

Dugongs and Mermaids, Seals and Selkies

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Recently, the developer, Keith Williams, has submitted a proposal to construct a resort situated on the Queensland coast and catering for 1500 people. This total complex would include: a commercial district, a large cluster of townhouses and a marina with 240 berths at Oyster Point — approximately four kilometres from Hinchinbrook Island and wedged between the Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropics, both of which are highly ecologically sensitive World Heritage Areas. Williams' proposed development is of special interest to many conservationists, as in 1994 it was ruled out by the then Federal Environment Minister, John Faulkner, and then in 1996, closely following a federal election and change of government, approved by the new Environment Minister, Robert Hill.

Such a development would attract a many boats to the area, and in the words of the Wilderness Society's Margaret Moorhouse,

the impacts [of such a development] on marine wildlife [such as the dugong], currently less effected by human caused morality, would be devastating,¹ as that area is 'the last bastion of the critically endangered'² marine mammal.

Notably, the now endangered dugong and its habitat have both played a role in the European mythicization of southern landscapes, and they have featured irregularly in the Australian media since 1905, following complaints that both dugongs and their food sources hamper drift fishing by T. Welsby, in his *Schnappering and Fishing in the Brisbane River and Moreton Bay Waters*.³ However, a campaign to save the dugong and its habitat began in the nineteen-seventies, and, following environmental impact assessments of Williams' proposed development by conservationists such as Moorhouse, it has much increased.⁴ Recent efforts to raise funds for this movement even include an art

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- 1 Moorhouse, Margaret, 'Whose heritage Hinchinbrook?', *Wilderness News*, 146 (1996-1997), pp.1-2 (p.1).
 - 2 Moorhouse, Margaret, *op. loc.*, p.1.
 - 3 'There is no good drift fishing in these coloured banks, for the dugong grass tears your bait away'. T. Welsby, *Schnappering and Fishing in the Brisbane River and Moreton Bay Waters* (Brisbane, 1905), p.142.
 - 4 One of the more substantial earlier efforts to raise the profile of this problem focused upon an international conference titled 'The Dugong', including delegates from Australia, Canada, India, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, at James Cook University in 1979, in response to the early recognition that 'dugongs are considered to be vulnerable to extinction throughout most of their range'. Professor K. J. C. Back, 'Foreword', in *The Dugong: Proceedings of a Seminar/Workshop held at James Cook University of North Queensland 8-13 May 1979*, ed. by H. Marsh (Queensland: Department of Zoology - James Cook University of North Queensland, 1979), pp.i-ii (p.i).

exhibition solely comprised of works donated for sale was organised in Sydney ('The Dugongs of Hinchinbrook', June 21 to July 6, 1997, Palm House, Royal Botanical Gardens, Sydney) and boasted works by prominent exhibitors such as: Charles Blackman, Arthur Boyd, Lloyd Rees, Martin Sharp, Peter Kingston, David Allen, Michael Leunig, May Gibbs, John Coburn and Reg Mombassa. Therefore, at such a topical time, this paper will attempt to outline the major aspects of the European imagination's dugong or mermaid, and of relevant folklore, with reference to both the seal, and to the mythic beast known as the selkie.

Many Australians, like their European cousins (in nations such as: Denmark (*maremind*), Estonia (*näkk*), Finland (*näkki*), and Germany (*meerfrau*)), possess a complex set of folk beliefs about the mythic humanoid beings known as mermaids. These 'marine beasts' have featured in folk tradition for many centuries now, and until relatively recently they have maintained a reasonably standard set of characteristics. Many folklorists and mythographers deem that the origin of the mythic mermaid is the dugong, posing a theory that mythicised tales have been constructed around early sightings of dugongs by sailors.⁵ However, the more traditional Livonian folk belief suggests that the first mermaids were actually children who drowned in the Red Sea, and were supernaturally transformed into their part animal shape.⁶

Physically mermaids are usually depicted as beautiful women above the waist, with their lower bodies tapering into a fish-like tail and fin. Such a description is loosely compatible with the theory that lonely sailors on lengthy sea voyages may have, from a distance, seen mermaids when looking upon dugongs, as 'in the form and position of their forelimbs, [do] the Sirenia [i.e. dugongs] resemble land mammals [i.e. humans]'.⁷

It is quite common for tales about mermaids to suggest that they possess some (limited) magical abilities. Like the half-woman Sirens of Classical mythology, mermaids are reported to be highly dangerous to male sailors, sometimes using their feminine wiles and sweet songs to lure ships onto rocks, thereby causing the sailors' deaths.⁸ Consequently, most modern scholars have,

5 This coupling has been recognised, yet rejected, by Maria Leach. 'Mermaid', in *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*, ed. by Maria Leach and Jerome Fried (London: Harper and Row, 1972; repr. 1984), p.710.

6 On this belief see Maria Leach, *op. loc.*, p.710.

7 Kaiser, Hans E., *Morphology of the Sirenia: A Macroscopic and X-Ray Atlas of the osteology of Recent Species* (London: S. Karger, 1974), p.1. Notably, the dugong's tail is also compatible with that of an imagined mermaid.

8 The half-woman, half-bird Sirens of Classical mythology, in the words of the French Professor, Pierre Grimal, 'lived on an island in the Mediterranean and attracted passing sailors with their music: the ships would approach too close to the rocky coast and thereby come to grief. The Sirens would then devour the sailors.' Pierre Grimal, 'Sirens', in *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, ed. by Stephen Kershaw, trans. by A. R. Maxwell-Hyslop (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986; repr. *The Penguin Dictionary of Classical Mythology*) St. Ives: Penguin, 1991), pp.403-404 (p.403). The volume was originally published as *Dictionnaire de la mythologie grecque et romaine* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1951). See also Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*, ed. by Charles W. Eliot, trans. by S. H. Butcher and A. Lang, Registered Harvard Classics Collector's Edition (Connecticut: Grolier Enterprises Corp., 1909; repr.

like the folklorist Professor Reimund Kvideland and the literary critic Professor Henning K. Sehmsdorf, come to the conclusion that 'mermaids are evil'.⁹ In this way, mermaids can also be loosely paralleled with Sea Witches, who, like both Sirens and mermaids, 'lurk up and down the coast, ready to [...] cause [...] ships] to wreck upon the rocks'.¹⁰

More recently, mermaids have featured regularly in the popular culture products of the English speaking world. These child-aimed products have largely been based upon the tale of *The Little Mermaid*, written by the Dane, Hans Christen Andersen (1805-1875). Notably, Andersen's tale was perhaps one of the earliest to clearly paint mermaids as 'good' creatures.¹¹ The strength of recent popular interest in these very human marine beings is most likely to be a reflection of the public reception of the Walt Disney Corporation's full movie length animated version of the classic tale, in 1989.¹² Such depictions of 'good' mermaids have even become an element of the regular television viewing habits of many children in Australia, through the regular broadcastings of Walt Disney's seemingly endless cartoon series, *The Little Mermaid*.¹³ This mass-exposure to legends of 'good' mermaids has, in the words of Professor Jack Zipes, made 'it is natural to think [...] of mermaid tales, such as *The Little Mermaid*,] as if they had always been with us, as if they were part of our nature';¹⁴ and thus as if 'goodness' was a part of the traditional mermaid's nature.

Among mythic marine mammals, such 'goodness' is traditionally attributed to the selkie. Selkies form an important part of the ocean lore of the Celtic and north-western Teutonic peoples. They are mythic beasts, who like the mermaid, are said to have been supernaturally formed from the souls of drowned

- 1989), Book XII, pp.162-173.
- 9 Kvideland, Reimund, and Sehmsdorf, Henning K., 'The Revenge of the Mermaid', in *Scandinavian Folk Belief and Legend*, The Nordic Series - vol.15 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988; repr. 1994), p.263-264 (p.263). Kvideland is the Professor of Folklore and Ethnology at the Norwegian University of Bergen, and Sehmsdorf is the Professor of Scandinavian and Comparative Literature at the University of Washington in the United States of America.
- 10 Guiley, Rosemary Ellen, 'Sea Witches', in *The Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft* (New York: Facts on File, 1989), p.313.
- 11 Recent years have seen a multitude of both new translations and versions, and reprinting of older translations and versions of this tale, including 'The Little Mermaid', in *Hans Andersen's Tales*, trans. by Reginald Spink, illustrated by Hans Baumhauer, The Children's Classics (Sydney: Times House, 1987), pp.10-35. One example of Andersen's portrayal of mermaids as 'good' creatures is that his little mermaid saves the life of a sailor, see pp.17-18.
- 12 *The Little Mermaid*, directed by John Musker and Ron Clements (U.S.A.: Walt Disney, 1989). Notably this production portrayed the tale's Sea Witch as a 'fat [..., yet] elegant octopus, exuding the charm, allure and power of evil' [Regina Bendix, 'Seashell Bra and Happy End', *Fabula*, 34 (1993), pp.280-290 (p.286).], breaking with Andersen's traditional vision of the Sea Witch as a repugnant, evil creature, who allowed 'a toad to eat out of her mouth, [...] and] horrid fat sea snakes [...] to] romp on her big, spongy breast'. [Andersen, *op. loc.*, p.25.]
- 13 This cartoon series features in the program, *Saturday Disney*, which is broadcast between 7 and 9am, each Saturday on the television channel Prime 7.
- 14 Zipes, Jack, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994), p.5. Professor Jack Zipes holds the Chair of German at the University of Minnesota, and has produced many fine volumes of translations of classic fairy tales and like studies.

people.¹⁵ Like the mermaid, who is said to be a physical combination of human and fish, the selkie is said to be a combination of human and seal. Selkie lore is probably most renowned in northern Scotland and Orkney. Consequently, the beasts feature in many distinctly regional twentieth-century literary texts produced in that area.¹⁶ Perhaps the most notable author who has dealt with selkies in recent years is the often mystical narrator, George Mackay Brown, whose writing, in the words of the historian, Marie Hlavac, 'reflects and confirms the depth of his attachment to Orkney, and to Scotland',¹⁷ through its respectful use of the narrative styles and folk traditions of those places. Most modern north-west European texts that deal with selkies have maintained a traditional interpretation of the creature, recounting that the beasts, like mermaids, often come into contact with humans through the power of song.¹⁸ Selkies are certainly not 'evil' creatures, and they do possess the power to shape-change between selkie and human forms.¹⁹ Additionally, male selkies are referred to as mermen — a word that is also used as both a masculine form of the noun 'mermaid', and a collective description of all beings of or belonging to those creatures' race.²⁰

These close likenesses and overlaps loosely suggest the possibility that, like the now accepted transference of Irish (Celtic) lore to Australia that moulded the Bunyip into its present form, the Celtic and North-West Teutonic imaginations may well have transferred their lore of the 'good' selkie/merman upon the lore of the 'evil' mermaid.²¹ Notably, Andersen, who possessed a deep and genuine interest in folk beliefs and legends, would most likely have become familiar with selkie lore during his extensive travels in Scotland, if he had not encountered it during his childhood in Denmark.²² Therefore it is

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- 15 On this belief see Reimund Kvideland and Henning K. Sehmsdorf, 'The Seal Woman', in *op. cit.*, pp.264-266 (p.264).
- 16 E.g. Rosemary Harris, *The Seal Singing* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), and W. Towrie Cutt, *Message from Arkmae*, ed. by Madeau Stewart (London: André Deutsch, 1972).
- 17 Hlavac, Marie, 'The Style and Significance of Select Prose Texts by George Mackay Brown' (unpublished M.A.(Hons.) thesis, University of New England, January 1997), p.iv. Selkies appear throughout Brown's *The Two Fiddlers* (London: Piccolo Pan Books, 1974).
- 18 This motif functions slightly differently to that of mermaids though, as the selkies are attracted to humans by singing while the mermaids attract humans with singing; i.e., "The Seal-singing," echoed Catriona. "She sang them in". Rosemary Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
- 19 On this power see W. T. Cutt, *op. cit.*, p.11. Notably, in *The Little Mermaid*, the little Mermaid shape-changes.
- 20 On this usage with regard to selkies see George Mackay Brown, 'The Vanishing Island', in *op. cit.*, pp.77-84 (p.82); with regard to its usage as the masculine form of the noun 'mermaid', and a name for the creature's race, see Hans Christian Andersen, *loc. cit.*, p.10.
- 21 As J. S. Ryan has indicated, the bunyip's name is drawn from the Koori 'Wergaia' dialect of Wemblawembla in western Victoria, yet most of the features currently attributed to the beast in popular lore have been superimposed upon it from Irish settlers' memories of a like beast called the 'poukha'. See J. S. Ryan, 'Bunyip', in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*, ed. by Gwenda Beed Davey and Graham Seal (Melbourne and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp.55-56.
- 22 On Andersen's travels in Scotland see Hans Christian Andersen, *The Fairy Tale of My Life: An Autobiography* (London: Paddington Press, 1975), ch.8 (July 1846 - December 1847), pp.275-331. This volume was originally published in 1868, as *Mit livs eventyr*. Kvideland and Sehmsdorf have noted that selkie lore is commonly known in Denmark in their 'The Seal Woman', in *op. cit.*, pp.264-266 (p.266).

(more than) possible that Andersen may have combined these two creatures in his effort to create a likeable, and familiar heroine for his *The Little Mermaid*. Additionally, the two English speaking nations that probably possess the most common links to this new vision of the mermaid, Australia and the United States of America, have both been settled by a variety European peoples who could have brought both mermaid and selkie lore to those lands, and have had close and regular contact with dugong inhabited waters.

As such adaptations of traditional zoological myth and legend become more widely disseminated amongst the global community, their new folkloric depictions of these beasts will most likely replace those of traditional folk belief. Involvement with this process can be interpreted as an important part of the development of former (British) colonial countries, such as Australia. This will occur as the transference of seal or selkie lore, onto the previously mythicised notions of the native Australian dugong, will ultimately allow future generations to enjoy imaginatively and explore the culturally important roles and functions of their racial heritages' mythic beasts, while simultaneously developing a close connection to and identification with their new geographical environment. This is possible as hybrid legends such as this, can, as the Estonian folklorist Aado Lintrop recently put it, 'generate [folk] memorates',²³ forming an essential element of each individual and unique national identity or spirit, and allowing each nation's people to develop greater spiritual connection to their particular landscapes.



23 Lintrop, Aado, 'The influence of oral tradition on the formation of beliefs', *Folklore*, 2 (An electronic journal published in Estonia: <<http://haldjas.folklore.ee>>.), p.2 (<<http://haldjas.folklore.ee/aado/infl.htm>>).