



Isle of Islay by Alastair Jackson

The Maidens of the Sea

A search for the watery women of island folklore



By Maeve Bruce

After a precarious 10-minute scramble over the rocks, I find it. Hidden in a small gully is a deep round pool with a smooth circular stone at its centre. Local legend has it that long ago a mermaid came here to bathe and bask in the sunshine. As the sun moved across the sky, she would turn to feel its warmth on her face, her tail making the indentation in the rocks.

I'm in Portnahaven, a pretty fishing village on the south-western tip of the Rinns of Islay. Whitewashed cottages curve around a small bay and on a bright summer's day it is picture-postcard perfect.

I wonder if it was the same bathing mermaid that was reported in *The Shipping Gazette* more than 165 years

ago. Only a mile or two from Portnahaven, just round the coast in Loch Indaal, two local fishermen declared that, on 4th June 1857, they had seen: "an object about six yards from us, in the shape of a woman with full breast, dark complexion, comely face, and fine hair hanging in ringlets over the neck and shoulders. It was above the surface of the water to about the middle, gazing at us and shaking its head. The weather being fine, we had a full view of it, and that for three or four minutes."

It might seem fantastic now, but there are many reported mermaid sightings in Scottish waters dating from the 18th and 19th century. In 1797, a schoolmaster from Thurso saw one sitting on a rock in Sandside Bay at Reay, combing her long brown hair. He described the mermaid as having a round forehead, a plump face, ruddy cheeks and blue eyes. Twelve years later in the same spot, two young ladies - one a minister's daughter - recounted seeing a mermaid



A common seal by Michael Steciuk

in the water with a similar plump round face, though her eyes were grey and her long hair had a "green oily cast".

In 1833, a professor of natural history at Edinburgh University reported that a group of fisherman had captured a mermaid off Yell in the Shetland Islands. They had apparently held it for three hours, noting that it had the face of a monkey, the torso of a woman and the tail of a dogfish. When it began to make "plaintive little moans", they let it go.

Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*, a compendium of hymns, prayers, songs and folklore orally collected in the Highlands and Islands between 1860 and 1909, yields several mermaid stories. A crofter named Colin Campbell from the island of Barra once spied an otter eating a fish on a reef. He raised his gun to shoot it, but began to think that the otter looked remarkably like a woman. Taking up his telescope, he saw it had the head, hair, neck, shoulders and breasts of a woman, and she was holding a child. He concluded that it was a mermaid. Another crofter, Neill Maceachain, was sailing home with others to South Uist on a scorching hot still day, having been to the Clyde to sell farm produce. When they emerged from the Sound of Mull, a creature appeared close to the boat with the head, neck, shoulders and breasts of a woman. Its hair was coarse and its eyes glassy. One of Maceachain's companions identified it as a mermaid - he knew because he had seen one before while making kelp at Airdmaoilean.

Perhaps the most famous mermaid sighting dates from around 1830 on the island of Benbecula. Crofters cutting seaweed on the beach at Sgeir na Duchadh saw a strange creature - small and womanly in appearance - close by in

the water. They tried to catch her but when a boy threw a rock at her, she cried out and dived beneath the waves.

A few days later, the creature washed up dead at Culla Bay, two miles away. A large crowd came from all over the island to see it and they all agreed it was the body of a mermaid. Carmichael describes her appearance thus: "the upper part of the creature was about the size of a well-fed child of three or four years of age, with abnormally developed breasts. The hair was long, dark, and glossy, while the skin was white, soft, and tender. The lower part of the body was like a salmon, but without scales."

The local sheriff, Duncan Shaw, also the factor for MacDonald of Clanranald, called for a shroud and a coffin to be made. The creature was given a Christian burial well-attended by islanders, but today nobody is quite sure exactly where the mermaid of Benbecula was laid to rest. Some say it was in the churchyard, some say it was in the dunes. Carmichael reports that she was buried a little way above the shore, but investigations into likely gravesites have so far yielded no clues.

Standing by the sea at Portnahaven, I look out towards the uninhabited isle of Orsay with its Stevenson lighthouse, just half a mile distant, and the neighbouring isle of Eilean Mhic Coinnich. The sheltered harbour here is a haven for grey seals, who lie on the rocks and skerries and congregate in large numbers on the remote beaches opposite. Inquisitive creatures, they often pop up from the waves and seem to be watching. There is something about their curiosity that feels almost human. Graceful and lithe in the water, their sinuous form has a feminine



Isle of Mull by Melissa Silver

quality. It is not hard to imagine that in certain light, it could be mistaken for a female body.

For thousands of years, the seal has lived on the edge of our world, in that liminal space between the land and the sea. According to The Wildlife Trusts, more than 40% of the world's grey seal population lives in Britain. For the villagers of Portnahaven, like many other coastal places around our islands, the seal is an inextricable part of the landscape in which they live. And for as long as we have shared the space with them, we have told stories of them.

The legend of the selkie was told throughout the Western and Northern Isles. The term selkie derives from the Scots word *selch* meaning grey seal. In the old stories, selkies and mermaids were not always differentiated linguistically; both were often referred to as *maighdeann-mhara* in Gaelic, or maiden of the sea.

Although there were regional variations, selkie folk were regarded as part-human. Some believed them to be the souls of those who had drowned, or those who were damned. Others told stories of them coming ashore, slipping off their skins and taking human form; more often than not, the form of a beautiful young woman. In the tales, a man sees the selkie-woman and instantly falls in love, taking her home for his wife. As long as he hides her sealskin from her, she is prevented from returning to the sea. Often, she sings a sorrowful, beautiful song. She bears him children, but the day always comes when she

finds her sealskin again and slips it back on. She abandons her human family and dives back into the waves.

The MacCodrums of North Uist claimed to be descended from such a union. This may have been a way to explain syndactyly – a hereditary condition that causes a growth of skin between the fingers or a fusion of the digits. Whatever the origin of the clan's story, it was said no man of the MacCodrums would kill a seal. Similar stories of selkie heritage have been told of the Macfies, whose long history is entwined with the islands of Colonsay and Oransay.

It was at Oransay in the late 1880s, that archaeologists made a curious find. In a shell midden, some 6,000 years old, bones from a seal flipper were found buried alongside bones from a human hand. On the isle of Lewis in the early 1990s, a cache of seal teeth was uncovered beneath the site of an Iron Age tower. And on Rousay in Orkney, a seal tooth pendant approximately 2000 years old was unearthed in 2019 at the ancient settlement at the Knowe of Swandro. It is clear that seals held some significance to early people, though we may never know quite in what way.

Before I walk back to the car, I sit for a while overlooking the bay at Portnahaven, hoping to hear the sound of seal song. Driving back up the coast to Port Charlotte, I keep my eye on Loch Indaal watching for mermaids. When I get into bed that night, I leave the curtains open so that I can see the moonlight reflected on the water, but as I drift off to sleep, there is still no sign of the maidens of the sea.