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Coastal Studies & Society

Coastal Studies & Society
2026, Vol. 5(1) 23–40
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DOI: 10.1177/26349817251348339
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They Do Like to be Beside the Seaside: Sea Monsters and the Liminal Coast of Great Britain and Ireland between the Wars

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Abstract

Different meanings are attributed to the coast and sea. Ideas about broad changes in our relationship with the coast are complicated when attention is given to a specific aspect. This article will argue that a particular place and period, the interwar years in the British Isles, represented a peculiar time in the history of the coastal imaginary. The concept of layered liminality is used to illustrate the way in which the monster was entwined with other physical, social, and political coastal liminalities of the time. By combining a study of sea monsters with notions of the coastal imaginary the study provides another way to explore the meaning of the coast. This article is not concerned with the sea monster found in the middle of the ocean but the monster close to shore. Such beasts thus occupy a liminal geographical as well as ontological space. Understanding the significance of these creatures requires careful consideration of the histories of leisure, popular culture, and international politics as well as that of the monsters themselves. This Fortean aspect of the coast offers another layer of liminality onto the liminal coast and illustrates how the mystery of the sea came ashore.

Keywords

monsters, coast, Great Britain, Ireland, interwar, liminality

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Introduction: Interwar sea monsters

Monsters are attached to specific environments. They take on the characteristics of the places in which they appear. Furthermore, monsters indicate a constellation of concerns about an environment. To borrow from Claude Lévi-Strauss, sea monsters are 'good to think with'.[1] This study considers sea monsters in a particular topographical context. Apart from lake monsters, water-dwelling oddities are often associated with maritime space, far away from land.[2] Yet littoral monsters, whether sighted from land or washed ashore, are easier to see, misidentify or record than those in the ocean. To be monstrous a monster must reveal itself.[3] Tales of an exotic creature may arouse wonder, but the coastal monster is nearby. The place of the coast in the construction of the monster merits attention as it provides a setting for an encounter imbued with meaning. A monster enchants the shore. Therefore, despite noting some of the details of monster sightings near the coast, the article is more concerned with the meanings drawn from or attributed to the creatures than in categorising or explaining encounters as is the case in studies that concentrate on the physical nature of Unidentified Marine Objects (UMOs).[4]

Monsters are also historical markers, they are shaped by the times and embody current anxieties. Interest in sea monsters was not limited to the interwar years. This article, however, suggests that these creatures took on an additional significance between the wars that shaped how the coast was imagined. It consequently addresses a different topic and context than work that explores the relationship between the anomalous and the coast that focuses on Gothic and later literature.[5] Although sea monsters featured in the history of the seaside from the advent of the popular beach holiday in the mid-nineteenth century, when the phrase 'sea serpent season' was coined, the appearance and atmosphere of seaside resorts was transformed between the wars.[6] Moreover, marine monsters appeared in the films *The Lost World* (1925), *The Mysterious Island* (1929), *King Kong*

[1]Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (London: Penguin, 1969), 132.
[2]Loren Coleman and Patrick Huyghe, *The Field Guide to Lake Monsters, Sea Serpents, and Other Mystery Denizens of the Deep* (London: Penguin, 2003).
[3]David D. Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 73.
[4]Robert L. France, *Disentangled: Ethnozoology and Environmental Explanation of the Gloucester Sea Serpent* (Wageningen: Wageningen Academic Publishers, 2019).
[5]Shelley Trower, "On the Cliff Edge of England: Tourism and Imperial Gothic in Cornwall," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 40, no.1 (2012):199–214; Lucie Armitt, "Ghost-Al Erosion: Beaches and the Supernatural in Two Stories by M.R. James," in *Popular Fiction and Spatiality: Reading Genre Settings*, ed. Lisa Fletcher (Heidelberg: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 95–108.
[6]Bernard Heuvelmans, *In the Wake of the Sea-Serpents*, trans. Rupert Hart-Davis (New York, NY: Hill & Wang, 1968), 387.

and *Son of Kong* (1933) that contributed to the interwar imagination.[7] This, together with factors including the Loch Ness monster and international politics, meant that the by then tired theme of sea serpents in summer took on a new life that expands our understanding of the wider liminal spatial imaginary of the coast. Reports and commentary about sea monsters provide a way of approaching the interwar coastal imaginary from another direction; one that uses the monstrous to peel back the layers of meaning and 'unconscious processes' associated with the coast.[8]

This study into the significance of sea monsters in the coastal imagination draws on the idea of layered liminality.[9] Some subjects possess multiple liminal elements that interact with one another. As a concept, liminality can be overused. Despite its value as a term that identifies a place or state of mind that is in-between, it could be argued that the liminal is in fact everywhere. To retain some of its value, therefore, it is important to differentiate between dissimilar liminalities and establish their relationship to one another. Coasts possess a variety of liminal characteristics. At its most elemental level, this involves the position of the coast between land and sea, earth and water. Then there are the liminal social activities that take place along the coast. An additional layer is provided by the potential of the coast to represent conceptual boundaries such as that of the nation or consciousness. Finally, sea monsters are a liminal actor in the sense of being a node where the known and unknown meet. Each layer is related and reinforces the others through the 'associational value' of the sea monster, which is an ostensibly physical object in addition to being a multifaceted cultural signifier. [10]

If a monster is a peculiarity, like the abject, that provides a 'primer' for a particular time, then it will be found in the bloodstream of the culture itself.[11] A sea monster does not inhabit a single type of source. While scientific literature or the cinema supply accessible material about strange animals and monsters, to get an idea of the reach of the monstrous it is necessary to consult other less readily identifiable traces found in, for example, the material culture of the day, conversation, and humour. References to sea monsters suffuse periodical and newspaper sources between the wars. Four kinds of

[7]Daniel Loxton and Donald R. Prothero, *Abominable Science! Origins of the Yeti, Nessie, and Other Famous Cryptids* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013), 129.

[8]C. Hofmeester, B. Bishop, L. Stocker, and G. Syme, "Social Cultural Influences on Current and Future Coastal Governance," *Futures*, 44, no. 8 (2012): 721.

[9]Lloyd C. Harris and Lisa O'Malley, "Stag Tourism and Scripted Liminality," *Annals of Tourism Research*, 108 (2024): 12; Lucy M. Long and Hannah Santino, "The Liminalities of Scones: Comfort Food, the Pandemic, and Other Excuses for Indulgence," *Digest: A Journal of Foodways and Culture*, 9, no. 2 (2002): 85–94.

[10]Paul Readman, "Preserving the English Landscape, c.1870–1914," *Cultural and Social History*, 5, no. 2 (2008): 203.

[11]Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2024), 2.

material are drawn on here. Witness accounts are of value, as are the theories of commentators who consider such testimonies. As well as those sources that deal with the presumed creatures, there are others that refer to them in looser yet no less useful ways. Then there is the place of the sea monster in material culture, traces of which are to be found in accounts about fashion and the carnivals held between the wars. How these scattered references to the sea monster contributed to the coastal imaginary will be illustrated through a consideration of their relevance to the nation, the social world, and the physical features of the shore and the monster itself.

Liminal sea monsters and their environment

How a coast is imagined is influenced by its topography and the activities that take place there. The physical makeup of the coast, where land meets sea, constitutes a foundational liminal layer. This section will consider how this physical liminality facilitated the contribution of sea monsters to the coastal imaginary. The coast provided the setting for those who saw a strange creature and others who imagined what one looked like. With increased leisure activity on the coast between the wars, this point of contact between land and water received considerable attention.[12] There was a temptation to populate the sea with hitherto unknown creatures. Unlike the creations of science or occult monsters, those in the sea were considered natural. [13] They were part of the environment.

Monsters reside in the mind and depend on the visual imagination. This is fed by the claims of witnesses and the cultural representation of monsters. The typical monster sighting, in any environment, is often brief and unclear. Yet it is even more so in the case of creatures that are partially submerged. These sightings are like the literal meaning of the word liminal in its optical sense of being partly discernible. The archetypical sea serpent has a neck that comes out of the water and a series of humps or a sleek line just above the waves. This visual liminality of the sea monster leaves sightings open to interpretation. Fred North, a journalist writing in the *Leeds Mercury*, asked readers 'Do you believe in monsters?' before relating his experience in Morecambe, Lancashire. This resort, nicknamed the 'Yorkshireman's Blackpool', would have been familiar to his audience.[14] North had seen a pod of porpoises, with 'black humps . . . popping out of the water in a straight line parallel with the shore' and wondered whether he would have interpreted what he saw differently if he had been told a monster had existed in the bay.[15]

[12]Michael John Law, "Charabancs and Social Class in 1930s Britain," *Journal of Transport History*, 36, no.1 (2015): 41–57.

[13]Deborah P. Dixon, "The Blade and the Claw: Science, Art and the Creation of the Lab-Borne Monster," *Social and Cultural Geography*, 9, no. 6 (2008): 671–92.

[14]John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 1990), 28.

[15]*Leeds Mercury*, 19 August 1937, 4.

Although North was keen to dismiss the existence unknown sea creatures, his acknowledgment of an iconic pattern 'prepared by many advanced stories' illustrates the role of sight and shape in the layered liminality of the coastal monster. Seeing part of something above the water gave the viewer a sense of discovering a new creature in a familiar environment. Observers became discoverers.

The liminal nature of the sea monster matches the temperamental or even dangerous character of the sea itself. Although the coast became less threatening from the late eighteenth century onwards, it retained its unpredictability for the unprepared bather or boater.[16] The sea is livelier than the land with different characteristics influenced by the time of the day or strength of the wind. These forces are invisible but influence human perception and activity. A sea monster is not that different from a stormy sea or an unexpected current. Dangerous out of place animals, such as the blue shark, were mentioned and accompanied by other less well-known or unknown monsters.[17] One commentator speculated that 'even though sea-serpents probably do attract the curious sightseer, they also certainly frighten off bathers, fair and otherwise'.[18] This might sound like an overstatement, but the death of Percy Harold Lee, aged 30, while bathing at Hornsea on the Yorkshire coast in the summer of 1922 generated speculation about strange, deadly fish off the northeast coast of England.[19] An assessment by a member of the Fishery Board for Scotland ruled out a blue shark. Circular marks on the victim's back made some think a large cuttlefish or octopus was responsible. A connection was made to reports about unusual creatures seen off the coast of Sunderland.[20] This death off Hornsea led to considerable speculation about the presence of unusual creatures near the shore.

Although an unusual occurrence, the response to Lee's death highlights efforts to comprehend the interaction between the sea and the coast. The coast is an ecotone, a place where two environments meet to form what one scholar has described as being 'a hotbed of furious biological processes'.[21] At a time when the world was more accessible, either virtually through the medium of the cinema and radio or physically by plane, car or ocean liner, there were fewer unknown places. For something so threatening to emerge near the shore made the coast unfamiliar. Unlike the unusual shapes espied from afar or a boat, this creature was not observed. Lee's partner did not see anything. It was speculated that the 'powerful fish' had been drawn to the North Sea by bodies from the First

[16]*Nottingham Evening Post*, 30 July 1929, 4.
[17]*Northern Whig*, 27 July 1928, 7.
[18]*Mercury and Sunday News*, 21 June 1931, 8.
[19]*Daily News*, 31 July 1922, 5.
[20]*Sunday Post*, 6 August 1922, 9.
[21]Jimmy Packham, "The Gothic Coast: Boundaries, Belonging, and Coastal Community in Contemporary British Fiction," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 60, no. 2 (2009): 207.

World War.[22] Lee's death presented a puzzle that played out in less serious ways at other times. These occasional visitors to the coast invited interpretation.

Knowledge of the natural world relies on classification, and as the Hornsea case illustrates it was not always that easy to identify the occupants of the sea. The coast was a liminal space and thus a boundary of knowledge. If the coast is a site where control and resistance occur, then the sea monster was part of wider efforts to define what constituted the real.[23] Old contests between the rational and the credulous were played out in debates about maritime creatures. When it came to questions of knowledge, coastal areas were even more significant as that was where many witnesses claimed to have seen a sea monster. A tourist or poorly educated fisherman could step into the waters of scientific knowledge. Yet some witnesses like the 'biologist and deep-sea fisherman' Major W. Peter Groves, who saw a strange creature off the coast of the Isle of Man in 1931, were themselves in a liminal social position when it came to the definition of these creatures.[24] Despite being given more credit as a reliable observer, Groves could not provide any evidence. Unlike many other aspects of the modern world, the strange shapes observed from the beach, cliff-top or a fishing boat remained a mystery rather than an easily dismissed superstition.[25]

Therefore, differences of opinion about the existence of sea monsters were not restricted to a contest between the learned and the ignorant. Disagreements about whether hitherto unknown large creatures exist punctuate zoological history.[26] As a result of the many public intellectuals active between the wars, readers and listeners heard a fair amount about the existence or otherwise of sea monsters.[27] The former naval commander R. T. Gould who published a book on the subject in 1930, along with his engagement in debates with the zoologist E. G. Boulenger about these creatures in *The Listener*, is a case in point.[28] The more well-known Victorian debates have led to these interwar

[22]*Hull Daily Mail*, 12 January 1929, 2.

[23]Matthew Peter and Peter P.K. Keer, "Introduction," in *Coastal Cultures of the Long Nineteenth* Century, ed. Matthew Ingleby and Matthew Peter Milton Kerr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 3.

[24]*Daily Herald*, 15 August 1936, 3.

[25]Ronald Westrum, "A Note on Monsters," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 8, no. 4 (1975): 866.

[26]Brian Regal, "Richard Owen and the Sea-Serpent," *Endeavour*, 36, no. 2 (2012): 65–68.

[27]Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain and the Crisis of Civilisation, 1919–1939* (London: Penguin, 2010).

[28]R. T. Gould, *The Case for the Sea-Serpent* (London: Philip Allen, 1930); E. G. Boulenger, " Aquatic Monsters – Do They Exist?," *The Listener*, 17, no. 426, 10 March: 137, 50–51; R. T. Gould, "Sea Monsters – A Vindication, " *The Listener*, 17, no. 430, 7 April 1937: 30–32; Correspondence between R. T. Gould, the Keeper of Zoology (William Thomas Colman) and the Deputy Keeper of Zoology (Martin Hinton) of the Natural History Museum, 1933–1934, Natural History Museum Archives (NHM), DF200/195/2; C. R. Haines, "Sea Monsters," *Quarterly Review*, 256, no. 508 (1931): 236–48; E. G. Boulenger, *Animal Mysteries* (London: Duckworth, 1927), 11–21; idem, *A Natural History of the Seas* (London: Duckworth, 1935), 198–208.

discussions being overlooked in scholarly work about this type of monster.[29] Observations of zoo animals were used to explain how marine monsters were often misidentified commonplace faunae. One account from 1919 ruled out snakes owing to their horizontal movement in water, which looked nothing like the vertical loops associated with the sea serpent. A large seal, however, was considered a likely reason why some thought that they had seen something strange.[30] All people would need to do to confirm this was to visit a zoo and observe. Many were not so easily convinced. Moreover, they could turn to the 11th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for support. There a scholar of cephalopods, William Evans Hoyle, noted that sea monsters may well exist.[31] The testimony of explorers, reports from around the world and debates in the press gave the coast a mysterious aura as a possible, if unlikely, place to observe an unusual life form.[32]

A strange creature may be observed from the beach but only those that had died or were in distress washed up there. In this sense, the beach is the crux of the liminal coast. A sea monster on the beach is like a person at sea. They have crossed over. The use of 'sea monster' to describe some known animals, such as the grampus dolphin killed on Brighton beach after being caught in a trawler's nets, is revealing. In this instance, the corpse of the nine-foot mammal was driven around on a truck to raise funds to replace damaged tackle.[33] This example of a large sea creature being taken from the liminal space of the coast to the land demonstrates how the beach marks a point of transition. Beaches were places where confrontations took place too, such as when what was called an 'Indian snake', thought to have fallen off a ship, arrived on the shore of Canvey Island Essex before being beheaded with a spade.[34] Although known, such immediately unidentifiable 'monsters' were rare. Their novelty resulted in the creatures being displayed in public.[35] They created a precedent for stranger creatures to exist along the coast.

The betwixt character of both the coast and the monster influenced how the interwar coast was imagined, but it cannot alone account for the place of the sea monster in the coastal imaginary between the wars. A preexisting coastal liminality was, arguably, accentuated by the reduction in the liminality of an adjacent environment. By the

[29]Ronald Westrum, "Knowledge About Sea Serpents," *The Sociological Review*, 27, no. S1 (1979): 294.
[30]*The Times*, 15 September 1919, 8.
[31]William Evans Hoyle, "Sea-Serpents," *The Encyclopaedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature and General Information*, 11th ed., vol. 24 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 562; *Belfast Telegraph*, 28 January 1931, 6.
[32]W. Lavallin Puxley, *Deep Seas and Lonely Shores* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1935), 71–86; *New Milton District Advertiser and Lyminton Times*, 13 January 1934, 3.
[33]*Sunday Mirror*, 3 June 1928, 3.
[34]*Daily News*, 8 August 1925, 5.
[35]*Eckington, Woodhouse and Staveley Express*, 26 May 1934, 3; *Lancashire Daily News*, 17 September 1932, 4.

beginning of the twentieth century, oceangoing vessels were hardier than they had ever been, and the open seas had their own sea serpents of human construction in the form of the submarine. Many had served at sea in the military or merchant marine during the First World War. As the post-war seas became occupied with vessels more suited to their environment, including the cruise ships that came to characterise the interwar era, the romance of the strange ocean had faded if not disappeared.[36] Steam powered many ships, but diesel engines were becoming more common. Long distance aeroplane flights, like those of Charles Lindbergh, also served as a reminder that it was possible to circumvent the oceans altogether.

At the same time, the monster may have moved closer to shore to compensate for the partial if not total disenchantment of the open seas. In doing so, the sea monster added its presence to a liminal shore. As monsters are reconstituted in different historical settings, the type of sea monster during the age of sail or even at the height of the steam age no longer sufficed.[37] Such beasts still informed current understanding, but they lacked contemporary resonance. A greater attention to coastal visitations is indicated by a comment from 1929 that when it came to this type of monster, what had once been associated with the yarns of sailors was now one of the fancies of holidaymakers and 'part of the stock-in-trade of the beach boatmen'.[38] Leaving aside the question of whether sea monsters existed, it could be said that they were very much alive as a social fact on land.

Sea monsters in liminal social space

Sea monsters were especially social between the wars. They were a topic of conversation, provided reading matter and left a visual mark on public activity and fashion, particularly near the coast. Few peculiar topics have taken hold in this way in the modern era, with the nearest parallel being UFOs after the Second World War. The very liminality of marine monsters and their environment lay beneath and infused the social liminalities associated with the leisure coast. While it would be going too far to say that the sea monster embodied the liminal social experience of the coast, it certainly contributed to seaside culture. Likewise, the context of the interwar years influenced the form taken by the monster. The presence of the sea monster in material culture and social interaction is a reminder that although monsters often symbolise societal anxieties, they can play a ludic role that in its own way also reinforces the liminality of the coast.

[36]Elliott O'Donnell, *Strange Sea Mysteries* (London: John Lane, 1926); George Gibbard Jackson, *Ships Seas and Sailors* (London: Heath Cranton, 1933).
[37]Yasmine Musharbash and Geir Henning Presterudstuen, "Introduction: Monsters and Change," in *Monster Anthropology: Ethnographic Explorations of Transforming Social Worlds Through Monsters*, ed. Yasmine Musharbash and Geir Henning Presterudstuen (London: Routledge, 2020), 8.
[38]*Portsmouth Evening News*, 6 August 1929, 6; *South Wales Daily Post*, 21 May 1932, 4.

Monsters in general have been credited as providing a source of novelty.[39] The subject of aquatic oddities could have served the purpose of small talk or at other times been the topic of debate. For example, the journalist Sisley Huddleston admitted that he 'positively revelled in' reports about sea serpents.[40] Such matters enabled disagreement to be expressed without reference to the political concerns of the time. The topic of sea monsters could also be a way to assess people's openness to the unknown in general. A reference to the 'customary' nature of the theme gives some indication of its prevalence.[41] An indication of how sea monsters provided conversational variety comes from a comment from 1920 that now the war and the Amateur Golf Championship had concluded 'it is up to someone to relieve the monotony by making the annual report' that the sea serpent has returned. Indeed, any gap in seaside sightings was noted and mourned by some.[42] A liminal time, the summer holidays, was accompanied by a liminal subject matter. Nevertheless, an expression of hope that the heavy winter storms of January 1925 would result in dead sea monsters being washed ashore shows that the topic was not restricted to summer.[43] The coupling of strange sea creatures with seaside holidays, however, was common and ensured that sea monsters contributed to some social interactions.

A central component of chatter about sea monsters was how to determine exactly what had been seen. An open question invited speculation, as seen in the response to a sighting in south Wales during the summer of 1932. Campers on the Gower Peninsula near Swansea reported seeing a large object a mile from the coast with three humps and a 'gigantic head, greasy and grey in colour'. The fact that these characteristics matched those of an archetypal sea serpent could explain why the story appeared on the front page of the *South Wales Daily Post*.[44] References to 'facetious friends' advising witnesses to reduce their alcohol intake and a witness claiming to know a lot about sea creatures are examples of how banter, disbelief and conviction played out in conversation. Conjecture was countered by 'serious' explanations, such as those given by a fisherman who suggested that the group had seen a flock of low-flying birds or, as the *Daily Telegraph* suggested, a pod of porpoises.[45] Given the variety of possible explanations, some as unlikely as the marine monster itself, it is easy to see how attempts at closing the subject only served to generate more deliberation.

Humour allows the absurd or strange to be entertained, if only for a moment. While there were serious discussions about whether unknown large sea creatures existed,

[39]Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 17.
[40]*The Sketch*, 18 August 1920, 22.
[41]*Herne Bay Press*, 16 April 1932, 7.
[42]*Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 23 July 1928, 6.
[43]*Western Morning News*, 7 January 1925, 4.
[44]*South Wales Daily Post*, 8 August 1932, 1.
[45]*South Wales Daily Post*, 11 August 1932, 4; *Daily Telegraph*, 15 August 1932, 10.

other conversations invited humour and added to the character of the playful leisure coast. When a strange object was observed by a notable local figure off the Norfolk coast, a Scottish newspaper speculated that the Loch Ness monster had left its home to seek cleaner waters because the lake had become unbearably 'fresh' during a hot summer.[46] There was a proliferation of intentionally amusing stories, cartoons and competitions to craft mock sea monster news reports.[47] Comments about the visit of 'an old friend' or the cartoon of a sceptical balding boffin coming face to face with a sea serpent were part of a wide range of topics, some of a risqué nature, that contributed a humorous element to the coastal imaginary.[48] Preexisting 'sea serpent season' japery from before the First World War expanded after the war. In doing so, the jocular reference to strange aquatic creatures could, as a Dublin daily put it, help to lighten up those waters stained by conflict.[49]

Representations of sea monsters were not limited to the press or idle conversation. The sea monster motif could be found in public space and its presence there illustrates the role of material culture in the maintenance and transmission of spatial imaginaries.[50] A depiction of a monster, like the mural at Ramsgate in the summer of 1934, rendered visible something that could not be readily seen in the flesh.[51] Pageants were a common feature of interwar life, and sometimes featured strange creatures.[52] On occasion a fabricated beast was placed in the water. The carnival at Shaldon, Devon, in 1936 incorporated a monster that was drawn ashore before being paraded around the streets.[53] These events were not restaging the past as much as adding a fantastical element to the shore, although this could also become absurd as happened at Shaldon when the creature's head was damaged after its brief swim. Such mishaps were, nonetheless, all part of the carnivalesque atmosphere of a resort in the summer with its 'playful crowd'.[54]

Interwar consumer culture integrated and capitalised upon marine monsters. This is another feature that distinguished this era, with the appearance of goods connected to

[46]*Dundee Courier*, 10 August 1936, 6.
[47]*Daily News*, 11 September 1924, 4; *Manchester Guardian*, 19 July 1933, 18.
[48]*Sunday Times*, 9 August 1936, 12.
[49]*Daily Express and Irish Daily Mail*, 19 July 1919, 3.
[50]Josh Watkins, "Spatial Imaginaries Research in Geography: Synergies, Tensions, and New Directions," *Geography Compass*, 9, no. 9 (2015): 511.
[51]*The Times*, 21 July 1934, 10.
[52]Angela Bartie, Linda Fleming, Mark Freeman, Alexander Hutton, Paul Readman, eds, *Restaging the Past: Historical Pageants, Culture and Society in Modern Britain* (London: University College London Press, 2020); *Western Morning News*, 20 October 1922, 8; *Hull Daily News*, 22 June 1928, 7; *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 27 August 1937, 9.
[53]*Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 4 September 1936, 8.
[54]Gary Cross and John K. Walton, *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), 179.

strange sea creatures prefiguring the use of flying saucers and aliens later in the century.[55] Appliquéd beach bags were shaped like sea serpents and swimsuits could come in a colour called 'sea serpent'.[56] In 1932 a patent was requested for inflatable sea monster water wings yet there were already plenty of 'wonderful sea monster' inflatables available for the beach in the 1920s.[57] A temporary 'sea dragon' tattoo was among the recommendations of socialite Sylvia Mayfair in 1931.[58] Readers were advised to imprint the image on their back when wearing a backless swimsuit. This advice and the tattoo itself typified how holiday makers had taken up sunbathing and greater physical activity between the wars.[59] As more parts of the human anatomy became exposed to the sun, so did the commercial sea serpent. Although many of these products appeared by the seaside before the media flurry about the Loch Ness monster, its arrival effected a further transformation in the history of the interwar coastal monster.

One way in which the monstruous can become more liminal is by momentarily revealing itself. In doing this, the monster moves from the imagination to being something that might just be real. Those who already believed in some undiscovered marine beast were overjoyed to hear of the sightings in or around Loch Ness in 1933. Gould, for instance, argued that Nessie was a sea serpent in *The Loch Ness Monster and Others*.[60] Not only was the purported photographic evidence of Nessie published in a popular newspaper but it was taken by a respected professional, the medical doctor R. Kenneth Wilson.[61] The similarity between the supposed monster in the photograph and popular conceptions of a plesiosaur, along with the loch's connection to the sea via the Caledonian Canal, meant that this image reinforced belief in a large hitherto unknown aquatic creature in general. Even though the 1930s may have been the last decade when 'sea serpent season' regularly appeared in the press, the Loch Ness sightings of 1933 and 1934 had lasting consequences for the way in which the coast was imagined.

It is difficult to overestimate the influence of the Loch Ness monster as a social phenomenon. For one thing, it provided a frame of reference. Whereas people in the past might have thought of sea monsters when they looked out from the shore, they would now have the famous photograph from the *Daily Mail* of 21 April 1934 in mind. Sightings were more likely to be reported and less easily dismissed. Feeding gulls one August

[55]Matthew P. McAllister and Greg Eghigian, "Flying Saucers and UFOs in US Advertising During the Cold War, 1947–1989," *Advertising & Society Quarterly*, 23 no. 3 (2022): 1–55.
[56]*Midland Daily Telegraph*, 27 July 1939, 4; *Berks and Oxon Advertiser*, 8 February 1935, 7.
[57]*Lancashire Evening Post*, 24 September 1932, 6; *Newcastle Journal*,14 May 1928, 1.
[58]*Skegness News*, 24 June 1931, 7.
[59]Steven Braggs and Diane Harris, *Sun, Fun and Crowds: British Seaside Holidays Between the Wars* (London: Tempus, 2000), 49–59.
[60]R. T. Gould, *The Loch Ness Monster and Others* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1934).
[61]*Daily Mail*, 21 April 1934, 11.

morning during 1937 in Weston-super-Mere, 75-year-old Fred Hobbs spent half an hour watching something unusual that put him 'in mind of the Loch Ness Monster'.[62] It is worth looking at this instance in more detail as it contains themes shared by other reports from the period. A contrast between Hobbs's mundane seaside activity and the mysterious marine creature suggested that an experience like this could happen to anyone at any time. The fact that Hobbs was a fisherman gave credence to his report. With its head out of the water, several humps and a 'long tail covered in scales', this 'blessed great thing' swam in with the tide before turning around and heading out to sea. The report mentions how Hobbs, who was accompanied by a friend, also saw a pod of porpoises. This helped validate their story further by demonstrating how they differentiated the UMO and a group of creatures that were often misidentified being a sea monster. References to sea monsters in earnest witness statements, entertainment and badinage incorporated the monster into a liminal space between the serious and the absurd.

Experiences of the coast were interwoven with stories about sea monsters, the image appeared in everyday life and sightings took place in day-to-day settings, while fishing on the shore or walking along a beach.[63] The very ambiguity of the sea monster enabled it to enter social interaction in different forms, a point of debate or humorous repartee. Representations of marine monsters appeared on streets and estuaries, while many products had some association with sea serpents. All these flowed into the coastal imaginary. Yet besides being a liminal beast well suited to a liminal physical and social space, the sea monster was shaped by national and international factors that brought out the original meaning of monster as warning.

Sea monsters and national liminality

Spatial imaginaries have been described as comforting and safe. This is true of many rural imaginaries.[64] However, the same place may be imagined in a less benign way. Sometimes positive characteristics are eroded over time. As a result, a symbol forms that encapsulates a feeling of unease. For all the jollity and social activity that characterized the seaside during what Robert Graves and Alan Hodge called the 'long weekend', geopolitical and economic changes lent the coast a different character.[65] The liminal sea monster contributed to this shift in the coastal imaginary.

[62] *Western Daily News*, 25 August 1937, 8.

[63] Correspondence between Keeper of Zoology (William Thomas Colman) and Director of Investigations at Board of Agriculture and Fisheries (Edward Stuart Russell), 3, 7, 8 May 1935 including a clipping from the *Western Morning News* 3 May 1935 concerning a sighting off Cornwall, NHM, DF 200/196/2.

[64] R. J. Moore-Colyer, "From Great Wen to Toad Hall: Aspects of the Urban-Rural Divide in Inter-War Britain," *Rural History: Economy, Society, Culture*, 10, no. 1 (1999): 105–24.

[65] Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Weekend: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918–1939* (London: Faber & Faber, 1940), 30, 110.

After the First World War the defensive and expansive connotations of the coast that had developed after the Napoleonic wars diminished. German naval and aerial bombardment and the U-boat represented a new challenge to British naval supremacy. Increased international tension from the early 1930s meant the seas were once again militarised. The situation was not, however, like the Edwardian era when the dreadnought was considered the 'surest safeguard of peace'.[66] The arms race of the 1930s was more of a scramble that included the added issue of air power, an aspect that rendered the coast less of a buttress. Moreover, a cluster of factors came together that resulted in the coast becoming less open to the outside world than had been the case before the First World War. Fish that had replenished somewhat in the war years were depleted by the early 1920s and scarcity led to resentment about the presence of foreign boats.[67] Economic policies took on a protectionist character during the 1920s.[68] Previous discursive constructs about the coast were eroded because of less secure open seas and economic concerns.

Studies of aerial oddities such as phantom airships in the Edwardian era and UFOs during the Cold War have noted how unusual phenomena, irrespective of whether they are physical objects, absorb and express social anxieties.[69] Monsters serve a similar function. The cartographic label 'Here be Dragons' associated with distant lands and deep waters on pre-modern maps could now apply to the coastline, estuaries and even in some cases the rivers of Britain and Ireland.[70] In the west the dragon has been associated with chaos and primeval qualities, traits shared with snakes.[71] Aquatic monsters possess similar associations but differ because their three-dimensional habitat means they are less easy to disprove. Nonetheless, between the wars the sea monster was coming closer to the shore. Part of the reason for this was the increased ease of communication and leisure time during the interwar period as outlined earlier. Yet the appearance of monsters at this time can also be attributed to the uncertainty engendered by the liminal position of the

[66]*Britannia*, 11 January 1929, 32.

[67]Robb Robinson, "Early Lessons on Overfishing from the British Isles," in *Too Valuable to be Lost Overfishing in the North Atlantic since* 1880, ed. Álvaro Garrido and David J. Starkey (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020), 76.

[68]Alan de Bromhead, Alan Fernihough, Markus Lampe, and Kevin Hjortshøj O'Rourke, "When Britain Turned Inward: The Impact of Interwar British Protection," *American Economic Review*, 190, no. 2 (2019): 325–52.

[69]Brett Holman, "The Phantom Airship Panic of 1913: Imagining Aerial Warfare in Britain Before the Great War," *Journal of British Studies*, 55, no. 1 (2016): 99–119; Curtis Peebles, *Watch the Skies! A Chronicle of the Flying Saucer Myth* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1994), 51.

[70]*Langport and Somerton Herald*, 8 June 1935, 2; *Lynn News and County Press*, 19 December 1933, 3.

[71]David E. Jones, *An Instinct for Dragons* (London: Routledge, 2000), 103; J. Harris Stone, "Is There a Sea-Serpent?," *The National Review*, 81, no. 485 (1923): 761–69.

United Kingdom and the Irish Free State. National fortunes and the experiences of other collectivities are connected to the monstruous. An example from Ireland in 1922, provides a particularly clear example of how sea monsters play a role in troubled times.

Named Cata, the aquatic monster that patrolled the Shannon estuary was first mentioned in the late fifteenth century work *The Book of Lismore* before making the occasional appearance during the Victorian era.[72] Most sea monsters off the coast of Britain lacked such a pedigree. During the Irish Civil War, Cata was observed by Limerick docks. There had been fighting in the city in July and the monster is said to have appeared on the day that the barracks fell to Free State forces. One of the individuals who recollected seeing the monster described 'hundreds of amazed spectators' lining both sides of the quayside.[73] Soldiers opened fire but to no effect. Real or imagined, Cata embodied a national crisis.

Most people in the United Kingdom had no direct experience of the Irish Civil War. This is not to say that marine monsters did not play a part in Britain's national drama. For monsters to capture the imagination they need to display attributes that resonate with the period in which they appear. Speed of movement was of great interest during the interwar years and one of the most commented upon features of sea monsters at this time was their pace when seen on the surface of the water. This fascination is understandable given the attention paid to technological developments in transport and associated record-breaking attempts on land and water such as those of Malcolm Campbell.[74] Motorboats and speedboats were increasingly common on the coast. Visitors could incorporate a journey on this type of transport as part of their holiday or day trip. Indeed, on occasion speedboats were thought to have been misidentified as sea monsters.[75] The fact that speedboats failed to keep up with a fast-moving object off Herne Bay in Kent in 1930 as 'hundreds of holiday makers' looked on and 'bathers left the water in panic', suggested that the pilots were chasing a powerful creature.[76] There may have been speedy sea monsters before the interwar period but the emphasis on this aspect and its display before the eyes of holidaymakers on the coast are distinctive features of the phenomenon between the wars.[77] A brief piece about sea monsters in 1926 referred to the creatures 'speeding

[72]Shane Mac Olon, *Cata the Monster of the Shannon Waves: A True Story* (privately published, 1991).

[73]*Gloucester Citizen*, 26 September 1923, 5; Denis O'Shaughnessy, *Limerick: 100 Stories of the Century* (Limerick: privately published, 2000), 6–7.

[74]Michael John Law, "Speed and Blood on the Bypass: The New Automobilities of Inter-War London," *Urban History*, 39, no. 3 (2012): 490–509.

[75]*Berwickshire News*, 15 May 1934, 3.

[76]*Daily News*, 5 September 1930, 7; *Thanet Advertiser*, 5 September 1930, 5.

[77]Paul Harrison, *Sea Serpents and Lake Monsters of the British Isles* (London: Robert Hale, 2001), 75.

along the surface [alongside British warships] as fast as a destroyer'.[78] Humans could travel at ever greater speeds, but this perplexing creature was as fast or even faster.

Like speedboats, submarines were mentioned in contemporary reports of strange aquatic animals. Observers, including those who saw an 18ft creature near Rosslare pier in 1934, often compared unusual marine creatures to a submarine both in terms of the smooth, long torso and a long neck like a periscope.[79] Nevertheless, it is the relationship between this most liminal object of war and the sense of unease and wonder outlined above that is significant here. The potential for 'German sea serpents' to threaten not only British naval supremacy but the nation's food supply had been demonstrated in the First World War.[80] In 1929 Commander H. Taprell Dorling, while pondering the 'naval warfare of the future', stated that 'by imports we live'.[81] Remilitarization reignited a fear of starvation that had not had time to disappear. Like the sea monster, submarines were generally unseen and disturbed the status quo.

Although the sea monster was not limited to a specific time between the wars or restricted to one part of Britain or Ireland, some of the most significant sightings took place on the east and south coasts of England from the mid to late 1930s. Those who lived in these littoral areas facing continental Europe were more likely to have memories of enemy bombardment from the sea and air. The rapid movement of an object a mile from Eccles in Norfolk was observed by the former mayor of Norwich during August 1936 led to it being christened the '100 M.P.H. Sea Serpent'.[82] Two years later, Suffolk fishermen described what they witnessed as being 'like a torpedo'.[83] Another object off Spithead near Portsmouth in Hampshire possessed a 'high turn of speed'.[84] Size was no less important, yet the ability to traverse distances at speed gave the phenomena a feature often associated with a threating human technology, especially when seen near naval bases like Portsmouth.

A mass sighting off the Yorkshire coast in August of 1936 illustrates the wonder and fear occasioned by these swift UMOs. Like other sightings, the humps and 'big head' were notable features. The number of witnesses put this event in a similar category to that of Herne Bay in 1930, but many of spectators in this case were children whose dance festival at Withernsea was disturbed by the excitement near the shore.[85] A host of explanations were offered and the most prestigious witness, in this case J. G. Twigg a justice

[78]*Lancashire Evening Post*, 27 September 1926, 4.
[79]*Midland Counties Advertiser*, 12 July 1934, 4; O'Shaughnessy, *Limerick*, 6.
[80]*Cornish Post and Mining News*, 31 January 1920, 2.
[81]*Britannia*, 11 January 1929, 32.
[82]*Daily Mirror*, 8 August 1936, 7; *Irish Weekly and Ulster Examiner*, 15 August 1936, 10.
[83]*Daily Mirror*, 22 October 1938, 5.
[84]*Hampshire Advertiser and Southampton Times*, 4 June 1938, 9.
[85]*Leeds Mercury*, 15 August 1936, 1.

of the peace and county councillor came to the fore, told the *Hull Daily Mail* that the object was moving at around 100 miles an hour.[86] This was part of a spate of sightings at around the same time along the east coast of England from Norfolk to Sunderland.[87] Of all the many encounters between the wars, those of the first weekend of the warm and dry August of 1936 appear to have generated the most attention, trainloads of people armed with binoculars travelled from Hull to Hornsea and Withernsea. Arguably as important as the weather was the backdrop of the Spanish Civil War, German remilitarization of the Rhineland and the display of Nazi power at the Berlin Olympics that opened at the start of August. While a direct causal link between international events and a rapid marine monster is out of the question, the projection of unnamed anxieties onto an unidentifiable object at sea is not.

There may have been a fair amount of magical thinking during the interwar years when it came to spiritualism and Gef the mongoose, the mysterious poltergeist-like presence that haunted a house on the Isle of Man, but to foretell a war from an omen was less in keeping with the period.[88] However, it was communicated through humour in a column by 'Peter Simple' (Michael Wharton) in the *Morning Post* during 1936. Simple mentioned how fishermen off Newfoundland had seen alarmingly fast 100ft sea monsters that made a loud noise. Experiences like these were supposed to herald significant, usually calamitous, events.[89] Simple cited times when he saw something similar and implied these were also occasions when he was inebriated. This may be a case of the author transferring their fears or those of others onto less rational groups, thus providing an opportunity to at once voice and dismiss a concern. Such displacement may have seemed unnecessary given how many thought that war had long been on the horizon. Even so, the idea of a herald of catastrophe manifesting itself captures those emotional components of impending danger that rational reason cannot.

There was something different about both the meaning of the coast and the characteristics of the sea monster between the wars. Even mysterious creatures that have a long history, like odd marine beasts, adapt to the time in which they appear. These creatures captured something of the shift that was taking place on the national and international scale as the future took on a menacing hue and Britain itself increasingly appeared to be in a liminal position between wars. It is little wonder that the appearance of these beasts was attributed to physical 'subterranean earthquakes' although they might better be considered the products of social tremors.[90] This darker side to enchantment is an important

[86]*Hull Daily Mail*, 11 August 1936, 1.
[87]*Daily Mail*, 12 August 1936, 3.
[88]*Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser*, 2 January 1943, 4.
[89]*Belfast Telegraph*, 19 September 1936, 6; *Portsmouth Evening News*, 17 September 1936, 5.
[90]C. E. Boyd Smith, letter to Keeper of Zoology (William Thomas Colman), 3 March 1934, NHM DF 200/195/13.

corollary to the lighter novelty outlined in the previous section. Here was the monster in its more usual guise as a shape of uncertainty or harbinger of danger.[91] An incident off the coast of Cornwall in the summer of 1938, when a practice torpedo crashed ashore narrowly missing a 'greatly frightened' child contrasts with the image of the coast as a place of leisure and relaxation.[92] Strange, unexpected things in the water could easily destabilize a pleasant coastal imaginary.

Conclusion: Liminal beasts for liminal places

If monsters 'define a spatial reality that escapes human knowledge and materialize themselves thanks to human imagination' then they will be observed in the liminal space between land and water.[93] This article has demonstrated how the coast plays an important role in the configuration of the monstrous and that this was particularly noticeable between the wars in Britain and Ireland. 'No holiday season would be complete without a report from some seaside town that a sea serpent had put in a brief appearance within sight of the shore'.[94] Yet aquatic monsters contributed more to the culture of Britain and Ireland than the already well-worn cliche 'sea serpent season'. Its trite reputation has prevented the seaside monster from being credited with being the complicated cultural signifier that it in fact is. Indeed, this monster draws much of its significance from a relationship with the popular imagination.

Through the deployment of the concept of 'layered liminality' this article enhances our understanding of how coastal imaginaries are generated and related to a potent cultural symbol in the form of the marine monster. This affiliation between the monster and society comprises layers of liminal features resting on a coastal template. The nature of the coast, its social aspects and some of the concerns of the time occupied the same imagined littoral space. The physical form and qualities of the coast brought the question of the sea monster's existence and habitat to the fore. Monsters influenced how the coast was understood. There was the coast as a place of danger. The physical, social, and national liminality combined with the idea of a boundary between the known and yet to be discovered. Through its ability to encapsulate and function in so many ways, the sea monster enchanted the coast.

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[91]Wes Williams, *Monsters and their Meanings in Early Modern Culture: Mighty Magic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10.
[92]*Belfast Telegraph*, 15 June 1938, 5.
[93]Nicolae Bobaru, "Sea Monsters: Theoretical Perspectives," *Acta Lassyensia Comparationis*, 29, no. 1 (2022): 2.
[94]*Sunday Mirror*, 7 September 1930, 5.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Centre for Port and Maritime History for a travel grant that enabled them to consult material held at the Natural History Museum, London, and express his gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable recommendations.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Support from the Centre for Port and Maritime History QR fund budget.

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