

a Pitch

A Book Review

by
Mike McDermott & Joe Roy III

Observations On Modern Falconry
The Taming of Genghis
Laggard
A Life With Birds,
By, Ronald Stevens

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Saint Paul, MO

This is a collection of four falconry books that one might be able to classify as instructional. *Observations on Modern Falconry* is overtly so, while the other three are more anecdotal (this happened to me) while still being generally instructional in nature. *Observations* is particularly recognized as a classic falconry text and is certainly collectable. Do buy this one while you can.

British writing in general is seldom direct and often circles round and round before getting to the point—qualifications layered upon rationalization all before the actual statement. Mr. Stevens books are all particularly “British” in their writing style and manner. Here is a quote from *Observations* first paragraph of the “Forward” illustrating the peculiar style that I’m describing: “Nevertheless I daresay that most falconers find much to puzzle over and much to widen their interest as they progress. It is

on such matters of which much of the substance is not found on the beaten track of text-book falconry, that I have attempted to write.” This typifies the usual British method of taking a long way around to say that he is writing about the refinements that experience brings.

Observations on Modern Falconry (1973), hardcover, 6” x 9”, 112 pages, table of contents but no index (this book reads well and feels good in the hand) approx. cost \$32.95, all text. Perhaps the single best text on habituation hood training and basic understanding of historical falconry principles. This is the classic raptorial husbandry guide. Easily read by apprentices but not generally fully comprehended without a few years experience. *Observations* is the quintessential bird handling, basic husbandry text. Although the falconry community has learned much since 1963-73, including advancements in raptorial understanding and

training methodology, one would (in general and overall) be well served by simply doing exactly as described. Certainly, most would agree that a fellow could do much worse than take advice from the venerable Ronald Stevens.

Taming of Genghis (1956), hardcover, 6” x 9”, 127 pages, is a delightful anecdotal story detailing, and by that, I do mean in the most inclusive manner possible of all possible minutia, both behavioral and assumed psychological aspects of taming a particular gyrfalcon. Well done! The story begins with our protagonist high in the arctic wilderness rappelling down a cliff face simply to verify the existence of eyasses. He then watches the development of the wild young falcons until the young male makes its first kill (a ptarmigan) and then sets up what appears to be what we currently call a “noose carpet” and traps his young gyrfalcon. After returning home the manning and taming begins in earnest. Perhaps as one of the more experienced readers, I enjoyed this book the most. To be sure, *Observations* is the preeminent classic of the lot, but it covers so much of what one might consider “tedious basics.” *Taming of Genghis* illustrates much more the thought process of the author actually put into action. Tedious yes, but in full Stevens regalia all the same. It is delightful, actually. The ending of *Genghis* is so outrageously dramatic that it simply must be true. No author would dare dream up such a stupendous climactic scenario and proclaim its truthfulness without it actually being based on a real experience.

A Life with Birds (published in 2010), hardcover, 6” x 9”, 156 pages, B&W photographs with some line drawings. This is essentially an autobiography detailing his privileged life, values and experiences. Mr. Stevens had a large waterfowl collection prior to WWII (destroyed), served in the armed forces and continued his falconry pursuits thereafter. During the global conflict he led a somewhat charmed life. Imagine being transferred from a combat artillery unit

to a newly-formed falconry squad designed to intercept German carrier pigeons! This most interesting anecdote is included during the war which “interrupted” his life. I think a global conflict whereupon millions died fighting the evil oppression of socialism (National German Socialist Party) qualifies as more than an interruption. However; perhaps he is simply understating the devastation and significance of the war as a means of



copying with it. Many WWII veterans would barely speak about it forty years after the fact. None-the-less, the venerable Ronald Stevens was stationed in the Scilly islands and put in charge of training soldiers to become falconers, who in turn would intercept German homing pigeons believed to be carrying secret messages released from submarines off the coast. Although many pigeons were caught, only two held German messages that were later proved to be unimportant. After the war ended he was assigned runway dut, much like our modern counterparts who reduce bird strike incidents at airports today. Naturally, the size of his unit tripled.

A great deal of his life was shared in friendship with Henry Swain and many letters of correspondence were included. Many of these are

reminiscent of conversations being repeated by our current falconry community with scarcely a change in content save for the names and the fact that our mails are largely electronic rather than written.

Laggard (1953), hardcover, 6” x 9”, 310 pages, a few line drawings. *Laggard* is an overly-detailed, rambling collection of life stories that sometimes includes falconry. There is not a major theme or point to be found. Pet-keeping and backyard biology are common threads that run throughout. This was Stevens’ first book and is crude in its focus and intent. His later work *The Taming of Genghis* is far superior and later still, *Observations on Modern Falconry* is the best of all. It is widely considered the Ronald Stevens classic for a reason. By the seventies, he has worked out all the bugs in his writing craft and finally gets to the point!

To illustrate the unending inclusion of minutia, here is a description of Edward, the lord of a manor where Stevens has hawked grouse for many years. Someone to whom, one would think, Stevens would show grateful patronage for allowing him to hunt on his property.

“Here comes Edward. Edward is the owner of all these thousands of acres, the lord of the manor. With a few hunting dogs at heel he approaches spare of body and baggy with old Harris tweeds. Always he tilts his face upward while speaking and the smile does not hide the melancholy and tiredness of those dark brown eyes that look directly into mine from under the brim of his deer-stalker. He sometimes wears a rain-washed, sun faded cowboy’s hat. Edward never has been, never could be, smart in his dress despite the inherent good quality of his clothes. His accent is soft and pleasing but his speech can be course, just put on, I suspect, in defiance of the suffering and disappointments that have featured much of his sixty-four years. In contrast to his roughness his face is aristocratic and handsome, his hands slender and artistic.”

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In return for permission to fly his falcons, Ronald Stevens has described his benefactor as having weak hands, rough speech, ungentle, and a sloppy dresser. Some gratitude...

Overall I believe *Taming of Genghis* was the most fun for me, but readily admit that *Observations on Modern Falconry* is the classic text to be had. The other two were not as pleasant to read and were by design an entrance into who Ronald Stevens was. That is exactly their problem. His interests and personality (however wandering the topic may be) were the point of both books. Overall they left me thinking I would not really enjoy his company very much, yet I can still appreciate his expertise at falconry husbandry within the two previous books.

Joe Roy III
Brea, CA

When I learned that Hancock House, was reprinting all four of Ronald Stevens' publishing's I was thrilled. I had read his third book,

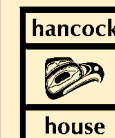
Observations on Modern Falconry, fifteen or twenty years ago and still consider it one of the best falconry books I've come across. As a falconer, Mr. Stevens (now deceased) was unconstrained by rigid thought modality, which led to some interesting and pioneering techniques. As a writer he was transcendent in his ability to articulate and convey his thoughts. With the re-release of the four volumes, I thought it high time that I finally read the other works. When the box of Stevens had come early. I subsequently lobbied the editor of *American Falconry* in an attempt to sway the magazine into a simultaneous review of all four volumes: They agreed, and I am thankful.

Observations on Modern Falconry

One of the things I most enjoy about falconry is getting better at it. As the decades slip by—with ever increasing speed, I might add—my skills sharpen, to be sure, but that is only part of the equation: I love

discovering the intricacies, the little details and nuances which reveal themselves over time to those who are patient and willing to observe. Ronald Stevens, a consummate observer, spent a good deal of his ninety-one years practicing and pondering falconry. His third book, *Observations on Modern Falconry*, was originally published in 1973, and was Stevens' best effort to put to ink all of the most important axioms of competent falconry he had acquired over a lifetime...and a good effort it is—I think I told you that.

Observations is a short book, a mere 112 pages in length, and presented in a format that Stevens describes as being "strictly utility," containing no pictures, prints, etc. (excepting the book jacket). Nonetheless, the tome is laden with the sound, practical and easily-digested advice which tyro and master alike can benefit from. In his self-written forward, Stevens modestly hopes that his book will "help a beginner with an equally unquenchable thirst as my own for finding out



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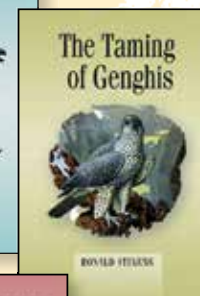
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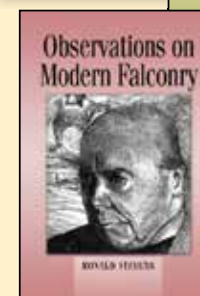
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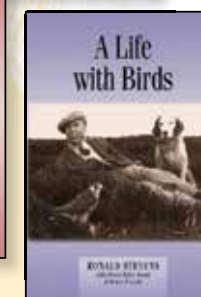
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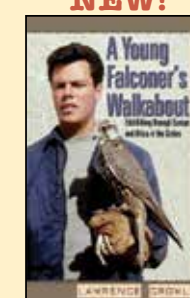
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more about the peregrine in her relationship to modern falconry." It does, and so much more.

There are 17 chapters, including some that cover the basics such as housing, weathering enclosures, perches, lures, baths, bells, health, etc. This, of course, is need-to-know kind of stuff for all who practice falconry. Admittedly, some of the information is dated, due to more recent advancements in technology such as radio telemetry tracking aids and pharmacology etc. Nonetheless, Mr. Stevens was, in a sense, light years ahead in his approach to all things falconry including the prevention and/or recovery of lost hawks.

As the book advances, the chapters explore infinitely more interesting topics such as hack, taming, hawking and homing. Stevens definitely had a penchant for thinking outside the box of conventional falconry. Consider this passage: "...I still think that hawking in its ideal, purist form is in the keeping of a hawk at liberty round the house

for the greater part of the day, seeing her flying around, soaring, bathing in the stream and otherwise amusing herself until the appointed hour, that she so keenly awaits, and then to go hunting with her in company with the dogs, and afterwards to put her in the mews and see her settle down at the end of a day during which she has never bated from restricting hand nor block". Stevens not only contemplated such things (as, I am sure, others have), he actually implemented them with varying results. These are the kinds of thought provoking conceptual gems that set this book apart from the standard 'how-to' manual.

Interestingly, the book ends with a chapter titled, "The Gyrfalcon," a bird for whom Stevens suffered a palpable obsession. This chapter is only eight pages long, but upon reading these pages one get the impression Mr. Stevens is attempting to cram in every tidbit of information he can regarding these enigmatic falcons of the north. For a guy that spent so much time flying peregrines over Irish moors, the last

sentence of his book is all the more telling and exemplifies his thoughts on gyrs in no uncertain words; in closing he says, "...I am not alone in the belief that a gyrfalcon, or gyrtiercel, successfully flown is by far the most rewarding experience a falconer can have." Of course, for those who had read Stevens' *The Taming of Genghis*, this revelation comes as no surprise.

The Taming of Genghis

Originally published in 1956, *The Taming of Genghis* could almost be called a love story, not in the typical sense, but rather in regards to the bond that exists—or not—between a falconer and his charge, in this case, a young jerkin trapped in Iceland.

The Taming of Genghis is ostensibly an account of Stevens' gyr obsession taken to its logical extremity wherein he travels to Iceland to secure a young gyrfalcon. The book is exceptionally well-written and instantly became one of my favorites. Stevens opens this tome with the following, "A lake, a

mountain and the sea beyond. The sky, so blue in the transient smiles of an Arctic summer, so leaden and lowering at most other times. Against this background Genghis had his home." And so it reads in a seamless fashion as Stevens takes his readers, and his new falcon, Genghis, from the wind swept mountains and valleys of Iceland, back to his home in Ireland, culminating on the grouse moor.

A friend of mine once described this book as a falconer's attempt to train his game hawk without incurring a single bate. While this no-bate philosophy is a central theme, the book is ultimately about so much more. The exquisite detail describing the process wherein a wild falcon learns to accept man as an ally is neither tedious nor dull and loaded with insightful raptor management techniques. It is also pure pleasure to read, and at a mere 127 pages is over all too quickly. If you have not read this short tome yet, you owe it to yourself to do so at your earliest convenience.

Laggard

Published in 1953, *Laggard* was the first book Stevens published. This delightful tome is decidedly less falconry oriented than either *Observations*, or *Genghis*, which is why my reviews are out of chronological sync. Nonetheless, more than half the book—which is 310 pages long—is devoted to falconry-related activities.

As a teller of stories, Stevens is second to none, and his rich descriptions of his arctic/gyr explorations are so well written that it is not hard to imagine being there: here we join Stevens in Iceland on the trail of the illusive gyr, traveling by foot, carrying little more than a "pocket full of sandwiches," he continues, "These I would usually eat when arrived at a place where gyrs are reputed to nest. I would look for a pocket in the lava or a hollow in the heather where body temperature could be kept up, and there it was very enjoyable to sit down and rest after so many hours of walking"...I used to eat these meals with deliberate slowness,

not out of any regard for digestion but because I did so like to spread out the munching period and to prolong the opportunity of having the unusual experience of having lunch interrupted by gyrfalcons."

His tales of hawking red grouse and mallard duck are equally lyrical and sheer enjoyment to read. While this book does contain a handful of rudimentary drawings, it too is all about the narrative, which, whether describing falconry or the simple life on a country estate, is poetic

As a teller of stories, Stevens is second to none, and his rich descriptions of his arctic/gyr explorations are so well written that it is not hard to imagine being there:

and peppered with vivid insight. How I enjoyed spending time—even if just in my imagination—at Frogs' Gutter, Stevens' hawking cottage, plopped in the middle of his grouse moor with a stream running past. The place was reportedly haunted, which is all the more believable considering its history. According to Stevens, "The cottage is old, but not nearly so old as its foundations which are unmistakably ancient, and these foundations sprawl over a large area and so make it appear that they once supported a dwelling place of some considerable size."

A Life With Birds

At 156 pages, this, the last book by Stevens, diverges from the others in that it is an autobiographical account of—as the title indicates—Stevens' life and relationship with birds. And an interesting life it had been. The book is also sup-

ported by additional text written in memoriam by Robert McCollum, Geoffry Pollard, and Henry Swain. Unlike the three previous books, this one does contain some twenty-two black-and-white photographs including one of a spritely Stevens at age eleven. Predating Stevens' preoccupation with falconry was his love of waterfowl, an affliction he acquired in his early youth and carried on throughout his life. Stevens, bankrolled by his millionaire father, built what became the world's largest waterfowl collection, until the military requisitioned the estate during World War Two.

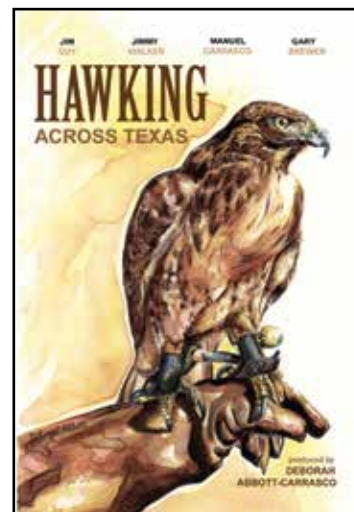
As an avid hawker of ducks, I particularly enjoyed reading Stevens' descriptions of the various species of waterfowl that populated his childhood and eventually his private lake. He writes, "Our lake had a nightlife all its own. Wigeon were its dominant habitues. The hours of darkness did nothing to quell their joy. Gleefully they called continuously one to the other "whee-oo, let us be merry." The sounds of wigeon, he continues "drifted into my bedroom to flit before my tired consciousness like fireflies of sound—a fitting prelude to sleep." If you enjoyed this passage, then this book—gentle and smooth read that is—might be a fine prelude to your sleep and I mean that in the best possible way. This is not a book to read to learn about falconry per-se, so much as it is a book about Stevens, about falconers, about whom he had this to say: "...if my reader should happen to be the privileged beholder of a wild peregrine's dramatic decent from the clouds, in pursuit of a grouse or some other game bird, see it struck to earth by what looks like the lightest touch of the feet of the speeding hawk, and to see her rocketing skyward again, all in the one movement that dramatizes speed and grace so vividly, would the sight of it hold you spellbound in awe, wonder and admiration? If it would do that for you, then you may be sure that you have the heart of a falconer." Amen.



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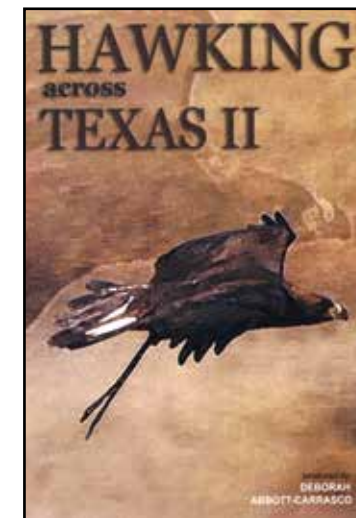
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