

Donald Anderson, with Joshua Mathew. *The Last White Hunter: Reminiscences of a Colonial Shikari*. Mumbai: Indus Source Books. 2018. 265 pp. Hardcover. ISBN 987-93-85509-12-4. INR 650.

***The Last White Hunter:
Reminiscences of a Colonial Shikari***

The Last White Hunter is the memoir of Donald Anderson (1934–2014), a lifelong resident of Bengaluru (formerly Bangalore) who chose to stay after India's independence. Best known as the son of Kenneth Anderson, an internationally-recognised sportsman and popular author, Donald Anderson emerges not only as a figure to compare and contrast with his father, but as an unlikely moral successor to that other giant of colonial *shikar*, Jim Corbett.¹ At the same time, Anderson's nostalgia and self-criticism offer few solutions for our modern woes, and his critiques of modernity have been heard before.

Anderson, as his co-author Joshua Mathew states in an epilogue, was a paradox. By his own admission, a selfish man who shrewdly chose friends and lovers for their willingness to fulfill his desires with minimal returns, Anderson felt his solitude keenly in old age and struggled to answer whether or not he regretted causing so much pain and taking so many lives. The question first appears in the introduction, but the author gives no answer there. The chapters that follow offer sustained equivocation on the issue. In the end, it is Mathew who answers on Anderson's behalf in the epilogue. He believes Anderson did regret his actions.

Indeed, ghosts, unsettling omens, and Anderson's macabre fascination with (and defiance of) death suffuse his memoir, doubling as literary tropes and narrative. A trio of elephants portend his father's death, ghostly blood spatter marks Anderson's own struggle with fate, and the author's repeated conviction that he would surely die by wild elephant, produce an undertone of unease. Judgement looms, and Anderson seemingly accepts his due by being careless with his own life. After he charged a tiger despite being unarmed, hired guides in the Nilgiris refused to work with him. A *dorai* (master) taking so little care of himself could get his men in trouble, too. Many colonial *shikar* memoirs include tales of Indian huntsmen mauled to death; Anderson's is no exception.

The Last White Hunter is billed as Anderson's own memoir. What precisely then, readers may wonder, was Mathew's role? The epilogue explains how Mathew met Anderson, and with a group of like-minded friends began recording his stories, taking him back into the jungle, tending him in the hospital, and helping cover his bills. Is the book a transcription of those recordings and other conversations, or did Anderson put pen to paper? Presumably Mathew edited Anderson's prose at the very least. Did he also polish the author's rough edges, consciously

or unconsciously, to make Anderson more palatable? Did he pick which stories to include? Is he responsible for the fine literary web that transforms Anderson's succession of stories into a cohesive book?

The Last White Hunter is accessible to, and suitable for, a wide readership. It will appeal to fans of *shikar* stories, and particularly to readers familiar with the author's celebrated father. Indeed, the younger Anderson gamely reminisces about trackers, companions, and hunting grounds made famous in his father's oeuvre, adding further dimension to these much-loved episodes. He identifies several of his father's old haunts—now much altered—and engagingly illustrates Kenneth Anderson's defining characteristics. Where else are we to learn that the man hoarded Model T engines and was wont to sleep with a pet bandicoot?

I would particularly recommend *The Last White Hunter* to fans of Jim Corbett, the most famous of India's colonial *shikar* authors, for a careful study in contrasts and comparisons. Even as Corbett occasionally drank milk offered by local villagers (so as not to offend them) and regularly stalked tigers on foot, he shot from a metaphorical ivory tower of cultivated patriarchal discipline, masterful self-restraint, and god-like superiority. His psychologically taut pursuit of man-eaters and nasty habit of sexualising the "shapely" remains and trailing black hair of dismembered village women is unlike anything found in Donald Anderson's prose. Anderson's approach to wildlife, the hunt, and women is far more direct. There is little evidence here of the self-exculpatory fantasies of the "great" white hunter, rather an acknowledged paradox of hedonistic pleasure and growing awareness of suffering caused in the name of self-fulfillment.

Unlike Corbett, Anderson is open about his comparatively unrestrained sexuality—he sleeps with women young and old, Indian, English, and Anglo-Indian alike. While he very likely abused his power to get sex—for example, as a top-level manager he habitually coupled with subordinates in a supply closet—at least his "no bar" attitude towards potential partners led him to focus on the living. Corbett, in contrast, seems to have been so uncomfortable with his own desires that he could only hint at them once all chance of consummation (one sincerely hopes) had passed, i.e., when an Indian woman lay dead at his feet. Sorry, Jim Corbett fans, but I'm with the Matt Cartmills and Carol J. Adams of the world on this one.²

Besides the *shikar* crowd, anyone curious about late colonial Anglo-Indian childhood, humorous stories about sexual awakening and coming-of-age experiences, or the post-colonial lives of Anglo-Indians who stayed in India, would be natural audiences for this book. Conservation biologists,

environmental historians, and related academics will discover no new theses explaining post-colonial degradation of forests and wildlife in Anderson's book, but will be compensated with plenty of new anecdotes and local detail. Finally, anyone interested in the development of Bengaluru and its hinterlands over the last century should find much to entertain and inform them.

The Last White Hunter has a companion website: <https://www.thelastwhitehunter.com>. Here, one can view additional photographs keyed to the appropriate book chapters, screen a selection of home videos, and read blog entries submitted by Kenneth and Donald Anderson enthusiasts from around the world. There is much raw material to digest, but the tab on "Shikar in Colonial India" provides too little information—only Jim Corbett and Kenneth Anderson make the cut. Rather than reifying the preeminence of Anglo-Indian exploits and sporting codes alone, the contributions of other major actors, ranging from poachers and tourists through professional huntsmen and Indian princes, ought to be acknowledged. The only other thing missing is a clip from the film *Sholay* (1975)—see chapter three for an explanation.

The Last White Hunter presents a familiar explanation for post-colonial environmental change—*shikar* is not to blame for environmental devastation and the loss of wildlife. Rather, sportsmen maintained ecosystem balance by culling excess stock and eliminating specific rogue animals, and in the early days these "penitent butchers" were the only ones sufficiently invested and knowledgeable to successfully develop and enforce conservationism. While scholars are still working to thoroughly document the myriad causes and the exact progression of early twentieth century and postcolonial environmental change in India, Anderson is certain where the blame lies. Farmers poisoned carcasses to kill tigers and leopards and in doing so killed off jackals, vultures, and other scavengers. Poachers used dynamite to kill *en masse* and indiscriminately. Quarries proliferated without check, and woodlands were cleared and ultimately swallowed whole by expanding cities. While paradoxically making it ever easier to crowd into nature (or crowd it out) for a picnic, technology divided people from the jungle. It quickened the pace of life and eroded our capacity for hard work, so that we no longer engage with the world to learn our life lessons, but instead—in Anderson's parlance—"Googly" it on the computer and get our answers without really learning or experiencing anything. It is not just nature that has suffered over the course of the twentieth century, Anderson asserts, but society as a whole.

But if Anderson's prescription is to slow down and head to the jungle for some much-needed reassessment, this is nothing but a hopeless and oft-told romance. As Anderson himself demonstrates, it is far too easy—and even thrilling—to destroy the things we love. Asking people everywhere to turn to the forest and learn its values is not only not prophylactic against overuse and destruction, but is in fact just another means of consuming nature, regardless of whether the goal

is personal growth, a trophy, or a selfie with an elephant. If too many follow Anderson's advice, what is the end result? Go ask Heisenberg if you don't know.³ Anderson's sporting code fails as anything beyond a niche environmentalist ethic with severely limited participation. What we desperately need now are broadly replicable ways of living—and living comfortably—that stop further damage to (and hopefully begin to restore) the things we most love and need. Read what you like—and Anderson's book is a perfectly good option—just don't forget to keep demanding cheap renewable energy, and lots of it.

NOTES

1. *Shikar* is hunting in colonial India, from wildfowling through big game shooting and poaching through royal sport. In Anglo-Indian circles, however, it generally meant "true" *shikar*, i.e., hunting in accordance with conventions that allegedly ensured fairness among sportsmen, a "sporting chance" for prey, and (from the late nineteenth century) conservation of certain species. More than a pastime, *shikar* was an act of rulership. Colonial sportsmen, like the old Mughal emperors and regional *rajahs*, used *shikar* to bring state power, surveillance, and services (such as *ad hoc* dispensations of justice) into the farthest reaches of their empire.
2. Matt Cartmill. 1996. *A view to a death in the morning: hunting and nature through history*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Pp. 239–240; and Carol J. Adams. 2000. *The sexual politics of meat: a feminist-vegetarian critical theory*. 10th anniversary ed. New York, NY: Continuum. Pp. 57–58.
3. This is a tongue-in-cheek application of Heisenberg's famous uncertainty principle. For the classic expression: Werner Heisenberg 1927. Über den anschaulichen Inhalt der quantentheoretischen Kinematik und Mechanik. *Zeitschrift für Physik* 43(3–4): 172–198.

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