Let us prey

Two loving tributes to the effects of raptors on our lives

JEREMY MYNOTT

Richard Hines

NO WAY BUT GENTLENESSE
A memoir of how Kes, my kestrel, changed my life
271pp. Bloomsbury. £16.99.
978 1 4088 6801 0

James Macdonald Lockhart

RAPTOR
A journey through birds
376pp. Fourth Estate. £16.99.
978 0 00 745987 2

Raptors – birds of prey – have always exercised a powerful hold on the human imagination, the metaphorical equivalent of the grasping capacities that give them their generic name. In the very first work of European literature, Homer's *Iliad*, they are there throughout the narrative – as imposing physical presences; in similes portraying power, speed and ferocity; and most importantly as omens and auguries that may be read by experts to interpret the mood of the gods and so guide human decisions. The symbolisms were established early and have persisted. The eagle was the bird of Zeus, signifying might and authority; the swift falcon was the representative of Apollo in Greek mythology and of Horus in Egyptian; the Romans marched under the standard of eagles, and the armies of Charlemagne, Napoleon, Bismarck, Peter the Great and Hitler all drew on the same imagery. Most countries now feel obliged to have a National Bird, and many have chosen a native raptor: for example, Bolivia and Ecuador (Andean Condor), Iceland (Gyrfalcon), Mexico (Golden Eagle), Philippines (Monkey-eating Eagle), United Arab Emirates (Saker Falcon), Zimbabwe (Fish Eagle) and Belgium (more modestly, Kestrel). The United States took this so seriously that it even enacted a law recognizing the Bald Eagle's iconic status:

> Whereas, by the act of Congress and by tradition and custom during the life of this nation, the Bald Eagle is no longer a mere bird of biological interest but a symbol of the American ideals of freedom . . . (Bald Eagle Protection Act, June 8, 1940).

One could trace the same iconography through flags, coins, stamps and commercial logos; and raptors feature, too, in countless toponyms and the names of sports teams and public houses, all pointing to a widespread popular fascination with this group of birds and associations embedded deep in the human psyche.

Authors have explored this phenomenon and contributed to it at various different levels. J. A. Baker's *The Peregrine* (1967) was a landmark text. In it this reclusive figure recounted his obsessive quest for peregrines and his attempt to enter their world and, in a sense, lose himself in it. A few lines from Baker's introduction give the flavour:

> For ten years I spent all my winters searching for that restless brilliance, for the sudden violence and passion that peregrines flush from the sky. For ten years I have been looking upward for that cloud-biting anchor shape, that crossbow flinging through the air. The eye becomes insatiable for hawks. It clicks towards them with ecstatic fury . . .

The intensity of Baker's vision and the extraordinary qualities of his prose have had their effects on a whole generation of later nature writers, and the aftershocks are still reverberating in contemporary debates among practitioners about the competing virtues of authenticity, accuracy and fine writing. Meanwhile, there has been a continuous stream of titles about or involving raptors – memoirs, novels, poetic evocations, travelogues, scientific studies, conservation texts, political protests, field guides, monographs on single species, and explorations of the rich folklore and cultural history. The most remarkable of these in terms of its popular reach as well as its literary qualities has been a book involving an artful combination of several of these elements – Helen Macdonald's bestselling *H is for Hawk* (reviewed in the *TLS*, October 31, 2014). It is not yet clear whether the extraordinary success of that title will prove a platform for other writers or a barrier, an inspiring model (as various publishers have rather obviously hoped) or an impossible, and so disheartening, aspiration. At any rate, neither of the present authors makes any direct reference to Macdonald's book – though each shares some of her obsessions and themes, and each employs at least one structural device that is similar to one of hers.

David Bradley as Billy Casper in *Kes*, 1969

Richard Hines's book is also about a raptor that changed a life, as his subtitle immediately proclaims. In his case it was a kestrel, and one that became famous for other reasons. Hines was born and brought up in a colliery town near Barnsley in the 1940s. It was a tough, Northern working-class existence, of the kind portrayed in novels and films such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* and *This Sporting Life*. His dad worked in the pit, the family bathed in a tin tub in front of the coal fire and had to share an outside lavatory in someone else's backyard. Richard's elder brother, Barry, found his escape through education at the local grammar school and from there went on to worldly success as an author. Richard, by contrast, failed his eleven-plus and was subjected to routine beatings and other brutalities by his secondary school teachers, who dismissed him as a hopeless failure – a judgement he and his mother both accepted. But he found his salvation and sense of self-worth through the natural world. He was captivated by the chance discovery of a nest of young kestrels, and conceived a passion to train one, using some ancient falconry texts he discovered in the local library, one of which was later to give him the title for this book, "There is no way but Gentlenesse to redeeme a Hawke" (Edmund Bert, 1619).

Richard called his hawk "Kes" and so inspired his brother's novel *A Kestrel for a Knave* and Ken Loach's film *Kes*, both now classics in their genres. The character of Billy Casper was based on Richard, who also trained the kestrels for the film. Half a century later, Richard now tells his own story, and he tells it very movingly and well as we follow him through his early, unsatisfactory relationships and career moves. The writing is vivid and direct, with many telling anecdotes and perceptive reflections. Hines's sense of social exclusion still persists, however, and he describes with painful honesty the slights he continued to suffer because of his class background and accent, the shame he felt during a spell of unemployment, and the pain caused by a neighbour's thoughtless revelation that his brother had all along been his mother's favourite. His brother was to trump him again even in death, since it was Barry who stole all the headlines with his obituaries in the spring of this year, just as Richard's book was being launched.

Richard Hines's book holds the reader throughout, and can be read straight through. James Macdonald Lockhart's is one to sample and savour in smaller doses. They say that the fragrance of violets only persists a few seconds before the ionone short-circuits our sensory systems. Lockhart's prose is so finely worked and so rich in arresting images that it has something of the same effect. His book, too, has a confessional subtitle, *A journey through birds*. The journey is structured as fifteen separate chapters, each devoted (and "devoted" is the word) to a British raptor and the landscape in which Lockhart encountered it. Or at least planned to. The idea had been to watch the hen harrier in Orkney, the merlin in the Flow Country, and so on through to the buzzard in Devon and the sparrowhawk back at home in Warwickshire. But the birds hadn't read the script of the publishing proposal and immediately subverted it, as birds will. Sea eagles invade the hen harrier chapter, a hen harrier glides into the merlin one, and buzzards threaten to upstage the goshawk in the Kielder Forest. No matter, the birds and the landscapes are all beautifully evoked, and there are many breathtaking turns of phrase. Lockhart also has a superb eye for jizz – the particular quality of a species – and makes some beautifully nuanced discriminations, for example between the flight patterns of the three different harrier species.

Hines interweaves his account with supporting quotations from his beloved falconry handbooks, one of which he had as a boy painstakingly copied out by hand in the local library when they wouldn't allow him to borrow it. Lockhart's sacred texts, on the other hand, are the works of the prolific nineteenth-century naturalist William MacGillivray, who had also made a long journey, in his case a journey on foot from Aberdeen to London, on a digressive route that took him six weeks and covered 838 miles. Lockhart quotes from MacGillivray so often and so extensively that one has the feeling there is another book trying to burst out here. Indeed, Lockhart would probably be the ideal person to edit a selection of MacGillivray's works for modern readers. But the interleaving of their two journeys comes to seem rather forced in Lockhart's own work, since there is no tension and therefore no resolution in the relationship of the kind Helen Macdonald achieved with her troubled interlocutor, T. H. White. J. A. Baker, by contrast, had offered us no reference points beyond the quest itself: "For ten years I followed the peregrine. I was possessed by it. It was a grail to me. Now it has gone. The long pursuit is over". Raptors can do that to you.