

Leslie McCracken and Charles Bethune Horsbrugh: collecting birds' eggs in Northern Ireland in the 1920s and early 1930s

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ABSTRACT: This paper is a case-study of a school-boy's egg collection in Northern Ireland in the 1920s and early 1930s. The collection and Leslie McCracken's friendship with Charles Bethune Horsbrugh, an established naturalist, not only expanded McCracken's consciousness far beyond the boundaries of his rural existence but also reveal, through the specimens given to McCracken by Captain Horsbrugh, the considerable extent of amateur egg-collecting and the interchange of eggs both within Ireland and Great Britain, and further afield, then and in previous generations. A socio-historic sketch is provided, together with an account of the more interesting bird's eggs, their collectors, and the location of collection.

KEY WORDS: history of collections – early twentieth century – Ulster – John Gould – Dr John Rae.

INTRODUCTION

Two small cardboard boxes apparently unremarkable and certainly unmarked were found at the back of a cupboard in the study, in Durban, South Africa, of Emeritus Professor J. Leslie McCracken MRIA (1914–2008) after he died (Brown 1981; Southey 2010). When opened the boxes were found to contain buried amongst surgical lint bandaging and parachute silk 188 birds' eggs, five of which were broken. Lying in a heap in one of the boxes were 192 completed labels, dating from 1876 to 1936. They emerged as a microcosm that revealed a past era of exchange of natural history specimens in a worldwide network of mainly amateur enthusiasts stretching from Ireland to India.

Leslie McCracken was the son of a rural Church of Ireland rector, being brought up at Annahilt, County Down. When Leslie McCracken was born on 14 August 1914, ten days after the Great War broke out, though only five miles from Lisburn, the area was remote and backward. There was no public transport, no electricity, no piped water, no hardened roads and only the doctor and the local representative of the gentry, Lieutenant-Colonel O. B. Graham of Larchfield, had motor cars (Rankin 2002). Farming amongst the drumlin hills¹ was, as it had been for generations, inefficient and wasteful. But that wastefulness meant there remained large tracts of unproductive or semi-productive land, be it bog or marshy land and hill-land as well as extensive hedgerows that had been planted by improving landlords in the eighteenth century. All of these flourished unrestricted and it was, in other words, a paradise for anyone interested in bird-watching.

The rectory grounds themselves were a birding treat, for a ruined overgrown garden existed, dating from before the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland (1868) when the clergy were more affluent and could afford to employ gardening staff. In a handwritten memoir, McCracken recalled that in addition to the derelict garden there was a 26-acre glebe land.² These “grounds [had been] laid out as befitted a gentleman’s seat. A two to three acre field separated it [the rectory] from the road. This contained several beautiful parkland trees.” There was also the old graveyard with its trees and a ruined church tower.

McCracken, as school boys often did, took an interest in what was termed nature study and by his teens not only knew the bird-songs of the neighbourhood, but also climbed trees, boated out to the crannogs³ in the loughs and scoured hedgerows in search of birds’ eggs, the last pastime primarily during the spring breeding months of April and May. Matters might have rested at that had not the young McCracken met a retired army officer, who lived during the late 1920s and early 1930s in the village of Hillsborough. This was Captain Dr Charles Bethune Horsbrugh (1874–1952).

As McCracken correctly observed in his memoir, in the early 1930s interest in birds was distinctly manifested by three groups: pigeon fanciers, cage-bird enthusiasts, and sportsmen. He asserted that those interested in birds were:

Drawn from all classes, urban and rural, but often better class, better off and better endowed intellectually than the average. They were the backbone of the natural history societies. But everybody in the country was more aware of birds and better informed about birds than rural dwellers are today for the very good reason that there were more of them [birds] about.

The first two groups were largely urban. Individuals like Horsbrugh could be classified with the sportsmen, the forerunners of modern bird-watchers.

Horsbrugh had had an interesting career. According to McCracken, he was of an Anglo-Irish family, and, as was not uncommon, his father was one of the many Irish who served in the Indian Army (Bartlett 1997). His father was Captain Charles Bell Horsbrugh (1844–1876), adjutant of the 2nd Central India Horse Regiment. Charles Bethune Horsbrugh was born at Goonsh on 13 December 1874. There were two other older children: Boyd (1871–1916), who joined the army and was later a celebrated ornithologist in South Africa, and a daughter, Beatrice Eleanor (“Daisy”) who became an accomplished violinist (Grau 1912). On the death of his father Charles’s mother returned to Ireland with her three children and rented a property belonging to the local landlord, the Duke of Devonshire, in the pretty village of Hillsborough in the north of County Down.

As a young man Charles Horsbrugh joined the Somerset Infantry and served in the regiment’s medical corps. But by the turn of the nineteenth century he appears to have become a bank manager in Church Street, Matlock, Somerset, a place where some of the eggs in McCracken’s collection originated. In 1905 Horsbrugh arrived in South Africa, working for a while under Dr Jan Willem Boudewijn Gunning in the Transvaal Museum, Pretoria.⁴ In the Transvaal, Horsbrugh joined bird-shooting parties with his brother Boyd. In August 1907, “with a large collection of South African birds which caused quite a sensation in avicultural circles” Horsbrugh returned to Britain (Barnicoat 1986; de Graff 1987). Still a restless soul, by 1917 Horsbrugh was in Calgary, Canada, describing himself as a “naturalist”. It was there that he joined the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force. And it was with the Canadians that he served as an army doctor in France in the First

World War. According to McCracken's memoir, Horsbrugh never spoke about his exploits overseas.

The young McCracken spent much of his free time with the naturalist in his home in Hillsborough. There is no evidence that the two ever went far afield to collect together. Their friendship also appears to have lasted a relatively short period. McCracken recorded:

Like most boys in the country I collected birds' eggs. When Miss Matthews discovered this she said that I must come with her to meet a naturalist friend of hers called C. B. Horsbrugh in Hillsborough . . . Dr Horsbrugh was a wirey little man, probably in his fifties, who had been a captain during the First World War. He was what used to be described as a gentleman of private means. A gentleman he unquestionably was but his means were very limited; obviously they lived quite near the bone.

Miss Matthews was "an elderly lady of good breeding but limited means" who lived in a gate lodge to Ballyhombra, a large farm belonging to a flourishing hardware merchant in Lisburn to whom she invariably referred as "Patterson, the creature". Captain Horsbrugh and his wife, "a large lady, gracious and kindly", lived in Blessington House, a fine Georgian building in Hillsborough, with a stone-flag hall and corridors and damp back-quarters:

The house was filled with stuffed birds, mounted horns and egg cabinets, for he had a superb collection. The locals thought him quite mad but were kindly disposed to him. A scurrilous paper in Dromore, not our respectable Dromore Leader, once launched a satirical attack on the Hillsborough elite but even it, while christening one trim-figured ex-army worthy Major Corset-Blethers, allowed Mr Horsbrugh to pass as Captain C. B. Stuffbirds. There were some nice stories about him though, one that when he was leading the ex-service men on parade he gave the order "Right turn" and turned left himself. One local resident with whom he was on very friendly terms was the governor of Northern Ireland, the old duke of Abercorn, whose official residence was Hillsborough Castle. Mr Horsbrugh had a key to a door in the castle estate wall and we spent many a Saturday afternoon in the castle park, round the lake and through the woods.

In later life McCracken was to note that in Hillsborough in the 1930s the Duke of Abercorn was "probably the only person locally who spoke the same language" as the eccentric and enthusiastic naturalist.⁵

As the memoir makes clear, the McCrackens regarded the Horsbrughs as the best of what Miss Matthews constantly referred to as the "broken down gentry of Hillsborough". They had a son, Patrick, whom McCracken never met. They gave McCracken his first bicycle so he could cycle the five miles from Annahilt rectory to Hillsborough. McCracken described this bicycle as, "I think the most treasured possession I ever had".⁶

McCRACKEN'S COLLECTION OF BIRDS' EGGS

One of the interesting features of the collection is the scarcity of eggs collected by McCracken himself. There are only 17 labels with his initials, though it is probable that some of the unlabelled eggs are his collecting. The McCracken labels date from May 1930 to May 1934, when he was between the ages of 15 and 19. That encompasses his matriculation years at the Wallace High School in Lisburn and his history studies at the Queen's University of Belfast from 1932 to 1936 under Professor James Eadie Todd (Crone *et al.* 1949). The first McCracken label is for a moorhen's egg from Annahilt dated 22 May 1930. His labels (Figure 1) are detailed. This impetus to observe detail (such as the rabbit-fur lining the blue tit's nest) and to catalogue would be transmuted in turn into scholarly work, writing, for example histories of Dáil Éireann and the Cape parliaments and analysing the contributions of their members.

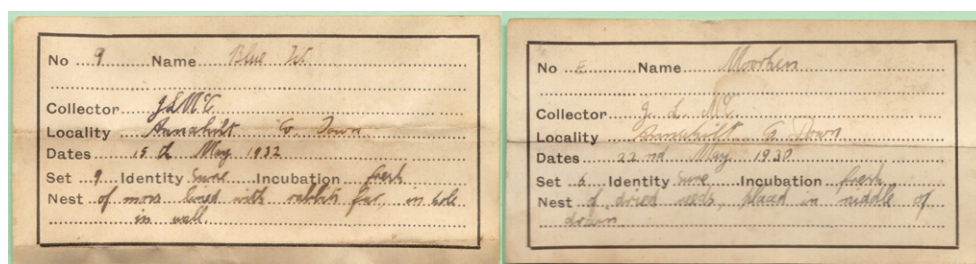


Figure 1. Two examples of Leslie McCracken's hand-written labels for the eggs of blue tit (left) and moorhen (right) collected at Annahilt in 1932 and 1930 respectively.

The dates on Horsbrugh's eggs end in 1934, which probably marks Captain Horsbrugh's departure from Hillsborough. There is just a single egg in the collection dated after 1934, a great black back gull from Ballyrowan, County Down; no collector's name is recorded.

Interestingly, neither McCracken nor Horsbrugh had binoculars. Their only reference work was Coward's *Birds of the British Isles and their eggs*. McCracken sold his set in 1982 before moving back to South Africa.

The collection can hardly be described as scientific. Table 1 lists the birds mentioned in McCracken's memoir which he recalled being around Annahilt in the early 1930s. To this list may be added the following birds found in the grounds of Hillsborough Castle: linnet, siskin, stonechat, goldcrest, and "Many lakeside" birds.

As the teenage McCracken travelled no further than Saul rectory outside Downpatrick to visit his grandfather (20 miles), it is logical to presume that the bulk of the collection came as gifts from Horsbrugh, who clearly exchanged eggs with naturalists elsewhere. This explains why the collection is much more eclectic than a selection of the common species then found in County Down. The collection comes from a veritable hotchpotch of collectors (Table 2). Of the 192 labels, only 49 bear Horsbrugh's or McCracken's initials. Twenty nine other collectors or collection owners are identifiable, with a further 18 listed only by initials. There are 15 labels without initials or a name.

LOCATION OF EGG FINDS

The location written on the labels (see Table 3) represent:

Ireland	99 (52%)
England	69 (35%)
Scotland	16 (8%)
Wales	6 (3%)
Hungary	1 (1%)
Unidentified	1 (1%)

Twelve Irish counties are represented, eleven from England, five from Scotland (including the Orkneys) and three from Wales. The core areas of counties Down (42), Antrim (22) and Tyrone (Lough Neagh) (19) represent 84% of the Irish locations, or 43% of the whole. Of the English locations, two-thirds come from the counties of Somerset (26) and Shropshire (20).

Table 1. Birds of the Annahilt area recorded by McCracken.

Blackbird	Abounded
Corncrake	Lived in the hay field
Fieldfare	Winter, locally known as the "felt"
Cuckoo	Perched outside the rectory study window
Dipper	Linen mill Legacurry, millrace overflow
Dove	Heard but never seen
Bull Finch	Occasional
Chaffinch	
Green finch	Common
Gold finch	Occasional
Heron	
Jackdaw	
Kingfisher	Rare sighting on Ravarnet River
Lark	Ubiquitous in summer
Magpie	Nested in the low roadside trees
Barn owl	In chimneys
Long-eared owl	Song "like a rusty hinge being opened"
Pigeon	
Redwing	Winter
Robin	
Rooks	Did not nest in surrounding trees
Spotted flycatcher	Exotic
Hedge sparrow	Common
House sparrow	Less common than now [1990s]
Starling	Less common than now [1990s]
Swallow	Lots
Common thrush	Abundant
Mistle thrush	Abounded
Bluetit	
Coal tit	
Tree creeper	Exotic
Yellowhammer	Locally called the "yarnie". It would sit conspicuously on the hedgerows singing "a little bit of bread and no cheese"

Locations which feature regularly are the greater Bath area; the Orkneys; Martock in Somerset; the area around Wigtown; Lough Neagh; the Donegal coast; and, of course, the Lisburn–Hillsborough–Annahilt region. Over 90 separate locations have been identified in the collection.

Why is the collection so diverse? There can be only one reasonable hypothesis. McCracken was too young and too trapped in the tight society of 1920s–1930s County Down either to mix or even correspond with naturalists interested in birds beyond his known world. McCracken recalled:

Not only did I learn a great deal about birds and eggs of the locality as a result of our expeditions but I was also given numerous other, often exotic, specimens from Mr Horsbrugh's surplus stock. The result was that I came to have a very fine collection of my own.

As well as McCracken and Horsbrugh, other collectors represented in the collection include the prominent and eccentric stock broker, Josias Cunningham of Fernhill, Belfast; and John G. Gordon, whose Wigtown eggs are represented in the McCracken collection. In 1922, the year from which the labels date, Gordon had been elected a member of the British Ornithologists' Union.

Table 2. Collectors or collection owners represented in the McCracken egg collection, with date(s) of collection and number of eggs.

Name	date(s)	no.	Name	date(s)	no.
C. B. Horsbrugh	1892/1934	32	W. Gooding	1929	1
A. C. J.	1930/1933	21	J. R. Gunn	1891	1
T. McK.	1923/1932	18	M. H.	1933	1
J. L. McCracken	1930/1934	17	W. H.	1906	1
W. G.	1931/1932	17	A. K.	1930	1
J. H. Symes	1901/1933	10	? E. Luthris	1908	1
S. B. for C. R. Wood	1930	4	H. M.	1932	1
C. H. Gowland	1925	4	W. McLaren	1919	1
M. L. Ridgway	1923/1927	4	John Mellish	1879	1
C. V. S.*	1903/1923	4	L. W. Montgomery	1926	1
J. G. Gordon	1922/1923	4	O. R. Owen and E. P. C.	1928	1
W. B.	1931/1933	4	A. P.	1913	1
W. Crook**	1922/1924	2	W. Priest	1891	1
J. S. D.	1931	2	C. F. A. Ritsor	1932	1
J. ffolliott Darling	1910/1915	2	Captain R. Sparrow	1919	1
T. W. Mulholland	1925	2	C. J. Spring	1921	1
T. W. A.	1923	1	J. R.	1931	1
A. D. B.	1903	1	George Tunnah, the collection of Wm Mark Pybus	1888	1
B. Bill	1907	1	collected for R. J. Ussher	1891	1
F. A. C.	1900	1	W. Walker	1923	1
? K. C.	1929	1	A. Westlake	1929	1
W. Cotts	1898	1	R. H. Wingley	1920	1
J. Cunningham	1917	1	without names or initials	1897/1936	15
H. Douglas	1917	1			

* probably C. V. Stoney (*cf* Nelson 2010). ** one with printed label: "F. E. Gunn".

Several collectors seem to have been clients for others whose printed labels are marked with their names. An example is W. Crook. In this instance, the label is for the taxidermist Frederick Gunn of 84 St Giles Street, Norwich, whose family had been in the business since 1844. Similarly, an unknown individual was collecting in Cumberland for C. H. Gowland, the naturalist from Walton in Liverpool.

James ffolliott Darling, an Irish naturalist who had once collected in Mashonaland, donated eggs of a ring plover from Roscommon and a great crested grebe from Lough Corrib. The single largest number of eggs recorded on a label is that of C. R. Wood, who on 25 May and 8 June 1930 took no fewer than 51 eggs from 17 little tern nests on the shore at Morston, north Norfolk.

THE COLLECTION

The number of eggs in the collection (188) and the number of labels (192) appear to match. In fact, this is not the case. It is known that in the 1960s there were breakages, when small children were permitted access to the collection. The original collection was, therefore, well over 200. And to complicate matters, there are eggs in the surviving collection that have notes directly written on their shells, but which have no written labels. These are mainly duplicates of eggs of species with labels.

Table 3. Locations of places named on labels, and numbers of eggs.

IRELAND	99 eggs (52%)	ENGLAND	69 eggs (36%)
Antrim	22	Berkshire	1
Donegal	4	Cumberland	2
Down	43	Durham	2
Dublin	2	Hampshire	1
Fermanagh	1	Lancashire	3
Galway	1	Norfolk	10
Louth	1	Northumberland	1
Mayo	2	Oxfordshire	1
Roscommon	1	Shropshire	20
Tyrone(LoughNeagh)	19	Somerset	26
Waterford	1	Yorkshire	2
Wicklow	1		
Ireland	1	WALES	6 eggs (3%)
		Merionethshire	1
SCOTLAND	16 eggs (8%)	Powys	1
Aberdeenshire	2	Radnorshire	4
Argyllshire	1		
OrkneyIslands	4		
Sutherlandshire	1	Hungary	1 egg
Wigtownshire	8	Unidentified	1 egg

There are a large number of wetland and seabirds' eggs, many from Donegal, including curlew, black-headed, common, great black-backed and herring gull, guillemot, kittiwake, lapwing, Manx shearwater, oyster-catcher, ring plover, razor-bill, black-throated and red-throated diver and fulmar, and a solitary puffin egg from Kerry.

The number of terns' eggs illustrates the targeting of these birds by collectors. There were at least 63 little tern eggs collected on 25 May 1930 and 8 June 1930 at Morston in Norfolk by "S. B." collecting for C. R. Wood. Little tern eggs were also collected at Rogerstown Strand (Dublin; June 1902) in addition to common tern (Ireland; 1930); Arctic tern on the Copeland Islands (County Down; June 1931); and sandwich tern (Ross Harbour, Fermanagh; 1923).

Featured also in the collection and less common today in many areas than when collected are the chaffinch (Coat Martock, Somerset; 1906); corn crane (Lisburn; 1932); great crested grebe (Lough Corrib, Galway; 1910); red grouse (Aberdeenshire; 1930); golden plover (Pryssor, Merionethshire; 1908); red backed shrike (Mildford, Bath; 1898); snipe (Hillsborough; 1931, 1932; Harray, Orkney; 1931; Lisburn; 1932; Shopshire; 1932); redpoll (Ballygannon, Wicklow; 1905); redstart (Newbridge, Bath; 1893); ring ousel (Waddington Fell, Yorkshire; 1920); crested tit (Bath; 1898); twite (Ballynagaulmore, Waterford; 1891); wheatear (Sedbergh, Yorkshire); white throat (Martock, Somerset; 1901); woodcock (Hillsborough, 1923; Larchfield, County Down; 1931); and yellowhammer (Walcot, Somerset; 1931; Marlock, Somerset; 1933).

Raptor eggs are very few. Birds of prey include the buzzard (Lake District; 1932); kestrel (Rothery, Aberdeenshire; 1907; Suddern, Hampshire; 1913; Aughrim near Toomebridge; 1932); sparrow hawk (Bunlinn, Welford, Donegal; 1925; Ash Martock, Somerset; 1929; Martock, Somerset; 1932); little owl (Coat Martock, Somerset; 1931); and tawny eagle (Glasbury, Radnorshire; 1926).

One unusual exotic included in the collection is a great spotted woodpecker egg from Sziget Csep in Hungary. There are also several specimens which, from their four

digit coding written on the shells, have been identified as once part of the egg collection in the Natural History Museum, London. How Horsbrugh acquired these eggs before passing them on to McCracken is unknown. These include the eggs of a kittiwake (47.10.18.5 collected by H. P. Walter, donated to the Museum in 1847), and of a black guillemot (48.4.14.15, collected by Dr John Rae (1813–1893) at Repulse Bay in northern Canada (see Rae 1850).

Equally intriguing is an egg of a tawny eagle (see below) from India⁷, one of the oldest surviving specimens of the species, originally acquired by the British Museum from John Gould (1804–1881) in 1859. This is an early example of the egg of *Aquila rapax vindhiana* and possibly had been sent to Gould by his son Dr Henry Gould (Tree 1992). Subsequently in February 1898 it was transferred as a duplicate to Warrington Museum. In Warrington Museum's record it is recorded as "DESTROYED PREVIOUS TO 1963". For the moment it remains a mystery as to what happened to the egg between 1898 and 1934.⁸

THE LATER HISTORY OF THE McCRACKEN COLLECTION

From Queen's University, Belfast, McCracken went to teach history at his old school, the Wallace High School in Lisburn. In 1947, with his wife Eileen (née Webb), he emigrated to South Africa to lecture at the University of the Witwatersrand. Post-war and early apartheid Johannesburg were not appealing to them and in 1950 they returned to Ireland to a series of university appointments: Trinity College Dublin; Magee University College, Londonderry; and the University of Ulster at Coleraine. Finally, the McCrackens retired back to South Africa for health reasons in 1984. In all these peripatations the McCracken and Horsbrugh egg collection went with them. There can be few egg collections so well travelled. Indeed, McCracken once ruminated that perhaps he should have collected stuffed birds as they would have been easier to transport.

In later years, especially while living in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, McCracken was an active bird-watcher, but after his youth he never collected eggs again. In his memoir he made no secret of his views on egg collecting. In summary it was that in his mind it had been permissible to collect birds' eggs when it was a "gentleman's pastime". They were particularly careful only ever to take one egg and to cause as little stress as possible to the bird, he explained. But with birding becoming a popular hobby, the volume of collectors rose and thus inevitably the practice of egg collecting had to be prohibited. It was to be an argument of justification in other spheres such as ladies collecting wild flowers for pressing and mounting in ornate albums.

CONCLUSION

As McCracken states in his memoir, the relationship between the retired medical army captain and the boy had ended "in happy circumstances" for the Horsbrughs. They inherited two legacies in quick succession and were able to move to England, according to McCracken to settle in Bath, though from 1938 C. B. Horsbrugh is listed as having a telephone at 84 York Mansions, near Battersea Park, London. The association with the McCracken family did not quite end there, however. In the 1940s, 50 years after graduating as a medical doctor, his colleagues held a dinner in London in Horsbrugh's honour. At this McCracken's father,

Revd John McCracken, proposed the toast. Horsbrugh died in Battersea, London, early in 1952.

The McCracken Collection is being donated to the Natural History Museum, Tring.

NOTES

¹ Drumlins are low, round-topped, glacially-formed hills, often formed in a cluster pattern, sometimes with small lakes between them.

² Leslie McCracken left two memoirs. One is a 222-page hand-written manuscript and the second, an eight-page typescript. Both are in the author's possession. Copies are being deposited with other family papers in the National Library of Ireland. Unless otherwise stated, quotations are taken from these two sources.

³ Crannogs, which date from the Bronze Age, are artificial islands in the middle of lakes. They were used as dwelling places.

⁴ The Transvaal Museum in Pretoria, in the then British Transvaal Colony, is now called the Disson National Museum of Natural History in Tshwane, Province of Gaunteng.

⁵ The Abercorns had and have their estate at Baronscourt in County Tyrone. They were one of the few Irish aristocratic families to have political influence in England and consequently held the highest office in Ireland. Horsbrugh's friend James Hamilton, the third Duke of Abercorn (1869–1953), was Governor of Northern Ireland from December 1922 to September 1945, the only Irishman ever to hold that office (Moody *et al.* 1984: 9: 499, 545).

⁶ The bicycle survived the Second World War, the McCrackens' sojourn in Africa and ended its days in Derry, where in the early 1950s McCracken used it to smuggle cheap butter over the border from Donegal.

⁷ On the egg is written, "Aquila Naevioides India Gould Coll. 59.6.5.31". *Aquila naevioides* was placed in synonymy with *Aquila rapax* and as such is undoubtedly a tawny eagle (*Aquila rapax vindhiana*).

⁸ D. Russell to D. P. McCracken, pers. comm., 24 January 2011. When this was given to McCracken we do not know, but a plain postcard to him has survived dated 25 April 1934 on which is written, "Can you come here soon, as I have something to hand you I think you would like? Yrs C.B.H.". This may well refer to this egg.

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Received 4 February 2011. Accepted 8 August 2011.