

# **“Here be monsters (and journalists)” – the UK press and the construction of the Weird Sea**

*Dr Alexander Hay*

## **Introduction**

The United Kingdom has a remarkably close relationship with the sea. The length of its coastline comes to a total of almost 20,000 miles. There is no point in the UK that is further than 70 miles away from the coastline. Culturally and historically, the sea has played a major role in defining the UK as a nation.

In many ways, however, the UK faces a crisis in how it perceives the sea, particularly in how it is now depicted in mainstream media. To say that the British are exclusively at odds with the sea is, of course, inaccurate to say the least. Many nations have endured any number of real maritime disasters, shark attacks and fictional sea monsters in their recent history, while rising sea levels threaten whole cities and even nations.

Yet it is the terms of this ‘othering’—a constructed antipathy—that makes it unique to our own shores. As we shall see, this is a relatively recent development, and the result of historical, political and cultural forces peculiar to this country. Here, the apocryphal phrase ‘Here be Monsters’ has become both an assumption and a running theme in media coverage of the sea.

## **It came from the depths**

The British fixation on sea monsters is a common and dependable source of news material. This flows into and melds with ongoing reports of lake and loch monsters, the most famous example being that of the Loch Ness Monster. The aim of this paper is not to argue for or against the existence of these creatures, though the vast amount of evidence suggests they are not there, or at least, are not in the form we would like them to be. Instead, the issue here is how these stories are outlined and expressed to their readers and how this can be seen to suggest a general pattern in how the sea and its contents, real or otherwise, are portrayed.

One recent news story, published in 2014 in the Scottish tabloid, *The Daily Record*, demonstrates a typical water monster narrative:

“I’ve fished the loch man and boy and I haven’t ever seen anything like that. As I say I don’t really believe in anything like that until I see it but what I saw was obviously what the Loch Ness Monster is - I’m not saying it was a fire breathing dragon and I never saw teeth or anything like that, but I must have thought there was something there if I stopped to take pictures. (Archibald, 2014)

In this case the mundanity of the witness is emphasised as a way of establishing their credibility through an implied guilelessness. In this case, ‘Tree planter Richard Collis’ is a ready-made everyman, his implied straightforwardness made pointedly clear by his wife, who points out the shortcomings in his technical and computer skills later in the same article.

Similarly, the other kind of monster authority in these narratives comes in the form of the ‘expert’ – a scientist or other similar authority. While it is not always necessary for the expert to have seen the creature, unlike the everyman, their opinions are given weight by who they are as much as by what they say. As this example, published in *The Daily Mail*, shows, the appeal to authority in such coverage is as important, if not more so, than the claims themselves:

“The huge number of “sea monster” sightings now on record can’t all be explained away as mistakes, sightings of known animals or hoaxes,’ said palaeontologist Dr Darren Naish of the University of Portsmouth... “At least some of the better ones – some of them made by trained naturalists and such – probably are descriptions of encounters with real, unknown animals” (Derbyshire, 2011).

This is not to say that Richard Collis really only saw a log, or that Dr Darren Naish is wrong, but it is important to note that the news stories construct the case for them in a particular, predictable fashion. Often, the two narrative styles are bought together, as a news story regarding Cornwall’s local sea monster, Morgawr, “a hideous hump-backed creature”, demonstrated:

“A television crew from the Discovery Channel series, Animal X, have recently been in Cornwall filming interviews with people who claim they have seen Morgawr...Producer Tony White said: “One of the people we spoke with was an elderly lady who saw the monster in the

Helford River. And the most recent sighting was by some people out fishing on the Carrick Roads who said Morgawr reared up out of the water in front of their boat..." (Western Morning News, November 2000, p.9).

Again, we see a predictable construction of credibility. The experts – in this case, a television crew with a named producer – are portrayed as having come to find the truth (As opposed to just making a television programme). The witnesses, meanwhile, are once again given credibility by their ordinariness, whether it is by being an old woman or recreational fishermen. The implication here is that such everyday folk are incapable of seeing anything not already filtered out by their salt-of-the-earth sensibilities.

The undercurrents of this narrative model are alarming. The implication is that there is an inherent authority granted by one's social rank, whether one is a scientist, a researcher or a television documentary maker. At the same time, the everyday, less informed witnesses are implied to be too wholesomely unsophisticated as to mistake an otter, a log or an errant seal for a sea or lake monster. Needless to say, there have been cases that demonstrate the flaws of this uncritical, not to say socially stratified model. The Surgeon's photo, taken in 1934 by Robert Kenneth Wilson, a gynaecologist, is a case in point, having latterly been exposed as a fake.

Another feature of the narrative is how the local lake or sea monster is personified and given a name, and even a personality, as the Tyneside sea monster Shony demonstrates (Bradbury, August 2000, p.8), or how the latter day preference for aquatic monsters such as Loch Morar's Morag (BBC, February 2013) and a whole raft of other Scottish loch-beasts are freely juxtaposed with existing longstanding maritime mythologies of creatures such as mermaids and kelpies (McQueen, March 2008, p.8). The narrative is also pliable and able to resist challenges to its core message, as demonstrated in this *Evening Herald* report of a sea creature seen off the nearby Devon coast:

A loch NESS monster-type creature has been snapped at sea off Paignton - just days after the sighting of a sperm whale in Tor Bay... The mysterious Plesiosaur-like creature was spotted just 30 yards off shore by locals who reported a sighting of what they first thought was a turtle... But pictures taken by one of the baffled witnesses reveal its

neck may be far too long for any known sea turtle... Boffins at the Marine Conservation Society say the creature may be some kind of turtle, but at present it remains unidentified (Finch, July 2010).

Note that while the story features possible explanations for what witnesses had seen, it puts great effort into dismissing them. The creature itself is envisaged as a 'Loch Ness monster-type', akin to a plesiosaur, thus grounding the sighting in existing myth, and more significantly, palaeontology. Scientists are referred to via the old journalistic cliché of 'boffins;' nameless but intrinsically learned, their authority invoked mainly to say that the creature is 'unidentified' while the story glosses over the more likely scenario they provide. As this story demonstrates, sometimes the presence of 'scientists' is enough to lend credibility to a story. Quotes need simply be attributed to a suitably authoritative-sounding institution and the possibility of a monster not dismissed out of hand, as another story, from the Daily Mirror in 2010 shows:

Marine Conservation Society biodiversity programme manager Peter Richardson said: "It could be another Loch Ness Monster. At the moment, it's an unidentified mystery creature" (Smith, July 2010, p.18).

The rest of this story plays to type. Again, the creature is described as having archetypal features, "like a pre-historic plesiosaur", and the story's eyewitness is, once again, a respectable tradesperson, in this case, an electrician on the verge of retirement. What is telling, however, is how the idea of a lake monster and a sea monster is interchangeable. Both lurk in the depths and so are seen as both exotic and alarming. Time and again, the same essential themes are revisited; the sea is rendered alien, freakish, bizarre and dangerous, though in the first news story covering the Devon monster, it is described as at least preferring to hunt fish.

### **Monsters Everywhere**

Is this strictly harmful, however? A defender of the press might argue that the content of such stories is simply there as entertainment, or that the reader is responsible for their own credulity. This is a problematic argument, however. These stories not only all share the same narratives and tropes but also disseminate them amongst their audiences without caveats. This is a peculiarly

British phenomenon, and so stands in contrast to how media in other nations respond to similar stories. For example, news coverage of cryptozoological events in America, has been strident in its scepticism (Regal, p. 178), up to and including open clashes with believers, while coverage of lake monsters such as Lake Champlain's Champ is coloured with a professional objectivity and distance that the UK press simply does not aspire to (CBS News, December 2011). Recent coverage of an alleged lake monster sighting in Norway, care of the state broadcaster NRK, is notable for its neutrality – leaving the reader to decide whether the eye-witnesses are telling the truth or not. (NRK, August 2012). Australian news coverage of strange sea creatures, alive or extinct, may employ similarly lurid language (Skatssoon, May 2005), but the irony is obvious, and safely expressed with suitably sceptical quotation marks (The Australian, May 2013); the approach ultimately more factual rather than sensationalist (Wells, April 2015).

These stories therefore, more than those delivered in countries with a more sceptical and dismissive media interest in sea monsters, colour and influence how the sea itself is interpreted. Yet a more direct criticism would be that they degrade and undermine journalism as a whole, encouraging the narrative of the weird sea to be applied to news coverage outside of the cryptozoology bracket. A common example of this is how paleontological news stories are reported, specifically those that relate to extinct sea creatures. These all follow a similar pattern; the monstrousness of the creature is emphasised, allusions are made to the Loch Ness Monster where possible and the maritime nature of the creature is also emphasised, casting them as a true monster from the deep. This extends even to less tabloid oriented news outlets, as one BBC news story demonstrates:

The fossilised skull of a colossal "sea monster" has been unearthed along the UK's Jurassic Coast... The ferocious predator, which is called a pliosaur, terrorised the oceans 150 million years ago... The skull is 2.4m long, and experts say it could belong to one of the largest pliosaurs ever found: measuring up to 16m in length (Morelle, October 2009).

Note the emphasis on the monstrousness of the creature, its savagery, and its implied menace. Perhaps fittingly, the news story even features a picture of the pliosaur about to devour a plesiosaur, and a size comparison with a killer whale, emphasising its size and power but also seemingly saying to the reader – 'look!

This sea monster is even nastier than Nessie! It's an even scarier aquatic predator than an Orca!" The first image also emphasises the size of the creature's mouth, open wide and all-consuming. While we can surmise a great deal about the creature's feeding habits and lifestyle from its remains, the news story still seems driven to emphasise this, in so doing once again visiting the depths of the Weird Sea.

The broadsheet *The Guardian* is similarly bewitched by the sea monster narrative. In addition to stories about pliosaurs, (Siddique, October 2009) replete with yet another picture of the beast devouring yet another unfortunate plesiosaur,<sup>34</sup> it emphasises the predatory nature of a new Scottish species of Ichthyosaur in another story, which was once "...among the top marine predators, sharing the seas with long-necked plesiosaurs..." (Sample, January 2015) Another pliosaur-themed news story uses yet another diagram to emphasise the creature's size by demonstrating how much bigger it is than, in this case, various species of Dinosaurs (Sample, March 2009).

The Daily Mail naturally follows this model too, with its description of a primitive shark, "believed to measure as long as 20 feet (6 metres) that prowled the seas 100 million years ago..." (Griffiths, June 2015). The *Western Daily Press* has a species of plesiosaur – again, "a sea monster" – with "flippers shaped like the wings of a Spitfire fighter plane", juxtaposing one British mythologised history with another (Western Daily Press, January 2002, p.16). Even fossilised soft bodied aquatic invertebrates are not spared this 'monstering'; *The Telegraph* reports about "flesh-eating 'penis worms'" from the Cambrian period (around 541 to 485 million years ago) that "could turn their mouths inside out and drag themselves along by their teeth" and which are compared to the vast Sandworms in Frank Herbert's science fiction novel, *Dune*. The journalist only then belatedly notes that the creature was "the length of a finger", its fearsome teeth only a millimetre long (Knapton, May 2015).

This creeps into coverage of modern nautical anomalies. Stories of mysterious bodies or 'blobs' of organic matter (Mirror, January 1998, p. 11) washed up on beaches are a common occurrence in the news media, their being described as innately mysterious and 'baffling' (Western Daily Press, July 2014, pg. 4), their inevitable identification as whale corpses being reported as if this were a startling revelation rather than an obvious conclusion (Daily Record, January 1998,

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<sup>34</sup> This is a surprisingly common theme in media illustrations, making one wonder what exactly plesiosaurs have done to magazine, newspaper and web site picture editors to deserve such consistently harsh treatment...

p.19). Even when the creatures are identified, they are still described in monstrous terms – two ‘huge’ oarfish found beached are described by the *Daily Mail* as being ‘sea serpents’, their deaths perhaps a portent for “a looming major natural disaster” (Olson, October 2013) while a bewildered moray eel is described as “a baby sea monster” (Western Morning News (Plymouth) May 30, 2005).

This rhetoric of the Weird Sea is carried on with stories involving real shark attacks, the realisation of the fantasy the other stories so keenly aspire to. Despite the seriousness of the subject, the same lurid language and imagery are used:

AN Irishman looked on in horror as a huge "dinosaur-sized" shark savaged a bather just yards away... Denis London stood stunned on the shoreline while the sea beast mangled and tore apart a 37-year-old swimmer... Local resident Gregg Coppen, who also witnessed the incident near Cape Town in South Africa, said the monster fish was "longer than a minibus"... He posted on Twitter: "Holy s\*\*\*. We just saw a gigantic shark eat what looked like a person in front of our house. "That shark was huge. Like dinosaur huge" (Conlon, p. 16).

Shark stories, even where there are no deaths involved, follow much the same formula. They include the same implied menace (Marris, June 2014, p. 17), the emphasis on size (McCloskey, March 2014, pp. 6-7), the creature’s mouth and its teeth (Daily Star, May 2015, pg. 20), and once again references to everymen and scientists and their assumed authority (Landreth, July 2015). Even stories concerning the majestically huge but utterly harmless basking (Derry Journal, August 2012) and whale sharks (Metro, August 2012, p. 9) can’t help but mention their size and fearsome appearance, referring to them as possible monsters or threats, before admitting that they pose no threat to anyone but plankton.

This language and outlook sometimes reaches absurd lengths. *The Sun* describes the world’s largest cargo ship as a “sea monster”, its size and capacity described in lurid terms fitting for a real creature from the depths (Spanton, January 2015, pp. 28-29). Meanwhile, *The Daily Record*’s 2012 report on a 14 year old girl hospitalised by a ‘monster wave’ demonstrates its ultimate perversity (Devine, June 2012). In this story, the sea itself is transformed into a villain that “knocked” its victim “repeatedly against the wall” “forced back” would-be rescuers and “dragged” both the girl and her friend “further out to sea”. Here the sea

reaches its final destination in this worldview, and becomes a monster in and of itself, beyond the hidden horrors that lurk in its depths. The UK media reflects and continues to perpetuate an alienation from the sea that is both highly stylised and utterly irrational.

### **Britannia (No Longer) Rules The Waves**

What lies behind this alienation, however? Certainly, UK media values play a role, but this is not simply down to our journalism being innately disingenuous. In part, easy narratives result from a news culture driven by deadlines, in turn the result of an industrialised society where timeliness (as opposed to accuracy) is the key commodity (Schleisinger, pp. 84-85). While this is the case in many nations' news cultures, in each case the exact approach reflects that nation's preoccupations. In the UK's case, this comes in the form of sensationalism and the Weird Sea. Regardless, such requirements naturally lead to stock responses, clichés and received wisdom being fallen back upon. Speed is the lifeblood of journalism but it does not foster critical thought outside its confines, and journalists are not entirely in control over what they report or how as a result (Schleisinger, p. 87), even discounting editorial priorities and each publication's house style. Deadlines require copy and so journalists fall back on certainties and stock formulas, which again reflect national preoccupations and even pathologies. Existing news cultures with their pre-supposed assumptions—their narratives—of what makes news and what the audience want to know (Schleisinger, pp. 116-117) inevitably lead to lurid stories of sea monsters, but have little time for the utter mundanity of fossilised barnacles or washed up starfish and bits of seaweed.

Such a prism is applied to the people as well as the creatures in these stories. They must both become remarkable, as John Langer put it, in order for them to be considered interesting and newsworthy, and join the ranks of the 'interesting', be they celebrities or experts, or—indeed—Loch Ness Monsters. They must be "...positioned by the story as 'ordinary' while at the same time be shown to be breaching expectations by doing extraordinary things", or at least claiming to have seen them (Langer, pp. 48-49). Complicating factors further is how celebrity and institutional elites are being blurred into a single bloc of what journalists assume are innately interesting and authoritative people, all constructed in the same fashion (Langer, p.53). In this structure, the views of celebrities such as pop stars (Hattenstone, November 2013) and 'experts' in strange phenomena are given



equal prominence, the assumption being that their notoriety alone – their newsworthiness – confers on them an innate authority (Dickinson, October 2014).

Needless to say, this is problematic; journalism views the public as a whole, with pre-determined tastes and expectations, the lurid and the escapist as much a lure to middle class readers as those from the working class (Conboy, p. 136). Complicating things further is the long-term effect of postmodernism, where presumptions of what is and isn't credible, serious or salacious or both, have broken down (Conboy, p. 139). This explains why *The Guardian* can win the Pulitzer Prize for journalism but still feature terrifying tales of extinct sea monsters. If it is newsworthy and fits into audience expectations, it is justified in and of itself (Conboy, p. 167).

Certainly, this blurring of the lines between entertainment and information affects all sectors of the press. where commercial pressures and ingrained beliefs about what the audience wants (justified or otherwise) have shifted the UK media as a whole towards 'tabloidisation' (McLachlan & Golding, pp. 76-77). This is historically observable, with the 'quality press' increasingly setting aside more serious content during the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (McLachlan & Golding, pp. 78-79) and becoming more visual (McLachlan & Golding, p. 80) and 'accessible' to a presumed popular audience (McLachlan & Golding, p. 85). This has not translated into the much-hoped for rises in circulation—sales of almost all newspapers continue to decline year by year—but it does explain why these stories are so common; there is an existential need for the press to pander to the preoccupations and quirks of their audience, even though this process is innately circular. If the news media gives the public the Weird Sea, the public has learned to expect it as the main narrative for depictions of the sea.

Does the press therefore actively distort how the sea is perceived? As the many examples in this paper demonstrate, certainly, but it would be too simple to say that they do this without the public's connivance. There is also the role journalism plays in the UK cultural landscape. Journalism serves a range of functions, even the most gleefully populist tabloid may sometimes undertake serious journalism, and broadsheets, as we have seen, like a big scary monster as much as the next red top. Yet in providing these stories and fitting into this existing narrative of the Weird Sea, the UK media fulfils another role: that which Jostein Gripsrud described as "ritual communication". Here journalism is the means whereby a society communicates to itself about itself, ensuring its sense of being is both remembered and disseminated (Gripsrud, p. 42). It is how Britain creates and

maintains its collective identity and its relationship with the rest of the world. This, of course, serves a purpose in providing a sense of stability and continuity in a shifting and uncertain world (Hetherington, p. 44). Yet, it also means that the perpetuation of prejudices, obsessions and received wisdom are maintained too (Helm, July 2015). With this in mind, the recurring themes and motifs of the Weird Sea fit into a broader picture. News audiences are not brainwashed or easily lead, but they do rely on underlying assumptions, and the press is the means by which such assumptions are laid.

This leads us to the central question – why does British culture now have such a distorted view of the sea? This is in stark contrast to its history. From the 16<sup>th</sup> Century onwards, the notion of English and latterly British power and national pride was rooted in the sense of it being a maritime power (Peck, p. 32). Arguably the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 was the first defining moment of this trend, its portentousness echoed in the nascent early modern nationalism and popular culture of the time (Cavanagh, p. 72). This reached its apex in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, following Nelson's victory at Trafalgar which, give or take several minor defeats, prevailed until the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This was echoed in novels and popular culture of the time. In the case of Jane Austen and many other writers, British seamen, be they officers or Jolly Jack Tars, were often portrayed as exemplars either of stoicism and courage, or character and masculinity (Peck, p. 28). This had a deep resonance in British culture at the time, and which still has echoes in our day-to-day language (Mack, p. 35) and ideas of society. (Mack, p. 193).

This dominance and confidence, of course, was not to last. The Royal Navy, key to this sense of national confidence, and essential in maintaining the British Empire, reached its high watermark in the 1880s. From that period on, increasing competition from other nation's navies, such as those of Germany and the United States of America, began to challenge this supremacy (Gough, p. 76). By 1914, at the outbreak of the Great War, the Royal Navy found itself no longer unassailable, its officers unprepared for the realities of fighting other well-organised, equipped navies (Gough, p. 253). While Britain could still maintain the illusion of naval power until the outbreak of the Second World War, it had nonetheless been eclipsed by other nations in the meantime (Gough, p. 265). From the 1950s onwards, the navy began a slow and relenting decline in military spending that carries on to this day (Bell, pp. 312-313). The national myth of naval supremacy had come to an end.

At the same time, there has been a growing estrangement between the British and the sea. (Foulke, p. 190) If you fly off on your holidays, have never travelled more than a few hours on a ferry or have never known the era of vast shipyards or the lives of the men who worked in them, then the idea that the sea is an alien place full of strange things to be feared or avoided does not seem so absurd. The press will certainly cater to your preconceptions. After all, they are made up of members of the British public too. Television documentaries and media are full of 'abyssal horrors' such as the Goblin Shark (Guardian, May 2014) and the Giant Squid (Ingham, October 2011, p. 22). According to research conducted by the Sealife Centre chain of aquariums in 2015, 10% of children believe mermaids are real, 17% thought sea dragons can breathe fire, 10% believed fish fingers were a kind of fish and 16% thought that sharks primarily ate humans (Ratcliffe-James, March 2015). Leaving aside the small sample size of 1,000 children and the commercial bias of the research, this still suggests a troubling state of affairs. We are surrounded by the sea and yet we are estranged from it.

Even the British seaside has suffered from 'othering'. This process began in the 1930s when modernist writers—even those on the left—expressed disquiet at the massive popularity of seaside resorts, with their teaming numbers of working class holiday makers, seeing them as a vast, dangerous mob in the midst of barbarous low brow entertainment (Feigel, pp. 16-17). The narrative that has descended from this view, as the fortunes of seaside resorts have declined, dwells on the ongoing decay, (BBC News, August 2013) despair (Barrow, August 2013) and dysfunction (Derounian, October 2013) of these neglected resorts, their inhabitants and visitors dehumanised and either ignored or gawped at (Doctorow, June 2014). The Weird Sea has now become not merely misleading, but harmful, where even those who live by it have become tainted, alienated and 'othered'. It is a very British descent into despair, cynicism and irrationality; the point where we turn against the environment itself.

## Conclusions

This paper is not an argument for or against cryptozoology. Should a sea serpent one day emerge from the depths, live on national television, then that is a discussion for the life scientists. Nor is it a jeremiad for the halcyon days of British naval domination; Britannia should not 'rule the waves' again, no more than anyone else should. Rather, we should learn to reconnect with the sea because it was, is, and shall remain an essential fixture of our geography, our history and our

day-to-day lives, with or without the press as gatekeepers. At the very least, we should engage with it on its own terms rather than as an outlet for our fears and irrationalities. Perhaps we can then learn to accept the sea for all its wonder, horror and its ordinariness. Yet first we must discard the Weird Sea and the process of othering: perhaps then we will remember that Britain remains a series of islands surrounded and defined by the sea.

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