

LOCH NESS ODYSSEY

by Henry H. Bauer

*Who, therefore, will join me in this search for the truth
—about the shores of this strange and beautiful place?*

TIM DINSDALE

ON MY NINTH VISIT TO LOCH NESS, I NO LONGER EXPECT TO SEE THE MONSTER, even though I fully believe that it exists. Others may think that paradoxical, but I think it shows that I have learned a bit about the Monster, and about some other things as well.

In 1958, on my first visit and as a casual tourist, I didn't expect to see the Monster because I didn't believe in it. In fact, I actively disbelieved in it. I knew the Monster to be a myth, a joke, or a hoax, good for the tourist trade but not for serious consideration. So I gave a mental sneer when, browsing in the library a few years later, I came upon a book entitled *Loch Ness Monster*. Superciliously I riffled the pages and found some glossy ones with photos, and those photos gave me pause. A long pause, for I took the book home and read it, and—for perhaps the first time in my life—I really didn't know what to believe.

The author, Tim Dinsdale, described with quite embarrassing naiveté how his interest had been aroused by a magazine piece, how he had searched out and analyzed reports by people who had seen the Monster, and how he had found so many similarities among the descriptions that he just had to believe the witnesses. Dinsdale described how he had borrowed a movie camera, fixed it onto a tripod in his car, spent his week's holiday at Loch Ness and, on the very last morning of his stay, filmed the large hump of a Monster moving through the water. He then contacted naturalists and scientists, and one of them, whom he did not name, advised him to keep his film secret pending professional assessment. He waited for months, in vain, for the professionals to speak. The book went on to tell of the many other places in the world where water monsters had been discovered by people, but ignored by science.

How incredibly naive it all was—monsters not only in Loch Ness but all over the world to boot! Dinsdale was so ready to trust anyone and everyone, so unaware of the pitfalls of observation and interpretation and of human improbity. Good reason not to believe what he had to say: that there exist animals forty or fifty feet long, looking unlike anything else alive today but very like the dinosaurs which died out sixty million years ago, animals that had somehow escaped the attention of science, even though they lived in a not-at-all-remote lake with roads and villages right beside the water. Hugely improbable.

But then again, there were the photos, and Dinsdale's very naiveté was subtly compelling—he seemed so to take it for granted that others could believe him that I was unwilling not to do so. Mentally back and forth I went, reading everything I could find about the Monster; and after a decade or so, I was more inclined to believe than to disbelieve. I had a sabbatical year in Britain, and in the spring of 1973 I managed my second visit to Loch Ness, not this time as a casual tourist but as a determined seeker of clues about Nessie.

Driving along the shore, I recognized Tim Dinsdale, from photos I had often seen. My family likes to tease me about that occasion, when not wanting to let him get away, I chased Tim through the woods, realizing belatedly that he needed to answer a call of nature.

Dinsdale was guarded with me on that first meeting. I had just seen some fake-looking photos, and I asked his opinion of them. I got only a noncommittal respond. Later, of course, I came to understand why he needed to be on his guard with strangers, but on that first occasion I was puzzled. However, we went on to talk of other things: Tim told me of the underwater photo recently published, showing a large flipper, and we exchanged addresses. We corresponded; and I arranged a lecture tour for him in and around Kentucky, where we then lived.

I invited Tim to stay in our house, and he turned out to be the most considerate guest we had ever had. He had a marvelous sense of fun and, far from being monomaniacal, as one might have supposed, on the subject of the monster, was interested in everything. He even revealed that he was longing for the time when the Monster would be accepted in science so that he could leave it and go on to other things. Our children and our cats—than whom there are no better judges of human character—gave Tim their stamp of approval on sight.

So I came to know Tim Dinsdale. I heard him speak on many occasions, I saw his film many times, and I became firmly convinced that the Monster exists. I came to understand why Tim's book had made him seem so naive: he *was* blessedly naive, always; expecting the best of everyone and always surprised when he encountered chicanery. He himself was as transparently honest and idealistic as anyone who ever quested the Holy Grail, and, as most of us do, he judged others by himself.

He told stories that had the strong flavor of authenticity—about the old Scot who was out in a boat when the Monster surfaced but wouldn't waste his film trying to photograph it, about the people who had told Tim of sightings but wouldn't admit it in public, about the well-known people who were playing both sides of the street, judiciously skeptical in public but maneuvering to accept credit for the discovery when it finally came.

I became the enthusiastic new convert. It was necessary to convert others, and it was necessary for me to see the Monster myself so that I could bear more convincing witness. So I returned to the loch as often as I could: in 1975 and 1980 and 1983 and, in 1985, for a mini-sabbatical of six weeks, alone, just to think and to write.

There is a paradox of scale that characterizes much of the Highlands: large distances and heights whose contours somehow evoke a feeling of closeness, of intimacy even. The clean, clear air must have something to do with it; that one can see everything so distinctly gives one a feeling that all is within reach, even the individual trees one can see so clearly miles away. Last year I watched a swan, about a mile from me across Urquhart Bay, as it paddled off north toward Lochend; an hour later I could still see it, or at least its wake on the otherwise still water. When the loch has its black-glassy calm—much more often in early morning and late at night than during the day—the wake from a single boat spreads steadily out to touch both shorelines, which are almost exactly a mile apart. That this single wake, with its recurring and successive patterns, so covers the whole loch perhaps accounts for the feeling—the illusion—that the boat and the loch share a single scale of size. In reality, of course, a hundred of those boats placed end-to-end would still not stretch all the way from one shore to the other.

This paradox of physical scale is paralleled by a paradox of scale in human affairs. On the one hand, Loch Ness is cosmopolitan and international. For more than fifty years, the "Loch Ness Monster" has been part of the vocabulary of people on every continent. On the other hand, activity at the loch itself is at the pace and on the scale of a quite small village. Those who have never visited Loch Ness imagine it to be a capacious, developed tourist resort; the reality is quite different.

In October 1987 a couple of hundred journalists came to observe a much bally-hoed sonar search for Nessie (Operation Deepscan, unkindly dubbed by some "Deep Scam"). They were mostly accommodated in Inverness, half a dozen miles out of sight of the northern end of the loch, because only a handful of hotel rooms is available at Loch Ness itself. Along the perimeter of the loch, about forty miles, there are sparsely scattered houses and half a dozen villages. At Dores and Lochend and outside the villages, the only accommodation for tourists is bed-and-breakfast in private homes or caravans or at a couple of youth hostels and camping sites; Foyers and Invermoriston each have only a single, small hotel, and there is another at lochside a few miles north from Drumnadrochit. Drumnadrochit and Fort Augustus each have several hotels, but most of them are also quite small.

Traffic along the loch may at times seem quite brisk, but the winding road is just two lanes, by no means a super-highway. By early evening the traffic thins, and quiet begins to descend. Last summer we stayed in a house right above the road. Our view extended over some ten or fifteen miles of the loch, but at night only a very few lights marked the dwellings, the village streets, the occasional moving car. After six or seven in the evening—still several hours before dusk—and until eight or nine the following morning, we heard chiefly birds and sheep and a few human voices. Yet we were within earshot of Urquhart Castle, the most famous viewing site of the loch. It has by far the largest parking area, sufficient for as many as forty cars and four or five buses at a time, large for a village but hardly for an international tourist resort.

For most of the world, the Monster is the most important thing about Loch Ness, but for most of those who live here it may be almost the least important. It matters to them only indirectly because visitors want to know about it and because it helps tourism. A robust sense of proportion and of values survives here. Tourism is encouraged, to be sure, because it affords one of very few avenues for people to earn a decent living; but the emphasis is on living. The making of money has not yet become for everyone an obsession in and of itself; so tourism is not exploited, nor is the individual tourist. The Highlander may be frugal, but he is not greedy, and he is not skilled in the ways of greediness. So we have here also a paradox of economic scale. On the one hand, the Loch Ness Monster generates at no cost worldwide publicity that no business, industry, or even country could afford. On the other hand, the level of commercial exploitation is quite wonderfully low. Until 1980, there was not even that car park above Urquhart Castle.

By and large, Nessie is directly exploited just on postcards, T-shirts, and tea-towels, in figurines of ceramic or of solid or inflatable plastic—penny-ante stuff. The level of insight (fortunately) and taste (unfortunately) that has spurred commercial exploitation is nicely illustrated by the bright money-making idea of 1987: "Nessie messies," faked animal droppings. In the last ten years, commercialism has visibly affected Drumnadrochit, where one hotelier has an "official" Monster Exhibition (actually quite a good one), "Monster Cruises" to his other hotel a few miles away, and an active feud with another hotelier who advertises the "Loch Ness Visitor Centre" a hundred yards down the road from the "official" Loch Ness Centre. But all this is still a very far cry from such characterless monstrosities of touristic degradation as Aviemore, a skiing and time-share-condos development in the foothills of the Cairngorm Mountains. Aviemore, with its rootless newness and incessant motion, everything quite up-to-date in tasteless banality, is only twenty-five miles from Loch Ness but a whole world apart.

Just as few of the individual entrepreneurs around Loch Ness understand much about commercial exploitation, so too are the Development and Tourist authorities out of their depth with the Monster and the fame it has brought. The Loch Ness

Investigation, a non-profit group led by a Member of Parliament, had organized Nessie-hunting, information-gathering, and news-disseminating for a decade, but lack of official local support, of sympathy even, led to its demise in the early 1970s. At about the same time, a charlatan and faker of Nessie photos was allowed to peddle his wares at lochside, where he remained until 1985, disseminating sometimes quite vicious falsehoods. The for-much-profit "official" Loch Ness Centre is advertised copiously in pamphlets distributed (and ostensibly prepared) by the Tourist Office, with such misleading claims as that the Centre houses the "National Archive" about the Monster. Yet in the Inverness Museum there is not even a passing reference made to the Monster, and the Inverness Public Library has few of the books about it.

Most incredibly, perhaps, fish-farming on Loch Ness is being permitted. Tourism brings far more to this area than fish-farming ever could, and fish-farming is ultimately incompatible with the idea of Nessie. Nessies are supposed to eat salmon, so salmon in cages on the loch ought to attract Nessies. If they don't, for long enough, the Nessie story may come to seem even more unbelievable than it now does.

I do believe in Nessies, as I've already confessed; but even I find it difficult to keep that belief bright when I'm actually at the loch. Many things here conspire to make Nessies seem unbelievable. For one, the locals keep their serious beliefs private. For another, this seems too domesticated a scene, of gentle pasture and tended forest, to be home for a huge, marine dinosaur. This is not the Lost World of Amazonia or a jungle of Central Africa; it is more like a garden. Even the much-maligned weather is mild, the rain so gentle and mist-like that soil erosion seems to be unknown; the farmers plough up and down the slopes rather than across them. But perhaps what most makes the Monster so unbelievable for the casual visitor is the lack of any monster-watching or monster-hunting. One can circle the loch without encountering powerful viewing instruments or cameras. The raft from which sonar and underwater strobes and cameras were deployed in Urquhart Bay in the 1970s is no longer there. The Loch Ness Project, featured in the Monster Exhibition and in the few days of Operation Deepscan, is nowhere to be seen on the water. Where have all the monster-hunters gone?

Actually, the lack of visible monster-hunting bespeaks not so much a lack of monster-hunters as a lack of suitably promising means of hunting. Off and on over more than fifty years, individuals and organized groups watched from shore and from the water, and their yield was small indeed: perhaps a score of sightings per year, usually nothing more than brief glimpses of a hump or an inexplicably large wake or a flurry of spray. Over the years, a total of perhaps a dozen or, generously, a score of indistinct photos and a similar number of scraps of moving film comprise the total yield of "hard" evidence, together of course with sonar "echoes" that tantalize more than they reveal.

The unpalatable truth is that Nessies don't spend much time at the surface, so little, in fact, that surface-watching can succeed only through the wildest, most improbable luck. Underwater photography faces even more incredible odds because the range of visibility is only tens of feet. Admittedly, sonar can "see" at long range underwater, and it has. Many hunters, with various bits of apparatus, have detected apparently large, moving, underwater objects. But they only reconfirm the existence of the mystery, for the sonars could not determine the shape or the material nature of their targets. They might even have been artifacts—water-layers of different temperatures, for instance. Unlikely though it seems, especially to those who know little about it, mankind's science and mankind's technology are not yet up to the task of thoroughly exploring Loch Ness.

But the monster-hunters, while not visible, are nevertheless here. They have either remained here, or they continue to return. I suspect that, like me, they have gained and learned much from their interest in the Loch Ness Monster, if not about the Monster itself then about other verities, temporal and eternal.

In the years that I have been coming to Loch Ness, I also encountered other matters as vexing as the existence of Nessie: Velikovsky's claim that Venus nearly collided with the earth just a few thousand years ago; tales of abominable snowmen and of flying saucers and of innumerable other oddities; myths that turned into facts, for instance the Kraken, which was the giant squid, or the herbal folklore through which were discovered digitalis and curare and much else. I came to realize that I had learned, starting with Nessie, about a great deal more than Nessie; I had begun to distinguish among knowledge, belief, and faith, and between scientific knowledge and truth.

I realized that I had needed to see a Nessie because I had imagined that I couldn't and shouldn't believe unless I had seen for myself, but now I know that seeing a Nessie is not at all a good reason for believing in it. I realized that I had felt the need to convert others because my own belief had not been entirely solid, that I had needed the assurance that others believed as I did; but now I know that what most people believe is often, usually even, wrong. I realized that I had needed to prove something, to others and to myself; and then, to my pleasant surprise, I found that I hadn't the need to prove those things any more.

It may have been the matter of cameras that led me to recognize what had happened to me. On successive visits to the loch, I was finding it increasingly irksome to be carrying cameras at the ready, not enjoying the scene because I dared not let my eyes wander far from the water. I found myself wanting just to experience what was there, instead of having to stay alert for a possible sighting. It was no longer so important to me, I recognized, that Nessie be finally photographed and proven. No such proof could add to the gifts that had already come to me through the mediation of Nessie and of Tim: new ventures both professional and avocational,

new and warm friendships, new and fascinating acquaintances, far more new interests than I could ever have the time to explore. Paradoxically perhaps, having so much to look forward to also made it easier to live in the present. It would be nice, to be sure, if I were to see Nessie some time, but it was also very nice just to be here.

So, on my ninth visit to Loch Ness, I no longer needed to see the Monster; and I no longer expected to see the Monster. My wife, among others, thinks that paradoxical, but I think it shows what I have learned. About Nessies, I've learned that they come so rarely to the surface that no one, including those who believe in them, should expect to see one. About paradoxes, I've learned that they exist only in the human mind, before understanding has dawned.

Unquestionably there is the opportunity at Loch Ness to gain understanding. There is the opportunity to learn humility, recognizing how gradually man has found secure settlement in this glorious but difficult terrain. There are burial cairns more than four thousand years old; vitrified forts, much younger but still very old, on some of the crags; ancient field systems with foundations of former dwellings all around Loch Ness. Cherry Island, in Inchnacardoch Bay near Fort Augustus, is a crannog, an artificial island built by homesteaders. The coming of Christianity is recalled by many places named for Ninian and by reminders of Columba, and the earlier pagan times can be glimpsed for example in the pre-history of Temple House and its sacred well. There lives here a richly legendary past: Urquhart Castle, Culloden battlefield, Prince Charlie's Cave, General Wade's Roads. And there are too, of course, marks left by modern technology and modern romanticism: the Caledonian Canal; Boleskine House, where Aleister Crowley practiced black magic and where a rock-singer now resides; a small hippie commune across the water at Bunloit.

It may have been the Monster that brought some of us to Loch Ness, but it is hardly the Monster that keeps us here. Perhaps we experience here a serene sort of satori, a tangible metaphor. Vast spaces seem intimate. The miles of loch are imprinted by the wave-patterns of a single boat; though so different in scale, they are somehow compatible and in harmony. So too is the universe vast; yet the transient waves made on it by life and by intelligence are compatible and in harmony and secure within it.

On good days, we feel ourselves to be at one with the world. At Loch Ness, there are many good days.