

# BLIGHT OF THE HUNTER

Peter Beard's photographs record the heyday of the African safari

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THE END OF THE GAME: THE LAST WORD FROM PARADISE BY PETER BEARD, FOREWORD BY PAUL THEROUX LOS ANGELES: TASCHEN. 288 PAGES. \$40.

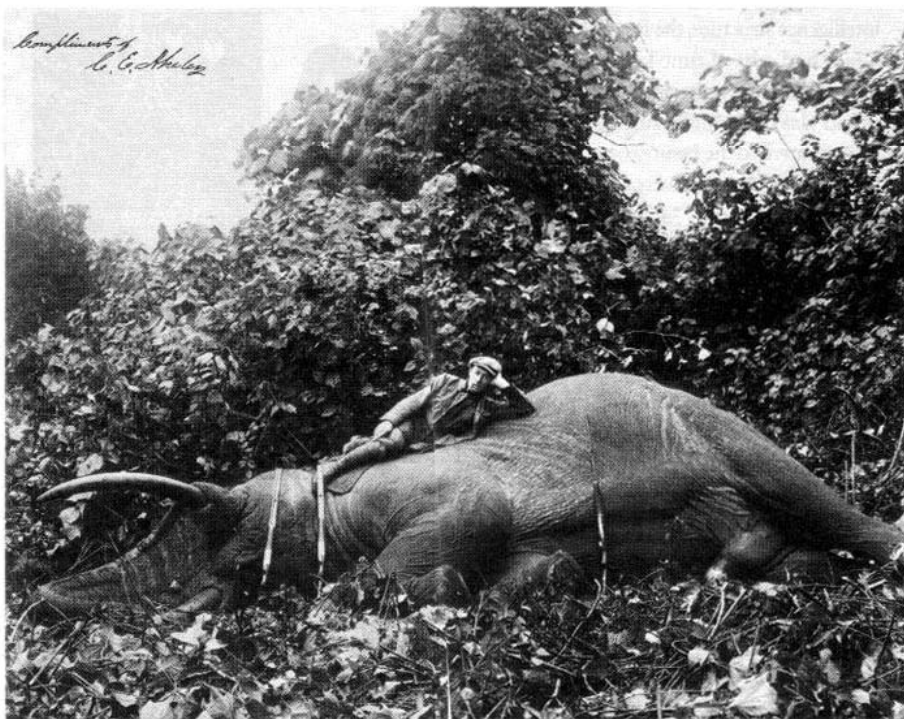
The focus of Peter Beard's unforgettably illustrated *The End of the Game* is the damage done by big-game hunting and the incursion of railways to wildlife and indigenous culture in early-twentieth-century Kenya. "The deeper [the white man] went into Africa," Beard writes, "the faster the life flowed out of it, off the plains and out of the bush and into the cities, vanishing in acres of trophies and hides and carcasses." This is very well put, but Beard's chosen generation of white settlers was not wholly responsible, instead merely accelerating a process that had started centuries earlier, when Europeans and Arabs first brought guns to Africa.

The history of this destruction actually stretches back to around 1700, when the Dutch were selling twenty thousand tons of gunpowder annually along the West African coast. A century earlier, the Portuguese had brought firearms to the Zambezi basin, harming man and beast. Only malaria and obstructions along the river saved the far interior from similar violence. In 1851, David Livingstone, standing on the banks of the Zambezi in the heart of Africa, was shocked to encounter the Mambari—half-Portuguese, half-African traders—who bought ivory (and slaves to carry it) from local tribes and paid with guns. Twenty years later, the slave and ivory trade had spread to the Congo, and in 1883, Henry Stanley discovered two thousand Arabs on the river, with twenty-three hundred slaves and many tons of ivory. By then, half a million people were being displaced or enslaved in central Africa each year. Much of the dark continent had ceased to be an earthly paradise long before Kenya was settled.

In 1961, after two visits to Africa, Beard traveled to Denmark to meet Karen Blixen (aka Isak Dinesen), his literary idol. Already a talented photographer at twenty-three, he took remarkable pictures of the emaciated, seventy-six-year-old author of *Out of Africa*. From this meeting sprang *The End of the Game*. (Published in 1965, it would be reissued three more times, the most

recent being this year.) Blixen helped shape the book, which contains, along with scores of Beard's outstanding wildlife photographs, many pictures of Blixen, her family, and her friends. Probably thanks to her, Beard was welcomed in Kenya by survivors of her elite band, who had gone out fifty years earlier as settlers, engineers, hunters, and colonial officials and had completed the exploration, mapping, and settlement of the new colony. Yet Beard's attitude toward them was ambivalent. "No one dreamed," he wrote, "that the game could ever be depleted by a handful of immigrants with

that of privileged sportsmen"—though "privileged" he certainly was. Beard approvingly quotes Roosevelt's contention that a sentimental attitude toward wildlife leads to its extinction, when protected numbers increase enough to threaten farmers. But in truth, it was the enjoyment of killing big game that motivated Roosevelt, Blixen, and her friends to hunt, rather than any laudable desire to bring animal populations into balance with human land users. (Men photographed beside fallen beasts have never convinced me as conservationists.) Blixen's memorable description in *Out of*



maps and gun powder, however immoderate they might be." But while he disapproved of excessive game tallies, he also admired these straight-shooting, hard-living men who had made the bush their home.

As a multimillionaire (thanks to inherited railroad and tobacco money), Beard was able to plan his 1961 safari along the lavish lines of Teddy Roosevelt's famous 1909 hunting expedition. He aimed to take "neither the side of tearful conservationists nor

*Africa* of shooting lions with her lover, Denys Finch-Hatton, throbs with pleasure. Finch-Hatton killed a lioness and handed her his rifle to kill the lion. "The shot," she wrote (meaning hers), "was a declaration of love. . . . As I shot, it seemed to me that the lion jumped straight up in the air. . . . I stood panting in the grass, aglow with the plenipotence that a shot gives you. . . . My heart was as light as if I had been flying it." In reality, Finch-Hatton shot both lions, and Blixen's

participation was artistic embroidery, but the “plenipotence” she describes is the thrill that draws most hunters. When Finch-Hatton wanted to shoot less and photograph more, Blixen remarked she did not “see eye to eye with the camera”; photography was only “a pleasant platonic affair.”

Beard, too, offers many marvelous safari anecdotes, such as the tense and tragic tale of how George Grey, the British foreign secretary’s brother, in the company of some of Kenya’s finest shots, was fatally mauled by a lion. On being dragged out from under the animal, he said very clearly, through lacerated lips, that he alone was to blame for what had happened. The same quietly heroic spirit was in evidence when Colonel John Patterson, the chief engineer on the Mombassa-Uganda railroad, took responsibility for tracking and shooting two man-eating lions that had killed dozens of his workers. The construction of the “Lunatic Line,” so called because of its hair-raising gradients, is engagingly related, with Beard fairly characterizing British motives for building the railroad as “a peculiar mixture of altruism, practicality, and political expediency.”

He also writes well about famous hunters, including the aptly named John A. Hunter, who culled some thousand rhinos in two years for the government and ironically ended up as a game warden and conservationist. An old friend of Blixen’s, he had retrieved her lover’s body from his crashed plane. Beard’s photograph of Hunter is eloquent: the leathery skin, craggy features, stubby chin, lips set firm, though very slightly smiling, and sad, deeply reflective eyes. Not only was he a few years from death in this image, but the end of white Kenya was also fast approaching.

In 1962, Beard had the good fortune to meet another giant of the settler community, Ewart S. Grogan, who, at twenty-four, became the first man to walk from Cairo to the Cape, having escorted Cecil Rhodes, a few years earlier, to his meeting with the Matabele chiefs to negotiate the end of their 1896 “uprising.” He also represented the settlers in their early struggles with the Colonial Office. Now, two years ahead of Kenyan independence, he told Beard he doubted whether he had made any lasting contribution to the country. In response, Beard quotes Blixen’s haunting plaint in *Out of Africa*: “If I know a song of Africa—of the Giraffe, and the new moon . . . of the ploughs . . . and the sweaty faces of the coffee pickers, does Africa know a song of me? Would the air over the plain quiver with a colour I had had on, or the children invent a game in which my name was?” Blixen told Beard she was deeply

moved by his book, which she described as “your epitaph, or monument, over the Old Africa.” This aspect of it moved me, too.

Unfortunately, after the 1977 edition appeared, *The End of the Game* would be known less for its core content than for its forty pages of pictures of elephant carcasses and bones. These images, taken by Beard from the air, capture the catastrophic elephant die-off of 1970–71 at Tsavo National Park. They were added to the book without any information about the number of deaths or about what had happened at Tsavo in the ensuing years. Even the afterword to the 1988 edition is confusing and low on facts. (This new version was printed unchanged.) The emotional impact of these pictures is immense, giving an apocalyptic feel to the whole volume, which is at odds with the mood of its best chapters.

Beard was farsighted enough to understand in 1963 that elephant numbers would rise in fenced reserves, causing many to starve as they destroyed their own habitat—especially in places like Tsavo where rainfall is low. By 1970, loss of reserve land through increased pressure by humans had compressed some forty-five thousand elephants into an area able to sustain only half that number. Up to nine thousand elephants starved to death. Yet today, I understand there are about eleven thousand elephants in the park, and the trees and vegetation have long since recovered. There seems to be evidence that elephant fertility drops naturally over the years in response to poor food supplies. Yet having survived overpopulation and poaching, Tsavo now hosts illicit mining and cattle herding, but Beard doesn’t mention any of this or offer an update on the prospects for Africa’s wildlife. (The many American and European big-game websites advertising safaris on which hunters can kill endangered animals are not encouraging.) But all this notwithstanding, *The End of the Game* contains, along with many outstanding photographs, a haunting account of those adventurous, but culturally destructive, decades, when the Lunatic Line crept across the savannah and Karen Blixen dreamed of love and literature on her farm in the Ngong Hills. □

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