

LARGE AQUATIC ANIMALS.

The following paper on the existence of large animals, (probably fresh water seals) in the upland lakes of Tasmania, prepared by C. Gould, Esq., F.G.S., was, in Mr. Gould's absence, read at the last meeting of the Royal Society:—

I wish to lay before the Society a statement of facts, which is full of interest and surprise, and which will show, if corroborated by further investigations, that the existence of rare, perhaps undescribed, animals may be generally unknown, and entirely so to science, for long periods after the occupation of a country.

It may be noted that while easy credence cannot be given to the tales of aborigines who too often fancy that their only chance of evading the dominating intelligence of their conquerors rests in their endowments of low cunning and mendacity; yet that many of the wonderful stories which such aborigines relate and which, when handed in turn to those who are unappreciative of the infinite diversity of the forms of animal life are considered to be mere "traveller's tales," are in reality entirely true or substantially based upon fact. The investigator of natural science will, therefore, never entirely abandon the enquiry in such cases until some completely satisfactory disproof or explanation has been arrived at, and he will be the more resolved in this upon reflecting that the specific features of the savage intellect consist in the possession of great powers of observation rather than in those of originality or invention. Hence the traditions or myths of uncivilized countries are more susceptible of direct tracing to an origin than the transmitted stories of more instructed nations who conserved knowledge under the form of allegory or fable—the true meaning or explanation of which was understood only by the few—and has, in many instances been completely buried under the successive increments of time.

It will be only necessary to instance, as examples upon the one hand, the distorted accounts which have travelled from the interior of Africa, and of Madagascar, of the Rhinoceros, and the Epiornis, and to which we are indebted for the story of the Unicorn, and of that most wonderful bird the Roc. Again the Eastern story of Sinbad familiarizes us with a liberal interpretation of the Chimpanzee or Gorilla under the form of the "Old Man of the Sea." And the Kraken is simply an enormous exaggeration of the gigantic species of cuttle fish known or believed to exist in the Indian Ocean.

The Anaconda of South America has supplied the Indians of the Amazon with the fable of the "Spirit of the Waters;"

while the Moa of New Zealand has only been checked from expanding into some horrible prodigy by the fortunate fact of its bones having been secured as unimpeachable witnesses of its true nature and dimensions.

But on the other hand, the history of the Golden Fleece guarded by dragons, the object of the expedition of Jason and of the Argonauts, is the result of an entirely different operation of the mind, and may be well considered (as suggested by Sir Redmond Barry) as being merely an allegory depictive of the jealous care with which the diggers at Colchis concealed a productive placer, and of the methods used by them for the purpose of collecting fine gold, viz., by placing sheepskins in the streams as is done in South America with ox-hides for the same purpose at the present day.

It will be unnecessary for me to illustrate my meaning by other examples, and I, therefore, pass at once to the confession that I have never considered the question of the Australian Bunyip as completely disposed of, but have always fancied that a satisfactory explanation of the tradition of the natives, might some day be arrived at by the discovery of some species hitherto unfamiliar to us.

In regard to the northern portions of the continent there is no great difficulty in the matter—the presence of huge, hideous alligators would explain this or any other horrible story. But the belief in the Bunyip was just as prevalent among the natives in parts hundreds of miles distant from any stream in which the alligators occur, and among tribes who could have no communication with those to the northward. Some other animal must be sought for, therefore, as the source of the story in these localities. And the question then resolves itself into whether this should be some already known animal appearing in unusual haunts, or an undescribed species. With a view to the consideration of these points, I now place the Society in possession of statements in regard to which I cannot, of course, pledge myself further than by expressing my personal belief in them.

Having heard rumours, ever since my arrival in this colony, of some large and unusual animals being occasionally observed in the lakes in the great central plateau, I had often projected a trip of exploration to them, which circumstances have continuously prevented. However, I always bore the point in mind, and, therefore, when passing the evening at Constable McPartland's hut at the Picton, while on an expedition to the Cracroft, knowing that he had been for a long time stationed at the Great Lake, I made enquiry whether he had seen any strange animals in the lake. He told me instantly that he never had himself, but his son, who was much more about the lake,

had done so several times, and calling him, desired him to tell me at once all about them.

I find from my notes that the date of our conversation was September, 1870, and that young Francis McPartland, who was an extremely intelligent and apparently truthful youth, stated that "two years previously he had several times seen water animals in the lake at different places; he had a good view of them off the shore of Swan Bay; going from the station towards Mr. Smith's Neck. They were within a stone's throw of the shore, and seemed to be three or four feet long, they were three or four in number, and seemed to be playing about; they did not jump out, but were splashing about, and sometimes threw the water seven or eight feet up in the air. They showed their backs above water, also their heads, which were round, "round like a bull dog." They were darkish in colour; he had seen them several times, once one alone, but generally two together; they swam about, keeping the head above the water, you can also see the shoulders; they show the back when they are splashing. These were always seen by McPartland in some part or other of Swan Bay; sometimes near the shore, sometimes in the middle.

Immediately on my return I asked Mr. John Forster to favour me with a few lines to the chief constable of the lake district, and through his hands I received the following statement:—

Steppes,
25th October, 1870.

SIR,—With regard to your memo. of the 23rd of September last, relative to animals reported to have been seen in the Great Lake by young McPartland, and supposed to be seals, having made their way from the sea up the Derwent and Shannon Rivers,

I now beg to inform you that I have made enquiries amongst the shepherds in the vicinity of the Lake, and I find that several of them have seen an animal swimming in the Lake very much resembling a black sheep dog with only its head above the water. I cannot find that more than one has been seen at a time. I do not think it possible for seals to make their way from the sea to the Great Lake, in consequence of a very considerable water-fall being in the Shannon near its junction with the Ouse, unless being amphibious they could escape the fall and reach the river above by land.

The people that have seen this animal in the Lake maintain that it is not a platypus, but twice as large and much darker, but as it has never been very plainly seen, and considering the difficulty of any sea animal getting as far as the Lake, I think it must undoubtedly be a very large platypus. Mr. Headlam's shepherd saw one at the very top of the Lake, which he say was four or five feet long, with a very large black head. A shepherd of Kermodé's also

saw one. Ryan saw one at Swan Bay in the moonlight. Ridgers the contractor, has also seen them, and I am told Mr. Kenrick Flexmore saw one at the Sandbanks.

I am, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

John Forster, Esq.,
Hobart.

JAMES WILSON,
Chief Constable.

Mr. Morton Allport having informed me that Mr. Charles Headlam had seen such a beast in the lake, proceeded to correspond with that gentleman, from whom I furnish the Society with the following note. I need hardly say the testimony of so well known a gentleman as Mr. Charles Headlam is unimpeachable:—

Egleston, Macquarie River, Tasmania,
29th April, 1872.

Dear Sir,—Yours of the 25th inst. I have, asking for information in reference to an animal I saw in the Great Lake some years ago. I have looked over my journal, which I have kept for the last 32 years, and find that it was on Monday, 25th January, 1863, that I saw the animal. My son Anthony was the only person with me at the time; the time of day was about 11 o'clock. The lake was very rough, and we were pulling our boat against a strong head sea, when my oar nearly came in contact with a large-looking beast, about the size of a fairly-developed sheep dog. The animal immediately started off at great speed towards an island in the Great Lake known as Helen Island. It appeared to have two small flappers, or wings, which it made good use of, as I should think it went at the rate of 30 miles per hour. We watched it as far as the eye could reach, and it appeared to keep on the face of the water, never appearing to dive. I never remember seeing such an animal before or since. My sons have just returned from the Great Lake, and crossed over the lake twice in the boat, but saw nothing of our strange friend. It was in the middle of the lake where we saw the animal, and in deep water. Should I ever fall in with the beast again I will not fail in securing him *if I can*, and you shall then see him in person.

I remain, yours sincerely,

CHARLES HEADLAM.

Morton Allport, Esq.,
Hobart Town.

Having arrived thus far, I was much gratified by seeing in *The Mercury* of the 26th of April, 1872, an extract from the *Wagga Advertiser*, which I copy as follows:—

What is the Bunyip? (inquires the *Wagga Advertiser*). There really is a Bunyip, or a Waa-Wee, actually existing not far from us; and others probably nearer than we imagined. The animal has been seen by many persons whose veracity is unimpeachable, and whose intimate acquaintance with the *Fauna* of the Murrumbidgee, coupled with their general intelligence and observation, puts it altogether beyond doubt that in the Midgeon Lagoon,

sixteen miles north of Narandera, there exists an animal which in every respect tallies with the description of the creature frequently reported as seen in various places. Here is the account of a gentleman who had a quiet half-hour's view of this strange nondescript. "A few days since, Mr. A., who was driving sheep across country to Melbourne, camped on the lagoon. He called at my house and asked what the animal was that we had in our swamp and proceeded to describe something which had alarmed him and the shepherds? I ridiculed his report, and he got angry, inviting me to come down and see for myself. I went down early next morning, between six and seven o'clock, accompanied by two other persons, and had not waited long before I heard the sound as of a body rushing rapidly through the water, making a noise as loud as that caused by a North Shore steamer. Looking in the direction of the sound I saw a creature coming through the water with tremendous rapidity, and directing its course immediately towards us. We stood still, deeply interested, and watched the approach of the animal, which having, as we presumed, lately risen to the surface, was evidently not aware of our presence. It came on with great swiftness until it was scarcely 30 yards from the edge of the lagoon, when it appeared suddenly to catch sight of us, and stopped instantly. It lay on the water then perfectly still, and I had a splendid view of a creature that surprised me more than anything I had ever before seen in my life. The animal was about half as long again as an ordinary retriever dog, the hair all over its body was jet black and shining, its coat was very long—the hair spreading out on the surface of the water for about five inches, and floating loosely as the creature rose and fell by its own motion. I could not detect any tail, and the hair about its head was too long and glossy to admit of my seeing its eyes; the ears were well marked. It made no noise, but kept its position for half-an-hour, surveying us, no doubt, leisurely, although its visual organs were hidden from us. At length it turned quietly round and swam off easily, without any manifestation of alarm, and we watched it moving leisurely along the surface of the lake until it was hidden by the distance. We have been greatly excited by its appearance, and I have offered £20 for its dead body, and £50 if captured alive." This statement may be relied upon, and there can be no doubt whatever the gentleman saw all he has described. Could not a party be fitted out to earn the reward, and ennoble Wagga in the annals of Natural History?

And I was still more interested by the spontaneous information received a few days back that several townsmen of this city had seen a remarkable beast in Lake Tiberias, while on a shooting expedition. My information is from Mr. Howe, market gardener of Campbell-street, a keen sportsman and a lover of natural history, evidently a good observer and not likely to mistake a tadpole for a crocodile, who states that in company with Messrs. Shadwick and Currie of New Town, and five others, he was at the Lake Tiberias on the 17th July last, and that while on the shore at the north-east end, he observed swans, and creeping to the edge of the lake, fired at them, imme-

diately on the report of the shot, a great splash was seen, and some large beast started off in the water from a point about 100 yards distant, dashing towards some rushes, and forming great wave by his passage through the water. The rushes swayed about violently as he passed through them, and one of the party who had the opportunity of seeing the beast more distinctly than the other, estimated the length at 5 or 6 feet, and the breadth of back at nearly two feet. About one hour afterwards the party saw, what they believed to be the same beast behind the rushes and out in the lake, splashing up the water to a height of ten or twelve feet; this was noticed several times. Enquiries made by Mr. Howe of persons in the neighborhood, elicited no information beyond that loud roarings had been heard at night.

Mr. John Butler of Shene, Bagdad, informs me that when on a visit to Lake Echo, in company with the Rev. H. D. Atkinson, some years back, they several times saw water thrown eight or ten feet high in the air, without any obvious cause; this happened right out in the lake, and was considered by them unaccountable. The only other information I have is from Mr. Morton Allport, to the effect that some aquatic beast, as big as a calf, was reported several times last summer as being in the deep pools of the Jordan River.

The evidence then shows that in the Great Lake, possibly in Lake Echo, certainly in Lake Tiberias, some unusual animals of large size have been seen at various times answering in general description to a seal, but not corresponding with any species hitherto described.

In regard to Mr. Headlam's estimate of the rate of speed of the animal seen by him, and which might be considered an exaggeration, I append an extract from a popular account of seals contained in the "Museum of Animated Nature," at page 222.

"The common seal can remain under water for about five minutes, and swims so rapidly that if alarmed, it will proceed nearly half a mile during that period."

While the description of the ursine seal "lowing like a calf," and of the sea elephant "in which the voice is deep, hoarse, and terrific," may give the clue to the mysterious sounds said to have been heard at night issuing from many of the Victorian lakes, and notably, if my memory serves me correctly, from Lake Werribee.

Now even should the animals, whose existence seems proved upon such good testimony, simply prove to be known seals, a good and substantial foundation for the Bunyip story will have been arrived at. The mysterious appearance and horrible sounds will be fully accounted for, and a very interesting and

novel page in the chapter of seals supplied to us ; how much more interesting then will be the discovery should they prove to differ specifically or even generically from any hitherto described form, and to be some fresh-water-inhabiting mammal analogous or allied to "the otter-like or seal-like animal," whose existence in the rivers and lakes of the mountain districts of New Zealand has recently been established by Dr. Haast without doubt. See Hochstetter's New Zealand, page 161. Dr. Haast writes, in June 1861, "At a height of 3,500 feet above the level of the sea, I frequently saw its tracks on the Upper Ashburton River, in a region never before trodden by man. They resemble the tracks of our European Otter, only a little smaller. The animal itself, however, was likewise seen by two gentlemen who have a sheep station at Lake Heron, not far from the Ashburton, 2,100 feet high. They describe the animal as dark brown, of the size of a stout cony. On being struck at with the whip, it uttered a shrill yelping sound, and quickly disappeared in the water among the sea grass."

I may, in conclusion, mention that, while on a recent visit to Sydney, I saw in the Museum a young specimen of a species of seal entirely new to me, of which the colour was black like that of the Wagga individual, but concerning which Mr. Gerard Krefft was unable to give me further information than that it was caught near Newcastle, New South Wales. Mr. Krefft also tells me that one seal in that collection had lived on platypuses, and must have been a great distance from salt water.