The Water Horse Legends in Ireland

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The water horse belief in Ireland consists mainly of two legend types, the Plough legend which is centered around Mayo and Sligo, and the Racehorse legend which is centered around Loughrea, Co. Galway. Both extend across the western half of the country, including North Munster (notably in Co. Clare), and the belief thins out in the east (see map). One feature of these stories is the fact that the liver and lungs of a victim of the horse float to the surface of the lake, a motif linking them to Scandinavian versions of the story.

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The Water Horse belief in Ireland exists in many forms. It has been preserved in placenames, it explains the existence of features in the landscape, and it is part of the rich tradition of migratory legends in Ireland. The Irish water horse itself is a species with relatives in Scandinavia and Scotland, with elements common to these types, but with distinctive traits of its own. The origin of this creature and the beliefs surrounding it have been subjects of debate for some time.

Recent research completed in 1988[1] revealed an extensive range of stories concerning the water horse, with two particular forms being particularly prominent. These are the Plough legend and the Racehorse legend. They both belong to Brita Egardt's Type B, Water Horse as Workhorse, but are distinctive legend types in Ireland and are rarely combined or confused. There are 99 versions of the Plough story and 50 versions of the Racehorse story in the U.C.D. Irish Folklore Department's manuscript collection, from a total of 265 references to the water horse between the Main and Schools' Manuscript Collections. Most live in lakes or rivers, like those water horses in Scandinavia, Scotland and the Northern Islands, though some live in the sea, and often occur in sightings by fishermen. The tradition of the water horse occurs largely in areas where Irish was spoken or where it had been in recent times (during the 1930s when many of the versions were collected by the Irish Folklore Commission).

The Plough legend is the more widespread of the two types, and is related to the Fairy Cow story. It concerns a farmer who has fallen on hard times and who is walking by the lake where he finds a horse. The horse works hard, and has a foal every year for a number of years which the farmer sells, and thus he becomes wealthy. One evening as he is ploughing, the mare refuses to work after sunset, and the farmer curses her, or strikes her with her own bridle. The mare turns and whinnies, and her foals who have been sold all over the country return, and all of them rush back into the lake, taking the farmer with them. The following day, his heart floats to the surface of the water.

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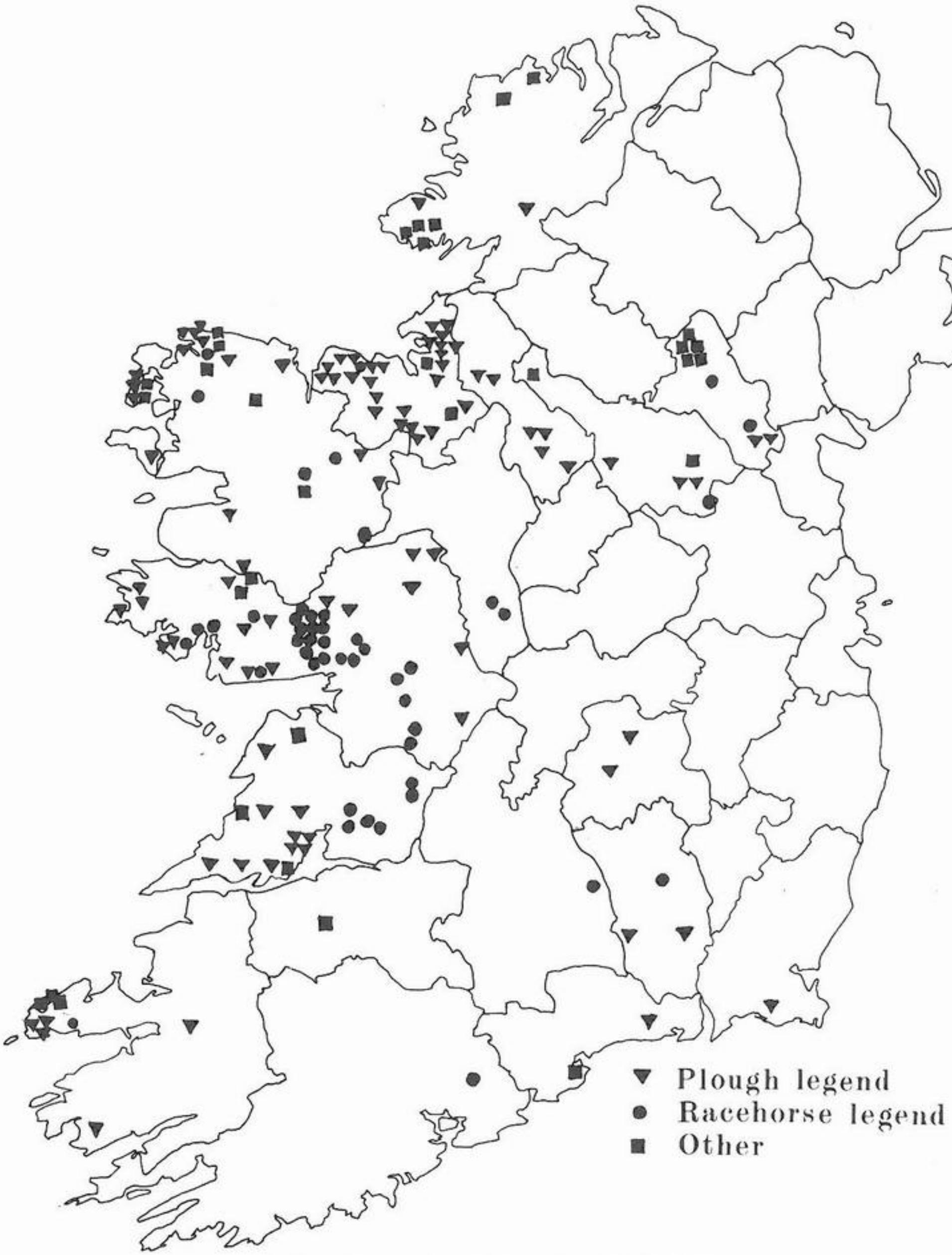
[1] A. Kilfeather, "An tEach Uisce: the Water Horse Belief in Ireland", a third-year dissertation for the Department of Irish Folklore, University College, Dublin, 1987-88.



Distribution map of water horse legends in Ireland.

The following (IFC S Ms 167, 50-51), a typical example of this story, is from a fifteen-year-old Co. Sligo schoolgirl, Peg Judge:

> Near the Ladies' Bray which is *c.*13 miles from Dromore West on the Sligo side there is a lake called Loch a' Chroidhe. There once lived a farmer near this lake, who had a very large farm of mountain and bog. This lake was a large one and the people of the district believed it was enchanted. They believed that under its dark waters lived great kings and chiefs of long ago.
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> This particular farmer became very poor. All his stock died and when he bought some more to replace them, they too died. Spring came and he felt very distressed and lonely not having a horse to plough his land. He did not know what to do. One evening he was out walking on his farm—very grieved and downhearted—when looking towards the lake what did he see but a most beautiful jet-black mare grazing along the lake. He went near to her. She stood up and looked at him. He caught hold of her and took her home with him to his stable.
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> He fed her and patted her and grew very fond of her. She ploughed and worked for him with cart and car very quietly. Each year she had a foal which the farmer sold and got well paid for. He was now growing very rich. The mare worked willingly and quietly for him for many years. During all this time the farmer was very kind to her. He never gave her even one blow.
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> At last one day as the farmer rode to the lake for a drink he struck her with the bridle. The mare leaped and neighed three times. Immediately all the foals she ever reared came round her. Then the mare with the man on her back, and all the foals dashed into the lake. It seems that the farmer was killed for it is believed that on the next day his heart was seen floating on the surface of the lake, and from that day the lake is called Loch a' Chroidhe.

The so-called "liver and lungs" motif is a Scandinavian characteristic, attached to a distincivetly Irish story, based on the Fairy Cow. This form is also found in Scotland but is rare in Scandinavia. Working water horses in this area rarely harm the human. The Irish water horse does not have a particular name, as its Scandinavian relatives do, but the horse shares with many other supernatural beings the fear of the name of the Devil, at which it will often return to its element, as in (IFC S Ms 819, 211-212 Co. Galway):

> Ach dar fhiadh, an lá seo bhí sé a' trabhadh sa nfarraidhe céadhna léithe agus i lár na sgríb sheas sí suas, agus dá mbeadh sè a' gabháil go whip ar fad an lae ní chorróchat sí. "hAman (*sic*) an Deoul", ar sé "teiri' go ceann na scribe agus ligfi' mé amach thú". Chomh luath is a bhí an focal ráidhthe níor stop sí go ndeaca sí go dtí ann ceann earruíoch. Agus sgaoil sé ón gcéachta í. Tháinic sì amach agus chraith sí í fhéin, agus chuir sé aisti, agus rinne sí a cuid fuail. Dheamhan ceann dár dhíol sé dhá bharr nach raibh insa garraidhe chómh luath léithe fhéin agus chuadar amach insa loch.
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> *(But this day, he was ploughing in the same field, when she reared up, and no matter how much he'd whip her she would not move. "In the name of the Devil", he said "I'll bring you up to the top of the hill and let you out". No sooner was the word said, than she was off and did not stop till she reached the top. He took the plough off her, she shook herself, and called out to her foals, which he'd sold. They all came to her in the field and went out into the lake.)*

Not all these stories end in tragedy (though most do) as this simple story (IFC S Ms 4, 222) from Galway told by Michael Conroy shows:

> A long time ago a man was fishing in the mountains of Connemara—a lovely sea horse came up out of the lake. The man went down to the brink of the lake and caught the horse. He kept him for a long time working him under a cart every day. One night about twelve a clock the horse ran away.

In most cases the horse drags the farmer, and sometimes even the plough and the other harnessed horse, into the lake. Loch a' Chroidhe (Heart Lake) is a common setting for the story in Mayo and Sligo, though the same story is also used to explain the placenames of Ceann na Searraigh (Foal's Head), and Poll an Eachaigh (Pulincha or 'hole of the horse') in Co. Sligo; Loch Láir (Mare Lake) and Cúl an Each (hollow of the horse) in Co. Clare, though this latter placename occurs in various anglicised forms as far apart as Counties

Cork, Galway, Kerry, Limerick, Laois, Tipperary and Wexford. Such placenames preserve traces of the belief even when the legend has long disappeared from the area. They include Domhnach an Eich (Donaghaneigh, 'church of the horse') near Omagh, Co. Tyrone.

The Racehorse legend appears to be centred around Loughrea, Co. Galway, where it is associated with a local hero, Seoirse de Barra. There are sixteen versions from Co. Galway, four from Mayo, six from Clare, and the story is scattered around south Munster and the Midlands. This usually involves the hero catching a colt which with a herd of other horses has been eating his corn every night. He is warned to keep the horse for a year and a day before riding it, but on the last day takes it to the races (often in Loughrea) where it wins every race. On the way home, the horse catches sight of its lake and bolts down to it, throwing and killing its rider. Unlike the plough horse, the racehorse is rarely illtreated, but in many cases, a vital piece of advice is ignored, such as the time limit, or the absence of shoes or a bridal-bit. The motif is also found in Scandinavia. In Ireland the horse's iron bit is sometimes removed, whereas in Scandinavia, the horse's own bit gives him the power to return. The racehorse story does, however, seem to be an Irish development, localised to areas where racing was common.

The following is a story (IFC S Ms 19, 308-312) from Galway about Seoirse de Barra and Leacht Sheoirse, anglicised here to Leacht George, where the hero is killed, told by Chrissie Callanan from her father Thomas:

> It is supposed that under a great heap of stones there is a man buried by the name of George Barry. This place is about a mile from here, a few miles from where this George lived. It is supposed that water horses used to come up and feed on his green field near the lake by night. This man was a particularly good horseman and could train the wildest and wickedest of horses. He said to himself one day, "I must watch and see if it is true that these horses come out of the lake". So this night he lay in wait. About twelve o'clock he saw one of the greatest surprises he ever saw. First of all came a shaggy old mare and when she found that all was quiet she let a whinny calling the remainder on. One by one they followed until about thirteen had come out. The job was to capture one.
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> He thought of a plan. He said that he would frighten them and make after half of them. He knew that in their excitement they would all dash off for the lake and the farthest away would hardly remark him. So he frightened the nearest ones into the lake and kept on the chase after them. When the rest came up on the same track he pounced on one, for he was a powerful man. He managed to overpower him. He had a rope around his own waist; he knew that he wanted the use of his two hands to tie down the animal. On his way home the following morning, he met a very strange type of woman. The woman said to him: "It's early you're out, and where did you get that strange animal?" So he told her of his adventure. This woman is what you might call a witch and knew of many things which were to come by some spell or omen. She said to the man "If you can manage to keep that horse for twenty days and twenty years and twenty nights..." The old woman gave him a red handkerchief to blindfold the horse. She also told him to put him in a very dark stable, and not to take the red rag from the horse's eyes until the years were past.
>
> All went well, he kept the horse and obeyed her orders. Just as the years were drawing to a close there was a great race to be run in the Curragh in Kildare. The most prominent jocks were to be riding, one from Castle Hacket and one from Crega-Clare known as Lambert. Those two jocks were known everywhere. They could win races on every type of horse. This George that we are now writing about said to himself: "I'll enter this horse for the race", ignoring the woman's warning, just on the eve of the last night. He said that he would take out the horse and test him to see what he would be able to do on the Curragh. The next or second day before the races, he saddled the horse and mounted him. The horse went off in a gallant speed around the field delighted to be in the open air again, as he had been a prisoner since his captivity. He left the pookeen (blindfold) on the horse for a few rounds of the field. He just thought of the jump he would have to jump on the Curragh of Kildare.
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> The man said that the horse would not jump it with the pookeen on. So foolish enough he took it off, ignoring the woman's warning as there had not been another night to be passed before the spell had lost its power. He snapped off the pookeen and faced him for the nearest fence. The horse sprung widely over the fence. The breezes changed to be blowing from the lake. The moment she smelled it she started

to snort wildly. It was only then the man knew his mistake, but alas it was too late. The horse made three desperate springs and kicking up some stones there he threw off the man off his back. The man was killed. He fell in the hole. There he was buried. The horse made away to the Corrib. People came from far and wide and put two stones each over his grave. The people ever since called it Leacht George.

This story differs from the Plough story in that the horse is captured against its will. It is usually a colt which is captured, and it rarely devours its rider, either drowning him in the lake, or throwing him before entering the lake.

There are a number of other story types associated with water horses in Ireland, but largely unrelated to the two main types. The story of the Giolla Deacair and his horse is one which appears to reflect the Scandinavian tradition of the Long Horse, which grows as more and more people sit on its back. It is otherwise absent in Ireland. It is distantly reflected however in the motif that the rider of the horse (either ploughhorse or racehorse) cannot throw himself from its back as it rushes into the lake. There are also tales in which the horse guards treasure in the lake (mostly in Counties Cavan and Monaghan), and descriptions of how to catch them, by throwing horseshoes or red earth. The most notable Scandinavian motif in the Irish stories is that of the liver and lungs which float to the surface of the lake. Various parts of the anatomy are recovered but sometimes the clothes can come ashore.

Galway

Ms 76, 119-123	'torn'
Ms 163, 20-21	*croí agus scámhóga* (heart and lungs)
S Ms 74, 284	bones

Mayo

MS 227, 448-450	*scámhóga* (lungs)
Ms 625, 278	*scámhóga* (lungs)
Ms 741, 234-238	*scámhóga* (lungs)
S Ms 102, 191-193	'bit of flesh and bones'
S Ms 120, 240-241	blood
S Ms 131, 493-494	'swallowed'
S Ms 136, 291-292	bodies of shod foals
S Ms 143, 291-293	liver

Sligo

S Ms 161, 185	blood
S Ms 167, 44-50	heart (Loch a' Chroí—three stories)
S Ms 172, 33-34	heart (Loch a' Chroí)
S Ms 176, 127-128	liver and lights (Loch a' Chroí)

Donegal

Ms 171, 303	'killed'

Cavan

S Ms 966, 136-137	cap

Monaghan

S Ms 931, 96	clothes

In both the Plough and the Racehorse legends it is made clear that the water horse is an animal not to be tampered with. It is not necessarily malign, as some of the Scottish and Scandinavian water horses are, but no matter what luck the horse brings as a brood

mare, a workhorse, or a racehorse, the story almost invariably ends in tragedy. Whether abused in some way, or simply catching sight of the lake in which she was born, the horse will eventually return to her natural element. In its most simple form, the story could be seen as a warning to children not to play near deep lakes; to women not to attempt to tackle what is seen as men's work; and to men to avoid strange horses. The legends point out the consequences of maltreating horses, and above all, warn against any dealings with the supernatural world.

Addendum

Subsequent to the original research on this theme, "An tEach Uisce; the Water Horse Legend in Ireland", there have been several developments in the field of water horse studies. Bo Almqvist's recent paper[2] draws attention to the problems of sourcing the legends, and discusses the various theories already put forward by such scholars as Egardt[3] and Strombeck.[4] Egardt divides the water horse legends into four groups, and argues on the basis of these groups and their distribution in Europe, for a Celtic origin. Strombeck suggests that the aforementioned 'liver and lungs' motif may have been introduced to Ireland in Viking times. Almqvist[5] stresses the characteristics of the various water horse legends in Ireland, Scotland and Scandinavia to argue for a non-Irish source.

Egardt's first group, the Water Horse as Riding Horse (the so-called Long Horse tradition, almost unknown in Ireland), is almost certainly of Scandinavian origin. Adults or children are caught by it, as children mount one after another until one cries out"...in the name of Christ...what a long horse!" (which rhymes in Swedish), or because of a lisp, accidentally says the horse's name, Nykur, upon which the horse throws them all off and dashes back to the pool. Irish terminology does not allow for a rhyme, nor does the motif of the name occur.

The second group, the Water Horse as Work Horse (into which both the Irish Plough and Race types fit) is more strongly Irish and Scottish in character. It has strong links with other native traditions such as the Fairy Cow, and has developed its own sub-types, the Racehorse and Plough horse stories. The liver and lungs motif features in the Scandinavian versions of these stories. Egardt's third group is one loosely based on the Self-legend in which the intended victim outwits the water horse by answering the horse who gapes and asks, "Have you ever seen such a big mouth?" with the reply, "Have you ever tasted such hot soup?", scalding the horse and so escaping. This motif is not found in Ireland, though the Self-legend is found over most of Scotland and northern Britain.

Almqvist points out the absence of the first and third types in Ireland and argues for a Scandinavian origin. Women and children rarely feature in Irish stories, while the Scandinavian stories suggest that women and children should keep away from horses and mens' work. There is also an added element of eroticism in the abduction of women by fairy men disguised as horses, a motif also found in Scottish stories. A girl on whose lap

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[2] Bo Almqvist, "Utt Slöts Lever och Longa: en preliminar omtuggning av Problemen Rörande de Nordiska Wattenhästsgnernas Ursprung", *Inte Bara Visor, Studier Kring Folklig Dikting och Musik Tillägnade Bengt R. Jonsson Den Mars 1990,* Stockholm 1990.

[3] Britta Egardt, "De Svenska Wattenhästsägnerna och deras Ursprung", *Folkkultur Meddelanden Fran Lunds Uneversetets Folkminnes Arkiv,* 4 (1944).

[4] Dag Strombeck, "Näcken", *Kulturhistorick Lexikon Forhordisk Medeltid, Roman 12,* Malmö 1967; "Some Notes on Nix in Older Tradition", *Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies,* Essays in Honour of Francis Lee Uteley, New Jersey 1970.

[5] Almqvist, *op. cit.*

the water horse as a man has fallen asleep, steals away, only to turn and see she is pursued by a huge horse. Rarely does this change from man to horse occur in Ireland. Almqvist also suggests that the Water Horse as Work Horse is adopted into the heroic cycle in such cases as Cú Chullainn's Liath Macha who returns to the sea once he has been loosed, and the obvious Long Horse story of the Giolla Deacair and his horse.

But does this constitute a Scandinavian origin for the Irish water horse legends? If the tradition is an introduced one, why then are there no Irish examples of the Self Legend and the Long horse? Stories such as the Giolla Deacair and the Liath Macha are possibly as late as the tenth century, when Viking contacts were developed through trading. The oral tradition in Ireland did not borrow from the heroic cycles, and the Giolla Deacair is never confused with other water horse stories. At the same time, however, it is abundantly clear that the Long Horse has a strong Scandinavian background, and appears never to have been adopted into the Irish oral tradition. This argues for a very early introduction of the tradition to Ireland, perhaps only the communication of the belief in such a supernatural lake-dwelling being. This belief then developed in Ireland, linked to other legends of lake animals, while in Scandinavia, the Long Horse and the Self Legend grew and expanded. Whether the Work Horse legends in Scandinavia are as a result of Irish influence through later contact is impossible to say. No doubt this debate will continue for a long time to come.

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