

*Monsters of the Sea: the History, Natural History, and Mythology of the Ocean's Most Fantastic Creatures.* Richard Ellis; The Search for the Giant Squid. Richard Ellis.

Jon Lien

Volume 16, numéro 2, fall 2000

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds16\\_2rv02](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds16_2rv02)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Lien, J. (2000). Compte rendu de [*Monsters of the Sea: the History, Natural History, and Mythology of the Ocean's Most Fantastic Creatures.* Richard Ellis; The Search for the Giant Squid. Richard Ellis.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 16(2), 276–179.

*Monsters of the Sea: the History, Natural History, and Mythology of the Ocean's Most Fantastic Creatures.* Richard Ellis, Toronto, Doubleday, xiii, 429 p., illusts., apps., bibliog., index, \$29.95, cloth, 1995, ISBN 0-679-40639-5.

New York, Doubleday Main Street Books, xiii, 429 p., illusts., apps., bibliog., index, trade pbk., \$17.95, 1996, ISBN 0-385-48233-7.

*The Search for the Giant Squid.* Richard Ellis. New York, The Lyons Press, 336 p., illusts., refs., index, cloth, \$50.00, 1998, ISBN 1-55821-689-8.

New York, Penguin Books, ix, 322 p., illusts., refs., index, trade pbk., \$20.99, 1999, ISBN 0-14-02-8676-4.

## JON LIEN

THE ENTRAPMENT ASSISTANCE and Stranding Programme of the Whale Research Group at Memorial University has operated for nearly 25 years. In that time numerous callers have reported a fascinating variety of unusual, typically large creatures: leatherback turtles, basking sharks, ocean sunfish, sturgeon, giant squid, "threshers" and numerous whales in various stages of life or death top the list. Typically, reporters feel that the sighting incident does not quite stand-alone. It is embellished by details of proximity, size, threat, smell, proportions, belief or personal reactions. "Right on top of me," "the worst kind," "the biggest kind," smells or noises "you can't believe," "scared to death" are frequently used descriptions that clearly convey the awe and thrill of their encounter with a creature from the depths.

Biologists too have shared this sense of excitement. Once I attended a talk by Dr. Fred Aldrich, well-known biologist at Memorial University and throughout the province. The title was "The ocean's bottom is more interesting than the moon's behind."

Throughout his career Fred was interested in squid, in particular the giant squid, *Architeuthis*. He conveyed this enthusiasm to generations of students and others. I still vividly remember when he met me at the newly-constructed Marine Sciences Laboratory on my very first visit to Memorial. He was trying to lure a new squid researcher into the pursuit. His brilliant hustle climaxed with the display of a giant red squid jigger modeled on the regular-size one, and an animated narrative on giant neurons, the evolution of colour vision in cephalopods, and the slim, but possible, capture of a live *Architeuthis* by his amazing device. I'm not sure how successful the jigger would have been in landing the squid; it worked quite well in recruiting assistant professors.

In *Monsters of the Sea* Richard Ellis traces the retreat of the monsters as knowledge of oceans and their inhabitants expands. Old charts portray the known world of oceans and land masses. Lurking at the edges of displayed knowledge are drawings of mysterious sea monsters constructed from glimpses and brief encounters with the unfamiliar, enriched by belief, mystery, and amazement: the possible and the unknown, symbols of the edge of human experience.

For me, the history of whale mythology and knowledge is most interesting. Early descriptions and drawings of monster cetaceans are full of imaginary organs incorporating fanciful traits. These depictions were largely based on stranded baleen whales that came to rest on shore. In this condition the huge bodies, which during life were kept intact by water pressure over their entire body surface, were pressed into grossly distorted forms by their weight on land. Puzzled by this, novel interpretations of both form and function were made.

As actual encounters at sea with living members of this group of animals increased, behaviours such as breaching, flipping and vocalizations were observed and added new, fascinating dimensions to fact and myth. Tales by whalers describing aggression and altruism added new dimensions to the images. But generally, mythology retreated as knowledge grew.

Our fascination with cetaceans matured when we learned of increasing threats to oceans. Suffering cumulative impacts from greed, ignorance and new technology, the ocean was in trouble. New scientific information now began to give fragmented insights into the biology of long-suffering whales. They were intelligent, sensitive, loyal, caring beings. New mythologies grew. Whales were implanted with super-human abilities to communicate, thinking thoughts unimaginable to mere mortals, living royal but threatened lives in the deep. Partial knowledge continued to enrich the myth-making; our amazement at these creatures grew. Monsters with new attributes. "Save the whales" campaigns came to the forefront of efforts to protect oceans. "If you can't save whales, you won't save oceans." New myths about whales allowed them to serve new roles as we re-examined our relationship to animals and the natural world.



Whales had completed a complicated trip through human consciousness. Initially conceived in myth and mystery, through insights of biology and ecology,

Memorial University of Newfoundland

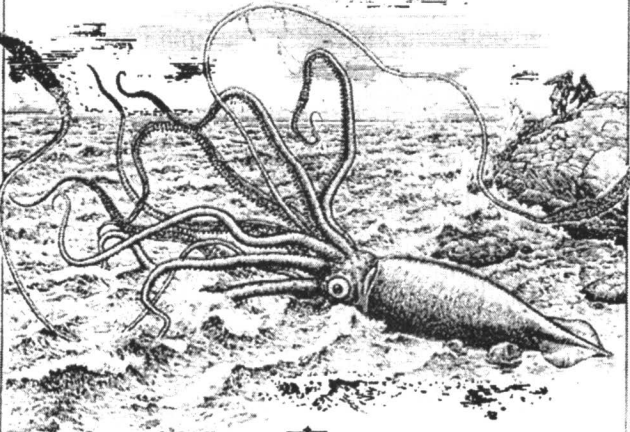
# WANTED!

DEAD OR ALIVE

As in the past we are looking for giant squid, which become stranded along the coast line of this province, usually during the months of October through January. Public co-operation has been excellent in the past and we hope to procure more specimens this year. Should you find one of these animals, please call collect at the Ocean Studies Task Force, 737-4725.

 REWARDS ARE OFFERED 

for finding and holding any of these animals for us, the value being dependent on their condition. Great care should therefore be taken to protect any specimens of giant squid from damage of any kind.



Dr. Frederick A. Aldrich  
Chairman, Ocean Studies Task Force,  
and Professor of Biology

August 24th, 1988 © BUSH LAMPE

back into myth, symbolism and mystery. In the movie *Star Trek IV* the crew of the *Enterprise* beamed humpbacks aboard for transport to outer space. The plan was for the extraordinarily endowed whales to communicate with alien life forms who were planning to blow-up Planet Earth! Now the whales were saving humans, monsters still acting just beyond limits of human knowledge, vivid in imagination.

The book concludes with a chapter on the new mythology of monsters. Discoveries of real giant squid and megamouths have created an “anything is

possible” attitude in many. Ellis believes that many of the observations of modern monsters will ultimately be identified as giant squid. I think he is wrong. The new monsters will still be unseen and incompletely known, but they will be smaller — virus and bacteria, I think.

The book is a wonderful read and will whet your appetite for this next effort on giant squid. Fred Aldrich figures prominently in this tale, setting aside myth but keeping the mystery.

Giant squid and large whales are unlike beasts such as unicorns, cadborosaurus and sea serpents in that, on rare occasions, we actually find a body. However, finding a living *Architeuthis* has been an unfulfilled dream of many. Once, responding to a call from local fishermen reporting a stranded creature, we found an *Architeuthis* with some signs of life. Its chromatophores were still active, changing the skin colours actively and dramatically. By the time we got it to the university and Aldrich examined it, the chromatophores were still active but proved to be too far gone for specific tests he wanted to conduct. In the 1980’s Aldrich arranged for time on a deep sea submersible to permit exploration of the ocean’s bottom — looking for *Architeuthis*. He just wanted to see one of the things alive.

Overall, Ellis is hard on Aldrich’s efforts to study this squid and on his speculations regarding its biology. But he thoroughly covers our knowledge of this exciting creature from strandings and sightings, to encounters with boats and the basics of its biology. The giant squid book is enjoyable and informative but I found it a bit less interesting than his monster book. Perhaps Ellis in the last paragraph of the book identifies the reason for my preference as he considers future studies of *Architeuthis*.

What will happen if someone finds it and takes its picture? It will lose some of its mystery, and, in a sense, we will be poorer for having been deprived of the anticipation of finding it. Often the realization of a long-held goal proves less fulfilling than the hungry waiting. We need to find the giant squid, but we also need not to find it.

In either case, the serious loss would be if we were deprived of our fascination with it. I think Fred would agree with that.