BOOKSHELF

Book Review: 'The Owl Who Liked Sitting on Caesar' by Martin Windrow

A military historian and an owl make a home together in a London high-rise. Visitors are issued vintage helmets for protection.

By BEN DOWNING

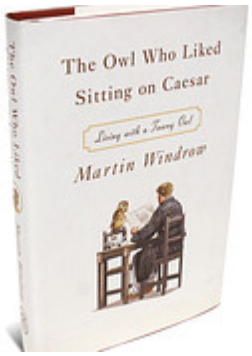
July 1, 2014 6:44 p.m. ET

In the annals of publishing, there may be a precedent or two for a venerable military historian setting aside his generals and artillery to evoke the love affair that consumed him as a younger man, but it's probably safe to say that in none of these memoirs is the object of adoration feathered, 10 inches tall and given to maniacally attacking the historian's shoelaces. Such is the case with Martin Windrow's "The Owl Who Liked Sitting on Caesar." If the above description makes the book sound funny, touching and divertingly novel, so it is. But there's more to it than that. In relaxed yet lapidary prose, Mr. Windrow—best known for "The Last Valley," his 2004 account of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu—has produced an homage to both a creature and its species that is almost Leonardo-like in its precision and spirit of curiosity. The result is nothing less than a small masterpiece of animal literature.

In the late 1970s, having grown fond of an owl that lived with his brother in rural Kent, Mr. Windrow decided to get his own, despite living in a London high-rise. After a disastrous experiment with a Little Owl that rejected him utterly, he obtained a month-old Tawny Owl. At their first meeting, he encountered a life form "shaped rather like a plump toy penguin with a nose-job. It appeared to be wearing a one-piece knitted jumpsuit of pale grey fluff with brown stitching, complete with an attached balaclava helmet. From the face-hole of the fuzzy balaclava, two big, shiny black eyes gazed up at me trustfully. '*Kweep*,' it said quietly. . . . It blinked its furry grey eyelids, then jumped very deliberately up onto my right shoulder. It felt like a big, warm dandelion head against my cheek, and it smelt like a milky new kitten. '*Kweep*,' it repeated, very softly." He was a goner.

Mumble, as he named her, had a cage on the balcony yet was often given the run of the flat. At times she would "roost happily" atop either a door or the author's bust of Germanicus. At others she would indulge in "boisterous hunting games," insist on riding the carriage of his typewriter as he wrote, and freely heed the call of nature. (Owls, he sighs, are "impossible to housetrain.") Decidedly a "one-man bird," she was highly affectionate with him but a territorial menace to others; whenever he had a visitor, he would issue them one of his many "old military helmets," since Mumble was bound to "fly for their scalp."

"Her job, her hobby, her passion was watching things," Mr. Windrow writes of Mumble, and his own passion was watching her. His observations—many of them quoted from the journals he kept—are a joy to



The Owl Who Liked Sitting on Caesar

By Martin Windrow
(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 302 pages, $26)

read, in part because of his gift for metaphor and association. "While Mumble was patrolling around the living-room floor," one passage begins, "her vainglorious strut suddenly reminded me of a character in a Japanese samurai film. Like some warrior played by Toshiro Mifune, she had the touchy air of someone who is ready, at an instant, to take furious offence over some imagined slight." He distinguishes and names Mumble's various poses—"giant moth" and "cottage loaf," to mention only two—and lists "six basic types of call," including a "sort of 'whistling kettle coming to the boil' as she pumps herself up in indignation, e.g., when she notices a pigeon lurking around. This starts with a crouch, a puff of the feathery throat, and an interrogation that quickly turns dangerous: 'skwer? . . . *skwer*? . . . *SKWER! . . . SKWERKK!*"

Riveted by Mumble, Mr. Windrow began reading up on the Tawny Owl and owls in general. He presents the fruits of his research in a series of interlarded chapters on the behavior, anatomy, place in the British ecosystem and folkloric reputation of owls. ("In Yorkshire, owl soup was supposed to cure whooping-cough.") But he also light-handedly dramatizes the way in which his growing expertise, together with his prior knowledge of aviation and military hardware, put him ever more in awe of Mumble as "a supremely elegant example of functional design." He was especially dazzled by her telescoping neck, which he compares to the gyroscopic stabilizers used in tank turrets. Realizing that she could, while perched on his hand, keep her head fixed in place even as her body is raised and lowered, he succumbed to "the mischievous temptation to play 'owl yo-yo'. . . . I did this several times, giggling foolishly, until Mumble got fed up with this childish game and took off."

In 1981 he decided to move to a small town in Sussex. For Mumble he built an outdoor aviary, where she thrived. Then one day in 1993, just before her 15th birthday, he found her dead, probably of a heart attack. Though tersely expressed, his devastation is clear. Like J.R. Ackerley, whose classic "My Dog Tulip" documents a relationship of almost exactly the same length, Mr. Windrow was a bachelor heavily invested in his pet. At the time he got Mumble, he was "chewing over the cold cud of some fairly discouraging insights into my own character and the probable future shape of my life." Yet he found it "impossible to sustain a mood of self-centered depression while an indignant ball of fluff was doing squeaking pratfalls all over the place." Mumble became his mate-equivalent, and he hers. With the restraint typical of an educated Englishman of his generation, he does not dilate on what she meant to him, but we feel it the more keenly for his reticence.

A paradoxical pitfall of animal literature is that it achieves its effects too easily: Consider how quick we are to laugh when a writer so much as mentions a monkey. The good stuff, however, stands out for its refusal to push buttons or indulge in glib anthropomorphism. In this perfect book, Mr. Windrow may compare Mumble to a samurai and think of her as hurling at pigeons the owlish equivalent of a certain Anglo-Saxon expletive, but he never loses sight of what she is: *Strix aluco*, a beautiful alien.

Mr. Downing is the author of "Queen Bee of Tuscany: The Redoubtable Janet Ross."