

THE DEERNESS MERMAID, 1887-1899:

Selkies, sideshows and silly seasons

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ABSTRACT: Between 1887 and 1899, a mysterious sea creature known as the ‘Deerness Mermaid’ (DM) was repeatedly sighted off the coast of Orkney, Scotland. Reported by locals and widely covered in British newspapers, the DM became a fixture of the late Victorian ‘silly season,’ filling column inches with speculation and spectacle. Although likely an unusual seal, its long neck and humanoid swimming style led to claims that it was a mermaid – an interpretation helped along by both local selkie folklore and Victorian popular culture. The DM’s recurring appearances fuelled national curiosity, attracting hunters, tourists and even theatrical adaptations. Some sought to capture or kill the creature, while others viewed it as an omen or supernatural entity. The article explores how shifting cultural understandings of mermaids – from traditional seductive sirens to grotesque sideshow exhibits – shaped perceptions of the DM. It situates the phenomenon within the broader context of Orkney’s maritime folklore and the rise of sensationalist journalism. Its story is a compelling case study in how legends evolve and persist in the modern imagination.

KEYWORDS: Aquariums, Folklore, Mermaid, Orkney, Seals

Introduction: The Mermaid, Orkney and Deerness

On 18 August 1890 a story began to spread through the British and Irish press. To use a modern phrase the piece ‘went viral.’ In Victorian terms this meant that it was clipped from one paper to another and reproduced in almost identical form, often with a different title (for this process Cordell, 2015):

A strange animal or fish has for the last few weeks been seen near Southside, Deerness, Orkney. It comes very close inshore, and sits on a sunken rock. It has a little black head, long white neck, and white body, shaped like a human being with two long arms, which it waves and works about its head. It has never been seen out of the water below its waist to ascertain whether it has legs or a tail (Unattributed 1890a, p.3).

For the journalist, for the editor and, indeed, for the reader this copy belonged to a recognisable type: the ‘strange story’. ‘Strange stories’ were fillers that would intrigue or entertain those who bought newspapers and that might involve anything from frogs raining from the sky to babies being baked in pies (Young, 2022, i-x). ‘Strange stories’ were typically ephemeral, not least because many, on examination, proved to be urban legends or journalistic inventions. However, this first report from Orkney proved to be the beginning of a long series. The ‘Deerness Mermaid,’ as it was quickly christened (henceforth the DM), would become a staple of British newspapers in the early, mid 1890s: the animal was seen by

hundreds of Orcadians and visitors over a number of years. The last report known to me of a contemporary sighting dates to 1899.

The DM's home, Orkney, is an archipelago off the northern coast of Scotland. Orkney consists of approximately seventy islands, twenty of which are inhabited: the population today is a little over 20,000, down from its peak of about 30,000 in the 1880s and 1890s.¹ The islands' current economy is based largely on agriculture, fishing and tourism. The islands traditionally belonged – with Caithness to the south and Shetland to the north – to the Norse sphere in Scotland. Indeed, as late as the early 19th century some Orcadians spoke Norn, a Scandinavian language (Barnes, 1996). Folklore (more of which below) and general culture have had a strong Scandinavian flavour and Orkney has a robust and not solely Scottish identity. Given the topic of this paper we might add that this area was, with Cornwall, the part of Britain that had the most folkloric interest in mermaids.

In the 1890s the islands had relatively few tourists and agriculture dominated. The vast majority of farmers rented their farms from landlords (Schrank, 1995, pp. 1-11; Thompson, 2000, pp. 30-41). It was a difficult existence, but the passing of the Crofters Holdings Act in 1886 did at least end the clearances that had been so controversial through much of Scotland (Orkney included, MacPhail, 1989; Devine, 2018, pp. 228-240). Some Orcadians were full time fishermen and in 1860 there were almost 700 Orkney fishing boats registered (Omand 2023, p. 153). But the sea, of course, impinged on everything, irrespective of job. Crofters with sea-facing land – of which on small islands there were many – or those with easy access to the shorelines, also caught fish and gathered sea food and sea goods. As the old saw has it: a Shetlander is (with Shetland's inferior agricultural land) a fisherman who farms; an Orcadian, instead, is a farmer who fishes (Fenton, 1997, p. 1). Like archipelago dwellers the world over, Orcadians were familiar with the sea. Their lives depended on it.

Deerness (“nearly an island,” Brewster, 1808-1830, XVI, p.6) is a peninsula of the most important island in the archipelago, known as Mainland (Figures 1 & 2). Dingieshowe, the tiny neck of land that connects Deerness to the rest of Mainland, is nine miles from Kirkwall, Orkney's capital. The landscape is characteristically Orcadian: “[f]rom the shores, which are haunted by myriads of sea-birds, the surface of the peninsula rises to a somewhat tabular summit” (Groome, 1882-1885, I, 348). In 1882 rope making from coastal plants and kelp collecting were reported as important Deerness activities and in the later 19th century the population stood at close to nine hundred (Groome, 1882-1885 II, p. 348; *Handbook*, nd, p.146). There was no consolidated urban centre in the 1890s. Contemporary OS maps show that farms were spread relatively evenly across the peninsula.² The DM habitually appeared in the south at Newark Bay, a sandy beach surrounded on both sides by low cliffs and rocks.

¹ https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10197247/cube/TOT_POP

² Deerness is spread across Orkney 109, 110, 115, 116 in the six-inch series surveyed 1879-1880 and published in 1882.

Young: The Deerness Mermaid

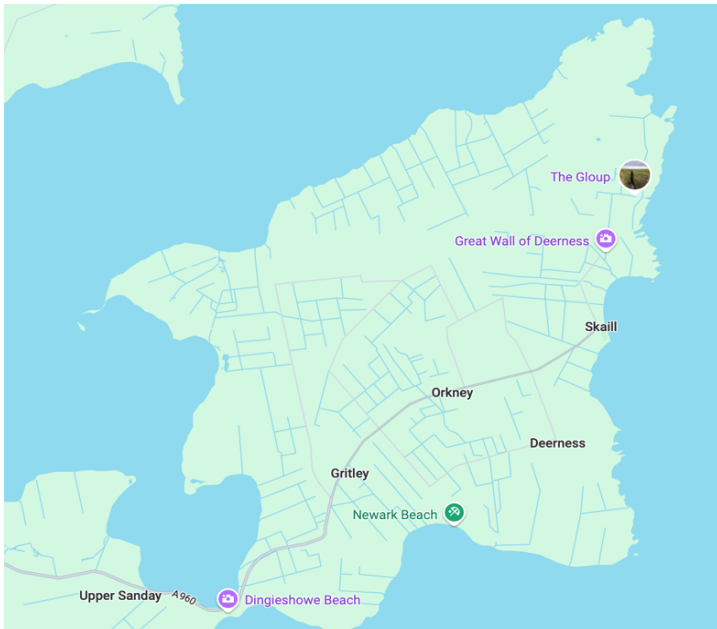
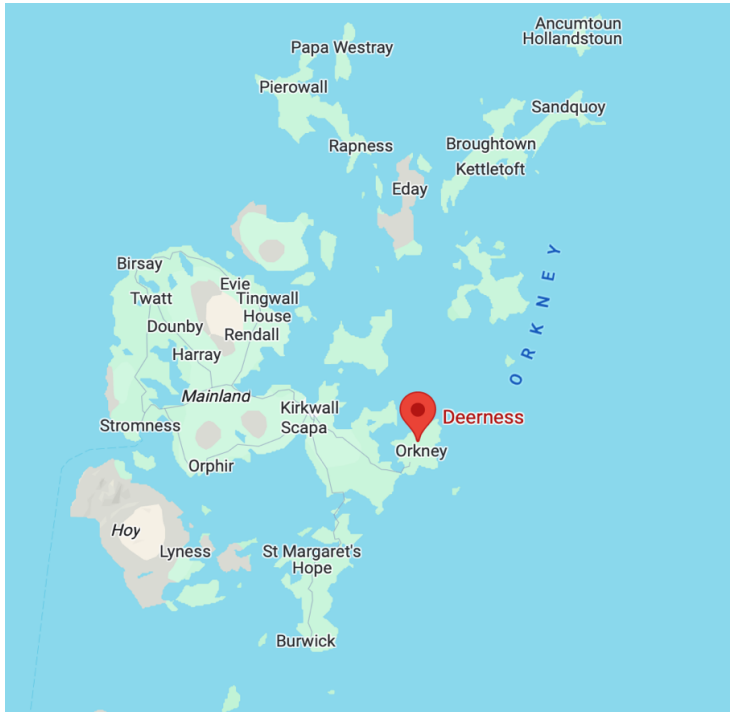


Figure 1 - The Orkney Islands, showing position of Deerness. Figure 2 - Map of of Deerness peninsula showing location of Newark Beach and Dingieshowe isthmus.

In this article I will, in as much as the sources allow, reconstruct the story of the DM. The DM has, despite its celebrity in the 1890s, barely appeared in secondary or academic texts and then only as asides, typically with mistakes.³ I overwhelmingly then rely on newspapers and magazines from the period: Scottish newspapers are overrepresented because they were often the first to cover the story.⁴ I begin with a detailed history of the DM from 1887 – sightings predated the first news reports – to 1899, the last news report I have found. I subsequently ask what species the DM belonged to: suggestions here have included seals and manatees. Then, in a final section, I look at how it was that a creature that was arguably an unusual seal was classed as a mermaid. To do this, I look at both Orkney folklore beliefs and shifting notions of the mermaid in British popular culture.

The Deerness Mermaid observed

The first sighting of the DM came apparently in 1887. A Deerness farmer noticed a peculiar animal in the sea. At some point he told his neighbours and:

he had undergone such a lot of chaffing... that he was determined the next time he saw it he would let them know. So, when he saw it about two weeks ago [1890], he called them all to the place, and they saw it for themselves.
(Unattributed 1890b, 4).

The story appeared in the press soon afterwards in of all places, the *Fish Trades Gazette*.⁵ The central description of the animal quoted at the head of this essay then featured in many British and Irish papers in the second half of August. There was already at this date the idea in the British press of the ‘silly season’. This referred to the period after the closing of Parliament when political news in the country simmered down.⁶ In this dry time (for newspapers) editors cast around for other material as copy. ‘Strange stories,’ of course, were a particularly effective way to fill column inches in a news drought. Mermaids were regularly reported in the 19th century press (Scribner, 2020, pp. 127-28). The DM was particularly useful because it arrived annually in Deerness in the late spring-early summer. It would become, in journalistic terms, the gift that kept on giving.

The Lowland and English newspapers, especially, cast aspersions on this story from the far north, while using the DM as copy, “[t]he return of the ‘Silly Season’ has been promptly heralded by the arrival of a ‘genuine Mermaid, this time off the distant shores of Orkney, and the event has been duly telegraphed and chronicled in the daily press’ (Unattributed, 1890c, p.5). “We are in the midst of the dull season, and the inventive reporter is now having his innings. A mermaid is reported from the Orkney Islands, so that presently we may look for the arrival of the sea serpent” (another silly season favourite) (Unattributed 1890d, p. 2). “The sea serpent had better look to his laurels,” a writer in the Birmingham Mail stated more laconically (Unattributed, 1890e, p. 2).

³ Some instances with asides, riddled with mistakes, are: Mackinlay (1893, p.168); Benwell and Waugh, (1965, p. 120); Marwick, (2000 [1975]), pp. 24-25); Silver (1999, p. 206). Note the one longer study we have – two pages – is Magin (2018).

⁴ I have some 25,000 words in my DM source file, almost all from the media of the time (Young, 2024).

⁵ I have not yet been able to find a copy of the *Fish Trades Gazette* for this year. This seems to be the original report in print.

⁶ The longer *Oxford English Dictionary* applies silly season to ‘August and September’ and gives its earliest attestation as 1861. The phrase is a little older, but it became commonplace in the 1860s.

Hunting the Deerness Mermaid

No sightings were reported for 1891; though in the winter of 1891-1892 locals wondered whether a “strange fish... in a decomposed state” was the mysterious animal (Unattributed, 1892a, p.4). However, at the end of March 1892 the DM was seen again “by lobster-men working their creels” and once more the story spread through the British press (Unattributed, 1892a, p.3). In May of that year a Mr Ritch managed to get relatively close to the DM in a boat and observed that “the skin appears to be like that of a fish” (Unattributed 1892b, p.3). “The strange creature may now be seen any calm day, and as there is no difficulty in getting within a short distance of it, it might easily be captured, but the people in the locality will not venture to touch it” (Unattributed 1892b, p.3).

These (supernatural?) scruples slowly receded as collectors to the south began to offer prizes for the capture of the animal: a “naturalist in Glasgow has written offering £200 for it alive, £150 for it wounded, or £100 for it dead” (Unattributed, 1892c, p.5). The climax came around the middle of June:

On Saturday [18th June] over 100 excursionists proceeded to Deerness on a picnic, also to get a sight of the sea monster there but they were disappointed, as the strange visitor did not make its appearance. A number of sportsmen with guns and rifles also proceeded there. (Unattributed, 1892c, p.5).

Then, on Tuesday 21 June, a Mr A. Reid of Braebuster, went out in a boat and shot the creature (Unattributed, 1892d, p.5). After this, the mermaid:

went out to sea a short distance, and then returned and sank. It is supposed to have been killed. Boats were engaged dragging the spot when the post left last night. (Unattributed, 1892d, p.5).

But:

the following morning it was seen in its usual place, swimming backwards and forwards. It is only supposed to have been stunned by the shot. Another attempt is to be made to shoot the mermaid the first fine day. (Unattributed, 1892e, p.3).

To judge by the local press, Orcadians were against the idea of killing of the animal:

It is to be hoped that before [another shooting] the equivocal and outspoken expression of public opinion will take effect, and that there will be no attempt at repeating an act of such gross and wanton brutality as the murder of the strange visitant to the Deerness-shores. (Unattributed, 1892f, p.5).

There is no report of further hunts in 1892. Nor, indeed, were further sightings reported in that year.

The hunt produced the most entertaining writing on the DM. Later Andrew Lang, one of the best Scottish writers of that generation, and someone with an abiding interest in folklore, put down his own impatience with this ‘kill-everything’ approach to the supernatural: Shooting, he wrote:

is no way to investigate a mermaid. The Psychical Society do not try to bag a ghost when they hear of one. The plan is to send a handsome young Orcadian to the mermaid's cave and then to hear from him what happened, as far as he may honourably divulge the course of events (Lang 1893, p. 183).

Lang was writing, tongue in cheek. That seems not to have been the case with one Orkney writer who unabashedly put mermaid hunting in terms of bad luck:

Everyone knows that there are knows [hillocks] and uncanny braes in several districts in Orkney. It is also certain that the man who dares to plough or turn up the sod on these is certain to lose a cow, or have a horse done for, or bad crops as the result. There are numerous instances of this recorded. But, dangerous as it is to meddle with these dancing-grounds of the fairies, it is as nothing in comparison to shooting at, or annoying a mermaid or her bairn; and anyone so foolhardy as to interfere in her concerns, or attempting to disturb her, must expect to find no luck in this world, but endless vexations and sorrow: cows dying, pigs without fat, horses with broken legs, all their geese ganders, and themselves in the hands of the lawyers. The awful harvests of the last two years can be accounted for by the action of the Deerness farmer who shot at her, and hence the grub and wet, while finger-and-toe being a fairy plant, like sillercup and fairy ring, came as a warning which, if neglected, will end in a dire catastrophe. (Cowan, 1893, p.5)

The Deerness Mermaid as mother and actress

In 1893 the DM arrived in mid-late April. “There can be no doubt that summer is at hand. Although a few weeks earlier than usual, the Orkney mermaid has put in an appearance, and will doubtless continue its performance at intervals during the season” (Unattributed 1893a, p.4). Then in June came the news that the DM had a pup: “The young one is of a white colour, and swims in the same way” (Unattributed 1893b, p.3). This sentimental twist on the DM story led to another rash of national reports. It also tells us, incidentally, that the DM – to whatever species it belonged – was a mature female within swimming distance of a breeding population. In 1894 the DM arrived at the end of March, it was apparently alone (Unattributed 1894a).

Interest in the national press seems to have been flagging by this point. But in Orkney the DM was as famous as ever. In fact, she was being absorbed into the local arts scene. “An Orkney burlesque, entitled the ‘Deerness Mermaid. is to be performed in the Temperance Hall, Kirkwall, on the evenings of the 25th, 26th, and 28th current” (Unattributed 1894b, p.5). This play, taking local folklore and making regional theatre (mixing dialect and standard English) represented a common Victorian strategy. It can be seen in other parts of the country. I myself have looked at ‘boggart plays’ in Lancashire and the West Riding (Young 2014).

The *Deerness Mermaid* was written by “Messrs Wilson and Mooney”. Several copies of the libretto from 1894 survive. I know of five: one at the National Library of Scotland (Wilson and Mooney, 1894). Some extracts and descriptions are also preserved in Orkney newspapers. Characters included the tourist, the widow, the farmer, the masher, the fairy queen, the trow (a trickster figure), and, of course, the DM. “Besides the songs”, the play was apparently “enlivened by some pretty dances contributed by the Fairies and by the country folks in the

wedding scene” (Unattributed, 1894b, p.5). The play remained famous in the area for many years. Just before the outbreak of World War I, at an “Orkney and Shetland Society meeting in London one of the artistes, Miss Katharine Currie-Smith, sang in splendid voice ‘Our Isles of the Sea’, from the original Orkney burlesque ‘The Deerness Mermaid’” (Unattributed, 1913, p.1). In the middle of the Second World War, meanwhile, a lecture was given on the play on Orkney. Mr. Money “read extracts from some of the scenes” and “members literally rocked with merriment” (Unattributed, 1941, p.4).

In 1895, the DM mermaid arrived (or at least was first reported) in the press in June, when there were also some hints of new attempts to “bag” her (Unattributed 1895b, p.4). Then in August 1895, the *Orkney Herald* ran a story of the DM being seen at the same time as the sea serpent (Menmuir, 1895)! The sea serpent was often associated with the Northern Isles in the British press (perhaps related to the publicity around the “animal of Stronsa” in 1808 - Oudemans, 1892, pp. 61-88⁷). This joint outing would be the last properly national story on the DM and even then, it was not as successful as some previous reports. Perhaps, despite being written by a sober sounding local it was just too incredible for the newspaper reader in Lothian or Surrey.

Interest in the DM in the Orkney press trailed off in the last years of the 19th century. There was a small report on attempts to shoot the DM in 1896 (Unattributed 1896a, p. 793), then the last reports came in 1898 and 1899. The final reference known to me was written up in July 1899, report that the ‘now famous Deerness mermaid has been disporting herself in her old quarters for a few weeks past’ (Unattributed, 1899, p.5) Many other references were given in the next years, but none, save a curious instance from Flotta in 1920,⁸ were contemporary sightings: they were memories of the DM or broader cultural references (e.g. W.H.M. 1905; unattributed, 1908; unattributed, 1941). Either the DM disappeared after 1899, further writing has not been found, or the DM was no longer of interest to the Orkney newspapers.

Deerness Mermaid Timeline

First sighting c1887
First press report August 1890
Shooting attempt June 1892
‘Pup’ reported June 1893
Kidwall burlesque December 1894
Last contemporary mention July 1899

Identifying the Deerness Mermaid

What was the DM? The creature was described as possessing seal-like characteristics. Its head was large, dark, and bullet-shaped, with a flat face and protruding jaws. The most striking feature, however, was its unusually long neck, which deviated from typical seal morphology. Its body was reported to be between five and ten feet in length. It had a dark

⁷ Also see Jenkins (2022) for discussions of the discovery and misidentification of the Stronsa beach carcass.

⁸ “One man I have recorded who saw [a mermaid] swimming off Flotta about 1920 was definite that it was not a seal, and the black head and white body he described tally with the published account of one ‘seen by hundreds of sightseers’ off Deerness, fifteen miles away, thirty years earlier” (Bruford 1997, p. 123).

back and a white neck, chest, and belly (with one description mentioning a mottled underside). The presence of hair was noted, with one account stating, that the “hair is black; not long but very abundant, as is seen when the creature shakes its head on coming to the surface after a long dive” (Unattributed, 1895c, p.3) Additionally, a mane-like growth or a ridge of dark hair running down its back was mentioned in one report” (Unattributed, 1895b, p.4). I know of no reference to whiskers.

The DM’s swimming behaviour was likened to that of a human. It propelled itself forwards using forelimbs (approximately three feet long) or moving around on its back (Unattributed, 1892b). The ‘arms’ were described as being set slightly lower than those of a human (Unattributed, 1890b). The animal was observed to consume fish and eels (Unattributed, 1892g), and it would frequently remain submerged for five minutes or more (Menmuir, 1895). Its diving behaviour involved a head-down motion, with the body doubling up as it dived, obscuring the lower part from clear view (Unattributed, 1895c). The creature also exhibited a peculiar sinking behaviour, with its face being the last part to disappear beneath the surface (Unattributed, 1895c, p.3). It was more likely to emerge during sunny weather than in dismal conditions (Unattributed, 1892g). Notably, the creature did not appear to reside permanently at Deerness but rather visited every summer, arriving between March and May and departing as autumn approached.⁹ It was never reported on land.

Some less consistently reported features include scaly or fish-like skin (in contrast to the smooth skin typical of seals), a fan-shaped tail (usually not visible due to the creature’s bobbing or back-swimming behaviour), and the presence of “mamma or breasts” (Unattributed, 1895c, p.3). Two witnesses who encountered the mother and child near the shore described them as resembling “monster Newfoundland dogs” when viewed from the side. The witnesses here – two tourists from Aberdeen – reportedly fled the scene! (Unattributed, 1893c, p.3) One late description had the DM “disporting itself for hours on the surface of the water, waving its long arms, snorting, blowing and making a loud noise” (Unattributed, 1898, p.5).

In 1895, the manatee was proposed as a candidate for the DM (Unattributed, 1895c). The manatee is large, has powerful flippers, and breasts in a similar position to humans. However, manatees have never been definitively recorded in British or Irish waters, and their uniform grey colour and dietary habits do not match our descriptions of the DM (for more on the manatee in British waters, see Parsons, 2004, pp. 76-78). A more credible candidate would be a mature female hooded seal, which is the right size and that can be found from Iceland northwards (Stewart, 1895; Unattributed, 1895c). These seals eat fish and eels and spend a significant amount of time in the water. However, they lack a distinctive elongated neck, the unusually flat face with protruding jaw and rarely swim on their back.

What was the DM? The question needs to be determined by a marine biologist specialising in sea mammals. I presume – as some contemporary naturalists on the island did – that the DM was some kind of abnormal or hybrid seal. Atypical features may have led to the development of an unusual swimming style and migratory habits. What is absolutely certain is that the DM was very far from the mirror and comb mermaid with centuries of tradition behind it. No one would mistake the DM for a woman swimming in the sea; or (*pace* Lang, 1893) fall in love with the DM as she bobbed up and down in the water. This leads us to ask:

⁹ For this point see the dates of arrival in the yearly reports above. Note that this is one of the most mysterious aspects of the DM. A seal would be expected to travel south for the winter. Should we expect then to find the DM further south in the months it was absent from Orkney?

why was the DM identified as a mermaid? There are two explanations that we can offer for this: local folklore; and the evolving popular culture mermaid nationally. Let's start with Orcadian supernatural beliefs.

A seal by any other name... Orkney folklore

The folklore of the Orkneys was capably collected in the later 19th century by a series of writers, most importantly, Walter Traill Dennison (1995). In fact, the northern islands have some of the best folklore coverage in Britain (see the useful collection in Black and Thoms, 1903). Supernatural lore on Orkney included a widespread belief in fairies and trows (the social supernatural element on the island, etymologically linked to 'trolls', see Coulson, 2018). There were the typical series of solitary ghosts and bogies on the island with such fearsome names as luridan (a house spirit; Black and Thoms, 1903, pp. 46-47) and the wilkie – (p. 47) with whom Orcadians used to scare their children and the neogle (who took on a horse form and tricked men to ride him; pp. 189-192).

But there were also, of course, folklore beliefs connected to the sea and wide range of supernatural creatures that dwelt there. In both Shetland and Orkney there were memories of the Finn Men who were said to come to the islands in their small boats, which has been interpreted as a historical memory of Inuit visitors (Dennison, 1995, pp. 33-47; Rogers, 2012; Westaway, 2020). There were sightings of the sea serpent, and his folklore reflex the gigantic Stoor Worm "the most terrible of all living things on land or sea" (Dennison, 1995; pp. 22-25). There was also the Nuckelevee, a sea demon, and perhaps the cruellest being in the lower mythology of Britain (Dennison, 1995, pp. 26-29). There were then sea-trows that were more mischievous than ill-intentioned, but to whom sailors owed their missing nets and lost fish to (Dennison, 1995, pp. 30-32). Most important, for the present article, were the selkies:

In Orkney, selkie was the popular name for the seal. Seals were popularly divided into two classes; namely, first the common seal... which had no power to assume human form.... To the other class belonged all seals larger in size than the Phoca vitulina... it was this class of larger seals that were called 'selkie folk' because they had the power of assuming the human form (Dennison, 1995, pp. 78-79)

More specifically, these selkie assumed human form when they came on land. As with mermaids, visitors to shore were almost always female and this brings us to the legend of the selkie wife. A selkie sheds her seal skin and comes to shore as a beautiful woman. A man takes the skin, effectively trapping her on land. She marries him, bears her children, but then on discovering the hidden skin, returns to the sea (Darwin, 2019; McEntire, 2010; Shimokusu, 2010).

Britain and Ireland can be usefully split into mermaid-believing and selkie-believing areas. The west of Ireland and north-western and northern Scotland (including the northern Isles) were in the selkie area. Looking at the distribution, the selkie legend complex seems to have a Norse origin and can also be found in Faroe, Iceland and throughout Scandinavia. Most of the rest of coastal Britain, meanwhile, belonged to the mermaid: though there are some areas where there are records of neither (Darwin, 2019 - see especially p. 289 and following pages for maps).

By the late 19th century, though, the mermaid had become dominant in national popular culture: it appeared in magazine illustrations, on soap boxes, on the stage and in oil paintings at the Royal Academy (Faber and Sliggers, 2013, pp. 85-102; Scribner, 2020, pp. 125-171; Muller, Halls, Williamson, 2022, pp. 77-100). The mermaid began to push into selkie territories in this period, in much the same way as the fairy, in the 20th century, began to displace local forms of the social supernatural. Indeed, I think we can be confident that by the end of the 19th century the mermaid was a familiar concept through selkiedom and the two forms began to be (choose your term) confused/interchanged/merged.

An example of a more conventional mermaid sighting comes from just some miles to the north of Deerness in Birsay. This was another widely reported case from 1892:

The story is that a woman was down on the beach at Birsay the other day and saw a big animal on the rocks, from which she could not dislodge it. Going for her husband, they both returned to the shore and saw the strange visitant. The woman describes it as a person, whilst the man is sure it was a mermaid. (Unattributed, 1892h, p.3).

The journalist argued that it was likely a seal.

There was (previous) mermaid-lore on Deerness. Somewhere on the south-western coast of the peninsula there was a mermaid lair, a “big unexplored cave is said to penetrate the cliff at the foot of the Howe Hole: and there is an old legend that this cave was the haunt of mermaid and her lover” (Mooney, 1926, p.2). Also, on the southern coast – here too there are difficulties identifying the place which appears in a geologist’s report – there were a series of coastal rocks known as the Mermaid’s Rocks (or the Mermaid’s Castle).¹⁰ Perhaps the story and the place-name were linked.

With selkie-mermaid lore running together it will have made sense for a local to refer to a strange human-sized marine animal as a ‘mermaid’ (instead of or as well as a ‘selkie’). This will have particularly been the case as locals had to explain the presence of this curious creature to outsiders. There, the word ‘selkie’ may have been quite mysterious to all but folklorists and the very well read. By using the word ‘mermaid’, communication was possible both in writing (as accounts went south) and in conversations with visitors from elsewhere in Scotland or, indeed, the world: one man who saw the DM was from South Africa (Menmuir, 1895).

General mermaid culture: Fairs and exhibitions

There are also, though, in the second half of the 19th century, shifts in mermaid culture in Britain more generally, especially around the idea of the mermaid’s appearance. Traditionally a British mermaid had been envisaged as a beautiful woman, with a fish’s tail and a mirror and a comb. This was the image that appeared in sketches and advertising. Relatively few 19th century accounts had people actually claiming to see mirrors and combs when they happened to spot a mermaid. But the idea of physical beauty was constant in art and also to

¹⁰ A complicated source and the author, a geologist, is quite vague: I suspect that the two sites are one and the same, but they may be two different Deerness mermaid names, Flett 1894-1897: 256-257.

be found in witness accounts. There was, though, let us say, a minority opinion about less human mermaids that came through from two places: fair-grounds and, strangely, aquaria.

We know from Shakespeare that living wonders (or paintings of the same) were shown at English fairs by the early 1600s. The jester Trinculo on getting his first glimpse of Caliban, lying on the ground, states: "Were I in England now, as once I was, and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver" (*Tempest*, Act 2, Scene 2).¹¹ At about the same time mermaids were being exhibited in London:

In Bell Yard on Ludgate Hill, is to be seen... a living Mermaid, from the waist upwards of a party colour from thence downwards is very strange and wonderful. (Larwood and Hotten, 1866, p. 225).

The earliest reference I know to a dead mermaid being exhibited dates to 1775, when a three-foot long female was shown in Dublin for a shilling "and may be seen by any Person, even by the Women big with Child" (Unattributed, 1775, p.2).

The mermaid really became popular in fairs and exhibitions in the 19th century. In 1821 and 1822 a mermaid supposedly caught in the Indian seas was shown in London and subsequently around the country. "Yesterday... I saw and touched - A MERMAID!!!" (Unattributed, 1822, p.3). The creature in question had been shipped in by Captain Samuel Barrett Eades who had purchased the metre long mermaid (see the 1775 mermaid above) for an almost unbelievable 6,000 pounds. It was quickly revealed to be a "clumsy composition" of a monkey and a fish (Scribner, 2020, pp. 135-145). This mermaid or another of the same type was exhibited by P.T. Barnum after an inspired press campaign. His mermaid was shown first in America and then in Britain. The Feejee Mermaid, as the 1842 monkey-fish hybrid came to be known, launched the most important phase of Barnum's career (Bondeson, 1999, pp.36-63).

Eades and Barnum's mermaids were, in a sense, celebrities: the Feejee Mermaid's fame persists and she even has her own Wikipedia page. But from the 1820s similar mermaids began to be shown, much more modestly, at British fairs and frequently appeared in news accounts. The mermaid, in fact, joined the pantheon of English fair wonders: "absurdities such as the Mermaid, 'Pig-Faced Lady', 'Whistling Oyster' and 'Industrious Fleas'" (Unattributed, 1854a). By 1850 she could be referred to rather rudely as an 'old dodge' (Unattributed, 1850) and by 1854 one travelling showman confessed that the mermaid had become too common: "everybody had seen mermaids" he explained, while reflecting why he had moved onto hottentot snakes (Unattributed 1854b, p.5). By 1883 it was "our old friend, the stuffed mermaid" (Unattributed, 1883, p.730).

What did these mermaids look like? With the exception of some rare attempts to introduce 'living mermaids' (either unfortunate women, seals or sea lions, e.g. Scribner 2020, pp. 146-146 – this aspect deserves its own study), the mermaid followed the model that Eades and Barnum had established. These were small mermaids (usually about one metre long) caught in an agonising death pose. Their upper bodies were simian and the lower body fish. Most seem to have come from mermaid makers in Japan who fused a monkey with a fish tail, for

¹¹ Bill Ellis in a personal communication (28 July 2025) compares this to a line in Bracciolini, (1879, originally fifteenth-century, I, pp. 61-63: "Hanc ligneam ad nos Ferrariam usque delatam conspexi" ('a wooden effigy of a triton was brought to Ferrara'). I wonder whether some other medieval mermaids might not be explained as commercial operations, for instance the Wildman of Orford (see further Young 2019, pp. 45-48).

steadily diminishing sums through the 1800s (Scribner, 2020, pp. 138-139). However, some seem to have been made in Europe and some were simply improvised: one mermaid proved to be a turnip in a bag (Unattributed, 1849).

For the millions of Britons who saw ‘mermaids’ at fairs in the 19th century, there was the shocking contrast between their ideal of the mermaid (a beautiful woman very possibly with mirror and comb) and the upsetting mermaid on display (often resembling a fishy primate version of Munch’s scream). This contrast was even stronger because many mermaid stalls lured punters in with images of beautiful, eroticised mermaids being captured by sailors. The contrast when the fair-goer paid their money and found themselves before the ‘mermaid’ proved memorable. “I had expected a fair damsel with a looking-glass and long hair and a comb”, complained a paying customer in 1884 (Unattributed, 1884, p.1). “When”, asked one 19th century journalist, “is a mermaid not a mermaid? When she’s on exhibition in a penny show” (Unattributed, 1890f, p.2).

General mermaid culture: Aquaria

“In the 19th century,” Béatrice Laurent has noted “the question was not whether mermaids existed, but rather what they were really” (Laurent, 2017, p. 1). This sums up very well the way that most educated Britons saw the mermaid. What sea animal could possibly explain the sightings? Candidates included the seal, the sea lion, the walrus and the various sea cows – tellingly classed as *Sirenia*: Dugong and the three types of Manatee. The favourites were, by the mid 19th century, manatees (a species not, according to naturalists, to be found within four thousand miles of Britain (Parsons, 2004, pp. 76-78).

Manatees seem first to have been displayed in British aquaria in the later 19th century and, for a time, proved one of the chief draws: perhaps surprisingly for an animal that lacks the attention-grabbing motility and playfulness of, say, dolphins or sharks. In 1878 a manatee was brought from British Guiana to Westminster Aquarium, two years after that place had opened (Unattributed, 1878b; Unattributed, 1878c). Such a storm of interest followed that in early 1879 Brighton aquarium also got a manatee (Unattributed, 1879e). After the death of this visitor two more manatee arrived at Brighton from the Amazon in September of that year (Unattributed, 1879g). The first Westminster manatee was seen by “tens of thousands” in its short life at the aquarium (Unattributed, 1879f. p.2). The Brighton manatee was popular too. One marvellous 1879 sketch in the *Graphic* shows a gentleman waddling down Brighton beach holding the flipper of a manatee (Unattributed, 1879a). The British press, meanwhile, covered the arrival and brief sojourn of the manatees (they all died within weeks) extensively.

What is interesting in relation to the DM is that the British press frequently termed the manatee ‘mermaids’. This seems to have been a PR trick by Westminster Aquarium, an institution that proved particularly skilled at titillating the general public (Munro, 1971). Certainly, ‘mermaid’ was used routinely for manatee in the aquarium’s publicity (Unattributed, 1878c). Visitors to the Westminster aquarium were, interestingly, confronted by drawings of legendary mermaids explaining how the manatee had been confused with a swimming woman (Unattributed, 1878d). The newspapers enjoyed, in any case, the conceit of referring to the manatee as ‘mermaids’ and played it up for all it was worth. Sentences like the following were normal, there “are the mermaids, the only living pair in Europe, and the sea lions and their cubs” (Unattributed, 1880a, p.8) and headlines followed suit: e.g. “Death of the Mermaid” (Unattributed, 1879b). Here, the public were told, was “the mermaid of tradition” (Unattributed, 1880b, p.4).

What was it like to pay your penny and be ushered into the presence of the manatee? Here too we seem to have the kind of cognitive dissonance that many Britons experienced when they were confronted by the fair-ground mermaid. One schoolboy who was tempted in said the manatee was “very like a whale” (Unattributed, 1878a, p.7); others “did not scruple to call it an ugly beast” (Unattributed, 1879c, p.3). A journalist summed up the problem as follows: “visitors are disappointed at the lack of resemblance to the traditional Syren” (Unattributed, 1879d, p.8). This was approached indirectly by one particularly entertaining comic strip ‘Married to a Mermaid’ that after a series of imagined domestic scenes ended with “nonsense, it was all a dream, which occurred after a visit to the Brighton Aquarium last Monday”. A manatee is shown floating like a dead seal in the water (Unattributed, 1885, p.4).

Conclusion

The DM was an unknown sea creature that was seen on Orkney (Mainland) between c. 1887 and c. 1899. In that time, it became a media personality being widely reported in the local and also the national press. It is not clear what sea animal the DM was, but it was more like a seal (albeit a very unusual one) than the traditional mirror-and-comb mermaid. Why then was the DM called a mermaid by the press? Local beliefs favoured ‘selkie’ legends, whereby large seals became women on land. It was very easy to fit DM into this model under the label ‘mermaid’ (a nationally understood term). But there were also important changes in the national image of the mermaid in the 1800s. Britons were introduced – in fairs and aquaria – to a number of very un-mermaid-like mermaids. The idea that a mermaid might be more marine mammal than a beautiful woman became much more common in the 19th century. The DM being identified by Orcadians and Britons more generally as a mermaid is best understood in that light.

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