

Did Fiction Give Birth to Bigfoot?

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Despite many claimed sightings and various forms of evidence, it seems there is a possibility that Bigfoot originally appeared out of a book and that the legend is founded in the works of Jonathan Swift, the English satirist. This surprising possibility springs from the fact that *Gulliver's Travels* was said to be the favorite book of no less a character than Daniel Boone. The significance of that will soon become apparent.

Swift's book has at least three mentions in the recent biography of Boone by John Mack Faragher: *Daniel Boone: The Life and Legend of an American Pioneer* (New York: Henry Holt, 1992). These references are not all listed in the book's index, but occur where cited in this article. On annual hunts, Boone "frequently carried along a copy of the Bible, or a book of history, which he loved, or *Gulliver's Travels*, his favorite book, to read by the light of the campfire" (pp. 55-56).

It seems that Boone would read to his hunting companions from Swift's book, and that at least one place name in Kentucky is inspired by the book instead of being an Indian name: "Lulbegrud Creek," said to be a distorted form of the fictional capital of Swift's Brobdingnag characters named "Lorbrulgrud" (p. 83). In the biography Boone

tells what the author calls a "tall tale" of "killing a ten-foot, hairy giant he called a 'Yahoo.' The Yahoos were giant beasts in human shape from Boone's favorite book, *Gulliver's Travels*. It was a tall tale that Boone repeated to a number of people during his last year, one such as he would (pp. 308-309).

A good place to check the source is Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels: An Authoritative Text; The Correspondence of Swift, Pope's Verses on Gulliver's Travels, Critical Essays*, 2nd ed., edited by Robert A. Greenberg (New York:



W. W. Norton, 1970). It is based on a 1735 Dublin edition with Swift's revisions of earlier publications, but without an index. The place to look for the "Yahoo" is Part 4, pages 191-260, entitled "A Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms." Swift featured the Yahoos throughout this part of the book, which deals with those talking and highly philosophical horse-creatures with the unpronounceable name. Human beings (and Gulliver) seem to have been considered a sort of Yahoo also, perhaps a slightly more advanced type (see e.g., pp. 198, 202, 204, 220, 237, 248, 260).

"The hair of both Sexes was of several Colours, brown, red, black and yellow" (p. 193). Yahoos could sometimes be found in herds or groups. They were stronger and more agile than people (p. 222). Some were kept by the horse-creatures in stables or kennels as their servants (pp. 200, 202, 232). Yahoos climbed trees, were hairy, and had sharp hooked and pointed claws (p. 193). Yahoo females could be sexually aggressive (pp. 232-233) and had an offensive odor (p. 230); but Gulliver once captured a three-year-old male with a "smell very rank" (p. 232).

Yahoos don't seem to have been bigger or taller than people; if Boone said he'd killed one ten feet tall, the height might have come from him rather than Swift's book. How plausible is this origin for the more modern Bigfoot? While Daniel Boone (1734-1820) may have not had much formal schooling, he apparently had opportunities for being tutored (Faragher, pp. 16-17). Specimens of his writing survive. He could well have been able to read, and it is not surprising for him to have a copy of a well-known

book of the period. The portrayal of the hairy "Yahoo" in *Gulliver's Travels* would also have been known by more people of the time than Daniel Boone. And Swift's attacks upon the vices of civilization may have appealed to woodsmen and others on the American frontier; while children might see Gulliver as a source of adventure, adults could read for amusement and disguised social criticism.

The "Mountain Men" of the far west, fur trappers of an era later than Boone's, were famous for tall tales. There is no real reason why Bigfoot cannot have come to life from the pages of Jonathan Swift's book and made the rounds of the camps of deer hunters and trappers of the frontier. The creature tales based on a literary Yahoo would have to last only a few decades to reach the western fur trappers. It's a short step from the last century to our time, such a legend could easily survive until today. Various pranks, hoaxes, and more tall tales would add to the legend, and such a potentially fearsome creature's existence could lend awe and romance to wild areas far from most people's daily lives.

Of course Boone's biographer may be wrong. There is some chance that Boone and others of the early frontier encountered creatures long since driven deeper into the wilderness by the advance of settlers and civilization. In that way, Boone's tale *could* represent actual evidence of a Bigfoot-like animal. But the new biography by Faragher strongly indicates a literary origin and must not be ignored theoretically since it casts doubt that such a creature even exists.

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