

## HISTORY OF HAWKING IN IRELAND

At present these are four species of birds of prey usable for falconry native and wild in Ireland. The Peregrine falcon, literally Lord of the Irish skies, and the smaller Merlin and Kestrel make up the longwings. The fourth member of the list is the Sparrowhawk which, being a shortwing, is, strictly speaking, the only one of the four correctly termed a hawk. To be very precise a falconer is one who hunts with longwings/falcons and an austringer hunts with shortwinged hawks. A sparviter is one who hunts with sparrowhawks.

Also native to Ireland is the Buzzard, sometimes used for falconry. It is however, usually very slow and does not display the courage required for excitement and sport. The Golden Eagle, once common, is rare even in those Northern counties which are very close to the Scottish coast where eagles breed. The Hen Harrier and the Marsh Harrier are common. Owls, such as the Barn owl, are also very common as is the Long Eared Owl. The Short Eared Owl migrates to Ireland but does not breed here. A not uncommon winter visitor is the magnificent Gyr falcon and regular sightings occur during Winter along the west coast and, more particularly, around the south east Wexford slob. The gyr, no doubt, follows in the wake of migrating flocks of waterfowl from Iceland and Northern Europe. Hobbies and Kites, now extinct in Ireland, were once very common. In 1531 Archbishop Cromer, Bishop of Armagh, who resided in Termonfeckin, Co. Louth, presented a cast of Irish hobbies to the then king of England, Henry VIII. The largest of the hawks, the Goshawk, is now also extinct on this island but was once plentiful in a landscape which up until the 17th century was thick with woods and forests. The deforestation which occurred then in Ireland saw the demise of this large and beautiful hawk and so for the last three hundred years the goshawk, to all intents and purposes, has disappeared. There has, from time to time, been the odd sighting of a goshawk. There are possibly one or two pairs in the south east of Ireland as reports have trickled in of

activity in the nesting season. The goshawk was, however, native in Ireland prior to the 17th century for thousands of years. The earliest known find of goshawk bones is over nine thousand years old by radio carbon dating. This find was at Mount Sandel near Coleraine in Co. Antrim. Professor Frank Mitchell mentions the find of goshawk bones in his book 'Reading the Irish Landscape' and asks, "could it have been used for falconry?" He also mentions further goshawk finds at a later mesolithic site on Dalkey Island and at a later still bronze age site at Newgrange, Co. Meath. No one knows as yet if the settlers at Mount Sandel, who were probably the earliest inhabitants in Ireland after the last Ice Age, practiced falconry or indeed if it was practiced later at Dalkey or Newgrange. What can be said, however, is that nine thousand years ago and up until the 17th century Ireland was thickly forested in pine and oak. The capercaillie was common and the goshawk, a bird of pine forests, would have preyed on this large bird which likes the fringes of forest and woodland. Ironically the rabbit, nowadays the favourite quarry for the trained goshawk, was unknown in Ireland until introduced by the Vikings in the ninth and tenth centuries. By the 1500s huge forest clearance began in Ireland to make way for agricultural land. The timber itself was exploited relentlessly, particularly oak for Mediterranean wine casks. Native timber was used also for barrels for exporting salted meat, shipbuilding and charcoal for ironworks. One wonders whether with the renewed interest in reforestation in this country, we may one day see the return of the Goshawk in the wild—and even the capercaillie.

The earliest references relating to falconry being practiced in Ireland is in an Irish text - *Betha Colmáin Maic Lúacháin* (Life of St. Colmáin Maic Lúacháin). This manuscript is now in the library of Rennes in Brittany. It is the life of Colmáin, a seventh century Irish saint, and refers to the king of Tara in Co. Meath having "two hunting hawks" (*dá seabac selga*). However, it is significant that this seventh century life

was written much later, probably in the twelfth century. By that time falconry was well established in Ireland. Manuscripts do exist from the early seventh century in Ireland. No reference to hawking or the value of hawks for hunting is made however in the early Irish law books. Written during the seventh and eighth centuries, the laws were very comprehensive and covered every aspect of life in Ireland at that time, from the value and rights of a *cumal* (female slave), to beekeeping and even to who had rights to seaweed along the tideline. The hawk is mentioned but in the context of a pest preying on domestic fowl. However, the Welsh law books of the later 13th century laid down a fine of fifty pence for killing a hawk or falcon to be paid to the landowner and the value of the bird to the king. Again according to E.D.Cuming "the Venedotian code of laws revised by Howell da around 914 A.D. refer to hawking and of the twenty four servants of the court, the king's falconer ranked fourth, whereas a court judge ranked fifth." Contact between the Irish, particularly from along the east coast and people from the west coast of Scotland, England and Wales by way of trade, was frequent and busy. Roman coinage has been found at Knowth in Co.Meath for example. So taming and training hawks for hunting must have come to the notice of the Irish if it was not already practiced here. Yet, as already said, no references appear before the twelfth century and the landing and subsequent occupation by the Anglo Normans. Ernst Jocher refers in his book 'Falcons Fly in Ireland' to an old Irish cross at Bewcastle showing a man with a hunting hawk on his fist. Bewcastle is not in Ireland but on the Scottish border in Cumbria. However that style of cross at Bewcastle is one which was common throughout these islands during the 8th-9th centuries. At Clonmacnoise, along the banks of the river Shannon, a similar cross depicts an ecclesiastic with a staff and a bird of prey perched on top. I believe this to be an owl associated with wisdom and learning with no evidence to suggest a trained hawk or falcon. Hunting scenes are the usual form of decoration on the base stone

of a number of biblical high crosses in Ireland all of which date from the 8th-10th century. At Bealin a deer can be seen caught in a foot trap and at Kells the market cross shows a hunting party on horseback. The deer and boar hunt are frequently encountered in Irish Celtic legend but nowhere, at least to date, is the falconer.

The Anglo Normans, many being Welsh, arrived in Ireland in 1169 A.D. In the same century Giraldus Cambrensis, a Welsh Anglo Norman, (Gerald of Wales) wrote the first travel book on Ireland - 'Topographia Hibernae' - The History and Topography of Ireland (translated from the latin by John O'Meara). Cambrensis describes Ireland's game and birds of prey

*"Wild peacocks abound here in the woods. Wild hens which are commonly called 'Grutae' are few here and rather small and very like partridges both in size and colour. Quail also is plentiful here. Hoarse and noisy ratulae are innumerable."*

*"Ireland has none but the best breed of falcons. Those inferior falcons commonly called by the name Lanner are absent. There are no magpies and no nightingales."*

Gerald Cambrensis is correct here as we do not have nightingales and the magpie did not arrive in Ireland until the 1600s. Cambrensis goes on to say

*"This country above any other produces hawks, falcons, and sparrowhawks abundantly. These birds have been provided by nature with courageous heart, curved and sharp beaks, and feet armed with talons, most suitable for catching their prey and all to afford amusement to the nobles."*

So it seems that hawking was, by the 12th century, an established practice in Ireland by the Normans and native Irish though it is very unlikely that hunting hawks were owned in either society by other than the nobility because of their value.

quāt aqua frigida ut omnis  
 uiscositas saluē. ⁊ flāns exi  
 stentis in ore suo remoueat  
 ⁊ aqua frigidior exire possit  
 ab ore si namq; non sic fieri  
 uiscositas saluē ⁊ flāns exi  
 ret cum aqua qm̄ irrozaret  
 falco ⁊ adhereret pennis ⁊ plu  
 mis falconis unde fierent i  
 uiscate ⁊ fordate ⁊ ad exiret  
 calidior ab ore que duo non  
 essent conuenientia postqm̄  
 autē os erit ablutū i plebit  
 aqua frigida cū sufflatu ⁊ i  
 pulsione labiorū s̄ illa aq̄ eiec  
 ta i minutas parcelas plūbz  
 i pulsionibz irrozabit falco s̄  
 dorsum ⁊ an̄ pectus eleuans  
 q; alis sursum irrozabit la  
 tera que sunt ppe cor ⁊ tan  
 tū irrozent q; pennis ⁊ plume  
 madate fiant sic namq; ces  
 sabit usq; ad horam a uolū  
 tate quam habebit diuiberā  
 di se ⁊ si ex toto cessabit nō  
 erit iteranda irrozatio si uō  
 p̄t primā non cessat se in  
 quietare potent irrozare se  
 cundo ⁊ tertio si opus est De  
 ber autē h̄mōi irrozatio fieri  
 falconis in loco obscuro q̄dū  
 durabit eius agilitas Ju  
 uamentū autē h̄m̄ irrozatiōm  
 mltiplex ē Nam p irrozatio  
 nes falco dimittit uolūtate

quā h̄t in quietate de ⁊ etiam  
 suas inquietationes ex eo q; q  
 irrozatio madefactū plumas ⁊  
 pennis ⁊ efficit falcones pigros  
 q̄ndū falco sentit pennis sua  
 madefactas non confidit iuuari  
 p eas vnd̄ stat maḡ quietē in  
 artentat dimouere eas neq; uo  
 late ad diffugiendū sentit ei  
 se pigrum ⁊ i potentes uolare  
 expectando quousq; penne sint  
 s̄siccate ⁊ signū h̄ ē quia mate  
 factus alas caudam ⁊ plumas  
 totus p̄sone segregat ⁊ excu  
 tit se sepius ut aqua p̄ excu  
 sionem cadat citius ⁊ citius  
 exsiccant plume Juuamen  
 tū autē in hoc est q; falco re  
 frigeratur p irrozationē vnde  
 in estate ⁊ qm̄ calefit quaq; di  
 eta sepius p̄t fieri hec irroza  
 tio Et q; penne s̄siccant citi  
 p̄t fieri plures ⁊ hoc q; iuuat  
 q; p irrozationē parciō t̄natorū  
 o est itaq; falco mansuefaciē  
 dul hoc modo in casibz p̄ditis  
 ⁊ qm̄ irrozandū ut dcm̄ ē ⁊ qm̄  
 dandū est sibi t̄natorū n̄ car  
 nosum ⁊ qm̄ t̄natorū carno  
 sum ut p ipm̄ carnosum all  
 cietur ad non carnosū de car  
 noso autē parū accipiat ne q̄  
 cedat s̄bitam q̄ntitate sui pa  
 stus potest etiam ⁊ ad alia ir  
 rozatio sicut dicit in singulis



Page from 'De Arte Venandi Cum Avibus' by Frederick II of Hohenstaufen. Written in the 13th century, it is a complete thesis on the handling and training of hawks for the hunt. The falconer is seen spraying cool water from the mouth to encourage the bird to rouse its plumage and so cool down during the early stages of carriage.

(Vatican Library)



Part of a fresco showing the three live kings at Abbeyknockmoy Abbey Co. Galway, founded by the Cistercians in 1189 a.d. The drawing is a reconstruction by the author of what remains of the damaged fresco and from 19th century drawings.

In the Cistercian Abbey at Knockmoy, Co. Galway, founded in 1189 A.D., there is a fresco which dates to 1400 A.D. Commissioned by Malachie O'Nollan and Conaire O'Eddnchan. The drawing depicts three dead kings and three live kings each with a hawk on his fist. Under the three dead kings the inscription reads "Fuimus ut estis vos eritis ut sumus nos" - "we have been as you are, you shall be as we are."

One thing is common throughout the references to hawks and falcons from this time on, and it is that Irish hawks and falcons were highly prized in England. Elizabethan falconers took eyasses from the cliffs at Cape Clear and up until very recent times falcons from Horn Head in Donegal were famous. By 1481 traffic must have been busy as levies had to be paid by trappers and merchants,

*"Whatever merchant shall carry a hawk out of Ireland shall pay for a peregrine thirteen shillings four pence, for a tercel six shillings and eight pence, for a falcon ten shillings and the poundage upon the same price".*

Levies such as these were no small sum and no doubt were expressly introduced to create revenue from a lucrative trade in exporting hawks and falcons. Cambrensis tells a story in a further chapter in "Topographia Hibernae" of a falcon in Kildare which was tamed and domesticated.

*"From the time of Brigid a noble falcon was accustomed to frequent the place and to perch on the top of the tower of a church. Accordingly it was called by the people "Brigid's bird" and was held in a certain respect by all. (Here Brigid would refer to St. Brigid associated with Co. Kildare). This bird used to do the bidding of the townspeople or the soldiery of the castle just as if it were tamed and trained in chasing, and, because of its own speed, forcing duck and other birds of land and rivers of the plain of Kildare from the air down to the ground to the great delight of the onlookers. For what place was left to the poor little birds, when men held the land and the waters and a hostile and terrible tyrant of a bird endangered the air? A*

*remarkable thing about this bird was that it did not allow any mate into the precincts of the church where it used to live. When the season of mating came, it went far away from its accustomed haunts and, finding a mate in the usual manner in the mountains near Glendalough, indulged its natural instincts there. When that was finished it returned alone to the church. In this is showed a good example of honour to churchmen especially when they are entrusted with divine office within the precincts of the church. Exactly at the time of the first departure of Lord John from Ireland, that bird which had for so many generations and so agreeably added interest to the shrine of St. Brigid, having occupied itself without sufficient caution with prey which it had caught, and having too little feared the approaches of men, was killed by a rustic with a staff which he had in his hand."*

By this account it seems, no matter the times, there is always a thick rustic with an even thicker stick to hand ready to mete out summary execution to any wild thing that crosses his path. I am reminded by this story of a similar end suffered by the otter as it ran along a ditch in 'Ring of Bright Water.' There are a number of similar accounts down through the years. Major Hawkins Fisher's tiercel, "Band of Hope", was killed by a ploughman. The equally famous tiercel, "Lundy", also suffered the same fate at the hands of a man with a hoe.

An interesting point about Gerald of Wales' story is that today there is at least one if not two peregrine nesting sites at Glendalough - presumably in continuous use since the 12th century - 800 years and probably longer.

The practice of sending hawks out of Ireland both for sale and as gifts continued well into the 17th century. The Salisbury manuscripts reveal a considerable flow of goshawks, falcons and merlins out of Ireland as gifts to the Earl of Salisbury from various personages eager to impress and to further their political careers. For one period of seven years, between 1598 and 1605, the Earl was the, no doubt delighted,

recipient of nine goshawks, ten peregrine falcons, and two merlins from Ireland. In 1604, for example, the Earl of Thomond sent a cast of falcons from Bunratty Castle, a year later a goshawk.

*"I have sent your Lordship a Goshawk, for that I never had a falcon this year in respect my man by negligence suffered them to be fostered myself being at Dublin. If you next year send a man of yours hither, he shall have the command of the long winged hawks and short that I shall have, who will use them better than any man can."* Bunratty, the last day of August 1605.

Earlier in the same year on July 13th, the 11th. Earl of Ormonde , Black Tom, a favourite of Queen Elizabeth who lived at Carrick-on-Suir.

*"Sends by the bearer a cast of Goshawks and a tarsel' to be presented in his name to the King. sends Salisbury, of such small store of hawks as he had this year one Goshawk of a very good eyrie - from my bed at Carrick,"* Co. Kilkenny.

Gifts such as these were no small gesture on the part of the giver. To send hawks to England was costly and needed careful organisation. A qualified man - (a falconer and some assistants depending on the number and kind of hawks to be transported) would have to accompany the hawks. Considerable cost would have been involved and care would have to be exercised as falcons, and more particularly goshawks, would not withstand the rigours of 17th century travel, including a sea journey, without the best of qualified care and attention. Also a gift of hawks to a royal patron would do little good, to say the least, for the sender if the birds arrived in poor condition. It is reasonable to assume the reverse was in fact the case, with the falconer charged by his master to indulge all necessary care, effort and expense to ensure a grand and impressive entrance at Court.

A lost falcon too was a considerable commodity. In 1693 the "Dublin Intelligence", newspaper, carried the following advertisement;

*"Lost the 28th September 1693 a tercel gentle hawk in the Queen's county belonging to my Lord Capell. The hawk had a pair of vervails with my lord's name engraved on them and a pair of copper bells. Whosoever shall give notice of him so as he may be had again to my Lord's steward at the castle in Dublin to my Lord's faulkner over against the angel dirty lane shall have thirty shillings reward."*

Thirty shillings in 1693 was a considerable amount and reflects the value of a trained hawk at this time.

That wild passage hawks and falcons were trapped and passed on for money and reward is also true. Also the taking of eyasses from nests was the preferred method, particularly with goshawks. Considerable trouble was exercised in procuring the rights to nests of goshawks which unlike falcon sites on wild and open cliffs, were always in a wood. Parchment documents were drawn up, signed and witnessed as legal agreements between native landowners, agents and their Anglo Norman overlords. Two parchments dated 1615, now housed in the National Library, Dublin make very interesting reading.

*"Indenture made the eight and twenty day of April in the year of our lord God one thousand six hundred and fifteen betwixt Donnell McMelagblin O Meager of Thomouony in the county of Tipperary yeoman of the one part and Thomas O Meagher of Boulebane in the said county gent of the other part. Witnesseth that the said Donnell have and do by these present give grant and confirm unto the said Thomas O Meagher all such hawks eyries of hawks both great and small as shall breed or any manner may be or remain in and upon ten acres of land which belongeth and appertaineth unto the said Donnell McMelagblin in the said Thomonony and Knockbaliemeagher or upon any the wood or appurtenance what so ever belonging unto the said ten acres. To have and enjoy and hold the said hawks and eyries both great and small unto the said Thomas O Meagher his heirs and*

This is to certify that the said Thomas O'Meagher  
 hath given unto the said Earl of Ormonde a nest of  
 Goshawks...

Witness my hand and seal at London the 15th day of  
 May 1615.

Thomas O'Meagher

John Mayhew  
 + Donogh O'Meagher  
 + Edmund O'Meagher  
 + Danyel O'Meagher  
 + John O'Meagher  
 + John O'Meagher

John Mayhew  
 + John Jemson  
 + John Jemson  
 + Derrett O'Meagher

Danyel O'Meagher

This is to certify that the said Thomas O'Meagher  
 hath given unto the said Earl of Ormonde a nest of  
 Goshawks...

Witness my hand and seal at London the 15th day of  
 May 1615.

Thomas O'Meagher

Thomas O'Meagher

Two parts of an indenture dated 1615 a.d.  
 between the Earl of Ormonde and  
 Thomas O'Meagher for the rights  
 in a nest of Goshawks.  
 (National Library, Dublin)



*assigns for ever without let stay trouble or vexation or interruption. Provided always and with this condition notwithstanding that the said Thomas O Meagher his heirs executors administrators and assigns shall for every such eyrie or eyries of hawks so found or had in and upon the premises before the removing or taking of them or any of them away satisfy content and duly pay unto the said Donnell his heirs and assigns one shilling sterling current money in and of England totius quotius and as often as it shall fall or happen in manner aforesaid without fraud or cozen. In witness thereof the said Donnell and Thomas O Meagher have interchangeably unto these parts put their hand and seals the day and year first above written."*

The second part a separate parchment and part two of the agreement reads:

*"To all christian people to whom these patents shall come Thomas O Meagher late of Bonlybane in the county of Tipperary gent sendeth greeting; where Donnell McMelaglin O Meagher of Thomonony in the said county, did by his deed indented bearing date the xxviiith day of April in the year of our Lord God one thousand six hundred and fifteen give grant and confirm unto me the said Thomas and my heirs and assigns for ever, all such hawks, eyries and hawks both great and small, as shall breed or any manner may be or remain in or upon ten acres of land which belonged and appertained unto the said Donnell McMelaglin in the said Thomonony and Knockbaliemeagher or upon any the wood or appurtenance whatsoever belonging to the said ten acres. Know you that I the said Thomas O Meagher, for and in consideration of a certain sum of money satisfied unto me by the right honourable Sir Walter Butler knight, Earl of Ormond and Ossory etc. where of I do by these present acquit and discharge the said Earl, bath given granted and confirmed and by these present I give grant and confirm unto the said earl and his assigns, all such eyries of hawks both great and small as shall breed or any manner may be or remain in and upon the said ten acres, or upon any the wood or appurtenance aforesaid, all my right title and interest in the said eyries and hawks with the appurtenances together with the said deed indented. To have and to hold unto the said Earl and of his assigns for ever. They yielding and paying unto the*

*said Donnell McMalaghlín and his heirs or assigns, for every such eyrie or eyries of hawks so found or had in upon the premises before the removing or taking of them, or any of them away, one shilling sterling in and of England, as often as it shall fall or happen in manner aforesaid without fraud or cozen. In witness of all the premises, I the said Thomas have hereunto put my seal the three and twentieth day of May, in the year of our Lord God one thousand six hundred and fifteen."*

Clearly by this longwinded (but thereby all the more legal) agreement Thomas O Meagher was acting as agent between Donnell McMelaghlín and the Earl of Ormonde for an undisclosed sum. The Ormondes, of Anglo Norman stock, were avid falconers, and used their not inconsiderable resources to procure hawks and falcons both for themselves and friends such as the Earl of Salisbury. An earlier parchment, witnessed and sealed 1542, is an agreement dated May 21st; James Earl of Ormonde buys the rights to a nest of goshawks for 21 years from James Keting fitz Maurice of Derrega.

*"John Keting of Nicholestown and Nicholas Keting of Ballygorman witness that said Keting has granted to the Earl for 21 years a nest of Goshawks in their wood called Glenegarve in Ofaghie in county Tipperary; the Earl to pay them yearly four marks Irish for each Goshawk and 26 shillings and eight pence Irish for each tiercel. Provided that they pay him a like sum for any bird flown from the nest or robbed by another. The payment to be made on the Nativity of St. John the Baptist without demand."*

The great hall at Carrick-on-Suir, seat of the Earls of Ormonde, no doubt held host to many a hawking party as deeds and grants to rights of nests show continuous activity from 1542 to 1615.

Later still in 1662 James Butler, 12th. Earl of Ormonde and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, travelled from Dublin to Dunmore, three miles north of Kilkenny, to attend a wedding. Colonel Edward Cook, a member of the entourage, probably in command of a guard of horse, kept a journal of events and in a letter to Lord Bruce described the adventurous journey

*'Tuesday October 21st, the Duke and Duchess both left this city (Dublin) but took several roads, partly because one could not bear both trains and partly because my Lord would .... pass through many parts of his estate. The Duchess led on her brigade by way of the valley, the Duke conducting his through the mountains of Wicklow. That day we went but twenty Irish miles to one Sir Richard Kennedys. This county called Wicklow, in the most barren parts, is very good for the breeding of cattle, but having been least inhabited and being full of high cragged mountains, deer, heaths, and furze, the great woods is very full of all sorts of game, as grouse in abundance pheasants and partridges, vast herds of deer both red and fallow and too many foxes and wolves; in the bottoms are the remaining ruins of lovely seats and a fertile soil but yet very thinly inhabited. The next day we continued in the same county, some twenty four miles further, to a town called Arklow, the first title and seat of the Dukes some 20,000 acres. We hawked all the way, we hawked and killed sundry pheasants, not flying partridges. That night we lay two miles from Arklow on Major West's called the rock, where though but a bad house we found very good entertainment, this major once commanding my Lord Fairfax troops and now my Lord of Anglesey.*

*The next day being thursday and the annual thanksgiving day for deliverance from the first Irish massacre, my Lord would not travel that day, but came in the morning to Arklow to church, but such a one as I never saw, mud walls, thatched roof, hogsty shape the seats like partitions for pigs, the pulpit as "if severed for the great boar"; here we heard good prayers and a bad sermon, and so returned home to dinner, and a good one it was, after which we rode abroad to see the country, lay out a park, and hawk, all of which we did, and saw a world of deer, killed two brace of*

*pheasants and saw and killed a peculiar curiosity to this country, called cocks of the woods (here colonel Cooke is probably referring to the capercaillie) a lovely bird as big as a turkey; the cock's are baked but the hens are roasted, and if anything towards young are incomparable meats, that is, I think them the best bird I ever ate. Back we came necessitated to it by night, and then the Duke, Lord Anglesey and I went to piece ombre, but I had my Lord Carlingford and Lord Ossory, though neither were there for my co-partners. Friday we advanced through part of the county of Wexford, which is a remove better than Wicklow, because not altogether so mountainous, though it be rough and hilly. This day we passed through goodly woods of the Earl of Stafford's called the woods of Slaney, where the last Earl had left the foundation of a famous fabric; and all the timberwork ready set together, but rotted in these times; a place I confess, I should never have chosen for so fine a house, having no prospect, not being able to see woods, for everything being choked up with the worst parts of the wood. And so forward to Tullow, where we dined, a pretty seat town on a fine rise and in a most pleasant county called the county of Carlow, which though but little, is the finest for profit and pleasure that I have seen; the soil rich and dry in which are all sorts of sports hunting and hawking." After attending the wedding at Dunmore, Colonel Cooke goes on to say, "we went to Kilkenny and having inspected a park and extended it from three miles to six, hawked back to dinner, and after hawked away the whole afternoon."*

The party finally returned to Dublin by way of Kildare to go horse racing on the Curragh.

Hawking, as a sport and a method of hunting, was well established in Ireland by the 13th and 14th centuries; goshawks, falcons, merlins, and sparrowhawks being readily available. In Co. Louth in 1311 the Sheriff of Louth was killed while out hawking.

*"Twelve jurors present that when Richard Gernon late sheriff of Louth in this county, together with others of his family, came on the Sunday before the nativity of the B.V.M., last, with hawks in a field at Althelardestown to take partridges and*

*other birds as is the manner in Autumn, Walter Brisbon junior; John Brisbon and William Brisbon deliberately assaulteð Richard Gernon ....'*

Richard Gernon died on the next day of his wounds. The assault was the settlement of an old score and had nothing to do with a disagreement concerning hawks. Not so the row between David McDermond O'Howman of Tullelesh in Co. Cork in 1593 and John fitzEdmund of Clane over payment for a hawk sent to fitzEdmund from the woods of Tullelesh. Swearing and public accusations outside church culminated in the whole affair being taken before the Vice President of Munster no less. Luckily no blood was spilt and there is no mention of what became of the hawk. I would guess that the sparrowhawk was preferred for taking partridges and probably it was with sparrowhawks that the ill fated Richard Gernon and his party rode out in August 1311.

Colonel Edward Cooke's reference to pheasants is interesting as they, unlike partridges, were introduced sometime after the Anglo Norman invasions. Pheasants certainly thrived despite "too many wolves and foxes." In 1568 John Hooker wrote to Sir Peter Carew,

*"The soyle and countrie of that baronry is very large and great, and yn all Europe not a more plesaunt, seeter or frutefuller lande; the same beinge referted with all things necessarye for man yn any respect, servinge for pleasure or neede, ffar huntynge the stagge, the hare, the fox, the wolff, for your pleasure at will; ffar hawkinge with all kinde of hawks, at partridge, rayle, fesaunt, crene, byttern and a number of other foules as miche as can be wished and desyred."*

Hawking was a sport no doubt, but it was also a very cheap way of getting meat for the pot, in fact that was its primary function. Rooks and magpies, now a prized quarry for the sport alone, never figured to any extent on the pre 18th century game lists. Rook pie was a traditional dish but the rooks were usually shot. As I mentioned earlier, the magpie did not find its way to Ireland until the 1600s. The popular belief is that a

small group of magpies were blown across the Irish sea from the south west coast of England sometime in the early 17th century landing on the Wexford coast. They obviously found Ireland an ideal home from home if the present innumerable population all over the country is anything to go by.

Certainly by the late 1800s magpies and rooks were the main quarry for falcons. The kills recorded by Captain Salvin in 1857, while based in the Curragh military camp, are astounding. It is well documented in a number of books which have been written about falconry how, on Captain Salvin's regiment being posted to Ireland in 1855, he and John Barr perfected the art of magpie hawking. They took seventy four magpies in enclosed country near to the Cahir Barracks Co. Tipperary. In the Autumn of 1857 Salvin and Barr again visited Ireland. They hunted this time in the countryside around Clonmel in Tipperary and in Cork and Kildare. The meets were advertised in the local papers to encourage a field of beaters. With two tiercels they accounted for one hundred and eighty four magpies in four months. In the previous century also, hawking was practiced throughout the country. For example in 1762 Lord Brandon, who had an estate in Dingle Co. Kerry, had a regular mews and a fulltime falconer employed at Ardfert Abbey. However it was in the 19th. century that most hawking activity seems to have taken place and that records were kept in the way of diaries and game books. According to E.B.Mitchell's "The Art and Practice of Hawking", during the 1820's a Mr. John Sinclair flew woodcock with success in Co. Monaghan. Curiously there are two stories told in relation to this, of how a tiercel was lost in Rossmore Park on the Westernra's estate near Monaghan town. One account by A.E.Knox in his book, "Gamebirds and Wildfowl", attributes the incident to a Colonel Bonham. (This was probably the same Colonel Bonham who flew falcons at grouse with Lord O'Neill of Co. Antrim). The second account is attributed to John Sinclair

by E.B.Mitchell. The tiercel was flown at a woodcock and was lost. The owner, whichever one of the two gentlemen it was, received a letter to say that it had been shot four days earlier in Aberdeen in Scotland by a gamekeeper. Despite the conflicting stories as to who the falconer actually was, I have no doubt that the story is perfectly feasible. In 1991 a tiercel was picked up on the beach near Howth in Dublin Bay and the bird had a British D.O.E. identity ring. The falconer, who was traced to Manchester, reported that the bird had been lost two days previously.

During the last century a popular area for flying falcons was undoubtedly the Curragh of Kildare. Situated in the centre of Co.Kildare, the Curragh is a large tract of open land stretching for miles. Being also virtually flat and treeless it is ideally suited for horseracing, and it has been so for over a thousand years. It is perfect for open flights at rooks and magpies. Also part of it was, and in fact still is, a military training camp. People like Captain Salvin found themselves posted there probably for cavalry exercises. Gerald Lascelles in "The Art of Falconry", writes, "The best sport we have seen is in Ireland, where the sport was ever heartily welcomed and cordially joined in. Great sport has been seen in Co.Kildare and in Wexford near Enniscorty in Tipperary near Fermoy". Salvin records in "Falconry in the British Isles" (Salvin and Broderick) that in four months during 1857 he killed 184 magpies, killing as many as eight in one day with his tiercels "The O'Donoghue" and "Dhuleep Singh". In 1873 Salvin with Lascelles took 28 magpies, three sparrowhawks and about the same number of rooks and other quarry during a months tour of Ireland. A Mr. Overton O'Keefe lived on the Curragh and employed Henry Pells younger son of John Pells as falconer. John Barr, falconer to the Maharajah Dhuleep Singh, flew falcons on the Curragh between 1875 and 1877. John Frost, head falconer to the Old Hawking Club in England, flew falcons on the

Curragh and elsewhere in Ireland. In 1870, at 212 Great Brunswick Street, Dublin, Lord Talbot de Malahide was chairman of a meeting held to establish an Irish hawking club. The Maharajah Prince Dhuleep Singh offered fifty pounds towards its founding. There are no records as to what became of the club. No records exist until the present Irish Hawking Club was founded in 1967. In the early 1900's Major Hawkins Fisher came to Ireland and flew his peregrines at grouse in Co. Mayo. At two-mile-bridge, near Clonmel, during the late 1890's the Clibborns, Thomas Harvey and his brother Frank, flew peregrines in the Knockmealdown mountains. They were a Quaker family, one of many such families who settled in the Suir valley in Co. Tipperary. There is a photograph of a hawking party which was in the possession of the Clibborn family until the 1960's. In Roger Upton's book, "A Bird in the Hand", a similar photograph appears, without the three individuals in the background. The figures, however, of Major Hawkins Fisher and his falconer William Ruthford, are unmistakable.

In 1937 the membership list of the B.F.C. journal lists N.P. Fitzgerald, The Island, Waterford as a member. In 1938, the last entry, his address is listed as Aspenden Hall, Buntingford, Herts. Nicholas Hatfield Purcell, R.A.F.V.R., was killed on a big game expedition in French Indochina on November 1st., 1938. He was a very young man, twenty five years of age in fact. A portrait now in the possession of Lady Levinge shows him with a goshawk on his fist. From 1938 and for a period of over forty years, William Rutledge, a well known member of the B.F.C., flew hawks in Co. Mayo. Jack Mavrogordato, a contemporary and friend, also visited the area. He mentions a trip to Belmullet in Co. Mayo in his autobiography "Behind The Scenes". William Rutledge was born in Rosturk near Mullrany which is between Newport and Achill Co. Mayo. His brother a very prominent member of the Irish Wildbird Conservancy, lived in Co. Wicklow. On many



Thomas Harvey Clibborn, Anner House, Clonmel 1895.

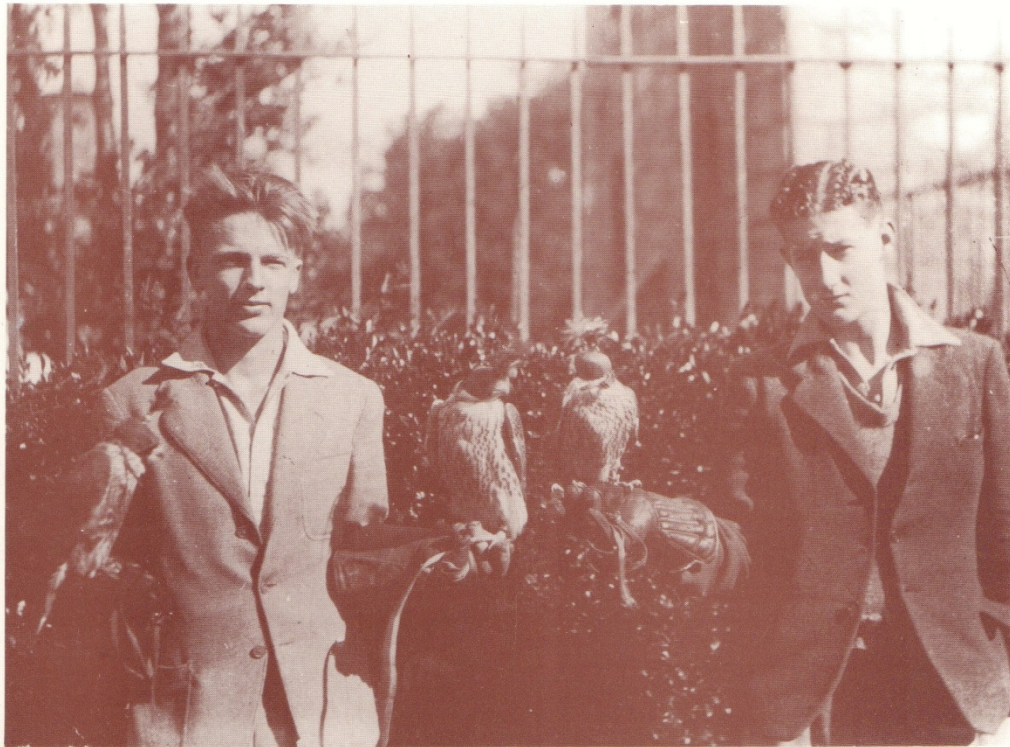


Frank Clibborn and unidentified falconer  
with cadge and falcons, Anner House  
Two-Mile-Bridge, Clonmel Co. Tipperary  
late 1800's.



A Hawking party including:  
Major Hawkins Fisher and falconer  
William Ruthford.

Hawkins Fisher flew peregrines at grouse  
in Ireland in the early 1900's, and may have  
visited Co. Mayo on several occasions. He  
also hunted near Clonmel in Co. Tipperary.

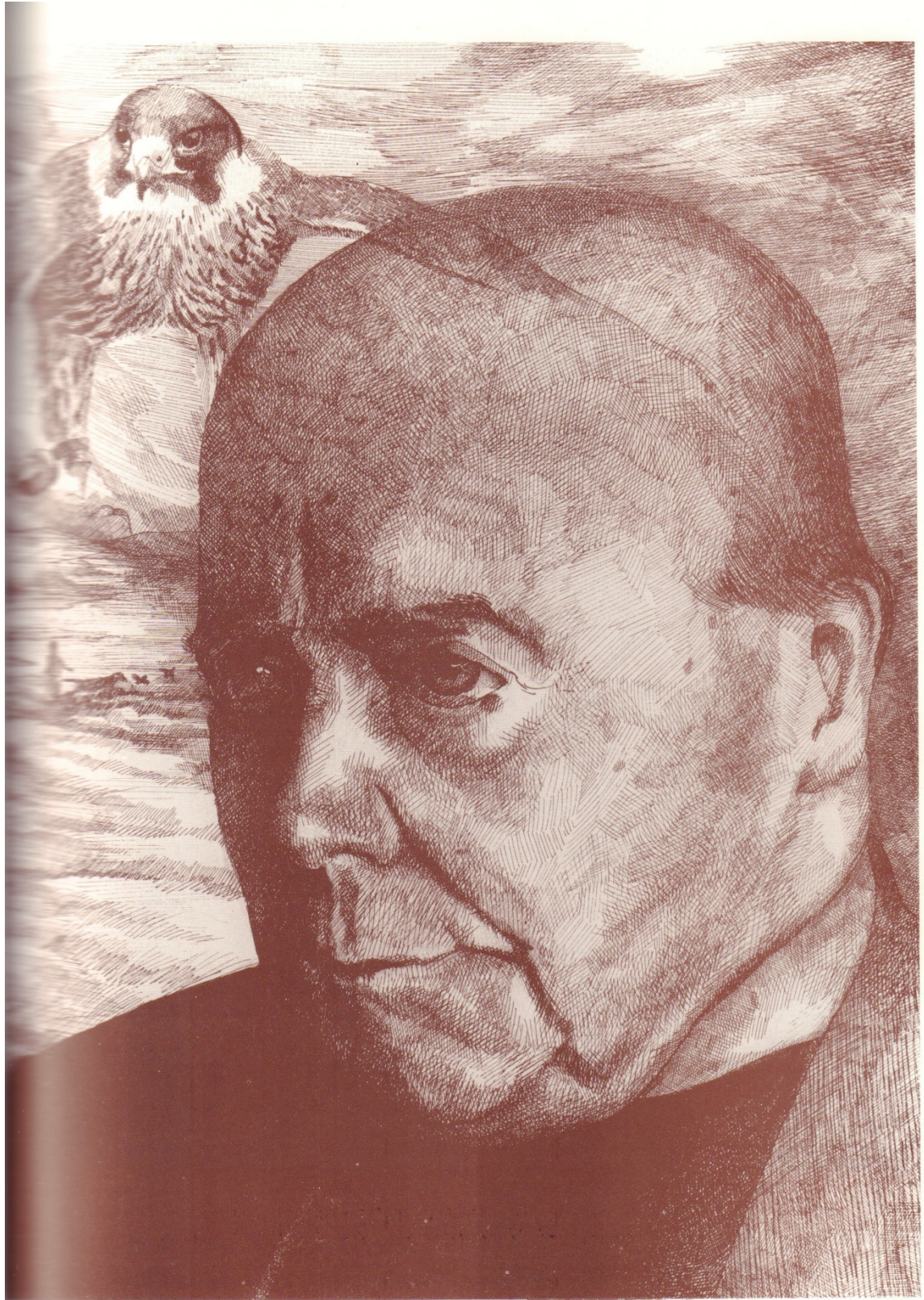


William McDougald and Ned Bayly, St. Columba's College Co. Dublin 1935.

occasions William Rutledge flew merlins in his native county, he was a familiar figure in the Mayo area and is still remembered today by many locals. Both Mavrogordato and William Rutledge were friends and contemporaries of Dr. George Luke, Hon. Vice President of The Irish Hawking Club.

During that same period in Ireland other younger falconers were arriving on the scene. William Mc.Dougald was a young student at St. Columba's College, Rathfarnham in south Co. Dublin. Pictured here with another young falconer, Ned Bayly, a classmate, who now runs a shooting syndicate in Woodenbridge, Co. Wicklow. Willie studied veterinary medicine at U.C.D. Shortly afterwards war broke out and he joined the R.A.F.. After the war he returned to Ireland and established a very large mink farm and also bred blue foxes. He became a successful vet and was highly regarded in equestrian circles. Those were his busiest years yet time was always found for hawking. Ballymanus House in Co. Laois, where the Mc.Dougalds lived, was visited by many well known falconers of the day. Visitors and friends included Ronald Stevens and another famous falconer and author, Phillip Glasier. Willie Mc.Dougald practiced falconry for over fifty years and in that time flew mainly peregrines and goshawks. He also flew a variety of birds including a sakeret, a lanneret and a redtail. The redtail was given to him by Ronald Stevens. It had in fact belonged to Tony Huston, son of John Huston the film director. The Hustons had a house near Craughwell in east Galway. Tony Huston, a keen falconer and contemporary of John Morris, had learned the technique of falconry from Ronald Stevens. Like all who have survived the rigours of falconry ( or perhaps they have survived because of it) Willie Mc.Dougald, now over seventy, leads a busy and colourful life. Both he and his wife are avid gundog enthusiasts and are familiar participants in trials all over the country. He is also a senior field trial judge.

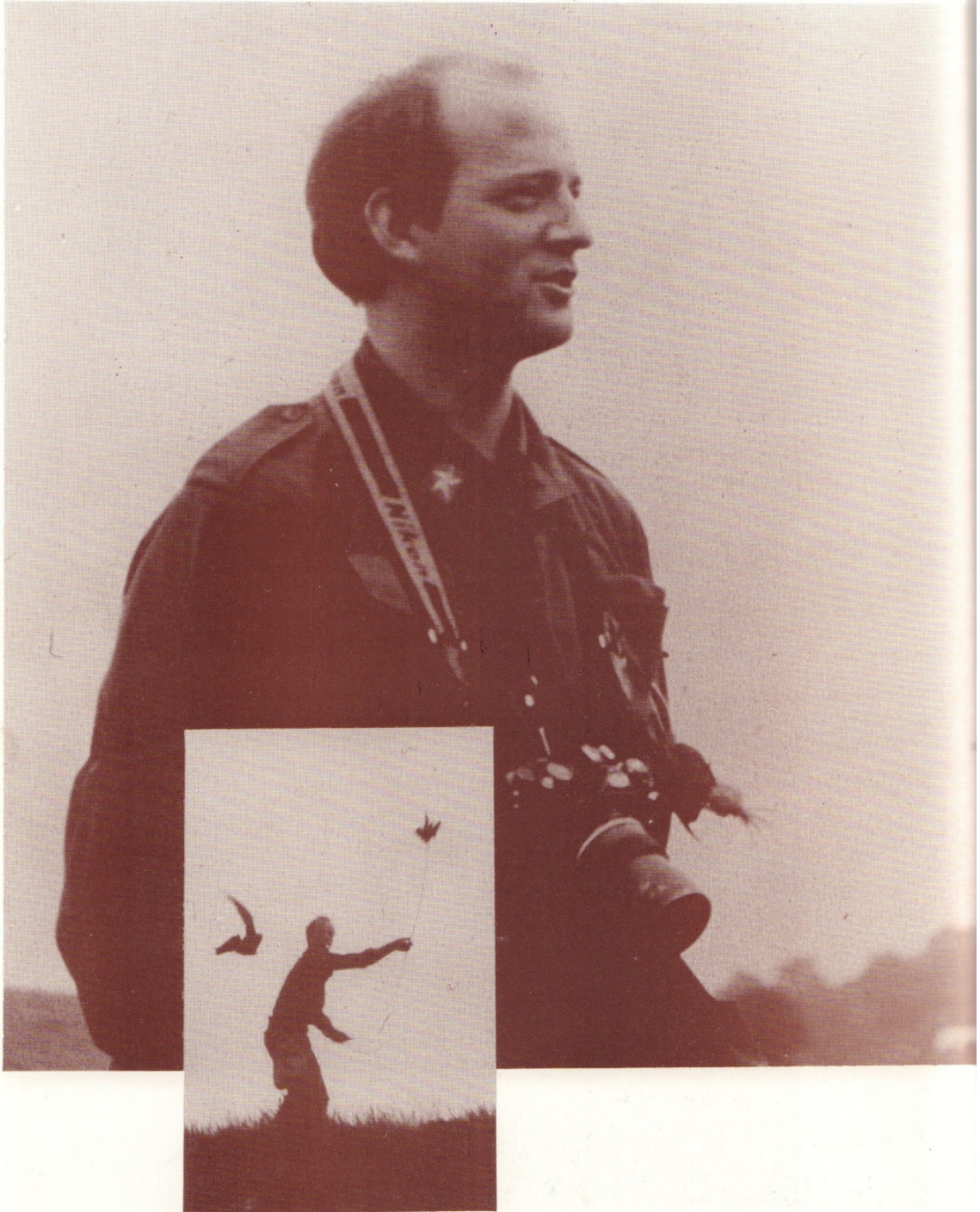
Ronald Stevens, born in England, has lived in Ireland since 1956. While living in England he visited Connemara on regular occasions, not to fly hawks, but to indulge in another of his many passions, fishing. Falconer, ornithologist and author of such classics as, "The Taming Of Ghengis" and "Observations On Modern Falconry", now ninety years of age he is about to publish his latest book "All My Life With Birds". This new title aptly sums up the man. He has literally spent his entire life with birds of every description. A legend in his own lifetime as a falconer and author on the subject, his interest in birds has been broad and varied. As a boy his first bird was not a hawk, as one might expect, it was in fact a young duckling. From this youthful beginning a fascination for waterfowl developed and continued throughout his life. By the age of nineteen Ronald Stevens' enthusiasm had taken him to Africa. By 1939 he had collected many pairs of exotic wildfowl which he personally brought back to England. This resulted in the foundation of a large and unique collection of breeding waterfowl on his estate in Shropshire. He never lost that fascination with waterfowl and to this day speaks as lovingly of them as he does of the many falcons and gyrs he has flown. On arrival in Connemara and after a short stay in a fishery keeper's lodge, Ronald Stevens bought a large estate house in the area, Fermoye Lodge. Set in the open Connemara landscape with the impressive mountains called The Twelve Bens as a backdrop, Fermoye, surrounded by trees, was a haven for wildlife. Having its own fishery and magnificent lake it was also an ideal place for a variety of native and migrating waterfowl. Nestled amongst pines and rhododendrons it was here that for over two decades Ronald Stevens held open house. Falconers from every corner of Ireland were always welcomed and they came from the U.K., Europe and as far afield as North America. The most celebrated chapter in Ronald Stevens long and colourful life must be his wartime experiences with peregrines. During the second world war he was approached by the Ministry of Defence.



Ronald Stevens, pen and ink by Liam ÓBroin.

The Hon. John Morris.

*photo: Barry Mason*



They asked him to set up a base on the Isle of Wight and fly his falcons at pigeons suspected of carrying enemy weather reports. The island golf course had a deserted club house and so it was there that Stevens, with assistant and falcons, set up base. Each day, weather permitting, the falcons in turn were flown free, sometimes for up to three hours. Little escaped and in several instances the falcons were found to have caught pigeons with messages attached to them. Fermoyle during the 1960's and 1970's was a must for every visiting hawking party to the west of Ireland. Willie Mc. Dougald on his first visit to Fermoyle describes it like this, "We drove through the open countryside really not knowing when we were going to come upon Ronald's house. Then a little further along, set down in a small valley off the road we saw a line of trees in the distance. There high up in the sky were two Gyr falcons in free flight over the house, we knew we had arrived". Ronald Stevens had many close friends to stay at Fermoyle. Geoffery Pollard, a member of the B.F.C., who still flies his falcons at grouse in Caithness in Scotland, stayed on many occasions. Another visitor amongst the many was a fascinating character, "Straight out of Rob Roy", to quote Willie Mc. Dougald. On departing from a visit to Ronald, Willie gave this Scotsman a ride back to Dublin to catch his boat. During the journey east the Scot told his driver that he had been given a small part in the film "Rob Roy", "And they did'na even hav tae make me up", he added. This colourful character was somebody or other's falconer. Arriving one day for a short visit, he instead stayed several months. Now retired from falconry due to failing eye-sight Ronald Stevens is nonetheless active with his writing. Having sold Fermoyle he now lives in a smaller and more managable house quietly tucked away in the tranquil Connemara landscape.

Another expatriate to make his home in Ireland was Ernst Jocher, who came here to manage a Krupps factory in Limerick. After some time he decided to retire from business and establish a falconry centre. This idea was something which had always been in the back of his mind. So when circumstances allowed he started the first falconry centre which was open to the public in Ireland. This was at Clonmel in Co. Tipperary. Besides the falconry, Ernst Jocher and his family also ran a restaurant. Helga his daughter, her husband, Hermann Geissel, and a young niece Vicky, along with his wife, all helped to run the centre, which became a major attraction. To say that the falconry centre was a major success would be an understatement. As well as receiving visitors from all over Ireland, it also became a major tourist attraction. The emphasis from the beginning was conservation and education. The Jochers wanted to create an awareness in the general public of the importance of birds of prey and their protection. In the 1960's it was not uncommon for hawks and falcons to be relentlessly shot and trapped as vermin by game keepers and gun clubs. When hawks and falcons were displayed and thereby were accessible to the general public, and particularly children, attitudes changed dramatically. The Jocher family established an international reputation for the falconry at Clonmel within a very short period of time. In 1968 the family travelled to the U.S.A., by invitation from the Bronx Zoo, bringing with them eleven birds of prey, including a golden eagle. Hermann Geissel flew this eagle in front of a large crowd at the zoo that September. All of the non-indigenous birds of prey for the centre had been collected in Germany by Helga and Hermann over a period. Most in fact were procured from Claus Fentzlott, who supplied the two sea eagles which were hacked out on Innisvickalaun off the Kerry coast in 1990. In 1972 the Jochers moved the falconry to Robertstown in Co. Kildare, where it was equally, if not more so, a huge attraction. There are conflicting attitudes to falconry displays amongst many individual falconers and clubs. However it must

be said that the falconry at Clonmel and at Robertstown did more to create public awareness and interest in birds of prey than any other public or private body in this country at that time. Robertstown in fact became a focal point for many young people eager to learn the sport of falconry. Eamonn Mc.Cabe, who had assisted Ernst Jocher until his retirement, became the new Director. Eamonn was the guiding light for many young and not so young would be falconers for several years afterwards. Sadly the falconry at Robertstown no longer exists. However, the efforts of the Jochers and their successors did bear fruit. Thousands of young adults, and their parents, still look back in awe and remember their favourite school trips. Robertstown was always the most popular and memorable. There are a considerable number of falconers in Ireland today who learned the basic techniques of handling hawks and in some cases much more at Robertstown under the various Directors, Eamonn Mc.Cabe, Noel Spain and Michael Comyns.

The Irish Hawking Club, founded in 1967 is the only representative body for falconry in Ireland at the present time. It has a very enthusiastic membership made up of falconers from both Northern Ireland and The Republic Of Ireland, having two joint secretaries, one for each area. The I.H.C., as well as catering for experienced falconers, actively encourages young people. They are graded as Junior Members until eighteen years of age. They then become Associates until qualified as Full members. In doing so they must be capable of flying a previously untrained hawk at quarry to the satisfaction of the club committee. An annual field meet is held each November. Also group field meets are held on a regular basis. The club produces a yearly journal and so there is a good network for technical advice, lost hawks, etc. As a member of the International Association For Falconry And Conservation Of Birds Of Prey, the I.H.C. is well informed of changing attitudes both in Ireland and worldwide and

particularly so regarding legislation for birds of prey. It operates a breeding programme and gives financial assistance to members who undertake breeding projects.

Besides the Irish Hawking Club there are also other small, loosely knit groups and individuals flying hawks of various varieties throughout the country both north and south. The Hon. John Morris, a former President and founder member of the I.H.C., is a dedicated falconer having learned the art from M.H. Woodford, Jack Mavrogordato and more particularly Ronald Stevens. John Morris flies peregrines both here in Ireland and on the Scottish moors. It was his association with Ronald Stevens which resulted in his saker and Steven's peregrine producing the first saker/peregrine cross; indeed the first hybrid falcon ever bred in captivity.

Perhaps the most interesting and colourful falconer of all the people I've mentioned in these pages is the late Edmund Mahony, or Brigadier Mahony as he was more popularly known. Huntsman, soldier, author and falconer, Edmund Mahony lived in east Galway. Well known as joint Master of the Galway Blazers hunt he was locally very popular. He was witty and full of local knowledge and lore, but above all else he was one of that rare breed of sportsmen typical of the west of Ireland. A man who loved the countryside, its people and its wildlife. Brigadier Mahony wrote three books. One was of his experiences in the Spanish civil war in which he fought with distinction, and his last publication "The Falcon And The Foxhound", is aptly titled given his lifelong association with both sports. His wit and personal knowledge decorate the pages of a book which is a wealth of personal reminiscences. His best story is about a favourite goshawk and a pair of nosey gamekeepers, which was actually told to me by his grandson Dominic. He had received permission to hunt the gos from a

friend who ran a shooting syndicate. The provisor was that only rabbits were to be hunted. The Brigadier was aware that he was being watched by the gamekeepers every time that he set foot on the hallowed ground. Their intentions were obvious, if the hawk gets a pheasant we've got the Brigadier! And so under the watchful eyes of the two, secreted, or so they thought, in some nearby bushes, Mahony and hawk set out. Suddenly a pheasant was flushed and the gos in an instant was in hot pursuit. It seemed as though everything was about to end in disaster when a convenient rabbit bolted out of nowhere. It came right across the path of the goshawk which immediately ignored the retreating pheasant and took the rabbit instantly. Needless to say Brigadier Mahony, with a typical turn of Celtic wit, informed the two speechless gamekeepers that his goshawk was trained to kill rabbits but only to chase pheasants!