

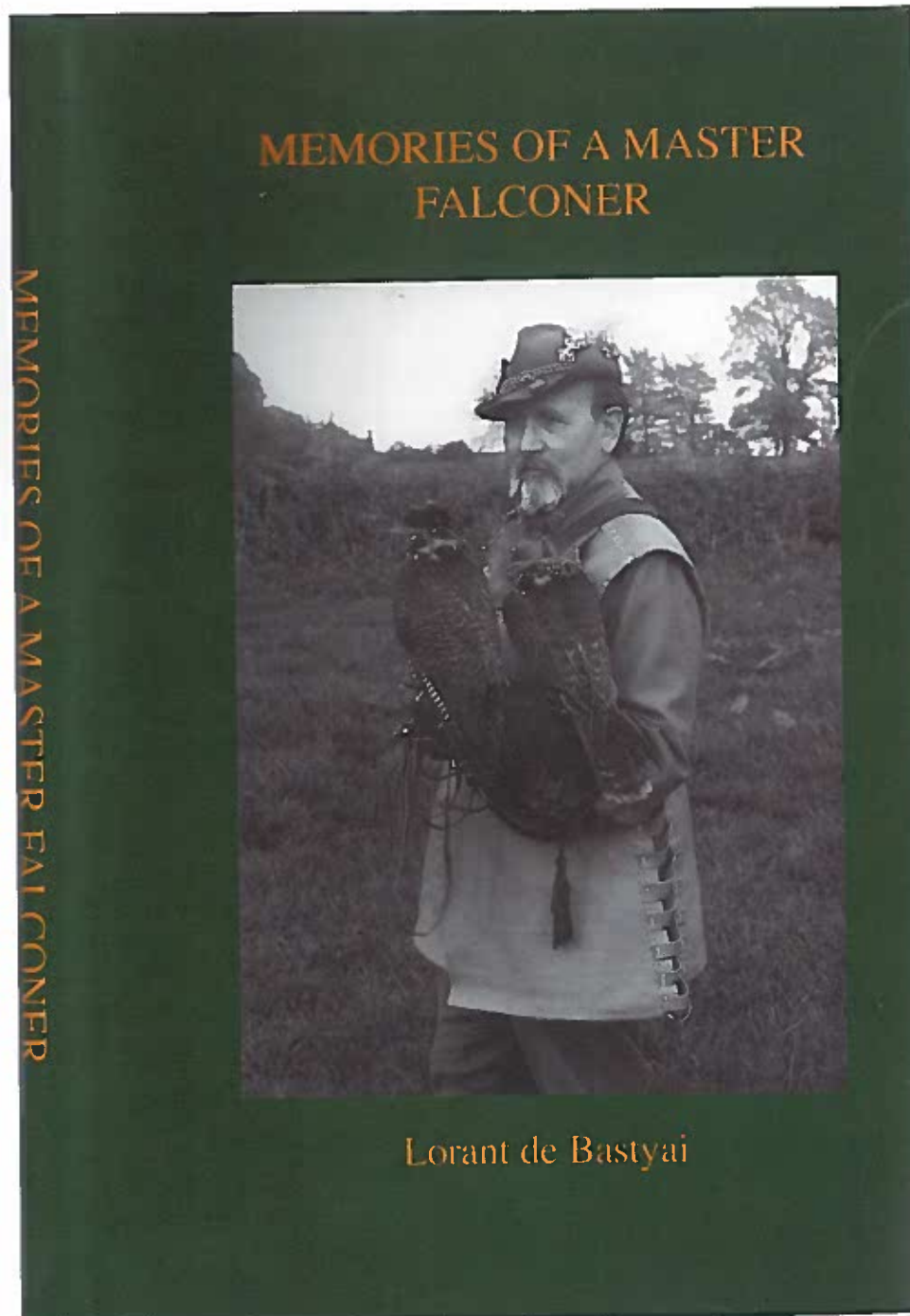
BOOK REVIEW: *MEMORIES OF A MASTER FALCONER* Lorant de Bastyai

Review by Mary Ellen Rooney

Hungarian-born Lorant de Bastyai rates among those considered a falconer's falconer. His memoir, recently published by the British Archives of Falconry, came to me in a most serendipitous manner. A member of my choral group is a relative of this legendary master falconer. She knew my interest and brought her family-auto-graphed copy of the book to me at a rehearsal.

Once I began reading this exciting tale of a life-long falconer and naturalist, I became glued to the rich narrative on many levels. This remarkable man's history as a master falconer is comprehensively documented, but there is so much much more. The memoir contains the story of what goes on in the head of one compelled to follow his/her star. The tale also illustrates over and over the futility of trying to cram individuals into molds that do not fit them, even if it is for their own good. Lorant de Bastyai eloquently describes his inability to pursue non-interests and his life demonstrated the ultimate reward of following one's own path. This independent characteristic seems to be present in other members of this distinguished family as well. The author's vivid remembrances of his brother, the musician, are particularly amusing and worthy of study by serious educators.

Although Lorant de Bastyai is probably better known in Great Britain than in the U. S., it was revelatory to discover that he had founded the Welsh Hawking Club. This group well recalled as being exceptionally cordial and helpful to me while attending the Second International Falconry Festival in Berkshire, England.



Editors Mark Upton, Paul Beecroft and David Horobin executed a remarkable job in creating a compelling book on the life and times of a pre-eminent figure in the falconry community.

Lorant de Bastyai's pursuit of natural history and raptor knowledge centered his life and affected his learning. It is wonderful to see how a greater focus can enable us to learn things that we resisted when presented in the context of education. I was reminded of my days as a professional photographer and how its technology was so willingly embraced only because it would enable the capture of a certain kind of light. At the time of Bastyai's growing up in Hungary during the forties there were few falconry experts in his sphere. Yet he persisted, acquiring knowledge of the ancient field sport any way he could. In a lesson of how consciousness can attract there is a moment of pure serendipity when he meets the Indian falconers from Great Britain on a train while leaving his uncle's estate. Falconers have always had to seek their individual pathways. In pursuit of becoming licensed I had to knock on many doors to convince experienced falconers to pass on their skills. In Bastyai's time, during the war years in Hungary, it was even more challenging. I so wished I might have met Lorant de Bastyai and to think it might have been possible since I know a family member.

This book of his life takes us through the Wars, including the cold one when places like Hungary were inaccessible to the western world. I discovered my first falconer in Kyrgyzstan while working for the UN after the Berlin Wall fell. At that time there was work for English speakers in the former Soviet Union. I shall never forget seeing Budapest for the first time. We'd been deprived of that part of the world for so long!

In addition to providing a wealth of information on the art of falconry this book is also an autobiography of Lorant de Bastyai's life and times. He was born in Hungary in Budapest in 1910. He came to England to join his mother and brother in 1957, following the Hungarian Revolution. Hungary's history during the World War II years as well as life during its revolution are vividly described and make insightful reading for a Westerner.

Falconers seem to have arrived in this world to do falconry and I always love stories of their struggles to gain needed arcane lore and training. Whenever asked how to become a falconer the reply was "you must keep knocking on doors and convince the masters to take you on and share their knowledge." My own education towards licensing took place in New York State, West Virginia, California and ultimately in Quebec. I have often said "it's equal to getting a PhD without a University sitting there to give you the courses." The great Lorant de Bastyai was even more challenged. His journey on the road to expertise is an inspiring tale for falconers and all.

He died in 1993, just short of his 83rd birthday. In the 1970's a chronic hip problem made de Bastyai less able to actively fly hawks at quarry though he continued to give demonstrations at the game fairs and attend international field meetings across Europe, especially those of the Welsh Hawking Club that he had founded.

This book is a must read for more than falconry lovers. It serves, as a primer for educators, is an inspiration for following one's own way against all obstacles, and is an absorbing history lesson on life inside Hungary during the wars and afterwards when communism reigned. The book is crammed with falconry tips and methods as well as anecdotes regarding the falconer's special birds. Finally it chronicles the difference this man made wherever he went.

In the words of John Buckner who wrote the forward, "this book is a must read for any sportsman who likes a good tale."



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