



The Skeptics SA guide to The Loch Ness monster

The possibility of a monster inhabiting a deep, dark Scottish loch has fascinated believers and irritated sceptics for decades.

The monster of Loch Ness is now as much part of our culture as Father Christmas and the Easter Bunny, although the legend is actually only a little over 60 years old.

Nicholas Witchell's book, *The Loch Ness Story*, Penguin, 1975, was (according to the preface dated September 18 of that year) 'rushed out in the autumn of 1975, at a time when the world is about to witness one of the greatest and most dramatic discoveries of the twentieth century.'

After 40 years during which the Loch Ness Monster was always good for a joke, the doubters and sceptics were to be silenced by final proof of the reality of the creature.

Well, it didn't happen, but then little about the Loch Ness legend is as the legend would have us believe. It is widely believed that Loch Ness is a dark and mysterious lake in the remote and deserted Scottish highlands. Part of the reason it is so desolate is that there have been tales of a mysterious creature lurking in the loch.

When a road made the loch accessible in the 1933 the truth of the legend was confirmed

with 52 monster sightings in twelve months (all by highly respectable people of high social standing, who would not stoop to deception), and these were soon supported by photographic evidence in the "Surgeon's photograph" taken in April 1934.

The facts are considerably different.

Loch Ness is not remote and deserted. It is part of the Great Glen, a rift valley that is a natural route for travellers crossing Scotland.

There are signs of human habitation at Loch Ness dating from prehistoric times, major roads have been running the length of the loch since before 1800, yet it was only in the 1930s that anyone saw anything strange in the loch.

As for the truthfulness of the witnesses, I'm not sure that we today share the same trust in respectability they had back in the innocent days of the thirties.

Respectability was certainly present in what is usually claimed as the first sighting of the creature. Both the witness and the reporter were certified holy men, Celtic Saints. St Adaman's Life of St Columba, noted that in the sixth century, Columba had, by the power of his voice, prevented a "water beast" from seizing a swimmer in the River Ness.



There are two things that should be noted about the legend. One, it takes place not in Loch Ness, but in the River Ness, a problem that is usually overcome by editing to make the location ambiguous.

Two, the legend does not refer to the creature as the traditional monster of the Loch, but to a monster that just appears, is rebuked by the saint and departs.

For this was its purpose. The lives of the saints weren't meant to be biographies, but illustrations of the saint's holiness. You weren't regarded as a proper Celtic saint if you couldn't walk on water, calm storms, raise the dead, and demonstrate power over beasts, preferably big ugly ones that could be assumed to be creatures of the Devil.

Actually there seems little evidence of any legendary monster specific to Loch Ness. Loch Ness became a major tourist destination in the 19th century, yet none of these tourists saw any strange creature in the Loch, or were even told about it by the locals. By 1930, the tourist trade was dying, the two tourist steamers that had plied the loch since the 1840s had been scrapped, the railway line was closing, and, unless something could be done to attract the tourist back, the economic outlook was bleak. Then on April 14 1933, the proprietors of a hotel near the loch, fortuitously saw something in the water. At the time the British Newspapers were engaged in a circulation war. While it might be hard for us today to imagine that the media would hype up a story to increase circulation, it did happen back then. The *Daily Mail* engaged 'Duke' Wetherall, a self-styled big game hunter, to discover the monster. He found tracks on the loch shore, but strangely couldn't determine what the British Museum subsequently did: that all the tracks were made by the right hind foot of a dead hippopotamus.

Of course the *Daily Mail* had more respectable witnesses, such as the 'respectable London doctor' who took the famous 'Surgeon's photo on 1 April (!) 1934. Despite the fact that he never said more than 'this is a photo of something in the water,' the general assumption was that a 'respectable' Harley street doctor would never be involved in a hoax. In 1994 it was revealed that the photo was actually taken by an acquaintance, the same 'Duke' Wetherall, and was of a model.

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It is doubtful if this will end the Loch Ness fascination. About every 10 – 15 years since the 1960s, someone decides to 'settle the question' by doing a complete sonar scan of the loch. Boats and equipment are organised, the loch is probed by sonar beams, nothing larger than a salmon is found, and the result is announced; 'Nessie's still not here.' Which settles the question: until next time.

And what caused the excitement back in 1975, mentioned to at the start of this article? Well, an automatic underwater camera snapped a picture of something, which, after computer enhancement (and possibly the help of an artist's air brush) showed an indistinct image of what could possibly be the head and neck of a huge monster.

But, despite the enthusiasm of the time, this didn't lead to any final conclusion. Then, in conjunction with the October 1987 sonar search, an underwater video camera scanned the location of the murky 1975 'sighting'. This time clear photographs were obtained of an old submerged tree trunk.

So, if you see a strange shape in the waters of Loch Ness, it could be a giant monster surviving since primeval times. Or it could be an old tree trunk. Consider the possibilities.

For additional information regarding the Loch Ness Monster, we strongly recommend Stuart Campbell's *The Loch Ness Monster – The Evidence* (Prometheus Books, 1997).

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