

Gyrfalcon Poems

Colin Simms — Selected Bibliography

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COLIN SIMMS

Gyrfalcon Poems

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'In the field' many more, including, both my wives Judy and Lesley one after the other with a gyrfalcon nearby, thirty years apart, and Nick Bevan here in the North Pennines, together with many generous local people wherever I watched gyrfalcons, including Gisli at Látur and Michael Shayer also in Iceland.

For tireless and painstaking processing for this publication and much else, Margaret Hartley; to whom this volume is dedicated with thanks.

I've consulted a number of falcon-smitten folk including falconers in my youth, and all the main Northern hemisphere museums with gyrfalcon skins. Mostly in North America, many of these poems have been read in public, and a few broadcast (usually on local radio stations from Alaska circumpolarly like this falcon) — just a few have been published previously: by Genera, Shadowcat and Pig Press, Durham; *Poetry Review*, London; The Many Press, London; one in my *The American Poems* (Shearsman Books, 2005), and another in *Goshawk Lives* (Form Books, London, 1995).

The poem 'Gyrfalcon of Westmorland' and the 'Whinash' series were read by the author at the protest and public inquiry meetings over the proposed Whinash, Westmorland, wind farm from April-June 2005. Our case was won.



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Drawings have been removed from this PDF sampler
in order to reduce space and bandwidth.

My first opportunity to study a hunting gyrfalcon in England came in the winter 1960–61 when I found one on the Westmorland Fells (e.g. *The Birds of the Lake Counties*, R. Stokoe, Trans. Carlisle Nat. Hist. Soc. Vol X. 1962; pp 50–51). Much of the watching was in the fells above Bretherdale, Wet and Long Sleddale, Wasdale, Borrowdale, Bannerdale (these of Westmorland) and North Lunedale; and this bird did not seem to travel far to hunt other places—unlike birds watched in W. Lancs., North Tyne/Redesdale, and Alston Moor—Upper Teesdale subsequently, when flights of over 20 miles and up to 40 miles were observed and deduced. I have not worked up and published a full account of these observations but have waited until I have had other experience, especially of intense work on wintering gyrfalcon in North America as well as in England and Scotland. Before the early English opportunity I had studied gyrfalcon on the breeding-grounds in Iceland, Siberia, Norway and (one) Sweden; since then I've had further chances in North America 1973–90, both on breeding-grounds and wintering-grounds, and the odd passage bird but especially in the North of England several wintering/passage birds since 1983—particularly one individual (Alston Moor and Upper Teesdale 1992 for several winters, and Iceland, 1972 and 1998. There have been 'white' and grey-phase birds over the North Pennines since, as currently as 2004/5 and early 2007.

Going back to the Westmorland bird of 1960/1, sketches were made on 16 December, and four subsequent dates, in various lights. The bird was a light-phase adult; not 'white'. On the basis of these, R Wagstaffe and C.S. considered the bird likely to have been of Icelandic or Greenland origin; we did not (and I do not) observe the old tripartite divisions of Gyrfalcons visiting Britain.*

* *There was a similar bird, or the same, wintering on the Freshfield Dunes, Lancs., 1961–1962.*

Hvita White Water

If I could jump to that first far wet boulder
over the divide froth cleaving the foam
shouldering air, rock, and my thoughts aside
Hvita invites that first, or second, false step as under
leap, hop, and jump for that far of the thunder:
one slip, falling-short or over-reaching; each
means it's over!
Whatever it is, bar parting/ heart wrenching/ and blenching
I'm over the waters grasp and pull
jokull—cold; sore rump, slight bump on the skull

Wet-through, welter-breast yet full of the onrush
setting mentality to ignore this torment
for the better one of the birds beyond it; beyond
the next fell, lava-fall, laughing ptarmigan. Then
will my best effort be *enough* to gain over again
Hvita's rapids' swell, bend parallax sight-lines.
Morning of silver *breughs* over the glaycier
and of/as if someone, something, was flying inside me
who have leapt through all the swill tumble-torrent racier

Braided-rapids brigand sight and sound, confuse-sense
raid on my sleep for years, last this long night
made creep under/these words; I remember I looked
at the skies, remembered the haycocks/hayrucks/ stooked up/cocked at
Scarth Nick; (the gap in the hills the weather comes through)
Now at the eyrie in its corrie-nick up there, corniche,
'current' falls away behind the climb, *their* eyes
supply electricity now; *they* have me, stooked
stare down the harry of the waters. Hurry. Life flies.

(of 1998) Sept. 9 2003
at On Set, Bewcastle

**At the Birdskin Cabinet,
Reykjavik Natural History Museum**

In the hand, the hands
holding these birds span
but don't control; they these
though formal, study-skins
tug for the air, scan wind
chrysal is/pupa: strain for (the) loose
pinions (longship) papoose
brittle-bundle shaped
made for passage one-way
the way the bill, the sightless
eyes point: forward to where
skies meet ice and land
and water, not arbitrary
as skins seem to the ignorant
or wise: birds still in the skies
ignore them lying on the ground
but not perched up(right), I've found
empty skins still *falcon* to my eyes

(of 1998)

2004

above the high geese...

above the high geese wailing their surprise
had been the highest of the tooth-beaks, clear
against the blue by something more than size,
by style, by presence inculcating unique fear:
the only thing he had was who he was
and all that he had done so far ... was near
the only thing he has, who *he* is
was rich in *that*, beyond our riches

it is in overcoming that comes certainty
(which nevertheless recognises there'll be surprise,
denial, further testing, even failure often)
experience in the strike when his eyes soften
in confidence, the strike itself his certainty.
Bold, but identity that is not in your face
(no-one knew his face, even, no-one knows it
—how fatuous then, a giant statue of the man!)*

Statement made, long enough to comprehend
the start of it, before the stoop, the dive
selects the leading goose whose head falls loose
in the same movement, part of it, to land
spent bullet, spent life, 'bolt of passing squalls,
sinking in the slew's soft earth at our hand
but nothing could be further from—its skill
or cleaner than the precision of this kill

A figure for the man who'd watched the hawks
(descendants told me, of Two Moon and Gall)
soar, strike, move on. He listened to their call
alter by fear prairie-chicken squawks...

*[the gyr-falcon of Pine Ridge
fall and winter 1975/6]*

* Crazy Horse, of course.

Gyrfalcon 1960

windstrength to rely on, haul to or hover
warmth on this wind; volcanic fire ever
his bone on the fell, cloud wrack in person
outshining and outflying. Come down, sun!
before you fly back north, thinning-out grinning
gulls, grouse, sends the snow scattering
spirit of northmen revisit, winning—

from the place, the spread, where is stored
so much sheer but locked up water
you come, mutely; tell of all that hoard
hinterland, history, ore, story, sinter,
but early only what is in books under gyr falcon
from now on I'm only interested in
gods and devils and their kith and kin!

Shap-Kendal, Dec 1960

I see the bird going away

I see the bird going away
and a solid thing melted away
refinement itself refined away
part of the fetch and the lift and the sway
not the grey of goshawks, that intricate grey
cross-bars chequering into the cloud's way:
arrowheads into one fletching goose-grey

Seeming to be Altai...

Seeming to be Altai on this side, Altay on the other (the other side only of this range; other ranges appeared beyond eastward with each ascent and from each saddle rose and tumbled in the other direction also); the passes between were no more than breathing spaces—breath was short anyway. They were dizzying relief: the northwest—southeast grain of the land, its overall grain though defined was different and the lot seemed let down into its own talus and desert, a graben seamed with age, was watched as we were by eagles and, often further away, wolves. I saw none of the birds I had come for, which I expected would be few and far between anyway, and nothing familiar since the blackgame bar the occasional golden-eagle but then there were few birds, even distant ones. The sense of vigour took over from that of relief. On the other side of the Altai mountains, and within those ranges where there are Mongolians and their sport of wrestling, there are grades of wrestling excellence of which one standard is called “falcon”, Apparently, “falcons” are less adept than “lion”, Did the Mongols have, or know lions is the days of Jenghis Khan; were there lions north of the Himalyas? Perhaps they imported them from somewhere through their empire. Anyway, I was unable to establish a clear link to the *Altai* falcon, but suspected it. The resemblance to ‘Cumberland and Westmorland’ wrestling back at home in the North of England had me curious again. Did such sport travel west with the Mongol hordes a version of it nearer the Cumberland and Westmorland trials of skill and strength I have watched in the Borderland back home, especially at “shepherds” meets? There *were* tigers north of the Himarleah, more eventually far to the northeast in Amurland; in medieval days there would no doubt be more and I would not be surprised, where vultures, eagles, buzzards and even falcons were given the same colloquial names, if lions and tigers had been so conflated. The mind races thus on these high ridges ... Grey marestails of cloud engendered there, hung, bent and disappeared from the rim, the gentle old waved rims of the hills—seeming hills rather than mountains, are more moraine in outline than alps, along this grey valley with ice on its higher lee slopes. A blue canyon but cobalt horizons and tilts along it, copper sulphate colour to malachite in places, red rims and feather-edges lower down over screes of grey and burnt dirty reddishness with darker shadowing under the clouds—emphatic varieties of scenes familiar, especially under early morning, and evening, light in parts of the North Pennines, the Border

hills, even the Yorkshire Dales and North York Moors and Lake Fells. Blue pools reflected grey and blue skies eyes as dark as Uzbek women's otherwise, and with few signs of life in or about them at this altitude. And cairns' fingers pointed like the Nine Standards on Hartley Fell above Mallerstang, whilst Wild Boar Fell across that deep valley was 'reflected' a hundred times in half-recognition here. Whether ever wild boars there, there were certainly yaks here—yaks in family groups and herds in the distance resembling buffalo (American bison) parties—though their grazing here was grayer and less ... Suddenly a way would open down into a flush or bog, even some extensive ones where snowfed springs rose, and so did Asiatic Golden Plover with their plangent cries, and calling from high circling; and I was home again. Then, an arrowhead high above even their circling—some two thousand feet above us, at least, and I saw at last the silhouette of the great falcon, the hierofalco kind. Not the trimmer, more sharp-set lines of the peregrine falcon, but the longer winged, heavier-set, formidable presence of the greater bird, and at speed such that it passed behind one of these not towering peaks in a matter of seconds; the plovers silent and spiralling down swiftly some few miles away. The pass had been in a straight line, not apparently gaining or losing height, and more than a glide; a wind-assisted swift patrol achieved by just several downbeats, shallow downbeats, of those majestic wings in what was miles of traverse. I watched and watched and hoped for a towering or a return, but nothing in the grey-blueness for an hour of increasingly urgent travel to be at the ger we were expected at in time for sunset. That was all I was to see of what might have been whatever the Altai's falcon is, if indeed it was not a saker or 'true' gyr from somewhere else. This tribe of falcons, like the peregrine, can turn up almost anywhere, usually briefly and tantalizingly, like this. I was assured by one of my hosts, and I have been by a friend at Ulan Bator, that these birds, brown-grey but very similar to the pictures in my book, *did* nest in some few of the steep canyons, often lined with miles of 'suitable' cliffs, we saw some days, and entirely missed on others. Not the right season; I was 'too late' for the nesting, but I was disappointed not to find signs of nest ledges, or sight of young birds. However, I had had many a similarly frustrating time in Norway, in Alaska, elsewhere in subarctic America, and even in Iceland, where the great falcon is perhaps 'thicker on the ground' than anywhere else.

Even a stranger such as I...

Even a stranger such as I thrills at such a bird:
feel each of us our fills of Sperrin spirit
along this high ridge "so nearly Pennine".
At her stand on the air above Mullaghmore
she'll see just now/today the Paps of Jura where
the Hebrides invite, and maybe she'll hunt there
tomorrow, Tobermore today while it is fine...

The heather's not over yet along this spine and spurs
as it is at home already, there in milder air.
Tyrone and Derry. Gyrs have a liking for heather
wherever they occur, for its varied grouse
the Willow and the Black of our Old World
most of all the Ptarmigan of New and Old
Worlds, all manner of game and ground-fauna

The river Owenkilled sounds like its curlew
and lapwing both in name and its singing
like its parallel Glenelly hardly a ridge away
where a harrier gave way to the great falcon
both hardly serious, surely, after a hare.
Will she bother to chase the ducks around Lough Neagh?
She won't find marmots, lemmings, in this turf

1958, 1974, Ulster

The Falcon's Crag is hers

1974

The Falcon's Crag is hers—it's bare just now of Peregrine
where McGuigan, naked as his horse Bucephalus
donned wings he made from seventy geese feathers
and, they say, flapped OK before they clapped. He flopped
and broke both legs. The bogland, laughed since he dropped,
smiles green and brown miles over according to weather:
the gyrfalcon comes and goes without any kind of fuss.