



THE FLEMISH CUCKOO

Searching for their origin

Text and photos:
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PART I. HISTORY

Preface

Gérard Coquerelle says in his book "La poule, diversité, génétique visible", 2000, p. 146: "... except their colour pattern, most of the European cuckoo breeds have one more thing in common; they all appear along the shores of the North Sea; the Norwegian Fowl, the Scotch Grey, North Holland Blue, the Malines, The Flemish cuckoo, coucou de Picardy, Coucou de Rennes and even the Marans. It is therefore highly likely that the gene/mutation "B" has come to us along the maritime road".

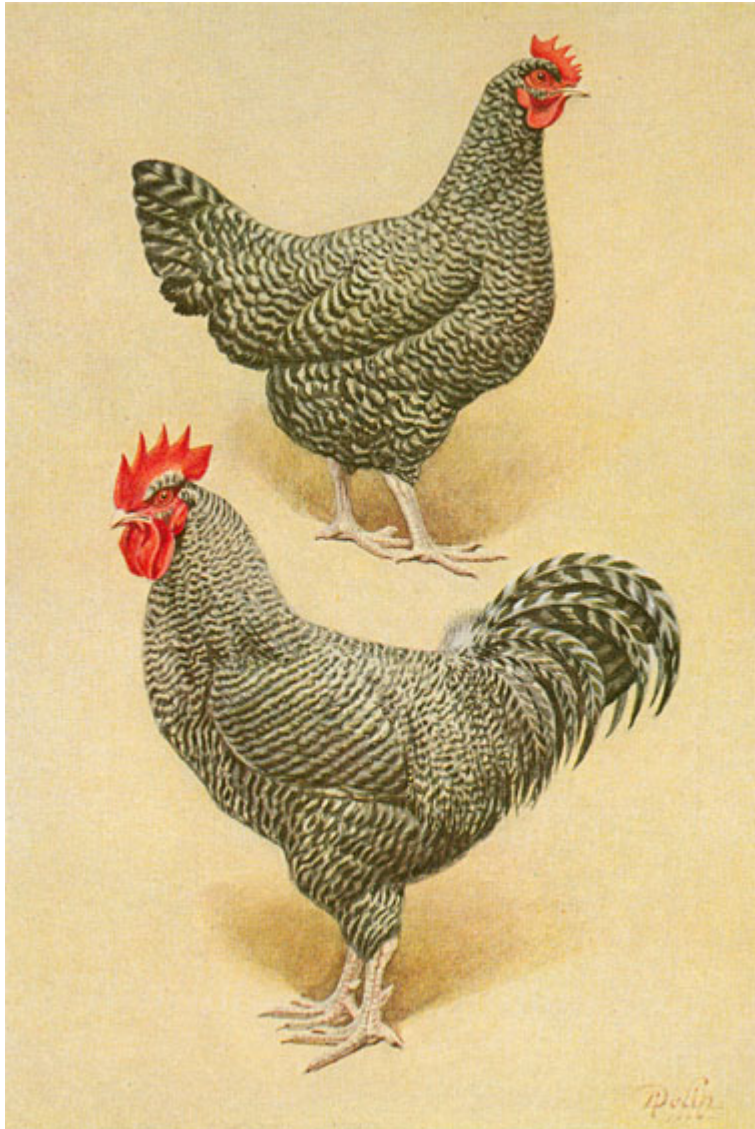
I have not found conclusive proof of this during my long search for the origins of the Cuckoo chickens and in particular the Flemish Cuckoo. We will probably never know for sure because even in scientific articles like this in Poultry Science 2009 - Genetic mapping of the sex-linked barring gene in the chicken - by B. J. Dorshorst and C. M. Ashwell of the Department of Poultry Science, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, we read: "The exact origin of the gene 'B' (*B=barred, or cuckoo. Editor.*) is not known to us."

In my research for original source material it constantly strikes me that facts prove not to be correct. One should be very careful when copying texts used by clubs in which they give their favourite breed a maximized history. An ancient breed is much more interesting to describe as living heritage than a new breed,

so it seems. When researching the cited sources I find that these are often misinterpreted, or they talk about generalities without any evidence, as: “.... There are documents from the 15th century, showing ...” What documents? Where can we find it? In which library or archive?

When I finally can find a proper referred source, for example this one: Monografie des races de poules, ed., 1892, p. 55, then it appears on this page the cited words are not found, but they are cited on page 33, and in a totally different version ...

Names are poorly translated, allusions are misunderstood, in short, one often makes a mess when citing, and tracing the true story will be even more difficult.



Above: Flemish Cuckoo.

Drawing by Rene Delin, from the collection of the Koninklijk Belgisch instituut voor Natuurwetenschappen, in Brussel.

Before the 19th century

After a thorough study of the available source material like this in the archives of Aalst and Oudenaarde and the University Library of Ghent, the National Albert Library in Brussels, the library of the Natural History Museum and the museum of Art and History in Brussels, it is my belief that before 1800 there was virtually no interest in chicken breeds, which does not mean they were not there.

The inevitable inbreeding of chickens resulted in many so-called 'land race chickens'. This explains the naming of chicken breeds to geographical areas or even cities.

In paintings from the 15th and 16th centuries, it is often difficult to recognize the chickens as a purebred, but it is quite clear that one did make a distinction between laying hens and table chickens.



Above: A poultry market, painting by Joachim Beuckelaer, 1570.

In this period one had only interest in large fattened capons of the gamefowl type, since at this time these were the most common large chickens, and the other smaller types were kept for egg laying.

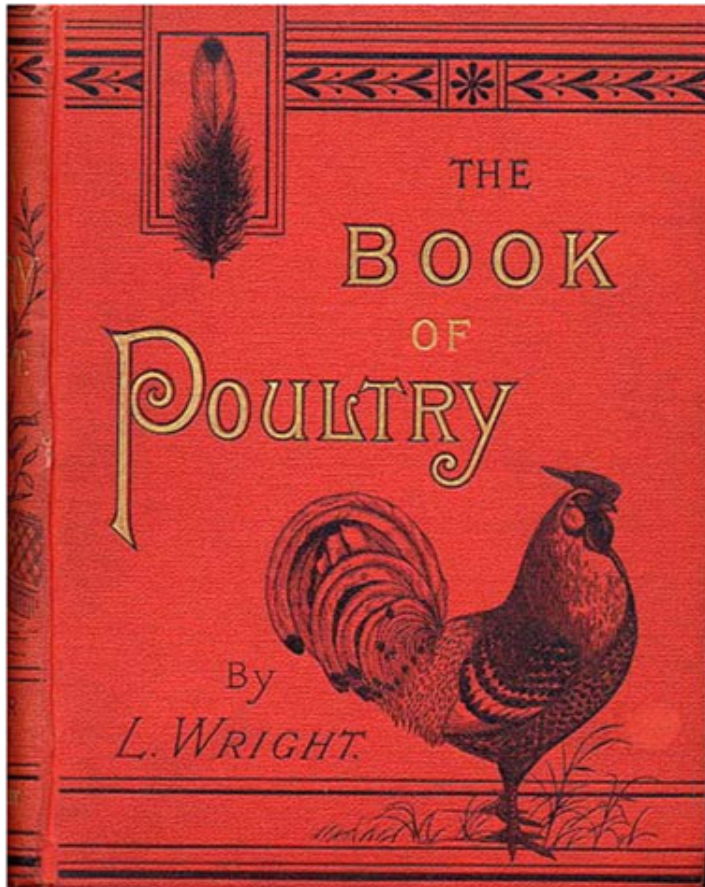
Breeds are not yet mentioned; one refers to the chickens from a certain region. Numerous varieties already exist but then there was no interest maintaining these as a pure bred. There were hardly any standards to which they could breed and every chicken keeper bred to his own liking. Moreover, the ordinary citizen could not afford to keep purebred chicken as a hobby.

During the 16th and 17th century there was a large increase in traditional chicken breeding. The industrial chicken breeding at that time was still non-existent, although attempts had already been made.

Around 1850 still no table fowl or layers are bred for the market, or at best only on a very small scale. In those days, a proverb said "Three hens will feed the farmer but six hens must be fed". Feeding chicken with extra protein-rich grain is expensive. Especially when you cannot get a good price for it on the market (Source: Centre for Agrarian History in Belgium). All activities such as feeding and collecting eggs are done manually. When improved housing and special feeds came on the market, the old breeds turned out not suitable for commercial reproduction and / or laying.

In 1880 the beautifully illustrated book "The Book of Poultry" by Lewis Wright appears, where all the then-known varieties are described often completed with a coloured drawing. This poultry book has been cited in many other articles and books countless times and used as a reference point.

The Mediterranean varieties were then known as layers of many large eggs and they were imported into Belgium on a large scale. In particular the Leghorn, an Italian breed, has contributed greatly to the development of the industrial poultry production and at the same time to the destruction of our ancient native varieties.



Also many cross-breedings with the recently imported Asian breeds (Brahma, Cochin, Langhans) took place.

Left: Book by Lewis Wright.

Below: Brahmans in Wright's Book of Poultry.



Out of this hodgepodge 'new breeds' arose that were kept and bred eagerly because of their amazing utility traits, compared to the 'old' chickens.

Examples are the Malines, the New Hampshire, the North Holland Blue, the Barnevelder and the Welsumer. Especially this cross-breeding for table purposes turned out to be of great economic importance, as the 'new breeds' were hardy and fast growing. Now they had these new breeds, the old habit of caponising the roosters and fatten the capons was no longer needed. One could fatten these new table fowls up to weights of 5 to 6 kg, just like that.

In these years, the breeding and fattening of chickens usually provided an extra income. Still, rearing chickens as a sideline income is higher in Belgium than in any other European country, except maybe for some French departments.

The large egg production centres are located in the provinces of Antwerp, Flanders and Liège and the fattening is practiced in the cities of Malines and Gent, and more southwards in Oudenaarde and Laplaigne. The adaptability of the Belgian breeds is really extraordinary. There is no other country in the world with as much poultry as in the densely populated Belgium 1900.

Looking for the Flemish cuckoo

In *Chasse et Pêche* (a magazine published between 1882 and 1935, which was a display window for the then poultry-keeping) printed on 29-11-1908 is a standard description for 'Malines with clean legs' (standard de la Maline a pattes lisses) followed on 3-01-1909 by the standard for the Flemish cuckoo, which is

clearly describing a different type of chicken. This makes it very confusing because the Flemish cuckoo is often referred to as the Malines with clean legs. More explanation is found in *Chasse et Pêche*, issue 52, dated 22-09-1889, on page 525:

(Translated) "The Malines or 'poulet de Bruxelles' is the result of a cross between Cochin and/or Brahma with the common cuckoo landfowl."

Thus, the Malines is a hybrid that became a breed. The old type of Malines (which is indeed the Flemish cuckoo) is probably the same fowl as the Scotch Grey or Scottish cuckoo still is. Around 1859 -1860 Antwerp Zoo was breeding large amounts of Brahma breed in the columbia variety (light Brahmas). During that time they had a single comb – like they still exist in France. Between the Brahmas bred in the zoo, there were many unicolour whites and they had pink legs. We assume that these were the first to be used for the improvement of the original Malines (Flemish cuckoo).

In issue 9 of *Chasse et Pêche*, 1/12/1889 on page 82 is written:

"We assume that the Scotch Grey is the same as the old Malines, that was abandoned in Belgium on the arrival of the Asiatic chickens and was bred back in England and Scotland for participating in poultry exhibitions".

The same is stated in 'The Farm Poultry' - an American weekly magazine from 1897: "The origin of the Malines is in the old Scotch Grey."

(To be continued in the August issue)



Merchtem. — Départ du Paysan pour le Marché. — Vertrek van den Boer naar de Markt. T. B. B.

Above: Merchtem. A poultry farmer leaves for the market.

Photo: Académie Royale de Belgique, collection Gemeentekrediet/Dexia – www.HetVirtueleLand.be, Centrum Agrarische Geschiedenis.

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This is a publication by the online magazine www.aviculture-europe.nl

English edition ISSN: 2352-2445

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