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THE MERMAID IN CANADIAN LORE AND HERALDRY

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Abstract

The article goes back to the Age of Discovery when the ancient legend of the mermaid thrived in far-off seas, including the Atlantic, where she vied with many terrifying monsters believed to exist there. It follows the myth into the coastal waters of Canada where many sightings were recorded. The few mermaids in the known arms borne by Canadian historical figures are examined, as are all sirenic creatures granted by the Chief Herald of Canada from 1988. The accessories and style of mermaids in Canadian grants are compared with the traditional heraldic model and the background of their symbolism is analysed.

Introduction

Like the unicorn and dragon, the mermaid or siren is a universal symbol that is present in the folklore of all maritime countries. As explorers sought a western route to China, the antique legend migrated into the Atlantic region, which was viewed, in early accounts, as a haven for monstrous beasts. From there, it crossed over to the New World and to Canada, which is bordered by three oceans where live abundant seals, the main animals credited for the mermaid legend. It is therefore not surprising that a number of the reported sightings of these creatures are on Canadian coastlines. But before the arrival of Europeans in the New World, a sirenic being existed in the legends of the North American First Nations. Mermaids have penetrated heraldry from its early beginnings and have found their way into the armorial bearings of a few historical figures connected with Canada. Since the establishment of the Canadian Heraldic Authority in 1988, creatures joining the torso of a woman to the tail of a fish have been given new life in the arms granted to individuals and corporate bodies.

Monsters in New Seas

During the Age of Discovery, the seas were viewed as teeming with monsters that menaced both ships and sailors. This is patently exemplified by the 1539 *Carta Marina* of the Swedish cartographer Olaus Magnus, illustrated with terrifying creatures from the north Atlantic. These menacing beasts were gathered into a woodcut entitled *Monstra Marina & Terrestria* published from 1544 in the many editions of Sebastian Munster's *Cosmographia Universalis (***Figure 1)**. On both the map and the woodcut, the most terrifying beasts are in the sea rather than on land. A map dated 1548, attributed to the Italian cartographer Giacomo Gastaldi, and published in volume 3 of Giovanni Battista Ramusio's *Delle navigationi et viaggi* in 1556, shows an island named *Isola de demoni* (island of demons) placed between *Terra de Laborador* (Labrador) to the north and *Terra Nuova* (Newfoundland) to the south. At its northern tip are three devils with bat wings, one of them in flight.[1] From the early explorations to the seventeenth

1 The 1548 date is given in Musée du Québec, *La renaissance et le Nouveau Monde* (Gouvernement du Québec, 1984), p. 62.

Figure 1: Marine and terrestrial monsters from Sebastian Munster's *Cosmographia Universalis*, German edition 1550, courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales.

century, the notion that there were unicorns in Canada was accepted, but with only a single very dubious attestation of such a creature being killed by Amerindians by Louis Nicolas, a Jesuit missionary who was there from1664 to 1674.[2] The recorded sightings of mermaids, on the other hand, are quite numerous and realistically described.

Mermaids seem too meek to figure among the horrid creatures on Magnus's map, but they do not always pass as innocent beings. In some cases, they are depicted with endearing qualities and moral values, such as in Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* who acquires a soul by sparing her prince's life. It is a theme that has found its way into many art forms such as opera, theatre and film. In other cases, their sinister side goes well beyond the simple vanity of eternally admiring themselves in a mirror and combing their hair, the standard depiction of the traditional heraldic mermaid. They are often viewed as temptresses that lure mariners to their death with their beauty, songs and music. They sometimes embody the role of *femmes fatales,* and even that of whores of the sea.[3] In Shakespeare's *King Henry the Sixth*, Richard of Gloucester utters, among a litany of threats: "I'll drown more sailors than the mermaid shall."[4] In the poem *Le*

2 Auguste Vachon, "The Unicorn in Canada", *CoA*, NS vol 11, no. 175 (Autumn 1996), pp. 283-294.

3 This darker side is described in many works, for instance: Rodney Dennys, *The Heraldic Imagination,* (London, 1975), p. 123; J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York, 1995), p. 298; Richard Barber and Anne Riches, *A Dictionary of Fabulous Beasts* (Woodbridge, 1996), pp. 102, 135-36.

4 *Henry VI, Part 3*, Act 3, Scene 2.

Figure 2: Saint Brendan and his companions encounter a mermaid somewhere in the Atlantic, woodcut from *Von Sant Brandon ein* Hübsch *Lieblichs Lesen* 1503.

vaisseau d'or, by Émile Nelligan, a famous Montréal poet, "the golden ship" is wrecked "In that treacherous ocean where the Siren sings."

The human imagination is the sea where hybrid gods and monsters take shape. We look back to ancient Egypt with its pantheon of hybrid human-animal gods such as the human-falcon Horus and the human-lion sphinx. From Greek mythology we received such creatures as the centaur, the minotaur and the human-goat god Pan. Some of these hybrid creations combine the parts of several animals such as the Egyptian goddess Ammit composed of a lion, crocodile and hippopotamus, and the dragon, which is basically a winged fire-breathing reptile. Heraldry can accommodate any form of these fabulous creatures, Canadian examples being the marine stag and marine doe that support the shield of the Village of Merrickville-Wolford in Ontario, and the raven-bear supporters in the armorial bearings of the Canadian Heraldic Authority.

From the Atlantic to Canada

Early explorers in search of new lands west of Europe brought the mermaid myth to the Atlantic, then to Canada. The Irish monk St. Brendan and his sixteen companions encountered several monsters during their Atlantic journey in the sixth century. There is speculation that they sailed as far as Iceland, Greenland and Newfoundland. A woodcut inside one account of his fabulous voyage shows the saint seemingly blessing a mermaid (**Figure 2**).[5]

5 *Von Sant Brandon ein* Hübsch *Lieblichs Lesen, Was Er Wunders Auff dem Mör Erfaren Hat* (Zainer, 1503) Bavarian State Library Res/4 V.ss. 130 m

A Norwegian didactic text in Old Norse from around 1250 by Konungs Skuggsjá takes the form of a son asking his father questions about various world phenomena. The answer to one question shows a certain caution on the part of the father regarding the existence of fabulous beasts: "It is reported that the waters about Greenland are infested with monsters, though I do not believe that they have been seen very frequently. Still, people have stories to tell about them, so men must have seen or caught sight of them." He describes the merman first in a way not unlike other accounts except that he has no hands, whereas the mermaid has large webbed hands. Depending on their gestures, both of them can herald either a safe journey, or disaster and death.[6]

Most historical works on Canada contain a chapter on the discovery of the New World in which Christopher Columbus is inevitably mentioned. To remember the important discovery date, school children recite the little rhyme *In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue*. Columbus' status as discoverer of the New World is now widely disputed, and one strong argument to the contrary is the existence of a Norse settlement in around the year 1000 at L'Anse aux Meadows on the northernmost tip of the island of Newfoundland. Christopher Columbus' first voyage in the Caribbean is undisputed as being the first recorded sighting of mermaids in the New World, as the accounts show:

> "Yesterday [8 January 1493], when the Admiral [Columbus] went to the Rio del Oro [river of gold], he said that he saw three mermaids rising well above the sea, but [they] were not so beautiful as they are portrayed, for their faces, in a way, resembled those of men. He said that he had seen others previously in Guinea on the Manegueta Coast [Pepper Coast]."[7]

The scene is engraved in Theodor de Bry's *Americas* where three mermaids are seen on the right of Columbus' ship and two mermen and Neptune on the left (**Figure 3**).[8] In the same work, a similar image depicts Ferdinand Magellan's ship entering the strait in southern Chile (Strait of Magellan), on All Saints' Day, 1 November 1520. It shows mermaids, mythological figures and a roc in flight carrying an elephant in its talons.[9] A comparable engraving illustrates the voyage of Amerigo Vespucci off the coast of South America.[10] In the Columbus image, the armorial bearings on the banner flying from the mast are logically a cursory rendering of the quartered arms of their Catholic Majesties Isabella I, Queen of Castile and Leon, and King Ferdinand II of Aragon, who sponsored the explorer's voyage. The shield should contain in the 1st and 4th quarters, Castile quartered with Leon; in the 2nd and 3rd quarters, Aragon impaling Sicily; and lodged in the tip of the shield, the pomegranate of Grenada.[11] The banner with Christ on the cross reflects the strong faith of the Catholic monarchs.

6 Konungs Skuggsjá, *The king's mirror (Speculum regale-Konungs skuggsjá)* translated from the old Norwegian by Laurence Marcellus Larson (New York, 1917), pp. 135-37.

7 Translated from Eduardo Charton, *Los viajeros modernos ...,* (Paris, 1860), p. 139.

8 Theodor de Bry, *Americae, Pars Quarta*, 1594, p. VI.

9 *Ibid*., p. XV.

10 *Ibid*., 8 pages after p. XXIV.

11 A depiction of this shield topped by a crown and placed on the breast of a black eagle *displayed* is illustrated in Whitney Smith, *Flags Through the Ages and Across the World* (Maidenhead, 1975), p. 124.

Figure 3: Christopher Columbus sights three mermaids in Caribbean waters, courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island.

Henry Hudson is well known in Canadian history for his quest of the Northwest Passage. He gave his name to Hudson's Bay where he and his son disappeared after being set adrift in a small boat by mutineers. In 1608, he set out from England in search of a northeast passage through the Russian Arctic. On June 15, at North Cape on the northern tip of Norway, where the Atlantic Ocean meets the Arctic Ocean, he reported that two of his sailors had seen mermaids:

> "This morning, one of our company looking over board saw a mermaid, and calling up some of the company to see her, one more came up, and by that time she was come close to the ship's side, looking earnestly on the men: a little after, the sea came and overturned her: from the navel upward, her back and breasts were like a woman's, as they say that saw her; her body as big as one of us ; her skin very white ; and long hair hanging down behind, of colour black: in her going down they saw her tail, which was like the tail of a porpoise, and speckled like a mackerel."[12]

On a map by the Norman cartographer Pierre Devaux (1613), the Canadian Maritime region and St. Lawrence River are well defined with inscriptions in French which I have rendered in English. The Gulf of St. Lawrence is called *Bay of Canada* and the region

12 G. M. Asher, *Henry Hudson the Navigator*... (London, 1809), p. 28.

south of the St. Lawrence River is designated as *Coast of Acadia*. The map emphasizes French expansion in the New World by marking possessions in North America with the royal arms of France supported by two angels, inscribed *New France* close to a large inscription *Coast of Florida*. In Brazil the arms are ensigned by the royal crown and placed within the collar of the Order of St. Michael beside the inscription *Antarctic France*, which marks the attempts at French settlements in the area.[13] Two mermaids facing one another on either side of a sun, in the centre of the Atlantic Ocean, tell another story. One is on the side of the Old World and the other on the side of the New. They are placed at the level of Cape Verde Island off the coast of Africa, intended to be the very location, 370 leagues west of the Cape, where the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494 divided newly discovered lands between Portugal to the east and Spain to the west. The sun between the mermaids is in fact a compass rose which marks the centre of the map, between east and west, between the rising and the setting sun (**Figure 4**).

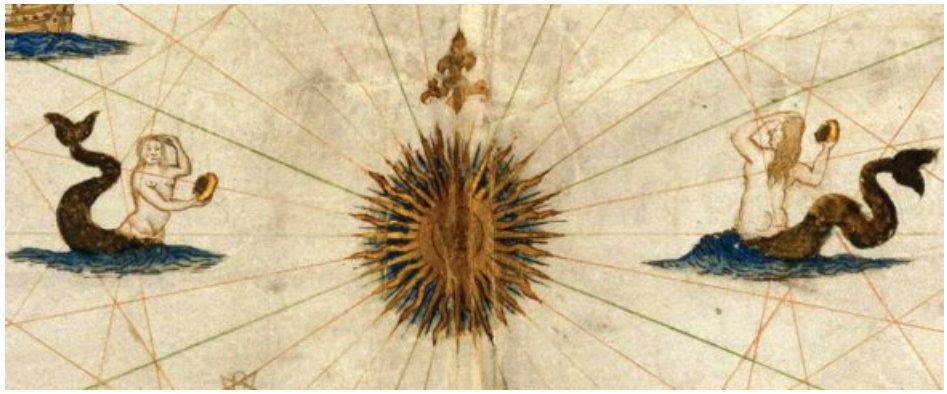

Figure 4: Two mermaids depicted as in heraldry on a map of the Atlantic and adjoining continents by Pierre Devaux, 1613, courtesy of the National Library of France.

The two mermaids are of special interest because they correspond to the heraldic model, something which is not always the case on other maps and depictions. Not only are they shown with a nude torso, but they are combing their long hair while viewing themselves in a mirror. They could have been inspired by an armorial model found in a published heraldic work of the time (**Figure 5**).[14] According to one author, the mermaid was present in the early manifestations of heraldic art: "A mermaid is found on the Seal of Sir William Bruvire, or Bruere, temp. Richard I., [the Lionheart 1189-1199] and probably had its origin in the tales told by travellers who joined in the crusades."[15]

13 Map of the Atlantic and adjoining continents with the inscription *Ceste carte a Esté faiste Au havre de Grace Par Pierre Devaux, Pilote Géographe Pour le Roy, l'an 1613*, online at gallica.bnf.fr. The fleur-de-lis decorating all the compass roses is a common practice, not at all specific to France.

14 An illustration of a mermaid with mirror and comb is found in Jérôme (Hiérosme) de Bara, *Le blason des armoiries ...* (Lyon, 1579), p. 112. This work was extremely popular. It was republished by different publishers in Lyon and Paris in 1581, 1604 and 1628.

15 James Parker, *A Glossary of Terms Used in Heraldry* (London, 1894), p. 406.

Figure 5: Early depiction of a mermaid in a printed heraldic treatise showing the arms attributed to Mandin l'Envoisié (Mandius Liennoysies), a knight in one of the versions of the Knights of the Round Table. From Jérôme de Bara, *Le blason des armoiries*, 1581, p. 183.

Canadian Sightings

A sighting by Captain Richard Whitbourne, the explorer William Hawkeridge and other crew members, occurred in Saint John's Harbour, Newfoundland, and was reported by Whitbourne:

> "Now also I will not omit to relate something of a strange creature that I first saw there in the year 1610, in a morning early as I was standing by the water side, in the Harbour of Saint Johns, which I espied very swiftly to come swimming towards me, looking cheerfully, as it had been a woman, by the face, eyes, nose, mouth, chin, ears, neck and forehead. It seemed to be so beautiful, and in those parts so well proportioned, having round about upon the head, all blue streaks resembling hair, down to the neck (but certainly it was no hair) for I beheld it long … it presently thereupon dived a little under water, and did swim towards the place where before I landed; whereby I beheld the shoulders and back down to the middle, to be as square, white and smooth as the back of a man, and from the middle to the hinder part, pointing in proportion like a broad hooked arrow; how it was proportioned in the forepart from the neck and shoulders, I know not; but the same came shortly after unto a boat, wherein one William Hawkeridge, then my servant, was … and the same creature did

> put both his hands upon the side of the boat, and did strive to come in to him and others then in the said boat: whereat they were afraid; and one of them struck it a full blow on the head; whereby it fell off from them; and afterwards it came to two other boats in the said harbour; the men in them, for fear, fled to land. This (I suppose) was a mermaid. Now because divers have written much of mermaids, I have presumed to relate what is most certain of such a strange creature … whether it were a mermaid or no, I know not; I leave it for others to judge…"[16]

This case is interesting because the close proximity should exclude optical illusion, but the loneliness may have played a role since the observer finds the creature well-proportioned, even beautiful. What these mariners, accustomed to sea life, really saw is cause for wonder. Whitbourne's account is repeated in a 1628 German edition of Theodore de Bry's *America*. An illustration shows three mermaids, one apparently conversing with European men on shore, another approaching the shore where people gesture at her to keep away, and another in the background on the side of a ship on which someone threatens her with a club (**Figure 6**). A related theme is found on a vignette of the title page where a mermaid is seen between two ships her arm stretched forward as if begging to come aboard.[17]

A novel by Alexandre Dumas titled *The Nuptials of Father Polypus*, which appeared in the *Gazette of the Union* in 1849, created quite a stir in the realm of mermaid sightings.[18] The periodical had a predilection for Dumas' novels and was running, in the same year, another one titled *The Thousand and One Phantoms*.[19] The first chapter of Father Polypus' nuptials titled "Mermaids and Syrens" describes what seems to be a real-life event which would give rise to varying interpretations as to where and when it took place: "Captain John Smith, an Englishman, saw in 1611, off an island in the West Indies, a syren, with the upper part of the body perfectly resembling a woman." After describing the enticing beauty of the creature, Dumas goes on: "Unfortunately the beautiful swimmer made a slip, and Captain Smith, who had already begun to experience the first effects of love, discovered that from below the stomach the woman gave way to the fish. It is true that this fish had a double tail; but two tails are not exactly calculated to make amends for two legs". The French version *Les mariages du père Olifus* (not Polypus) also published originally in 1849, contains the same description with the significant difference that the date is now 1614 rather than 1611.[20] Dumas' story took on a serious aura of reality when reiterated succinctly by Armand Landrin, a geologist, curator at the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris, and reputed a scholar:

16 Captain Richard Whitbourne, *A Discourse and Discovery of New-found-land …* (London, 1620), an unpaginated appendix titled "A Conclusion to the Reader,", 3rd and 4th pages after p. 69, the spelling has been modernized.

17 Theodor de Bry, *Dreyzehender Theil Americae, das ist, Fortsetzung der Historien von der Newen Welt* (Frankfurt, 1628), p. 5.

18 *Gazette of the Union* subtitled *Odd Fellows' Family Companion* (September 29, 1849), p. 200.

19 *Idem*, July 14, 1849, p. 21. The French title was *Les mille et un fantômes* also published in 1849.

20 Alexandre Dumas, *Les mariages du père Olifus* (Paris, 1885), pp. 33-34. The relevant chapter (p. 30) is entitled *Femmes marines et sirènes*.

Figure 6: Sighting of a mermaid in Saint John's Harbour, Newfoundland, from a 1655 German edition of Theodore de Bry's *America*, Johann Ludwig Gottfriedt, *Newe Welt vnd Americanische Historien* (Frankfurt, 1655), p. 193.

The English Captain John Smith sailed to America in 1614 and was quite near the new continent when he saw a woman swimming gracefully, with beautiful wide and expressive eyes, although somewhat too round, with nose and ears rather well-formed, and with long green hair. The captain felt nascent feelings of love when she unfortunately rolled over, revealing to her frustrated admirer a double fish tail.[21]

In 1614, John Smith landed in Newfoundland from where he went south to explore New England and never reached the West Indies. The Landrin account, which situates the sighting before Smith's landing, clearly points to Newfoundland as the theatre of the scene. Fletcher S. Bassett, a folklore scholar, retells the mermaid story retaining the 1614 date, but designating the West Indies as the site and quoting Landrin as the source, although his embellished account is much closer to Dumas' than Landrin's simple account.[22] In a 1967 work, Edward Rowe Snow relocates the sighting to Newfoundland.[23]

21 Translated from Armand Landrin, *Les monstres marins*, 2[d] ed. (Paris,1870), p. 271.

22 Fletcher S. Bassett, *Legends and Superstitions of the Sea and of Sailors* (Chicago and New York, 1885), pp. 195-96, first edition 1867.

23 Edward Rowe Snow, *Incredible Mysteries* and *Legends* of the Sea *(New York*, [1967]). p. 102.

Figure 7: Sirenic creature drawn by the Jesuit missionary Louis Nicolas, in Canada1664-1674, from *Les raretés des Indes* 1930.

A powerful indication of the fictitious nature of the sighting comes from the fact that it cannot be found in the published writings of Captain John Smith, but Dumas himself may have given a hint in this direction. The two tails of the creature suggest a seal which sometimes claps with its double flippers, which may have been Dumas' way of indicating to readers that the encounter was in fact with a well-known maritime creature. The theme of the novel which involves the marriage of Olifus to a mermaid, and the many baroque complications that follow, clearly indicate a piece of fiction which introduces a real historical figure to give it a semblance of authenticity. The reason why Dumas chose a well-known figure who played an important role in American history for his mermaid story seems clear when we consider that a good part of his readership was in the United States.

Another creature combining a human torso with a fish tail on Canadian territory was drawn by Louis Nicolas, a Jesuit missionary who journeyed in Canada from 1664 to 1674. Nicolas' drawings were meant to illustrate his manuscript entitled *Histoire naturelle des Indes occidentales*, which the author attempted without success to publish during his lifetime, but which ultimately came to be published in 2011,centuries after his

death.[24] The strange creature combines a fish tail with a human torso. The face appears rather feminine with long hair, but with appendages under the chin which seem to be fins, but could possibly be a beard. The torso and arms are scaly, the "hands" appear as smaller fishtails. The torso is separated from the large fishtail by a broad band or ridge. The French inscription translates: "Marine monster killed by the French on the Richelieu River in New France (**Figure 7**)." The *Histoire naturelle* does not provide any information on this creature, which is unusual since Nicolas took pains to describe in detail any curiosity he encountered in the New World. This leads one to believe that the missionary did not see the creature himself but drew it from someone's oral description. The nature of the monster purportedly killed in the Richelieu River remains a mystery. An interesting sighting was made in 1886 by the fishermen of Gabarus, a community on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia:

> "The fishermen of Gabarus, Cape Breton, have been excited over the appearances of a mermaid, seen in the waters by some fishermen a few days ago. While Mr. Bagnall, accompanied by several fishermen, was out in a boat, they observed floating on the surface of the water a few yards from the boat what they supposed to be a corpse. Approaching it for the purpose of taking it ashore, they observed it to move, when to their great surprise, it turned around in a sitting position and looked at them and disappeared. … The face, head, shoulders and arms resembled those of a human being, but the lower extremities had the appearance of a fish. The back of its head was covered with long, dark hair resembling a horse's mane. The arms were shaped like a human being's, except that the fingers of one hand were very long. The color of the skin was not unlike that of a human being. There is no doubt, that the mysterious stranger is what is known as a mermaid, and the first one ever seen in Cape Breton waters."[25]

Other Canadian sightings were reported, one near Victoria on Vancouver Island between 1870 and 1890 and another observed by ferry passengers in 1967 on a rock in Active Pass near Victoria.

From Illusion to Myth

The persistence of the belief in the mermaid as a real being from ancient to modern times can be explained by the resemblance of certain sea animals to humans when seen at a distance by mariners:

24 Louis Nicolas' sketches are held by the Gilcrease Museum of Tulsa, Oklahoma, while the *Histoire naturelle* manuscript is kept in the National Library of France. Before their acquisition by the museum, the drawings were published in 1930 as a photographic facsimile entitled *Les raretés des Indes "Codex Canadiensis"* by Librairie Maurice Chamonal, Paris. The original sketches were afterwards acquired by to the Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma, and have been placed online by the National Archives of Canada. Both the sketches and manuscript were published together with a lengthy introduction and abundant annotations by François-Marc Gagnon, Nancy Senior, Réal Ouellet, eds., *The Codex Canadensis and the Writings of Louis Nicolas* (Montreal & Kingston, 2011). The monster which takes the form of a mermaid is on p. 207.

25 *Cape Brooklyn Eagle* newspaper 22 August 1886.

> "... in the northern countries, are various seals, which formerly abounded upon the coasts of Western Europe, and still are to be seen in the less frequented spots. They have a way of lifting their round heads and shoulders from the water, with a queer human intelligent look upon their faces, and hugging their young to their bosoms with motherly affection."[26]

The other sirenian sometimes quoted in the same way is the dugong whose habitat is the shallow coastal waters from the Red Sea and East Africa to the Philippines, New Guinea, and Northern Australia. Near at hand these uncouth monsters would never be mistaken for human beings; but seen at a distance, by fearful and wondering voyagers along the coast, such an error might easily happen, for they frequently stand upright among the weedy shallows of the coasts, perhaps draped with loosened vegetation like long hair, and holding to their breasts a young one who nurses from pectoral mammae much as a human baby would do.[27]

Several species of the manatee, also mentioned as a source of the mermaid legend, are found on the Florida coast, on the northern and eastern coast of South America, and on the western coast of Africa. Another species of sea cow (now extinct) was discovered by the German naturalist Georg Wilhelm Steller (Stöhler) in the coastal waters of the Komandorski Islands in the Bering Ocean off the Siberian peninsula of Kamchatka, when shipwrecked on Bering Island in 1741. Observing that the animals had an affectionate disposition and mated like humans, Steller remarked that it was these creatures that had long been taken for mermaids.[28] The fact that mermaids are viewed by sailors far away from home for long periods of time might explain their popularity in comparison with mermen.

Representations of mermaids probably came to Canada as figureheads perched on the bow of ships where they braved the raging seas. We know for instance that one of John Davis' ships on his 1586 expedition to the Canadian Arctic was called the *Mermayde*. In the Thousand Islands (St. Lawrence River), Mermaid Island is named after a gunboat and not because a mermaid was seen there. Many other ships called 'Mermaid' or '*Sirène'* are connected with the history of Canada,[29] but this mythical creature has been present in other spheres of life such as the series of essays on literary and other topics entitled "At the Mermaid Inn" published in the *Globe* (Toronto, 1892-93) by three Canadian poets, William Wilfred Campbell, Duncan Campbell Scott and Archibald Lapman. *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* is a 1987 Canadian comedy-drama film written and directed by Patricia Rozema and starring Sheila McCarthy, Paule Baillargeon, and Ann-Marie MacDonald. It was the first English-language Canadian feature film to win an award at the Cannes Film Festival. A number of inns, resorts and hotels include "mermaid" in their name.

26 Ernest Ingersoll, "Mermaid" in *The Encyclopedia Americana: Canadian Edition,* vol. 18 (Montréal, 1957), p. 677.

27 *Ibid*.

28 *Ibid*., vol. 24, p. 473; Daniel Farson and Angus Hall, *Mysterious Monsters* (London, 1991), pp. 155-56.

29 This becomes apparent from a full text search in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online* under mermaid and *sirène.*

Figure 8: Ulysses' mermaids: oil painting by Edward R. Jost of Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Homer's account of sirens (or mermaids) attempting to lure Odysseus (Ulysses) and his crew into the sea with their music and songs is well known. A Canadian painting in the early 1860s by Edward R. Jost, a Halifax cabinet-maker, depicts Ulysses' sirens as normal naked women playing a harp or lyre on a craggy shore (**Figure 8**).[30] The absence of the fish tail cannot be viewed as an erroneous interpretation, since Homer did not describe the physical composition of his sirens. On Greek vases, Ulysses' sirens are half woman and half bird.

The mermaid is also connected with Canada in the myths and legends of the North American First Nations. This constitutes a fascinating area of investigation and is another witness to the universality of the mermaid phenomenon, something that is also reflected in the similarity of descriptions by Amerindians and Europeans, namely: a female upper body and some form of fishtail. In Inuit art, which is flourishing today, the sea goddess Sedna frequently takes the shape of the traditional mermaid.

One can still find contemporary purported mermaid sightings on various websites such as YouTube, but none of these can be taken seriously. Even with modern technology, the images shown remain unconvincing. By evolving from a reality to an abstract entity, the mermaid legend has lost none of its strength. No sane person still believes that Hercules truly existed, but he remains an archetype and his imagery remains powerful in modern media such as movies and television series. Likewise, the mermaid survives as a legendary or abstract creature in many literary creations and art forms, an important one being heraldry.

30 J. Russell Harper, *A People's Art* (Toronto, 1974), p. 157.

Arms of Canadian Historical Figures

The arms connected with Canada at the time of New France are documented in a work entitled *Armorial du Canada français*. It includes nobles who took root in the country, those who played an important part in the colony's development, as well as historical figures in the Province of Québec up to 1918.[31] Many corrections were brought to this work by subsequent authors.[32] From the beginning of the twentieth century, a company designed arms unofficially for Francophone Canadians including the clergy, many municipalities, and some institutions; another company followed suit in the 1950s.[33] These company designs are not recorded in any comprehensive way. Consultation of the available information has only yielded one mermaid shield dating to the time when Canada was still a French colony.

Figure 9: Arms of Isaac-Louis Forant registered in Charles D'Hozier, Armorial général de France vol. xxxi, Généralité de La Rochelle (1697-1709), p.56, courtesy of the National Library of France.

Isaac-Louis Forant entered the naval service as a midshipman at Rochefort (France) and as commander of a king's vessel, he sailed frequently to Louisbourg and Quebec in the 1720s and 1730s. He was named governor of Île Royale (Cape Breton Island) in 1739 and died there unmarried at Louisbourg, in 1740. The Forant arms were registered

31 E.-Z. Massicotte and Régis Roy, *Armorial du Canada français* 2 vols (Montreal, 1915-18).

32 The main author to supplement Massicotte and Roy's armorial was Ægidius Fauteux, *Armorial du Canada français*, typed manuscript in the Gagnon Room of the Montreal Central Library, n. d. Other arms of Francophone Canadians can be gleaned from the journals: *Heraldry in Canada/L'Héraldique au Canada*, *Bulletin des recherches historiques* and *Mémoires de la Société généalogique canadienne -françcaise*.

33 Institut généalogique Drouin was created in 1899, and the Collège canadien des armoiries worked in Montreal during the 1950s. A number of Drouin's designs were published in Fortuné Koller and Arnold Schillings, *Armorial universel*, vol. 1. (Brussels, 1951).

in response to the 1696 edict which forced all nobles and anyone in France with a degree of wealth or social standing to have their arms recorded, or to receive new ones if not armigerous. The registration note with the shield reads: *Forant, écuyer, chef d'escadre des armées de Sa Majesté*. The fact that the armiger is a noble (*écuyer*) and *a rear-admiral (chef d'escadre*) in the French navy tells us that the arms are registered in the name of the father of Isaac-Louis, Job Florant, who died in 1692.[34] The son would no doubt have inherited the undifferenced arms of the father since heraldic *brisures* were rarely used in France. The blazon is *Azure a mermaid on a sea argent, on a chief sable three mullets or* (**Figure 9**). A chief that is of the same tincture as the field is unusual and normally termed *cousu*, meaning sewn on, in French blazonry.[35]

Figure 10: Armorial bearings of the Earl of Stirling c. 1633: copy from the records of the Court of the Lord Lyon in Library and Archives Canada.

34 Charles D'Hozier, Armorial général de France, dressé, en vertu de l'édit de 1696, vol. xxxi La Rochelle, p. 56. The father is sometimes confused with the grandfather even in Isaac-Louis Forant's biography in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. The family genealogy on Geneanet is reliable.

35 The blazon in French from Hozier, op. cit, is *d'azur à une sirène d'argent sur une mer de même, au chef cousu de sable, chargé de trois étoiles d'or*.

The arms granted by the Heralds of England, the Lord Lyon of Scotland and the Chief Herald of Ireland to persons who played a major role in Canadian history are fairly well known and described in various publications. Many armigers from Great Britain who were instrumental in shaping the country's destiny, without being outstanding figures, are not included in any Canadian armorial compilation, whether they took root here or returned to their homeland. Efforts were made to compile the emblems of municipalities and educational institutions, but nothing comes close to being comprehensive. Many of the devices are assumed, and a large percentage of them are closer to logos than armorial compositions. From the varied sources consulted, including those relating to the badges of the Canadian Forces, two armorial bearings displaying a mermaid were found prior the establishment of the Canadian Heraldic Authority in 1988.[36]

Although he never came to Canada, Sir William Alexander, Earl of Stirling (Striveling) is called the founder of Nova Scotia because of his role in the creation of that province. In 1621, James VI of Scotland and I of England granted him a large tract of land in the area of the Maritimes which he named New Scotland. After two years of effort at settlement he was £6000 in debt. To raise money, he divided New Scotland into provinces, dioceses, counties and baronies. In return for a title and the privilege of wearing the arms of Nova Scotia in the canton or in the centre point of a shield, each baronet was obligated to pay 3,000 marks to Sir William, 2,000 of which would serve to furnish settlers. The Order of the Baronets of Nova Scotia, was given official status by a charter of Charles I in 1625. At the time of the union of Scotland and England in 1707, when baronets of Nova Scotia ceased to be created, the number of baronetcies had reached 329. Memorials to Sir William's achievements include a panel at Menstrie Castle in Scotland displaying the shield of arms of 109 baronets, a plaque in Victoria Park, Halifax, Nova Scotia and a plaque outside Edinburgh Castle, Scotland. Alexander was created Viscount of Stirling in 1630 and Earl of Stirling, Viscount of Canada in 1633.

The depictions of the armorial bearings of the Earl of Stirling present many variances, probably because there was no clear blazoning of them at the time they were authorized. Eighteenth century works describe *a mermaid with her comb and mirror all proper*, the traditional accessories in heraldic representations. Engravings of the earl's achievement, within the same works, show her holding a mirror in the *dexter* hand and holding the shield, and nothing else, in the *sinister* hand. The mirror is readily recognizable by the face appearing inside its frame.[37] In **figure 10**, what the mermaid is holding could just as well be a pick comb as a mirror.[38] A 1904 blazon by Sir James Balfour Paul, Lord Lyon King of Arms, who confirms his authorship by the initials [J. B. P.], reads: *a mermaid proper, holding in her right hand a mirror argent.*[39] A 1981 drawing by the Canadian

36 Most of the works consulted in search of mermaids are contained in the section "Canada, Armorials and Similar Works" of my work *A Guide to Heraldry from a Canadian Perspective*: https://heraldicscienceheraldique.com/bibliography.html. The bibliography also includes Ian L. Campbell's index to *Heraldry in Canada* and *Flagscan* and his compilations of the emblems of Canadian municipalities and educational institutions.

37 *The British Compendium*, 3d ed., vol. 2 (London, 1729), illustration p. 47, blazon p. 305; *The Scots Compendium*, 6th ed. (London, 1756), illustration p. 47, blazon pp. 285-86.

38 Figure 10 is a copy from the records of the Court of the Lord, Library and Archives Canada, ID number: 2837145. The original, from *Kings and Nobilities Armorial* (vol. II Lyon Office MS 2), is illustrated in Elizabeth Roads, "The Baronets of Nova Scotia and the Knights of the Thistle", *Genealogica & Heraldica xxxv Reformation, Revolution, Restoration, CoA* supp. vol. 3 (London, 2023), p. 427.

39 Sir James Balfour Paul, *The Scots Peerage,* vol. 8 (Edinburgh, 1904), p. 185.

heraldist Alan Beddoe retains the mirror only.[40]

Sir William O'Grady Haly, an officer commanding British forces in North America, acted as head of government during the absences of Governor General Dufferin. He was born in 1810, in Sussex, England, married Harriet Craven Hebden and remained in Canada until his death at Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1878. In Burke's *General Armory*, his arms are blazoned: *Vert three bars wavy argent in chief a mullet pierced or*; crest: *A mermaid with comb and mirror all proper;* motto: *Sapiens dominabitur astris* (The wise will rule the stars).[41] Burke's blazon clashes with the hatchings on Haly's seal which show the field to be argent, the base or and the bars to be azure, although the horizontal lines on them should be straight, not wavy (**Figure 11**). Since all the other components are the same as in Burke's, and given that such drastic changes in the tinctures are unusual, it is likely that the engraver saw the *hatchings* as purely decorative. The mermaid crest and the same motto are recorded in *Fairbairn* under the name of William's son, Major-General Sir Richard Hebden O'Grady-Haly as: *A mermaid with comb and mirror all proper*.[42]

Figure 11: Matrix of the privy seal of Sir William O'Grady Haly, K.C.B., administrator of Canada (1874-75 and 1878). Library and Archives Canada, photo C 33799.

40 Alan Beddoe, *Beddoe's Canadian Heraldry*, revised by Col. Strome Galloway (Belleville, Ontario, 1981), p. 57.

41 *Burke GA*, p. 445.

42 *Fairbairn,* p. 420.

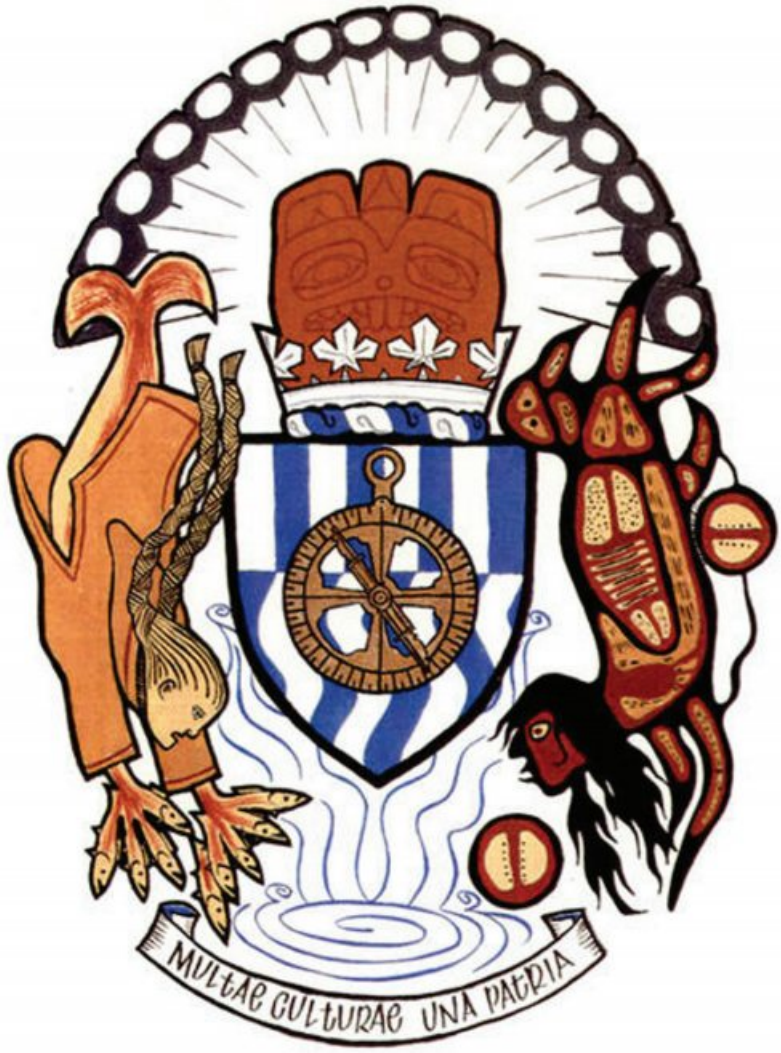

Figure 12: Sedna as the *dexter* supporter of the achievement of arms of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, now the Canadian Museum of History. By permission of the Canadian Heraldic Authority

Arms Granted by the Chief Herald of Canada

The dexter supporter in the achievement of arms granted to the Canadian Museum of Civilization in 1989 is blazoned: *A representation of the Inuit underwater Spirit Sedna her finger joints producing fish …* (**Figure 12**). The grant states that Sedna "the guardian of sea animals in Inuit culture, represents the First Peoples of Canada's North; she is styled after a work by Inuit artist Manasie Akpaliapik." The goddess Sedna with the torso of a woman joined to a fish tail is frequently depicted in Inuit sculptures and drawings which can be viewed on the internet.

Figure 13: Sedna as the dexter supporter of the achievement of arms of Ann Meekitjuk Hanson of Iqaluit, Nunavut. By permission of the Canadian Heraldic Authority.

A different depiction of Sedna serves as the dexter supporter of the armorial bearings granted in 2007 to Ann Meekitjuk Hanson (**Figure 13**). It is blazoned *The figure of Sedna proper vested or queued argent*, and the symbolism specifies "Sedna (Nuliajuq) is a famous creature from mythology around the circumpolar world, known as the sea ruler of the Arctic."

In the grant to the former Governor General Michaëlle Jean in 2005, the water spirits or Simbis supporters (**Figure 14**) are very close in their outward appearance to mermaids, but have their own spiritual attributes which are described as follows: "Beside the shield are two Simbis, water spirits from Haitian culture who comfort souls, purify troubled waters and intervene with wisdom and foresight. Moreover, the Simbis' words are enlightening and soothing. These two feminine figures symbolize the vital role played by women in advancing social justice."

In French heraldry, the mermaid sometimes takes on the name of the fairy Melusine which is often depicted with a serpent's tail. The heraldic Melusine usually has two fish tails or is shown in a tub where her husband Raymondin discovered the true nature of her lower attributes by peeping through a hole while she was bathing.[43] The double-tailed

43 Emmanuel de Boos, *Dictionnaire du blason* (Paris, 2001), pp. 97, 282-83; Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* (Harmondsworth, 1996), p. 646. The legend of Melusine is connected to the Lusignan family and the City of Lusignan: [Jean d'Arras], *La noble histoire de Lusignan, roman du XIV^e siècle* (Paris, 2003).

Figure 14: Two Simbis supporting the arms granted in 2005 to Michaëlle Jean, Governor General of Canada (2005-2010). By permission of the Canadian Heraldic Authority.

mermaid is also found in English heraldry, for instance, it served as the dexter supporter of the arms of the Academy of the Muses at Covent Garden, London.[44]

In the crest granted to François Payeur in 2006, Melusine is blazoned: *Issuant from a coronet flory, a melusine or on a rock proper holding in the dexter hand a sceptre terminating in a fleur-de-lis or.* The crest is repeated in his badge along with the motto: *Cum meta bene definita opportunitates surgunt* (**Figure 15**) which translates "When the goal is clear, opportunities abound" and is inspired by the words of British statesman Benjamin Disraeli: "The secret of success is constancy of purpose." Here Melusine takes on an attribute sometimes ascribed to the mermaid in Canadian grants, namely that she sways, not by sweet alluring songs, but by the power of elegant convincing speech, a quality also attributed to the spirit Simbi:

44 Rodney Dennys, *The Heraldic Imagination,* (London, 1975), pp. 120-21. Another source wrongfully describes the supporter as "a merman with two tails": Arthur Charles Fox-Davies, *The Book of Public Arms* (London, 1915) p. 6. That this is an error is apparent from the College of Arms's drawings of the grant reproduced by Dennys, op. cit., on pp. 120-1.

Figure 15: Melusine in the badge of the diplomat François Payeur.
By permission of the Canadian Heraldic Authority.

> "The mythical creature Melusine could lure others to follow her with the sound of her voice. In the same way, persuasive speech is the best weapon for a diplomat and professional such as François Payeur because, as he notes, violence is the speech of the poor of spirit and the defeated. The Melusine also symbolizes the voice and, by extension, art in general, about which Mr. Payeur is passionate. As a marine creature, it also represents Rivière-du-Loup [Province of Québec], in which the municipality of Saint-Arsène, Mr. Payeur's birthplace, is located. The floretty sceptre represents power, and in this case, specifically the power generated by effective communication, the master key to harmony."

The notion that mermaids are eloquent, which seems to be derived from the fact that they are enticing in song and music, also comes up in the arms granted to the Sir John A. Macdonald Historical Society in 2010. The supporters, two mermaids proper issuant from barry wavy azure and or, symbolize "eloquence and thus the Society's mandate in hosting an annual dinner featuring a speech by a prominent Canadian".

The arms of Jason Jay St. John Kennedy Crummey granted in 2008 are blazoned: *Azure a mermaid between two piles reversed argent* (**Figure 16**). His choice of the sirenic creature rests on folklore and a family tradition: "For Mr. Crummey, the mermaid is of great cultural significance to Atlantic Canadians, appearing in folk-tales for as long as people have lived there. As well, the mythical mermaid was a symbol beloved by

Figure 16: Armorial bearings of Jason Jay St. John Kennedy Crummey.
By permission of the Canadian Heraldic Authority.

Mr. Crummey's mother, Janet Crummey (née Asbery), who was an artist who painted many fanciful figures of them." This symbolism ties the mermaid to the collective consciousness of Newfoundlanders and to the island around which so many sightings were reported.

The blazon of Stephen Troy Chledowski's crest, granted in 2009, reads: *A mermaid affronty proper queued vert grasping in her dexter hand a scimitar and in her sinister hand a staff proper supporting a gonfalon ensigned by a rose gules* (**Figure 17**). "The wild rose alludes to Mr. Chledowski's birth in Alberta. His wife's ancestral background is symbolized by using a mermaid based on the arms of the city of Warsaw. The gonfalon alludes to her Polish *herb (arms)[of] Radwan." The Warsaw mermaid protects the city with its sword and shield. It is represented in sculptures and carvings throughout the city.*

The supporters of the Gen-Find Research Associates, Nanaimo, British Columbia, granted in 2010, are blazoned: *Dexter a merman proper queued azure, his beard and hair argent, wearing a wreath of fleurs-de-lis and roses gules and holding an hour glass or, sinister a mermaid proper queued azure wearing a wreath of maple leaves gules and holding a compass rose or, both issuant from barry wavy azure and argent* (**Figure 18**). Their symbolism is as follows: "Mermaids and mermen represent the idea of seaborne migration and new beginnings, already suggested by the crest. The white-haired and bearded merman, with his crown of roses and fleurs de lis, represents the Old World, while the youthful mermaid, with her crown of maple leaves, represents the New. The hourglass and compass-rose signify time and space respectively."

Figure 17: The standard of Stephen Troy Chledowski includes his mermaid crest and motto *Tuis et tibi honori esto* (Bring honour to thy family and thyself). By permission of the Canadian Heraldic Authority.

The symbolism of the merman and mermaid supporters granted to the city of White Rock, British Columbia, in 1992 is stated very simply: "The mermaid and merman represent both the men and women who have created the community and the spirit of the sea." The merman and mermaid granted in 1997 to the Aquatic Hall of Fame and Museum of Canada in Winnipeg, Manitoba, symbolize the institution's function as archives of aquatic sports, namely swimming diving, synchronized swimming, and water polo. The mermaid granted in 1996 as dexter supporter of the arms of the Town of Montague, Prince Edward Island, relate to the town's "historic association with the sea ... the circlet of oak leaves worn by the mermaid refers to the oak trees in the arms of Prince Edward Island. The waves beneath her are another allusion to the sea."

In Haitian voodoo, the mermaid (*Lasirèn*) is a spirit (*lwa*) that takes possession of young women that are overly concerned with their looks and elegance.[45] This is surprisingly close to the self-admiration of the traditional heraldic mermaid who combs her long hair while gazing in a mirror. Again, we are confronted with the universality of a creature found in the mythology of many countries, but in modern times petitioners can be reluctant to include in their armorial bearings such a self-absorbed entity as is conveyed by the traditional heraldic mermaid.

45 See the exhibition catalogue *Vodou* prepared by Mauro Peressini and Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique, (Gatineau [Québec]: Museum of Civilization Corporation, 2012), p. 44-45.

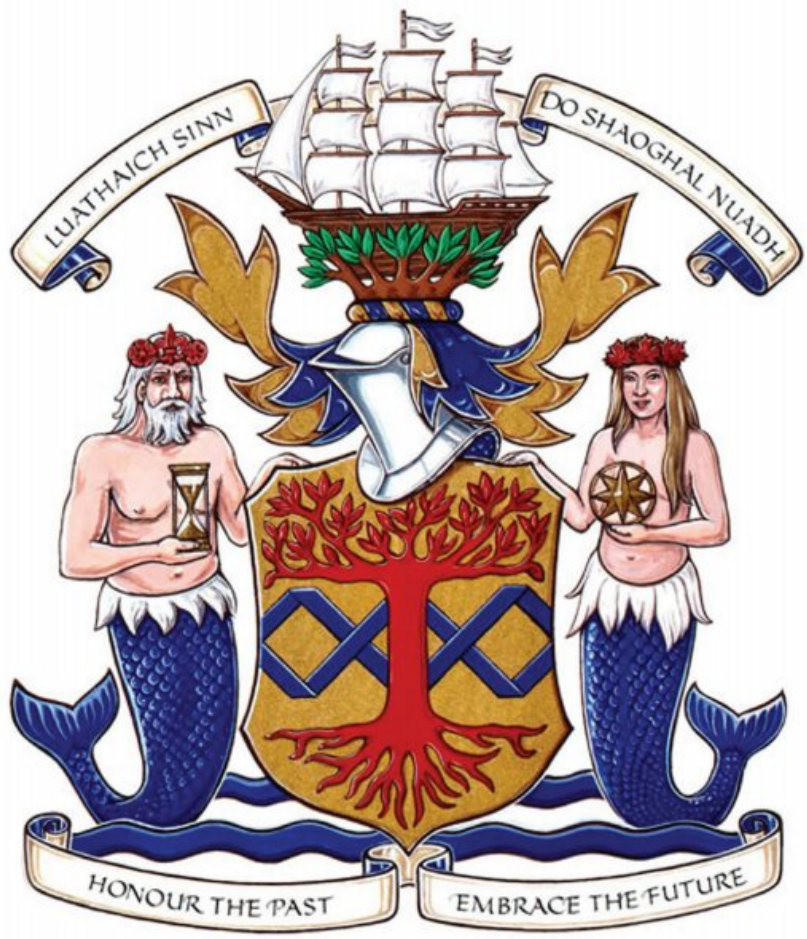

Figure 18: Merman and mermaid in the arms of the Gen-Find Research Associates, Nanaimo, British Columbia.By permission of the Canadian Heraldic Authority.

Conclusion

Canada has its share of aquatic monsters, mostly sighted in lakes. The best-known one is undoubtedly Ogopogo said to dwell in Lake Okanagan, British Columbia, a monster that found its way into a grant of arms from the year 2000 to the City of Penticton situated on that lake. The legends of the mermaid and unicorn that go back to antiquity no longer enjoy credence. On the other hand, the belief in a gorilla-like sasquatch or bigfoot sighted from sea to seas, but most frequently in British Columbia, has many adherents. There can be little doubt that such reported apparitions are the product of gossip or rumour, as personified by the multi-tongued Roman goddess Fama of which Virgil states in the Aeneid "she gains strength as she goes" (*Vires acquirit eundo*). Incidentally, these words are used in a positive vein in the motto with the armorial bearings granted in 2008 to the city of Brandon (Manitoba).

Mermaids were part of the legends of indigenous peoples in Canada, something

that is reflected in heraldry by the inclusion of the goddess Sedna in the arms of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and on those of Ann Meekitjuk Hanson. Some sirenic creatures have been imported from other countries such as the Simbi from Haiti and the Warsaw mermaid from Poland. Although the mermaid has penetrated into Canadian folklore (as reflected in the many reported sightings and its presence in the names of some establishments as well in literature, poetry, song and drama) the only allusion to its folklorish dimension appears in the symbolism of the arms of Jason Jay St. John Kennedy Crummey. The other symbolisms are based on a connection to the sea or to aquatic sports as in the case of the Aquatic Hall of Fame and Museum of Canada. In two of the grants, the enticing powers of the mermaid are converted into the convincing sway of eloquence, a trait also attributed to the Haitian Simbi. Although the merman or triton is relatively rare in heraldry, the mermaid is coupled with a merman in three Canadian grants which seem to be an effort to reflect gender equality, although in each case, the merman is on the dexter side.

None of the mermaids in the Public Register of Arms, Flags and Badges hold the traditional mirror and comb. This may be explained by the fact that eternally combing one's hair in front of a mirror smacks of narcissistic vanity, a trait that petitioners may well be reluctant to include in their achievement of arms. When mermaids hold something, it often covers their breasts as sometimes does their hair, or a pendant around their neck. In the case of the Aquatic Hall of Fame and Museum of Canada, the breasts are covered with what looks like floral decorations. This recurring pattern inevitably point to a certain degree of prudery. None of these details are recorded in the blazons, which means that the depictions could be altered at a future date if so desired.

The reluctance to emphasize some of the traditional features of the mermaid finds a parallel in opposition to certain aspects of heraldic stylization which emphasize the defensive attributes of animals. In the medieval world, knights placed ferocious-looking animals on their shields to intimidate the enemy or opponent. Today, armorial bearings do not generally serve that purpose, except on badges of the armed forces, where they can appropriately look lean and mean. Some petitioners ask whether animals in their armorial achievement could be made to look less ferocious and not rudely stick out their tongue. As a rule, heraldry, particularly in modern form, shies away from concepts that are negative or offensive.[46]

46 The grants by the Chief Herald of Canada are available online in the Public Register of Arms, Flags and Badges of Canada by inserting as research words the name of the recipient or the words mermaid, merman Sedna, Simbi, Melusine. The illustrations from the Register are reproduced by permission of the Canadian Heraldic Authority of Canada © His Majesty in Right of Canada.