columba who saved a swimmer from a hungry monster in the river. This tale was recorded in the book *The Life of Saint Columba* sometime in the late 7th Century and is often connected with later sightings in the nearby lake.

These folklore tales of a supernatural creature in the loch have not declined and indeed the mythic discourse persists to this day. As Walsham (498) has pointed out, the German sociologist Max Weber's (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*) historical view of the rise of Capitalism as one of progressive disenchantment with the world is far from straightforward. This can be seen in the rise of reports of sightings of the creature after a new road was built along the edge of the loch in 1933. These sightings have, in some instances, been supported by grainy photographic evidence which, like such evidence associated with UFOs, has become the subject of claim and counter-claim regarding hoaxes and fakes. There seems to be persistence in the willingness to believe in the mythic nature of a being that takes us back to an enchanted world of creatures that cannot be explained from the modern perspective.

Part of this mythology is associated with the geography of the land and the sense of wilderness that it evokes. This is in turn associated with a discursive construction of the Highlands of Scotland as desolate, of nature in the raw. This mythology taps into the idea of a place where it is easy for a creature to remain hidden from the modern world; a world now almost thoroughly explored and yet containing pockets of the unknown and mysterious. It is in this space that cryptozoology gains a foothold and straddles the mythic and the scientific; it is, in effect, a pseudoscience. From a rationalist scientific perspective such a pseudoscientific approach is harmful in the sense that it undermines the logic of science by tainting it with an engagement with the mythical. In other words, it undermines the credibility of science through 'guilt by association'. However, from the point of view of people who engage with this approach it is in a sense a re-enchantment of the world; a quest to engage with the mysterious. The Loch Ness monster fits the bill here perfectly: a long tradition of mythic folklore, a rise in reported sightings, the ability to use sonar or other scientific equipment to seek out the creature, and an eager public willing also to apply a sense of re-enchantment with the world, or at least to keep abreast of the latest hunt for the creature through engaging with the media.

The scientific discourse

Given the pseudoscientific status of cryptozoology the main focus for the production of scientific evidence has been attempts to produce compelling physical evidence. This has commonly been through a combination of surface and underwater images, as well as sonar mappings of the Loch over protracted periods of time. Much of this work has been written up in articles but also in book format, typically as an unfolding story of the investigative process and its outcomes. And yet for the most part, the cumulative outcome of this process has yielded tantalising fragments of evidence that are at one and the same time suggestive and deeply ambiguous. However, this only adds to the mystery in a world where science has produced a plethora of modern wonders, but where wonder is reduced to technical scientific accounts of phenomena. In the case of cryptozoology it is evident that what is being sought is not simply a scientific account of a new or lost species – it is the monstrous and the mysterious, and in this sense cryptozoology connects the scientific rational world with the world of folklore and mythology.

Dendle has explored the nature of such interest in these mythical cryptozoological creatures from a historical and modern world perspective. As he points out: “The belief structures of the ancient world were not different in kind from our own, such that the study of ancient monsters is folklore/mythology while that of contemporary cryptids is methodical science, mainstream or otherwise” (193). He goes on to note that sensationalism and scepticism were in tension with one another in the pre-modern world just as much as they are a feature of modern science. The scientific approach to the confirmation of species and their taxonomical place is the foundation for modern zoology but this leaves open a space for the unconfirmed. It is in this space that cryptozoology finds itself in trying to align what is out there, so to speak, within the modern taxonomy of the natural world.

Dendle draws attention to the monstrous as bound up with various allegorical tropes in the medieval world. Mythical creatures were associated with moral tales, particularly with regard to the maintenance and policing of boundaries between animality and humanity, between the sacred and the profane or evil. Today, allegory is still a major rhetorical feature of cryptozoology in its alignment with the scientific basis of environmental concerns about the destruction of habitats and the extinction or near-extinction of species. As Dendle so aptly puts it: “One important function of cryptozoology, then, is to repopulate liminal space with potentially undiscovered creatures that have resisted human devastation” (198). Indeed, it is interesting to note, as in the case of the Loch Ness Monster, that the search for evidence is related to extinct species, a plesiosaur-like creature that is an aquatic, reptilian survivor or mutation from the age of dinosaurs. This can be considered as an attempt to seek evidence that nature can still “win out”; that the world is still a place where species from eons ago can still survive. Moreover, the sense of wonder that such hidden creatures evoke is not unlike the early history of zoology where there was a sense of adventure in seeking out beings from far off lands. There are examples where fantastic creatures were once pursued only by cryptozoologists and have been found to be in fact in existence, as the case of the giant squid testifies. This gives those in the field a spur to keep pursuing other cryptids that may occupy the space between fantasy and scientific recognition, waiting to be discovered by cryptozoologists and formally recognized by the scientific community.

However, this is now connected to a sense of urgency to find such creatures before it is too late, before environmental degradation destroys their habitat, kills them off, and denies us the chance to confirm their existence. Thus the seeking of scientific evidence combined with a resistance towards orthodox structures within contemporary science is a curious hallmark of cryptozoology. It is locked into scientific methodology but prides itself on keeping its distance from the institutionalized scientific academy. It is little wonder then that most of its proponents present themselves in keeping with the early modern scientific scholars: mavericks that operate on the margins or beyond the confines of the academy but who nonetheless adhere to the canons of the scientific method.

Other scientists have been drawn into controversies surrounding the sighting of cryptids through proposing alternative “rational” explanations. These scientists are less likely to be involved in any direct way in searching for these creatures and tend to offer up alternatives based on either existing animal or non-animal phenomena. For example, in the case of the Loch Ness Monster, it has been proposed that the sightings may be due to underwater currents in long deep lakes which results in standing waves known as *seiche*. The wind direction can lead to a layer of warm water at one end of the loch that forces the underlying cold layer to the opposite end. This is not visible on the surface but moves underwater with the interaction of the layers and may lead

to debris being brought to the surface. Another explanation argues that decaying Scots pine logs in the loch may have pockets of gas in them that expand and propel the logs through the water. The point is not so much that these explanations are credible as that they are part of the scientific sceptical dismissal of the sighting of these creatures, much in the same way as other scientists propose alternative explanations for sightings of UFOs. In effect, there is a sceptical scientific discourse that engages with cryptozoology and in so doing seeks to maintain the authority of science by either implicitly or explicitly contributing to its characterization as a pseudo-science.

The marketing discourse

The world of cryptids and monsters is bound up with marketing: from tourist brochures and websites on the geographical locations where there have been reported sightings; to the production of books, films, and animations; and also through to the publicity surrounding the individuals themselves who seek out these creatures.

In the case of the Loch Ness Monster the creature has for many years been used to promote the Highlands of Scotland as a tourist destination, and there is a visitor's centre devoted to the story of the monster and the various sonar and other searches that have taken place over the years to detect it. However, more than this, the monster has become symbolically associated with Scotland and Scottishness; a national symbol and treasure. Tourist brochures and websites heavily market the Highlands of Scotland as a semi-wilderness, a place of beauty as well as mystery. This wild land is historically associated with the Scottish clans, with people who lived in this harsh environment and in doing so this is presented as what came to define them and their struggles. Now desolate in parts, with only the ruins of dwellings and castles, there is a romanticism that pervades the marketing literature of this landscape; a human world lost and a natural world that remains. Within this remaining natural world a new symbol of Scottishness has replaced the old one in the form of the mysterious monster. However, while this is, in part at least, used to promote the area there is also the added boost to this marketing that trades on the pseudo-scientific nature of the cryptozoological search for Nessie as itself a hopeless romantic endeavour.

The interplay of these two forms of romantic discourse makes for a highly marketable "product," so much so that it attracts around hundreds of thousands of visitors to the area. This kind of business does not go unnoticed and has attracted the attention of those who argue that the monster should be further capitalized upon for the benefit of the local and national economy, as well as those who argue that it is cashing in at best, or a cynical stunt at worst. Others still adopt the view, in spite of what they consider to be the weight of the marketing machine, that ordinary people's experience and what they see and report has lent authenticity to the story of the monster. Nevertheless there is a range of views with newsprint, magazine and broadcast media last year reporting various stories: "Loch Ness Monster: Nessie's back, just in time for Scotland's big year" (*The Independent*, 12th August, 2014); "Business seminar on cashing in on the Loch Ness Monster" (*BBC* 23rd April, 2014); "Has the Loch Ness Monster been spotted on Apple Maps?" (*Fox News* 21st April, 2014); "The Loch Ness Monster brand is 'as big as Coca Cola'" (*Management Today*, 23rd April, 2014). These kinds of headlines tap into a common dilemma surrounding tourist attractions, that is, the extent to which an attraction is promoted through artificial inauthentic marketing hype where, as the French sociologist Baudrillard would have it, symbolization has outpaced and taken over reality, versus the view that tourism benefits from an authentic and unique marketable product.

While the marketing of the Highlands as a tourist destination through promoting Nessie is big business there is also a longstanding and considerable popular culture associated with the monster that has ensured that symbolically it is recognized around the world. This has taken the form of books, both fact and fiction, and films and animations. There are over sixty books or booklets that deal with the issue in a serious way as well as numerous fictional works and children's books. In looking over the more serious works these tend in some way or other to contribute to the amassed data through presenting and analyzing new sightings, film and video footage, sonar traces, and photographs. These books also make a contribution to speculating or theorizing about the nature of the phenomena, many offering accounts that can be taken as being biased one way or the other. In addition, a number of books add a cultural dimension to the story through dealing with issues of folklore and the stories of those who have reported sightings or are involved in the hunt for the creature. Most books are aimed at a general rather than specialist audience and perhaps this is again linked to the cryptozoological tendency to bypass a more scientific and sceptical audience.

Although such books go back as far as 1823 with the publication of Grant Stewart's *The Popular Superstitions and Festive Amusements of the Highlanders of Scotland* that recounts tales of the Loch Ness Kelpie, the landmark date of publication can be taken as 1934. Four books were published on the creature in that year that show the range of interest and genres associated with it. The first theorized that the creature was a giant salamander (Lane, W. H. *The Home of The Loch Ness Monster*), the second was a tourist booklet on the best sightings up to that point (Hamilton, W. D and Hughes, J. *The Mysterious Monster of Loch Ness*), the third – a serious attempt to present interviews and conversations with witnesses, including sketches of “X” as it was referred to (Gould, Rupert T. *The Loch Ness Monster and Others*) and the final one that year speculated that the creature was a stray sea serpent (Oudemans, A. C. *The Loch Ness Animal*). These four books set out the different paths that other publications would follow and by 1961 the era of the Nessie hunter had arrived with publication of Tim Dinsdale's “*Loch Ness Monster*” based on his research in the area and footage in which he “captured” what he claimed was the creature on film. However, also in the same year a book was published that offered a sceptical view that ranges over sightings being potentially other animals or simply hoaxes (Burton, M. *The Elusive Monster*). Perhaps the most serious, if not the longest treatise on the monster was published by Roy Mackal in 1976 (*The Monsters of Loch Ness*) and by this point attention was turning to the plesiosaur theory. Also during the 1970s books are published by teams involved in the hunt, detailing their equipment and findings (e.g., Meredith, Dennis L. *Search at Loch Ness* 1977). By the 1980s books were being printed that offered a more sceptical turn, the first appearing in 1983 (Binns, R. *The Loch Ness Mystery: Solved*). This trend has continued with more and more sceptics giving their analyses of photographs and speculating on what the sightings may be, including the recent 2013 publication by Daniel Loxton and Donald Prothero entitled *Abominable Science!* which takes a wider swipe at cryptozoology. What this brief run through these publications evidences is the ebb and flow of proponents and sceptics as they battle to establish claim and counter-claim. However, what is also striking about this is that these books bring to the public the debate itself about the evidence and counter-evidence and claim and counter-claim. It is very much this dialectic that has caught the public's attention and imagination thereby adding to the sense of the unsolved and mysterious.

This motif has been carried over in children's book films and animations. Some employ a humorous tone while maintaining historical accuracy in explaining the nature of the mystery and are aimed at older children (e.g., Richard Brassey's 2010 book *Nessie The Loch Ness Monster*),

others tell the tale through the notion of its elusive nature and disbelief in its existence and are aimed at younger children and come complete with a soft illustration of the monster wearing a tartan bonnet (e.g., the 2013 book by Chani McBain and Kirteen Harris-Jones, *No Such Thing as Nessie!* which is aimed at pre-school and early school year children). Other literary works, such as children's poetry also continue the theme of disbelief and its effects, with Ted Hughes' 1992 *Nessie the Mannerless Monster* telling the story of how the Loch Ness monster becomes tired of having her existence denied and sets off to London for an audience with the Queen. Still other books use the tale of the monster to teach moral lessons commonly associated with children. For example, in a picture book published in 2007 by Alice W. Flaherty (author) and Scott Magoon (illustrator) entitled *Luck of the Loch Ness Monster: A Tale of Picky Eating* a girl from sometime in the past on board an ocean liner bound for Scotland from America, tosses her oatmeal overboard several times over because she is a picky eater. The story goes on to show how a small worm swimming alongside the liner ate bowl after bowl of the oatmeal tossed overboard because it liked it so much only to grow in size to become the monster.

What this children's literature evidences is the way in which the image of the monster is wedded to the world of the child. The monster that cannot be found or can only be seen by locals mimics the discourse of the child's magical world that is populated by imagined creatures and talking animals that sometimes develop a friendship with the child as a believer. In effect, it sets the child's magical world apart from the sceptical world of the adult. This literature also shows how the monster is marketed as a means of delivering moral tales that children can relate to through a sense of the humorous or magical.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion points to the ways in which the Loch Ness monster serves as a totem for a world that stands apart from environmental degradation and technological exploitation. It also serves as a means of maintaining a sense of the mysterious and the belief that it is still possible that natural phenomena can evade scientific rationalism. Indeed, it is possible that people wish to maintain both views, that neither wins out and that there is a humour derived from doubt. This kind of knowing doubt is something of a contradiction in terms, where we want to leave a space for the seemingly impossible as a way of maintaining an imaginative toehold on the world. As for the status of cryptozoology, this too is the subject of contradictory discourses, on the one hand being seen as the work of at times overenthusiastic mavericks, and on the other hand – genuine amateur investigators who are considered in a romantic way as battling against the odds. In recent years the sceptics seem to have had the upper hand but the burgeoning literature debunking the sightings of the monster has not led to any mass public scepticism. Finally, it was noted that children's literature has also drawn upon the monster as a way of tapping into a shared world of a belief in the magical in the face of a disbelieving adult world. This kind of literature sides with the monster in an imaginative leap into the world of the child where doubt and disbelief have no place. In this world the mythic becomes the real and perhaps necessarily so, as children have little else to rely on but what they learn through an unquestioning acceptance as part of their socialization. Doubt would not serve children well given the knowledge and social practices they are faced with acquiring as they develop. However, in the adult world doubt serves very alongside belief as a means of keeping the mystery of the monster alive.

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