

The History of Falconry in Ireland

This article sets out to summarise what is known about hawking and falconry on the whole island of Ireland, regardless of whatever political situation was defining its borders at the time. With this information condensed, it is hoped it will be more easily digestible to club members or anyone for that matter.

Eric Dempsey's thorough and engrossing book *Ireland's Lost Birds* has a wealth of information on this subject, especially in the chapter about the Goshawk, which will be looked at later. Where other authors have often fallen into the trap of looking at raptor history and cultural references while ignoring the etymology and reverence that was directly as a result of falconry, Dempsey not only acknowledges it, but reveals so much more than we would have known had he not undertaken the task. For this, he is due a debt of thanks from the falconry community here.

Liam O'Broin's *The Sparrowhawk: A Manual For Hawking*, itself something of a landmark in the development of modern Irish falconry, has a chapter in which Liam charts what is known about the sport's presence here, detailing the people and places that emerged through his rigorous research. It makes for fascinating reading, and when I was younger, always gave me a sense of legacy and cultural continuity from those who had gone before.

The history of Irish Falconry is a nebulous subject. It has very often been looked at as something that simply went on here from time to time, something transient that was occasionally brought by visitors. This is not quite the case, as we will see. Meanwhile, Irish raptors were much in demand.

But how far back can we look to see an interaction between man and hawk for the purpose of actual hunting? The difficulty lies therein – for example, Eric Dempsey discusses fossil evidence of an interaction with Goshawks. Remains of these once common accipiters have been found in Mount Sandel, Coleraine (c.7000 BC), and Dalkey Island, Dublin and Newgrange in the Boyne Valley (c. 3000BC). But was this true falconry? Regardless of whether it was or not, it indicates that man and hawk certainly dwelled together in some capacity.

The earliest known reference to falconry is in the Irish text *Betha Colman Maic Luachain* (The Life of St Colman Maic Luachain) in the 7th Century, in which the King of Tara is described as having '*da seabhac selga*', or two hunting hawks. Actual falconry references are nowhere to be found until the 12th Century, when it would seem the arrival of the Anglo Normans finally secured falconry's place here, albeit amongst the nobility.

At this point, the country already had a reputation for providing the best hawks available at the time. A Welsh monk, Giraldus Cambrensis wrote in his book *Topographie Hibernae* (The History and Topography of Ireland) about the abundant game and raptors: '*Ireland has none but the best breed of falcons. Those inferior falcons commonly called by the name lanner are absent.*'

They were so good in fact that a roaring trade opened up. Raptors, particularly the goshawk, became a valuable commodity, something to be harvested, and

subsequently used to pay rent or to gain political leverage with overlords. A lucrative black market soon emerged. It got to the stage that by 1481, stiff levies had to be imposed on trappers and tradesmen: *'Whatever merchant shall carry a hawk out of Ireland shall pay for a peregrine 13 shillings four pence, for a tiercel six shillings and eight pence, for a falcon ten shillings and the poundage upon the same price.'*

But legislation existed even before this. Reginald Talbot, in 1218, was heavily fined for illegally trying to smuggle a goshawk out of the country at Dalkey. In 1386, during the reign of Richard II, a proclamation was made at Drogheda against the export of raptors, and rigorous searches took place to curb black market trade.

A 14th Century document from Kilkenny Castle details the only three types of hawks that were to be used for rent payment. Elizabethan falconers prized falcons from Cape Clear off Cork, and Horn Head in Donegal. In 1531, Archbishop Cromer, the Louth-based Bishop of Armagh, presented a cast of hobbies to Henry VIII. The Earl of Thomond at Bunratty Castle, Clare, has his signature on legal documents from 1615 in which the rights to his harvest of goshawks are made legally binding. This was serious stuff – raptor stocks actually written into the law. In the late 16th Century, an inventory had even been written up of Gos nests in Kerry and Limerick. Thomas Molyneux, depicting the natural history of Leitrim in the 17th Century, says: *'The woods are full of large and excellent timber: and well stocked with excellent goshawks.'* In his book *Falconry or Hawking* (Edited and Transcribed by Derry Argue), George Tuberville refers to one French falconer by the name of William Tardisse who had this to say about our Goses: *'But truly there is no goshawk more excellent than that which is bred in Ireland in the north parts, as in Ulster, and in the County of Tyrone.'*

A Tudor poem describing the falconry birds available in Ireland sums up the sentiment at the time:

*The Goshawke first of the crewe
deserves to have the name
The Faucon next for high attemptes,
in glorie and in fame,
The Tarsell then ensueth on,
good reason tis that he:
for flying haukes in Ireland next,
the faucon plaste should bee.
The Trasell is gentels course in nexte,
the fourth peer of the lande:
Combined to the Faucon, with
a lovers friendly bande.
The pretie Marlion is the fifth,
to her the Sparhauke nexte,
and then the Jacke and the Musket laste,
by who the birds are nexte.
These are the haukes which chefly breed,
in fertile Irish grounde:
whose match for flight and speedie wing
elsewhere be hardly founde...*

- From by J Derrick's 1581 book *The Image of Ireland*.

In the mid 1600s, Charles II's viceroy Lord Ormonde established Phoenix park as a Royal Hunting Park just at the edge of Dublin city. The sight was stocked with deer and pheasants for hounds and hawks. A high wall was built around it to keep game in and poachers out. The park was finally handed over to the people of Dublin in 1745. Meanwhile, in 1693, a newspaper called the *Dublin Intelligence* carried an ad for a lost hawk belonging to Lord Capall, offering a handsome reward of 30 shillings for its return.

Things really took off sport wise in the mid to late 18th Century. There are records from 1762 of Lord Bandon having a mews of hawks and a falconer at Ardfert Abbey in Kerry. Around 1800 or so, it would appear that the Curragh in Kildare began to be exploited as a key destination for rook and magpie hawkers. Captain Salvin was based at the Curragh military camp in 1857. He and John Barr, falconer to Maharajah Dhuleep Singh, became fierce magpie hawkers, advertising meets in local papers to get beaters on board and reportedly nailing 184 magpies with two tiercels in four months. EB Michell refers to woodcock hawking in Monaghan, while Salvin was joined by names like Broderick and Lascelles for continued sport on the Curragh.

It is around this time that we come to the formation of the first Irish falconry association. In 1870, 212 Great Brunswick street, Dublin played host to a meeting chaired by Lord Talbot de Malahide to establish the Irish Hawking Club. The aforementioned Dhuleep Singh donated £50 towards the fund. After that, no records survive of what went on. Eventually, the present club was reconstituted in 1967. Before then, the hawking parties came and went. William Rutledge and Jack Mavrogerdato went lark hawking with former IHC president Dr George Luke in the west and north west. Ronald Stevens and Philip Glasier would visit Willie McDougald at his home in Ballymanus, Co Laois.

One hopes that they were aware of the use by Nobel Laureate WB Yeats of falconry imagery in his post-war poems at the start of the century. It is undocumented whether or not Yeats actively participated in falconry. What is known, however, is that he would often watch wild falcons from his spiritual home of Drumcliffe in Sligo. His family may also have socialised with the Coopers of nearby Markree Castle, Lord Cooper himself a keen austringer. Yeats also had a fascination with Japanese culture, which often featured falconry-related images. Much is written on the poet's use of the falcon and falconer metaphors, some perhaps missing the point, or unaware of the presence of falconry around the time Yeats was in his formative years. The falcon and falconer remain vibrant symbols of matters close to Yeats' heart, particularly his torment over the unrequited love of Maud Gonne – the falcon is the unhindered, wild companion, ranging and wandering as the falconer strives, in vain, to attain total mastery of her. The falcon is emotion and the falconer intellect. In *The Second Coming* (1920) we have lines such as:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,*

*The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

However, it is in *The Hawk* (1919) that the falconry metaphor is taken to new levels:

*Call down the hawk from the air;
Let him be hooded or caged
Till the yellow eye has grown mild,
For larder and spit are bare,
The old cook enraged,
The scullion gone wild.'*

*'I will not be clapped in a hood,
Nor a cage, nor alight upon wrist,
Now I have learnt to be proud
Hovering over the wood
In the broken mist
Or tumbling cloud.'*

*'What tumbling cloud did you cleave,
Yellow-eyed hawk of the mind,
Last evening? that I, who had sat
Dumbfounded before a knave,
Should give to my friend
A pretence of wit.'*

It is arguable that Yeats meant to say 'cadged' rather than 'caged' in the second line of the first stanza. Another raptor reference, presumably instilled by his time in Sligo is his little-known one-act play *At The Hawk's Well* (1916), in which a dried-up well on a desolate mountainside is guarded by a hawk-like woman.

That one of 20th-Century literature's most revered poets and dramatists should adopt falconry imagery is unsurprising and not entirely original. But unlike Shakespeare, who used hawking as a tool and a set of symbols, Yeats probed right into the heart of the falcon-falconer dynamic, and leaves us with a sense that he must have at least fraternised with falconers to attain such insight into the relationship.

No history of Irish falconry would be complete without a mention of Ronald Stevens, unquestionably the guru of the sport in modern times. Stevens came to live in Connemara in the early 1960s, settling in the remote Fermoy Lodge. In a letter in the British Falconers' Club journal, *The Falconer*, Stevens describes his move to Ireland, his search for a remote place where 'my hawks can fly without risk of being sniped at' and his hacked Jerkin coming to sit on a nearby rock 'above the tumbling waters' while he was fishing.

Despite his best efforts, his house became something of a Mecca for falconers from all across the world. Stevens not only inspired generations through his classic treatise *Observations on Modern Falconry* and *The Taming of Genghis*, but also imparted

much knowledge on to a privileged handful of Irish falconers, particularly the Hon Johnny Morris. The two accidentally invented the hybrid falcon in the 1960s, when Stevens became frustrated with trying to breed peregrines and asked Morris if he could try the tiercel with Morris' Saker falcon, a bird sourced by the then Iran-based US falconer Kent Carnie. The pair got on famously and hatched out two males that first year. Letters of congratulations and intrigue arrived from around the world. Stevens and Morris flew one each, noting a similar temperament to the peregrine. A further three were bred the following year, this time including a female who stunned the two men by her size. This bird appeared on the glove of Charlotte Rampling in the John Boorman film *Zardoz*. She was lost by Stevens in Mayo.

In his later years, Stevens' eyesight began to fail and falconry became less practical. He moved to the smaller, more manageable Bunagipoun, closer to the village of Oughterard. He died in 1994, leaving some money to the IHC which went towards a breeding fund. A hooded falcon sat on the glove of Johnny Morris during the funeral ceremony in Oughterard.

Hopefully this has provided an overview of Ireland's falconry heritage. It remains to be seen what new details are uncovered on the topic, of which many must still exist. For those who would like to have a more detailed account of what we know, I refer them to the two books which I mentioned earlier.

References

- Dempsey, E., *Ireland's Lost Birds*. Four Courts Press, 1999
O'Broin, L., *The Sparrowhawk: A Manual For Hawking*. Old Abbey Books, 1992
British Falconers' Club, *The Falconer 2002 Anniversary Edition*. BFC, 2003