

Colonel Meinertzhagen: Scoundrel. Bogus birds? Fowl Play?.

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By Robert Brockie

Richard Meinertzhagen was born into a wealthy English family in 1878, later joining the Royal Fusiliers. His regiment served with distinction in India, Burma, then in East Africa where the now Colonel Meinertzhagen took to big game hunting and ruthlessly butchering the blacks. He was wounded in fighting there.

Meinertzhagen then served as a very successful spy in the Middle East during the Great War. He fought with T.E. Lawrence in Palestine, Lawrence noting that the colonel had 'an unusually powerful body and savage brain which chose the best way to its purpose unhampered by doubt or habit'. Lawrence recalled that Meinertzhagen once spattered the brains of a cornered mob of Germans one by one with his Knob-Kerri. The Colonel was commended for his courage and clever spying and honoured with the OBE.

The Great War over, Meinertzhagen became a member of the British Delegation to the Paris Peace Conference. Although not a Jew, the Colonel became a close friend of Chaim Weizmann and a supporter of Zionism, even visiting Hitler in the 1930s to promote the cause of Jewry.

Drama dogged Meinertzhagen's every step. While dining with the British Consul in Odessa he witnessed an anti Jewish pogrom, and saw a 12-year-old Jewish girl being dragged along the gutter by ravaging Russians. The Colonel dashed downstairs, kicked the Russian in the guts and carried the child upstairs into the consulate. In 1928, Meinertzhagen's wife Annie (an expert on wading birds) died in a suspicious shooting. The Colonel was wounded again while evacuating troops from Dunkirk.

But Meinerzthagen had a burning passion. Ornithology! Wherever he served, he studied the local birds. In 1930 he wrote the 700-page *The Birds of Egypt* and, in 1954, his 600-page magnum opus *The Birds of Arabia*. He accumulated

a vast collection of stuffed birds and held office in the British Ornithological Society.



On his death in 1967, the 89-year-old Meinertzhagen donated his collection of 20 000 stuffed birds to the British Museum - all meticulously labelled and catalogued. He also gave the museum his collection of 600 000 parasitic bird lice, flies and mites, again meticulously catalogued in 15 volumes.

But, in 1993, an eagle-eyed ornithologist realised that, back in 1914, Meinertzhagen had stolen the skin of an extinct Indian owl from the British Museum, had it re-taxidermed and relabelled, then claimed to have re-discovered the species in India. Searching further, the ornithologist found that the Colonel had stolen heaps of specimens from other museums, re-labelled them with fictitious details and added them to his private collection.

American ornithologist Pamela Rasmussen and Britain's Robert Prys-Jones have spent the last ten years uncovering the extent of Meinertzhagen's deceit. Breathtaking! "There are hundreds and probably thousands of fraudulently catalogued specimens" in British and American museums say the stunned sleuths. Part of the Colonel's undoing was his inveterate diary-keeping. Dates and localities on his specimens didn't match the dates and localities in his diaries. But Meinertzhagen cheated even in his diaries. They're littered with fake entries rewritten to boost his reputation.

Add Colonel Meinertzhagen to your list of legendary scoundrels.

References

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Knox Allan (1993). Richard Meinertzhagen - A case of fraud. *Ibis* 135: 320–35.

Faked diary entries of his 1917 meetings with T. H. Lawrence, glued in 1954.