



## *Romanticism on the Net*

### **The Caithness Mermaid, Female Testimony, and the Production of Coastal Knowledge**

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#### **Abstract**

In 1809, Elizabeth Mackay was walking on the beach a short distance from her home in Reay, Caithness, when she saw a mermaid in the water. Her detailed and deeply mysterious account of what she saw caused a national sensation when it appeared in the press. Whether a hoax intended to draw investment and tourists to Caithness or a genuine document, Elizabeth Mackay's testimony is worthy of close reading, as it documents a rare coastal encounter between a human and a marine animal and the partial connections forged between them. The first part of this article sets her observations in the context of other "strange" phenomena encountered on Scotland's northern coastline and draws on feminist materialist approaches to read her testimony as an example of what Donna Haraway calls "situated knowledges"—partial, subjective, and most importantly, embodied encounters that oppose an Enlightenment model of all-seeing, detached objectivity. The second part traces the influence of the Caithness mermaid on literary production during the following decade by Christian Isobel Johnstone, Thomas Love Peacock, and Walter Scott. Despite attempts to memorialise the Caithness mermaid in verse, the sighting had a stronger literary afterlife in satirical fiction than it did in poetry.

#### **Biographical Note**

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1. In January 1809, Elizabeth Mackay was walking on the beach near her home in Reay, Caithness, when she witnessed a "strange phenomenon" (E. Mackay and Mackenzie).<sup>1</sup> Along with her cousin, Miss C. Mackenzie, Elizabeth was exploring Sandside Bay, a cove "about half a mile broad, with some sandy links [dunes] a little about the flood-mark, about

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the Kirk of Reay,” which forms one of the “occasional gaps” in Caithness’s dramatic cliffs of blue and red sandstone (Henderson 9).<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 1. Sandside Bay.



Fig. 2. Rocks at Sandside Bay.

The two women sighted three other people at a distance, standing on a rock and “shewing signs of terror and astonishment at something they saw in the water” (E. Mackay and Mackenzie 735). Approaching, they observed “a face resembling the human countenance, which appeared floating on the waves.” High tide made it impossible to “discover the appearance and position of the body,” but Elizabeth and her cousin had a clear view of “the face, throat and arms of the creature,” only “few yards” away (735). It was a mermaid.

2. In Elizabeth’s description of this mysterious event, mermaid” emerges as a convenient name for something she and her cousin leave ungendered, an “it” rather than a “she”:

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[A]s the waves advanced, the Mermaid gently sunk under them, and afterwards re-appeared. 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 whole side-face of a bright pink colour. 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 over the face; it seemed to feel the annoyance, and as the waves retreated, with both its hands 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. At a little distance we observed a seal. It sometimes laid its right hand under its cheek, and in this position floated for some time. We saw nothing like hair or scales on any part of it, indeed the smoothness of the skin particularly caught our attention. The time it was discernible to us was about an hour. The sun was shining clearly at the time; it was distant from us a few yards only. These are the few observations made by us during the appearance of this strange phenomenon. (E. Mackay and Mackenzie 735)

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The creature's light grey eyes, small nose, large mouth, long green hair, slender white throat, and recognisable "hands and fingers" ("not webbed") are reported as certainties, while the women note more cautiously that the face "seemed plump and round," the jawbone "seemed straight" and the face "looked short." In contrast to the account of the nearby seal, their description of the mermaid emphasises the difficulty in obtaining a clear view of bodies in water: the high tide obscures not only its lower half but the inside of the mouth ("I can say nothing, not having attended to it, though sometimes open") and its elbows ("we did not think of observing whether it had elbows; but from the manner in which it used its arms, I must conclude it had").

3. This testimony appears in a letter Elizabeth wrote five months after the incident to Mary Innes, a sixty-seven-year-old dowager of the prominent Innes family of Sandside House, a mansion positioned at the west end of Sandside Bay with lands housing 122 tenant families (T. Sinclair, "Highland Estate" 291).<sup>3</sup> Why Elizabeth waited so long to write the letter is unclear; possibly she decided to bring it to the attention of a prominent member of the local community in a bid to counter what she described as the "doubts of those, who may suppose that the wonderful appearance I reported having seen in the sea on the 12<sup>th</sup> of January was not a Mermaid, but some other uncommon, though less remarkable inhabitant of the deep" (E. Mackay and Mackenzie 734). Here Elizabeth vaguely suggests that she has already "reported" the story orally to locals who remained sceptical, and one retrospective account states that "many a laugh" was had "at the time at the expense of the mermaid seers!" (Paterson 3). Her hopes in writing to her social superior about the "uncommon spectacle" on their shared shore are conventionally modest: if her account of the "strange

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phenomenon” provides “any satisfaction” she will be “particularly happy” (E. Mackay and Mackenzie 734–35). Simon Young thinks it “very likely that ... Mrs Innes and Eliza[beth], the dowager and the rector’s daughter, mixed socially” (27); they were certainly connected by the shoreline, visible from their respective windows.



Fig. 3. View of Sandside Bay from Reay Church.



Fig. 4. View of Sandside Bay from Sandside House.

4. Although apparently written “merely for private information; without the smallest suspicion of any other use to be made of it” (D. Mackay, “Letter” 3), Elizabeth’s letter to Mary Innes made its way to the newspapers and generated “an intense excitement ... all over the kingdom” (“A Mermaid Seen in Caithness”). Elizabeth’s father, Reverend David Mackay, explained that “having excited Sir John Sinclair’s curiosity, he obtained a copy of this letter, and it seems by one of his friends it found its way into the newspapers” (“Letter” 3).<sup>4</sup> From August 1809 and into the following year, Elizabeth’s letter circulated widely through British regional and national papers, travelling as far as Spain, India, and Barbados, and David Mackay received “many a letter ... from different quarters, both at home and abroad, making enquiries on the subject.”<sup>5</sup> Sinclair had been the sitting MP for Caithness since 1780, and is best remembered as the orchestrator of the huge data-gathering

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exercise that produced the *Statistical Account of Scotland* in the 1790s.<sup>6</sup> His ancestral home was Thurso Castle, ten miles east of Sandside Bay and so close to the “sea-mark” that sea spray passed over the roof and fish could be caught from the drawing room window (C. Sinclair 2). For Sinclair, who was known for his “brash vigour” and unflagging energy for agricultural and social improvement projects, the Caithness mermaid sighting became an obsession during the 1809 summer parliamentary break. As he told fellow Scottish politician Henry Dundas, “My original idea was, to circulate some Copies of these papers merely [*sic*] for the amusement of some particular friends, during the Recess, but the existence of this Animal, is likely to become so much a subject of public discussion, that I must endeavour to probe it to the bottom” (qtd. in Rudinsky, “Satire” 110).<sup>7</sup>

5. Sinclair’s reference to multiple “papers” indicates that he received more than just a copy of Elizabeth Mackay’s letter from his unspecified source. Indeed, from its first printing, Elizabeth’s account appeared along with another letter by William Munro, a schoolmaster from Thurso, offering his own account of a mermaid seen in the same bay twelve years earlier. Munro’s letter responded to “queries respecting the Mermaid” from a Dr Torrence, also of Thurso (Munro 736). The precise relationship between Elizabeth Mackay’s letter and Munro’s, dated June 9, 1809, is unclear, but Young’s suggestion that “Torrence’s missive was excited by Eliza Mackay’s recent sighting” seems likely (28). Torrence’s enquiries suggest that some knowledge of Munro’s sighting circulated orally in the community between 1797 and 1809; as the “regular Thurso practitioner for many years,” he would have been a vector for local gossip and marine news (“Alpha” 2). Local interest in the mermaid spanned all levels of Caithness society: surviving handwritten copies of



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both letters indicate that they circulated privately among the local aristocracy between May 25, 1809 (the date of Elizabeth’s letter) and their press publication in late August.<sup>8</sup>

6. Munro’s mermaid appeared on the more dramatic rocks extending into the sea at the west end of Sandside Bay, known to be “dangerous for bathing” (Munro 736).



Fig. 5. Sandside Head, a short walk from the west edge of Sandside Bay.

The teacher described “an unclothed female ... apparently in the action of combing its hair, which flowed around its shoulders, and of a light brown colour.” It had “the breasts and abdomen, the arms and fingers of a full grown body of the human species,” as well as a plump face, ruddy cheeks, and blue eyes. Munro had a clear view from the headland, “at

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no great distance from the creature” (736), and the sighting lasted just three or four minutes; then, with a glance towards Munro, the mermaid disappeared into the sea. Voicing his awareness of the “general scepticism which prevails among the learned and intelligent about the existence of such a phenomenon,” Munro presses the scientific value of his account, which he hopes will be “subservient towards establishing the existence of a phenomenon, hitherto almost incredible to naturalists, or to remove the scepticism of others who are ready to dispute every thing which they cannot fully comprehend” (736). Elizabeth also made a point of telling Mary Innes that she and her cousin had “frequently ... combated an assertion which is very common among the lower class here, that Mermaids had been frequently seen on this coast” and, therefore, their “evidence cannot be thought biassed [*sic*] by any former prejudice in favour of the existence of this wonderful creature” (E. Mackay and Mackenzie 735). In October, Elizabeth and Munro’s evidence was joined by a third letter from Elizabeth’s father, Reverend David Mackay, to the Glasgow Philosophical Society, in response to a request for confirmation of the details of the case. Reflecting on the “strange phenomenon,” and describing how his daughter and the other spectators tracked the mermaid along the shore until it disappeared, David Mackay pronounced both letters as “genuine” and Munro as “a gentleman whose veracity is not called in question” (D. Mackay “Letter”).

7. The Caithness case is now widely recognised as “one of the most popular—and, in time, most debated—sightings” of the nineteenth century (Scribner 129). As they made their way through the regional and national papers, the three letters were sometimes printed together, sometimes sequentially, with Elizabeth’s, as the starting point for the others, achieving

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around twice as many reprintings as Munro's. It is surprising, then, that most modern discussions of the Caithness case from the early twentieth onwards draw solely on Munro's account: a historical imbalance I have attempted to rectify in my account of the sightings above.<sup>9</sup> The female eyewitness is easily submerged, it seems, because her involvement in early nineteenth-century scientific debate is precarious. Reflecting on the Caithness case in 1885, a Victorian correspondent noted that "a good deal is known" about the parochial schoolmaster William Munro, whereas only a few details colour Elizabeth's life. Known locally as "Bessie" and described as an "amiable girl," she married a tradesman, William Sutherland, the year after the sighting ("Alpha" 2). Male networks—connecting the middle-class teacher to the local doctor; the clergyman to the Philosophical Society; and the politician to the press—bring her account into print, but simultaneously remove the possibility of further dialogue. Elizabeth's contribution to scientific debate begins and ends with her private-made-public document, after which she disappears, eclipsed by her father, who becomes the destination for all subsequent "letters of enquiry."

8. The following discussion argues that Elizabeth Mackay's letter transmits an important perspective on Scotland's coastal ecology in the early years of the nineteenth century. As a record of an hour-long conversation with a sea creature with "elbows" that moved like her own, it registers how, as Lauren Winkiel has put it, "what we know about the ocean is partial, situated, and shot through with imagination and desire" (5). As the desiring subject, whether travel writer, natural scientist, or folklorist, is so often male, recovering Elizabeth Mackay's coastal knowledge, and that of others like her, is vital: without it, coastal studies risks positioning the male perspective on the littoral as hegemonic. In what follows, I argue

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that her eyewitness account can be positioned as an example of what Donna Haraway terms “situated knowledges,” registering her implication in a number of “webbed” systems of marine exploitation. I then trace the literary afterlife of the Caithness mermaid case into the 1810s in order to examine how two strands in the cultural history of the mermaid, the ecological and the sexual or pornographic, intersect.

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9. The only daughter of Reverend David Mackay and Jane Macpherson, who married in 1787, Elizabeth was born on the edge of Sandside Bay, its mature sand dunes the only barrier between her home and the water. Her presence on the shore in early January indicates that she visited the beach frequently, perhaps daily.<sup>10</sup> David Mackay became minister of Reay church by the sea in 1783 (Beaton 268), returning to a coastal life after a childhood spent on the shores of the Dornoch Firth, where his father worked as a ferryman. According to one source, David Mackay suffered from a “nervous disorder,” which, “though it did not interfere with his physical health, totally unfitted him for the discharge of his ministerial duties” (Sage qtd. in Beaton 268); but he is also characterised as industrious and scholarly, rising at 4 a.m. to study and fond of “literary and scientific subjects” (*Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae* qtd. in Beaton 268). His report on life in Reay for the 1793 *Statistical Account of Scotland* (“Parish of Reay”) includes a much fuller account of local fauna and marine life than many of his contemporaries; as Gerard Lee McKeever points out, reports were generally “idiosyncratic,” reflecting the concerns of their authors (10).<sup>11</sup> He catalogues the large variety of fish caught around Sandside Bay, including “cod, ling, turbot, haddock,

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skate, whiting, dog fish, mackerel, hornback, sand-eels and flounders.” Under the subheading “sea-ware, shells, &” (a category not used in the majority of reports), he notes that the “winter storms frequently throw in broken pieces of sponge; and, among these, now and then, whole sponges spreading out in a bush, from one stem,” while the shells of sea urchins often appear on the shoreline (D. Mackay, “Parish of Reay” 572).<sup>12</sup> Much of this marine knowledge would have been derived from his observations and explorations of Sandside Bay, and perhaps discussed with his only daughter.

10. Of the larger inhabitants of the sea, David Mackay notes that “[s]eals abound on the coast and it has been occasionally visited by whales, sharks, and porpoises” (“Parish of Reay” 572).<sup>13</sup> Seals would have been a common sight, as Elizabeth’s offhand reference to a one bobbing near the mermaid suggests. Around thirty miles west of Reay and close to the coastline is Eilean nan Ròn (Island of the Seals) in neighbouring Sutherland, currently estimated as the birthplace of 350 seals per year. Elizabeth would also have heard news of several extraordinary marine discoveries on the islands further north in the recent months. In October 1808, a “Small-headed Narwhal, or Sea-Unicorn” was spotted off the coast of Shetland for the first time and pronounced an “excellent and rare addition to the Fauna of Scotland” (“N.,” “Monthly Memoranda” [Nov. 1808] 806). But it was soon superseded by a “still greater rarity” in the form of a gigantic fifty-five-foot animal that washed ashore on nearby Stronsay, Orkney, sixteen miles off the Caithness coast (“N.,” “Monthly Memoranda” [Nov. 1808] 806). The Edinburgh-based Wernerian Natural History Society reported a creature with a head “not larger than that of a seal, ... furnished with two spiracles, or blow-holes. Along the back was a row of filaments, hanging down like mane.

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The animal had three pairs of large fins, resembling paws” (“Proceedings” 805). The specimen was badly damaged by the violent waves in the coming days, but some remains were sent to Edinburgh for examination. As Bill Jenkins has outlined, the investigations into the physical remains and oral testimonies of several eyewitnesses continued until May 1809, drawing to a close just a few weeks before the publication of Elizabeth’s letter to Mary Innes (4–5).

11. The timing of the Caithness mermaid sighting, surfacing immediately after the Stronsay investigations ended, therefore seems suspiciously convenient, and it remains a possibility that Elizabeth’s letter was a hoax designed to capitalise on the attention already directed toward northern waters. The appearance of the Stronsay beast directed renewed attention to earlier studies of seemingly miraculous marine creatures. John Barclay, the Edinburgh scientist who examined the remains, believed it was the skeleton of the “Sea-Orman, or great sea snake” described sixty years previously by Erik Pontoppidan, Bishop of Bergen, in *The Natural History of Norway* (Jenkins 14). Alongside the sea snake, Pontoppidan catalogued other “Sea-monsters,” including, the kraken and the “Have-Manden, or Merman,” whose mate is called the “Hav-Fruen, or Mer-maid” (186). For Pontoppidan, mermaids and mermen were “not impossible or improbable in the nature of things”; the problem, as he saw it, was that “most of the accounts we have had of it, are mixed with meer fables, and may be looked upon as idle tales” (186). He noted that “when the creature is represented as a prophet and an orator” or “when they give the Mermaid a melodious voice, and tell us that she is a fine singer, one need not wonder that so few people of sense will give credit to such absurdities” (186–87). “Fabulous stories” had been “mix’d with the

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truth,” and so an apparently scientific account, like Elizabeth Mackay’s, was potentially of great value. For Pontoppidan, the volume of eyewitness testimony surrounding mermaids constituted important evidence for their existence. In Bergen alone, he noted, there were “[s]everal hundreds of persons of credit and reputation, who affirm with the strongest assurances, that they have seen this kind of creature sometimes at a distance, at other times close to their boats, standing upright, and formed like a human creature down to the middle; the rest they could not see” (190). Like Elizabeth Mackay, Pontoppidan’s witnesses—most of them fishermen—could not attest to the bottom half of the creature but were in no doubt that they had seen a mermaid.

12. The mermaid of Caithness thus appeared to Elizabeth Mackay in the wake of immediate scientific discussion about a creature that, for some, appeared to confirm Pontoppidan’s work. Likewise, the “existence of Mermaids, or Sea-Women (hitherto generally supposed to be fabulous) seem[ed] now to be established” by the Caithness letters (“Mermaids, or Sea-Women” 2). Although Elizabeth had no material evidence, her testimony prompted similar attempts at classification from scientific communities, including one suggestion that “the description of the head agrees very well with the appearance of the Angel-fish, or Mermaid-fish of Artedi (*Squalus Squatina*),” though they added that “the minute account of the hair on the head, of the long arms, and fingered hands, baffle our conjectures” (“N.,” “Monthly Memoranda” [Sept. 1809] 646). Edward Donovan’s *The Natural History of British Fishes* (1802) provides a drawing of the *squalus squatina*, or angel shark, “an indeterminate creature between the two genera Rays and Sharks” that “haunts our coasts in abundance” (1: n. p.).<sup>14</sup>

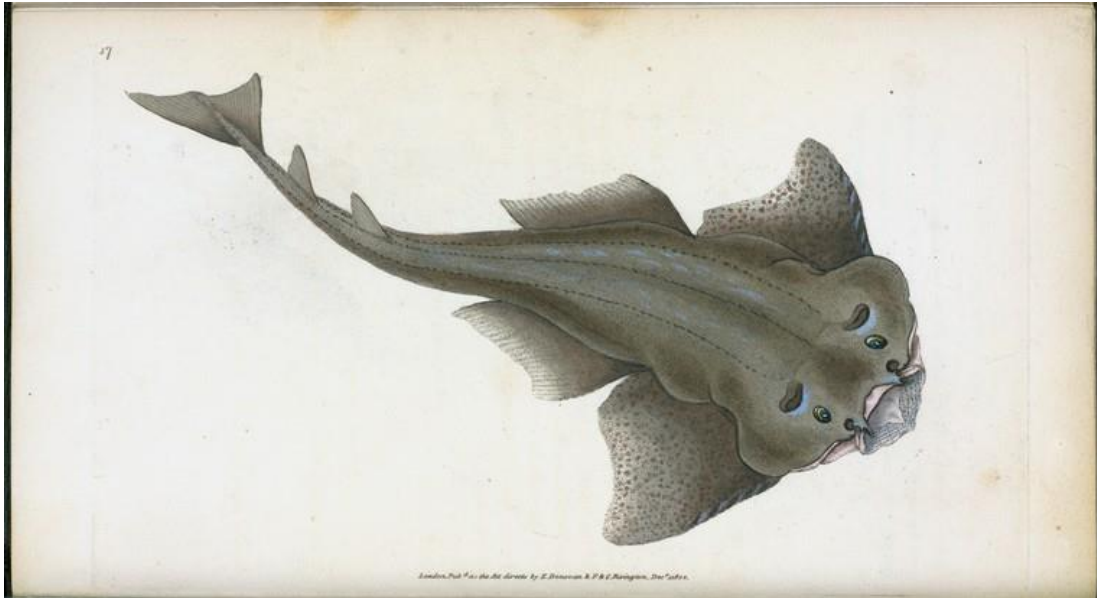


Fig. 6 Donovan, *Natural History of British Fishes*, plate 17: *Squalus Squatina*.

“[I]ndeterminate” and in-between, neither ray nor shark, the *squalus squatina* seems a fitting analogue to the human-fish hybrid that Elizabeth classified as a mermaid.

13. In some respects, then, Elizabeth Mackay’s evidence was taken seriously by the scientific community, which subjected it to the same scrutiny as the bones of the Stronsay beast. But the *Scots Magazine* went on to openly weigh the value of Elizabeth and Miss Mackenzie’s report as *female* testimony, extracting an imagined context for “their opportunities, and fitness for observing and describing” what they saw (“N.,” “Monthly Memoranda” [Sept. 1809] 645–46). They concluded that the “two young ladies ... had not probably been in the habit of examining or describing large marine animals,” and that their “minds, it may easily be supposed, were apt to be fluttered, and whose imagination would thus be ready to supply deficiencies” (645–46). The *Scots Magazine* constructed Elizabeth and her cousin as ignorant and fallible “witnesses,” so that after having dedicated significant space to the



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discussion of their testimony, it was swiftly undermined. Other papers also concluded that “the supposed mermaid was nothing more than a seal,” choosing to ignore Elizabeth’s careful distinction between the mysterious creature and the seal nearby that demonstrated her clear familiarity with “larger marine mammals.” Other seal theorists persisted in countering her claims well into the Victorian period (Review). Forty years after the sighting, a local man named John Paterson wrote to the *John O’Groat Journal* arguing that Elizabeth and her cousin saw a familiar “old grey seal” often seen in Sandside Bay, possibly with “a salmon in its mouth,” which was “no uncommon thing.” Paterson concluded that “[t]his would add to the queerness of the appearance, and lead the ladies to believe they were in sight of a mermaid!”

14. In their prejudice against the female eyewitness as an unreliable scientific observer with a flighty imagination, the misogynistic comments of the *Scots Magazine* share an unexpected insistence on the embodied nature of knowledge with Donna Haraway’s account of feminist “situated knowledge,” a form of scientific knowledge that is always embodied in the subject and the product of a specifically located mind. For Haraway, the very idea of “disembodied scientific objectivity” is a myth or “god trick” that erroneously—and dangerously—promises unlimited and unbounded vision (576, 581). The corrective, she argues, is a form of “[f]eminist objectivity” that foregrounds “limited location and situated knowledge” (583). Against false claims of impartiality, Haraway describes the project and viewpoint of feminist science:

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A splitting of senses, a confusion of voice and sight, rather than clear and distinct ideas, becomes the metaphor for the ground of the rational. We seek not the knowledges ruled by phallogocentrism (nostalgia for the presence of the one true Word) and disembodied vision. We seek those ruled by partial sight and limited voice—not partiality for its own sake but, rather, for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible. Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular. The science question in feminism is about objectivity as positioned rationality. (590)

15. Such a vision of scientific endeavour radically reorients Elizabeth Mackay's testimony. The oscillation between "I" and "we" in her "evidence," mediating between her own thoughts and the experience she shared with her cousin on the shoreline, insists on a collective—a "confusion of voice and sight"—and becomes a way of enacting marine science that insists on community as a means to achieve "positioned rationality." Introducing her description of the mermaid, Elizabeth insists on the limits of her vision in the same way that Haraway celebrates "those ruled by partial sight": Elizabeth insists that "the face, throat, and arms are all I can attempt to describe, all our endeavours to discover the appearance and position of the body being unavailing" and that they "saw nothing like hair or scales on any part of it." Written and directed to Mary Innes, her testimony also enlists "communities" and is implicated in them by definition: as the bourgeois subject, Elizabeth can address the dowager Mrs. Innes in gentile language, but by the time she has finished giving her evidence she aligns herself and her cousin with the "lower classes" and

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their belief in mermaids. Elizabeth, like the mermaid, is split and in-between, her testimony concluding with a partial articulation of newly “webbed” local connections, a product of enmeshed ecological and mythological experience (Haraway 588).

16. Whatever she saw in the waves on January 12, 1809, Elizabeth Mackay’s ability to find “a face resembling a human countenance” records a moment when the distinction between human and marine life dissolved. She imagines herself into what John Paterson described as the mermaid’s “queer” body, observing that it “seemed to feel the annoyance” of the waves throwing its hair into its face, and that the bird hovering above it “seemed to distress it much.” Such conclusions are only possible through a deep connection between subject and object: a closing of the ontological gap between human and animal that makes the mermaid a vessel for posthuman investigation. Stacy Alaimo’s concept of “transcorporeality,” itself indebted to Haraway’s work, defines a “time-space in which the human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from ‘nature’ and ‘environment’” (238). As Alaimo explains, by “indicat[ing] movement across different sites, transcorporeality opens up an epistemological ‘space’ that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, non-human creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other factors” (238). The mermaid is nothing if not transcorporeal, offering the fantasy of a full marine existence to shore dwellers already deeply implicated in the ocean’s ecosystems: eating its fish, burning its seal oil, and, in the case of the female eyewitness, wearing a baleen (commonly known as whalebone) corset against her skin. Recognising Elizabeth’s account as a record of transcorporeal experience also allows us to move past the epistemological cul-de-sac where marine mammals are

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“mistaken” for mermaids to generate new questions. What happens to material, human corporeality in these moments? How might they act as a location for recovering “unpredictable and unwanted” information about the subject’s relationship with the sea?

17. The seals inhabiting the waters of the British archipelago were still mysterious to naturalists in the nineteenth century. Seals appeared to elude classification: as Harriet Ritvo has summarised, debates about whether they were fish or a type of whale were still ongoing in the 1870s (47). The most common seals on the northern coasts of Scotland are the grey (*halichoerus grypus*) and the common (*phoca vitulina*) species, although the hooded, ring, bearded, and harp seal are occasional visitors. Recording his experiences of Caithness in 1769, Thomas Pennant admitted he was unsure how large seals could grow, having heard a report of one “near 12 foot long,” while the “common kind seldom exceeds six feet” (*Tour* 38–39). Around this time, George Low, the bishop of Banff in Orkney and a dedicated naturalist, noted with characteristic precision that the largest seal he had seen measured “from the point of the nose to the hinder claws, 8 feet.” (16) Pennant’s description of common seals that “float on the waves,” “swim with vast strength and swiftness,” “frolick greatly in their element,” “never go any great distance from land,” and “cannot continue long underwater,” registered their combination of land-based and fish-like qualities (*Synopsis* 340). For William Borlase, writing in his *History of Cornwall* (1753), the “great docility” of the seal, “(little short of that of the human *species*), and his being so easily trained to be familiar with and obedient to man, may make us with some grounds conclude, that this is the creature to which imagination has given the shape of half-fish half-man”—or indeed half-woman (285; emphasis in original). George Low mentions that

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seals are attracted by “people speaking loud,” and that when the bell rang for divine service at the Church of Hoy, situated near a small sandy bay very similar to the position of Reay Church, “all the seals within hearing swam directly for the shore, and kept looking about them, as if surprised, rather than frightened; and in this manner continued to wonder, as long as the bells rang”—an anecdote much repeated in the nineteenth century (17). Seals whose behaviour stopped “little short of the human species” would have been a familiar sight in Reay.

18. Folkloric texts from Caithness share the same taxonomic uncertainties about the seal, chronicling their appearance as “wonderful beasts ... half dog half fish” (Stewart 65) and, in so doing, serve as another form of situated knowledge. Folktales by their very nature come from the community as well as from individuals, and typically foreground the mysterious, unknown and the partial, shunning “clear and distinct ideas” (Haraway 590). Serpil Oppermann has argued that “the stories of the sea matter as much as its materiality”; the importance of story and metaphor demonstrate “how marine meanings are crafted and lived in a palpable sense between the natural and the cultural” (450). Connections between the human and the seal are the basis for the wealth of selkie folktales alive in the North of Scotland and Ireland, and while these are usually considered transmitters of vernacular knowledge or domestic anxieties rather than scientific records, they can contain information that falls easily under the remit of natural history. An 1823 recording of a tale usually known as “The Seal-Catcher’s Adventure” or “The Seal Catcher and the Merman,” set forty-five miles west of Reay near John O’Groats, includes a preamble explaining how proof that seals are “neither dogs or cods, but down-right fairies” can be found in the

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shifting appearance of their dead skin. “[N]ever the same for four and twenty hours, together,” it “sometimes will erect its bristles almost perpendicularly, while at others it reclines them even down; one time it resembles a bristly sow, at another time a *sleekit* cat, and what dead skin, except itself, could perform such cantrips?” (Stewart 66).<sup>15</sup> Indigenous knowledge about the shifting texture of the seal coat is a helpful context for interpreting the “smoothness of the skin” exhibited by Elizabeth’s mermaid, and the lack of the appearance of “hair or scales” in the January sunshine. Caithness locals were well aware that the seal’s appearance could be deceiving.

19. Caithness was known to the nineteenth-century reading public for its seal trade. Pennant’s visit to Caithness in 1769, recounted in his popular *Tour in Scotland*, is dominated by his description of seal hunting on the coast every November, when “numbers of seals are taken in the vast caverns that open into the sea.” Pennant paints a vivid picture of the seal hunters, who enter the caves “in small boats with torches, which they light as soon as they land, and then with loud shouts alarm the animals, which they kill with clubs as they attempt to pass” (201–02). Later commentators like John Paterson, the Victorian Caithness resident who recalled Elizabeth’s letter in 1849, could revel in such cruelty: Paterson connects the Caithness mermaid to the seal trade in his letter to the *John O’Groat Journal*, when he gleefully reports that one day he “shot the Mermaid!” and “claimed half the oil, being anxious to know what kind of light mermaids’ oil would give” (3). In contrast, Elizabeth’s sympathetic vision of the mermaid’s “human face,” troubled by the water and observed in the winter months following the season of seal culling in Caithness, can be read as an abject response to the mass killing of bodies that are, in Borlase’s words, “little short of ... the

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human *species*” (285). If this is only subtly hinted in Elizabeth’s report of the “wonderful creature,” “The Seal-Catcher’s Adventure,” as recounted by Stewart, offers a more obvious imaginative representation of the moral injustices of seal culling. A seal catcher wounds a large seal with his hunting knife, prompting a mysterious horseman to appear and escort him to the bottom of the sea. In the process the seal catcher is “unconsciously transformed” into a seal and catapulted into their community, surrounded by seals “who could nevertheless speak and feel like human folk” (Stewart 67). In this new form, he is guided to an underwater palace where he finds the seal he wounded earlier that day, his knife still embedded in its body. Selkie tales are known for foregrounding anxieties about gender roles, as do the many tales about the selkie wife, who is taken by a human husband, lives as his wife and bears him children before eventually finding her selkie cap and returning to the sea. “The Seal Catcher’s Adventure,” by contrast, is an ecological fable critical of seal killing as part of a capitalist economy, and which forces the seal catcher to confront the violence he performs on the seal’s “human” body. The seals are “poor, generous animals” that “did not mean [the seal catcher] any harm, however much he deserved it,” and in order to return to land the seal catcher must promise to “never maim or kill a seal” for the rest of his life (Stewart 68).

20. Like “The Seal Catcher’s Adventure,” Elizabeth’s testimony demonstrates a Romantic concern for the life of the (marine) animal, and suggest that inhabitants of the Caithness coast were far from unaware of the environmental and moral costs of exploiting the sea’s resources. Her description of a mermaid offers a view from the shoreline by an eyewitness who was not a fisherman, seal catcher, or man of science. Standing to one side of those

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capitalist and knowledge systems, she also stands queerly adjacent to the structures of sexual desire that position the mermaid as a male fantasy. While William Munro's letter describes an "unclothed female" with bare breasts in the act of "combing its hair," Elizabeth's letter is devoid of any description of breasts or aspects of "fable" that Pontopiddan complained muddied eyewitness accounts. Elizabeth views the mermaid as sublime, a "wonderous" being who takes her partly out of herself and into its aquatic existence, contemplating its behaviours and struggles as it battles with a bird hovering overhead. As Oppermann has noted, marine creatures are not "mute": "in fact, they tirelessly project a storied existence conveyed in signs, colors, sounds, signaling, and codes we may or we may not yet fully understand" (453). Elizabeth's testimony offers a rare early nineteenth-century record of those signs, colours, sounds, signalling and codes, which the metaphor of the mermaid enabled her to leave unexplained, unconnected, and unrationalised. At the same time, her evidence sits in complex relation to local folklore, science, and cultural history. Understanding the Romantic coastline necessarily involves attending to a patchwork of intersecting—and emerging—situated knowledges, if we are to recover the experience of the local subject for whom the sea was a daily presence.

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21. In November 1810, about a year after the publication of Elizabeth Mackay's letter, John Sinclair wrote to Walter Scott suggesting that his next poem "should be called *The Mermaid or The Lady of the Sea*." Scott was still enjoying the huge success of *The Lady of the Lake*, published five months earlier, and so Sinclair's very idea for a similar title



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appeared to Scott presumptuous and ridiculous. But Sinclair had “a strong inducement for wishing [him] to adopt that suggestion,”

as it would be necessary for you; in order to carry it into effect, to pay a visit to Caithness, the coast of which is at present the favourite haunt of these Oceanic nymphs. I should be particularly glad to have the pleasure of seeing you there next summer, & of introducing you to some of them, for I have no doubt, when they heard the sound of your lyre, that they would immediately make their appearance.... I really do not know a better subject for a poem. & I am sure if any one can make anything of it, you will.

(J. Sinclair, Letter)

In 1810, Sinclair's fortunes were mixed: he had just been made a member of the Privy Council but he was on the brink of bankruptcy, and his brash appeal to Scott appears an attempt to attract tourists, and investment to Caithness (Mitchison 225). Scott, who found Sinclair's appeal deeply insulting, was still bristling six weeks later, telling Joanna Baillie in a letter dated December 31, 1810, that “[Sinclair] wrote me a long letter laying down the rules for a poem to be called the Lady of the Sea and which was to turn upon the adventures and intrigues of a Caithness Mermaid with whom he almost promised me an interview.” Enjoying mocking Sinclair, Scott told Baillie the essence of his reply: “I parried the undertaking,” he wrote, “by reminding him that he had brought the sea nymphs so much into the province of natural History that they could no longer be considered as fictitious beings and had therefore ceased to have a title to poetic commemoration” (*Letters*, 2: 419).<sup>16</sup>

22. Sinclair's enthusiasm for "Oceanic nymphs" was well known enough to feature in at least two satirical novels from the 1810s.<sup>17</sup> In Christian Isobel Johnstone's anonymously published *The Saxon and the Gaël* (1814), a thinly veiled comic sketch of Sinclair named Sir John Caithness gazes "long and earnestly" at the heroine, Lady Rosabell Macallan, across an Edinburgh ballroom and asks her if she was "lately seen on the coast, in the North of Scotland." After Rosabell answers in the affirmative (she has just returned from a holiday to the Highlands), Sir John requests that she let her "fine hair flow around [her] shoulders, as on the happy occasion to which I allude." Rosabell blushes with embarrassment, but Sir John persists: "'Are you then not the Mermaid?'" Johnstone makes Sir John Caithness the subject of "a universal laugh," and the comedy of errors means that "the confusion of the baronet almost equalled that of the supposed Mermaid" (1: 70–71).

23. As Norma L. Rudinsky has charted, George Ellis and George Canning carried out a full mockery of Sinclair and the mermaids in two *Quarterly Review* articles from November 1810 and January 1811. These may well have been Johnstone's source for the portrait in *The Saxon and the Gaël*, especially as Rudinsky has traced their influence on Thomas Love Peacock's characterisation of the ichthyologist Mr Asterias in *Nightmare Abbey* (1818). Peacock's Asterias is obsessed with finding "a triton or a mermaid, the existence of which he most potently and implicitly believed, and was prepared to demonstrate, *à priori*, *à posteriori*, *à fortiori*, synthetically and analytically, by arguments deduced both from acknowledged facts and plausible hypotheses" (Peacock 72; Rudinsky, "Satire"). Located "on a dry strip of land between the sea and the fens, at the verge of the county of Lincoln,"

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Asterias is lured to Nightmare Abbey by “a report that a mermaid had been seen ‘sleeking her soft alluring locks’ on the sea-coast of Lincolnshire” (Peacock 39). Shortly after his arrival, he catches what he is sure is “the glimpse of a mermaid, but she had eluded him in the darkness, and was gone, he presumed, to sup with some enamoured triton, in a submarine grotto” (73). In the *Quarterly Review*, Canning and Ellis dished out mock praise to Sinclair for “extend[ing] the bounds of animated nature by his authentic discovery of the *Mermaid*” (519) and for his “Essay on Mermaids,” describing “a race of aquatic females, perfectly distinct from seals and porpoises, whom he has lately allured to the coasts of this island; and on one of whom he is said to have composed, in his sportive moments, a lively, yet chaste and discreet, piscatory eclogue” (532).<sup>18</sup> Canning and Ellis’s ironic description suggests that there was nothing chaste or discreet about Sinclair’s desire for “aquatic females”; in 1810, Sinclair was fifty-six years old and his desire for “Oceanic nymphs” had more than a little in common with the depictions of leering men in Thomas Rowlandson’s scopophilic cartoon, *Summer Amusement at Margate: A Peep at the Mermaids* (1813).



Fig. 7. Rowlandson, *Summer Amusement at Margate; or A Peep at the Mermaids*.

24. Despite Sinclair’s desire to locate mermaids firmly along the Caithness coastline, Mackay and Munro’s “well authenticated accounts” prompted the recollection of other historical mermaid sightings across the globe, indicating that such “extraordinary creatures” inhabited waters from Suffolk to Ceylon, Martinique to Poland.<sup>19</sup> “[A] short time since a mermaid was seen in the north of Scotland,” a boy saw “a creature of the mermaid species” in a harbour in Grimsby (“Another Mermaid”).<sup>20</sup> The anonymously authored “Prologue and Epilogue to the Tragedy of Helga,” published in the *Scots Magazine* in February 1812, collected the Caithness mermaid into a comic catalogue of recent Scottish coastal “wonders”:

In times like these, when British travellers find  
Their foreign tours, that narrow limits bind,

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Through France and Italy forbid to roam  
They seek wonders nearer home,  
Gigantic snakes are cast on Orkney's isle,  
And mermaids rise in Caithness and Argyle:  
These spread their toilets (wondering shepherds swear)  
And comb with ivory fingers, emerald hair. (135)

Reports of another mermaid sighting in Argyle appeared in 1811, where three witnesses gave lengthy oral testimonies to the sheriff of Kintyre, describing a clear view of a being half “white, and of the shape of a human body, and the other half, towards the tail, of a brindled or reddish grey colour, apparently covered in scales” (“Evidence”). The chief witness was a farmer, transformed by the author of “The Tragedy of Helga” into “wondering shepherds” from pastoral tradition. While taking a typical comic poke at mermaids performing their “toilet” for any gazing onlooker, the poem also identifies a domestic coastal turn, as the Napoleonic Wars continued to prevent the exploration of Europe’s celebrated seas, lakes, and rivers. The investigations into marine wonders in Northern waters become a convenient (or consciously cultivated) distraction from events in Europe. Others also saw news of the Caithness sighting in the shadow of war. One “Archibald James, Junior” wrote a serious letter to the *Morning Advertiser* calling for urgent investigation of the Caithness case as there was a real risk that Napoleon himself would claim the scientific victory:

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As France takes at present decidedly the lead in scientific researches, and her philosophers have made many discoveries of phenomena before believed impossible, I have no doubt but, immediately on the return of peace, Bonaparte (whose patronage of science in no inconsiderable degree counter-balances his atrocities) will station a party of *savans* off the coast of Caithness, to ascertain this important fact of natural history; I hope, however, he will be anticipated by our own Royal Society, and that in a short time Mr. Pidcock will be able to exhibit at his Menagerie over Exeter Change, as many Mermaids as he now does Black Swans, birds which, until the discoveries of his present Majesty's reign, were also believed to be non-existent, or least to be equally rare as white mice, white crows, or any other *lusi naturae*, instead of being a distinct and numerous species. ("Mermaids, &c.")

Gilbert Pidcock had been exhibiting his previously travelling collection of exotic animals at Exeter Exchange in London since 1800; it became "The Royal Menagerie" in 1802 (Grigson 115). That same year he acquired "a black swan from Botany Bay," likely sent to him by Sir Joseph Banks, which became the first to be exhibited in England (Grigson 116–17). As much as the Caithness case turned eyes toward Scotland's northern shores, then, it also suggested that any marvels, if found, would become part of a London collection, as part of a larger European competition for significant scientific discoveries.

25. Scott, as we have now seen, was far from alone in mocking Sir John Sinclair for his aquatic enthusiasms. Yet he too would capitalise on the Caithness sighting. When preparing the

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fourth edition of the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, he added a few lines to the end of John Leyden's "The Mermaid," one of the *Minstrelsy*'s imitations of an ancient ballad:

I cannot help adding, that some late evidence has been produced, serving to show, either that imagination played strange tricks with the witnesses, or that the existence of mermaids is no longer a matter of question. I refer to the letters written to Sir John Sinclair, by the spectators of such a phenomenon, in the Bay of Sandside, in Caithness.  
(3: 331)

In Scott's note, Sinclair eclipses both Elizabeth Mackay and William Munro, now only unnamed "spectators." After 1810, the *Minstrelsy* thus invited its readers to consider the puzzle of the Caithness case before turning to Leyden's poem about the kidnapping of Macphail of Colonsay by the seductive mermaid of the Corrivrekin whirlpool. The Caithness case, then, which Scott himself noted had little to say about the literary mermaids from "fable," bringing them instead "into the province of natural history," became absorbed into an example of their "poetic commemoration," as Scott described it jokingly to Sinclair. The setting for Leyden's "The Mermaid" is highly localised—"the dangerous gulf of Corrivreken ... between Jura and Scarba, and the superstition of the islanders" which has "tenanted its shelves and eddies with all the fabulous monsters and daemons of the ocean"—but his long introductory note to the poem ranges widely across folklore and literature from Norway, France, and the Isle of Man, introducing his mermaid as but one example of a global phenomenon, just as newspapers had added global mermaids to the Caithness sightings. As Sarah Dunnigan has argued, mermaids are "easily 'translated,'" as

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“their very capacity to serve as signs or emblems of national culture, or of a distinct topographical region” means that they can “bind Scottish culture with other cultures” (21). Added to a *Minstrelsy* headnote, the Caithness case became part of the first significant attempt to provide a European literary history of mermaids.

26. The cultural footprint left by the Caithness mermaid is predominantly satirical. Her literary evocations poke fun at Sir John Sinclair as a blundering enthusiast and draw heavily on the popular image of the young, naked, and beautiful mermaid of myth that was such an attractive male fantasy. The nature of such satires suggests that the Romantics were well aware that cultural uses of the mermaid often “bordered on the pornographic,” as Boria Sax puts it (182). The failure of the Caithness sighting to generate a long poem is unsurprising given the scientific nature of Elizabeth Mackay’s account; although it uses the metaphor of the “mermaid” as a signifier, it describes a marine creature of indeterminate gender, who, rather than frolicking or bathing in the water like its poetic incarnations, suffers “annoyance” and soiling from the waves and is distressed by sea birds that pester it.<sup>21</sup> It will always be difficult to know quite what to make of her evidence. But in her openness and commitment to recording the marine behaviours she perceived, aware of her own positionality as a witness and without recourse to aspects of mermaid “fable,” her testimony records how Romantic subjects who lived at the shoreline felt themselves deeply connected to the ocean world in complex and mysterious ways.



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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> As Simon Young has shown, the *Oxford University and City Herald* seems to have been the first to print the letter on August 26, 1809, but with some omissions, whereas the *Scots Magazine* printed it in full.

<sup>2</sup> I have been unable to trace Miss C. Mackenzie's full name.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth's letter is addressed to "Mrs Innes," but she is identified as Mary Innes (née Cradock) by "Alpha" in "The Caithness Mermaid" (2).

<sup>4</sup> The *Kentish Gazette* reported that "copies of the original letters were transmitted to a Gentleman in Sussex, by Sir John Sinclair" ("Mermaids, or Sea-Women" 2).

<sup>5</sup> See "A Mermaid Seen on the Coast of Caithness" (*Madras Courier*), "Mermaid Seen on the Coast of Caithness" (*Barbados Mercury*) and Paterson. For a full account of its circulation in the regional presses, see Young.

<sup>6</sup> Between 1708 and 1832, Caithness only returned an MP every other election; it was paired with Buteshire, which returned a candidate in the alternating years. Sinclair was elected MP for Caithness every time Caithness had a seat between 1780 and 1811, serving 1780–84, 1790–96, and 1802–11.

<sup>7</sup> Sinclair's letters are held in a private collection. I quote from extracts given (also privately) to Norma Rudinsky by Rosalind Mitchison, Sinclair's biographer (see also Mitchison 202).

<sup>8</sup> MS copies of the letters from Elizabeth Mackay to Mrs. Innes and the letter from William Munro to Dr. Torrence are held in the National Records of Scotland, GD 87/2/28/1 "Letters to Miss Innes..."). They are undated and addressed to the Countess of Caithness (probably Frances Harriet Fanny Sinclair [1793–1854]) from William Forsyth.

<sup>9</sup> Polson (1926) quotes from William Munro's letter, misattributed to James Munro (74); Benwell and Waugh (1961) print Munro's letter in full (111–13); Kingshill and Westwood (2012) title their discussion of Munro's letter "The Schoolmaster and the Mermaid" (364–65); and Scribner (2020) refers to the "Munro case" (129–30). The later omissions may well stem from Benwell and Waugh's.

<sup>10</sup> For the most extensive discussion of Eliza "Bessie" Mackay, see "Alpha."

<sup>11</sup> David Bunce notes that on the topic of natural history, Sir John Sinclair's description of Thurso simply stated "Nothing remarkable occurs," causing many other ministers to "follow suit" (362).

<sup>12</sup> Notwithstanding Bunce's general comment above (n11), the *Statistical Account* contains other notable remarks on marine life. Communications received from Thomas Mouat and James Barclay, reporting for Unst, the most northern of the Shetland isles, include a large catalogue of fish ("ling, cod, task, skate, holibut [*sic*], and dogfish," as well as "Piltocks, fillocks, haddocks, mackarels, and flounders"), shell-fish ("spouts, muscles, cockles, collucks, smurlins, partans, crabs, limpets and black wilks"), and frequent sightings of porpoise, as well as rarer sturgeon, lean whales and sperm whales (190). More surprisingly, the entry for Glasgow, compiled "from the communications of several respectable inhabitants of that city," contains a list of fifty-six fish found in the River Clyde, including the blunt-headed whale, basking shark and porpoise (535–38).

<sup>13</sup> In his list of Caithness cetaceans, Bunce notes that common seals are "very common all round the coast"; grey seals "fairly common, breeding in caves all along the coast"; porpoises "very common"; and the bottlenose whale "well known by the fishermen." Listed also are the humpbacked whale, common rorqual (described as a "monster"), sperm whale, white whale, and pilot whale or blackfish (366–67).



<sup>14</sup> Donovan gave his own view on the identity of the “Mermaid of the Scottish Isles” in *The Naturalist’s Repository*, plate 58 (2: n. p.), believing it the *chimera monstrosa*, or rabbit fish (see *The Natural History of British Fishes*, 5: plate 111).

<sup>15</sup> Versions of the story are also told by Charles John Tibbits (1889; 101–05), Elizabeth Grierson (1910), and David Thomson (1954; 16–19).

<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of these letters and other correspondence between Scott and Sinclair, see Mayer (35).

<sup>17</sup> Scott’s comment and his exchange with Sinclair was included in a review of Peacock’s *Nightmare Abbey* (1818). See Rudinsky (“Contemporary Response” 335).

<sup>18</sup> Sinclair’s “Essay on Mermaids” appears not to have survived; it is not among his extensive private family papers, containing 367 items and pamphlets authored by him. Mitchison suggests “it may not have been a formal publication, though printed” (cited in Rudinsky, “Satire” 110.)

<sup>19</sup> In November 1809, both the *British Press* and the *Sun* published accounts of reported sightings called “Mermen and Mermaids.”

<sup>20</sup> See also Scribner (130–31), who documents other sightings on the Isle of Wight (1810), Nassau (1811), and Campbeltown (1811).

<sup>21</sup> In 1855, the Caithness historian and poet James Traill Calder published “The Mermaid of Dwarwick Head” in his collection *Poems from John O’Groat’s*, a self-described “pretty long poem” based on “a curious local legend.” Calder made considerable apologies for it, noting that “from the general diffusion of education, and its enlightening influence on the public mind, the belief in mermaids, fairies, and other fanciful creatures is of a bygone [*sic*] and credulous age is, is well nigh extinct even amongst the lowest vulgar; and as this source of imaginative poetry may

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in some measure be said to be done away, the Author is fully sensible that in making a fabulous being, like the mermaid, the subject of a ... poem, he lays himself open to critical censure" (iii).