

THE REAY MERMAIDS

In the Bay and in the Press

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ABSTRACT: C. 1798 and then again in 1809 a mermaid was seen at Reay on the very northern coast of Scotland. These two mermaid sightings were both described in letters in 1809 and afterwards the letters were, without the authors' permission, printed in an Oxfordshire newspaper. The story created a national sensation in late August 1809 and the Reay mermaids became perhaps the most famous mer-folk to emerge from 19th Century Britain. In this article, I look at how the Reay mermaids were treated by the press and how the case can help us to exploit other mermaid encounters in 19th Century newspapers.

KEYWORDS: Britain, Scotland, Caithness, Mermaids, Press

Introduction

Mermaids were sometimes seen on the British and Irish coasts in the 19th and even in the early 20th Century and, on some occasions, reports of them made it into the local or the national press (Benwell and Waugh [1961: 111-119] base their chapter on the 19th Century largely on newspaper accounts). These newspaper reports are frequently neglected, not least because they are difficult to recover, but digitisation has made it possible to search for them in a relevantly efficient fashion.¹ A particularly interesting case of mermaid sightings came from Reay in Caithness, the northern tip of Britain (Figures 1 and 2) in 1809. Caithness, like much of Highland Scotland, has a tradition of water spirits and monsters (see Calder, 1887: 10-11, for example), so a report of a mermaid being spotted in this period should come as no surprise. There was even a mermaid placename in the immediate area: a Mermaid's Cave ('A Remote' 1891: 3), although I have not found this on any 19th Century Ordnance Survey Map [such as Figure 1]). What is fascinating and worth chronicling is, first, how the story made it into the press; and, second, the story's long afterlife both locally and nationally. I offer this brief account of the Reay sightings as a more general reflection on how press accounts about mermaids can be exploited by folklorists and historians but also to show how they must be handled with care.

The Sightings

In 1797 or thereabouts,² a local school teacher William Munro was walking by Sandside Bay on a summer day "when my attention was arrested by the appearance of a figure resembling an unclothed female, sitting upon a rock extended into the sea, and apparently in the action of combing its hair, which flowed around its shoulders, and [was] of a light brown colour"

¹ I have argued for the potential of digitisation for folklore in Young (2013 and 2018).

² "About twelve years ago, when I was Parochial schoolmaster at Reay" (A Naturalist, 1809: 4).

Young: Reay Mermaids



Figure 1 – Map showing position of Reay (ringed in red) within Caithness (and with insert showing position within Scotland) (Wikicommons, 2017)



Figure 2 – Details from Ordnance Survey map of Reay and adjacent shore of Caithness (1878)

(A Naturalist 1809: 4).³ Munro observed the mer creature in great detail for “three or four minutes”, even noting the colour of its eyes:

The head was covered with hair of the colour above mentioned and shaded on the crown, the forehead round, the face plump, the cheeks ruddy, the eyes blue, the mouth and lips of a natural form resembling those of a man, the teeth I could not discover as the mouth was shut: the breasts and abdomen, the arms and fingers of the size of a full grown body of the human species, the fingers, from the action in which the hands were employed, did not appear to be webbed, but as to this I am not positive. (ibid)

Munro insisted, too, that the creature was quite human-like:

The resemblance which the figure bore to its prototype in all its visible parts was so striking that had not the rock on which it was sitting been dangerous for bathing I would have been constrained to have regarded it as really a human form, and to an eye unaccustomed to the situation it must have undoubtedly appeared as such. (ibid)

I have been unable to establish Munro’s age when he saw the mermaid.⁴

The second sighting came 12 January 1809 when two young women were walking by the sea near Reay, very likely, like Munro, in Sandside Bay, although the exact place of the sighting was never confirmed. This date is intriguing because there is a Caithness tradition of mermaids appearing before national disasters: on 16th January of the same year, British troops would be evacuated from Corunna (in Galicia, Spain) after a vicious and famous clash with French forces there.⁵ One of the two young women, Eliza Mackay, was the daughter of the local clergyman David MacKay and the other was Eliza’s cousin, C. Mackensie. I have been unable to establish how old Eliza was when she saw the mermaid (or even the full name of ‘C. Mackensie’).⁶ A later writer though describes Eliza as being “then [in 1809] the ‘belle of the north’” (Patterson, 1849: 3); and we could assume, thinking of 19th Century social conventions, that she was perhaps between fifteen and thirty and probably closer to twenty. She was described by a local earl, meanwhile, as being a “young woman” at this date (Fraser 1889, vI: 303-304).

³ Note that while I do not know if the original letters survive, I have found a reference in *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* n24 (1904: 63) to a ‘copy’ of Eliza Mackay’s letter surviving in the Mackay Bighouse Papers. Although I cannot speak to the mermaid letters, these papers are to be found in the National Archives of Scotland (GD 87 and GD1/1200).

⁴ Munro was certainly dead by 1849, see Taylor (1849a) where Munro is described as “late”. Munro was evidently younger than David Mackay (see further below) who seems to have given him a start in life: Patterson (1849).

⁵ Apparently, the Caithness mermaid appeared “before any great national calamity or war, washing a bloody shirt” ‘Unattributed, 1842: 4). Calder: “In the superstitious creed of the Caithness, it was the popular belief that the Mermaid, before any remarkable battle, was occasionally seen sitting on a rock, singing a melancholy air, and washing a bloody shroud” (1842: 4). (Note that these are not two independent attestations as both depend on the work of Calder.) I’m not suggesting, of course, that the mermaid actually appeared to presage Corunna, but, rather, that the sighting could have later taken on significance because of the coincidence of dates.

⁶ I’ve looked through census and newspaper databases without any luck: of course, the fact that ‘Mackay’ was a maiden name complicates matters. I assume that Eliza was dead by the *John o’Groat Journal* letters of 1849 (see below) as the assumption seems to be that all the witnesses had vanished.

These two women, in any case, noticed two servant maids and a boy who had seen something in the water. The boy was shouting. When they arrived, they could only see “the face, throat and arms” of an extraordinary creature:

The face seemed plump and round, the eyes and nose were small, the former were of a light grey colour, and the mouth was large, and from the shape of the jawbone, which seemed straight, the face looked short: as to the inside of the mouth I can say nothing, not having attended to it, though sometimes open. The forehead, nose, and chin were white. The head was exceedingly round, the hair thick and long of a green oily cast, and appeared troublesome to it, the waves generally throwing it down over the face: it seemed to feel the annoyance, and as the waves retreated, with both its hands it frequently threw back the hair, and rubbed its throat, as if to remove any soiling it might have received from it. The throat was slender, smooth and white: we did not think of observing whether it had elbows, but from the manner in which it used its arms I must conclude that it had. The arms were very long and slender, as were the hands and fingers, the latter were not webbed. The arms, one of them at least, was frequently extended over its head as if to frighten a bird that hovered over it, and seemed to distress it much: when that had no effect, it sometimes turned quite round several times successively. (A Naturalist, 1809: 4)

They watched the creature for about an hour before it disappeared into the waves. The sea was high, “[t]he sun was shining clearly at the time. [The mermaid] was distant from us a few yards only.” (ibid)

It might be worth noting that both William Munro and Eliza MacKay reported that others had seen mermaids in the same general area (ibid). The difference between their sightings and those others was, of course, that the two were members of the local middle classes. As we shall see, constant reference is made in the writing about this incident to their trustworthiness and to their general respectability.

The Reports

For the historian or the folklorist, the way in which these mermaid reports reached the public is quite as interesting as the sightings themselves and, needless to say, the process was much messier than the simple chronology given above. On 25th May 1809 Eliza Mackay wrote a description of her sightings for a local aristocrat, Mrs Innes, Dowager of Sandside. It is very likely that, in an isolated part of Britain, Mrs Innes and Eliza, the dowager and the rector’s daughter, mixed socially. The letter was signed by Eliza and also by her cousin C. Mackenzie, perhaps a middle-class version of the sworn statements made about mermaids elsewhere in Scotland in the early 19th Century (‘Mr. Editor’, 1820 [1811]; Unattributed, 1809). It was written, though, “merely for private information, without the smallest suspicion of any other use to be made of it” *Unattributed, 1857: 5).

In 1809 William Munro, by then a teacher at nearby Thurso, received a letter from one Dr Torrence. This individual – who also lived in Thurso⁷ – had asked Munro to describe a

⁷ There is some confusion about where Torrence was from: indeed, it is frequently and erroneously stated that he was from Glasgow (eg Benwell and Waugh, 1961: 111). This appears to be because of a mix-up with the part played in the story by the Philosophical Society of Glasgow (see below). The first

mermaid experience that the school teacher had had some years before. Munro's description was given as an answer to this letter. It is very likely that Torrence's missive was excited by Eliza Mackay's recent sighting. We have no date for Torrence's letter but Munro responded on 9th June 1809 with a description of his own encounter, and I have quoted extensively from the letter above.

Mrs. Innes passed Eliza's letter on to Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster (deceased 1835), a man with a wide range of interests who had been born at nearby Thurso Castle and represented this part of Caithness in successive parliaments (Mitchison, 2015). We can note that Eliza's father wrote a familiar-sounding letter to Sir John in 1810, so the Mackays and the Sinclairs were themselves in contact, albeit perhaps only distantly (Sinclair, 1831: 4 [Appendix, separate pagination]). Munro's letter was either in Mrs Innes' hands already and was passed on with Eliza's or the account was passed on by Sinclair to Torrence or to some other reader who possessed Munro's letter. According to David Mackay (Eliza's father), Mrs Innes "having excited Sir. J. Sinclair's curiosity, he obtained a copy of this letter [ie Eliza's], and it seems that by one of his friends [the letter] found its way to the English newspaper" ('Unattributed, 1857: 7).

The earliest report that I have been able to find in the press dates to 26th August 1809. All of Eliza Mackay's and most of William Munro's letter were included in the *Oxford University and City Herald* on that day (A Naturalist, 1809). The contributor signed himself as 'A Naturalist' in a letter dated 24 Aug from W____k (Warwick?). This was presumably Sinclair's 'friend' and I suspect that this was the first time that the letters were printed. As so often happened in the 19th Century press, an attractive news story was excerpted. The story appeared in the *London Courier* (5th September), the *Morning Post* (6th September), crucially *The Times* (8th September),⁸ the *Kentish Gazette* (8th September), the *Hull Advertiser* (9th September), the *Bristol Mirror* (9th September), the *Staffordshire Advertiser* (9th September), the *Examiner* [London] (10th September), the *Perthshire Courier* (11th September), *Saunders's Newsletter* [Ireland] (12th September), the *Hereford Journal* (13th September), the *Dublin Evening Post* (14th September) and *The Scots Magazine* (1st October). Those who know the 19th Century British press will see here the familiar spider web of reprintings as the story ripples out from the epicentre, in this case Oxford.

The story then started up again, in late October when David Mackay replied to inquiries from the Glasgow Philosophical Society (1857): this private letter was handed over to the Glasgow press; after his daughter's experience, Mackay should perhaps have known better! The first printed version of this letter I have found dates to 25th October and appeared in Ireland, but it was certainly published some time prior to this and probably in Glasgow (Unattributed, 1809).⁹ Reverend Mackay decried, in his letter, how his daughter's account had been published: inadvertently giving a second life to a story that had all but died in the press. He also gave some marginal extra information, telling us something, for example, of

printing, by A Naturalist 1911, has the "letter from Mr. William Munro, schoolmaster of Thurso, to Dr. Torrence, of that place". Note that Torrence may have had a local connection with Oxford as the marriage of a Dr Torrence at Thurso was reported there (Unattributed, 1817: 2). Perhaps 'A Naturalist' was a close family member? Note for non-British readers, Torrence is a relatively rare surname.

⁸ It is sometimes stated that Munro sent his letter to the *Times* (eg Clark and Pear 1997, 415). This is incorrect.

⁹ But this is excerpted from the *Glasgow Courier*. The *Glasgow Herald* ran, a half century later, an article 'The Philosophical Society' (Unattributed, 1857). There is included the original letter from the Society that was sent to Mackay on 23rd September 1809 and his response dated 3rd October 1809.

the three other witnesses who had seen the mermaid. As was perhaps to be predicted, this mermaid story in the British press opened the door to at least two other mermaid reports. One mermaid, it transpired, had been seen in the Hebrides and another mermaid was spotted near Grimsby (Unattributed, 1809b: 3; 1809c: 4). Given this general excitement it is not surprising that a pamphlet on the Reay mermaids was published in London in the same year (Unattributed, 1809e).

Behind the news reports there were doubtless many more letters running up and down the country, most of which will now have vanished from the historical record. We learn from John Patterson that “many a letter had the rev. minister of Reay from different quarters, both at home and abroad, making enquiries on the subject” (Patterson, 1849: 3). We are lucky that one letter concerning the Reay mermaids survives, though it was not sent to the Mackay family. On 11th September Lord Haddington wrote to the Earl of Caithness asking whether the mermaid accounts were “London fabrications” (Fraser, 1889, I: 303-304). On 19th September, the Earl wrote back and admitted to having read the original letters, before they were published, suggesting that they had been passed around among the Caithness ‘good and great’. He, then, returns to the character of the witnesses, putting his comments in terms that will be very familiar to those who know 19th Century literature:

With regard to [the] character of their authors, Miss Mackay is the daughter of a respectable clergyman in the neighbourhood, and a well educated amiable young woman. Had she alone said that she saw the animal so well described in her letter to Mrs. Innes, I could have had no right to have doubted the authenticity of her report. When we also take into view that not only Miss Mackay, but also her cousin, Miss Mackenzie, and three other creditable persons saw at the same time, this strange inhabitant of the sea, for upwards of an hour together, and at the short distance of about ten yards, it can hardly be supposed that the powers of imagination could have operated so strongly and consonantly upon so many different minds as to make the witnesses all believe that they had seen a mermaid, and all agree in the particular description given of said lady, but that the object of their vision must have been real and such as Miss McKay described. Mr. Monro’s account is entitled to an equal degree of credit. He maintains a very respectable character as a preacher and school-master, is a man of sound sense and good information, and is not supposed as being given to exaggerate much less as being capable of imposing on the public a gross deception. (ibid)

National Afterlife

The British and Irish press ran many mermaid accounts in the 19th Century: much as UFO accounts have been run by their 20th and 21st Century successors. In 1850 *Punch* included mermaids in their list of classic penny-a-lines for desperate journalists. “Any person retiring from [this job] and having on hand a few Sea Serpents, early Gooseberries, Mermaids or Earthquakes, not much the worse for wear, may hear of a purchaser” (Unattributed, 1850: 73). A year later a correspondent for the *Liverpool Albion* wrote a humorous paragraph about a news drought:

Nobody who is anybody will hang or drown themselves... underwriters are beginning to disbelieve in respectable shipwrecks; gunpowder mills can neither

be coaxed nor provoked to blow up; railway trains have ceased killing people as they ought to do. (Unattributed, 1851: 4)

This list continues until we reach mermaids who “have committed *felo da se*” [suicide] (ibid). Then, in 1899, one newspaper writer wondered aloud “what would we [journalists] do without old friends like the sea serpent and the Deerness mermaid?” (unattributed, 1899: 4). The Deerness mermaid was a much-reported mermaid from Orkney who starred in British newspapers in the 1890s (Mackinlay, 1893: 168-169). She and others like her were 19th Century press staples.

Though the Deerness mermaid became briefly famous the Reay mermaid or mermaids was to become a media sensation. Why? What made the story so attractive? Well, the letters had involved people of a certain social standing: see the tacit snobbery in the Earl of Caithness’ letter. A school teacher or the daughter of the reverend were the 19th Century equivalents of the reliable witnesses of today – a pilot or a police officer. There were two separate accounts that could be taken to confirm one another: although in reality the two accounts are rather different. Then, the story was widely picked up and reprinted, appearing in such prestigious papers as *The Times*, *The Scots Magazine* and *Saunders’ Newsletter*. It was only natural, then, that these experiences would have an afterlife both nationally and in Caithness.

One national story that grew out of the Caithness sightings was an account from Sir Humphry Davy (deceased 1829) who decided, incredible as this might sound, that he had been the mermaid! Davy claimed that he had been in Caithness in the year of a mermaid sighting there. He had, while there gone down to the sea to bathe:

He happened the year after to be at Harrowgate, and was sitting at table with two young ladies from Caithness, who were relating to a wondering audience the story of the mermaid they had seen, which had already been published in the newspapers: they described her, as she usually is described by poets, as a beautiful animal, with remarkably fair skin and long green hair. (1828, 244-246).

By comparing dates and location Davy established that the two young women had seen him swimming in the water near their home.¹⁰

The story is a good one, save for the fact that Davy was reported to have been swimming in the evening in August whereas the Mackay mermaid had been watched for an hour at midday in January. Needless to say, there are few human swimmers brave enough to launch into the seas off Caithness in midwinter and none alive who could manage an hour! There are also differences in descriptions of the beach where the mermaid was seen (Unattributed, 1849). Perhaps the reference is to another mermaid sighting or, more likely, this is an after-dinner story that got out of hand: Davy argued against the existence of mermaids and perhaps this was part of his ‘battery’. In either case, it became part of the hinterland of the Caithness sightings, not least because it was noted by Sir Walter Scott (Scott, 1841, III: 97-98) and was retold by William Maxwell in his much-read *Wild Sports of the West* (1843: 353-354). Davy’s explanation continued to appear in British newspapers through the 19th and even into the 20th century (eg ‘Unattributed, 1914).

¹⁰ Note that Davy ascribes the story to “a worthy baronet” and gives the story in the third person. The “worthy baronet” has universally been taken to be Davy himself.

There were other, less gentlemanly and less convincing attacks on the Reay mermaids. A particularly unpleasant example appeared, for instance, in 1869 in *Harper's Weekly* (because the sightings continued to be recycled by the press and by publishers):

The editor of a newspaper, who inserted the statement, had been told by a gentleman, who had been shown a letter by Sir John Sinclair, who had obtained it from Mr. Innes, to whom it had been written by Miss Mackay, who had heard the story from the persons (two servant girls and a boy) who had seen the strange animal in the water. (Unattributed, 1869: 331).

It is true that 'the chain of custody' for these letters needs to be established (as I have tried to do above), but the writer here was incompetent or dishonest or both.

Davy and those who quoted him represent a sceptical point of view. But what is striking about the Reay sightings and the resulting reports is that the existence of mermaids was still considered at least a possibility among educated readers. Starting with Eliza Mackay, going through Sir John Sinclair and looking at the tone of newspapers there is not the generalised credulity that greeted mermaid accounts in the early 20th Century. The Glasgow Philosophical Society we know had at least two discussions on the question, including one entitled: 'Our curiosity is much excited as to the phenomenon' (1857). Then, three years after the original media storm, the two letters were published as an appendix in an agricultural work sponsored by Sir John Sinclair (Henderson 1812: 108-113). Sinclair clearly continued to find the sightings intriguing.

It is worth pointing out here that by 1809 it would have been difficult for an educated man or woman to openly admit to believing in fairies and perhaps even in ghosts. However, mermaids have long been interpreted by some as supernatural denizens of the deep and by others as unidentified zoological creatures. As such, belief in mermaids continued to be credible among the educated through the Enlightenment and well into the 19th Century, with the second option being socially acceptable. In the same way that some biologists today can indulge in cryptozoology without damaging their academic reputations, early 19th Century men and women could speculate about an unknown mammal in the seas.

Local Afterlife

The Reay mermaids also continued to be famous in Caithness. We have a chance reference to the Reay mermaids in a letter to a local newspaper in 1839: a correspondent promised to give "some anecdotes relative to the Mermaid seen on the Caithness coast a great many years since... as soon as satisfactory accounts are received from Boston" (B, 1840: 4). He seems not to have done so, perhaps his trans-Atlantic evidence never arrived. In April 1849, though, the *John o' Groat Journal* answered a reader that "It is quite true that in 1809, a great sensation was created over the kingdom, by the report of a mermaid having been seen on the coast of Caithness" (Unattributed, 1849: 2). The editors promised to reprint the letters. This was done later that same month and the newspaper noted that: "It is enough for us to say that the report was generally believed to be true for a good many years; but afterwards credence was generally denied it, and it was regarded as a hoax" (1849a: 3).¹¹ The article

¹¹ Munro's letter here begins "Four queries respecting the mermaid are before me"; whereas in every other account the sentence begins "Your queries...".

included both Eliza Mackay's and William Munro's letter. Then, a week afterwards, the same newspaper published the Davy story, taken directly from Maxwell's *Wild Sports*, the editor pointing to some of the problems with that enjoyable farrago (Unattributed 1849c: 2).

This republication of Eliza and Munro's accounts created much interest in the area and a number of letters were sent into the paper, in two cases written by men who had known the protagonists. The first letter published was from a Mr. Patterson, evidently a local personality and, to judge by his prose, something of a blowhard.¹² Patterson stated that the mermaid was no more than an old grey seal and claimed that he had personally shot the seal in question (1849: 3)! He also made two other interesting observations. First, he claims that "the mermaid seers" (Eliza and her cousin) were widely ridiculed by Patterson and his acquaintances at the time; and, second that Munro had invented his story because he was in love with Eliza Mackay and wanted to support her and her father, David (who had advanced Munro in the world) once Eliza had written out her experience (ibid).

A subsequent letter from another local who had lived through the 1809 mermaid flap, and who was then resident in Dublin, defended both Eliza and Munro. The author, one James Taylor, after gently berating Patterson, "a man of sterling worth", noted that:

It would be superfluous in me to say that my friend Mr. Munro's name and character as a Christian and otherwise were far above that of lending his testimony, to any circumstance he was not fully convinced of. And Mr. MacKay's family, who were patterns of virtue, whose wife and sister were women pre-eminent for manners and education, which Caithness ladies then were, and I believe still are, it was impossible that they, accompanied by others, could say, much less sit down to write, what was false, even what there could be doubt about... Without farther trespassing on you or your reader's time, I assert, no matter whatever may be said to the contrary, that the evidence and letters of Eliza Mackay, C. Mackenzie, and William Munro, are conclusive of the fact that mermaids have been seen by them at Head in 1807 [sic] and 1809 and under the circumstances described. (Taylor, 1849a: 3)

This must surely stand as one of the last attempts by an educated Briton to defend the reality of the mermaid. Letters on the mermaids continued to be published in the *Journal* as late as August of 1849 (J.M, 1849; Taylor, 1849b; Mathewson, 1849) but none added substantially to the information given here. They do show, though, a lively local interest in mermaids and the events of 1809.

It is worth reflecting for a moment on how mermaid belief had evidently changed in Caithness from 1809 to the 1840s. In 1809 Eliza Mackay wrote:

I have stated nothing but what I clearly recollect: as my cousin and I had frequently previous to this period combated an assertion, which is very common among the lower class here, that mermaids had been frequently seen on this coast, our evidence cannot be thought biased by any former prejudice in favour of the existence of this wonderful creature.

¹² Patterson seems to be mocked in an article entitled 'Bibliolical Education' where a mock will of Patterson is given: "My gun with which I shot the mermaid half-a-century ago, shall go to the British Museum." (Unattributed, 1849: 2)

The mermaid was then an important part of local folklore, as, indeed, it was around much of the Scottish coast, in 1809. However, John Patterson (1849) claimed that he and others in the community had laughed, at that date and at the idea of mermaids at the time. In much of Britain and Ireland in the 19th Century traditional beliefs were dying out and it is very likely that in the period between 1809 and the renewed interest a generation later, mermaid beliefs had diminished considerably. One Caithness native speaking in 1880 recalled how “as a boy the people all round believed in ghosts, and fairies, and water kelpies, and mermaids, and second-sight of all sorts; but he thought that they had all gone to the winds” (Unattributed, 1880). Belief is always difficult to track through time and cast-off comments like these should not be taken as simple facts. It is tempting to think that in 1809 it was possible for an educated person to convince themselves that mermaids existed as a zoological reality; and that many of the ‘lower classes’ believed in this being, though probably in a supernatural key. However, by 1849, we might suspect, it was considerably more difficult either for the educated or uneducated to believe in the marvelous merfolk in the waters of Reay.



Figure 3 – Ackergill Tower Hotel’s ‘Helen’s Gate’

Conclusion

The Reay mermaids remain anomalies that have never been explained: and I have studiously avoided any attempt to do so. I have offered them, instead, as the best known of the many British and Irish 19th Century mermaid sightings. I have attempted to show that we can reconstruct the history behind this account (and by implication others like it) and trace their impact both at a local and national level. It might be worth noting here, by way of conclusion, that the Reay mermaid swims on internationally – a Swedish band, Le Roots has a song entitled ‘Caithness Mermaid’¹³; the mermaid has her own permanence, meanwhile, in Caithness, at Wick, some thirty miles from Reay, the Ackergill Tower Hotel installed, in 1996, a fabulous iron gate (named ‘Helen’s Gate’) with a mermaid playing a fiddle (Figure 3).

¹³ A live performance of which is online at: <https://youtu.be/ypNzVmvYDnA> - accessed March 4th 2017.

What really needs to be done now is for someone (or for a group) to take up the challenge at the Scottish, British or preferably European level. With the rise of digitisation we can track mermaid sightings that made it into the press with relative ease: even those accounts that only appeared in one number of a local paper. Few of these other accounts will rival the Reay mermaids, but taken together they would give us a valuable dataset of lived mermaid folklore, instead of the rather theoretical traditions to be found in so many 19th Century folklore collections. It would need a team of dedicated scholars, ideally covering different geographical areas but the results would be well worth the efforts of coordination, research and editing.

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