



CHAPTER NINE

Birds and Beasts

IT MUST have been noticed in the last two chapters that although our medieval forebears often described each other in simple, straight-forward words, they were also very much inclined to compare people to birds, animals, plants and objects, and indeed everything they saw and knew. Already we have mentioned a number of living creatures used as types of tall, short, fair and dark people, but many more were used to make nicknames expressing other qualities.

If we collect some of these together we see how well those remote ancestors of ours knew and understood the wild life of the woods and hills around them. They lived much nearer to nature than we do now; the

forests and marshes of their England were untamed, and teemed with wild birds and animals. Then again they had fewer distractions than we have—no ready-made entertainment, few books, little in the way of transport. They had to find their own pleasures by looking about them, and they were far more observant than most of us today.

At that time many popular old tales were current in England about birds and animals, tales in which each creature had its special character. The fox was cunning, the owl wise, the goose foolish and so on. But though our forefathers knew these traditional characteristics well, they also noticed the true habits of the living creatures, or they would never have used so many of their names so freely.

Best of all they knew and loved the birds, looking on them as friends and companions. This is shown in the way people liked to give human names to the most familiar birds, calling them Tom Tit, Jenny Wren, Mag Pie, and Jack Daw. Two little birds were called Robin and Martin so regularly that now we think of these as the names of their species. But they were boys' names first. In reverse bird names were often given to men. Some of these have been already mentioned in the last two chapters. Others with obvious meanings are *Nightingale*, for a very good singer; *Jay*, a flamboyant fellow with bright clothes and a loud voice; *Sparrow*, a lively and quarrelsome little person; *Coot*, a bald man; *Partridge*, a plump one.

Finch is well-known as a surname, and there are many kinds of finches. In fact few people nowadays

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would know what the name implied. But all the finches are brightly coloured, merry little birds, particularly goldfinches, which were often kept as pets, and their proverbial meaning is "gaiety". An old name for the chaffinch was *Spink* or *Pink*, because this is exactly the sound of one of his frequent notes, and this too made a name for a bright, happy person.

Many other bird names exist that we might not recognize. Some have old forms or spellings, while others are words that have become obsolete. A Lark used to be called *Laverock* or *Laverick*, and the Thrush generally *Throssel*. The old word for a woodpecker was *Speight*, which made a good nickname for a carpenter. The hedge sparrow, a quiet little grey-brown bird that should not be confused with a house sparrow, was a *Dunnoch*, and a red breast (when not called Robin) a *Ruddock*. A tit was often a "tit-mouse" and the surname *Titmus*, though it is not common, is very well known today. This name must I think have been given, like *Wren*, to a very small man, but whereas a wren is a small *shy* bird, a tit is a small *bold* one.

Anyone can find amusement in looking out for more of these bird names. I have found over fifty different species in the London Telephone Directory alone, and though some require special knowledge for recognition, others are quite obvious. The numerous water birds should not be forgotten. Nearly all are there, including *Teale* and *Mallard* and the *Shoveller* whose name describes his mode of eating.

This surname, often contracted to *Showler*, must have been given to someone who ate his dinner in this vigorous style.

Of all the birds the one that has made most surnames is the *Hawk*, and this reflects not only the love of falconry in our period but also admiration of the fierce, wild, courageous creature with its magnificent powers of flight. Many kinds of hawk may be found in the directory, including the *Sparrowhawk*, which has survived in full length from before the Conquest when a bishop of London in 1050 was so called. A *Haggard* was a hawk that had been trained but gone back to the wild.

But even more common than *Hawke* is the general term for a male bird, "cock". From our very earliest history this was a favourite nickname for a lively, domineering young fellow, and by the time surnames were sticking fast in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries it was so widely used that it was often tacked on to the end of a Christian name, making forms like Will-cock, Sim-cock, and Ad-cock (Ad being in this case short for Adam). Very often as it turned into a surname in passing from the original Wilcock to his son it acquired a final "s", becoming *Wilcocks* or *Wilcox*. In this last spelling, as in the simpler form *Cox*, the "cocky" bird is lost to sight.

When we begin to look for "animal" surnames there are almost as many. The *Fox* has been mentioned already. He also had another name, *Todd*, now nearly forgotten. A *Brock* was a badger, and the old word for the polecat, a fierce wild creature with

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flashing eyes and sharp claws, was the *Fitch* or *Fitchett*.

Anyone called “the *Bull*” was tremendously strong, while “the *Hart*” and “the *Buck*” implied handsome, active young men, for in the surname period everyone thought a fully-grown stag in the forest a glorious sight. The *Wolf* stood for ferocity, and had been used in naming men from the earliest recorded times.

The most exciting animal to hunt in Norman England was the wild boar because it was so fierce and dangerous. Because its courage was admired, its name, like “*Wolf*” was thought fit for a hero. It has sometimes survived in full as *Wildbore*, more often shortened to *Wilber*, but the special word most generally used for it was *Hogg*, which meant the full-grown young male animal. Since those days this word has come down in the world sadly, and is now used chiefly in ordinary speech to denote greed or bad behaviour (we speak for instance of “road hogs”), but in the surname period it was a compliment.

Many animal and bird names became attached to men because they were connected with their daily work. It would be among fishermen on the coast that a big man would be called *Whale* and a small one *Spratt*. And it would be the fowlers creeping through the woods with their nets, or crouching all day among the rushes, who would know the wild birds so well that a *Quayle* or a *Woodcock* might remind them of one of their friends.

The reason that so many families are called *Lamb* is simply that there were so many Shepherds spending

their lives among their flocks that they were bound to make some comparisons from this familiar sight. If a Shepherd's son had curly fair hair, like sheep's wool, it would be very natural to call him a Lamb. When he grew up into a very un-lamblike young man, it would make a good joke, or pass unnoticed, for nicknames given in childhood often stick for life. Other names for young animals are *Bullock* and *Kydd*, while *Bird* originally meant a young bird, the more general term being *Fowl*. *Purcell* meant a little pig, and *Lovell* (a special favourite of the Normans) a young wolf.

It will be noticed that all the names that are at all common come from creatures that were to be found in England, for nicknames sprang from real observation and familiarity. A possible exception among birds is *Peacock*, but although these handsome birds have never been wild in England, they were kept as pets by kings and nobles from Anglo-Saxon times, and were well known. They were regularly used in speech as an example of pride.

The lion was known only by hearsay, to all but a very few. And therefore, though it was occasionally given as a nickname among the nobility (we think of course of Richard Coeur de Lion, and the old Scottish family of *Lyon* from whom the Queen Mother is descended), it was seldom used among the ordinary people whose speech has given us all our regular names. Among the Jews the lion had a special significance, and many of them have this surname, generally in the form of *Lyons*.

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But though it is true on the whole that men made nicknames from the creatures that were most familiar to them, there are two strange omissions. No one was ever called by the names of those two friends of man, horse and hound. Were they too near and dear to be spoken of jokingly in this way? There is no easy answer to this question ; it is just a curious fact.