

THE SPARROWHAWK

# *A Manual for Hawking*

LIAM Ó BROIN



*edited by Michael Comyns*



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LIAM Ó BROIN

First published in 1992 Hardbound

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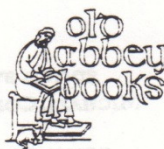
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*A Manual for Hawking*  
LIAM Ó BROIN

*Illustrations by the Author*

EDITED BY  
MICHAEL COMYNS

DESIGNED BY  
BRIAN BARNES



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*A brief rule to keep a hawk by  
for him that had knowledge.*

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with twice a week casting  
makes her sounde and long lasting”.

1557 A.D.

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*Feeding the Hawk, Feeding the Hawk, The Hawk.*

*This book is dedicated to*

**RONALD STEVENS**

*"The Falconer Gentle",*

*who by his personal dedication*

*and through his writings has enthralled*

*and captivated the imagination*

*of all those who would follow in this art.*

---

EDITED BY  
MICHAEL C. CROFT

DESIGNED BY  
BRIAN B. BATES



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Falconry is a minority sport so the number of people who do not fly hawks but were involved in the making of this book, is considerable. To them I owe my grateful thanks for their patience and forbearance. On the other hand, the falconers involved though few were vital to its completion. Firstly I would like to thank my editor Michael Comyns, author and falconer and more particularly, sparrowhawk of no mean ability. The first sparrowhawk I ever saw flown at quarry was from Michael's fist and the sport we had that day is etched forever on my mind. To him I owe an enormous debt of gratitude for his unfailing attention to detail. Michael's knowledge and wealth of experience with sparrowhawks has added a dimension to this book which I alone would never have achieved.

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## FOREWORD

would be very grateful for their correspondence. To beginners, young

Our grateful thanks to Michael Begley and Associates Design Consultants, Dublin and Gerry O'Connor The Type Bureau, Dublin. For technical facilities and advice given graciously, and without whose generosity this publication would not have been possible. It is which must

will be revealed with time and experience. Provided a falconer cares for his hawk, then, with the will to learn, only time and patience are the real ingredients. Many books, some five hundred years old, have been written on this subject. Most, both old and modern, deal with hawking and falconry in general; few have been written on the sparrowhawk exclusively. One book, a classic, was bible for us all in our early years: "A Hawk For The Bush", by the late Jack Mavor Gordon. I purposely decided to write specifically on the sparrowhawk also, as I rather think there is a tendency today for would-be falconers to choose "big" hawks, thinking the bigger the better. In that they can be so misguided! If the special art of hunting with the diminutive sparrowhawk should ever be lost then it will be a sad day for the art of falconry. It is a fact that modern techniques, equipment and the hawk's furniture have developed to a very high degree of perfection. But we must not develop a fetish for things. Our energies should be concentrated towards the hawk and her primary raison d'être. She should be kept by her falconer as nature intended: flying free and hunting quarry. It is only by the measure of our success in the field and the art of keeping her well that we can claim to be falconers.

In 1976 at an international conference on falconry, Sheikh Zayid bin Sultan Al Nahayyan of the United Arab Emirates, in his address, said,

*"A successful falconer once wrote that good falconry was the finest sport in the world, bad falconry the very worst. As with all arts, falconry is better practised by those who do it well, those who have the gift of understanding what is falconry. It is for those who would create an exhibition of it or hawk it to commercial gain, it is*

encouraging and suggesting their contributions. The author is indebted to the following for their assistance: The Hon. John Morris, Emma McCabe, Dan Ferdinando D'Arcy Carrascione, Ronald Stevens, William McDrumald, Denis Mahony, Vaughn Sargent (U.K.), R.P.C. Harman and Helga (nee Jocher) Gebel and Vicky Morgan for their generous assistance and thanks to Peter for the spare wheel! Clavin and Nicola Hughes of Cork and Anna Hegan, Tina Naylor administrator Pota House, Coth. Richard Wood for permission to reproduce the painting of a bowling party by Daniel MacLise. (Pota House Collection.) The late Brian De Breeffay, British Library U.K. for permission to reproduce the Salisbury letters. Barry Mason for the additional photograph of the Hon. John Morris. Paul Leach for permission to reproduce the portrait by the author of Ronald Stevens. My thanks also to John Hardy (Vet. M.B. V.S., Vet. Surgeon, Animal Welfare Veterinary Hospital, Dublin, To Dermot Shevlin, David Clarke, Neil Mitham and Sam and Shelia Holt a special word of thanks also to Austin Davis and Eugene Holland my gratitude and to Peter, McRinney. I thank my family, especially Margaret my wife, also Niamh, Fiona and Aoife for perfectly timed respite, good humour and constant encouragement. I have made every effort to contact institutions and individuals who have copyright of material quoted and reproduced in this book. If I have omitted anyone I



## FOREWORD

This book will, I hope above all else, be of help to beginners, young and old. The art and practice of falconry is very difficult and it demands only the very best of effort and commitment from those who would practice it. I trust also that those who read this book will take heart when all seems impossible and know that each thing which must will be revealed with time and experience. Provided a falconer cares for his hawks, then, with the will to learn, only time and patience are the final ingredients. Many books, some five hundred years old, have been written on this subject. Most, both old and modern, deal with hawking and falconry in general; few have been written on the sparrowhawk exclusively. One book, a classic, was bible for us all in our early years "A Hawk For The Bush", by the late Jack Mavrogordato. I purposely decided to write specifically on the sparrowhawk also, as I rather think there is a tendency today for would-be falconers to choose "big" hawks, thinking the bigger the better, in that they can be so misguided! If the special art of hunting with the diminutive sparrowhawk should ever be lost then it will be a sad day for the art of falconry. It is a fact that modern techniques, equipment and the hawk's furniture have developed to a very high degree of perfection. But we must not develop a fetish for things. Our energies should be concentrated towards the hawk and her primary *raison d'être*. She should be kept by her falconer as nature designed, flying free and hunting quarry. It is only by the measure of her success in the field and the art of keeping her well that we can claim to be falconers.

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*a fine field sport and only for those dedicated enough to do it justice, despite the difficulties of achieving real and continued success in the field. For that is where the skills and competence of a falconer are to be judged."*

But what of this individual? The falconer; one who dares to train hawks and falcons to hunt with him and his dogs. In medieval times he, most likely, was of the nobility with a retinue of handlers, horses, hawks and, above all, had open lands to ride across, with an abundance of game. When Sheikh Zayid echoed those words of wisdom in 1976, he was addressing kings like himself, and the rich and privileged, bankers and industrialists. He was also addressing, at that same conference, butchers, bakers and computer operators. Doctors, dentists and all manner of men, women, boys and girls. Now falconry is a sport and art open to all. We don't have to work as long a day as before. With more leisure time at our disposal falconry will not become a dim, distant, romantic memory. Falconry is probably now better understood and practiced than it ever was. Modern techniques with respect for old proven methods, sensible management and good veterinary backup, captive breeding, and ready access to information all contribute to a high standard of hawk management and success in the field.

Over three hundred years ago in 1688 one Richard Blome published an encyclopedia of the arts and sciences. The second volume included horsemanship, hawking and hunting. Though plagiarised from a French manuscript, 'Les Ruises Innocentes,' the part on hawking is nonetheless an excellent essay on hawk management and hunting. That section is now available as a reprint from the Cresset Press edition of 1929 by Thames Valley Press entitled "Hawking or Falconry".

The fact of Blome ever having been a falconer has been much argued and it seems doubtful that he ever was. Probably Blome gleaned the information from the French work mentioned and practicing falconers



## INTRODUCTION

of his day. Either way, it is a book of merit and contains much sound advice. E. D. Cuming, in the Cresset Press edition, gives a most interesting preface on the origins and history of falconry in Britain since early Roman times. There is no mention of hunting with hawks in Ireland except, ironically, to say that Peregrine falcons from the coasts of Ireland were famous. Falcons from Bean Cliff on Cape Clear were prized by Elizabethan falconers. Whatever about Blome's credentials there is no doubt that the 'Necessary Rules for a Falconer to Obey' ring very true and are as applicable now as then, when Blome wrote them down.

*"Whosoever intends to apply himself to this art, and to become master, must for some time bestow all his care and endeavours therein; he must be diligent to learn, and observe the natures, inclinations, strength, mettle, and conditions of his hawks; he must treat them with a gentle and loving hand and pass by their faults with patience; he must not be addicted to tables, cards, or playing of good fellow, for many an excellent hawk hath been lost, through the intemperance of her keeper, nor can he be termed a good falconer that is apt to be led away by these disorders; I grant he may be expert in reclaiming, enweaming, and fleeing his hawk, nay, he may attain to great skill in the ordering and managing her in her flights, and whilst she is in the field, but if then he betakes himself to the pot and pipe, when he is returned home, and peradventure to let his poor tyred hawk to hang by the beels, such a one cannot deserve the name of a good falconer. He that is a smoker must not chew the hawk's meat in his mouth, for some good time after; for it will make her cast her gorge or stand upon her meat, which will occasion a disorder unto her, if not kill her.*

*It is not enough that a falconer knows how to cure his hawk of any disease, or distemper, nor what remedies he ought to use in such and such; but his care must be to preserve her from diseases and ill accidents, which he may in a great measure perform, by care and diligence for that phisitian which prevents a disease, is of more esteem, than he that cures it."*



The Holy Roman Emperor, Fredrick II of Hohenstaufen, in his 13th century thesis "De Arte Venandi Cum Avibus" (The Art of Hunting With Birds) went a step further in describing the practitioner of this noble art.

*'The falconer should be of medium size; if he is too tall he is likely to be too easily tired and not nimble; on the other hand, if he is too small his movements, either on horseback or on foot, may be too quick and sudden. He ought to be modestly fleshy, so that he is not handicapped by emaciation and thus be unable to do hard work or to withstand the cold; nor should he be so fat he is likely to shun exertion and suffer from the heat.'*

So now, gentle reader, if you are not too large and not too small and if you have not been eliminated already for other reasons, read on and perhaps you'll become a falconer.

Slane Co. Meath  
Ireland. 1992



## INTRODUCTION

That falconry is an ancient sport there is no doubt, as Aristotle and Pliny both refer to the practice of training and hunting with hawks. According to E.D.Cuming Aristotle mentions the practice in his "Historia Animalium":

*"In the district sometimes called that of Cedrepolis men hunt for little birds in the marshes with the aid of hawks. The men with sticks go beating at the reeds and brushwood to frighten the birds out, and the hawks show themselves and frighten them down. The men then strike them with their sticks and capture them. They give a portion of their booty to their hawks; that is they throw some of the birds up in the air and the hawks catch them."*

Two aspects of this account are interesting. The reactions of other birds to a hawk being in the air; that as soon as a hawk appears in the sky any living thing will immediately freeze. Of course the hawk will sometimes be mobbed in the air. That is because the birds know they are far less vulnerable than their fellows on the ground. Once when out hunting with a sparrowhawk we walked along a hillside which was bare except for two small hawthorn bushes about ten metres apart. As I approached curiously, I became aware that the bush nearest was alive with small birds. Something like three dozen blue tits were flitting from branch to branch kicking up an incredible racket in alarm at the sight of the hawk. Never, at any stage, did one even dare to leave the safety of the web of tiny branches. Neither did the hawk make any attempt to indulge in the futility of a chase. Both parties knew the chances of the hawk catching anything was remote. It then struck me, as I watched the antics of the noisy blue tits, that in early Christian times the same practice was used in Wales to catch birds for food, where the birds would be netted. There is no doubt that having a net and one or two assistants we could have caught the entire occupants of that bush with no difficulty. The second aspect of Aristotle's account is the sheer practicality of the whole operation. The hawks were not flown from the fist for sport or the thrill



## INTRODUCTION

of the chase. Food was at stake here so the job was done as quickly and as practically as possible, in short, without the bother and problem of training the hawks to fly from the fist. E. B. Mitchell, in "The Art and Practice of Hawking" mentions the hobby as ideal for "daring larks." The hobby, very difficult to train to chase, was put up into the air in free flight. This was done over ground with an abundance of larks. The small birds, being so terrified of the hobby in the air, were picked up by hand.

As man hunted and gathered for survival for thousands of years before crops were ever planted, acute observation of nature was an essential attribute for a successful hunter. It is easy to imagine a scene like the one Aristotle describes where hunters, both man and hawks, became opportunists and shared a situation. And likewise other species, such as the dog, became opportunistic and teamwork evolved in the act of the hunt. The Honey Guide of Africa, free and untrained, is another prime example of this co-operation between man and the animal world.

The honey guide will, on sight of a familiar individual, lead him to a nest of wild bees and its hoard of honey stashed in a tree hollow. The man sets about smoking away the bees and raiding the honey combs. Finally the waiting bird is rewarded with a portion of honey comb hung on a nearby branch.

Hawking is viewed by some people as a regal sport of pomp and ceremony, a leftover from Medieval times. They have a romantic image of a mounted noble with embroidered gauntlet and hooded falcons riding out from a castle with a retinue of followers for a day's hunting. That certainly was the scene in Medieval Europe, England and in Ireland too, as only the rich and privileged could afford the highly priced hawks and falcons, horses and parties of men with trained dogs for the chase. There are accounts of King Alfred the Great in 884 A.D. hawking and hunting. King Henry VIII, his daughter Elizabeth, and her successor, James I, were very keen falconers as was Elizabeth's arch rival, the







unfortunate Mary, Queen of Scots.

In the East falconry has been practised by the Arabs for many centuries and today in many Arab countries is almost a national pastime. Strict laws are established by Islamic custom dictated by Koranic law, as to the manner in which quarry may be taken by hawks and falcons for the table.

It has been suggested by some authors that hunting with falcons may have been known to the ancient Mesopotamians of Babylon and Nineveh. This would date falconry to 3,000 years B.C. Persia, now Iran, has a long history of falconry and manuscripts on the keeping and hunting of hawks were written by men revered for their knowledge. One such manuscript, Baz Nara-yi-Nasiri, was compiled in the twelfth century A.D. It makes an amusing read regarding the recipes for the cure and treatment of various ailments. Nevertheless, it also contains useful information and a fascinating insight into hawking in 12th century Persia. Hunting with hawks and falcons has been practiced in many parts of the world at different times, having evolved or been discovered by particular civilisations independently of each other, much like weaving, pottery, metalworking and, indeed, hunting itself. That hawking and falconry was introduced into one culture by another is also possible and, indeed, probable. Widely practised in Asia, Europe and the Middle East it does not appear to have been known, however, in the African continent south of the Mediterranean, outside the area of main Arab influence, until the European colonisation of Africa. There is no evidence of hunting with hawks in North America before colonisation from the Old World, although it does seem to have been practiced by the Indians in Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest.



Hawking in twelfth century Europe in these islands and in the Arabian desert would fundamentally have been the same. The primary objective was to hunt and obtain meat for the table. For lack of any other method until the invention of gunpowder and the musket, hawking one way or another was the best and most practical method to catch other birds - duck, pheasant, partridge, quail in which the countryside, at that time, abounded.

When the shotgun became a more reliable piece with which to hunt game, especially when combined with pointing and retrieving dogs, the emphasis on hawking shifted to flying hawks, albeit to kill and catch quarry, but essentially for the sport and quality of the chase, along with the art of keeping a hawk that it always was. Heron hawking, for example, became the sport of kings and the very well off. In some cases the herons were subsequently released and those that were not hardly found their way to the table. Rooks too became a prized quarry, being very difficult to catch with any but the best of falcons.

The eastern falconers still hunt their hawks both for the art that it is and, in many cases, meat for the family, especially in parts of India and Pakistan. Wild trapped hawks, quickly trained, are cheaper and easier to get than shot and guns. Goshawks and sparrowhawks are used by local falconers to catch partridge and quail all over northern India. Sparrowhawks are still trapped in nets in Tunisia, trained within ten days and are used to hunt migrating quail in Spring. Once the annual passage of quail ends the hawks are well fed and released to continue to ply their trade in the wild, no doubt having developed a taste for quail. Now in the 20th century falconry is practised worldwide by all manner of people. However, falconry is not and never should be the keeping of hawks as pets. Hawks and falcons are superb athletes: swift, courageous and, like all predatory species, test themselves, and sometimes the falconer, to the very limits in order to survive.



Black Tom, Earl of Ormonde 1513  
from a portrait painted by Holbein  
the younger.

*(Winsor Castle Collection)*



The great house built in 1568 by  
Black Tom (known so because of his  
swarty looks) at Carrick-on-suir,  
Co. Tipperary. It was built in the  
style of an English Tudor Manor.

*photo: the author.*

