Episode 32: Birds, Nations and Empires

Birds, Nations and Empires

VOICEOVER
Welcome to Melbourne University Up Close, a fortnightly podcast of research, personalities, and cultural offerings of The University of Melbourne, Australia. Up Close is available on the web, at upclose.unimelb.edu.au. That’s upclose.u-n-i-m-e-l-b.edu.au.

SIAN PRIOR
Hello, I’m Sian Prior, welcoming you to Up Close which comes from the website of Melbourne University, Australia. And today, a most surprising combination of subjects up for discussion here for Melbourne University Up Close. We are talking ornithology and politics: birds, nations and empires. Think of America and the bald eagle, New Zealand and the kiwi, Australia and the emu. Birds have played a significant role in the cultural symbolism of nation states. Think of the widespread use in English, of the terms “hawks” and “doves” to describe political aggressors and peacemakers. But it goes further than symbolism. According to our guest in Melbourne University Up Close, modern systematic bird knowledge has mirrored the spread of empires throughout the 18th and 19th centuries and even earlier. Dr Lewis Mayo is a lecturer in Chinese Studies at Asia Institute here at the University of Melbourne, Australia, and he has a particular interest in the social history of plants and animals. He has been tracing the relationship between political power and birds and he is here to share his results with us today. Lewis, welcome to Melbourne University Up Close.

LEWIS MAYO
Thanks, Sian.

SIAN PRIOR
So, where did the idea come from to trace the cultural and symbolic role of birds through political history?

LEWIS MAYO
Well that was, in a sense, a process of elimination. I started my PhD at the Australian National University, wanting to work on the environmental history of the borderlands
between China and Central Asia, as I narrowed that down, I became particularly focused on a community in the oasis which is the last outpost of traditional Han Chinese settlement before you move into Central Asia, that is the oasis of Dun Huang. And the oasis of Dun Huang is of interest to historians because there was an enormous body of documentation relating to it from the medieval era because a library of manuscripts, in perhaps 15 languages, numbering tens of thousands of scrolls was discovered there in 1900 and so historians have been working through this with great intensity over the last 100 years. In working through that material which probably gives us a better picture of any medieval community anywhere on the planet, I was interested in the animal and plant related materials and particularly struck by avian writing and I suppose I became aware of the strongly political dimension of that and interested, I suppose, in why it was that there seemed to be a strong connection between ideas of power and something that power can?t really control, i.e. bird life.

SIAN PRIOR
So tell us a little bit more about what has been discovered in these documents about how birds were used to represent social strata in imperial China.

LEWIS MAYO
Well, a particular favourite of mine is a depiction of a bird government in which the ranks of birds mirror the order of the bureaucratic system of central China. And I suppose you can see that in two ways. One, it is a way of making the bureaucratic order seem natural: it is something which is essentially a political construct appears to have a direct analogue in the non-human world. On the other hand, we would see the political and the natural in opposition to each other, but I?ve come to the conclusion that the division between those two domains is something that has really only been established authoritatively since perhaps the 19th century. And prior to that people have always thought of animals and, particularly birds, as being analogues to the political order. So our sense of non-political birds, I think, is historically, quite unusual. And maybe it is related to societies like Australia, New Zealand and the United States, where you?ve had settler colonisation from Europe with no historical relationship to the particular indigenous birds in those areas and therefore no pre-existing set of political symbols for representing those birds. So, they kind of have a clean slate.

SIAN PRIOR
Well, let?s talk about America, because that is a country that has long made use of the bald eagle in its national symbology. What is the history of that choice of bird?

LEWIS MAYO
The bald eagle got onto the US state seal in 1782, just after the American Revolution. And it was controversial. There is a famous story about that which I?ll come to a little later. But to some extent you could say the choice of seals and of emblems, for states is something that arises out of the European tradition of heraldry. And I think that in the case of the eagle, which is a pre-eminently Roman imperial symbol, the American aspiration to take up some of the heritage of Roman
republicanism as well as Roman imperial mission. It is a complex middle symbol between a national, republican entity and an imperial entity. And that the eagle, was, I suppose, America ascending? to some extent - after its revolutionary war to that status of new Rome and also opponent to Rome. And it is quite interesting that Benjamin Franklin in 1784, wrote to his daughter complaining that, and I quote here, for his own part he wished that ?the bald eagle had not been chosen as the representative of our country. It is a bird of bad moral character. He does not get his living honestly. You have seen him perched on some dead tree, near the river, where too lazy to get fish for himself, he watches the labour of the fishing hawk, and when that diligent bird, has at length, taken a fish and is bringing it to his nest for the support of his mate and young ones, the bald eagle pursues him and takes it from him.? 

SIAN PRIOR 
So, he?s a thief!

LEWIS MAYO 
He?s a thief indeed. It is interesting that ? the choice I suppose of an aquiline or eagle-like raptorial symbol of the nobility and dignity of the States is something that is very widely spread and you can see that ?

SIAN PRIOR 
There was a suggestion that the wild turkey should become ?

LEWIS MAYO 
Yes, that was Franklin?s suggestion. That the turkey was a much better symbol for the United States. I can quote him here: ?I am, on this account, not displeased that the figure is not known as a bald eagle, but looks much more like a turkey. For the truth, the turkey is in comparison a much more respectable and with all, a true original native of America. He is ? though a little vain and silly ? a bird of courage and would not hesitate to attack a grenadier of the British guards, who should presume to invade his farmyard with a red coat on.? 

SIAN PRIOR 
We do love to anthropomorphise the natural world, don?t we?

LEWIS MAYO 
It is interesting, the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, made the argument that birds are a kind of parallel universe to humans. And birds of course, are the one form of living being that you can find with every human community. There are areas in which humans have minimal relationships with mammals or fish, but there are always birds. And the fact that the bird order is free, though the wild bird order is not something humans can control, it provides a very natural sense of analogy. And of course the thing works the other way. If we are talking about trying to understand political relationships and trying to figure out how they operate, then birds form a natural explanation for supposed relationships of power, domination and exploitation. And eagles, hunting birds of course, helped to explain why it is dominant and violent.
forces seem to exert themselves with such persistency in human history. And in that regard, it is quite interesting that the great French nationalist and republican historian, Michelet of the 19th century, actually believed that bird evolution and human evolution were following a similar pattern and that fierce birds were actually like fierce humans, being slowly replaced by soft and gentle and accommodating ones.

SIAN PRIOR
We wish.

LEWIS MAYO
We wish. But Michelet was convinced in the 19th century that this was pretty much the way it was going. Perhaps you could say that, these days, given that often hunting birds, raptors of one kind or another that are faced with endangerment extinction and birds like sparrows or pigeons are proliferating in vast numbers, Michelet might not have been as wrong as we might think.

SIAN PRIOR
Yes, the sneaky, adaptive, little birds.

LEWIS MAYO
Exactly.

SIAN PRIOR
I’m Sian Prior and my guest today in Melbourne University Up Close is Dr Lewis Mayo, lecturer in Chinese studies at Asia Institute, here at the University of Melbourne, Australia. And we are discussing the curious connections between birds, empires and nations. Lewis, what about bird watching as a leisure pastime, what can you tell us about the history of bird watching, when and why did it begin?

LEWIS MAYO
Bird watching proliferates in middle class societies, really from the late 19th century to the early 20th centuries. And it happens pretty much wherever you get an industrialization. The most important feature is the spread of field guides, which people can carry around with them so that they can actually identify birds in the field. Binoculars are obviously another technology that are necessary for bird watching. But I think you could see it as part of, I suppose, the general production of a middle class sensibility. Often, in the early 20th century in the United States, in Australia, in Britain and in continental Europe, there is a real struggle between bird watching as a peaceful and kind of feminine activity and egg collecting and bird hunting, which are often seen as threatening the survival of species.

SIAN PRIOR
You’ve been looking at the ways in which the spread of bird watching might relate to the spread of empires.

LEWIS MAYO
Yes, that is interesting because in the dominions, the British dominions, you were often finding birdwatchers and ornithologists and bird experts as, I suppose, often among the first kind of, local nobility, who made it through their knowledge of actual colonial materials, back in the motherland. My favourite example is the doyen of 19th century New Zealand bird watching, Walter Lawry Buller, who was born in New Zealand, he was quite pakeha, of English descent, from Methodist missionaries, and he grew up speaking both Maori and English. And in fact, there was a rather improper record in native land dealings where he acted as an interpreter. But he was an indefatigable ornithologist. And his bird watching and I suppose, ornithological narration enabled him, I suppose, to achieve the ultimate success for an Australasian person of that era, which was to get himself into the minor ranks of the British elites and he ended his career, in fact, living in England. Knowledge of birds was often a way in which people from those kinds of backgrounds, people from humble backgrounds often, could in fact establish themselves as credible individuals on the, I suppose, world-bird-stage, which was really centered on Germany, Britain and France in the whole of the 19th and through to the middle of the 20th century.

SION PRIOR
There is an irony in all of this in that, while some birds are indigenous to certain nation states, many birds are found in a number of different countries, many birds, in fact fly thousands of kilometers across many borders each year in migration patterns that have existed much longer than many empires or nation states.

LEWIS MAYO
And of course, this creates a problem, when you do have national bird systems coming into existence and the question of well, who owns the birds? One of my favourite satires on this is an English wartime propaganda film called, ?English without Tears?, in which an eccentric English woman on holiday in Italy is horrified to find small birds served on the menu. And so, she initiates an international movement for the protection ? to grant extra-territorial rights to English birds while in transit in foreign countries. So, she is shown to have in fact to have helped initiate World War II by demanding this at one of the League of Nations conventions.

SION PRIOR
Passports for birds.

LEWIS MAYO
Exactly. And in fact, there is now a move because of one of the other issues, a very, very powerful issue in the present, is the question of the smuggling trade in falcons from Central Asia. Wild falcons are illegally sold or smuggled to falconers outside of Central Asia.

SION PRIOR
In particular in the Gulf States?

LEWIS MAYO
Yes, in the Gulf States, in particular. So it is being proposed, because, people are
going particularly from the Gulf States to Pakistan to hunt a particular kind of bustard, the Houbara Bustard. They hunt that every year, and there is research to produce a sustainable system for hunting these things, but the birds are being carried around the place. So, you require a passport to move around with your falcon. But I suppose that is an example of a very, very old tradition of associations between political power, particularly male political power and hunting birds that runs through the whole of northern Eurasia, from Japan all the way across to Ireland. Basically, every ruling class between about maybe about 400AD and about 1700 to 1800, through that area, basically hunted with birds. In fact, one of the most remarkable things was that hunting birds were directly implicated in the fall, supposedly, of one of China’s dynasties.

SIAN PRIOR
How so?

LEWIS MAYO
Okay. The Liao or the Khitan Dynasty from the 10th century through to the early 12th century, as a mixed state on what is now the northern borderlands of what is now China, the ruling dynasty, the ruling ethnic group, were speakers of a form of Mongolian, proto-Mongolian language. They exacted an annual tribute in a particular kind of white goshawk from the tribal peoples living on the Korean border.

SIAN PRIOR
So, it was like a tax in birds.

LEWIS MAYO
Compulsory tax. This is a common feature of having to supply birds for political purposes in this history of Mongolian and other states. And the tributaries had to fight their way through to the sea, through various rival groups supposedly to get hold of these birds, which were very powerful symbols of political authority and a royal monopoly.

SIAN PRIOR
Dead or alive?

LEWIS MAYO
Alive. You can’t hunt with dead birds. And they were used in the annual hunt which was part of the ritual political cycle of this particular group. And the tribute had become so exacting by the early 12th century, so it is recorded, they in fact revolted and over through the dynasty. And then conquered some of northern China, forming one of the people that Ghenghis Khan helped to dislodge in his conquest of China and Central Asia. So, as you can see it is not a marginal connection at all, but actually quite central to a major political crisis of the 12th century.

SIAN PRIOR
I’m Sian Prior and you’re listening to Melbourne University Up Close, where today we are discussing birds, empires and nations with Dr Lewis Mayo, lecturer in
Chinese Studies at Asia Institute, here at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Lewis, I guess, one of the most common metaphors for birds and their flight, is the idea of escaping, particularly from imprisonment or political oppression. Have you been able to trace this particular symbolic use of birds?

LEWIS MAYO
Yeah. I mean, there are numerous ones of this. One of the most interesting examples comes from the pointer, which the most influential of modern Indian ornithological guides appeared in public, which is Salim Ali?s, ?The Birds of India?. And this book was first published just on the eve of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. And published in large numbers in 1942, when large numbers of English soldiers arrived with an interest in bird watching, being English, in the area adjacent to Burma, preparing to fight the Japanese there. But at the same time the members of the Indian Congress Party, including Nehru, Indira Ghandi, and various other people, had been imprisoned by the British for calling on them, to quit India immediately. This was seen as against the war effort. And according to Salim Ali, this book was very enthusiastically received by the imprisoned Indian nationalists who, I think, could see their nation?s future in the symbolism of free flying birds they were looking at from inside their cells.

SIAN PRIOR
Well, Lewis, finally, with the growing threat of potentially massive environmental degradation, imposed by human induced climate change, which is something we have discussed several times here in Melbourne University Up Close, there are predictions that birds, as with many other species will suffer species decline, as a result of the massive environmental changes that are predicted, what is your feeling about the future for birds, and I guess, the future cultural symbology of birds, giving this looming environmental threat?

LEWIS MAYO
Well, not being a biologist, I would be very loath to make any predictions about what the consequences will be for avian life forms from climate change. But I imagine that birds will be a very important rallying force for action against climate change. In part because bird extinction has been so central to the symbolism of the environmental movement over the last 150 years and particularly when modern environmentalism in the Anglophone world really gets going in a big way in the United States in the late 19th century through to Rachel Carson?s, ?Silent Spring? about DDT, just after World War II. The loss of bird life is one of the most powerful ways in which people were galvinised around concern with environmental change because you did have these, you know, massive bird tragedies, I mean, particularly the story of the Carolina parakeet, and the passenger pigeon in the United States, which are both incredibly abundant species in the early 19th century, just wiped through the course of the late 19th through to the early 20th century. And so, that was the great lesson about how humans needed to act upon those things. And my own interest has not always been, I suppose, not so much on environmental type politics. But because I am a specialist in the medieval era, I?m much more interested in how political power acts upon birds, rather than the concerns of the birds themselves. But it is significant
that anxieties about what happens to birds might be traced to larger anxieties about social and political systems.

SIAN PRIOR
Well, Lewis, many thanks for joining us here today, a fascinating trip around the world of birds. I?m Sian Prior and my guest today on Melbourne University Up Close has been Dr Lewis Mayo, lecturer at Asia Institute, here at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Melbourne University Up Close is brought to you by the Marketing and Communications Division in association with Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia. Relevant links, a full transcript, and more information on this episode can be found on our website at upclose.unimelb.edu.au. We?d also invite you to leave your comments or feedback on this or any other episode of Up Close, simply click on the ?add new comment? link at the bottom of the episode page. This program was produced by Kelvin Param, Eric van Bemmel and myself, Sian Prior. Audio recording is by Craig McArthur and the theme music is performed by Sergio Ercole. Melbourne University Up Close is created by Eric van Bemmel and Kelvin Param. Until next time, goodbye.

VOICEOVER
You?ve been listening to Melbourne University Up Close, a fortnightly podcast of research, personalities, and cultural offerings of The University of Melbourne, Australia. Up Close is available on the web at upclose.unimelb.edu.au. That?s upclose.u-n-i-m-e-l-b.edu.au. Copyright 2008, University of Melbourne.

© The University of Melbourne, 2008. All Rights Reserved.

Source URL: https://upclose.unimelb.edu.au/episode/32-birds-nations-and-empires