

William MacDougald: A Life Less Ordinary

Don Ryan, Dublin



In 1922, as Civil war spread across Ireland, William MacDougald, only son of Mabel and Hugh was born. His mother had served on the frontline as a nurse in the Great War where no doubt the illnesses and hardships she experienced took their toll and she passed away when William was only three. This left his father, a former British army officer, to rear him.

He was educated at St Columba's college in Rathfarnham where he established the Natural History Society and kept deer, ducks and peregrine falcons. Many a falconer that has read Liam O'Broin's classic treatise on the sparrowhawk may recall the picture of William and Ned Bayley in front of the college in 1939 holding a number of Peregrines. It was clear he had a great passion for animals when on leaving St Columba's, he entered veterinary college.

Meanwhile in Europe, war was spreading even further into Egypt and Russia. Like many Irishmen, William joined the war because he felt it was the right thing to do. Early In 1942, at the age of 19, he left veterinary college and went to Britain to enlist in one of the most dangerous arms of the British Forces, the RAF Bomber Command.

'Mac', as he became known, was trained in the US but due to an infection on the return

troop ship, his entry into active service was delayed by at least six months. This delay may have saved his life as the draft of young pilots he trained with, passed through one of the bloodiest battles of the entire war; the Battle of Berlin. After his recuperation while he was stationed in Wales, he finally saw front-line action in the closing months of the War.

With war finally over, William was one of the lucky soldiers that got to go home. He returned to Ireland with his new English wife Alice Wheeler (or Billie as she was more commonly known) and their six-week-old daughter Suzanne. He resumed his veterinary studies and eventually opened a practice in the then quiet Dublin suburb of Dundrum. Their home, Glenville Manor, became home to five children and a menagerie of animals from horses to all types of birds including peregrine falcons. Rowland Eustace had reason to call to him one day where he had recognised the distinct falcon cry. To William's surprise, Rowland asked could he see them and William became quite alarmed that Rowland knew of their presence. It was the mid 1960's and the effects of DDT were taking their toll on falcon populations around the world and their acquisition was becoming more difficult. It was from Glenville that William revived the fortunes of the South Dublin

Hunt and started Ireland's first mink farm.

In 1965, they moved the farm to Ballymanus House, Henry Grattan's old home in Co Laois. The rare auld times were changing in Dublin and Glenville House was a victim of progress, being knocked down to build the original Dundrum Shopping Centre. The mink farm at Ballymanus grew and blue foxes were added to the list. At the height of the mink farms prosperity it produced 80,000 mink and 20,000 foxes and employed 70 people.

Meanwhile, throughout all this period, falconry played a large part in Mac's life. He corresponded regularly with many falconers, including Ronald Stevens, whom on his arrival in Ireland in 1956 enquired from Mac where pigeons may be obtained. He joined the Irish Hawking Club in 1967 at the invitation of the Hon John Morris and encouragement from Ronald Stevens, who believed he may "leaven the immaturity" of the young committee. He later spent some time on the IHC committee himself.

He flew a variety of birds, including a Redtail belonging to Tony Huston, son of the legendary Hollywood film actor and director, John. Tony was living in the west of Ireland at the time. He also bought a haggard Luger



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falcon that Tony had left with Ronald. Tony had ordered a Peregrine from India and paid the princely sum of £40 so was pretty disappointed when the Lugger arrived. He sold it on to Mac for £15. Mac also flew goshawks but falcons were his preference and Ronald agreed in correspondence to him when he wrote: "Shortwings Bah! Longwings Hah!"

In 1970, he got a call from a friend in Cork who had been shooting pigeons and unintentionally shot a white Gyr-falcon that had flown in after them. It had suffered a wing injury from the shooting and was put on the train to Mac to see if he could help. Unfortunately, the injury was irreparable and the beautiful white Gyr had to be put to sleep. Mac sent the Gyr to Gerrard's in London to be mounted.

By all accounts, William MacDougald was the quintessential sportsman. He fished, hunted and engaged in falconry. He bred and trialled Labradors, helped establish a number of pheasant shoots in the country and was instrumental in forming the Laois regional game and wildlife council. He retired to Castledermot in 1987 with his wife Billie where he kept up many of his pas-

simes. He still kept a Larsen trap at the end of his garden though his son Colin admitted he released all the birds he caught in his later years.

He remained in Castledermot until he passed away in December 2002 leaving his wife Billie who passed away five years later in April 2007. In his lifetime, Mac had done his duty to freedom and civilisation. He brought enterprise and employment to a struggling economy. He left his mark on fieldsports throughout the country and raised a fine and enterprising family. He played a role in falconry, serving on the IHC committee and helped in getting goshawks imported

into the country. The life of William MacDougald truly was a life less ordinary.

We are very grateful to his son Colin who kindly donated a number of his falconry items to the new falconry exhibit of the Irish Fly Fishing and Game Shooting Museum in Attanagh, Portlaoise, Co Laois.

