

Scots Word of the Season: 'Kelpie'

By Maggie Scott

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

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

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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