

ESSAY REVIEW

Discoveries and Discoverers

A Monstrous Commotion: The Mysteries of Loch Ness by Gareth Williams. London: Orion, 2016. 365 pp. ~\$20 on Amazon shipped from UK (hardcover). ISBN 978-1-4091-5873-8.

Readers should be aware that this reviewer is mentioned at several places in this book, not always in a complimentary fashion.

What do the personalities of those who assert something tell us about the possible validity of what they assert?

On scientific issues, nothing, really. As I. J. Good was fond of saying, geniuses are cranks who happen to be right, and cranks are geniuses who happen to be wrong. Both exemplify stubborn persistence and a refusal to be swayed by critiques coming from lesser minds. Sheer luck plays a huge part in scientific progress (see, e.g., Stephan & Levin 1992). Nasty people can make significant scientific advances (see, e.g., such insightful novels as Balchin 1949 or Hilton 1947). Albert Einstein was less than nice to his first wife and their daughter. And so on.

In that light, this book is wrongheaded, in effect if not in intention. Gareth Williams focuses primarily on the people who have been drawn into the quest to solve the mystery of what the Loch Ness Monster is. He disclaims making a case for or against Nessies being real animals, and at the end suggests rather vaguely that the question remains open: “a place where almost anything could be hiding” (p. 295). But throughout the text, the book makes a case implicitly against the reality of Nessies by denigrating those of us whom he calls believers and by mis-describing the evidence through the lenses of the debunkers, whom he mis-describes as skeptics.

That is a great shame, because Williams gained access to and shares with readers much interesting and useful new material, notably from the archives of Sir Peter Scott. What he cites would allow an historian or a sociologist to construct a nuanced narrative of people’s actions and what that reveals about their cultural context, for example Britain’s rigid social caste system that was only beginning to dissipate around the time of World War II.

That would leave aside, of course, the issue of whether Loch Ness harbors a population of large unidentified creatures. Such a discussion

would be in the spirit of the so-called “strong program in the sociology of science,” which held that scientific activity should be described as a truth-neutral process: How science gets done should be analyzed and understood without taking into account whether a claim or a research program turns out to be true. That this makes no sense is at last beginning to be admitted (e.g., Collins 2009), just as the associated postmodernist fad of deconstruction has been largely abandoned, in part because it was seen to be a personal attempt by Paul de Man to distract from his pro-Nazi activities (Alter 2014).

In any case, a truth-neutral story about Loch Ness might not have much popular appeal. Most people simply want to know whether Nessies are real, and they are likely to seek clues about that in this book—and thereby they would be greatly misled. *A Monstrous Commotion* is chiefly a collection of asymmetric gossip: disbelievers, debunkers, and fence-sitters are portrayed sympathetically, while committed believers are treated in a manner that verges on sneering. Moreover, substantive evidence is described quite misleadingly by accepting uncritically even highly dubious assertions by disbelievers.

About People

For one example, Roy Mackal is described as a failed academic whose failure could be ascribed to seduction into Nessie-hunting: “From that moment, Mackal’s promising career was history. . . . Some believe that Mackal was ‘booted out of the biology department’; an alternative view is that ‘lateral promotion’ landed him the post of Energy and Safety Coordinator” (pp. 261–262).

But the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology thought Mackal worthy of a respectful obituary, which described not only his early work on bacteriophage but also his restless curiosity and his love of tinkering with gadgets, suggesting that he “discovered his true calling” in cryptozoology.¹

Not unlike Mackal, after a decade or two of a quite successful career in chemistry I wanted to do something different, in my case not cryptozoology but academic Science & Technology Studies, and as a stop along the way I took an administrative position. Mackal had tenure and could not have been “booted out” without demonstrating incompetence or malfeasance. Becoming more interested in other fields is not in itself a sufficient reason for losing tenure; academe is replete with faculty who are no longer fascinated with research but who continue to pull their weight in other ways, typically by teaching or administrative service. In the absence of documentation, it is perfectly plausible that Mackal took the initiative in moving from biology research to administrative service congenial to his bent for gadgetry and

mechanical things, leaving time and intellectual effort for adventuring in search of creatures awaiting discovery. There are no grounds for denigrating Mackal for having changed interests and having the courage to follow them; to regard his career as a failure is just academic snobbery.

There are many other places in the book where individuals are portrayed less than favorably and without relevance to the possible existence of Nessies:

- Alexander Keiller enjoyed sexual orgies, for example (p. 25).

- Rupert Gould (p. 253) is said to have had a “fondness for orgies with prostitutes . . . and Keiller.” Thus he “lived the lie,” having had an ugly divorce, once suffered a mental breakdown, and had been an “unpromotable lieutenant.”

So what? “His many obituaries celebrated . . . his flair for exciting the man in the street with oddities and enigmas, and the place he earned in history by resuscitating John Harrison’s priceless chronometers.” In my view, Gould’s books (1923, 1928, 1929, 1930, 1934) remain even now informative, rewarding reading, and his work on chronometers is of permanent value.

- Robert Rines had once been described as “an unscrupulous opportunist” (p. 265) who faked the flipper photos (p. 264). “His achievements as lawyer, inventor and philanthropist . . . were breathtaking,” but “Some of it . . . was too good to be true” (p. 264); “his patents looked nothing like the eventual technologies, were never tested, and, if the laws of physics can be trusted, could never have worked” (p. 265, citing Wikipedia [!]). But the Academy of Applied Science² that Rines founded carries on worthwhile projects in science and technology education. He organized research at Loch Ness that enlisted such eminent people as Harold Edgerton, Charles Wyckoff, Martin Klein, and which produced important, unprecedented results, including the first proof that Loch Ness had been part of the ocean after the last Ice Age had ended (Rines & Dougherty 2003).

- Surgeon Wilson is alleged to have hoped “that war would break out again” (p. 36), rather incongruously since his office had been close to Harley Street which specialized in “the extraction of money from the wallets of the wealthy” (p. 36).

- This reviewer is referred to as “cryptozoologist, who believed the Monster existed and that the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) did not cause AIDS” (p. 198). I suspect that this was not intended as support for my credibility since my book-length analysis of HIV/AIDS theory (Bauer 2007) is not cited nor is the website³ where I list more than 900 peer-reviewed mainstream articles that demonstrate flaws in HIV/AIDS theory.

None of these derogatory allegations, nor any number more, could substitute for a substantive analysis of the actual evidence, and the claim that the flipper photos were faked is without basis, see About Evidence section below.

Tim Dinsdale is portrayed as an initially naïve obsessive given to wishful thinking and over-interpretation, even as it is acknowledged that it “is generally agreed that he was . . . a man of . . . transparent honesty . . . [and] ‘an intelligent man of great integrity’” (p. 263). The book giggles at his approaching the British royalty over his filmed evidence for Nessies. But a sociologist or historian might have taken the opportunity to enlighten the reader about the role of the monarchy as traditionally iconic of the best non-political aspects of British society, a role entrenched by the morale-building personal courage displayed by members of the Royal family during World War II. To a man of Dinsdale’s age (born 1924) and background (born outside Britain to parents who sought to bring British ways and faith to foreign shores), it would not have seemed inappropriate to forewarn the Palace that a zoological discovery of worldwide interest had been made within the homeland. Dinsdale had just not caught up with our modern times where credentials and connections trump substance.

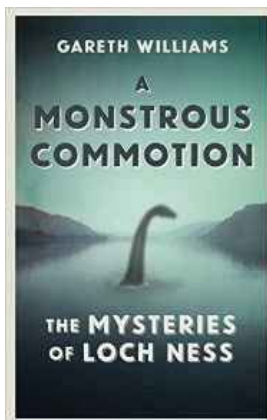
On the flip side of portraying Nessie fans unfavorably, this book relies on undocumented comments from disbelievers or debunkers such as Adrian Shine, whose attempt⁴ to characterize as a boat the Nessie hump filmed by Dinsdale is nothing short of absurd. No one who has seen the film could give Shine’s view credence. As to personalities, if one wanted to portray Shine less favorably one might cite his determined spreading of the unfounded rumor that Dinsdale had lost faith in his own film,⁵ or perhaps his unscrupulous takeover of the Loch Ness Monster exhibition that Tony Harmsworth had founded in 1979 at the Drumnadrochit Hotel.

About Evidence

The publication of this book was accompanied by considerable media ballyhoo⁶ emphasizing its new information, including that a public-relations consultant, D. G. Gerahty, had thought up Nessie to bring tourist trade to local hotels. Far from new, however: I had discovered and published this story 30 years earlier (Bauer 1986). *A Monstrous Commotion* gives my book full credit for that, but it misleads on a crucial point in saying that “Gerahty’s assertion was . . . that he created the Monster *de novo*, where none had existed before” (p. 278). In fact Gerahty had written to me that one of his partners “told us that for centuries a legendary creature was supposed to dwell in Loch Ness” (Bauer 1986:3); and *A Monstrous Commotion* even cites that on the same page as the statement that the Monster was created *de*

novo. So the publicity firm did not invent Nessie, they capitalized on old folklore that could well have a basis in fact (Bauer 1986:155–156).

The objective evidence—leaving aside eyewitnesses, that is—about Loch Ness Monsters comprises the Dinsdale film and several short clips not publicly available; a few photos, notably the underwater ones by Rines et al.; and sonar echoes. For a detailed description and analysis, including refutation of allegations of faking, re-touching, etc., see Bauer (2002a). Many of the documentaries dealing with Loch Ness are somewhat misleading, and they sometimes include serious errors (Bauer 2002b). So too with *A Monstrous Commotion*.



First, as to films: The book accepts that the Nessie hump in the Dinsdale film is really a boat, apparently taking Adrian Shine as authority (p. 263). But the hump is quite obviously not a boat, since at one point it submerges with corresponding narrowing of the wake. The film is available on the Internet,⁷ as is Shine’s discussion⁴ which is based not on an authentic copy of the film but on a TV show; see my response⁵ to Shine for more detail.

The book states that “nothing diagnostic could be made out” (p. 36) in the 1934 film taken by Captain Fraser; yet the *Proceedings of the Linnaean Society* record (Pt. 1, 8 November 1934. 7–12) that the experts judged it to be an animal, albeit they could not agree that it was an otter, seal, or whale, as one or another suggested; in other words, the film was of an unidentified, even unidentifiable and sizeable animal. Nor does the book mention the several short bits of film (upturned boat, large object on or near shore) obtained by the Loch Ness Investigation, or the 1977 Smith film that shows a tubular object rising vertically out of the water.

Second, as to the Rines photos: The book accepts that the flipper photos are fakes (p. 264). That is unadulterated nonsense. As stated on my website⁸:

Charles Wyckoff, the photographic expert on the Rines team points out that the only manipulation was to superpose several transparencies filtered through different colors. Alan Gillespie, who did this “computer enhancing” at Jet Propulsion Lab, pointed out that the flipper shape can be seen in the original un-enhanced transparency, which was published in a WILDLIFE, March 1976, article by Nigel Sitwell, “The Loch Ness Monster evidence”, pp. 101–109. The “retouching” allegation was first made in an article in DISCOVER magazine, which refused then to print Wyckoff’s letter of protest, a copy of which is now available here.⁹

Rines is criticized for failing to publish the claimed photos, for example one purported to show parts of two Nessies; but the latter is the bottom illustration in this book's Plate 46, albeit mis-described there as a computer-enhanced version of the flipper in the upper part of Plate 46.

The book also accepts that the most famous Nessie photo, the Surgeon's, was faked; for a debunking of that allegation, see Shuker (1995: 87).

Third, as to sonar evidence: The book discounts this rather vaguely by pointing to possible artefacts, echoes off side walls, and periodic water seiche (pp. 243–236). But there are far too many documented reports of large, moving, underwater things to all be dismissed as artefacts, for instance the 1969 tracking of an object that moved steadily through a circular course underneath the tracking boat (p. 148). Shine recorded more than 40 contacts with moving objects underneath his floating platform in the early 1980s, described then as confirming the observations by the Birmingham team some years earlier. In 1987, Operation Deepscan recorded 3 contacts with objects that could not later be located again, one of them described by the sonar manufacturer Lowrance as not a shoal of fish and larger than a shark but smaller than a whale. A midget submarine "logged a large sonar contact, 50 feet above the bottom, which moved away as the submarine closed in"; but this is described as "Positive results: nil"! (p. 147).

There are a few other errors in the book as well, as pointed out above regarding Plate 46. Thus Plate 1, the Hugh Gray photo, shows a bulky, light-colored object apparently at rest with a long protuberance (neck?) at the left and the suggestion of a short one (tail?) at the right, with little blips where front and hind limbs would be; yet the text (p. 24) calls it a sinuous dark object with spray suggesting high speed. The book also cites the suggestion that Plate 1 shows a dog with a stick in its mouth, on the authority of Tony Harmsworth recounting that schoolchildren pointed this out to him (p. 230). I've tried unsuccessfully for years to see that, not succeeding despite Harmsworth's hints of how to look. *A Monstrous Commotion* cites (p. 230 & p. 340 note 23) Harmsworth's book (2010:88), but the relevant pages in Harmsworth are 83–84, and he mentions a visitor to his exhibition, not schoolchildren, as "seeing" the dog.

Others' Opinions

A number of individuals have made favorable mention of this book on various websites. I certainly agree that it makes interesting reading, replete as it is with human-interest material. I confess that, like many others, I cannot help getting interested when people of whom I know something are subjected to derogatory gossip, as here about Dinsdale, Gould, Keiller, Mackal, Rines, et al. But I hope that other readers will be as clear as I am that flawed human

beings—as we all are—have nevertheless accomplished major things—which far from all of us have. And I certainly hope that readers of the book will not be taken in by the biased and erroneous presentation of the evidence (see above).

Notes

- ¹ Angela Hopp (2014). Roy P. Mackal (1925–2013)—Biochemist-turned-cryptozoologist hunted Loch Ness monster and other mysterious beasts. <http://www.asbmb.org/asbmbtoday/201409/Retrospective/Mackal>
- ² <http://aas-world.org>
- ³ The Case against HIV (2013). <http://thecaseagainsthiv.net>
- ⁴ Adrian Shine (2003). The Dinsdale Loch Ness film. An image analysis. <https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/56983081/FilmAnalysis---dinsdale%20paper%202003%20V2.pdf>
- ⁵ Henry H. Bauer, “To whom it may concern” (response to Shine’s request for a copy of the Dinsdale film). <https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/56983081/HHB%20response%20CZ-list.pdf>
- ⁶ I saw stories in a number of newspapers:
<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/weird-news/legend-loch-ness-monster-invented-6743971>
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3297971/Was-Nessie-just-invention-boozy-London-pub-lunch-hoteliers-keen-drum-custom-Scottish-hotels.html>
<http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/features/6719078/Loch-Ness-monster-was-invented-at-a-boozy-pub-lunch.html>
<http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/cant-true-london-pr-come-6745044>
<http://www.thenational.scot/news/was-the-loch-ness-monster-just-a-pr-stunt-to-boost-hotel-occupancy-in-the-1930s.9566>
<http://www.thenational.scot/news/new-twist-in-nessies-tale-debunks-claims-of-pr-stunt.9608>
<http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/legend-loch-nessie-believers-inspire-6779943>
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/news/2015/november/loch-ness-mystery.html>
<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/loch-ness-monster-just-fantasy-6840324>
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/event/article-3325725/Loch-Ness-monster-CRAIG-BROWN-Lost-Ness-monster-hasn-t-spotted-1954-1933-cares.html>
as well as on various websites, for example:
<https://uk.news.yahoo.com/loch-ness-monster-pr-stunt-142502542.html#9TbV2Vm>

<http://www.thedrum.com/news/2015/11/02/historian-claims-nessie-nothing-more-monster-pr-wheeze>

⁷ <http://www.themanwhofilmednessie.com/tims-nessie-film.html>

⁸ Genuine facts about “Nessie,” the Loch Ness “Monster”;
<http://henryhbauer.homestead.com/LochNessFacts.html>

⁹ Charles Wyckoff to Henry Grunwald, 27 August 1984.
<https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/56983081/WyckoffToDiscover.pdf>

HENRY H. BAUER

Professor Emeritus of Chemistry & Science Studies
Dean Emeritus of Arts & Sciences
Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University
hhbauer@vt.edu; www.henryhbauer.homestead.com

References Cited

- Alter, R. (2014). Paul de Man was a total fraud: The literary-critical giant lied about every part of his life. *New Republic*, 5(April). <https://newrepublic.com/article/117020/paul-de-man-was-total-fraud-evelyn-barish-reviewed>
- Balchin, N. (1949). *A Sort of Traitors*. London: Collins; *Who is my Neighbor?* Boston: Houghton, Mifflin.
- Bauer, H. H. (1986). *The Enigma of Loch Ness: Making Sense of a Mystery*. Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Bauer, H. H. (2002a). The case for the Loch Ness ‘Monster’: The scientific evidence. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 16:225–246. http://henryhbauer.homestead.com/16.2_bauer.pdf
- Bauer, H. H. (2002b). Common knowledge about the Loch Ness Monster: Television, video, and films. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 16:455–477. http://henryhbauer.homestead.com/16.3_bauer.pdf
- Bauer, Henry H. (2007). *The Origin, Persistence and Failings of HIV/AIDS Theory*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Collins, H. (2009). We cannot live by scepticism alone. *Nature*, 458:30–31.
- Gould, R. T. (1923). *Marine Chronometer: Its History and Development*. London: J. D. Potter.
- Gould, R. T. (1928). *Oddities*. London: Philip Allan.
- Gould, R. T. (1929). *Enigmas*. London: Philip Allan.
- Gould, R. T. (1930). *The Case for the Sea-Serpent*. London: Philip Allan.
- Gould, R. T. (1934). *The Loch Ness Monster and Others*. London: Geoffrey Bles.
- Harmsworth, T. (2010). *Loch Ness—Nessie—and Me: The Truth Revealed*. Drumnadrochit, Scotland: Harmsworth Consultancy.
- Hilton, J. (1947). *Nothing So Strange*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Rines, R. H., & Dougherty, F. M. (2003). Proof Positive—Loch Ness was an ancient arm of the sea. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 17:317–323.
- Shuker, K. P. N. (1995). *In Search of Prehistoric Survivors*. London: Blandford.
- Stephan, P. E., & Levin, S. G. (1992). *Striking the Mother Lode in Science: The Importance of Age, Place, and Time*. New York: Oxford University Press.