

## THE ARTS: BOOKS

# AFRICA'S KILLING FIELDS

**BIG GAME HUNTERS AND EXPLORERS ALTERED AFRICA FOREVER. TREVOR ROYLE ASSESSES PETER BEARD'S CHRONICLING OF THEIR COLONIAL EXPLOITS**

**D**AWN, the best time, when it's good to be alive. The air is still fresh from the cool of recently departed night, a glisk of dew covers the ground and stretching into the distance the red road offers limitless possibilities. The sun also rises.

On cue, a convoy of Land Rovers coughs into action and we clamber aboard, glad of the chance to be on the move because, despite the burgeoning sun, there's a chill on the soft breeze. At intervals, we stop to allow a tracker to examine the first droppings from the beasts we are following. If our luck is in, we might even see one of the big cats that are on the move in those precious hours between dawn and the heat of noon. If not, the bush is still rich with game from comical zebras to shy antelopes as well as a veritable air force of exotic birds and fowl.

During the 1990s, I was a frequent visitor to Africa while researching and writing a history of the end of the European empire and visiting a game park was as good a way as any of winding down at the end of an assignment. On one level, it was quite corny, a ticking of boxes (been there, done that), but on another level it offered a glimpse into that long-lost colonial past. The bungalows with their big eaves and teak furniture were redolent of another age, as were the waiters with their crisp khaki shorts and the sundowners they served once the sun had slipped under the yardarm. At night we sat beneath the bowl of the heavens, the stars flashing like diamonds.

Today, most people who track animals in Africa carry nothing more lethal than a telephoto lens, but in the heyday of Empire they would have been toting a weapon like a Holland and Holland double ejector or a Nitro Express built by Alexander Henry of Edinburgh. Any beasts that strayed into their sights would have been despatched ruthlessly, and usually efficiently. They were known as big-game hunters, or more self-consciously as big shots, and as the American conservationist and photographer Peter Beard put it, "equipped with a child's dreams and a man's courage", they were also "the advance scouts of the Western World".

Those men and women were not just big shots, they were also integral to the colonial process in Africa and their influence can still be felt to this day. Before they arrived, Africans hunted game for food or killed wild animals for protection, herds

were driven from one place to another and there was a natural harmony to their movements. All that was changed by the Europeans who arrived with high-powered weapons and a tireless desire to test themselves against a wide range of animals – the speed and élan of the wildebeest, the lumbering threat of the elephant or the cunning and potential ferocity of a hunting lion.

They were a diverse bunch. Although a fair number of big shots killed only for pleasure and saw nothing wrong with slaughtering beasts in a mechanical sort of way, many of them were also naturalists, conservators and explorers who added to our knowledge of this mysterious continent. They believed that Africa was so replete with wildlife and so abundant and infinite in its variety that the game would go on for ever. Only later in life did they come to realise that they might just have been wrong. Take the example of William Cotton Oswell, the model for the character Young Brooke in the novel *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, who recorded his experiences as a big game hunter in Africa in the middle of the 19th century and in so doing provided later generations with a fascinating glimpse into a long-lost world. Writing in old age – he died in 1893 – Oswell was also remarkably prescient about what he had done and about what he should perhaps not have done.

"I am sorry now for all the fine old beasts I have killed but I was young then and there was an excitement in the work and I had large numbers of men to feed ... Every animal save three elephants was eaten by man and put to good use ... But I am writing of close upon 60 years ago. Africa is nearly used

### 'A game control officer casually noted that in a single shoot 996 rhinos had been killed'

up. She belongs no more to the Africans and the beasts: Boers, gold-seekers, diamond-miners and experimental farmers (all of them from my point of view mistakes) have changed the face of her."

Oswell considered himself to be a sportsman in that he respected his prey and took care to despatch them as humanely as possible, but there were others who shot indiscriminately or failed



to kill with a well-placed shot. In 1908 JA Hunter, a game control officer working on the Mombasa railway, casually noted in his diary that in a single shoot 996 rhinos had been killed. Trophy-ism also played a part. Shooters would pay good money to get a handsome head or an elephant-foot wastepaper basket, and slowly but surely some big shots became professional big-game hunters.

They were big shots in other ways too. The Happy Valley area of Kenya became infamous for the sexual shenanigans and wife-swapping that led not just to incontinence, but also to murder, as in the case of the death of the cuckolded Earl of Errol in 1941, immortalised in the movie *White Mischief*. Even today a snigger can be raised by the question: "Are you married or do you live in Kenya?"

Inevitably, too, the racy backdrop and the sheer enormity of the continent attracted the attention of writers who could handle a typewriter as easily as a Steyr-Mannlicher full-stock hunting rifle. Think of Karen Blixen (pen name Isak Dinesen) and her lover Denys Finch-Hatton (played by Robert Redford in the movie *Out of Africa*), or the granddaddy of them all Ernest Hemingway, whose *Green Hills of Africa* records the primal thrill he felt while out on safari. Added to the boxing and



**Hunter Reggie Destro, right, and famous photographer Arnold Newman with a collection of wild animal trophies in the countryside outside Nairobi in Kenya c.1960**

**Photograph: Slim Aarons/Getty**

the bull-running it all helped to produce the hard-boiled style that suffuses most of his work.

And yet, all those pleasures, innocent or not, attracted a heavy price. As man moved in to the wilderness the animals moved out to territory that was not of their liking. Worse, the natural balance was removed. By the 1970s 30,000 elephants were living in the crowded confines of Tsavo Park in the Aberdares in Kenya, and those that did not succumb to the poachers' fell victim to that oldest of killers, lack of food and water.

In 1965 Peter Beard showed what was happening in a succession of heart-rending photographs and offered the stark warning: "This is the shadow of the end – the end of nature's processes, patterns, cycles, balances: all equilibrium and harmony destroyed. As boundaries are declared with walls and ditches, and cement suffocates the land, the great herds of the past become concentrated in new and strange habitats. Densities rise, the habitats are diminished, and the land itself begins to die." Almost half a century later that message has still not been heeded.

*The End Of The Game: The Last Word From Paradise* by Peter Beard is published by Taschen at £24.99