

# Big Foot's constituency

*The search for mythical monsters in the United States is like that at Loch Ness.*

THEY just don't make mythical creatures like they used to. For one thing, they used to come in a healthy mix of body sizes. But ever since the business fell into the hands of people with a special ability to raise money for expeditions to interesting places (invariably equipped with cameras whose lens caps show a special propensity for remaining in place at critical moments), little has been heard of leprechauns (small) or unicorns or centaurs (roughly average). Taking their place are the Loch Ness monster (monstrous), Yeti (abominable, if not large) and Big Foot (large feet, at least). Perhaps there is something especially appealing in the idea of modern science having missed big things. Certainly an expedition to hunt for mythical bacteria would not be a financial success. (But viruses are excellent candidates for "cryptoorganisms". If the proposed Reagan administration cut in NIH grants is carried out, virologists might consider making a direct appeal to the public for support of a hunt for "living fossils, mysterious half-dead, half-alive creatures that have colonized the Earth from its earliest days, invisible to us, ready at any moment to seize control of human or animal bodies to reproduce themselves". It might just work; sale of the movie rights could finance a new electron microscope.)

In reality, the correlation between ephemerality and size may be just one of those quirks of nature, akin to the indisputable fact that airplanes and ships mysteriously vanish but that trains never do. Regional pride may also matter, as with the competitors to the Loch Ness monster that have recently been championed. One of the odder recent manifestations of regional pride in defence of a local ephemeral best was in Washington State, where a public outcry followed the announcement by a former US Army Ranger that he was tired of all of those blurred photographs and footprints that, yes, might have been left by a big hominid but might, too, have been spots where a long-nosed dog laid down in the dirt, and that he was going to go out and shoot him a Big Foot.

Several indignant counties passed ordinances to outlaw the hunt. (They were also concerned about threats by a Big Foot conservation group to disrupt the hunt.) One local law made it a "gross misdemeanor" to kill a Big Foot with malice (one year in the county jail, \$5,000 fine, or both). The local chambers of commerce, which know a good thing when they see it, may have had a hand in the passage of the legislation. The thousands of outraged citizens who called the fish and game department to complain of the impending hunt are not so easily acquitted.

Local pride and a nose for publicity may also be the charitable explanation of the recent move by the commission overseeing matters related to Chesapeake Bay to take up the question of mounting a scientific investigation of "Chessie", the New World's answer to Nessie, as the Loch Ness version is known. (Actually, it is only one of the New World's answers; the Vermont Tourism Council would be sure to complain at any omission of reference to "Champ", which lives in Lake Champlain.) The potential for mischief here, however, is far greater than in the passage of ordinances declaring Big Foot out of season.

Chesapeake Bay, which provides fishermen in Maryland, Virginia and Delaware with a direct livelihood, and which indirectly supports much of the economy of the region, has become a model for studies of complex aquatic ecosystems and their interactions with man-made pollutants. Efforts to halt the deterioration of the bay depend greatly on developing a better understanding of these interactions, particularly the very complicated part played by non-point-source pollution, including agricultural run-off. It is sad to see the powers-that-be pursuing, or even contemplating, a will o' the wisp.

It is not clear just how Chessie came to be on the commission's agenda, though if the Big Foot outrage in Washington State is an indicator, it may have been the result of activism by devotees. Administrators should remember, though, that science is rarely

the right place to practise popular democracy. Those public officials who insist on seeing science as a place for special-interest-politics-as-usual should heed last year's Gallup poll which showed that only 18 per cent of US teenagers (usually a credulous bunch) said they believed in it, a sharp decline from 31 per cent in 1978. It is perhaps best not to mention how many said they believed in ghosts. Astrology (at 59 per cent) is obviously a less special interest. □

## Oxford's indiscretion

*Those who denied Mrs Margaret Thatcher an honorary degree should now count the cost.*

FROM time to time, the University of Oxford distinguishes itself by means of a controversial ballot on a controversial topic. In 1937, for example, Oxford undergraduates voted for the proposition that they "would not fight for king and country", earning for their pains a certain notoriety and, by some accounts, helping to earn a short while later an opportunity to prove that they had not meant what they said. Last week, Oxford academics took up their ballot papers on the narrower issue of whether the British Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, should be awarded the honorary degree with which all previous British prime ministers who happen to have been Oxford graduates have been rewarded. The case against the university administration's plan was that the present British government has been beastly to British higher education and, latterly, towards research. Now, to their own considerable surprise, Oxford's academics find that the discontented have mustered two-thirds of the votes, that Mrs Thatcher has been snubbed and that the university's chancellor Lord Stockton (still better known as Mr Harold Macmillan), himself recently an oblique critic of the government, has taken them to task for discourtesy. Now, the worry is what the retribution will be.

Fair play will probably ensure that no ton of bricks falls on Oxford, or on universities in general. Direct public subvention of the universities is channelled through the University Grants Committee, unlikely to be much influenced by Oxford's show of defiance. Subventions from the research councils of academic research are similarly unlikely to be biased against what may be thought a wayward university, even though the Secretary of State for Education and Science, Sir Keith Joseph, is personally told of all proposals to make research grants above a value of £50,000. The delicate network of committees responsible for these distributions will no doubt meticulously avoid anything that seems like taking sides. The retribution will come in a different form, and will unhappily affect all British universities, not just Oxford.

The British government's policy towards higher education and academic research is generally acknowledged to be mistaken, short-sighted and potentially disastrous. The cuts in university budgets decreed four years ago were arbitrary and have since been enforced in needlessly arithmetical fashion. On research, the government has not until recently listened with anything like enough care to warnings that the system is so short of funds that the damage done would far outweigh the money saved by the economics demanded. Sir Keith Joseph's failure to deliver in full December's promise of extra money for the research councils and the grants committee, apparently an important factor in last week's vote at Oxford, can however be regarded in two ways — as a proof of muddle (which it was) and as a sign of repentance (which is probably also true). What voting Oxford academics last week overlooked is that British universities troubles have roots in the way the universities lost all their political friends in the late 1970s, after they had greeted the then government's statement of the academic money problem with a mixture of derision and indifference. In the past few months, there have been signs that the quarrel was about to be patched up. The danger is that a vote whose chief purpose seems to have been a snub will make it harder to bridge the conflict between academics and the rest of the world, and may even again inflame curiosity about universities' conduct of their own affairs that recently has been so unwelcome. □