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MICHAEL MITTON'S MERMAN
by
John M. Plummer

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Cover Illustration
Michael Mitton's Manatee,
by Daniel R. A. Cooper,
1997
About the 26th of June 1639 a group of English gentlemen were sitting around the parlor of Henry Jocelyn's house at Black Point, now in Scarborough, Maine. Besides Henry Jocelyn, who was Governor of Piscataqua (the area around that river between Maine and New Hampshire), there was his brother John Jocelyn, "traveler, writer and naturalist;" probably their father Sir Thomas Jocelyn, knight; Michael Mitton; Richard Foxwell; probably Foxwell's father-in-law Captain Richard Bonython, whose house had been the site of the first court of the Province of Maine; surely Captain Thomas Cammock, a cousin of the Earl of Warwick; and perhaps others. They were talking, perhaps smoking, and probably drinking, as was the custom in early Maine. There, "amongst variety of discourse," the following story was told:

One Mr. Mittin related of a Triton or Mereman which he saw in Casco Bay, the Gentleman was a great Foulner, and used to goe out with a small Boat or Canow, and fetching a compass about a small Island, (there being many small Islands in the Bay) for the advantage of a shot, was encountred with a Triton, who laying his hands upon the side of the Canow, had one of them chopt off with a Hatchet by Mr. Mittin, which was in all respects like the hand of a man, the Triton presently sunk, dyi¥ the water with his purple blood, and was no more seen.

Mermaids or Tritons are of course mythological creatures, but this first person account is graphic enough and realistic enough to make one wonder whether it represents an actual sighting of a marine animal. No area fish is humanoid enough, especially in the "hands," to be a suspect. Local amphibians are too small. Large sea turtles and crocodiles live nearer the equator and are not very manlike in appearance. We are left with marine mammals or possibly with a human being. The few white men in the area would be well enough known to Mitton to preclude a case of mistaken identity. One might suggest that it was an Indian, perhaps somewhat bizarrely ornamented. However, Indian trade was one of the major industries in this area, with Michael Mitton probably taking a hand in it himself, so this again is extremely unlikely. We are left with marine mammals.

Besides sea otters and polar bears which are not found here anyway, we have three groups of marine mammals: the order or suborder Pinnipedia, or seals; the order or superorder Cetacea, or whales; and the order Sirenia, or manatees and dudongs. Whales are too specialized to be mistaken for mermen or mermaids; they are more often mistaken for fish. They can be ruled out. Seals are the only marine mammal indigenous to Maine who might likely give rise to a report of a merman sighting. Their faces are vaguely human in appearance and their front flippers have "a claw
Michael Mitton's Merman

on each of five digits." Thus they at least have the same number of recognizable digits or fingers as we do. Seals frequently come up on dry land, so it is possible one could have hoisted himself up by his flippers onto Michael Mitton's canoe. On the negative side, the flippers tend to be a bit too broad and turned the wrong way for a close resemblance to human hands and/or arms. Moreover, seals are not only indigenous to the Maine coast, they are common worldwide and often congregate in large numbers, especially in those places where they come ashore. This means that they would very likely be familiar enough to be recognized for what they were, especially by an outdoorsman like Mitton. Other documentation supports Jocelyn's statement that Mitton was a great fowler and indicates that he must have spent much time outside along the coast hunting. We know that Mitton's acquaintance John Jocelyn was quite familiar with New England pinnipeds for he mentions numerous "Morse" (walruses) and also the "Soil" (seal).

It seems most likely that Michael Mitton's merman was not a marine mammal common to the seacoast around what is today Portland, but that it was one rare enough for a sighting to be a remarkable occurrence. Might the creature have been an errant sirenian? Apparently it could have been. Just this year a Florida manatee nicknamed "Chessie" for a sighting in Chesapeake Bay last year made it to New England waters. It was spotted off Watch Hill, Rhode Island on 16 August 1995. Florida manatees have been found in waters as cold as 14 to 16 degrees centigrade or celsius (57 to 61 degrees fahrenheit), but they "appear not to be able to tolerate prolonged exposure to water colder than 20° C. [68 degrees fahrenheit]." Another source says that 65 degrees fahrenheit can be tolerated for long periods. As the water reached at least 65 degrees fahrenheit on the Maine coast this year, a manatee could have survived the water temperature there. Manatees will eat a very wide variety of food, so a Maine visitor could probably stay well fed. The environment was probably similar enough in 1639 so that a manatee could summer in Maine then as well as today. Temperatures seem to have remained relatively stable in the north Atlantic for the past few thousand years. Of course the manatee population would have been much higher in 1639, greatly increasing the chances of strays.

Now that we have shown that a manatee might have made it up to Maine, we need to examine how closely it fits Michael Mitton's description of the "merman." One writer informs us that "science has produced a sea mammal theory reliant on the possible confusion between the mermaid and a surfacing sea cow or a basking seal." Generally identification is made with "the two favourite sea cow contenders, the dudong and manatee." A standard reference work agrees that the "manatee or its relative the dudong may have given rise to the folklore of mermaids." The face of a manatee is somewhat humanoid. It resembles a caricature of Sir Winston Churchill. It is the position which is
assumed in the water and the shape and function of the front flippers which are the real selling points. Mermaids are generally depicted with their upper body erect and their arms free. Manatees regularly assume exactly this position. It is particularly striking when the females assume this position and "suckle their young in human fashion above water." Michael Mitton was especially impressed by the fact that the "hand" of the merman "was in all respects like the hand of a man." The front flippers of the manatee are narrower than those of a seal and appear to be used much more like human arms and hands. "The flexibility of the forelimbs allows a manatee to 'walk' along the substrate, manipulate food, and caress companions." They retain nails at the end of their front digits or "fingers" which would be more like human fingernails than the claws of seals. We can picture Michael Mitton out canoeing in this very sparsely populated wilderness. He turns a corner and surprises a stray manatee. Perhaps the manatee tries to fend off the canoe with its front flippers to avoid being run over. Mitton was obviously extremely surprised also. This distinctive creature was virtually unknown in these waters; certainly unknown to Mitton. The surviving species of sirenians attain lengths as great as twenty feet, so with its upper body extended out of the water, the head of the manatee may have towered over Mitton. It is no wonder that Mitton used his hatchet to keep the manatee or merman's "hands" off his canoe. Did it survive? Maybe, maybe not. Present day manatees often survive bad run ins with boat propellers. At any rate, "all of the bones are of exceptional density," so it is not surprising that it sank and was not seen again, as Mitton informs us.

Surprisingly, we possess an actual reference to a "manate[e]" as such by one of Michael Mitton's Maine companions. John Jocelyn mentions it in a discussion of New England wild life. Sometimes he mentions some species of flora or fauna not native to New England in an aside, such as his discussion of the elephant, but that does not seem to be the case here. As Jocelyn was stationed in Maine, it seems he may have heard at least two accounts of manatees in Maine waters. One by Michael Mitton, who was unfamiliar with the beast or its proper name. Another or others perhaps by fishermen or other mariners who may have known of the manatee by name from voyages to more southerly waters. Jocelyn even gives us an accurate account of the manatee's production of offspring, informing us that it "never brings forth more than two at a birth." A contemporary reference work tells us that "the normal birth is a single calf...very occasionally twin fetuses are found." All things considered, it appears that one summer between his arrival in Maine in 1637 and his account of 1639 Michael Mitton came across a stray Florida manatee, Trichechus manatus latirostris.
Michael Mitton's Merman


14. Beatrice Phillpotts, Mermaids (New York, New York: Ballantine...


AFTERWORD
by Alice Branson

IF A STURGEON, MISHE-NAHMA, WHY NOT A MANATEE, MERMAN?

The Complete Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, pub. 1902, Boston,
The Song Of Hiawatha, viii, Hiawatha’s Fishing, p. 159 (excerpted)

Forth upon the Gitchee Gurnee
On the shining Big-Sea-Water,
With his fishing-line of cedar,
Forth to catch the sturgeon Nahma,
Mishe-Nahma, King of Fishes,
In his birch canoe exulting
All alone went Hiawatha.
He could see the fishes swimming;
See the yellow perch, the Sahwa,
Like a sunbeam in the water,
See the Shawgashee, the craw fish,
Like a spider on the bottom,
On the white sand of the bottom
Lay the monster Misha-Nahma,
Lay the sturgeon, King of Fishes;
Through his gills he breathed the water,
There he lay in all his armour;
Down his sides and back and shoulders
Plates of bone with spines projecting!
Painted was he with his war paints,
Stripes of yellow, red and azure,
Spots of brown and spots of sable;
And he lay there on the bottom,
Fanning with his fins of purple.

Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 14, p. 772, Copyright 1947

“The manatee is said to be the origin of many legends of mermaids.”

“Manatees inhabit bays, lagoons, estuaries and large river, but not the open sea.”

“From the shoulder-joint the flippers can be moved in all directions, and the elbow and
wrist permit of free extention and flexion. In feeding, manatees push the food toward
their mouths by means of the hands.”

“The fore limbs are flattened oval paddles, with no external signs of division into fingers,
save the three (3) flat nails near their extremities.”

The Associated Press, Love Alone Can’t Preserve The Manatee, Florida Finds by
Nicole Winfield, reprint in The Salt Lake Tribune, Jan. 12, 1996

“...the manatees migrate from the Carolinas to Florida every winter...”

“Perhaps no other endangered animal enjoys such widespread support for preservation as
the manatee that has been in Florida’s waters for more than 45 million years...”

“...a 40,000-member group founded by singer Jimmy Buffett has made one (manatee)
named Chessie an international icon.”

“...the Save The Manatee Club has tracked the manatee named Chessie as far north as
Rhode Island.”
The Cleeve Family Association
The Pioneer Families Association
and
The Fifth Maine Regiment Community Center

proudly announce the dedication of

The Michael Mitton Memorial
Forest City Landing
Peaks Island, Maine

Saturday, August 9, 1997 at 1 o’clock in the afternoon

A reception and viewing of a new exhibition, The Pioneer Trail,
will follow at the Fifth Maine Regiment Memorial Hall.

Michael Mitton, son-in-law of George Cleeve, the founder of what we know as the City of Portland, played a pivotal role in the settlement of the Portland Harbor area. It is from Cleeve and Mitton that many of Peaks Island’s pioneer settlers (and many present-day residents) are descended.

Please join us in honoring this multi-talented man who contributed so much to our past.