

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WGM-20
Falcons and Me - II
A Bit of History

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Dear Dick,

I have rarely been able to write very much while traveling. Airplanes are too cramped and get to their destinations rapidly; trains and cars are too bumpy--and, besides, there is always much to see along the way. Ships, on the other hand, offer perhaps the best opportunity for writing, unless the weather is rough and the green wooziness of seasickness descends.

We will be in Svalbard (Spitsbergen) in two days, with a call at Bjørnøya (Bear Island) on the way. I have opportunity, therefore, to put a bit down on paper. I know that the days in Svalbard will be busy, as will the return to North Norway and, hopefully, Russia. The ocean voyages from Norway to Svalbard and back offer two periods of relative quiet. On this trip north I want to spend some time on a second letter about falconry. The return voyage from Svalbard will, I hope, be spent filling in some initial impressions from those Norwegian islands.

What I am writing now is very much off the cuff. (I checked my dates on return to Denmark.) It concerns the beginning of falconry and what I know of the highlights of its history. My letter WGM-15 dealt with the beginning of falconry in my experience. This letter is an attempt to place falconry in world development--a bit of history. No one, however, has been able to determine the date and place of falconry's beginning. As a geographer, I have always appreciated the importance of history. And even in such a brief, casual discourse as these newsletters on falconry, the history of falconry and its significance in social development are important.

Falconry was the "Sport of Kings" long before people got into racing thoroughbred horses. It had its place in the social order, contributed richly to our present-day language and, most important of all, offered unparalleled training in patience, discipline, and exercise to those who pursued it--which included a vast cross-section of the population in times past.

Essentially, falconry is man's use of certain birds of prey for hunting. These birds are, by nature, hunters. Falconry's art involves training them to hunt in man's presence, to permit man to take the prey caught, and to come when called, or to return after an unsuccessful chase. All of this, of course, implies the patient task of breaking down the falcon's natural fear of man. Once this fear has been dispensed, the falcon is really in a vulnerable position. The falconer must never place this new-found relationship with his hawk in jeopardy--by act or look. Never must the doubt arise that the falconer is to be anything but trusted.

It is easy to see that this art and sport of falconry (for it is indeed both art and sport) could not grow up among primitive peoples. It is an art full of nuances, technique, and conditioning. It is a sport whose success demands intimate knowledge of hunter and prey alike.

It is generally agreed that falconry is a very old sport, but its precise origins pre-date recorded history and are shrouded in the mists of antiquity. We still lack a complete history of falconry, but a few generalizations can be offered which are usually accepted.

Falconry originated among the nomadic Mongols on the vast steppes of Central Asia at about 2,000 B.C. or earlier. We know from a Japanese work that falcons were presented as royal gifts in China during the Hsia Dynasty (2205-1776 B.C.). We must assume that these were trained falcons, although this fact is a bit unclear. By 1700 B.C., falconry was carried through invasion by the Mongols to Persia and Arabia, but its spread throughout the rest of the world is, at times, difficult to trace until we begin to get pictorial and literary evidence of the sport.

In general, the technical knowledge of falconry was transmitted from the East (Ex oriente lux!) through the channels of Islamic civilization. Some men believe that falconry was known to the Egyptians as early as the XVIIIth Dynasty (1580-1350 B.C.) and perhaps even earlier. The falcon or hawk appears commonly on Egyptian works of art and it is a common hieroglyphic symbol; the falcon was considered a sacred animal. Here again we have no proof of actual use of falcons for hunting.

The earliest positive evidence of falconry, cited in many historical references, is an 8th century B.C. Assyrian bas-relief from the period of Sargon II (722-705 B.C.) at Khorsabad's ruins in Babylon (present-day Iraq) near Nineveh. The bas-relief depicts a hunting scene in which one hunter is using a bow and arrow, while a second carries a hawk on the fist. This bas-relief was found by the Frenchman Layard in 1848.

If our assumption that the Chinese were practicing falconry as early as 2,000 B.C. is incorrect, we nevertheless have literary

evidence for falconry in China in the 7th century B.C. and such evidence of hawking becomes commonplace during the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C., especially during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. - 220 A.D.).

Hawking seems to have come to Japan from Korea sometime in the 3rd and 4th centuries A.D.

By the 5th century A.D., falconry was well known in Persia and Arabia. The Persians probably taught the Arabs the sport. Falconry was not generally known or practised in Greece or Rome before the advent of Christianity; the literature and art of ancient Greece and Rome shows no knowledge of the sport.

Falconry was introduced into Europe (Italy) by about 560 A.D. The great popularity of falconry on the continent began with the returning Crusaders, who brought back trained birds and falconers from their campaigns in the East. After the Norman Conquest (1066), falconry really began to take hold in England, although it was known there before William arrived.

The invention of efficient guns and the later clearing and fencing of lands for agriculture brought about the decline of falconry in Europe. As the feudal system itself broke down, falconry became less popular.

We could perhaps best break falconry's history down into three periods as one historian has suggested:

1. origin and earliest history to about the 7th century A.D. Use in the East and firm establishment in Europe.
2. falconry during the Middle Ages from the 7th to the end of the 11th century.
3. Apex: 12th to 17th century. Appearances in literature on the sport and the gradual decay through, first, gunpowder, and then changing social and economic patterns.

We must here distinguish between the utilitarian and the aristocratic practice of falconry. Perhaps the earliest form was utilitarian--the best method of getting food on the treeless plains of the East. By the late Middle Ages, falconry was both a practical and an aristocratic sport. Today the two types exist, but in separate areas of the world. A recent Sports Illustrated article about a falconer in Japan shows obvious pursuit of falconry for food and income. In North Africa, the Middle East, and various parts of Asia, falconry is practised today primarily as a means of obtaining food--with, of course, some sport for the oil shieks. This practical falconry contrasts with that for sport in North America and Europe, but the sport is no longer associated with aristocracy.

Falconry never recovered from the blow of gunpowder. The thrill of hawking is known in the world today only to a comparative few. The scale and color of the sport, once commonplace, are not to be repeated. Consider a few of the old examples:

From Marco Polo we are able to get a glimpse of how falconry was carried out in Central Asia around the beginning of the 13th century. He tells that Ghengis Khan's grandson, Kublai Khan, went on a yearly hunting trip into Manchuria, accompanied by no less than 10,000 falconers and trappers with 500 falcons.

During the Middle Ages, trained falcons were considered among the most valuable of all possessions. The most prized of all was the white gyrfalcon from Greenland. But if a falcon were lost during the hunt, or if it strayed away and was taken up by another falconer, the custom was to return it to the owner. During the siege of Acre (Ptolomais) in Syria in 1104 A.D., however, a white Greenland falcon of the crusading King Philip August of France strayed and was later captured by the city wall. The King offered Sultan Saladin the enormous sum of 1000 gold ducats for return of the falcon, but the bid was refused.

After a late 14th century crusade battle, Carl VI of France was bargaining with Sultan Bajazeth I for the return of French prisoners (among whom were the cream of French knighthood), but the Sultan declined all offers. Later, he was offered a jeweled gauntlet and twelve Greenland falcons as ransom for the son of the Duke of Burgundy. The Sultan accepted this ransom for the Duke's son and, in the bargain, let all the prisoners free.

The crusader best known as a falconer was Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, Holy Roman Emperor, King of Sicily and Jerusalem. Frederick II (1194-1250) wrote the classic treatise on falconry, *DE ARTE VENANDI CUM AVIBUS*. He was clearly one of the most amazing men of the Middle Ages, known as stupor mundi et immutator mirabilis (marvel of the world and wonderful innovator). Whole books have been devoted to Frederick who was, in addition to a falconer, a mathematician, architect, naturalist, and man of great burning inquisitiveness. He founded the University of Naples in 1224 and has been variously described as "the first modern man upon a throne" and "the real beginning of the Italian Renaissance". So much for old *stupor mundi*.

From the time of Frederick II early in the 13th century, falconry flourished in Europe for more than 400 years. In England, the Stuarts were especially known for their pursuit of falconry. Henry the Eighth was a great advocate and is the subject of the well-known story that while trying to vault a dike during a chase, his leaping pole broke and the weighty king almost drowned. In Henry's day the Royal Mews were at Charing Cross close by what is now Trafalgar Square. Shakespeare was no doubt close to the sport; indeed, few were the great men (and women even) prior to the 17th century who did not know the art.



"I spurn your offer, sire. The ransom I desire is twelve white falcons from Greenland."

William the Conqueror, Mary Queen of Scots, St. Thomas á Becket, warriors and bishops, statesmen and scholars--all were passionately devoted to the sport.

As written above, the invention and use of firearms struck the first blow at the popularity of hawking. The shotgun provided a better

and easier way of securing game. We can seldom, however, ascribe any great change to a single factor. Disruptions in social structure with the disappearance of a leisured, ruling class, the enclosure of open land and, more recently, the breaking up of larger estates all had their profound effect in limiting the terrain suitable for hawking and the men to hunt over it.

Falconry managed to cling on in most European countries and has been practised by a few devoted sportsmen without a break up to now. Holland was the center of European falconry from the 1700's. Falcons were trapped during the autumn migration on the Dutch plains of Brabant, centering on the town of Valkenswaard. Professional Dutch falconers served in the courts of Europe and England. The last of the great Dutch professional falconers and trappers died in 1937, but falconry--at least in the Royal Houses--had declined in popularity long before.

In 1841, the English started the Loo Hawking Club for heron-hawking in Holland. The object of this form of hawking was for the falcon (or falcons, for usually they were flown in pairs) to drive the heron lower and lower in the air until it was grounded. At this moment the hawking party would ride up, place a ring on the heron's leg, and release it. Many herons were banded which already had several bands on their legs. I am not certain, but I wonder if this method of hawking was not a forerunner of modern bird banding? Heron-hawking at The Loo in Holland lasted some 12 years and, not long after the demise of the Club, the Old Hawking Club was founded in England--eventually to be replaced by today's British Falconers' Club. Until this century, the English falconers' clubs had been served by energetic and skillful professional falconers. To hawkers today, the names of John Andersen, Peter Ballantine, the brothers Barr, John Pells, Bots, Möllen and John Frost, have a familiar ring.

Until a few years ago, two professional falconers trained hawks in Britain: photographer Phillip Glasier once served under actor Sir James Robertson Justice, but he no longer leads that idyllic life. Only Ronald Stevens, author and country gentleman, maintains a professional falconer. The British Isles today boasts many eager, amateur falconers, and two falconry clubs. The word "mews" in England harkens back to the day when falcons were kept in such buildings (a falcon in moult was known in olden times as a mewing falcon); but now the "mews" shelter the family auto, or even serve as small apartments.

Falconry was never widespread in Scandinavia, although Norway, Iceland, and Greenland were important in supplying falcons which the Nordic courts passed on as royal gifts throughout Europe and the East. The Danish court maintained a mews in Copenhagen at the present Falkonerallé 118 from the time of Christian the Fifth (1690's) until 1810. The Royal parties went hawking near present-day Kongens Lyngby

and Jægersborg. There are no falconers that I know of today in Scandinavia. Several men keep birds of prey in Denmark, one of whom is writing a book on falconry. But falconry, as it is known in other lands, is strangely absent from the Scandinavian sporting scene.

It is in Germany today that falconry finds its largest following, but falconers are also found in most other countries of Europe. In the United States, Mexico, and Canada, scattered groups of devotees pursue their sport. The North American Falconer's Association, with over 200 active members in the United States and Canada, is the latest attempt in North America to band together in a formal group. This club, along with a few local falconers' clubs, appears to be influencing state legislation to permit legal hawking. Surely falconers are among the most enthusiastic wildlife conservationists and have been able to change the image of birds of prey from that of pure vermin to something which they are: great use to man and an exciting part of our natural heritage.

Gunpowder, which dealt falconry the first blow, is still a menace today. Ten million hunters with rifle and shotgun stalk game (and often themselves) each year in the United States and Canada. Not more than 100 falconers go afield regularly with their hawks. Most do not dare fly a bird during the hunting season when the nimrods will gun down anything that flies--despite protection laws. So gunpowder, which initially undermined falconry as a means of getting food for the table, now has added a formidable risk for the owners of hawks (to say nothing of owners of cows, dogs, and miscellaneous other animals gunned down regularly each year). Because a trained falcon has lost her natural fear of man, she makes easy pickings for those who would do her harm. I saw a trained falcon take a pheasant on the 16th green of a country club near Philadelphia. We were too far away so that our cries went unheard, but an instant later, one of a golfing foursome clubbed the bird to death "because I was afraid it was going to attack me". We got what we thought was a fine although, as usual, distant view of the falcon's pheasant kill. The golfers must have had ringside seats and must certainly have heard her bells as we did from farther away. I guess the head of a 28-ounce falcon makes a better target than a golf ball for course-weary players.

The falcon is the official mascot of the Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs. Many football fans have witnessed the Academy's falcons flying to the lure during the halftime lull. More important, the Air Force is interested in the falcon as a possibility for clearing airfields of small birds and gulls.

Falconry, which played such a remarkably important role in the life of times past, seems to have no place in today's world. As we bash ahead in "progress" polluting our streams and air and everything about us, we cannot pause to consider a few souls who find pleasure in

a pastime once the passion of nations. We have virtually slaughtered most of the animals known as vermin, and we are now well on our way to poisoning the remaining ones. The old days of natural balance are lost forever. Fifteen years ago we mapped 200-300 pairs of peregrine falcons nesting east of the Mississippi River. Today there are none. Not one pair. The story is the same in England, Scandinavia, and most of Europe. The falcons that are around lay eggs, but they are sterile and the eggs will never hatch. This occurs when the concentration of pesticide poisons (mainly chlorinated hydrocarbons) reaches an intolerable level in the bird's body. I often wonder if we realize fully the implication of what we are doing. I think not.

But this letter has history as its purpose. Most of this history is a glorious one and bears closer study. No one has written a good history of falconry and its importance throughout the ages, perhaps because the subject is so comprehensive.

My next letter on falconry concerns the birds which are trained and the men who train them.

Sincerely,

Bill Mattox

W. G. Mattox

