

# POPULAR ERRORS

EXPLAINED AND ILLUSTRATED.

BY

JOHN TIMBS,

EDITOR OF "LACONIC; OR THE BEST WORDS OF THE BEST AUTHORS,"  
"THE YEAR BOOK OF FACTS," &c.



*Communis Error facit Jus.*

|   |              |
|---|--------------|
| To unmask falsehood, and bring truth to light   | SHAKESPEARE  |
| A Common Error is the greater and more mischievous for being so common  | CLARENDON.   |
| A judgment exempt from all prejudices and Popular Errors  | HARRISON.    |
| The being void of Errors is the first great step to the greatest knowledge  | SPRAY.       |
| Up into the watch-tower get,  |              |
| And see all things despoiled of Fallacies   | DONNE        |
| Every country has its foolish notions. • • Let us not laugh at any people   | VOLTAIRE.    |
| In all sciences, the Errors preceded the truths; and it is better that they should go first than last               | WATPOLE.     |
| By the communication of general and popular science, Vulgar Errors, and Common Prejudices are constantly diminished | SIR H. DAVY. |

LONDON :

TILT AND BOGUE, 86, FLEET STREET.

MDCCCLII.

The best account of Giants, at once scientific and popular, that we have seen, will be found in *Jameson's Journal*, 1833: it is by the eminent naturalist M. Geoffroy-St-Hilaire, and extends to nearly fifty pages of the above journal.

#### THE UNICORN.

THE most famous among the Fabulous Animals of the Ancients, was the Unicorn, whose real existence has been obstinately asserted, even in the present day; or, at least, proofs of its existence have been eagerly sought for. Three several animals are frequently mentioned by the Ancients as having only one horn placed on the middle of the forehead, viz. the *Oryx* of Africa, having cloven hoofs, the hair placed reversely to that of other animals, its height equal to that of the bull, or even of the rhinoceros, and said to resemble deer and goats in its form; the *Indian Ass*, having solid hoofs; and the *Monoceros*, properly so called, whose feet are sometimes compared to those of the lion, and sometimes to those of the elephant, and is, therefore, considered to have divided feet. The horse-unicorn and the bull-unicorn are, doubtless, both referable to the *Indian Ass*, for even the latter is described as having solid hoofs. We may, therefore, be fully assured that these animals have never really existed, as no solitary horns have ever found their way into our collections, excepting those of the rhinoceros and narwal. Again, in all cloven-footed animals, the frontal bone is divided longitudinally into two, so that there could not possibly, as very justly remarked by Camper, be a horn placed upon the suture; a conclusion fatal to the identity of the *Oryx* and the *Monoceros*.

It has, however, been suggested that the straight-horned *Antelope Oryx* of Gmelin may have furnished the idea of the Unicorn being an *Oryx*. Supposing an individual of this species to have been seen which had accidentally lost one of its horns, it may have been taken as a representative of the entire race, and erroneously adopted by Aristotle, to be copied by all his successors. All this is quite possible, and even natural, and gives not the smallest evidence for the existence of a single-horned species of antelope.

One of the most eminent zoologists of the day, however, refers the Unicorn to the *Indian Rhinoceros*; and his ex-

planation is at once brief and satisfactory. He observes: "The Indian Rhinoceros affords a remarkable instance of the obstructions which the progress of knowledge may suffer, and the gross absurdities which not unfrequently result from the wrong application of a name. This animal, to whose horn the superstition of the Persians and Arabs has in all ages attributed peculiar virtues\*, became known to the Greeks through the description of Ctesias, a credulous physician of that nation, who appears to have resided at the court of Persia in the time of the younger Cyrus, about 400 years before the birth of Christ. His account, though mixed up with a great deal of credulous absurdity, contains a very valuable and perfectly recognizable description of the Rhinoceros, under the ridiculous name, however, of the *Indian Ass*; and as he attributed to it a whole hoof like the horse, and a single horn in the forehead, speculation required but one step further to produce the fabulous Unicorn, such as it appears in the Royal Arms of England, and such as it has retained its hold on popular credulity for the last two thousand years†." We suspect that Heraldry, with its animal absurdities, has contributed more to the propagation of error respecting the natural world, than any other species of misrepresentation.

It should be added, that the Rev. John Campbell, in his *Travels in South Africa*, (vol. ii. p. 294,) describes the head of another animal, which, as far as the horn is concerned, seems to approach nearer than the common rhinoceros to the Unicorn of the ancients. While, in the Machow territory, the Hottentots brought to the traveller a head different from that of any rhinoceros that had previously been killed. "The common African Rhinoceros has a crooked horn resembling a cock's spur, which rises about nine or ten inches above the nose, and inclines backward; immediately behind which is a straight thick horn. But the head they brought, had a straight horn projecting three feet from the forehead, about ten inches above the tip of the nose. The projection of this great horn very much resembles that of the fanciful Unicorn in the British arms. It has a small thick horny substance eight inches long, immediately behind it, and which can

\* See page 274.

† Mr. Ogilby: Dr. Royle's Natural History of the Himalayan Mountains.

hardly be observed on the animal at the distance of 100 yards; so that this species must look like a Unicorn, (in the sense 'one-horned,') when running in the field." The author adds: "the animal is considered by naturalists, since the arrival of the skull in London, to be the Unicorn of the ancients, and the same that is described in Job xxxix." A fragment of the skull, with the horn, is deposited in the Museum of the London Missionary Society.

#### THE MERMAID.

THE absurd notion, "that there are Mermen and Mermaids, half man or woman, and the remainder fish," was of long standing, but is now exploded. "Few eyes," says Sir Thomas Browne, "have escaped the picture of Mermaids, (for he does not admit their existence,) that is, according to Horace, this monster with woman's head above and fishy extremity below; and these are conceived to answer the shape of the ancient Syrens that attempted upon Ulysses. Which, notwithstanding, were of another description, containing no fishy composure, but made up of man and bird; the humane mediety variously placed, not only above, but below." Sir Thomas is, on the contrary, inclined to refer the Mermaid to Dagon, the tutelary deity of the Philistines, which, according to the common opinion, was half human and half fish—that is, with a human female bust and a fish-like termination: though the details of this fish-idolatry are very confined and conjectural.

The progress of zoological science has long since destroyed the belief in the existence of the Mermaid. If its upper structure be human, with lungs resembling our own, how could such a creature live and breathe at the bottom of the sea, where it is stated to be? for our own most expert divers are unable to stay under water more than half an hour. Suppose it to be of the cetaceous class, it could only remain under the water two or three minutes together, without rising to the surface to take breath; and if this were the case with the Mermaid, would it not be oftener seen?

The olden accounts of the taking of Mermaids are too absurd for quotation: but it is truly surprising that the exhibition of a pretended Mermaid in London, so lately as in 1822, should have caught thousands of dupes; 300