



LETTER TO THE
EDITOR

Comments on Watson's "Empirical Analysis of the Hugh Gray 'Nessie' Photograph"

Bruce Champagne

I would like to comment on Watson's interesting paper on the subject of the 1933, Hugh Gray, Loch Ness photograph that appeared in the Summer issue of this journal (Watson, 2022). Having a couple of Roland Watson's books in my personal library (which I strongly recommend) and having corresponded with him for his opinion and thoughts in my own research, I can assure the reader that Watson has a significant knowledge of the history and current thought on the subject of the Loch Ness Monster (LNM) and other unidentified aquatic megafauna of the area. I would suggest this paper would benefit, and the proposals strengthened, with a greater and more consistent application and methodology (Heuvelmans, 1988) and a greater effort toward explanations of any imbalance.

DISCOUNTING THE WITNESS

An initial inference is that Watson asks the reader to discount the witness's narrative but accept his. If Gray's minutes-long account should be disregarded in whole or part, it could be helpful to understand why it should be accepted at all, and why Watson's interpretation is preferable over Gray's eyewitness report or any of the other cited suggestions. This exercise is critical, as Watson's proposal could not stand unless Gray's narrative is discounted.

It must be remembered the photograph captured only a split second of time, not the entirety of Gray's experience. Gray reportedly watched the target object for a "few minutes" under bright sunlight at a researched distance of 32–50 m. Under such conditions, it would be reasonable to expect Gray would have been able to identify, at some point, a swan or other bird, a swimming dog, bobbing log, otter, or extraordinary invertebrate. Though Watson identified a head, Gray said he never saw the creature's head.

Allowably, eyewitness reports can be challenging to analyze. A witness can be honest and certain, but still mistaken. Not only can witness recall be influenced by their selective or global attention of an event (Vickers, 2007), but also by the presence of a bias or schema used to interpret any ambiguous information associated with the event (Tuckey & Brewer, 2003).

In my previous studies of unknown aquatic megafauna, I noted a need for a more robust methodology to evaluate the quality, credibility, and usefulness of an observation, before any inclusion into a dataset for subsequent analysis, and developed a rating scale upon which each observation was subjected (Champagne, 2007, 2016). I realized actual observations could be discounted and errors could be included, but understood the importance of applying a consistent, defensible, and repeatable system of data quality control. Using that methodology and the information provided by this paper, at best Gray's

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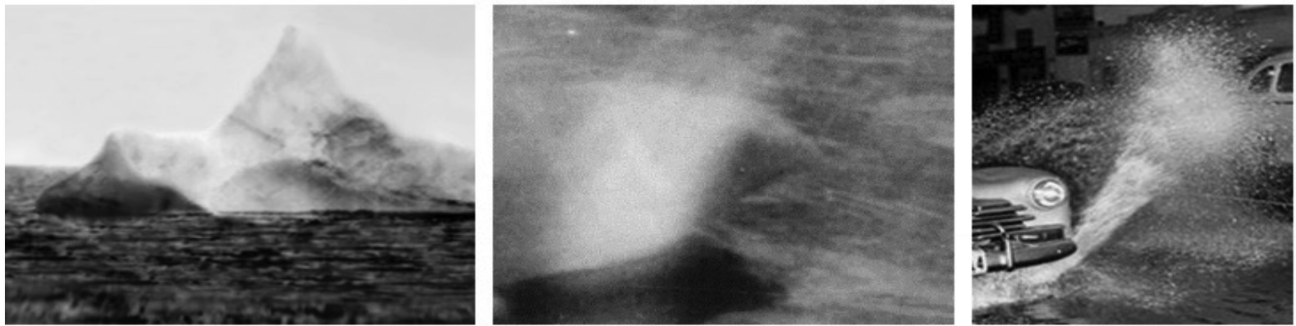


Figure 1. Comparison of the Palmer Titanic iceberg photo (left), the Gray photograph (center), and a period photograph (right).

observation would have scored the minimum rating for a debatable inclusion into the unknown aquatic megafauna dataset.

CAMERA CAPABILITY

Watson's proposal is also dependent on the capabilities and limitations of the camera Gray used to photograph the target subject. Some allowance was made for overexposure; however, Watson's proposal suggests Gray's photograph captures spraying water, which necessarily obstructs or influences not only Gray's view at the time but also anyone else's subsequent examination of the photograph.

Understanding the capacity of the camera to capture the image under the conditions both known and estimated would support Watson's conclusions. Though the camera is not specifically identified, apparently the photograph negative was examined by Mr. M. Howard of Kodak and Mr. C. Clarke of the *Kodak Magazine*. Because of that association, and the fact the popular Kodak Brownie box camera was manufactured by the Eastman Kodak Company during that period (Gustavson, 2009, 2011), it could be that Gray used one of the affordable 120 film camera models of the time to produce the questioned photograph.

It is unknown if Gray used a tripod, but it could be assumed he understood he may have had limited time to photograph the unique target subject, and rather than taking the time to mount his camera on a tripod, held the camera by hand to ensure he had time to photograph the subject. As a result, the resulting photographs may have been affected by camera movement. The camera would also have been subject to overexposure. The Kodak box camera user's manual of that period advised that under the sunlight conditions Gray reported, "The shutter can hardly be opened and closed quickly enough to

avoid over-exposure" (Kodak).

With informal research, I confirmed that the period Brownie box camera was capable of capturing moving, spraying water, and was indeed, subject to overexposure and artifacts (Figure 1).

My personal observation is that the Gray photograph is more consistent with the effects of overexposure rather than the display of airborne water.

PAREIDOLIA AND COGNITIVE BIAS

Watson suggests the counterproposals are the reflection of pareidolia, apparently because they disagree with his proposal and their suggestions required drawings and image outlining in support. I would agree with Watson that the skeptical exercises and alternative proposals are biased, incomplete, poorly demonstrated, and/or otherwise implausible—in essence, pseudoscience. However, Watson uses the same outlining application as the counterproposals he is critical of.

Unfortunately, circling and outlining are common in the study of hypothetical species. To prime a recognition (Bourne & Ekstrand, 1985), dark shadows in forests and thick vegetation are routinely circled to identify the hiding relict hominoids within them, and outlines direct our recognition of unknown animals from the ambiguous shapes in, and contours of, water.

Naish (2016, 2021) is an educated skeptic, and Watson and the other participants are active investigators of the LNM. Like any human being, each is subject to bias. Daniel Schacter (2002) reflected:

“. . . the various forms of bias are so deeply embedded in human cognition that few good remedies exist for overcoming or avoiding them altogether. Perhaps the best we can do is to appreciate that cur-

rent knowledge, beliefs, and feeling can influence our recollections of the past and shape our impressions of people and objects in the present. By exercising due vigilance, and recognizing the possible sources of our convictions about past and present, we can reduce the distortions. . .

With the same photograph producing such varied proposals, I would suggest each participant demonstrated a cognitive bias and prototype matching with their individual proposals and arguments. This reminded me of the Jastrow 1899 Rabbit–Duck Experiment.

Psychologist Joseph Jastrow examined human perception and the associated visual processing, and how it related to our interpretation of our environment. Jastrow used drawings and optical illusions to illustrate his argument that what is actually perceived is dependent on our mental and emotional states and how we experience and view our environment (Jastrow, 1900). Jastrow conducted well-known experiments with the ambiguous drawing of a rabbit or duck to support his observations (Figure 2). Which do you see? A rabbit, or a duck?

One would expect that not only the Gray photograph but also the individual proposals about it should be able to stand on their own merits without outlined interpretations, drawings, or photographic overlays. I informally asked seven adults to individually identify anything they observed in the Gray photograph. None of them had ever seen the photograph and had no interest in unknown aquatic megafauna. Answers ranged from reflected light, an x-ray, an ultrasound image, a whale (though not

consistent with Watson’s drawing), or had no idea. Interestingly, the person reporting an ultrasound image had just been discussing them minutes before the exercise. No one reported seeing a swan, dog, or unknown serpent.

CONSILIENCE AND CONSISTENCY

Perhaps, future skeptical examinations could strive for consilience of independent and historic data (Laudan, 1981), and objective analyses could improve the consistency of critique and application. And perhaps, the Gray photograph should remain inconclusive and unidentified for the time being.

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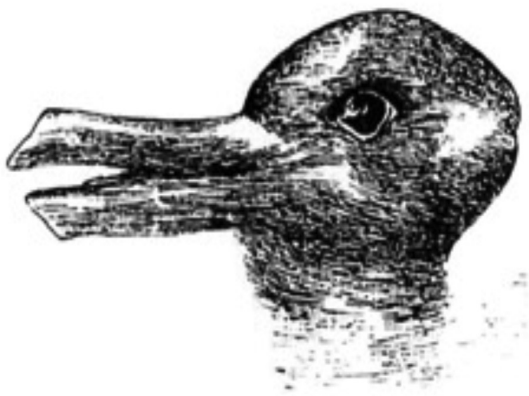


Figure 2. Jastrow’s Rabbit–Duck (Jastrow, 1900).