

Ravens at the Tower of London

by Mary Reed
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One of the most popular tourist destinations for visitors to England is the Tower of London which, in its time, has housed political prisoners, traitors, the Royal Zoo and the Mint; the crown jewels are still kept there. It is also home to a number of ravens, a somewhat curious sight nowadays in the heart of a city, though common in the days when rubbish was thrown out into the street without much regard for health. Indeed, the ravens' residence at the Tower is at the heart of a curious legend to the effect that, if they should leave, Britain (or, in some versions, the Crown itself) will fall.

How did this curious belief arise? Why, for example, ravens, and not, say, pigeons or sparrows or robins? The answer is open to speculation, and this article will present a possible explanation, which will have its roots in a time even before the Tower was built.

The Tower is, in fact, more than one building, surrounded by a fortified wall, close to the River Thames. The White Tower, the first part of the complex to be built, dates from the 1070s; it was erected by William I, commonly known as William the Conqueror, who seized the throne of England by winning the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

The Tower then is the location, but what of the enigma of the legend itself?

In Norse mythology, the raven was sacred to Odin, who was said to be accompanied by two of them. H.R. Ellis Davidson, in *Gods & Myths of Northern Europe* (Pelican Books, 1964) notes that the names of these two ravens are known, quoting the following fragment from the poem *Grimnismal*:

Huginn and Muninn, Thought
and Memory, fly over the
world each day.

I fear for Thought, lest he come
not back, but I fear yet more
for Memory.

which is to say, the author comments, that the ravens symbolize the "mind of the *seer* or shaman" (my emphasis). The book also mentions that figures, similar to the Norse Valkyrie, are to be found in Celtic stories, Morrighu and Babd being two examples.* These goddesses were



A Beefeater (prestigious guard at the Tower of London) holding one of the ravens at the Tower of London. Legend has it that if the ravens ever abandon the Tower, the Crown will fall.

able to take the form of birds of prey, often uttering prophecies. They also sometimes appeared on the battlefield, or before the actual engagement; the book mentions that the raven is referred to in practically all battles described in Old English poetry.

The Celtic connection mentioned is another important part of the puzzle, for we now turn to the Celtic hero, Bran (also known as Bran the Blessed), whose story is to be found in *The Mabinogion*, a collection of eleven medieval Welsh epics. Bran was a giant who, after the usual adventures, is wounded in battle, and instructs his fellow warriors to behead him. The Celts practiced a cult of the head; not just regarding them as spoils of war (although heads were taken for this purpose) but also as sacred oracles, for they believed that the head was the place where the soul resided, even after death, and thus that it possessed super-

natural powers. For this, and other reasons, the head was regarded as taboo by a number of cultures; for a discussion of this subject, see Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic & Religion* (Macmillan Ltd., 1970). Bran's severed head was said to have prophesied for a number of years; we shall return to this in due course.

According to Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* (Faber & Faber Ltd., 1948), the alder was sacred to Bran. In the Beth-Luis-Nion (an orally transmitted tree-alphabet used by the Druids, the Celtic priestly caste, the consonants of which, Mr. Graves notes, also form a tree-magic calendar) the tree of the fourth month, which ran from March 18th to April 14th, is Bran's alder, which was also regarded as one of a trio of "Trees of Resurrection."

The Most Ancient Order of Druids currently holds a ceremony celebrating the Spring Equinox (which falls during

this period) on Tower Hill. There is some controversy about the authenticity of the ceremony as, despite its name, the Most Ancient Order is a comparatively recent foundation. Very little is known about the original Druids, who were very secretive (as are many sects), handing on their knowledge orally, often in forms incomprehensible to the layman. In addition, the Celts regarded the alder as the Tree of Divi-



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nation. It is a tree which flourishes best near water, and these two facts may be quite significant, as will be seen shortly.

The raven, often in its oracular aspect, was also sacred to Apollo, Athene, Saturn and Cronos, among others. (So was the crow, a somewhat similar-looking bird). The Greek goddess Athene is occasionally called Pallas-Athene, although in fact Pallas was originally a completely separate god. However, readers of Poe will remember that it was a bust of Pallas upon which the raven, croaking its pessimistic prophecy, perched.

Yet another part of the puzzle may be found in children's rhymes. When the writer was young, there was a custom whereby, upon seeing a flock of blackbirds, one repeated the following:

One for sorrow,
Two for joy,
Three for a letter (sometimes
'girl')
Four for a boy,
Five for silver,
Six for gold,
Seven for a secret never to be
told.

The idea was that, depending on how many blackbirds there were, one would be able to foretell the future.

The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book, collected by Iona and Peter Opie (Oxford University Press, 1955) includes

this rhyme, but with three representing a girl. It does not, however, mention counting birds, listing the rhyme merely as a children's charm. From a brief survey of friends here, this rhyme does not seem to be known in the Midwest, although a virtually identical form of it is, according to William S. and Ceil Baring-Gould, in *The Annotated Mother Goose* (Bramhall House, 1962) apparently known in Maine, where it is applied to crows. They also quote the following European variant, relating to crows, magpies or ravens:

One's lucky,
Two's unlucky,
Three is health,
Four is wealth,
Five is sickness,
And six is death.

It will be noted that ravens, crows and magpies all belong to the same bird family, whereas the blackbird is a member of the thrush family. However, it may be that in the case of the blackbird, one is more likely to see that particular bird than, say, a flock of crows, or possibly magpies, and almost certainly ravens, which are not that common. In any event, it is noticeable that all the birds mentioned are those of a feather — in this case, black.

As mentioned above, magpies are also regarded as oracular birds, and a similar rhyme is applied to them in a curious story related in a talk which Robert

Graves gave to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1963. This talk, entitled "The Uses of Superstition" was reprinted in *The Crane Bag and Other Disputed Subjects*, Cassell & Co., 1969, as follows:

In France, during the First World War, said Graves, "... an Irish friend of mine named Cullen, an infantry captain, was marching up the *pavé* road with his company, from reserve billets to support billets, and saw a magpie in a field. He fell out, put the company in charge of a lieutenant, and waited for the other magpie to arrive — because of 'one for sorrow, two for mirth'. Now, in normal times, France is so stiff with magpies that one pays no attention to them; but this was 1915, and all birds were getting pretty rare in the fighting areas. Cullen waited until dark before he rejoined us, disappointed and hungry, and found a telegram waiting for him — his brother had been killed in the division to our left."

As Mr. Graves has pointed out, in *The White Goddess* (op cit), the ancients often did not distinguish between ravens, crows and other large, black birds, which probably, the present writer speculates, accounts for variations in the subject birds of the children's rhymes quoted — which could well be folk-memories of the role of such birds as prophets.

Returning to Bran. The raven was also Bran's sacred bird, and, indeed, this

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may provide the last "link" for the answer to the puzzle. According to the saga, Bran's head (at his own request) was buried on the White Mount (White Hill or Tower Hill) in London, as a charm against invasion and other disasters. Although this is said to have taken place before the building of the Tower of London, the story was, of course, known. It will be noted that Tower Hill is by the river, where Bran's alder (tree of divination and resurrection) would have flourished.

Here, then, are the pieces for a possible explanation of the legend: Bran's miraculous oracular head, his sacred water-loving tree, and his sacred bird, the raven. Even if one does not accept the story of Bran's supernaturally-gifted severed head, the link between ravens and prophecies is still, apparently, remembered.

There are two possible interpretations of the legend. The obvious one is that the departure of the ravens would, in effect, symbolize the removal of Bran's oracular head, which is supposed to guard the country.

A slightly more convoluted interpretation is, however, worth considering. In other words, could cause and effect have become reversed, that is, that, rather than disaster occurring *because the ravens have gone*, perhaps they go *because they see disaster coming*, rather like avians rats from a sinking ship?

Of course, the whole thing is merely speculative, but in any event, it would seem that the authorities are taking no chances, for while the Tower ravens are, of course, well cared for, their flight feathers are clipped, so that (unless they actually walk away) they remain at their historic home, and the country and Crown are safe.

Acknowledgements and References

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Avian Identification

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Recent proposed and passed legislation in New York and other states precludes the sales of most wild caught birds. Only domestically bred birds are allowed to enter the animal trade. These laws necessitate the need for distinction between birds locally produced and birds legally or illegally imported.

Identification of individual animals within any species is difficult. Unless an animal has unique features, such as missing appendages or an unusual color pattern, it can easily be mistaken for another of the same species. Even to the trained eye, subtle differences of appearance between animals can be confusing.

One needs to be able to differentiate individual animals to ascertain sex, genetic makeup, age and legal status. Ear tags, ear notches, freeze brands, hot brands, tattoos and collars are frequently used in mammals. Various methods to mark birds have been tried. Toe clipping, web notching, and wing banding work well for certain species. Open banding, where a premarked band is placed on the leg of a bird by a clamping device, is commonly used. These bands, if properly placed, work well when one is dealing with animals that don't chew. However, many birds, including those nonchewers, can injure themselves by catching the band on wire or by clamping the band so as to cut off the blood supply to the foot. The open band also has the disadvantage of being easily removed, altered and replaced.

Because of the nature of the skin of birds, tattooing is impractical. Any mark soon becomes an illegible blur. For this reason, it is limited to coarse site marking such as right versus left or red versus black. Tattooing has the added disadvantage of necessitating the handling of a bird to verify its mark.

Closed banding has been practiced by the pigeon industry for many years. A ring shaped band with identifying letters and numbers is placed on the bird before the bird reaches adult size. The bird is then allowed to grow into the band. In this way, an adult bird can be permanently marked. Even birds that chew cannot remove the band and there is no gap to catch on caging. Once on, the band cannot easily be removed,

therefore illegal forging is discouraged. Closed banding does have disadvantages. Older birds cannot be properly banded; what can be placed on, can also be pulled off. Closed bands can catch on objects and traumatize the underlying structures. If the leg starts to swell for any reason, a closed band will act as a tourniquet. Birds can be closed banded and still be illegal if the bird is caught at an early age. Nonetheless, in psittacine propagation this is the recommended means of identification.

In our aviaries, we faced the problem of permanently identifying our progeny as our legal domestically bred stock. We have developed a system of identification that includes closed bands, with a combination number and letter sequence, as well as an accompanying certificate containing the vital data. Certainly this combination of leg band and certificate can be easily duplicated; however, we make it difficult to duplicate the certificate by a number of checks and balances. The color and type of paper used is not universally available. The ink used to fill out the certificate is also not easily copied. The bird's band number is recorded as well as its species, color variation and hatching date. One certificate is issued for each bird. We record the first owner in the space provided and the original certificate is to go with the bird to each successive owner. We sign the certificate and emboss the signature with a specially made "notary" type stamp which, in our case, matches the logo contained in the certificate. All this can be counterfeited. However, we hope to make it economically unjustifiable to do so.

Certainly this procedure would not be used for all domestically bred birds. The paperwork and expense would be prohibitive. However, when dealing with birds that are expensive or easily smuggled, the procedure has merit. We hope by identifying our birds as legal and domestically bred, we can inhibit the ease in which illegal birds co-mingle in the pet trade. We hope this voluntary measure will help circumvent further restrictive legislation. We encourage others to adopt our method or develop their own in order to infuse responsible professionalism into the business of aviculture. ●