

The Meinertzhagen Mystery: The Life and Legend of a Colossal Fraud

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The Meinertzhagen Mystery: The Life and Legend of a Colossal Fraud.—Brian Garfield. 2007. Potomac Books, Washington, D.C. xiv + 352 pp., 14 black-and-white photographs. ISBN 978-1-59797-160-7. Paperback, \$17.95.—Richard Meinertzhagen (1878–1967), born into “wealth and position” in Victorian England, had a varied and eventful career in the British Army, in diplomacy, in exploration, and in ornithology. He was billeted to India before World War I, and after hostilities began he went to northeastern Africa, where he was an intelligence officer and, evidently, a skilled cartographer. Afterwards, he served in Egypt and Palestine. He served briefly in World War II. He was a Zionist (although also an anti-Semite) and championed the Zionists’ cause at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 and later. He rubbed shoulders with luminaries of the early 20th century (e.g., Winston Churchill, T. E. Lawrence, Chaim Weizmann) and was an influence on the career, literary and governmental, of Ian Fleming. Meinertzhagen’s activities are chronicled in many well-regarded histories of those regions and events.

He also made substantial contributions to the ornithology of India, North Africa, and the Middle East in the form of papers, books, and specimens. He was highly esteemed and honored in international ornithology and was a friend of Salim Ali, Alexander Wetmore, Ernst Mayr, and others. Unfortunately, and to an almost incredible extent, a significant part of his record is false: indeed, a colossal fraud.

In this highly entertaining yet sobering book, Garfield examines the underside of Meinertzhagen’s life, one that “RM,” as he is called in the book, made up. Not content with reality, RM concocted greatly exaggerated or wholly imagined feats of derring-do, often hilariously improbable and overall like a bloodthirsty version of *The Hardy Boys*. He typed 10,000+ pages of “diaries” that were actually fictional memoirs that he constantly revised

(destroying earlier versions in the process) to, perhaps, suit his whims of the moment, to present a newly “remembered” escapade, or to shine a light on his supposed prescience.

Again incredibly, these accounts, as summarized by RM in four published books, have been taken as gospel and incorporated into definitive histories and social commentaries about the regions he traversed. The extent of these deceptions is boggling as Garfield reveals them carefully and patiently. Two bookmarks will be needed: one for the text and the other for the notes: 247 pages of text with 80 pages of notes, which are informative and often amusing mini-essays on aspects of RM’s activities.

For ornithology, RM left a sorry trail; careful examination of his huge ($\pm 20,000$) donation of bird specimens to the British Museum (Natural History) by several scientists—prominently, but not at all entirely, by Pamela Rasmussen, while she was preparing *The Birds of South Asia: The Ripley Guide* (Rasmussen and Anderton 2005)—revealed that RM had stolen skins from other collections (including the British Museum itself), restuffed them to hide the original collectors’ distinctive preparation techniques, and then relabeled them to conform with his claimed “discoveries” of range extensions. Perhaps a fifth of his skins have something wrong with them, and association now taints the remainder.

RM had first been caught stealing from the British Museum beginning in 1919, but his status, social and scientific, caused the incidents to be swept under the rug. (See also Knox [1993] and Seabrook [2006] for discussions of the scandal.) There was also, apparently, wholesale fraud in his half-million donated specimens of *Mallophaga*, so RM left his black mark on entomology as well. This lousy work was done in collaboration with his close and much, much younger cousin Theresa Clay (1911–1995), who apparently had some sort of Lolita, then Pygmalian, relationship with RM after his second wife died in an unusual gun accident of which he was the only witness. RM named perhaps a score of species and subspecies of birds after Theresa, including, according to Garfield, a dozen “in one short paper.”

Garfield rues that his book can only touch the surface of RM’s hallucinations or deceptions, though he presents a sufficiency by the dozen (and he scrupulously cites works and letters by Michael Occleshaw that defend RM). RM did real harm to ornithology; many fine ornithologists are having to go grimly through life sweeping up after RM’s elephant parade, instead of devoting their time and talents to expanding knowledge. There are among us liars; unfortunately, some go into ornithology, so we should beware. I recommend this book to anyone interested in Middle Eastern history, science, or the corruptibility of human nature.—ROBERT L. CRAWFORD, 208 Junius Street, Thomasville, Georgia 31792, USA. E-mail: rlcrawfd@rose.net

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