

The Guardian - Tower's raven mythology may be a Victorian flight of fantasy

As every school child knows, there have been ravens at the Tower of London since time immemorial, and if they ever leave, the monarchy and the tower itself will fall.

The story is one of the most cherished of all the tower's many tales, and the current seven stalk about the grounds, glossy and pampered, very much as if they own the place - but it is not true.

A historian has scoured the records for 1,000 years, and can trace the ravens back no further than the late 19th century. Geoff Parnell, official Tower of London historian and a member of the Royal Armouries staff, is now convinced they are merely a typical piece of Victorian romance.

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Worse, at at least one point in the tower's comparatively history, Dr Parnell has found the blunt statement in the records "there are none left" - and yet the monarchy and the tower have more or less survived.

A spokeswoman for Historic Royal Palaces, which runs the Tower and has a special ravens section on its website, swallowed hard and said firmly: "This is a very interesting piece of research, which adds to the history of the Tower. So much of the appearance of the tower that we see today does date back to the Victorian period that it is quite appropriate that the ravens should be a Victorian legend."

An American author, Boria Sax, who has also been hunting down the ravens, has reached the same conclusion: the birds are eminent Victorians, not Ancient Britons.

However Dr Parnell has added another layer to the legend: his research suggests some ravens may have been a punning gift to the tower by the Earl of Dunraven, an archaeologist and antiquarian fascinated by Celtic raven myths, who added ravens to his family coat of arms, or by his son the Fourth Earl.

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The tower was definitely raven-less by the second world war, when some were killed in bombing raids, and others understandably pined and died of shock. The myth was already so powerful

however, that when the tower re-opened to the public, on January 1 1946, at the heart of the ruined City of London, somehow ravens had been obtained and were back in place.

Dr Parnell first became interested in the ravens story when working on an exhibition about the Tower menagerie, kept by generations of monarchs for at least 600 years until it became the foundation of London Zoo. There were hawks, lions, leopards, monkeys and even a polar bear - but ravens were conspicuously absent.

The full-blown version of the legend is that the ravens have been in the tower for centuries, possibly since Roman times. In the days of Charles II, his astronomer, John Flamsteed, complained that their chattering put him off his work, and the king ordered that they be destroyed - before being warned that dire luck would follow, for him and the tower. Instead he ordered that they should be fed and sheltered forever.

Tourists from all over the world cite the ravens as a major factor in their visit, second only to the Crown Jewels. The current batch, including Thor and Odin who arrived seven years ago from an Owl Sanctuary in the New Forest, have their own official food and accommodation budget, comfortable quarters by the Bloody Tower, and are cared for by a Yeoman Warder with the splendid title of Raven Master. Some are excellent mimics: one can bark, and Dr Parnell is among many passersby startled by a deep voice saying "hello!" when there was no human being in sight.

Each bird has one clipped wing, so they cannot fly far, but as many visitors have discovered they can walk very fast. One small girl last week was torn between thrill and terror when a raven the size of a small dog stalked up to her and calmly plucked her ham roll out of her hand, before retiring behind the barriers and the "caution, these animals can bite" warnings before neatly removing it from its plastic bag.

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Despite their swaggering arrogance, once Dr Parnell was on their case their days as authentic living history were numbered. The earliest reference he found was 1895, in a piece in the RSPCA journal, *The Animal World*. One Edith Hawthorn referred to the tower's pet cat being tormented by the ravens, Jenny and a nameless mate. The article also had the first illustration of the ravens and the unfortunate cat - which Dr Parnell has just managed to buy on eBay (see illustration, above).

Dr Parnell suspects the first ravens may have been pets kept by Yeomen or other staff: there was a craze for pet ravens after Edgar Allen Poe's poem in the 1850s. By 1903 they had acquired a sinister air: "In ominous proximity to the site of the Block the five pet ravens may be seen", Henry Thompson wrote.

The Dunraven family may have stepped in after Jenny was left alone, after enraging her mate - she is recorded as shredding every nest he built - until he fled the tower. Dr Parnell has even tracked an old family firm, Philip Castang, now closed, which supplied animals to zoos or as pets - and operated for years a stone's throw from the Tower in Leadenhall Market.

In 1955 the manager wrote to Country Life saying he had "the order for the first Tower Ravens" framed and hanging on his office wall. Although Dr Parnell has interviewed the last owners of the firm, the former manager has died, and the order has disappeared. He yearns for the document to resurface, so he can add it to his growing collection on the true phony history of the Tower ravens.

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