

# Scots Word of the Season: 'Kelpie'

By Maggie Scott

**kelpie** *n.* (*folklore*) a water spirit haunting rivers, fords and pools

Kelpies have the ability to appear in two different forms, taking on the guise of old men or horses when moving around the human realm. As horses, they emerge from their burns and lochs to enchant their human victims, enticing them to ride on their backs only to bear them away to grim darkness beneath the water. Beautiful and sinister, echoes of their activities are found throughout Scottish literature from the eighteenth century onwards. Robert Burns describes them as agents of a darker force in his *Address to the Deil* (1786): “When thowes (thaws) dissolve the snawy hoord / An’ float the jinglin icy boord / Then, water-kelpies haunt the foord / By your direction / An’ nighted trav’lles are allur’d / To their destruction”.

Kelpies appear in a variety of tales of the supernatural, but, being elusive creatures by nature, it is not surprising they are difficult to trace back through the history of Scots. The earliest evidence presented for the term *kelpie* in *A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* is encoded in the spellings of a seventeenth-century place-name, recorded as *Kelpie hoall* and *Kelpie Hooll* in the Burgh Records for Kirkcudbright in 1674. The word is thought to originate from Scottish Gaelic *cailpeach* ‘bullock, colt’, and is chiefly associated with Lowland Scotland.

Similar water spirits are found in the Northern Isles, including the shoupiltin or shoopeltee, also known by the names neogle or necker (variously spelled). As workers of mischief, kelpies and their ilk are sometimes associated with water mills. The *Statistical Account of Scotland* (1845) explains that the neogle “makes his appearance about mills, particularly when grinding, in the shape of a beautiful poney [*sic.*] ... But some millers ... salute his Neogleship with a burning brand through the lightning-tree hole, which makes him immediately scamper away”.

Sir Walter Scott hints at a rational explanation for the legend in [The Bride of Lammermoor](#) (1818), where Kelpie’s Flow denotes a treacherous area of quicksand. Conversely, industrial progress may have led to the demise of the

kelpie, as suggested by James Headrick in his *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Angus* (1813) with the claim that: “The water kelpie ... has fallen into oblivion, since bridges were constructed in all convenient places”. Fear of the kelpie was used to warn children away from places they should not play, as recalled in a Aberdonian’s letter from 1956, quoted in the *Scottish National Dictionary*: “I mind fine on hearing Auld J — M — in Drumblade speaking about kelpies. He used to tell the boys going to school, if they went near his dam, the water kelpies would take them”.

And the legend of the kelpie has not entirely drifted into the mists of the past. Golfers may be aware that the ‘unlucky’ hole thirteen at the Queen’s Course in Gleneagles is known as Water Kelpie on account of the water hazard represented by the aptly-named Loch-an-Eerie.

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