

Life With an Indian Prince

By John J Craighead and Frank C. Craighead, Jr.

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Reviewed by Stephen Bodio

John Craighead and his late twin brother Frank, lifelong naturalists, explorers, and conservationists, may be best known for their studies of the grizzly in Yellowstone in the sixties and seventies. But their work started in the thirties when, as teenagers, they studied and photographed birds of prey for the *National Geographic*. Their article led to a book contract for *Hawks in the Hand* (1939) and an invitation from an Indian Prince, R.S. Dharmakumarsinjhi ("Bapa") to come and see how falconers in India still carried on a tradition that was hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years old.

They passed into a world that, despite Daimlers and swimming pools, was still medieval. From October 1940 until April of 1941 they traveled, photographed and filmed everything from falconry and coursing with trained cheetahs to a royal wedding. They never dreamed that, soon after their return, the flames of World War II and the passions of Indian Independence would sweep away the entire society that they had glimpsed. The brothers published a short article, "Life With an Indian Prince," in the *National Geographic*, and went off to train naval pilots for survival in the South Seas.

Although they made a film for *National Geographic*, it was never released. About fifty years later, Frank Craighead delivered a detailed day-to-day diary of the trip, together with hundreds of color slides, to S. Kent Carnie of the Archives of American Falconry in Boise, Idaho (now renamed the Archives of Falconry). Carnie realized that, rather than an obscure text of interest only to falconers and bird of prey specialists, he

had his hands on something like a time machine, an intimate glimpse into the high culture of the Raj. The Archives have made every effort to produce a book worthy of the material, and have succeeded magnificently. *Life* is a lavish and oversized volume of 277 pages printed on fine paper and with color photographs on virtually every page and backed up by a detailed glossary.

The Craigheads' diaries begin at the trip's start in Pennsylvania . The brothers drive across the country (stopping to climb in the Tetons) then embark from San Francisco on the *President Cleveland*. During the crossing they paint vivid, innocent pictures of prewar South Seas travel, and photograph such things as a Hong Kong still dominated by forested hills, early reminders to the present-day reader of how much the world has changed.

But the bulk of the book details a sporting season in western India. The Craigheads participate in trapping and training a princely team of falcons and goshawks (Bapa alone has a team of 33 birds, all attended by professional falconers) using methods unchanged since the dawn of falconry. They ride on bullock carts with trained cheetahs to pursue blackbuck antelope. They cross India to attend a royal wedding complete with a retinue of costumed elephants and a ritual lion hunt in the formally managed Gir forest. Finally, they take their team of trained birds out to hunt hare and partridge, heron and plover, even such medieval quarry as ibis and kite.

Readers should realize that, despite all the hunting, British India's wildlife was intensely managed and conserved. The Gir forest lions survive today because they were preserved for the Maharajas' hunts. Post-Independence chaos and unrestrained population growth have reduced the wildlife of Bhavnagar, and all India, to a ghostly

remnant of what existed in 1940. Bapa devoted the rest of his life to conservation and the preservation of endangered species, as did the Craigheads.

But this book is a grand testimony to a time when the problems of the late Twentieth Century were still on the horizon. The lives of the upper classes were the same as they had been for centuries, except for a few modern conveniences, and it was possible to believe that this life could go on indefinitely. This bright window into the past should be of interest to all falconers and naturalists, but also to historians, anthropologists, and anyone curious about lost customs and cultures.