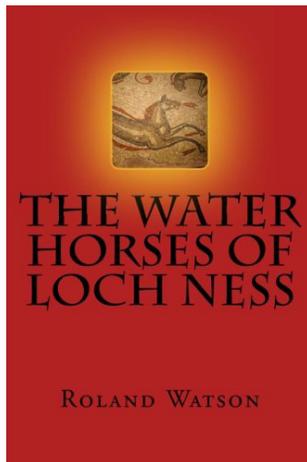**BOOK REVIEW**

The Water Horses of Loch Ness
by Roland Watson

**Reviewed by
Henry H. Bauer**

hhbauer@vt.edu

Virginia Polytechnic Institute
& State University

CONTEXT AND AUTHOR DISCLOSURES

This is an updated version of a review written in 2011 that somehow fell through the cracks of publishing procedures; a shorter version was posted on Amazon.com and is still there, dated 24 October 2011.

One reason for publishing it now is simply that it is an excellent book worth drawing to the attention of Scientific Explorers. Another reason is that we are working on an analysis of the spurious criticisms made, typically by self-styled Skeptics, about the reality of the so-called "monsters" of Loch Ness, the Nessies; and the book reviewed here includes some important original, even unique, relevant data.

The author of this review also discloses conflicts of interest: a long-standing belief in the real existence of Nessies[1] and congenial e-mail relations with Roland Watson.

For a reliable overview of the history of Nessie-hunting, I recommend Witchell (1989). For an illustration of how the same evidence may be used to support opposing beliefs, that Nessies are not real and that they are real, see chapters 1 and 2 in Bauer (1986).

CONTENT OVERVIEW

In *The Water Horses of Loch Ness*, Roland Watson presents a significant and original contribution to methods for evaluating and interpreting traditional stories and folklore.

Are Nessies real animals, or are they an entrepreneurial tourist trap capitalizing on folklore? Or are they perhaps supernatural entities?

Each of those hypotheses has its adherents, and they each offer evidence. Most cryptozoologists pursue the real-animals hypothesis. However, a British novelist and former PR executive confessed to inventing the creatures to help the hotel industry (Bauer, 1986, pp. 3–4), and an Italian journalist later claimed, separately and independently, to have invented the creatures[2]. Ted Holiday (1973), among others, envisaged a supernatural explanation.

In any event, it surely seems relevant that Scots folklore features such creatures as Water Horses, Water Bulls, Water Kelpies, to which are attributed a variety of characteristics. But relevant in what way? How to assess what lies at the root of this folklore?

The serious cryptozoological literature about Loch Ness mentions the legendary stories rather fitfully. Constance Whyte, in *More than a Legend* (1957), presented a determinedly empirical discussion of the evidence and referred to the difficulty in evaluating what local inhabitants have to say, citing the fellow who denied having seen the Loch Ness Monster, saying that he had however seen the Water Horse.

The debunkers try to make much of the fact that the big fuss arose in 1933, asking why Nessies only appeared then. As earlier possible mentions were uncovered, they would dismiss those as mere folklore, legend, myth. But, as Dmitri Bayanov has pointed

out with respect to yetis and their ilk, if anything like such creatures existed then surely they would have made their way somehow into folklore. A presence in traditional tales is no evidence that nothing real is at its root.

In *The Water Horses of Loch Ness*, Roland Watson gathers written accounts pre-dating 1933, more comprehensively than any earlier work about Nessies. He then uses this information in an ingenious manner. Is An Niseag, the water creature of Loch Ness, just like the kelpies and water horses and water bulls associated with other Scottish lochs?

It is not, it turns out. Half of all the books that mention such creatures mention the Loch Ness creature specifically; it is referred to more than twice as often as any other such entity.

Is that because Loch Ness itself was so often mentioned by geographers and others for some other reason than its Water Horses? How to estimate that?

By using Google Ngrams. That's one of the valuable things I learned about from this book. Google has scanned by now about 4% of all books ever printed, and this database can be searched to find how the frequency of use of a word or phrase has changed over time. For a quick overview, see http://books.google.com/ngrams/info; for the full treatment, see Michel et al. (2011).

Watson used Ngrams to determine how often Loch Ness itself had been mentioned. Only about as often as Loch Tay, and far less frequently than Loch Lomond, Loch Katrine, and Loch Awe. In other words, where Loch Ness is concerned, its Water Horses are a significantly more characteristic attribute than are such creatures in other Scottish lochs. Nessies are not the "usual" folklore associated "typically" with Scottish lakes.

Of course this does not establish for certain that Nessies are real animals, but it does put the kibosh on debunkers' arguments that Nessies are no more than myths, misperceptions, and 1930s tourist attractions. Nor does Watson attempt to extrapolate the evidence to that extent.

Indeed, a further attractive feature of this book is its determination not to shy away from any of the evidence, no matter that explanations are not yet forthcoming. Thus the land sightings—more than 30 of them—are pointed to; they pose real difficulties in identifying possible candidates for Nessie's identity. A survey of the candidates—fish, reptile, mammal, invertebrate—illustrates that no good explanation is yet at hand. In a more recent book, Watson (2018) offers a fully detailed and documented analysis of the land-sighting reports.

A particularly useful aspect of this book, at least for me, was Appendix B, "The ones that got away," which lists some of the claimed source-references to Nessies that others than the original author were unable to trace: John Keel's claim about an article in the 1890s in the *Atlanta Constitution*, and David James about a mention in Daniel Defoe's travel book. Watson also debunks an alleged Roman reference to a sea monster in a harbor named for Augustus, since the Fort Augustus at Loch Ness was not so named until many centuries later.

THE BOOK'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE LITERATURE

For the literature specifically about Loch Ness, the definitive list of reported sightings before 1933 is invaluable, as is the discussion of sources sometimes mentioned without specific citation. For the literature generally about cryptozoology, this book's approach is exemplary and, so far as I know, original and unique. All potential readers who do not yet know of, let alone use N-grams, this little gem of knowledge will be greatly appreciated.

Beyond the Nessie material and Google Ngrams, I also learned about the Moorov doctrine in Scottish law, which Watson mentions without explanation. Google helped me there immediately: The Moorov doctrine offers criteria for judging the reliability of corroborating evidence.

RECOMMENDATION

Highly recommended reading for anyone with even the slightest interest in the possible existence of animals featured in folklore myth and legend. Absolutely essential reading for cryptozoologists in general and Nessie fans in particular.

NOTES

[1] https://henryhbauer.homestead.com/LochNessFacts.html

[2] "Invention of Loch Ness monster, fortune-teller's misfortune and an amusing fraud". https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/invention-of-loch-ness-monster-fortune-teller-s-misfortune-and-an-amusing-fraud-1.1237032

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