

The Colonel

SEVERAL REQUESTS made in public and in private for details of my involvement with Colonel Baron Xavier-Xavier “Za-Za” Forbes Houdemont de Sapinberg have persuaded me to release a little more detail than has previously appeared in the public prints. The responsibilities of the biographer of such a distinguished man are onerous, for so much of the research he has completed in distant lands has created political enemies whose nefarious activities must be, for his safety, concealed for many years yet, and personal data that might help his enemies to identify his safe houses must be carefully camouflaged. In consequence, what I shall relate here will not be the full story of our friendship: it will be sufficient to describe only a small part of the wide range of his achievements.

We first met in the autumn of 1960 when I was unexpectedly posted to a small base in Oman as second-in-command. It was a fairly quiet job because the activity of the local rebels had faded to a quiet murmur and the 120 Baluchi riflemen I commanded spent most of the day asleep. The British, almost all of them Royal Air Force, worked well, and my most demanding task was to find ways of keeping them amused in the evening when the nearest town with any permissible entertainment was six hundred miles away. As part of my contribution a small heraldry group was formed, and it was for one of their lectures that the Colonel dropped in to tell us of his work with the Bactrian gryphons. I do remember well how enthralled the men were, but later, after a drink in the Mess, when I was hoping he would relax and tell us more, he called for his camel and just disappeared, like a ghost. I learned later that he often did that.

I saw him only once more in Oman before I was posted to Khormaksar in Aden Colony, the last outpost of the British Raj, and it was the story he told me on that occasion that prompted me to become his biographer. As a secondary duty I had been appointed editor of Aden’s flight safety magazine *Flightline*, traditionally a compilation of dull accident statistics which almost no one read, and it was following the welcome to my explosive introduction of photographs of the sort of starlets the men hoped were waiting for their return to the shores of England that I decided to try also short stories. The first of these, *Rumbled*, introduced the Colonel to the wider world.

We next met in 1966 in what was then British North Borneo in its process of becoming Sabah in Malaysia. I had been preparing notes on fabulous monsters of the type he would one day make famous, and he briefed me on his visit — he was hunting for the meringue, which was the name he had given to the orang-outang with a mermaid’s tail (not a fish tail for reasons he explained). It could not have been at a better time and I included it in the next lecture I gave.

I then persuaded him to make our base his headquarters and he stayed with us for the remainder of my twelve months there, which was useful for him, as I was able to lay on helicopters when he had to be lifted into the meringue river basins, and I was able to learn more of his extraordinary past.

He was not then a baron, of course, or perhaps I should say he was not the baron, for his family followed the continental fashions and distributed its titles to all. He wore a heavy signet ring without a crest; it has only the coronet of a French baron carved deeply into it. His name did not then include Houdemont, for that came later when he inherited from his alcoholic cousin Binkie. He did not use his arms then on anything either, claiming that his only interest in the noble science of heraldry was in the destruction of the silly stories, the *bêtises*, perpetuated in the books that described the so-called “mythical” creatures. He was both very French and yet very cosmopolitan, almost English in his aristocratic eccentricity, and when questioned on this one night he confessed that he had a Scottish grandmother, a Forbes, who had left him an estate in Aberdeenshire, Easter Madderglen, a near neighbour of my own.

As he was always using the helicopters the other officers quickly became used to him being around, and as he had reached the rank of colonel before his right leg below the knee was torn from his body by a *Panzerfaust* in 1944 there was no difficulty in the inclusion of his name on relevant paperwork. Unfortunately, the free and easy way we had adopted for this encouraged the use of his name for matters with which he had no connection, and memoranda featuring his name were soon flying all over the base. Any officer who thought he might not be missed for a few days and wanted to fly to Singapore or Hong Kong for some shopping would just sign the chit with the Colonel’s name and push off. We were supposed to be in a war with the Indonesians (the politicians called it *Confrontatie* because they did not want to admit they were at war – how much has changed, I wonder), and I found memoranda circulating about arranging a ceasefire to allow us all to go home; these had his name on them too.

My tour expired about the same time everything else did, and Malaysian forces assumed command of the base, but when I was about to leave and was being dined out in the Mess the Colonel, who was staying on, admitted to me that while he was out there he was on a mission for the French secret service and it was this story that I eventually wrote as *Plausible Denial*. He promised to keep in touch when I returned to a boring job in England, but I heard nothing until I received a card from Tannou-Touva describing very briefly his success in temporarily capturing a unicorn. When an actual photograph eventually arrived I took it, as he asked, to the Lord Lyon, then Innes of Learney, and after serious discussion it was agreed that the arms he now wanted matriculated could bear a single Preston unicorn instead of the inherited Preston-Forbes quarter.

In view of the controversy about his arms that arose later in his life it may be helpful if I explain that initially, despite his ownership of Easter Madderglen, he had no interest in Scotland, and that this altered only after he was requested to investigate the 1969 sightings of Nessie just off Urquhart Castle and detected the influence of the Scottish Tourist Board. Later, as everyone now knows, he conclusively demonstrated that the famous Nessie was in fact a kelpie hired by a consultant once attached to the Board and tasked with monster imitation. He then went to see the Lord Lyon, Innes of Learney, and although he never told me what transpired we all eventually learned that the plans to include a Nessie as a charge in Scottish heraldry were abandoned. However, he was persuaded that as a Scottish landowner of some Scots ancestry he had an obligation to matriculate arms in Scotland, and he discussed quartering Preston-Forbes of Easter Madderglen with the French Sapinberg arms.

That was the state of play when he left on the first Hindu Kush opinicus expedition, but everything changed when he caught the rare silver unicorn on film in Tannou-Touva. He then wanted the Forbes quarter removed from the Preston-Forbes grand quarter and a single unicorn's head coupé instead. The Preston unicorns were black, of course, but he insisted that the silver unicorn head should be silver, which he claimed was natural (he has never been expert in traditional heraldry), and he asked for the blazon *Sable a shadowed unicorn's head by moonlight coupé Proper, a bordure Argent.*



Someone at Lyon Office telephoned me to complain that such a blazon would make people suspect the arms were fictitious, and I was sure that was correct, yet when later the blazon appeared online on a message board no one questioned it in public (although several expressed polite concern in private). Eventually, of course, the Colonel succeeded to Houdemont, an undistinguished fief buried entirely under concrete which, owing to his cousin's gross mismanagement, produced no rents and was worthless. However, he then took the Houdemont arms for his first and fourth quarters, placed the new Madderglen

unicorn's head in the second quarter, and adopted as arms of affection in his third quarter those of his collateral ancestor, the famous early gryphon hunter, Sir John de Mandeville of Hertford. The arms of the hereditary Constable of Sapinberg he placed on an inescutcheon.

Then followed a sustained period of silence broken only by his requests for more money to fund his monster-hunting expeditions. He had by this time been widely recognised as the world's foremost expert on the Bactrian gryphon and by most as the principal expert on all the gryphon family, and it was in this role

that in 1993 I introduced him in California to the group of writers with whom I then worked. Their interest in him was sparked more by what my clerk, Brother Septimus, had written of him and the importance of Easter Madderglen as the access to the warp that allows entry to the lands of Maddercreag and the castle I built there so long ago. It had been my baron baillie, Septimus's eldest brother Theodore, who had first briefed the Colonel on the incredible stories, the wholly unbelievable tales, of a "Loch Ness monster" and then fired his enthusiasm for the search for a solution to its mystery, and it was on what was only their first visit that he produced the obvious source of the monster appearances, the use of a kelpie in the tourist promotion programme. He was typically modest about it, claiming it was only common sense, but to the Californians it was very clearly the uncommon sense of a man with unrivalled experience in monster detection and research.

When I was approached for my contribution to the *2004 Britannica* I sub-contracted the Colonel for the section on beasts and he happily obliged with an unusually authoritative account of all those he had seen and monitored in their native habitat. Regrettably the *Britannica* editors, in their task of restructuring their publication primarily for a CD platform, chose to remove the beasts from heraldry and to slot them into their myths section, as wholly an inappropriate home for a gryphon or opinicus or unicorn as might be imagined. Moreover, in their description of the gryphon as possessing "a bird's head, usually that of an eagle" the important identification feature of its long and furry ears is ignored, and on enquiry it emerged that when dispensing with the Colonel's work they had chosen that of an archaeologist instead! We were all absolutely mortified, but the Colonel took it very well, commenting that people who had never met him must be excused for undervaluing his work. True, I suppose, but a typically generous reaction.

As readers might expect, when the Baronage web operation decided that requests for some form of Scotch Cousins' introduction service were long overdue recognition, the Colonel was the first I consulted outside the editorial team. He immediately volunteered to be its nominal head. He suggested also that we use for publicity a picture of the new wing at Maddercreag (hardly "new" now, of course, but still so-called) as it can be seen looking up from the bank of the Madder, and that we should use his arms for the stationery, as once previously for a sting that failed. We could not predict then, as he flew off to prepare his new opinicus expedition, the strife this was to trigger in the following days as the malcontents who had published a leaflet defaming the Baronage operation and questioning my courage seized on what



Maddercreag
The new wing

they prayed might be evidence to destroy Baronage and what we had achieved over these last eleven years. Ostensibly wishing to discuss the Colonel's arms but actually using these as a platform from which to accuse us of selling bogus baronies with the help of a fraudulent French baron, the fraudulent baron being the Colonel, their intention was to replace Baronage in our readership's affections with their own rather shoddy imitation. When I radioed the Colonel for advice on how we should protect his good name he laughed and recommended that we feed the troublemakers sufficient information to sharpen their appetites, because he confidently expected that in their brutish excitement they would suspend from operation what little intelligence they possessed. He had recorded this behaviour in Borneo, he said, when while searching for the meringues he had studied the orang-outangs with which the ancestors of the meringues were believed to have mated.

As we are fortunate in having on the editorial staff a jewellery designer who during her apprenticeship had spent a great deal of time winding clocks and watches in employers' window displays, we immediately had a splendidly qualified volunteer pleading for the chance to wind up the malcontents. The weakness she quickly recognised as having the most potential was their conviction that the Colonel was bogus and a known international conman, so in the exchange of posts on Internet message boards she did nothing to contradict this. Her strategy was quickly recognised by most of the Internet users following the excitement, and by all who sent private mail to thank her for the fun they were having, but a sudden intervention stopped the continuation when an independent reader, taking pity on them, warned them that not all was what it seemed. There was then a sudden switch to attempts to discover whether the Colonel was not so much bogus as fictitious, an imaginary character that had just been invented to "insult" the heraldry community with a fraudulent coat of arms. Apparently fruitless searches were made for Sapinberg; Lyon Office, it is claimed, seemed not to have a record of the blazon *Sable a shadowed unicorn's head by moonlight couped Proper, a bordure Argent*; and the famous three spears of the hereditary Constable of Sapinberg (defending against humbugs, blatherskites and poseurs) were said to be derived from my own arms.

And that is where we stand today. The level of intelligence exhibited by the malcontents in their obsessive pursuit of the Colonel is seen by all the observers to be a reflection of the same intelligence they applied to their judgement of the Baronage operation. They appear incapable of understanding what they read and forever repeat it with words of different meaning substituted for the actual words their eyes temporarily recognised only seconds before. Their ill will, their malevolence, is now plain for all to see.

The Colonel is very well and is currently in the Hindu Kush.