

**Nick Redfern interviews Michael A. Woodley on his new book:
*In the Wake of Bernard Heuvelmans***

I recently conducted a lengthy interview with Michael A. Woodley, the author of a new book on sea-serpents titled *In the Wake of Bernard Heuvelmans* (CFZ Press, 2008. See: www.cfz.org.uk for purchase details).

As you'll see below, Woodley has much to say about his views, thoughts and opinions on Heuvelmans' seminal work and acclaimed theories on the subject of sea-serpents. And for those not fully acquainted with the life and work of the monster-hunting Heuvelmans, click here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernard_Heuvelmans

Q: "What got you interested in cryptozoology in general, and sea-serpents and the work of Heuvelmans in particular?"

A: "My earliest scientific interest was in marine biology. Most people, who get into sea-life at the age of 10, start off interested in the obvious animals – sharks and whales etc, but I found the Cnidaria (Jellyfish, sea anemones, hydras etc) to be especially fascinating due mostly to their complex life cycles. To me they were so alien compared to other forms of marine life and I felt them thusly to be especially worthy of study.

"My first exposure to cryptozoology came when I found a well-illustrated book on sea monsters in the library of my primary school. I vividly remember reading about the McCleary encounter of 1962 in which he claimed to be the lone survivor of a sea monster attack that allegedly resulted in the loss of four of his friends whilst diving off the Florida coast; the story was gruesomely illustrated as I recall. It was this that got me thinking about the possibilities of large and maybe even dangerous, unaccounted for animals lurking in the world's oceans. It also triggered in me a life-long dislike of the sea!

"I suppose then that it was a fascination with both the unknown and the unusual that really roped me into cryptozoology, although I will admit that my interest has always been heavily skewed towards dracontology, the study of sea serpents.

"My first exposure to Heuvelmans came much later on, when I read of his work in an essay on sea serpents by the mystery-writing couple, Janet and Colin Bord. It featured in a general text on anomalistics and introduced me to the basics of Heuvelmans' classification scheme. I seem to recall that it came as a surprise to me that a qualified Zoologist would actually write in a scientific manner about a topic such as sea serpents.

"It wasn't until quite some years after this that I got around to seeing a copy of Heuvelmans' *In the Wake of the Sea-Serpents*. My copy arrived in the summer of 2006, fully six weeks after I had put in an order for it on Amazon. I had actually forgotten all about the order so its unexpected appearance came as a very pleasant surprise. I quickly absorbed the books content and set about formulating my own ideas. It wasn't long

before I decided that they needed to be written down, and that's when I started on the book."

Q: "How do you compare Heuvelmans' importance and relevance to cryptozoology in the past with the cryptozoological field of today?"

A: "This is a question that will probably get you as many different answers as there are cryptozoologists; my particular take on it is that ultimately, cryptozoologists generally align with one of two camps on the issue. There are many cryptozoologists who believe that the field needs to come out from under Heuvelmans' shadow so to speak; that it effectively needs a fresh start as they feel that Heuvelmans' influence ultimately had a detrimental influence on efforts to garner mainstream credibility for the field. I tend to label those who hold this view as the 'new' cryptozoologists; they recognize Heuvelmans' historical significance as effective founder and chief popularizer of the field, but basically regard him in much the same way that the majority of modern psychiatrists might regard Freud – as an ultimately misguided visionary.

"On the other hand there are those, like myself, who perceive Heuvelmans' fundamental interdisciplinary vision of cryptozoology and the methods he developed for the evaluation and analysis of non-audiovisual evidences as being still central to contemporary cryptozoology. Those who maintain this position could be labeled as 'Heuvelmansian' cryptozoologists, I would personally describe myself as a 'neo-Heuvelmansian' as whilst I maintain that Heuvelmans' theories and methods are still relevant to contemporary cryptozoology, I recognize their limitations and have attempted to improve on them."

Q: "What was it that prompted you to write the book, and how would you broadly describe it and its contents?"

A: "Since Heuvelmans penned *In the Wake of the Sea-Serpents*, there has been very little progress made in really advancing his thinking on the issue of marine cryptid identity hypotheses. The Coleman-Huyghe classification model for all its numerous merits was ultimately an attempt at lumping and splitting, within Heuvelmans' original categories, albeit one that was extremely original. There is of course the model of Bruce Champagne, which is especially interesting because it attempts to quantitatively score the evidence associated with marine cryptid encounters.

"In addition, and perhaps most significantly, it also looks at ecological and ethological correlates associated with the sightings and their locations, which he uses in the building of more heuristic 'multifactor' marine cryptid identities. The problem with the Champagne model is its unfortunate lack of visibility within cryptozoological circles; only specialists in the field ever seem to have heard of it.

"There existed in my opinion, an opportunity for a book that would attempt to take Heuvelmans' theories to the 'next level' (to use the cliché), i.e. one which would examine the veracity of Heuvelmans' identity hypotheses simply as they stood at the time of his

death, from the perspective of contemporary advances in zoology, ecology and evolutionary biology.

“It was especially in regards to the latter two that I felt the most new light could be shed on his theories, as I believe ecological inference and evolutionary narratives to be the most useful tools in evaluating the contemporary plausibility of Heuvelmans’ identity hypotheses and in creating a framework with which viable alternatives to his proposed identities could be proposed to account for the sightings ‘clusters’ from which he made his initial deductions.

“I do not believe that Heuvelmans’ got it completely right, and there is certainly scope for new identity theories to be added to any potential future classification scheme in the vein of Coleman, Huyghe and Champagne; however the creation of new categories was not the main purpose of the book, it was primarily an attempt at dealing with Heuvelmans’ theories on his own terms so to speak.”

Q: “How do you feel about Heuvelmans' conclusions and theories and (a) how are they similar to yours, and (b) how do they differ?”

A: “It is obvious that Heuvelmans’ invocation of multiple identity hypotheses was an improvement over Oudemans’ single hypothesized *Megophius megophius*, which was basically an attempt to condense all the factors associated with alleged sightings of unknown large marine animals into one massively oversimplified identity.

“In criticizing Heuvelmans it is easy to point out the obvious errors – for example, there is his claim for the existence of armored archaeocetes, which turned out to be due to the presence of turtle shell fragments found intermingled with basilosaur fossils, or there was his belief that the allometric scaling between leptocephalus and adult eels holds true for leptocephalus at 6 feet (unfortunately it doesn’t – the adult forms are only marginally larger than the larval forms). However, in raising these criticisms it is necessary to remember that Heuvelmans was writing in an era when these suppositions were considered at least plausible.

“A more valid point for criticism concerning Heuvelmans’ identity hypotheses concerns the fact that he could theoretically have done much more with his data in terms of quantitative correlative analysis both between and within groups of sightings and with respect to broader ecological patterns.

“As I mentioned previously, I consider myself to be a neo-Heuvelmansian, which means that I believe Heuvelmans’ methods for evaluating non-autoptic evidence sources, coupled with professional fieldwork, to be the essential bread and butter of cryptozoology. This is not to say that I don’t embrace new ways of evaluating the evidence and indeed I believe that cryptozoology can only benefit from this kind of thinking – this being the basis of the book.

“A nuanced treatment of the differences between Heuvelmans’ identity theories and my own revisions would take too long to present here (plus it would negate the need to buy the book!), but let’s suffice it to say that there probably aren’t any Cretaceous period reptiles swimming around in the oceans, there may be a rather large marine cousin of the centipede lurking in the depths and super-otters may well actually be otters!”

Q: “How do you hope the book will be received?”

A: “I know that there will be much scope for disagreement, particularly between myself and the new cryptozoologists who might not see the contemporary relevance of Heuvelmans’ identity hypotheses to the field, or who may even question the scientific legitimacy of such speculation. It is actually my fondest wish that the contents of this book be debated as it is through reasoned debate that new perspectives can be gleaned and progress can be made.”

Q: “What has been the reaction thus far?”

A: “I have received little in the way of feedback so far, which is understandable owing to the relatively recent publication of the book. Charles Paxton and I have exchanged e-mails concerning the text; he is of the opinion that whilst they are certainly fun to generate, cryptid classification schemes are essentially non-scientific; a point which I readily cede on the grounds that such hypothesizing can have no true scientific value in the absence of a criterion for falsification – something which I hope to address statistically in a paper that is currently in preparation.”

Q: “For how long were you working on the book?”

A: “I started on the long necked seal chapter back in April of 2007, during my final semester at Columbia University. It was my intention at the time to have it published as a short book, however there were no takers initially. I then approached Jonathan Downes of the Center for Fortean Zoology, and he suggested that it be incorporated into the 2008 Yearbook. This was how things stayed until January of this year when I suggested to him that we create a book incorporating reviews and re-evaluations of all of Heuvelmans’ proposed marine cryptid identity hypotheses. He agreed that this was a good idea and to compensate for the sudden absence of the long necked seal article from the year book I agreed to write an article on the Mongolian Death Worm, in which I would utilize the ‘plausibility method’ to re-evaluate the current identity hypotheses for this cryptid.

“The book was in a publishable condition by the end of February, after I had invested considerable amounts of time into analyzing the data on the other proposed identity hypotheses. It was quite a good feeling when March rolled around and I finally got my first ‘in hand’ copies.”

Q: “Are you planning on any further cryptozoological works?”

A: “In the conclusion of the book, I mention that I am contemplating a follow up work, in which I will hopefully get around to dealing with the issue of rationally expanding Heuvelmans’ identity taxonomy for marine cryptids. However I feel that before this can be attempted, there are a variety of issues that need to be addressed. For example there is the matter of being able to scientifically falsify cryptid hypotheses, the key to which may be found in the patterns of cumulative species description and will, as was mentioned previously, constitute the basis of a published statistical treatment of the subject.

“There is also the issue of the use of binomial nomenclature in cryptozoology. Heuvelmans was very liberal in ascribing binomial names to his putative species, and the new cryptozoologists tend to rule these out as *nomina nuda*. However, what is seldom discussed is Heuvelmans’ reasoning behind ascribing to cryptids binomial names in the first place.

“In a 1982 essay, Heuvelmans critiqued the 1958 decision of the International Congress for Zoology to reject the ‘parataxa’ concept, which was first proposed by More and Sylvester-Bradley as a means of classifying inconclusive fossilized remains, animal tracks and body fossils (imprints) (a revised form of which has been subsequently accepted as ‘ichnotaxa’).

“Heuvelmans suggested that in essence, binomial names in cryptozoology could be rationalized on the basis of their being parataxonomic, as cryptids tend only to be known through anecdote or through other inconclusive evidences (photographs, footprints etc).

“The utility of Heuvelmans’ parataxa concept as a means of generating taxonomic ‘placeholder’ names with which cryptids can be formally recognized upon discovery, needs I feel to be firmly established within cryptozoology. This too will be the object of a new paper.”