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The Saga of the Sea Serpent

Sailors see 'em but scientists scoff

Book Commentary by George W. Earley

You say you're looking forward to a quiet summer on the beach? Surfing, a little snorkeling, maybe wade in a tide pool or two? Is that what you're planning, gentle reader?

Well, just when you thought it was safe to go back into the water, here comes Richard Ellis with **Monsters of the Sea** [Alfred A. Knopf; 1994; \$30 . . . and worth it] which just might scare you right back onto the shore again.

Ellis, a world-class marine artist, here takes a comprehensive look at reports of the Great Sea Serpent and other aquatic unknowns that have been reported since time immemorial.

His opening chapters cover "a Variety of Scaled, Serpentine, Anthropophagous and Otherwise Terrifying Creatures" said by seafaring men and others to inhabit the waters of "the Seven Seas and Elsewhere." I suspect for most readers this book will be their first indication of how many kinds of 'sea monsters' are alleged to have been disporting themselves in the oceans of the world.

If you saw the Disney version of Jules Verne's **20,000 Leagues Beneath the Sea**, you've likely not forgotten that breath-taking battle with giant squid, one of the finest monsters ever crafted by Hollywood's talented technicians. Disney's creature [he showed only one whereas Verne had the Nautilus assailed by a dozen or more, but then it is far cheaper to write about monsters than to build them for a film] was patterned after *Architeuthis*, specimens of which went aground between 1870-90 on beaches as far apart as New Zealand, Ireland, Norway and the Newfoundland coast of Canada. Tail to tentacle tip, some of those stranded squid measured 60 feet long! Monstrous, indeed.

Architeuthis, writes Ellis, is normally a very deep sea creature whose surface appearances seem to take place only when they are dying. But take no comfort from that. Other squid, considerably smaller than *Architeuthis* but still larger than humans, actively seek prey in the Pacific . . . underwater photographer Alex Kerstich was attacked by three 5-foot-long Humboldt squid in 1991 while filming a shark hunt off the coast of Mexico. After stripping some items of scuba equipment from him, the squid fled, leaving a badly shaken swimmer.

While no squid attacks have been officially registered along the Oregon coast, the squid are there, we do lose swimmers from time to time and who is to say one or another of them may not have not been taken by a hungry squid? [My speculation, not Ellis's.]

But **Monsters of the Sea** is more than a book of such of Spielbergian horrors as giant squid and swimmer-gobbling sharks; it's a quietly exciting survey of once-mythical sea monsters that have moved from legend to biology book as well as the accepted 'monsters': sharks and octopi. There are even chapters on their biology which will help you better understand them.

As Ellis points out, we now know that what we once called *Leviathan* are the Great Whales. The Norse *Kraken* has been identified as the giant squid while mermaids are really manatees.

Also discussed are a variety of reliably reported unknowns, mystery creatures not yet resident in aquariums, museums and zoology books but which apparently live comfortably in the oceans that cover 60% of earth's surface.

One chapter, *Blobs and Globsters*, looks at strandings of giant masses of flesh [estimated weights of several tons] which apparently are from some of those unknown sea animals. The 'official' scientific line is that these huge fleshy masses were somehow detached from whales but neither their appearance nor the few laboratory tests seem to justify such an identification. It seems clear that a number of yet-unknown creatures live deep below the ocean surface.


But while admitting those 'blobs and globsters' are puzzlingly unknown, Ellis remains skeptical of "sea serpents" per se and makes a pretty good case that some 18th and 19th century sighting reports were misidentifications of the then-unknown giant squid. However, when his skepticism leads him to assume trained naturalists would attribute features to a sighted unknown that weren't actually there, I think his skepticism overreaches the evidence. In short, I think some 'monster' reports represent real but still scientifically unclassified marine animals.

So . . . do I recommend Ellis' book? Yes I do. In **Monsters of the Sea** we have the first really detailed look at the possible existence of sea monsters since Bernard Heuvelmans' *In the Wake of the Sea Serpents* appeared in 1965 [American edition from Hill & Wang, 1969, long out of print but well worth hunting for]. Ellis may be a bit of a skeptic but he's done a good piece of work and even long-time water monster buffs will find much that is worthwhile here.

And before I forget them, a word about the illustrations: superb! A number are by Ellis, others are contemporary drawings made scores to hundreds of years ago by eyewitnesses or by artists working from first-hand descriptions. They more than complement the text -- they're an integral and indispensable part of the book.

The oceans of our world are wide and deep. Even today we are discovering new species in them and we will continue to do so; to paraphrase the *X-Files*: The Unknowns Are Out There.

Enjoy your summer . . . but swim cautiously! . . .



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George W. Earley has had a lifelong interest in sea monsters as well as other 'unknowns.' His book reviews appear in a variety of publications including *UFO* magazine, *The Gate* and, occasionally, even *The Oregonian*. His house stands atop a glacial moraine near Mount Hood, safely away from sea serpents and other aquatic unknowns.

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