

# The 'Monster' Tree-Trunk of Loch Ness

*The photographer claims his pictures show a monster, but another local resident has a different interpretation.*

Steuart Campbell

There has been great controversy over alleged photographs of the "monster" at Loch Ness in Scotland, and it is usually difficult to determine the reliability of such pictures. Indeed, no still photograph has been authenticated. Consequently, it would be helpful if some definite conclusions could be reached about at least some of these pictures.

Frank Searle is one of the most publicized "monster watchers" at Loch Ness. He has lived beside the lake since June 1969. He is an ex-soldier (18 years of service) and was a manager for a London fruiterer until he abandoned the "rat race" to seek the Loch Ness monster. His days are now spent watching the water with still and movie cameras at the ready.

Beside his caravan at Foyers Falls, Searle has built a small shed in which he displays sighting reports, newspaper clippings (about sightings and about himself), and photographs alleged to show the monster. Some of these photographs have appeared in his book *Nessie: Seven Years in Search of the Monster* (Coronet, 1976) and in some pamphlets about the lake (e.g., Barrie Robertson's *Loch Ness and the Great Glen*, undated). Some of these photographs accompany this article (Figures 1-5).

It now appears that some conclusions *can* be reached regarding Searle's photographs. Figures 1, 2, and 3 show pictures alleged to have been taken at about 6:00 P.M. (local time) on October 21, 1972, near Urquhart Bay. Searle took four pictures; the fourth is similar to the one shown in Figure 3 and appears in his book. He claimed that the "monster" suddenly appeared beside his dinghy, then dived and appeared on the other side, about 250 meters away. He said that this incident was witnessed by his companion (a 23-year-old Australian teacher), although he has not named

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FIGURE 1

her. Searle immediately sent the film for developing and printing, and when he saw the results he sent prints to two British tabloids (one English, one Scottish). One of the newspapers captioned the photographs "The Most Amazing Pictures Ever Taken," and Searle was interviewed by the media. He has never released the negatives (not even for inspection by experts), although he sold some prints through a London photographic agency in 1972. Since then he has withdrawn the agency's rights and will not even sell the prints.

Many have been skeptical about the authenticity of these photographs. Indeed, local people are generally incredulous. When I first wrote about Searle (*New Humanist*, May/June 1976, pp. 20-21), I was prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt; I even used one of the pictures (Figure 3) in my article. Since then, two things have caused me to change my mind.

The first was my inspection of what Searle claimed was his most recent photograph of the alleged monster, but which appeared to be a montage of a picture of part of a reptile (a plesiosaur?) mounted on a picture of the lake. A similar picture appears in his book. It was so crudely done that I suggested to Searle that, if he expected to be taken seriously (I did not rule out the possibility that *some* of his photographs were genuine), he did himself no good by such obvious fakes. He took offense at this, claiming that the picture was genuine, and now will not allow me access to his photographs.

The second was my discussion with James A. Menzies, an elderly Lewiston garage-proprietor who owns Temple Pier, near Drumnadrochit. Menzies lives beside the pier, with a grand view across Urquhart Bay



FIGURE 2



FIGURE 3

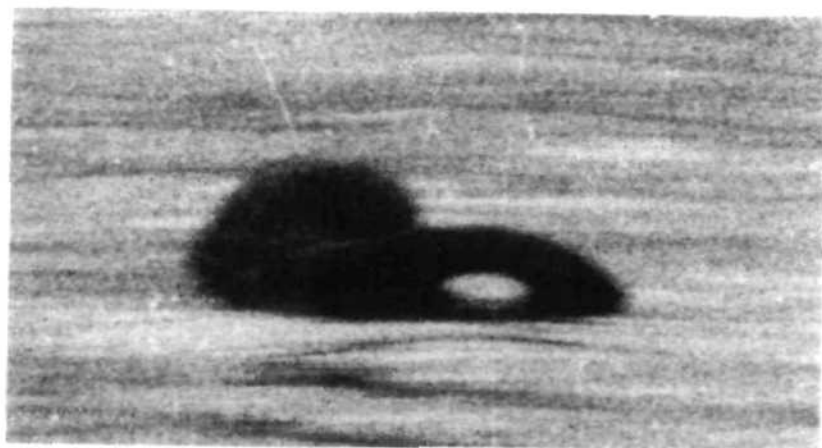


FIGURE 4

toward Urquhart Castle. Temple Pier is used by many of the individuals and organizations who come to investigate the “monster.” Because of his assistance to the Boston Academy of Applied Science in their underwater explorations, Menzies was made an honorary member of the Academy. During our first conversation, in 1980, I asked Menzies about Searle and his photographs. He said that he had seen a large branch or a tree trunk drift into Urquhart Bay from the River Enrick on the day Searle took these pictures. When, in July 1981, I showed Menzies the first photograph taken by Searle (Figure 1), he identified it as a picture of the tree trunk he had seen in 1972.

In his book, Searle admitted that there had been heavy rain earlier that day; it would not be surprising, therefore, if some portion of a tree had been washed down the flooded river. If the photo in Figure 1 shows part of a tree, then it is a fair assumption that Figure 2 shows the same tree, although after a little more of it had surfaced. Since Searle claimed that all the pictures were taken at the same time, then we may also conclude that Figure 3 shows the same tree after it had become waterlogged and had sunk further into the water.

The tree looks unusual probably because (a) it has lost its bark, and (b) we can see only the part above the water. The trunk/branch is sinuous, but that is not unusual. The part of the object that looks like an open mouth is surely the part where a break occurred.

Searle’s book contains other pictures that resemble floating branches or trees. Two that he claims to have taken March 23, 1973, appear to show an almost fully submerged trunk. Two other pictures (Figures 4 and 5) were supposedly taken on January 8, 1974, from the shore at Balachladaich. If this was the case, it is surprising that Searle did not take a picture with a wider view that would show the “monster” *and* the background shore. The pictures could be of anything, anywhere. Indeed, they could be out-of-focus pictures of the object shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3, but with the trunk rolled over and giving a different profile. The tree did appear to have had a large bulky part, distinguishable from a more slender component that could have been a branch.

Menzies is a respected member of the Drumadrochit community; he has never claimed to have seen the “monster” and is unlikely to have invented his claim to have seen a tree trunk. It seems clear that both Searle and the tree-trunk were in Urquhart Bay on the evening of October 21, 1972, although Menzies does not recall seeing Searle. However, Searle did not mention seeing the trunk! We may conclude that Searle photographed the trunk, later claiming that it was the “monster.” It seems likely, then, that *none* of his photographs are genuine “monster” pictures. Searle states, for instance, in a handout dated 1976, that he does not claim that any of his photographs have “any real scientific value”! This seems strange if he really thinks the pictures show an unknown aquatic animal. The evidence



FIGURE 5

suggests that over the years Searle has become increasingly desperate in his need for photographs of the "monster" and has had to resort to increasingly outrageous deceptions. He may think his public expects him to see the "monster" regularly and to provide photographic evidence of these encounters.

There may be a genuine "monster" in Loch Ness, and doubt regarding Searle's photographs should not be taken as evidence against its existence. But his hoaxes have not helped to bring about proper scientific investigation. ●

*Editor's Note:* The SKEPTICAL INQUIRER asked Charles J. Cazeau, professor of geology at SUNY-Buffalo and coauthor of *Exploring the Unknown*, to examine the Searle photos and comment on them. Here is an excerpt from his response: "Most damning of their authenticity as 'monster' photos is, upon close examination, the lack of any indication of water disturbance around the 'monster.' A large animate creature (as was the plesiosaur, for instance) would be likely to be in motion and to leave a wake of some kind. This 'creature' is hanging dead in the water (like a tree trunk). . . . In my field days as a geologist, I saw many old, curvaceous tree-trunks floating motionless in the water that could quite easily be perceived as some kind of monstrous creature. Figures 4 and 5 show something that is not only dead in the water but also slowly rotating. I would lend my support to the tree-trunk theory."