
***Behind the Naturalist's Lens* – Celebrating the life and contribution to natural history of Charles Eric Palmar (1920-1986)**

D.C. Palmar

15 Endfield Avenue, Glasgow G12 0JX

E-mail: dpalmar2000@yahoo.co.uk

ABSTRACT

Charles Eric Palmar was Curator of Natural History in Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow from 1949 to 1984 and a long-standing member of the Glasgow Natural History Society. This article provides an outline of his life and the major achievements in both his professional career and natural history activities. The latter included pioneering studies on the golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*) of Scotland and made much use of photography and cinematography. A project is currently under way to scan, archive and make publicly accessible many of his photographs and films.

INTRODUCTION

My father, Charles Eric Palmar (CEP), was Curator of Natural History in Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow from 1949 to 1984. He studied, photographed and filmed natural history subjects, particularly golden eagles, over many decades.

Over the past two years I have been working on a project to scan, archive and make publicly accessible many of his photographs. I have archived some of his photographs on my website (www.photoscot.co.uk) and a talk on the project *Behind the Naturalist's Lens* was given to the Glasgow Natural History Society in the spring of 2018, which is the basis of this contribution. My work has benefitted from the assistance of Ruth Olden, who initially helped with photo-editing, a job that involved identifying biological and geographical subjects, keywording, describing and renaming pictures. Later, before having to leave the project, Ruth applied successfully to the Blodwen Binns Bequest for funding that has supported part-time assistants – first Fiona Torrance and then Ami Kirkbright.

Norman Tait wrote an article in this journal about nature photographers, in which CEP featured (Tait, 2001), and a subsequent short note included some of his photographs (Palmar, 2014). Since, apart from obituaries, these are the only memorials in print to him and his involvement in natural history, I thought it appropriate to provide the following outline of CEP's life and major achievements.

CHARLES PALMAR'S EARLY YEARS IN ENGLAND, THE RAF AND HIS MOVE TO SCOTLAND

CEP was born in Royal Leamington Spa, and grew up in Brighton, where he went to Varndean School. The South Downs were therefore amongst his early stamping grounds. During his teens in the 1930s he became a very proficient naturalist. On various cycling trips round southern England, mainly in Sussex and Kent, but even to Devon and as far as the Forest of Dean, Monmouth and Ross on Wye, he wrote notes on the wildlife he encountered and on the photographs he took. Unfortunately, although there are 32 notebooks, no early photographs survive.

His notebooks were obviously valuable to him (Fig. 1). One early notebook from 1933 records butterflies he collected at the age of 12 at Newtimber in Sussex. "I arrived home with the following ones: Brimstone, Large Pearl Bordered Fritillary, Duke of Burgundy, Grizzled Skipper, Dingy Skipper, Orange Tip, Small Copper, Holly Blue, Wall Brown, Small White, yellow moth with black spots – 39 insects in all." What he did with them is not recorded. Nowadays they would be released, but in those days he probably kept and mounted them instead.

At the age of 17 on 31st August 1936, he records at Stanmer Park, Brighton a stone curlew (*Burhinus oedicephalus*), which he identified by its wailing call (which he had previously heard on Salisbury Plain), and he got his first look at a live stone curlew. Another bird flew up, and he noted "Had they bred here?" It is worth noting that stone curlews are now largely restricted to Salisbury Plain and the Breckland area of Norfolk.

During the Second World War, CEP was stationed as RAF ground crew at Manston in Kent, where bombs fell around him while he hid in a crater during the blitz, probably in 1940. The bombing must have had a severe effect on him - I imagine he had what would now be described as post-traumatic stress, as he was sent to Scotland to recover, spending several weeks in hospital in Larbert before being posted to Oban.

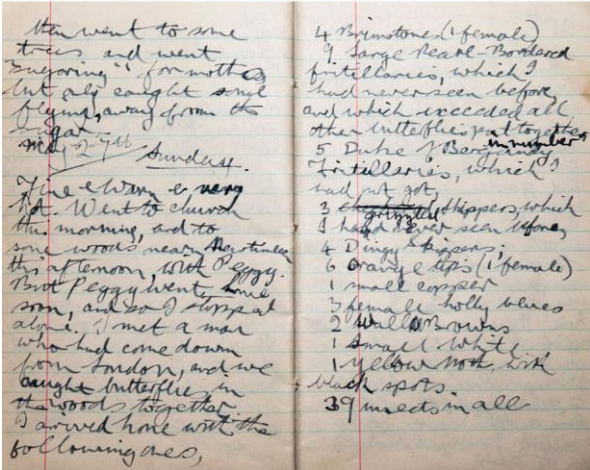


Fig. 1. Charles Palmar's notebooks. Top: a selection of his notebooks. Bottom: his notes for 27th May 1934. (Photos: D.C. Palmar)

EARLY YEARS IN SCOTLAND

After the war CEP came to Glasgow and found work as a medical photographer at Yorkhill Hospital. It was at this point that he went to a natural history meeting, and found that only he and my mother Molly had turned up. Romance must have blossomed, as they married in 1949 and went to live in a flat in Clarkston Road, Cathcart.

Molly graduated from the University of Glasgow with first class honours in Botany, and so she was able to help him with plant identification. Most of her exquisite plant drawings, along with her notes, now reside in the University of Glasgow library. In the 1950s, Molly was a demonstrator in botany in what is now called the Bower Building and helped in the production of his early films, e.g. *Carnivorous Plants*, which was made in 1952 and included sundew (*Drosera* spp.) and butterwort (*Pinguicula* spp.) After university, Molly became a biology teacher at the Park School, Glasgow.

In 1949 CEP was appointed Curator of Natural History in Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery, and in 1958 the family moved from Clarkston Road to University Avenue, quite near the museum. CEP had a darkroom in University Avenue, where he developed black-and-white films and prints (Fig. 2). He became involved in various natural history activities, some local, some further away. He met George Waterston, then Scottish Director of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

(RSPB), at the Osprey Camp at Loch Garten in 1965, and later Charles Millican sent him records of golden eagles on Mull, which he passed on to George Waterston at the Scottish Ornithologists' Club (SOC).



Fig. 2. Charles Palmar's photograph of a male capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*) displaying in the 1950s. (Photo: C.E. Palmar)

Amongst his many endeavours he was partially responsible for an agreement with the landowner to create a Scottish Wildlife Trust Reserve at Ardmore Point, near Helensburgh on the Firth of Clyde. Perhaps ahead of his time, he also took an interest in invasive species, a topic which takes centre stage these days. During the mid-20th century he was a member of the GNHS, then known to my parents as the "Andersonian Naturalists", and he became a member of the GNHS Council, latterly a Vice-President. He was also on the local committee of the Scottish Wildlife Trust and served on the Council and as Chairman of the Glasgow branch of the SOC, of which he was elected an honorary member in 1984.

It is for his work with golden eagles that CEP will be most remembered. This became a passion in his life. From 1947 onwards, he studied, photographed and filmed golden eagles, particularly in Argyll during the 1950s (Fig. 3). "There, his research on the eagle placed him in a small, confidential conclave of ornithologists, including the late Dr Leslie Brown, P.W. Sandeman, the late George Waterston and Dr Adam Watson, whose pooled records constituted the total assay of information on the status of Scottish eagles in the 1950s and 60s" (Boyd, 1986). The first eagle photographs I have come across are from 1947 and are of an eyrie in Galloway, which Chris Rollie of the RSPB was able to identify last year. Much of his research on golden eagles (and other



Fig. 3. Golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*). Top: Charles Palmar's 1952 photograph of an eagle landing in Argyll. Bottom: golden eaglets, North Uist, 1969. (Photos: C.E. Palmar)



Fig. 4. Field holiday: hide at a buzzard's nest (*Buteo buteo*), near Cuan Ferry, Isle of Seil, Argyll, with the author's brothers, Colin and Michael, in 1965. (Photo: C.E. Palmar)

species) was conducted during many family field holidays on mainland Scotland, the Inner and Outer Hebrides and the Northern Isles (Fig. 4).

CEP's work on golden eagles and other wildlife resulted in the publication of many photographs and articles, which are listed in the Appendix.

KELVINGROVE MUSEUM

CEP had been appointed Curator of Natural History at Kelvingrove Museum in 1949, succeeding Dr Stuart Henderson, who had been promoted to Depute Director. CEP was the first Curator of Natural History in the museum with a specific knowledge of birds since the original curator, James Thomason in the 1870s. He soon had an influence on the displays, and completed some of the large habitat groups in the Natural History Court, which had been started in the late 1940s, and which were only removed in the early 1980s. He also continued the tradition of the plant table, which was much appreciated by the general public (Fig. 5). CEP initiated the "Bird Class" – an extra-mural class of the University of Glasgow, which ran for seven years from 1959 and included excursions to Loch Lomond and elsewhere. The classes could be attended by over 100 people and holding them in the museum meant that CEP could use examples from the collection to illustrate particular points (Fig. 6). He started to redisplay the Bird Gallery in 1955 and attempted to include examples of all resident (and many migratory) birds on the British list - making it ideal for teaching bird identification. It was completed in 1963. A notable addition to the museum collection for which he was responsible was a specimen of the extinct great auk (*Pinguinus impennis*) (Fig. 7). This, one of only 78 skins in existence, was negotiated as a long-term loan from a private owner and later bought by the museum for £30,000.



Fig. 5. Plant table at Kelvingrove Museum in the late 1970s. In attendance is Dick Prasher M.B.E. (extreme left) who helped to assemble the plant table from 1964 until 1980. (Photo: C.E. Palmar)

CEP's contribution over the years to education was considerable – this included his work in the Kelvingrove Museum, which must have touched thousands of people who visited the bird and animal galleries over decades, his publications, the “Bird Class”, and his contribution to many natural history societies. He also gave broadcast talks and illustrated lectures and made a number of films on wildlife and other subjects (see Appendix).



Fig. 6. Charles Palmar delivering a Bird Class lecture in Kelvingrove Museum during the 1960s. (Photo: Glasgow Museums)

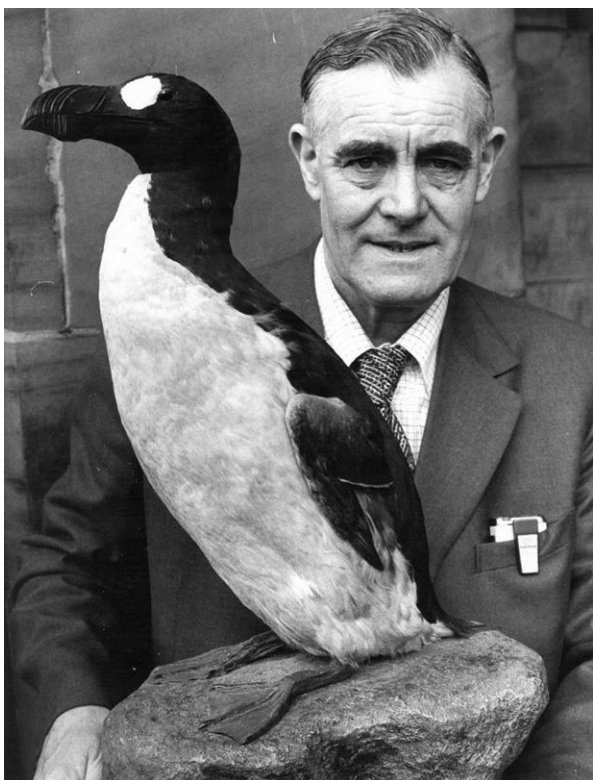


Fig. 7. Charles Palmar and his great auk (*Pinguinus impennis*), 1977. (Photo: Glasgow Museums)

RETIREMENT

CEP retired on 30th November 1984. He knew all of his staff and looked after them as individuals, and in the light of this, he was presented at a relatively light-hearted party in the Museum with a unique “Cheese roll collection”. Each Museum department created an

exhibit which commemorated the fact that he had a cheese roll for morning break in the Museum tearoom for many decades (Fig. 8). There was a special formal retirement dinner for him at Pollok House on 6th December of that year, which was attended mainly by senior colleagues and members of the Natural History Department.



Fig. 8. Stained glass window of a cheese roll, created for Charles Palmar's retirement party in Kelvingrove Museum, 1984. (Photo: D.C. Palmar)

As a retirement project, CEP had been planning to write a book about *Fifty Years of Natural History* (the title taken from a talk he gave to the GNHS). Unfortunately, shortly after he retired, he was taken ill with a brain tumour, and was unable to do much fieldwork, being restricted to printing some colour enlargements of a few of his photos, and the book never materialised. He died on 14th February 1986.

It is hoped that this article and the website archive, both part of the *Behind the Naturalist's Lens* project, will go some way to commemorating his contribution to Natural History in Scotland and beyond. Included in the archive of photos on the website www.photoscot.co.uk are a number of historical as well as natural history photographs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to both my parents for inspiring me to take up an interest in natural history, to Pat Palmar for assisting CEP in his natural history work, and to my wife Janet for assisting me in my project. I thank the Committee of the Blodwen Lloyd Binns Bequest fund of the GNHS for providing a grant, and Ruth Olden, Fiona Torrance, Ami Kirkbright, Alan Hill, Lizzy Cairns, Louise Smith and Douglas Lindsay for their help with various aspects of the project. Richard Sutcliffe,

John Murray and other people, too numerous to mention, contributed valuable reminiscences and anecdotes.

REFERENCES

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- Palmar, D.C. (2014). Murder in the eyrie: a behavioural study of a native species. 1950s Golden eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* photographs by Charles Eric Palmar. *The Glasgow Naturalist* 26(1), 50.
- Tait, T.N. (2001). Photography in the Glasgow Natural History Society. *The Glasgow Naturalist* 23(6), 80-87.

APPENDIX.

Charles Palmar's publications, broadcasts and films

Publications and broadcasts

1945. The raven. *Scottish Field*, February 1945.
1945. Birds in a Highland garden. *Scottish Field*, March 1945.
1945. The rookery in spring. *The Field*, April 1945.
1946. The whaups are back. *Scottish Field*, April 1946.
Late 1940s-early 1950s. Photos in various articles. *Birds of Britain* Vols. 1-5.
1950. Photo of swift in "An album of bird portraits". *RSPB Occasional Publications* No. 15.
1951-54. BBC Radio Home Service – 14 broadcasts.
1951. A Summer-Winter Diorama. *Museums Journal* 50, 263-266.
1951. Two photos of swans. *British Birds* 44, 384.
1951. Some recent photographic studies of the golden eagle [with five others]. *British Birds* 44, 404.
1951-1956. Notes then Report on Birds of the Clyde area (with M.F.M. Meiklejohn). *Scottish Naturalist* in volumes 64, 65, 66.
1954. Scotland's golden eagles at home. *National Geographic* 105(2), 273-286.
1955. Photographs of golden eagles. In: Gordon, S.P. *The Golden Eagle, King of Birds*. Collins, London.
1955. My friend the eagle. *Scottish Field* July, 59-61.
1956. *The Capercaillie*. Forestry Commission Leaflet No. 37.
1962. Some photographic studies of the swift. *British Birds* 56, 19-22.
1962. *Titmice in Woodlands*. Forestry Commission Leaflet No. 46.
1962. *Animals of the Polar Regions*. Booklet. Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum.
1962. *Animals of Scotland Habitat Group*. Booklet. Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum.
1962. Arctic redpoll in Lewis. *Scottish Birds* 2(4), 251-252.
1963. Two photographs of capercaillie. *British Birds* 56(1), 19-22.
1965. *Woodpeckers in Woodlands*. Forestry Commission Leaflet No. 42.
1966. Front cover - golden eagle, and article – "Sea loch bird life". *Animals* 9(4).
1966. Photo of golden eagle and photo of great northern diver. *Ornithologische Mitteilungen* 18.
1968. *Blackgame*. Forestry Commission Forest Record No. 66.
1969. Photo of eight-week old golden eagle. *Birds of the World* 8(2).
1969. Photo of eider ducks. *Birds of the World* 10(2).
1969. Photo of female capercaillie. *Birds of the World* 11(2).
1970. *Titmice in Woodlands*. Forestry Commission Leaflet No. 46 (reprinted).
1973. *Titmice in Woodlands*. Forestry Commission Forest Record No. 89.
1976. *Capercaillie*. Forestry Commission Forest Record No. 109.
1976. Sowerby's whale and bottle-nosed whale. *The Glasgow Naturalist* 19(4), 337-338.
1979. Great auk. *Sunday Post*, 18th March.
1981. Dick Prasher, MBE, field botanist extraordinary. *The Glasgow Naturalist* 20(2), 175-176.
1984. Hunting eagles. *Amateur Photographer*, 1st March.
1985. *Natural History of Scotland*. Leaflet. Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum.

Posthumous publications

1988. Golden eagle photo. *Glasgow Herald*, accompanying letter to the editor from Greer Hart.
2013. Five photos and reference to articles. In: Ellis, D.H. *Enter the Realm of the Golden Eagle*. Hancock House, Surrey, British Columbia.
2018. Several hundred photos. In: Palmar, D.C. *Behind the Naturalist's Lens*. At: www.photoscot.co.uk

Films

Several of CEP's 16 mm cine films have been digitised, just in time before the colour had faded completely. In fact it was too late in one case – *Highland Eagle*, where the colour had faded to purple, and it had to be made into a black and white film. The films listed below were digitised and are now held by the Scottish Moving Image Archive at Hillington, Glasgow. The obituary by Boyd (1986) mentions a film entitled *Scenes from the Life of the Golden Eagle*, made in 1948 and said to be the first of its kind in colour. It is not included in the list, because I have no other evidence that such a film existed.

British Carnivorous Plants, 1952

Highland Heronry, 1961

Outer Hebrides – Human Activities, 1968

Highland Eagle a.k.a. King of Birds, 1970

Loch Lomond Nature Reserve, 1970

Seabirds in Scotland, 1974

Spring Flowers in a Scottish Wood, 1980