

## Remembering T. H. White

**Steve Bodio & Conor Mark Jameson revisit the legacy of a famous author and controversial falconer**

*Conor Mark Jameson*....January 2014 marks the 50 year anniversary of the death of T. H. White, probably best remembered by raptor enthusiasts for his mini epic *The Goshawk* (1951), and by the general public for *The Once and Future King*, his Arthurian novels, and the blockbuster Disney and Broadway spin-offs that ensued. Like J. A. Baker, author of *The Peregrine* (1967), White's work inspired a number of prominent naturalists and writers. J.K. Rowling, for example, acknowledged White's character Wart, the young King Arthur in his novels, as the 'spiritual ancestor' of Harry Potter. It seems timely to remember the man, and to reflect on his life and influence.

White was born in India in 1906. He was a prolific writer and some authorities – his agent David Garnett included – consider *The Goshawk* to be his best book. It featured on the reading lists of many literature courses, and no doubt influenced J. A. Baker himself, as it was known to have been on his bookshelf. Intriguingly, White considered himself a failure in the hawk-taming saga described in *The Goshawk*.

White wrote *The Goshawk* in the mid-1930s, but hid the manuscript until Garnett chanced upon it more than a decade later. Garnett managed to convince White that it should be published, even though the writer was sheepish about the various personal and practical imperfections his words lay bare. For if White was no expert ornithologist at this stage of his life, he was no expert falconer either. But he did love birds, and animals in general, probably more than he cared for the grown-up world. 'I had only just escaped from humanity' wrote White of his captive. 'The poor gos had only just been caught by it.'

White was an enthusiast – a 'smatterer', as his biographer Sylvia Townsend Warner put it - and an avid learner of new skills. He was driven by a need to preoccupy himself, his discontent stemming from a traumatic childhood. 'Everything collapsed at a critical time in my life and ever since I have been arming myself against disaster,' he once confessed to Garnett in a letter. By the mid-1930s, White had given up a teaching career to rent an old game keeper's cottage and wrote to Germany for a goshawk. Weary of society, he hoped to 'revert to a feral state' – thinking that somehow winning over the hawk might give him this.

He sought to train the bird using medieval methods, and make a living from his account of their relationship. But he overestimated his ability to do this single-handedly. The archaic method usually involved more than one person 'watching' the bird – staying awake for days and nights while the hawk repeatedly 'bates' from the wrists to which it is tethered, until finally it must sleep, and thereby submit to its captive state. And maybe he underestimated the brute intransigence of the bird, taken as a well-grown nestling, and already wired with a detestation of the human form.

The modern method of manning a hawk is much gentler on both parties, and takes longer, with the bird gradually accustomed to the proximity of humans and their paraphernalia, steadily overcoming its innate suspicion. But that wouldn't have made such a compelling tale or involved such an intense battle of wills. While the book tells us little or nothing about the goshawk in its wild state – it was extirpated from the United Kingdom by the Victorians and only the occasional escapee was at large in the landscape there – it tells us much about the relationship between people and birds.

In later life, White gave up field sports and contented himself with bird-watching instead. He bird-watched across North America between stages of a three-month lecture tour in winter 1963-64. He kept a journal of the tour, later published as *America at Last*, a revealing snapshot of the nation through a turbulent period in its history – encompassing the Kennedy assassination – and decorated with descriptions of birds and other natural features seen.

On the tour he lectured about his work and his inspirations, sometimes to audiences of thousands in open-air stadiums. He was 'box office' in America. The Arthurian legends played well there. The Disney deal had made him wealthy at last. This often shy, prickly and reclusive man had probably never been happier, appreciated and liberated in that vast continent beset with social problems, but so alive, he discovered, with openness, optimism and possibilities.

Tour over, he said his tearful goodbyes. He returned to Europe by ocean liner, partly because he hated flying (despite having trained as a pilot to learn another new skill and to attempt to overcome his fear) and partly so he could visit Athens, Greece. His ship docked in Piraeus harbour there, and it was on the morning of January 17<sup>th</sup> that he was discovered dead in his cabin. The cause of death was recorded as heart failure. He was just 57 years old.

He never made it home. With no family in England, it was decided that he could be laid to rest in the corner of an Athens cemetery, within view of Hadrian's Arch. The Emperor Hadrian was one of his passionate interests. Within White's oeuvre is a treatise on field sports called *England Have My Bones*. He would have enjoyed the irony that England never got them. Nor did England get his archive, which is housed at the University of Texas. It seems that even in death he was ill-fitted to this country: a misfit, much like the bird of which he wrote so vividly.

In part to correct this estrangement, it struck me that the anniversary of his passing might be formally recognised in some way, perhaps with a modest plaque or sculpture installed at one of White's many stopping off points here in a nomadic life. Maybe Stowe in Buckinghamshire, where he taught, and near where he took the keeper's cottage and did his best work. Or Doolistown in Ireland, where he spent the war years. Or the Channel Island of Alderney, where he lived last. But my enquiries and promptings left me with no strong sense of a lasting appreciation of White, or much appetite for resurrecting him.

If his literary legacy is not quite assured – I'm guessing because his most famous work was written for children – perhaps his contribution to natural history, albeit by an unorthodox route,

can be recognised now. *The Goshawk* may not add much to the sum of knowledge about the species' conservation status, but it is the only British book written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century devoted to the bird. For *The Goshawk* alone we might doff our caps to Terence 'Tim' Hanbury White, and acknowledge the place and the lasting legacy, of the misfit.

**Steve Bodio....**T. H. White is overdue for a revival as a writer, but he should also be remembered as a falconer. In my introduction to the Wilder Places edition of *The Goshawk*, I wrote: "This is a book about excruciatingly bad falconry. It is the best book about falconry, its feel, its emotions, and its flavor, ever written."

Both statements are true. Even those who love it must admit the incompetence of his early efforts; those who hate it, or think of it as the last word from White on falconry, should remember that these events took place in the 1930s, and he continued to fly hawks for over twenty years.

They also might take heed of what he wrote to J. G. Mavrogordato in 1951:

"The other matter which I am rather ashamed of, is that I kept a diary about the first goshawk I ever tried to train. Naturally, when I kept my second goshawk, and my next two merlins, five peregrines and one gyr, I got to feel ashamed of my maiden efforts and threw the diary away. Unluckily – my publisher came to stay, found it in a cupboard, and ruled it had to be published.

"It is being published very soon. It is all rubbish. It is just what a very young, romantic, inefficient austringer might write. It will probably make me several million pounds. The twelve real living falconers will hate it and despise it in their guts.

"Well, before they all rise up and send me a nice present of strychnine, could you convey to them that this is simply a boy's enthusiastic book – and they are not to bully me about it? It will be called THE GOSHAWK."

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All the papers and letters of Terence Hanbury White are stored at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas in Austin, probably the largest repository of English letters in the world. "Letters" in this sense also encompasses diaries, unpublished manuscripts, drawings and even oil paintings. When the poet, Cambridge scholar and goshawker Helen MacDonald and I made a pilgrimage there two summers ago we soon abandoned all pretense of objectivity. We had both read not only virtually all of White's books, but were familiar with his biography by Sylvia Townsend Warner. We knew what to expect, or at least what had existed. But faced with all these legendary artifacts, we turned into two screaming fans: "LOOK! I can't believe it!" We were seeing unpublished poems, a shooting diary and drunken, satirical descriptions of country gentry. We were seeing what I call the holy relics: tufts of red hair from his beloved setter Brownie, feathers from the geese that he shot, and ones from the red grouse felled by his peregrine on his moor in Ireland.

And here was the manuscript for *The Merlins*, his second projected falconry book. In it, at least at first, he was still playing the fool. "Both are of the same size and sex. So, on Balin I tried a female's hood, and on Balan, we put on the jack's."

But was he, really? On the page before, he notes his annotation on the Badminton Library *Coursing and Hawking*, which I own. I checked his notes against my pages and they show close reading of every passage. And on every page of the manuscript are his perfect-pitch observations. On the rudeness of experts: “It is something to do with being quite wrapped up in the complications of an art which is too wide to explain to the layman briefly. This is why masters of hounds are usually rude men.” On hooding: “The best way to put on a hood was to put it on. Before the day of anaesthetics, it was better to have a slashing surgeon who did the business in thirty seconds, rather than the tenderest virtuoso who took five minutes.” (This, by the way, expresses what it took Emperor Frederick II five pages to say).

His paragraph on how to pick up an errant bird has a certain insane brilliance: “Snatching the jesses of a free and escaped falcon is rather *like catching hold of your divorcing wife*. You do it *gently*. You stretch out a throbbing hand. You get the jess in your fingers without believing it. The fingers close. You say: *Got you, you bitch!!*”

And one of the most telling things about his hard-won knowledge is a much quieter statement on the essence of falconry, as true today as it was back then: “As soon as you are in it properly, one falconer cannot tell lies to another.”

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Some of this material, both in *The Merlins* and in unpublished sections of *The Goshawk*, is best understood by those who have already trained a hawk. “Training the raptors is like pushing a heavy motor which has stopped. Once you have got weight on it, you must keep it going forward by its momentum. If you allow it to come to rest, it is difficult to get it to start again.”

Some of it helps interpret falconry to the innocent. On lure flying: “The point of all this murder-play is that in time one could get the falcon to a pitch. It could not snatch its food from the lure at a height of twenty feet – because one was clever enough to whip it away – well, then it would learn to fly to forty feet, to a hundred, the three hundred, and still the aeronaut would learn to go higher-higher.” He added an elegant line: “In a very few lessons, one was playing kittens with a murderess.”

Or take this passage cut from the original manuscript of *The Goshawk*, which explains the difference between falcons and hawks better than anything in the published version. “The falcon flew high and gave long points, the goshawk flew low and killed with cunning and certainty. For the falcon, with his high circles and great distances, an open country was essential. Such had been the old unenclosed England, with its moors and heaths, which had allowed the long and remote battle to be followed on horseback without losing sight of the combatants. Her noblest flight had been at the heron, whose broad spoon-shaped wings had enabled him to rise more steeply, while the falcon's greater speed had allowed her to describe wider circles in her mounting spiral.”

And here, a piece of pure bravura writing that stands for itself: “Like the fall of Satan from Heaven, they streaked down vertically, one after the other – archangels, principalities and powers: yes, jet-propelled. *Yes, like rockets flown downward rather than upward*; with a swish, like meteors.”

And then he'll crash – like all falconers must. “Hawks are birds of bitter bile, and we seem to

catch our vices from them.”

I wish he had continued his writing on hawks. In his last letter to Mavrogordato, he wrote: “If they sneeze at my simple idiocy about Gos, believe me, I have a rod and pickle for them about Merlin and Peregrine. I have suddenly revived from the last war, packed with theories and enthusiasm, and am ready to lose my temper with just about anybody. Why hood hawks? Why any hawks? If any, why this arty-and-crafty stuff about hooding? Why watch [wake] them? Why man them? Why can’t you fly a hawk twenty-four hours after catching it (a passager)? In fact, you see, I am boiling with iconoclastic manias of interest.”

As far as I know he never wrote on these new theories, though given the innovations since his death one might hope that he had. There are still pages of delight for the naturalist and falconer, unpublished. Perhaps a falconer’s memorial might be the impetus to see some of these writings in print, for in them, White demonstrates that as a falconer, he does not lie.

**Footnote:** In commemoration of T.H. White, a memorial fund has been established at The Archives of Falconry in Boise, Idaho in the United States. A plaque honoring T.H. White as a falconer will be installed on The Wall of Remembrance. Fifty years on, naturalists, bird-watchers, writers, literary scholars and falconers still mourn his passing. Few authors have left such a profound and lasting impression on the world. A total of \$700 USD has been raised in support of this project so far; only \$300 USD more is needed to fund the memorial. Please join Steve Bodio, Conor Jameson and Stacia Novy in celebration of Terence Hanbury White, and donate to a memorial in his honor at the Archives. A link to Steve Bodio’s blog site, which includes detailed instructions on how to donate online to The Archives of Falconry, is below.

<<http://stephenbodio.blogspot.com/2014/03/t-h-white-memorial.html>>