

Letter from the editor

About 'Science & Imagination'

By *Christiane H Friauf*

Why do Scots devote an entire museum to falconry? – That was my first question when I entered the remarkably decorated ancient building called Falconer Museum. It was on one of my first days of visiting Forres, a town in the northeast of Scotland. I simply entered the old building to get a map of the area, as this impressive sandstone monument also housed the Tourist Office. A friendly elderly gentleman handed me my first map of Forres while I tried to peek around the wooden entranceway into the main hall, expecting daunting birds of prey, or rather feathery taxidermy on wooden perches, waiting in perpetuity for a falconer to train them. The hall at first glance appeared to be huge and airy, my neck grew longer, but still, I could not spot a single bird.

Instead, a huge tooth. A gigantic tooth. Had it not been gigantic, the reader might think, it was a trick of my imagination. What does a tooth have to do with falcons, I wondered. I took a mental note: Will have to come back and find out, even if I am not interested in falconry at all. As, to be honest, I was not.

With this anthology, the Friends of the Falconer Museum aim to help those who still wonder why the museum is called as it is. The main aim of the essays, of course, is to discuss a multifaceted scientist, botanist, geologist, palaeontologist, an explorer who was representative for his era – and unique. With very few exceptions, the texts were written specifically for this anthology, celebrating 150 years since the museum first opened its doors, and the Friends are grateful for the time and effort that each author put into her or his contribution.

It appears that Hugh Falconer, although famous while alive, is still relatively unknown today. One reason for this could be that there is no theory attached to his name, no invention, and no law. Even his involvement in the introduction of tea plants to India, crucial to outcompete the tea trade from China, did not make for an entry into our schoolbooks. Anne-Mary Paterson and other authors who shed light on Falconer's botanic endeavours in India, make it quite clear that there was smuggling involved. But would that be a reason not to mention him? Tea, by the way, features prominently throughout this book.

Falconer might have worked in too many fields of science to make a huge impression in one of them. We can suspect the main foundation for fame in pre-TV times lies in the written records. Unlike other explorers of the Victorian era, Falconer did not leave a legacy in form of an impressive number of articles or thick scientific volumes that later generations could refer to. He took countless field notes and wrote diaries, but they seem to have vanished, as Victoria Herridge points out in this anthology. Aware of the lack of written records of his work, colleagues and friends, soon after Falconer's death, assembled a wealth of notes in two volumes:

Murchison, Charles 1868: *Palaeontological Memoirs and Notes of Hugh Falconer, with a Biographical Sketch of the Author*. Compiled and edited by Charles Murchison. 2 vols. London: Robert Hardwicke.

These books form an important source of information, but they are not easily accessible. And here is where this anthology steps in.

First, we take a closer look at the Falconer Museum itself, a building where “private philanthropy responded to the public thirst for knowledge”, as John R Barrett reflects in his essay on the stone heads that adorn the façade. His engaging study offers a thorough analysis of architecture and decoration of this cultural monument. And more than that, he situates the conception of the Falconer Museum in the cultural and economic atmosphere of the Victorian era and then draws the bow to recent worrying developments.

From the outside to the inside: Explaining the importance and relevance of the Falconer Museum’s collections is easy, their status as tourist attraction with the highest possible rating undoubted, and the interest of researchers and other visitors from far and wide speaks for itself. Still, the findings that Torben B Ballin describes are mind-boggling: “With the artefacts from three lithic industries, visitors of the Falconer Museum can look at three different species of humans at once, *homo erectus*, *homo neanderthalensis* and *homo sapiens*.” Ruth Fishkin shares the story of her unexpected encounter in the museum store with 250,000 years old hand-axes, still “carrying the mud of St Acheul”, the world-famous archaeological site. She wonders: “What else is there that can be held in the palm of the hand and has roots this deep in us?”

Memory as a morphing experience is at the heart of Scott Keir’s essay in which he discusses the intricacies of “what to bin and what to keep”. Museums struggle to accommodate growing collections, while we constantly adjust “the lens through which we look at the past”. Norman Thomson joins the conversation about museum’s canon and heritage, concepts that are in constant flux. Like other authors in this anthology, who honour the immense importance of volunteer work, he also advocates professional staff, because museum collections cannot be adequately looked after without “the intelligence, experience, and powers of discretion of a skilled individual as curator”.

Next, the man behind the museum comes into focus. Authors Ruth Fishkin, Victoria Herridge and Vijay Sathe study Hugh Falconer from different angles, fostered by their individual academic background and work experience. Vijay Sathe for example honours his colleague as founding father of the palaeontology of India, drawing from deep knowledge of the academic life in his home country India, and from weeks of research in the Falconer Museum in 2019.

If at some point in the past, readers got frustrated with the apparently never-ending stream of male scientists in the written record, they may rest assured that this anthology did not forget about the women. There is a lot of information on women scientists waiting to be dug out, as you would expect in an archaeological or even palaeontological context. At a time when women were still denied access to higher education, Grace Milne, Hugh Falconer’s niece, was encouraged by her uncle to study geology, and in later years she published articles

and books. Alison Wright tells her story, observing how rapidly scientific thought developed “through the Victorian age, establishing frameworks that later discoveries have embellished but not fundamentally changed”.

We come to ponder at what point in time Falconer adopted the idea of evolution. Unlike the common assumption that Darwin’s epochal *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859, caused Falconer to turn away from the still widespread belief of Creationism, I would argue that letters to his niece, like the ones to be found in this anthology, show an earlier recognition of evolution.

Another important protagonist in the scientific arena of this time who, like Falconer himself, belonged to what John R Barrett laconically calls the “Scottish/Indian/naturalist circle”, was surgeon and geologist John Grant Malcolmson, also from Forres. Malcolmson, beside his many other accomplishments, became famous for his finds of beautifully preserved fossil fishes at Lethen Bar in Nairnshire. How the information about these exciting finds made its way into the scientific world and beyond is subject matter for a detective investigation. Bob Davidson gives a summary of the events, not forgetting to mention eminent collector and supporter of the, then still young, science of palaeontology, Lady Eliza Maria Gordon-Cumming.

The moment the Falconer Museum opens its doors to the public again, the Friends of the Falconer Museum will continue to support exciting exhibitions, and there will be a special focus on women in geology and other sciences. One of the Friends’ many endeavours in the past was the acquisition of the ‘Tortiphant’, the sculpture of the world-bearing tortoise-riding elephant of Indian cosmology, inspired by a caricature of Hugh Falconer and sculpted in 2018. It is at present the youngest addition to the museum’s portfolio and can be seen on the book cover. Those who wish to learn how the Tortiphant really came into existence, find the story in this anthology, narrated by Jenny Mena.

Three literary pieces conclude this volume, each in its own way inspired by Falconer’s findings and the breadth of his interests, ranging from botany to mythology. Undoubtedly, science worked as the motivating force here, inspiring the creativity of authors Jude Clay, Luca Brite, and aforementioned Jenny Mena. India, the country of Falconer’s many important discoveries, is their joint point of reference, while each follows her imagination in a unique way.

While I have been wearing the editor’s hat, other committee members of the Friends of the Falconer Museum diligently worked in the background. Without Alison Wright, Christine Clerk, John R Barrett and Ruth Fishkin, this anthology would simply not exist. My heartfelt thanks also go to Ruth Lunn and Jay Thompson of UK Book Publishing who, throughout the process, made the production of an incessantly evolving publication appear like a breeze. May this joint effort bring joy and the sense of wonder to its readers, in addition to the treasure of information. At the very least, it provides some good answers to the question why museums matter.

About the editor

Christiane H Friauf is a historian, non-fiction author, and editor. In a previous life in Germany, she published numerous books and articles, including on culture history, visual

art, and literature. Since her recent relocation to Northeast Scotland, the cultural as well as the physical landscape of this special part of the world draw all her attention.