

LESLIE BROWN—SOME MEMORIES¹

Leslie Brown, who was felled by a heart attack at his home near Nairobi in early August, had become the world's best known expert on birds of prey. How does one write an obituary on such a remarkable man? We could give an inventory of his achievements, but these are well-known to all of us and they are well summarized in the citation accompanying the award of the medal of the British Ornithologists' Union in 1970 (see *Ibis*, 112: 427–428). Not that he rested on his laurels after that, and the last ten years of his life were some of his most productive, despite ill health.

Leslie published half a dozen books on birds of prey and more are to come. He had underway, in joint authorship, books on the Golden Eagle and on the owls of Europe. More technical aspects were dealt with in numerous papers in periodicals. I (D.A.) prize most highly Leslie's first raptor book, titled simply *Eagles* (1955) based on research at his beloved Eagle Hill, where about a dozen species bred, not to mention Peregrines. Nor was Brown's work confined to raptors. He did basic research on, for example, the Lesser Flamingo (*Mystery of the Flamingoes*, 1959), even learning to pilot a plane so he could locate and map its colonies on the sulfurous flats of Lake Natron, where he was once mired and nearly lost his life. He wrote the volume on Africa in the *Continent We Live On* series, perhaps the best of the lot, and even found time for a book on coral reef fishes as observed near his hide-away on the Kenya coast.

How did Leslie Brown, who, after all, was a busy colonial officer in the agricultural service into middle age, accomplish so much? Partly by an unremitting capacity for toil; partly because his mind, while without the superficial flashes of brilliance, was yet so organized and retentive that he could write page after page of manuscript ready for the printer almost without revision.

Physically Brown was a big strapping Scotchman with hair inclined to the reddish and with a bristly beard—the sort of figure one might have found at the prow of a Viking warship. And indeed he was a bit of a rebel. His early experiences in poaching salmon and duck on Scottish estates were hair raising. Leslie often drew a small figure of a cobra with raised hood next to his signature on a letter; the message, just as with the rattlesnake in colonial America, was “don't tread on me.” In financial matters, however, he was a typical conservative Scot.

I (P.S.) learned a great deal about Leslie in Scotland. He was an accomplished poacher, but he only poached because it added spice to the chase. I wonder how many can kill a cock pheasant in flight with a catapult? He loved his food and was very knowledgeable about wines. He had the gift of tongues and in later years I remember his impatience with me when I could not read a paper in Spanish on the Booted Eagle—“Why don't you learn it? I did.” He loved classical music. His general knowledge exceeded that of any man I know. As a raconteur he had no peer. How I wish I had space to repeat some of his hilarious stories. Perhaps his greatest ability was to commit his thoughts directly to paper in clear readable prose. It was as if he carried the whole plan of a book in his head. Few people can produce a first draft that requires almost no alteration. He could.

Leslie suffered from more than his share of physical afflictions: terrible asthma, two operations for skin cancer, and cardiac attacks. All this did not seem to slow him down—if anything the reverse—but it did make him a trifle irritable at times. He dismissed artists, no matter how talented, who did not deliver as many plates as they promised as

“hopeless dilettantes.” Nor did he make any concessions as to food and drink. He once told me that if I (D.A.) ate a “decent breakfast” I wouldn’t start glancing at the clock about 11:30 to see if it was lunch time. For Leslie a “decent” breakfast was perhaps 3 eggs, a large helping of ham, 3 or 4 slices of toast heavily spread with sweet butter and jam, all washed down with an ample amount of coffee, by preference laced with heavy cream.

Leslie Brown also found time to do consulting work for UNESCO and other agencies, especially in Ethiopia. I (D.A.) conclude with his final experience in that country some 6 or 7 years ago, which gives a little further insight into Brown’s character. He was making an aerial ecological survey in the company of 4 or 6 Swedes, those most tireless of international do-gooders, when, as Leslie put it, “The bloody incompetent fool of a pilot” became disoriented and flew off into Somalia, then, and perhaps still, at war with Ethiopia. When nearly out of fuel they saw a tiny airstrip with a village and put down. Arrest came immediately and it was about 5 weeks before the party was released. The others in the group literally worried themselves sick but Leslie, who as the only Englishman was in the greatest danger, strode up to their captors and in effect said: “If you’re going to shoot me, get it over with, if not give me some pencils and paper.” He bluffed them into doing so, and by the time they were released had written the entire text of a charming little book, recently published, each chapter of which relates to an unusual experience Leslie had with one species or another of animal—ranging from the chimpanzee to the huge whale-shark which one day swam around and beneath his tiny boat as he drifted off the Kenya coast.

In his last year Leslie was a very sick man, but he continued to drive himself relentlessly. He died just before his book on the *African Fish Eagle* appeared and he was preparing a major work on the birds of Africa. At the end it was almost as if he had the words of Dylan Thomas in mind:

“Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

Leslie Brown—truly we shall not gaze upon his like again.



Leslie near Eagle Hill, July 1969, with John Hopcroft (left) and Sally Spofford (center)



Leslie at Eagle Hill in July 1969 with Njeru (left) and an unidentified younger man.

Leslie at a Golden Eagle nesting site in the Adirondack Mts., New York in May 1961 with Dean Amadon (left) and David Peakall (right).



'Editor's note. This memorial is the combined work of Dean Amadon and Peter Steyn. The photos were supplied by Walter R. Spofford. I have taken excerpts from Steyn's article, published in Bokmakerie 32:86, 1980 with permission of Steyn and the Editor of Bokmakerie. We are grateful to these men for their knowledge of and camaraderie with Leslie and their shared experiences.