

# MENAGERIE MANOR



Gerald Durrell

## MENAGERIE MANOR

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For  
Hope and Jimmy  
In memory of overdrafts, tranquillisers  
and revolving creditors



# CONTENTS

Foreword by Lee Durrell.....	7
Explanation.....	11
1. Menagerie Manor.....	15
2. A Porcupine in the Parish.....	40
3. The Cold-blooded Cohort.....	66
4. Claudius Among the Cloches.....	85
5. The Nightingale Touch.....	104
6. Love and Marriage.....	124
7. A Gorilla in the Guest-room.....	145
8. Animals in Trust.....	166
Final Demand.....	182
Durrell's Legacy by Will Masfield.....	184
A Message from the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust..	190



# FOREWORD

by Lee Durrell

*M*enagerie Manor was the second of Gerald Durrell's books I read, just after *My Family and Other Animals*. This was some time ago, during my student days in Madagascar. I was just completing the research for my PhD in animal communication, and welcomed a break from writing up the day's field notes. I hadn't yet met Gerry, but on discovering his books in a mission library in a remote area in southern Madagascar, I became not only a fan, but also a convert to his own mission to save species from extinction. Imagine my excitement when I actually met my hero some years later! Then to marry him!

On re-reading this book, published 43 years ago, I was struck by a number of things. First, it is a quintessentially Durrell book, with all the charm and style Gerry had become famous for in the dozen books he had already written. Poetic and graceful, amusingly sardonic on occasion, but always affectionate, *Menagerie Manor* is an effortless read. I believe it will still captivate people of all ages and open their eyes to the wonders of the animal kingdom, which is the first step in securing a commitment to wildlife conservation.

Another thing that struck me, because it was so ahead of its time, was Gerry's very clear statement about the threats to the animal kingdom and the role zoos could

## MENAGERIE MANOR

play in mitigating them. Remember, it was written when most conservationists scoffed at the idea that zoos could contribute to the survival of species, and most zoos were no more than mere ‘stamp collections’ of animals, selling entertainment to human beings. Now it is well recognised that zoos have a vital part to play in species conservation, not only by breeding endangered species, but also in the fields of research and professional training in conservation biology. The opportunity they have to educate the public and raise awareness of conservation issues is unmatched. Bona fide zoos worldwide receive more than six hundred million visitors a year.

Gerry was not only prophetic about zoos in general, but he laid out the special path he envisioned for his own institution, which we are still following whole-heartedly today. He spoke of the plight of small and obscure creatures, which may be every bit as conservation-needy as the charismatic mega-vertebrates, such as lions and rhinos, typical of most zoos. He singled out island fauna as exceptionally worthy of attention, given the fragility of island ecosystems and the susceptibility of populations of animals (and plants) on islands to extinction. He declared that the main function of his own ‘zoo’ was to be the restoration of natural populations of animals by breeding the species concerned and returning the offspring to their ancestral homes in the wild. This is much easier said than done, and Gerry and his team pioneered many of the various techniques used today in species restoration.

We do all this and more here in Jersey at the original ‘Menagerie Manor’ and around the world, as Will Masefield, one of the stars on our animal staff, elegantly explains at the end of the book.

## FOREWORD

Gerald Durrell was a prophet, a visionary and a pioneer, as well as a remarkable and well-loved writer, all of which made him an icon of wildlife conservation in the twentieth century. But I think his most valuable role was as a mentor, because he guided and inspired so many people, like Will and myself, to follow a career in conservation and pursue the mission to save species from extinction. Gerry is still a mentor, because his books continue to rally people to the cause. Collectively, we have been dubbed ‘Durrell’s Army’, and we need more recruits! I hope this book inspires you to join us!

*Lee Durrell*

*Jersey, May 2007*



## EXPLANATION

*Dear Sir,*

*We should like to draw your attention to the fact that your account with us is now overdrawn...*

Most children at the tender age of six or so are generally full of the most impractical schemes for becoming policemen, firemen or engine drivers when they grow up, but when I was that age I could not be bothered with such mundane ambitions. I knew exactly what I was going to do: I was going to have my own zoo. At the time this did not seem to me (and still does not seem) a very unreasonable or outrageous ambition. My friends and relatives – who had long thought that I was mental owing to the fact that I evinced no interest in anything that did not have fur, feathers, scales or chitin – accepted this as just another manifestation of my weak state of mind. They felt that, if they ignored my oft-repeated remarks about owning my own zoo, I would eventually grow out of it. As the years passed, however, to the consternation of my friends and relatives, my resolve to have my own zoo grew greater and greater, and eventually, after going on a number of expeditions to bring back animals for other zoos, I felt the time was ripe to acquire my own.

## MENAGERIE MANOR

From my last trip to West Africa I had brought back a considerable collection of animals which were ensconced in my sister's suburban garden in Bournemouth. They were there, I assured her, only temporarily because I was completely convinced that any intelligent council, having a ready-made zoo planted on its doorstep, would do everything in its power to help one by providing a place to keep it. After eighteen months of struggle, I was not so sure of the go-ahead attitude of local councils, and my sister was utterly convinced that her back garden would go on for ever looking like a scene out of one of the more flamboyant Tarzan pictures. At last, bogged down by the constipated mentality of local government and frightened off by the apparently endless rules and regulations under which every free man in Great Britain has to suffer, I decided to investigate the possibility of starting my zoo in the Channel Islands. I was given an introduction to one Major Fraser who, I was assured, was a broad-minded, kindly soul, and would show me round the Island of Jersey and point out suitable sites.

My wife, Jacquie, and I flew to Jersey where we were met by Hugh Fraser who drove us to his family home, probably one of the most beautiful manor houses on the Island: here was a huge walled garden dreaming in the thin sunlight; a great granite wall, thickly planted with waterfalls of rock plants; fifteenth-century arches, tidy lawns and flower-beds brimming over with colour. All the walls, buildings and outhouses were of beautiful Jersey granite which contains all the subtle colourings of a heap of autumn leaves and they glowed in the sunshine and seduced me into making what was probably the silliest remark of the century. Turning to Jacquie, I said:

‘What a marvellous place for a zoo.’

## EXPLANATION

If Hugh Fraser, as my host, had promptly fainted on the spot, I could scarcely have blamed him: in those lovely surroundings the thought of implanting the average person's idea of a zoo (masses of grey cement and steel bars) was almost high treason. To my astonishment Hugh Fraser did not faint but merely cocked an inquiring eyebrow at me and asked whether I really meant what I said. Slightly embarrassed, I replied that I had meant it, but added hastily that I realised it was impossible. Hugh said he did not think it was as impossible as all that. He went on to explain that the house and grounds were too big for him to keep up as a private individual, and so he wanted to move into a smaller place in England. Would I care to consider renting the property for the purpose of establishing my zoo? I could not conceive a more attractive setting for my purpose, and, by the time lunch was over, the bargain had been sealed and I was the new 'Lord' of the Manor of Les Augres in the Parish of Trinity.

The alarm and despondency displayed by all who knew me when I announced this, can be imagined. The only one who seemed relieved by the news was my sister, who pointed out that, although she thought the whole thing was a hare-brained scheme, at least it would rid her back garden of some two hundred assorted denizens of the jungle, which were at that time putting a great strain on her relationship with the neighbours.

To complicate things even more, I did not want a simple straightforward zoo, with the ordinary run of animals: the idea behind my zoo was to aid in the preservation of animal life. All over the world various species are being exterminated or cut down to remnants of their former numbers by the spread of civilisation. Many of the larger species are of commercial or touristic value, and, as such, are receiving the most attention. Yet, scattered about all over the world are a

## MENAGERIE MANOR

host of fascinating small mammals, birds and reptiles, and scant attention is being paid to their preservation, as they are neither edible nor wearable, and of little interest to the tourist who demands lions and rhinos. A great number of these are island fauna, and as such their habitat is small. The slightest interference with this, and they will vanish for ever: the casual introduction of rats, say, or pigs could destroy one of these island species within a year. One has only to remember the sad fate of the dodo to realise this.

The obvious answer to this whole problem is to see that the creature is adequately protected in the wild state so that it does not become extinct, but this is often easier said than done. However, while pressing for this protection, there is another precaution that can be taken, and that is to build up under controlled conditions breeding stocks of these creatures in parks or zoos, so that, should the worst happen and the species become extinct in the wild state, you have, at least, not lost it for ever. Moreover, you have a breeding stock from which you can glean the surplus animals and reintroduce them into their original homes at some future date. This, it has always seemed to me, should be the main function of any zoo, but it is only recently that the majority of zoos have woken up to this fact and tried to do anything about it. I wanted this to be the main function of my zoo. However, like all altruistic ideas, it was going to cost money. It was, therefore, obvious the zoo would have to be run on purely commercial lines to begin with, until it was self-supporting. Then one could start on the real work of the zoo: building up breeding stocks of rare creatures.

So this is the story of our trials and tribulations in taking the first step towards a goal which I think is of great importance.

## CHAPTER ONE

# MENAGERIE MANOR

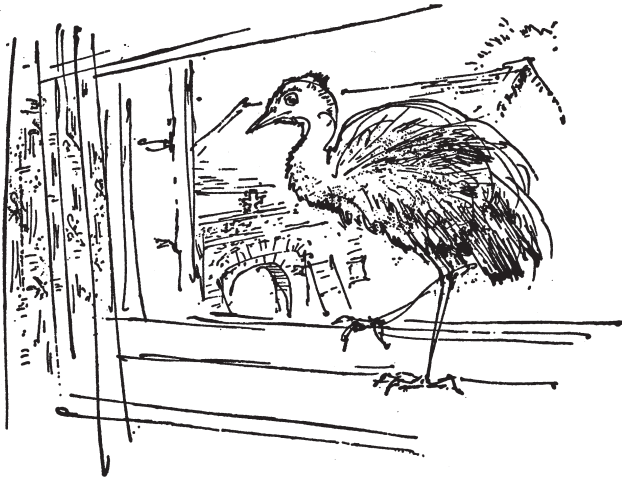
*Dear Mr Durrell,  
I am eighteen years old strong in wind and limb having  
read your books can I have a job in your zoo...*

It is one thing to visit a zoo as an ordinary member of the public but quite another to own a zoo and live in the middle of it: this at times can be a mixed blessing. It certainly enables you to rush out at any hour of the day or night to observe your charges, but it also means that you are on duty 24 hours a day, and you find that a cosy little dinner party disintegrates because some animal has broken its leg, or because the heaters in the Reptile House have failed, or for any one of a dozen reasons. Winter, of course, is your slack period, and sometimes days on end pass without a single visitor in the grounds and you begin to feel that the zoo is really your own private one. The pleasantness of this sensation is more than slightly marred by the alarm with which you view the mounting of your bills and compare them to the lack of gate-money. But in the season the days are so full and the visitors so numerous that you hardly seem to notice the passing of time, and you forget your overdraft.

## MENAGERIE MANOR

The average zoo day begins just before dawn; the sky will be almost imperceptibly tinged with yellow when you are awakened by the bird-song. At first, still half asleep, you wonder whether you are in Jersey or back in the tropics, for you can hear a robin chanting up the sun, and, accompanying it, the rich, fruity, slightly hoarse cries of the touracous. Then a blackbird flutes joyfully, and as the last of his song dies the white-headed jay thrush bursts into an excited, liquid babble. As the sky lightens, this confused and cosmopolitan orchestra gathers momentum, a thrush vies with the loud, imperious shouts of the seriamas, and the witches' cackle from the covey of magpies contrasts with the honking of geese and the delicate, plaintive notes of the diamond doves. Even if you survive this musical onslaught and can drift into a doze again, you are suddenly and rudely awakened by something that resembles the strange, deep vibrating noise that a telegraph pole makes in a high wind. This acts upon you with the same disruptive effect of an alarm clock, for it is the warning that



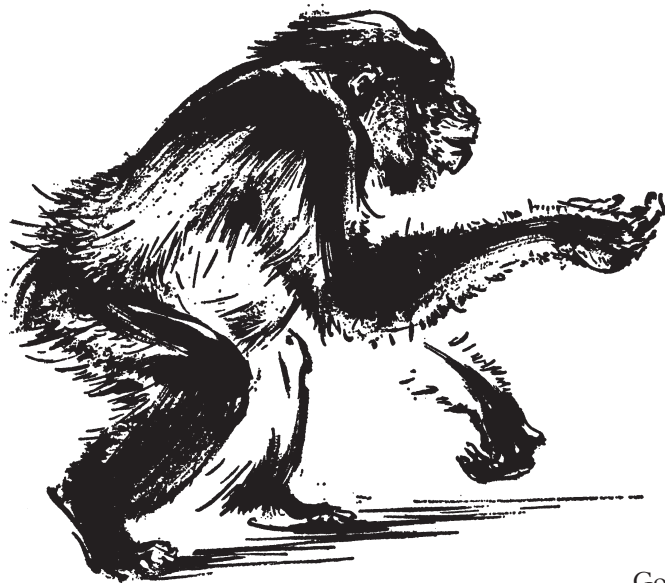


Trumpy has appeared, and if you have been foolish enough to leave your window wide open you have to take immediate, defensive action. Trumpy is a grey-winged trumpeter, known to his more intimate ornithologist friends as *Psophia crepitans*. His function in the Zoo is three-fold – combined guide, settler-in and village idiot. He looks, to be frank, like a badly made chicken, clad in sombre plumage as depressing as Victorian mourning: dark feathers over most of his body and what appears to be a shot-silk cravat at his throat. The whole ensemble is enlivened by a pair of ash-grey wings. He has dark, liquid eyes and a high, domed forehead which argues a brain-power which he does not possess.

Trumpy – for some reason best known to himself – is firmly convinced that his first duty of each day should be to fly into one's bedroom and acquaint one with what has been going on in the Zoo during the night. His motives are not entirely altruistic, for he also hopes to have his head scratched. If you are too deeply asleep – or too lazy – to leap out of bed at his

## MENAGERIE MANOR

greeting cry, he hops from the window-sill on to the dressing-table, decorates it extravagantly, wags his tail vigorously in approval of his action, and then hops on to the bed and proceeds to walk up and down, thrumming like a distraught cello until he is assured that he has your full attention. Before he can produce any more interesting designs on the furniture or carpet, you are forced to crawl out of bed, stalk and catch him (a task fraught with difficulty, since he is so agile and you are so somnambulistic), and push him out on to the window-ledge and close the window so that he cannot force his way in again. Trumpy now having awakened you, you wonder sleepily whether it is worth going back to bed, or whether you should get up. Then from beneath the window will come a series of five or six shrill cries for help, apparently delivered by a very inferior soprano in the process of having her throat



Gorilla

## MENAGERIE MANOR

cut. Looking out into the courtyard, on the velvet-green lawns by the lavender hedge, you can see an earnest group of peahens searching the dewy grass, while around them their husband pirouettes, his shining and burnished tail raised like a fantastic, quivering fountain in the sunlight. Presently he will lower his tail, and, throwing back his head, will deafen the morning with his nerve-shattering cries. At eight o'clock the staff arrive, and you hear them shouting greetings to each other, amid the clank of buckets and the swish of brushes, which all but drowns the bird-song. You slip on your clothes and go out into the cool, fresh morning to see if all is right with the Zoo.

In the long, two-storied granite house – once a large cider press and now converted for monkeys and other mammals – everything is bustle and activity. The gorillas have just been let out of their cage, while it is being cleaned, and they gallop about the floor with the exuberance of children just out of school, endeavouring to pull down the notices, wrench the electric heaters from their sockets or break the fluorescent lights. Stefan, brush in hand, stands guard over the apes, watching with a stern eye, to prevent them from doing more damage than is absolutely necessary. Inside the gorillas' cage Mike, rotund and perpetually smiling, and Jeremy, with his Duke of Wellington nose and his barley-sugar-coloured hair, are busy, sweeping up the mess that the gorillas' tenancy of the previous day entailed and scattering fresh, white sawdust in snowdrifts over the floor. Everything, they assure you, is all right: nothing has developed any malignant symptoms during the night. All the animals, excited and eager at the start of a new day, bustle about their cages and shout 'Good morning' to you. Etam, the black Celebes ape, looking like a satanic imp, clings to the wire, baring his teeth at you in