

Sealskins: Finns, Seal Wives, and Mythmaking

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From the far north of the British Isles come a set of tales about sealskins, and a people who wore them in the sea: the Finn-folk or selkies. The tales are spread across the Irish, Scottish and Shetland coasts, but many name one clan, the 'MacCodrums of the Seals' from Uist, and fit one pattern. A man discovers a woman on the beach, who has come through the water in a sealskin. Capturing her skin, the man captures a wife. After some years, having given birth to children, the woman finds her sealskin, and returns to the sea. There is sometimes an inheritance: generations born with webbed fingers and a taboo against killing seals, making this an etiological myth.

Scottish folklorist David MacRitchie (1851–1925) hypothesised that myths had historical roots; an ancient approach to myth, known as euhemerism after the Greek mythographer Euhemerus. MacRitchie is best known for his much-derided theory that British myths of the 'little people'

referred to an aboriginal pygmy race of prehistoric

Picts. MacRitchie's theory of the Finn-folk was that

they were in fact Finns: Finno-Ugric peoples of the

Arctic Circle, whose sealskin clothing and kayaks

allowed them to travel great distances through the

seas. MacRitchie's euhemerist researches now lie

outside the fold of academic respectability, but have

been absorbed into the discourse, approaching the

status of folklore themselves.



Alutiiq Seal Decoy Helmet, Kodiak Island, Alaska, 1800s

This presentation will look at the story of the seal wife

in the context of MacRitchie's euhemerism; an etiological myth about an etiological myth. Reading both mythography and mythology against the grain, we can ask what these double structures tell us about ourselves. Where does the other become animal, or magical? And in our practices of explanation, where does the study of myth become mythmaking?

Peter Le Couteur (*1982) is a research artist, writer and singer. A long-term interest in the relationships between objects, narratives and their contexts led to his current PhD by practice at

the Royal College of Art, 'Mislabelling and the Fictive Museum'. What happens when museums meet fiction and conceptual art? This project seeks to revive the Transnational Whaling Museum, an unrealised project from the 1960s, in order to explore what unique modes of questioning the fictive museum affords. Peter produces collaborative installations with museums and archives, and sings his own and other's songs at private views and events around London.