

Dame Daphne Sheldrick

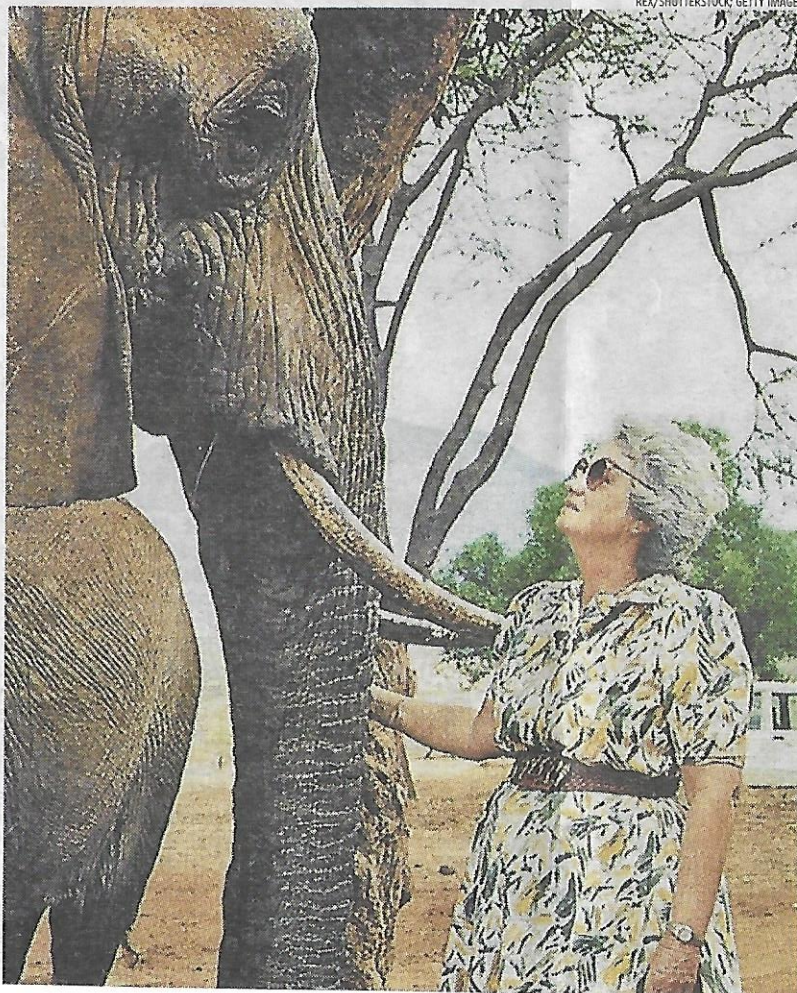
Redoubtable conservationist whose life in Kenya was dedicated to protecting her elephant 'friends'

In 2016 a group of wildlife officials and conservation experts gathered in Nairobi National Park to inspect towering pyres of tusks that had been hacked from the corpses of 6,500 elephants. They were due to be set ablaze by Uhuru Kenyatta, Kenya's president, to demonstrate theatrically that the poaching of elephants had to stop.

Seated at a distance in a camp chair was Daphne Sheldrick, looking inexpressibly sad. For her the event was neither a protest nor a policy statement. She was in mourning for fallen comrades, some of which she may well have known personally.

Born into a farming family in colonial Kenya, Dame Daphne Sheldrick was a self-made woman who became internationally renowned for her empathy for wild animals and her conviction that their lives matter as much as ours. She was best known for her friendships with the many orphaned elephants she raised. These bonds endured even when her charges had grown into adults twice her height and were living with wild herds where, Sheldrick firmly stated, they belonged. She made a science of elephant sentience and gained a first-hand understanding, as a mother would, of their fragility and strength, and their capacity to love, grieve and heal. Sheldrick's approach was at odds with scientific orthodoxy, making her a divisive figure in the conservation world.

After many years of trial and error, her landmark discovery of a formula based on coconut oil to feed infant elephants still dependent on their



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YWCA. Three weeks after her 19th birthday in 1953, Sheldrick married Bill Woodley, her school sweetheart who worked as an assistant warden for the fledgling Royal National Parks Service. Her off-the-peg wedding dress was the first shop-bought dress she had owned. They honeymooned in England, her first trip overseas.

Woodley worked in Tsavo, 8,000 sq miles of wilderness the size of Wales that was chosen to be one of Kenya's first national parks because it was uninhabited.

Sheldrick's marriage to Woodley ended amicably in 1958. Two years later she married his boss, David Sheldrick, who was ten years her senior. Pragmatic and capable, he had spent the war years as a major in the King's African Rifles commanding a company in Abyssinia and then Burma. For a short while after that he had been a professional hunter.

During her two decades living in Tsavo, most often barefoot and in a cotton frock, Sheldrick raised numerous abandoned youngsters alongside her two daughters, Jill Woodley and Angela Sheldrick. They included a zebra foal that was fond of devouring the official park correspondence and obstreperous rhinos. It was the elephants, however, that truly captured her heart. They were brought to her by the park rangers after being found abandoned and terrified standing beside their dead mothers. They were, she said, "grief-stricken and orphaned, their soft petal ears frazzling painfully to wafer-thin parchment in

today shelters 20 to 30 young elephants at a time and is visited by thousands of Kenyans and tourists every week. In midlife, after the untimely death of her husband in 1977, she founded the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust. It has successfully raised 230 orphaned elephants, each one being cared for over a period of about 17 years.

The films and media exposure

The lions licked the tent for salt while the girls lay on the other side listening

depicting Sheldrick with the baby elephants enchanted audiences around the world. By showing that the creatures, endangered because of market demand for ivory, were intelligent and loving mammals with an emotional spectrum similar to humans, she enabled people to relate to them even if they had never set foot in Africa. Sheldrick's dedication over six decades to protecting wildlife contributed to an awareness that resulted in crucial bans on ivory imports into China (a primary consumer), the US and other countries.

"She was a warrior, totally fearless. She stood up to government officials, scientists, anyone who threatened the elephants. Some said there's no point in saving individual animals, but of course there is. In order to curb the ivory trade, people had to first get to know and care about them," Cynthia Moss, the founder and director of the Amboseli Elephant Research Project, the world's longest running study of elephants, said. In 2006 the Queen conferred a damehood on Sheldrick, the first to be awarded in Kenya since its independence in 1963.

She was born Daphne Marjorie Jenkins in Gilgil, Kenya, in 1934, a descendant of pioneers. Her parents Bryan and Marjorie had a 770-acre farm where they brought up four

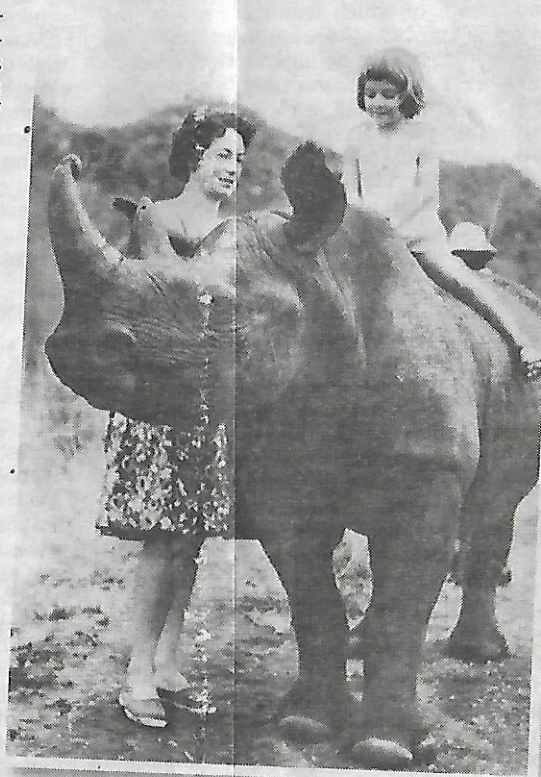


daughters and a son. Her father's family had left Scotland for South Africa in 1820. During the Second World War Sheldrick's father was deployed to feed the troops in Abyssinia and Burma, as well as Italian prisoners of war. This meant shooting thousands of wildebeest and zebra, and drying the meat to create biltong.

The family joined him at his bush camp during the holidays. When visitors came, Sheldrick and her sister, Sheila, vacated their tent and slept under an open-ended tarpaulin that was barricaded at night with chairs. Sheldrick remembered well "becoming somewhat edgy when darkness set in". The tarpaulin had been used to carry salt and the lions made a habit of coming to lick it while the girls lay on the other side listening to their rasping tongues. It was here that Sheldrick's knowledge and understanding of ecology and wildlife behaviour flourished.

She won a bursary to a university in England, but turned it down for secretarial college in Nairobi and digs with Sheila in the

Sheldrick in 2005 with Eleanor, one of her elephants, and, below, with the rhino Rufus and one of her daughters in 1981



attack. She started the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust soon after with the help of Jill. By the time of her death it had raised millions of pounds, a proportion of which continues to underwrite the running and maintenance of Tsavo National Park with the Kenya Wildlife Service.

The genesis of the trust's flagship elephant orphanage in Nairobi National Park was a request from park officials to look after two tiny elephants whose mothers had been killed by poachers. Sheldrick did so, spending a year driving to park headquarters every three hours, day and night, with her special elephant formula. When asked to look after a third baby, she said she

would, but only if it could live with her, so that she could get some sleep. Olmeg was housed in the chicken pen near her wooden house at the southern end of the park, but he bellowed so loudly at night that Jill relocated him to her bedroom, having first removed the carpet and put down straw. Angela, Sheldrick's younger daughter, and her husband, Robert Carr-Hartley, eventually took over the running of the trust, but Sheldrick remained a forceful presence as chairwoman.

Her memoir was published in 2012. An intensely private person, she at first resisted writing about her personal life. When the publisher insisted, Sheldrick complied with a deft and surprisingly passionate sentence: "Seldom a night passes that David does not appear in my dreams, and the sense of loss on waking leaves a void in my heart."

Daphne Sheldrick, conservationist, was born on June 4, 1934. She died of breast cancer on April 12, 2018, aged 83