

## 19<sup>th</sup> Century literary non-fiction

### Source B

This 1879 letter in response to an article about carrier pigeons is from a doctor who uses pigeons as part of his daily work and seeks to bring these birds to the attention of more people.

### Carrier Pigeons

Sir, – With reference to your article of the 25<sup>th</sup>, upon the possible services which might be rendered mankind by the carrier pigeon, permit me to say that since I have been practising in the country I have made valuable use of the carrier or homing pigeon as an auxiliary\* to my practice. So easily are these winged “unqualified assistants” reared and trained that I am surprised they have not been brought into general use by the profession I belong to. My “modus operandi”\* is simply this. I take out half a dozen birds, massed together in a small basket with me on my rounds, and when I have seen my patient, no matter at what distance from home, I write my prescription on a small piece of tissue paper, and having wound it round the shank of the bird’s leg I gently throw the carrier up into the air. In a few minutes it reaches home, and, having been kept shut up fasting since the previous evening, without much delay it enters the trap-cage connected with its loft, where it is at once caught by my gardener or dispenser, who knows pretty well the time for its arrival, and relieves it of its despatches\*. The medicine is immediately prepared and sent off by the messenger, who is thus saved several hours of waiting, and I am enabled to complete my morning round of visits. Should my patient be very ill, and I am desirous of having an early report of him or her next morning, I leave the bird to bring me the tidings. A short time since I took out with me six pairs of birds. I sent a pair of them off from each village I had occasion to visit, every other one bearing a prescription. Upon my return I found all the prescriptions arranged on my desk by my dispenser, who had already made up the medicines. I should like to see a more intelligent interest taken in these winged messengers by the general public. There appears to be a settled belief in people’s mind that homing pigeons fly by faith, and not by sight. Each bird must be trained a few miles at a time, away from its home, to ensure its inevitable return to headquarters. A good bird can, of course, be trained to return to its loft from a distance of 500 miles, but it will steer its course, piloted by its wondrously beautiful eyes, from point to point, of course the most salient ones in the landscape, with which it has become familiarised in its training by successive stages. The pigeon would long since have been used for bringing messages from the sea, but there being no fixed objects to catch its eye, although eager to return home, it has not the courage to launch itself from the ship over the trackless ocean, and will hover round and round, and last probably “perish in the waters.”

– I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

HARVEY J. PHILPOT, L.R.C.P.\*

Cirencester, Sept. 26.

## Glossary

- \* auxiliary – providing additional help or support, can be used to refer to soldiers
- \* “modus operandi” – particular way of going about one’s task; a Latin phrase (literally “mode of working”) that has been adopted into English
- \* despatches – written messages sent with speed, often from an officer in the army
- \* L.R.C.P. – abbreviation for Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians (of England)

### **Sample Paper 2 Section A Question 3:**

**03** You now need to refer only to **Source B** from **lines 6 to 19**.

How does the writer use language to describe his system for using pigeons?

**[12 marks]**

This letter is from *The Aberdare Times* (4<sup>th</sup> October 1879) where it was reprinted from the *Daily Telegraph*. The full text can be found online at <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3025160/3025163/26/pigeons>.

This resource was found by using the free [Welsh Newspapers Online](#) website created and maintained by Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru – The National Library of Wales.

This resource is brought to you by Dr Catherine Charlwood, a former teacher, lifelong scholar and co-host of [LitSciPod: The Literature and Science Podcast](#). If you have questions, she can be contacted at [catherine.charlwood@cantab.net](mailto:catherine.charlwood@cantab.net).