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Russell Aitken -- artist and hunter

Douglas Martin, New York Times

Saturday, August 31, 2002

Russell Barnett Aitken, an artist, expert marksman, big-game hunter and adventure writer whose substantial philanthropy reflected his passions for art and sport, died Aug. 11 at his home in Newport, R.I. He was 92.

His wife, Irene, said he suffered from Parkinson's disease for more than 16 years. He also had a home in Manhattan.

At the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where he was an honorary trustee for 10 years, two rooms of armor are named for him. At the Bronx Zoo, the seabird colony built in 1995 to replace an aviary destroyed in a storm is also named for him.

An avid conservationist, he was an early and generous benefactor of the World Wildlife Fund and the National Audubon Society. Mr. Aitken represented a throwback to a time when famous people had time to relax together. In competition in the 1940s, he was best skeet shooter in the nation and shot socially with Bernard Baruch and Clare Booth Luce. The society columns chronicled his expeditions, including his seven-month safari to Africa in 1947.

He was born on Jan. 20, 1910, in Cleveland. He almost died from spinal meningitis at 9, and partly to aid his recovery, his family bought a farm where he could hunt, fish and trap.

He graduated from the Cleveland Institute of Art as valedictorian in 1931 and received a journalism degree from Case Western Reserve University the same year. Early in his career, he worked with the ceramist R. Guy Cowan, later setting up his own studios in Cleveland; White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., and Manhattan. His work was shown at leading Manhattan galleries and at the Neue Galerie in Vienna. A Surrealist sculpture he made in 1935 is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In 1939, he was commissioned to do a mural for the New York World's Fair.

In World War II, Mr. Aitken served in the Army Air Force, teaching pursuit pilots and gunners to shoot. His uncanny marksmanship played a large part in his life after the war. In 1949, he was "High Gun," meaning he was the best skeet shooter in the United States. He went on to win major contests shooting live pigeons, a more difficult feat. He bagged the biggest water buffalo ever documented.

He was an associate editor of Field & Stream from 1948 to 1952 and wrote more than 300 articles for it and other sporting publications. He wrote a book,

"Great Game Animals of the World" (Macmillan, 1969).

His first wife, Annie Laurie Crawford, died in 1984. Her daughter from a previous marriage,

Martha Auersperg von Bulow, is in a coma and is divorced from Claus von Bulow, whose conviction for trying to kill her was reversed on appeal.

His wife Irene, his only survivor, is also the widow of John A. Roosevelt, the youngest son of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Mr. Aitken's sporting interests extended from buying a duck decoy in 1986 for \$319,000, then a record price, to building an elegant croquet court at Champ Soleil, his Versailles-style chateau in Newport.

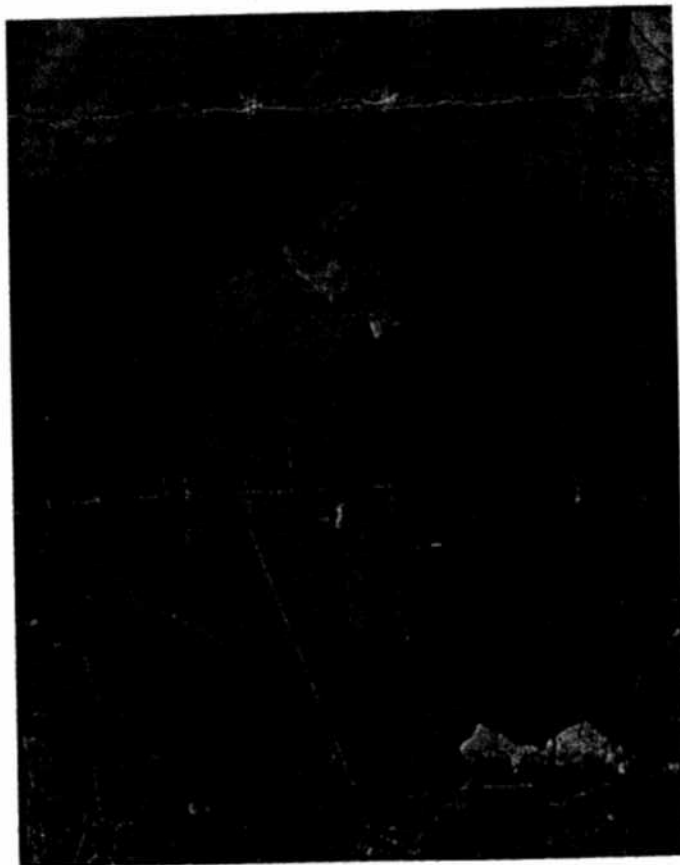
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Robert Churchill (1886-1958), who introduced the 25in. barrell'd gun and was gunmaker to King Edward VIII

Annie Laurie Crawford Aitken, was a prize winning sculptress and patron of the arts. She was a superb wing shot and winner of many cups at live pigeon shooting in the United States and Europe. In her first year of competition in the Ladies World Championship at Seville, Spain in 1959 she out-shot all the great Spanish contestants and shot off against an American veteran Dolly Isetts, to win the number two spot. The following year at Milan, Italy she out-shot all the Italian women, including their number one, Princess Ruspoli, and ended up competing against Madam Pigeon for the Championship of the World. In the same year at Monte Carlo, she shot against the best male shooters and finished eighth in the Prix de la Côte d' Azure, two places ahead of the professional Callistani, who had twice won the Championship of the World. A.L.C. and Russell Aitken were married in 1957. She died in 1984.



Annie Laurie Crawford Aitken ~~1959-1984~~

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Premiere
Churchill ~~Premium~~ Grade, pair former property of Anne Laurie Crawford and her husband Russell Aitken. A.L. Crawford's daughter Martha (Sunny), ^{from a previous marriage} is the wife of Claus von Bulow, who ^{reportedly} supposedly poisoned her and put her in a permanent coma. This drama lead to a Hollywood Oscar for Jeremy Irons as Claus von Bulow in the movie, "A Reversal of Fortune."

A fine pair of 12 Bore "Special Repeating Trigger" self-opening *Premiere* XXV sidelock ~~Elector~~ ^{ejector} guns by E.J. Churchill. No. '5 ~~356~~ ⁵³⁵⁵. A pair of only six or seven guns made by Churchill with repeating triggers.

Smith-System self-opening action, double rolled edge trigger guards, best foliate-scroll engraving with full ^{CASE} hardening color and blueing, well figured stocks of 14 $\frac{3}{8}$ ", 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 2". Chopper-lump barrels with filed Churchill-ribs and scroll-engraved breech-ends, the trigger guards, each with gold inlaid monogram "ALC". The rear of ribs, the forend tips and the toplevers each inlaid with a gold game bird.

MOD Weight (No. 1) 5 lbs. 13 oz (No. 2) 5 lbs. 14 oz, twenty-five inch barrels, choke (No. 1) $\frac{1}{4}$ and ^{.019 .019 .033} $\frac{3}{8}$ (No. 2) $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{3}{4}$ chambers 2 $\frac{5}{8}$ " and 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ " original nitro proof in their leather 'V.C.' case. ^{.09 IC get dimension}
MOD Full

Built in 1936 for Annie Laurie Crawford (N.Y.C.) Gold engraved ^{grouse} grouse (No. 1) and Gold engraved ^{pigeon} quail (No. 2). Label in the case reads, "Special repeating trigger mechanism - the stud behind the rear trigger controls the mechanism. A slight pressure on the stud from the lefthand side will push it over to the right and in that position the gun can be used as a single trigger, the front trigger will fire right - left and rear trigger left right. To cut out the single trigger push the stud from right to left. The gun can be used as a double trigger, whatever the position of the stud." The guns have been used very little.

The guns were made in 1936 when Annie Laurie Crawford was shooting grouse at Skibo Castle. The former property of Andrew Carneige. Robert Churchill supervised the making of the guns himself and this is mentioned in the Churchill correspondence.