Disposition - a hollow-eyed harrier, displaced and out of time

Kate Foster and Hayden Lorimer

In this article, a prologue and postcript by Hayden Lorimer act as bookends for a description of Disposition, *an artwork by Kate Foster. Work on this 'Biogeography' began in 2003, when a museum specimen was taken to its place of origin and re-presented in the context of the Hunterian Zoological Museum in Glasgow. The initial investigation combined drawing, travel, dialogue and photography. Themes have been developed in other publications through geographical research by Merle Patchett and Hayden Lorimer: here you will see drawings and texts describing a creative enquiry that used the specimen and its label as departure points, with photographs documenting the exhibition in the museum.*

Prologue: just the thing, itself

Even in her reduced state – and before other words intrude – she remains a thing of the severest beauty. Breast: a fine-weave swatch of caramel and crème. Wing feathers: close-plated, clean edged with arching white strips. Eyes: emptied, yet defined by a pale-coloured patch, tapering to a hooked-V. Primaries, when fanned as if for flight: ring-tailed with dark bars of sober brown, alternating with blocks of white. By their very nature, bird skins are feather-light; husky, and dry to the touch. Though long since ruffled, they still offer whispers of the airy life. For the pure love of aerobatics, these wings dipped, baffled, arrowed, buffeted and flexed. Once, she threw caution to the wind.

The hen harrier's story is one of a fate sealed as soon as its name was conferred. Commonly known by countrymen of sixteenth-century shires as the Hen Harrier, or "harroer", this was a bird nominated according to habits and tastes rather than looks. The sworn enemy of free-ranging poultry, and by association their keepers, its ill repute for butchery overruled any aesthetic appeal. A penny bounty was placed on its head. So it is that harriers must only have enjoyed true prelapsarian freedoms of the skies before man domesticated animals. Unloved for centuries. A breeding population harried back to westernmost isles, only recently recovering proper footholds on mainland Scotland. And to this day, in spite of more widespread distribution: red-listed in status.

Given this troubled history, it is hard to offer a behavioural description of the hen harrier apart from humans. To begin to know just the thing itself, the briefest notes of introduction must suffice. The harrier is a ground-nesting bird. The female is renowned as 'an exceptionally tight-sitter', and the doughtiest defender of her fledgling brood. Nests, built in long heather and rank ground vegetation, are subject to predation by the Red Fox. Hunting in search of small mammals and birds, harriers favour open country, spying hillsides and working clear-felled ground. During spring come rituals of courtship, the male's tumbling and toying skydance, a spectacular signature in which he is sometimes joined by the female. During winter, outside the breeding season, they are known to congregate, using communal roosts. These few things we know.

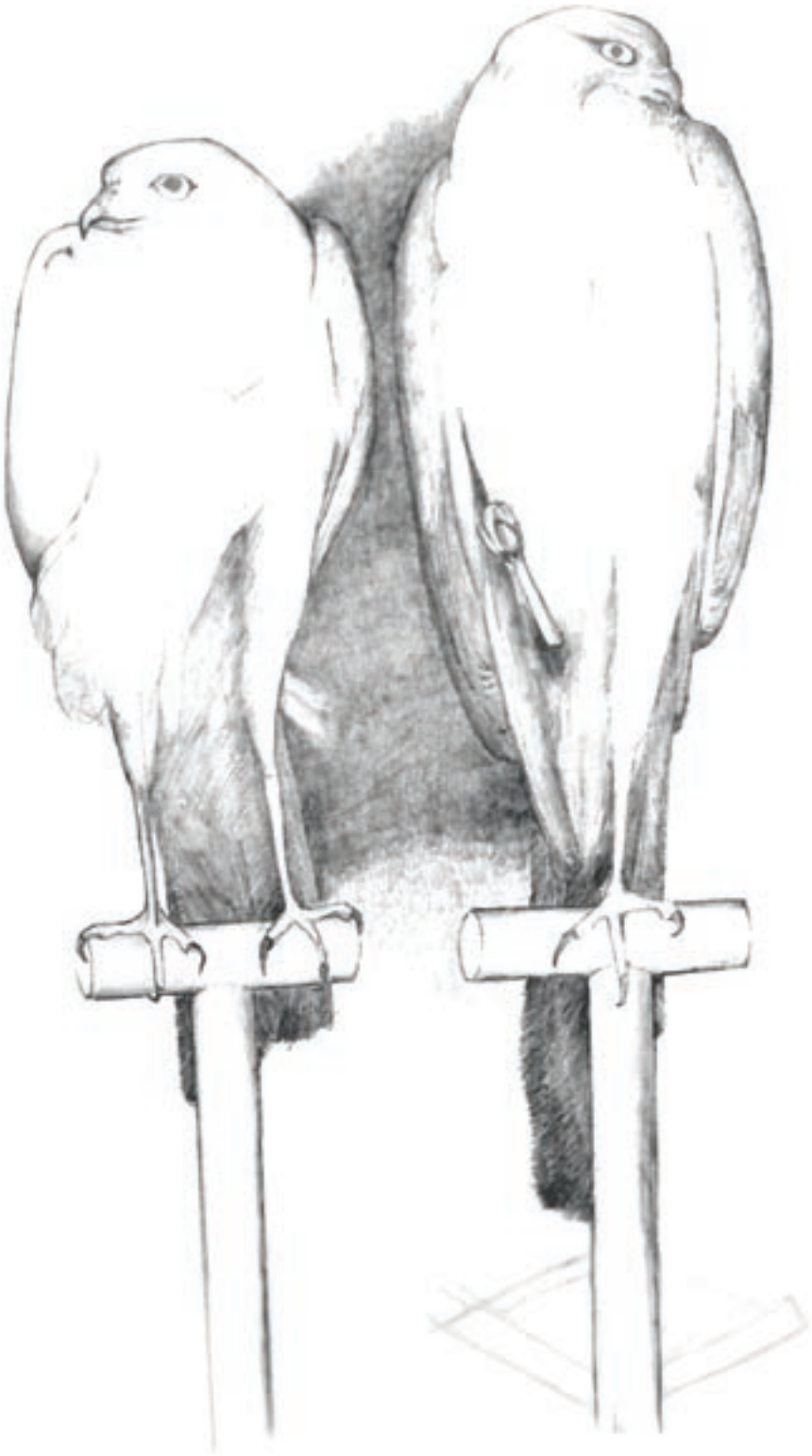
A question to myself, what might the specimen have been like in life? See *Harriers of the world, their behaviour and ecology*. In this book - which has plentiful drawings - Eddie Balfour is quoted as he caught '*some of the energy and sheer abandon of the birds*' performances on spring days in Northern Scotland:

The Hen Harrier exhibits flying powers which combine great vigour with an airmastery of the first order. Generally after a bout of undulating flight he appears to abandon himself in mid-air and hurtles earthwards, seemingly out of control, wings threshing, sometimes spiralling, until he seems destined to crash to the ground. He is, however, in perfect control for when near the ground he sweeps upwards and ascends with vigorous strokes to regain height. When at the top of the ascent he may execute a half-roll, or turn a somersault to fling himself into the next headlong dive (1962).

ZOOL. COLL. UNIV., GLASGOW.

The Hunterian Zoology Museum Collections has systematically stored birds, dedicated to studious scrutiny. As 'cabinet skins' they are tubular - re-arrangements of feathers and skin, set on sticks and bagged. Other skins have been 'mounted' into lifelike poses through the skill of taxidermy. Artists also use this zoological archive - my attention was directed to hen harriers, absent birds of moorland, Britian's rarest bird of prey. One particular specimen, a female, has a clutch of labels declaring her provenance. The sparse information on this label gave leads to develop this specimen's afterlife. She was an acquisition from 1926, when Zoological Science in Glasgow was settling into state-of-the-art premises. I looked also at Red Grouse and imagined the transitions from corpse to specimen: strange patterns of who is predator and what is prey, of persecution and resurrection.

Name CIRCUS CYANEUS (HEN-HARRIER

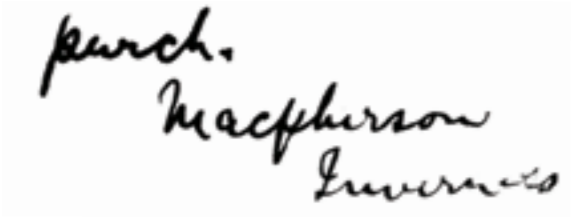


Circus cyaneus, Harrier of Hens. *Chicken-thief* in Dutch. No longer officially classed as vermin, but still accused of poaching Red Grouse – birds reserved for table and trophy. Described for science by Linnaeus in 1766, now a persecuted species with unnoccupied haunts, habitat but no subject. It is illegal to kill them, but there remain suspicions of blue-blooded collusion with this wildlife crime.

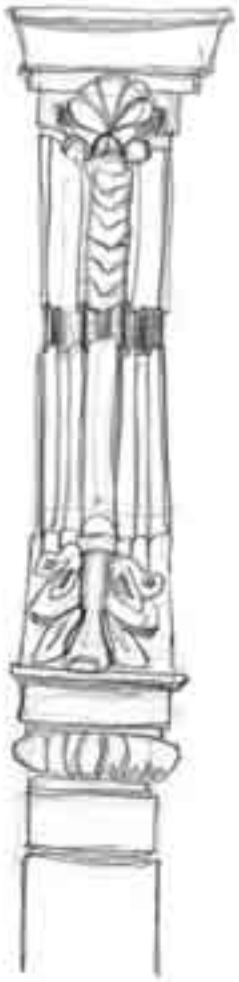
Sex Female

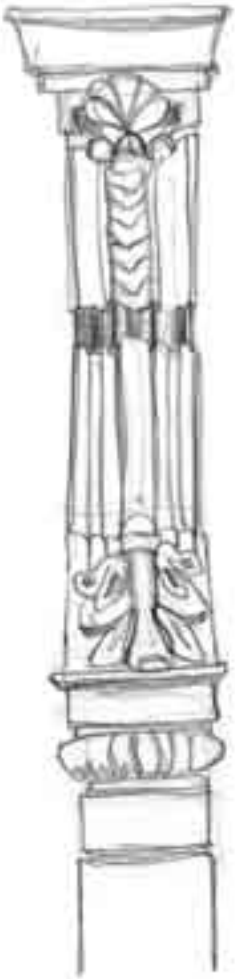
An adult female – perhaps once paired, won by its sky-dancing white mate. Her plumage a blend of moorland colours. Reared in a nest of sticks on the ground, the youngsters then need to search for their own territory and food. With these 'ringtails', the female can easily be confused for a young male. Check the streaks on its chest, the pale areas creamier than chestnut. Compare this with Westminster Glencheck.

'Deer forest' – preserves of red deer, treeless vastnesses of mountainous moorland. Reay Forest, in the far north-west of Scotland, bought in 1921 by the Duke of Westminster from the Duke of Sutherland. Westminster Tweed, manufactured by Hunters of Brora, a livery of camouflage for ghillies. Estate tweeds: unique weaves designed to allow the disappearance of hunter into particular ground. Some sections of the stalking grounds were planted in the 1950s, celebrated as bringing economic regeneration and employment. As they grow, these spruce trees become impenetrable to harriers, and also considered unprofitable to humans.



Purchased in 1926 from Macphersons, Inverness: Sports Suppliers and Taxidermist of the Northern Highlands. Falling out of business in the 1970s, Macphersons' workaday material legacy was acquired by Inverness Museum. The workshop contents are no longer on public view but stored: photographs of the chief taxidermist, John MacDonald, in his deerskin apron, alongside the tools of his trade. Craftsman's choice - japanese gut, wire gimp, a handbook of Chemical Magic, "FLIT" flyspray. Tools of the trade, animals passing through turned inside out and back again, bound into shape and groomed - fit for the best collections, the most superior walls. These remnants are now dislodged to the perimeters of interest, with skins strewn empire-wide. Stuffing Books offering a complete record.





EAST SIDE

2, 4, 6, 8 Squair, Middleton and Co., solicitors
Mrs Jessie Munro, caretaker
8 John Macpherson and Sons, sports emporium
10 George Morrison, baker and confectioner
12 Singer Sewing Machine Co. Ltd.
14 Carlton restaurant
16 Birrell, Ltd., confectioners
18 W. and D. Fraser, chemists
20 Hosiery Manufacturing Company, Ltd.
24 Edward F. Hunter, tobacconist
26 Macrae's—gift and toy shop
28 James B. Stewart, restaurant

Below: detail of *Disposition 1* © Kate Foster / Hunterian Museums and Art Gallery (2003). The first part of a public artwork, displayed as a photograph in the University of Glasgow Biology Department's research boards.

I returned with the specimen to Reay Forest - part of the Duke of Westminster's Scottish Estate. I met people living in the estate village, and learned about how the land has been shaped for hunting - no wilderness this. The story emerged that after it had been killed in the far north-west of Scotland in the 1920s, the hen harrier would have travelled somehow to Glasgow via the taxidermist in Inverness. Who would have shot it? Well, a 'Gun' most likely, otherwise the incident would persist in living memory. And what would this gentleman, the Gun, have done with it? Ah, taken it to Macphersons on his way south, but abandoned it as a trophy on learning the cost. So, it would have been entered into Macphersons annual sale, and been acquired by the Museum. We also talked about how there is ongoing persecution of hen harriers in some places, though other landowners allow space for birds of prey. While they wished to see hen harriers, the estate staff said there were still no live birds in Reay Forest. Returning to the museum, I redisplayed the hen harrier in combination with elements from Reay Forest, as *Disposition 1* (above) and *Disposition 2* (below).

Above: detail of *Disposition 2* © Kate Foster / Hunterian Museums & Art Gallery, Glasgow (2003).
Acknowledgements to Westminster Estates for use of Westminster Tweed.

Postscript: Two down, third in line

As a news item it flat-lined almost the very same moment it flared. Newspaper reports were suggestive, throwing out tit-bits to tantalise readers, Royalist or Republican. Two unexplained deaths, but no bodies to speak of. And two suspects for a crime punishable with a spell behind bars. The story merited cartoonist Steve Bell's attentions. His portrait depicts a pair in flight, their label: 'Protected Species'. Above, Harry the Gun, on the wing, rifle trained on some prey unseen, signature plumage fiery red, jacket and wellingtons Barbour green. Hovering below, identically clad, William van Cutsem, close family friend, a ruddy-cheeked son of England. "They couldn't have? Could they?"

Two hen harriers plucked out the sky as they quartered their hunting ground, running the border where the Dersingham Nature Reserve backs onto the Sandringham Estate. The reserve warden spoke of hearing the shotgun's muffled retort, then another soon after. With each sound, a bird fell instantly. Expert work. The local constabulary came knocking with questions that demanded answers. The Prince, his shooting chum and their gamekeeper-consort had the same story. It was straight. Duck hunters only, duck hunters all. No ballistic evidence. No forensics. And no eye-witnesses. So no charges to be brought. The police decision to terminate inquiries dropped the whole thing stone dead. Gallows humour, it seems, is all that's left when the Establishment closes ranks.

The sorry tale and its satirical treatment are, truth to tell, as old as the hills of the Highlands, far north of Norfolk. In those days when it is said that the Cabinet might reasonably have met in Inverness, rather than Whitehall, Punch enjoyed making fun of rotund men who love hunting game, and of the silly games that they play. Politics and power, prestige and privilege, have annually convened in places where animals and birds are plentiful, and know when to take flight in sporting fashion. But if the plunder of protected species continues unabated and goes unpunished, all the poking and pointing, all that conspiratorial nudging and winking, troubles this social scene not one jot.

Pray silence a moment for the fallen. By certain countryside economies, the hen harriers' greatest value is neither as study skin, cabinet trophy or living treasure, but rather as anonymous dead thing. The gamey's secret cache. Poisoned, bagged up or burned. Best dealt with behind the back shed. The most discreet of disposals, leaving behind no mortal remains. Thus, persecution is the troublesome fact wherein lies a difficult truth. Knowing just one of the birds' number as well as we do – which by many a biographer's measure is not well at all – is in some respects miraculous. The killing of hen harriers is something done so as to leave the investigator policeman, artist or geographer with absolutely nothing to go on. And long after the inquisitors have gone, so it goes on, and on. Spelling out the continuance of stewardship, and the associated indulgence of boyish adventure, by older and long outlawed means.

References:
Merle Patchett, Kate Foster and Hayden Lorimer (2011), The 'Biogeographies' of a Hollow-eyed Harrier, with Merle Patchett & Hayden Lorimer, in Afterlives of Animals, edited by SJMM Alberti, University of Virginia Press (including the prologue by Hayden Lorimer).
RE Simmons with drawings by J Simmons, Harriers of the world, their behaviour and ecology, Oxford University Press, Oxford (2000). Cited on page 61: Eddie Balfour (1962-3, p146). The Hen Harrier in Orkney. Part 3. Courtship, display and sociability. Bird Notes, 30, 145 – 153.
Acknowledgements:
The Hunterian Museum and Art Galleries, Glasgow; staff and residents of Westminster Estates; Inverness Museum and Art Gallery, the Department of Geographical and Earth Sciences at the University of Glasgow, Maggie Reilly, Dick Hendry, Mr. Willy Elliot, RSPB Scotland, Michael van Beinum.
Disposition has been shown at the University of Glasgow (Scottish Arts Council) 2003, and at "*The Animal Gaze*" exhibition, Plymouth Art College, 2009.

Further details of *Disposition* can be seen on http://www.meansealevel.net/?q=node/9