

GEORGE EDWARD LODGE

By Dick Treleaven MBE

In the late 1940s when wandering down Piccadilly, my eye was taken by some paintings of falcons in Rowland Ward's window. The pictures portrayed cold, sharp-eyed gyrfalcons perched atop lichen covered boulders, staring out into Arctic wastes; a welcome change from the plethora of ducks endlessly flying against purple sunsets which frequently adorn the walls of suburbia. I decided there and then that this was the way I wanted to paint. I asked the Hon Aylmer Tryon, a director of the gallery, if it would be possible to meet the artist. He gave me George Lodge's address and suggested that I write to him.

On my return to Cornwall I did so and was delighted to receive a reply by return of post saying: 'I am 88 and don't wander far. Come any time.' It was only then that I learnt that Lodge was not only the foremost painter of birds of prey in Europe, but a contemporary of Archibald Thorburn and Bruno Liljefors (all born in 1860). The die was cast and on a wintry afternoon in November I nervously made my way up the drive of Hawk House, Camberley. Brenda, his niece, who acted as his housekeeper, opened the door. She wore a long black dress with a white embroidery anglais collar as would befit an elderly Victorian maiden lady. She made me welcome, offering me a cup of coffee, and warned me that the previous day someone had told her uncle that he looked like Bernard Shaw, and he was not amused.

I was led into his vast, high-roofed studio, the size of a small gymnasium, which was full of mounted specimens of falcons and game birds in glass cases, huge oil painting hanging from the ceiling and large wooden cabinets containing his collection of bird skins. At the far end, huddled in front of a gas fire, sat the great man, a patch over one eye, looking like a pirate. Clad in his magnificent old green hawking jacket with the brass buttons, he was contentedly smoking his pipe. He rose from his chair and shook me warmly by the hand. I was like a small boy who had accidentally stumbled into Aladdin's cave. I tried to take it all in, but there was too much of everything.

I had brought with me a selection of my most recent watercolour paintings. He went through them one by one, gently pointing out the errors of my ways and explaining that I must try and improve my knowledge of the way feathers were grouped. Going to a cabinet he took out the skin of a drake teal and showed me how each scapular overlapped the one next to it when he closed its wing. The next three hours passed in a flash. He told me he could not teach anyone to paint as he 'dashed about too much', but I was welcome to watch him at work.

It was during this first meeting that I learned that as a young man he had been much influenced by the work of the legendary Joseph Wolf. With a twinkle in his eye he told me: 'I liked visiting his studio as he always gave me a glass of whisky.' Questioning him further he told me that Wolf used to complain that John Gould, the unscrupulous producer of lavish and exotic nineteenth century bird books, frequently visited him and stole his sketches from which his wife would make engravings, leaving a cigar on the

table as token payment. Listening to these magical tales from the past was, for me, a kind of apostolic succession. When it was time for me to catch my train back to London, he walked slowly down the drive with me. His final words as he bade me goodnight were: 'We painters should be allowed to live for at least a thousand years, then perhaps we could get an inkling of our trade.' My ego rose a hundred percent as I walked back to the railway station in the dark.

I was to become a frequent visitor to Hawkhouse until his death at the age of 93 in 1954. If the light was too poor for him to paint we would retire to his inner sanctum, his study, which was lined with shelf upon shelf of finely-bound books. On one of these was a row of thick volumes all entitled *Grouse in Sickness and Health*. When Edward Wilson perished in Antarctic (he was a member of Scott's tragic 1912 expedition, Editor) he had been studying grouse disease. His scientific papers were then re-edited by W R Ogilvie Grant, part of which were published in 1912 *British Game birds and Wildfowl, The Gun at Home an Abroad, Vol 1*. George Lodge painted all the plates, which are some of the finest examples of his work as a bird illustrator.

I was anxious to know about his relationship with the taciturn Archibald Thorburn. He acknowledged that Thorburn was an extremely skilful watercolourist and always received a far higher price for his illustrations than he did; then he added a trifle mischievously, 'but I knew much more than he did.' He admired the work of Bruno Liljefors, the Swedish painter, who was influenced by the French impressionists, and considered him to be the greatest of all the wildlife painters, an opinion that s shared by many today. Of modern artists he was a little scathing, saying some of them seem to use cement instead of paint and their paintings were all too frequently petrified with accuracy and completely lifeless.

One of the reasons why Lodge has always been so revered by falconers is because he often painted individual birds, birds that were readily recognised by their owners. Skins he said were only useful to show the effects of light, not to copy from. He was emphatic that birds must be depicted with shadow under them and that the shadow must contain reflected light in order for it to become convincing. One has only to look at Lodge's birds to sense that they are made of feathers and there are bones beneath the skin. They were alive, not stuffed or cast in concrete. Every blade of grass or plant had to be botanically correct. There were not excuses for inaccuracy.

He was an avid believer that there was no reason why bird illustrators should not introduce a *little art* into their work and, to prove his point, he undertook the enormous task of painting all the birds on the British list for David Bannerman's book when he was well into his eighties. The final volumes were not published until after his death but they remain a monument to his work as a bird painter.

Lodge had a great sense of humour and gave me much advice, all of which I have tried to heed. He once told me to believe only a quarter of what I heard and half of what I saw. Then he said that he had found a black grouse (*Lyrurus tetrrix*) on the outskirts of Camberley, which was a very, very unlikely place to find one. He warned me: 'Never date your pictures. Visitors to your studio always want to buy one you did yesterday, not two years ago.' When I spotted a picture which he had dated, the picture of a juvenile gyrfalcon (Bannerman and Lodge, Vol 5), he said with a smile: 'when you are ninety-two you can.' He had started painting the illustrations when aged eighty-two.

On another occasion he said a man had written to him saying he had just bought two old paintings of his done on wooden panels, what should he do with them? Lodge chuckled: 'I told him to burn them at once.' On another visit to his studio he hailed me with the words: 'What a pity you didn't come yesterday when I had another chap who, like you, had been in the army. Yes, 'he went on, 'a fellow called Alanbrooke.' (Lord Alanbrooke was a Field Marshal; a member of Churchill's War Cabinet, Editor) And I was a junior Second Lieutenant.

Lodge's pictures are always distinctive and easily recognisable by the way he painted backgrounds. The vegetation and rocks were always very much part of the picture and never tediously overworked. His colours were invariably soft and kind to the eye. Although he produced a number of large oil paintings, much of his best work was done in tempera, but as eggs could not be used for this purpose during the war he resorted to gouache, often painting on brown paper. He encouraged me to continue painting in gouache and showed me how he used old shaving brushes to smooth out clouds. 'Most people,' he said, 'find tempera far too difficult a medium and soon give up using it.'

For me, the great thing about George Edward Lodge was his tremendous enthusiasm, which never diminished despite his age, and the unstinted help he gave to all those who sought it and, like me, sat at his feet.