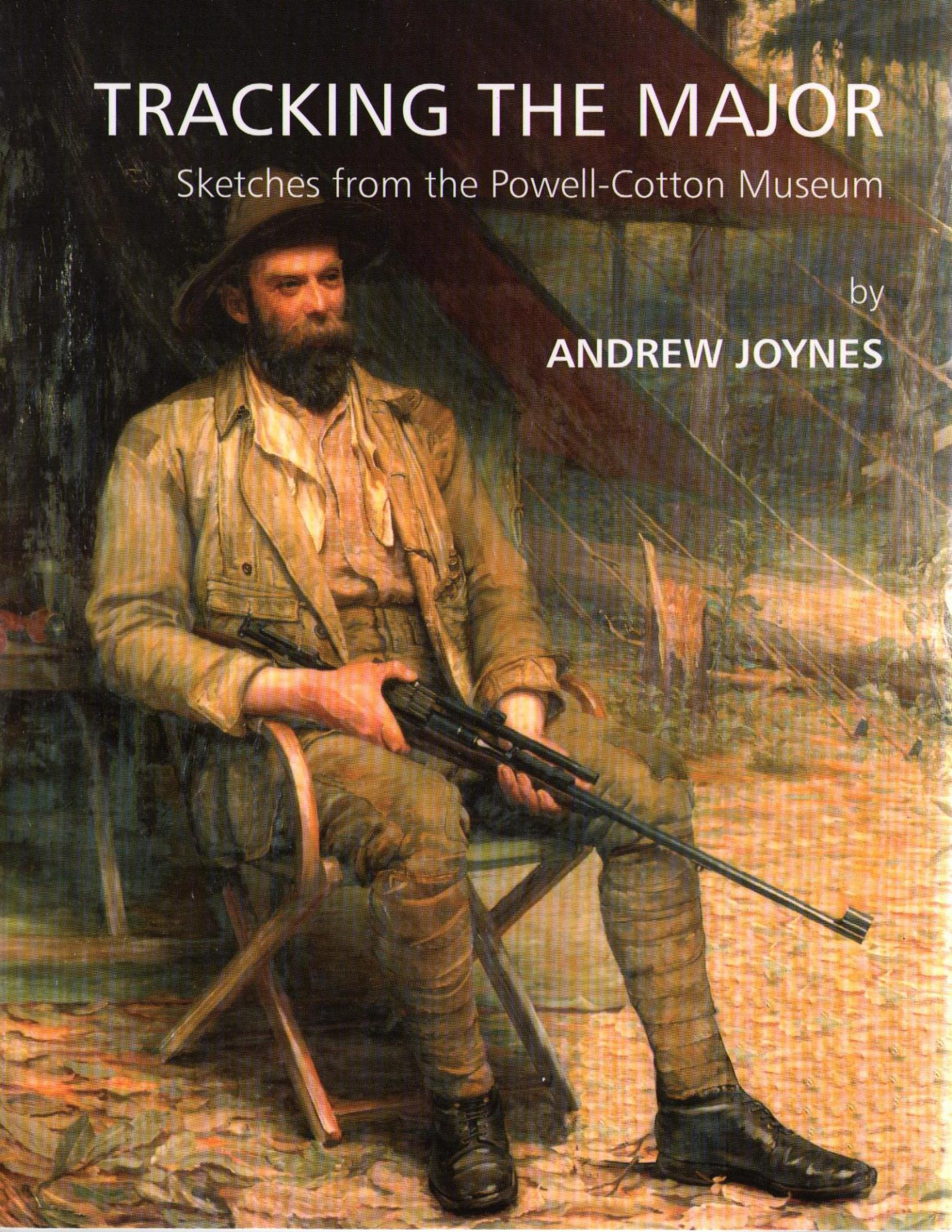


TRACKING THE MAJOR

Sketches from the Powell-Cotton Museum

by

ANDREW JOYNES



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Behind the Baize Door

In 1999, when I first went into that hidden room behind the baize door, it was the archive of the Powell-Cotton Museum at Quex Park in Kent. Much has changed since then. The archive has been moved and expanded; the pavilion roof has been repaired; and there are new galleries and displays in the Museum itself. But the singular fascination of the place remains, and despite all the modernisation this is still essentially a collection of curios – some of them tiny and some enormous – assembled in the Victorian manner and in due course filtered through the developing disciplines of modern museum scholarship.*

The name 'Quex' may derive from that of a medieval family which once owned the neighbouring farmland; their name was Quekes, an archaic term for the board game of checkers; and this in turn might be a derivation of the Latin word '*quercus*' meaning 'oak', because the squares on a checker-board were often formed of light- and dark-grained wood. The estate is situated at the south eastern tip of England, and lies in the district known since Roman times as the Isle of Thanet, between the villages of Birchington and Acol, near the seaside resort of Margate.

The Museum was set up in the late 1890s by the young man who had inherited the life tenancy of the Quex estate, which at that time covered much of what was then the agricultural region of Thanet. More importantly, the estate also had substantial property holdings in North London. Even today, in the maze of red-brick streets off Kilburn High Road, a Quex Road and a Birchington Road lead into Acol Road, all of them lined with the terraced villas which provided the ground-rents which financed the young man's early travels.

His name was Percy Powell-Cotton, who even today is referred to by people who live and work at Quex Park as 'The Major' because of the military title he held as an officer in a fashionable militia regiment at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He used this military title throughout his life. His exploits in Asia and Africa as an explorer, anthropologist, hunter and collector of zoological specimens – which were then mounted and displayed in so-called 'dioramas' – made him a regular feature in the British and imperial press. His adventures were written up by Reuters, the international press agency, from reports which he himself sent from some of the world's wildest places. When they were circulated to the newspapers in Britain and the imperial dominions they added to what would today be described as his 'celebrity'. He was somebody who enjoyed instant name recognition and was associated by the newspapers with a set of what were then regarded as heroic values.

* An asterisk in the text denotes a reference in *Notes and Commentary*

By the end of his life, Percy Powell-Cotton had made twenty six overseas expeditions, early in his career to Asia and the Himalayas, latterly to Africa, in search of exotic animals and the tribal artefacts of the people who lived in the jungles and deserts of that vast continent. On some of these journeys he was away for years at a time.

The Major was at his most active during the high tide of the British Empire, in the decades before the First World War. For a time he enjoyed fame as a kind of imperial icon: he was an embodiment of the manly virtues on which the Empire was popularly thought to be based. Perhaps this was because he handled his public relations very astutely. He wrote books about his journeys. *A Sporting Trip through Abyssinia* was published in 1902; *In Unknown Africa* came out in 1904. He donated zoological specimens to Britain's great national museums: the bones and hide of the mysterious jungle creature the Okapi to the Natural History Museum, a record-sized elephant from the Congo to the Edinburgh Museum.

He was fully aware of the promotional value of the international news agencies. The press cuttings in the Quex Park archive are extensive.* A routine Reuters report, typically beginning 'Major PHG Powell-Cotton is on his way home after a long expedition in Central and East Africa' might appear in a dozen newspapers, ranging from the *Glasgow Evening Times* to the *Cromer Post* and the *Bombay Gazette*. My favourite cutting, incidentally, is an example of what today would be called 'niche journalism'; a couple of lines in a 1902 edition of the specialist journal *Our Dogs* which reported that 'Major Cotton has had an encounter with a pack of wild dogs near Lake Baringo, and is now proceeding by way of Wadelei.'

As a typical wealthy collector of his time, the Major set up a private museum in a specially built pavilion beside Quex House, the Regency mansion on his Kent estate. It was clear that he intended the pavilion to be a kind of enormous Cabinet of Curiosities (albeit a learned one, painstakingly catalogued) which would attract, edify - and indeed, profit from - the crowds of trippers flocking to the seaside resorts on the Thanet coast. Even in holiday mood, these citizens of the empire might be tempted away from Margate Sands or Minnis Bay to visit a shrine to what an editorial about the Major in a Manchester newspaper of 1907 called 'the indomitable spirit of the British explorer.'

The diorama displays of stuffed animals are the most distinctive feature of the Powell-Cotton Museum today, and they are of course the focus of the uneasy fascination - the ambivalence of response - felt by many modern visitors to Quex. The displays are extraordinary monuments both to formerly living creatures and to the craft of the leading firm of taxidermists in Edwardian England, Rowland

Ward of Piccadilly, a firm which the Major patronised as he might a good tailor in Savile Row.

To the modern eye, of course, accustomed to watching wildlife programmes on television, stuffed animals and trophy heads seem bizarre. Today there are complex international agreements which govern, not always successfully, the trade in even the tiniest relics of endangered species; and the notion that the hides, horns and skulls of wild animals were once openly shipped back to workshops in Piccadilly to be fastened onto enormous maquettes of wood and metal so as to re-create their appearance in the wild seems, to the modern sensibility, preposterous.

Inevitably, the modern visitor to this extraordinary collection begins to wonder about the motivation of the Museum's founder. The term 'Cabinet of Curiosities' can of course suggest that the original collector was a dilettante, which would be a misleading description of the Major, who was nothing if not methodical in his categorising and classification, and in his correspondence with institutions such as the Natural History Museum and its parent foundation the British Museum, the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Geographical Society. But it can be argued that the genesis of Percy Powell-Cotton's private museum lay in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century vogue for 'gentlemanly collecting', a predilection which the Major shared with a number of his Quex forebears, who were assembling curios for the amusement of fashionable East Kent society from the Napoleonic wars onwards.

The more one thinks about the collection, the more one comes to believe that the Major created his vast dioramas of African and Asian wildlife in their natural setting not out of crude unthinking 'trophyism' - not as a splendid and extravagant statement, like the Waterloo bell-tower which one of his ancestors had built in the woods behind Quex House - but as an early and, from a modern point of view, flawed attempt to foster ecological awareness.

These exhibits are not the result of grotesque taxidermy, what in Victorian times was called 'animal art.' There are no elephant's-foot umbrella stands, no alligators standing upright with cigar-cases in their bellies, no lamp-bases made out of stuffed owls with eyes which lit up when the lamp was switched on. Each of the Museum's enormous display cases, as wide and as high as the pavilion gallery in which it was situated, can be seen to represent a vignette of a vanished imperial paradise, the unsustainable global order which, by the time of the Major's death in 1940, had begun to collapse under the weight of its own assumptions and the onslaughts of Britain's rivals for world dominance.

The Kashmir Gallery*, where the ibex and the markhor and the other game animals of the Himalayas rear their splendidly horned heads against a mountain crag made out of packing cases and tarred canvas, was set up following the Major's first forays, as a typical young Victorian adventurer, to Kashmir and Ladakh in the 1890s.

The exhibits in the Central African Diorama, where the elephant, aardvark, forest pig and rhinoceros loom out of a shadowy jungle made of painted scenery drapes, began to be prepared by the Major during the first decade of the twentieth century. This was a time when the diplomatic Scramble for Africa of the European powers had resulted in a general cultural fascination with the animals and people of the so-called 'Dark Continent': the time for instance when artists like Braque and Picasso were using African tribal masks in their painting and sculpture.

The Savannah Gallery was the work of the 1920s and 30s. Its painted backdrop of vast skies, rift valleys and thorn trees, its giraffes, zebras and African buffalo, evoked the colonial world of Kenya, Rhodesia and Uganda. This was a time when dreams of a sweet and prosperous life as a coffee planter in the White Highlands summoned pre-war emigrants from Britain to the imperial enclaves of East Africa.

The thoughtful modern visitor begins to regard the Major as a bit of a challenge, which lies in overcoming (or, rather, coming to terms with) a stereotype. So firmly has a cultural safety-curtain fallen between the Major's time and ours, so deep is the rift between the high imperial age and our own - politically, socially and in terms of attitudes to the natural world - that the Major and his fellow-explorers have come to be seen either in terms of caricature or of outright revulsion. After all, his 'collecting' of specimens meant shooting them with a high-powered sporting rifle. Even before the Major himself died, if a newspaper cartoonist wanted to evoke the response 'African Explorer' in the mind of a reader, he needed only to draw a few lines showing a figure in a pith helmet with a gun and a line of native porters. In the stories of PG Wodehouse, in the light theatre comedies of the 1930s, the character of the eccentric uncle who was once a big game hunter was a frequent figure of fun as he crouched in the shrubbery outside the French windows. Was Major Percy Powell-Cotton, hunter, traveller, museum-keeper and imperial icon, himself anything more than a caricature?

This was the kind of question which I first asked myself fifteen years ago, when I was encouraged by Christopher Powell-Cotton*, the Major's son, to spend time in the museum archive. He pointed out that in his father's archive there was

an extensive collection of contemporary newspaper cuttings giving accounts of the Major's exploits at the time of his greatest celebrity. These, Christopher suggested, might be the prism, the useful examining glass, through which a researcher with a journalistic background such as myself could gauge the Major's place in the popular and scientific culture of his time.

I also found my way to the Major's letters and correspondence, to his photograph albums and to his - tantalisingly unrevealing - diaries. Although the diaries are extensive* and frequently brim-full of the trivia of each passing day, they are almost entirely empty of any reference to his personal feelings. Paradoxically, their very detail can be more of a hindrance than a help from the point of view of a writer hoping to construct a standard biography, because - for all their references to the times of day and the activities with which the day was filled - they impart little sense of the diarist's opinions or emotional responses. Clearly, today's standard media question 'How did you feel?' would not have been understood by the Major. Feelings were perhaps not worthy of record for his generation; may not even have been consciously acknowledged by the individual. Perhaps indeed self-analysis was a mode of thought which had not yet evolved culturally, and might have been considered decadent and unhealthy.

To some extent, my conversations with the Major's son helped to fill in the gaps in his father's diaries. By then, in the first years of the twenty-first century, Christopher Powell-Cotton was an old man living alone in an apartment at Quex House; a bachelor who had spent much of his career in the Colonial Service in Uganda, and thus witnessed at first hand the passing of the 'Wilderness Africa' into which his father made so many forays during the half-century before.*

During those conversations with the Major's son, I sensed the burden that ancestral achievement can place upon a current generation, and the weight of family honour that can be felt by an individual who feels challenged by the profile of his forebears. This may well have been true of Christopher himself. He was the Major's fourth child and only son, who was born in 1918 when his father was over fifty: he spoke of his regret that the disparity in their ages meant he and his father did not know each other better. In those twilight conversations in the drawing-room at Quex House, he made clear his concern that his father's exploits, once so celebrated in the days of Empire, were not being accorded recognition and he seemed uncertain of how this might be achieved in what to him seemed a brash and undifferentiated new media age.

But it was to the archive, the room behind the baize door, that I frequently returned throughout that rain-sodden winter. Sometimes, during the months

when the museum was closed to the public, I would lose my way as I walked through the empty corridors.

'Turn left by the horses in dresses' a cleaning-lady would call to me as she set out another bucket to catch the rain-drops. She was referring to a display of Fulani horsemen whose caparisons – robes for their horses resembling the adornments of crusaders' steeds, protecting the animals' flanks from sword-grass and leeches – the Major had acquired on a trip to French Cameroon in the 1930s. 'Just past those shields and spears on the wall,' she would call from the end of the gallery*, as I pushed the baize door open and entered the lost world once more. 'That's it!'

At first, I was daunted at the prospect of finding even a starting-point for my research, for there seemed to be so many anecdotes attached to the photographs and press cuttings in the archive. There were stories of how, in the first days of the twentieth century, the Major was part of a British delegation to the Emperor Menelik of Abyssinia, who had just defeated a massive Italian army after it invaded his country. Stories of how, when the forty-year old Major got married, he took his new wife into the Ituri rainforest of the Congo, and of how each evening they would set up a gramophone to play a series of recordings (most popular of all – 'The Laughing Policeman') to gauge the reactions of the forest pygmies who gathered at the entrance to their tent.

Then there was the question of whether I, as a non-scientist, could make sense of the zoological material contained in the archive. That careful scholarly handwriting on the metal drawers of the filing cabinet belonged to the museum's longest-serving curator, a man called George Pinfold, whom the Major employed for a quarter of a century to keep his collection in good scientific order. I sensed there was a story to be told about the relationship between the two men: the Major, the derring-do adventurer, making his frequent expeditions to desert and jungle, and Pinfold the quiet methodical classifier, tethered to his laboratory bench, to whom the Major's bundles of hides, skulls, hoofs and horns were posted back from the wilderness for sorting and classification. It was George Pinfold's handwriting on those box labels: 'Insectivora... Arteriodactyla... Primates: Potto to Langur Monkey...'

Above all, in this archive of a vanished world behind the baize door I had to make the surreal connection between the two extremes of the Major's existence, the Wilderness and the Home Meadow. These haphazard objects, these spears and hieroglyphs and animal skulls, these volumes of press cuttings with details of expeditions in the trackless jungle, were gathered together in a room which looked onto the kitchen garden of an English country house. It was yet another

remarkable feature of Percy Powell-Cotton's extraordinary way of life that, when he came back from his expeditions, he resumed the role of local squire and estate-owner. Until he looked out his pith helmet and crated up his rifles for yet another safari, he took on the duties of Magistrate and Commissioner for Drains, President of the Isle of Thanet Chrysanthemum Society, and judge of the annual Ploughing Match. Was this, I wondered, another aspect of a now vanished way of life, or merely another facet of the Major as stereotype, a gentleman and sportsman who performed in a kind of theatre of the public imagination, where the social structure of Edwardian England and the vast horizons of the imperial wilderness merged into a continuous backdrop like the painted scenery of a museum diorama?

In my attempt to fathom the mind of the Major, I began to think of the Quex archive, with its variety of objects and documents, as a kind of lair to which a rare animal had retreated. I came to regard this cluttered room as being like a dense thicket in the African bush, into which a hunter might carefully venture in search of an elusive, almost extinct, quarry. As I followed up the many anecdotes in hundred-year-old newspaper clippings, as I gazed at photographs and leafed through files, I realised that in attempting to place the Major in his time, I was also trying to define a set of values which my post-imperial generation could barely comprehend.

In the room behind the baize door, I had embarked upon an exercise in historical fieldcraft. I was following up what the old backwoodsmen of Southern Africa used to call a 'spoor'.

I had begun to track the Major.

Rivalries

Files of press cuttings can be deceptive, particularly those which are compiled by a cuttings agency on behalf of a client, as the Major's clearly were. Because they tend to highlight press stories featuring that individual, they can suggest that he enjoyed unique public prominence. But a more general reading of the cuttings in the Quex archive shows that the Major was merely one of a number of well-bred Englishmen who enjoyed the celebrity associated with a public appetite for stories of wilderness derring-do. Every few weeks the newspapers carried stories about yet another explorer who had staggered, gaunt and emaciated, out of the jungles of the Dark Continent and given an interview to the local Reuters correspondent before taking a steamer back to England, home and glory.

It also became clear that there was competition between them for public attention. It was almost as though they were rival performers on the public stage, reflecting within the microcosm of fashionable society the wider rivalry between the great powers of Europe as they laid claim to colonial territory – what the Kaiser called, in asserting Germany's right to establish an African empire, 'a Place in the Sun.'

Indeed, the growth of the cult of the wilderness wanderer in the latter half of the nineteenth century reflected the expansion of the European powers – particularly the British and the French – into hitherto unexplored regions of the African continent. With all such expansion (and a parallel can surely be drawn with the Wild West frontier in America) there were self-publicists and journalistic myth-makers anxious to talk up the drama of the wilderness. Henry Stanley's well-publicised search for the missionary David Livingstone, who was of course not 'lost' in the jungle and was extremely reluctant to be 'rescued', caught the fancy of the British public in 1871. From this story in particular, and from the seeds which it planted in the fertile soil of the public imagination, grew the nineteenth century myth of the Dark Continent into which only Heroes ventured.

There were various aspects of the myth, all of them compelling because, as far as the newspaper-reading public was concerned, they were rooted in the fascinating 'otherness' of Africa. There was the alien landscape of dense jungle, great rivers and boundless plains. There was the extraordinary wildlife of Africa. Vast numbers of creatures – great and small, tusked, toothed, horned, clawed – provided quarry for hunters and scientific collectors. Meanwhile there were the native peoples – the warrior tribes of the southern veldt, the pygmies of the central jungles, the nomads of the northern deserts – acting as a kind of human chorus for an epic drama which unfolded around the figure of the European hero venturing into the wilderness like an Arthurian grail knight.

It has already been suggested that the celebrity which Percy Powell-Cotton enjoyed in the years before the Great War derived from a heroic stereotype, which influenced both the way in which he recounted his exploits and the way in which his reports were interpreted by the newspaper-reading public. The stereotype was not solely the product of the heroic literature of the Victorian period. It derived also from the exploits in Africa of actual individuals from the generations before his own, and it might be useful therefore to take three of these individuals as examples. The colourful careers of these prominent forerunners influenced both the stereotype of the wilderness wanderer and perhaps, by catching the imagination of the young Percy Powell-Cotton, influenced his own self-image and his own collecting and display style in later life.

The undoubted Galahad of the white hunter cult was Frederick Courtney Selous.* Such was his fame in the late nineteenth century, and so striking were his personal qualities (his courage, humility, and patriotism were frequently commented upon) that he is widely thought to be the model for Rider Haggard's Allan Quatermain, the perfect gentle knight of the African wilderness. Born in 1851 in London, Selous went to South Africa as a teenager to work as a diamond prospector in Kimberley, but soon became a trader and hunting guide up the Vaal and Orange rivers. Before he was twenty, he had sought an audience with Lobengula, the King of the Matabele people and, exceptionally, been given permission to hunt in the royal domain. Selous's account of this royal audience was written in an early autobiography before he was thirty (*A Hunter's Wanderings in Africa* – 'people have got good sums from writing bad books about Africa' was his wry comment at the time) and Percy Powell-Cotton's own encounter with the Emperor Menelik decades later clearly had resonances of such earlier meetings between stern warrior chieftains and English adventurers.

Selous became famous for the role he played as the guide to the so-called 'Rhodes Column' of 1889, a pioneering wagon train sent north by the British South Africa Company into Mashonaland, which resulted in due course in Britain staking a claim to the land which became Rhodesia. His careful handling of negotiations with Lobengula of the Matabele, whose territory had to be cautiously by-passed, led Cecil Rhodes to describe him as 'the man above all others to whom we owe Rhodesia to the British crown...' Thereafter, like the fictional Allan Quatermain – and of course like our real-life hero the Major – Selous divided his time between the English home counties and southern Africa; marrying, like the Major in due course, a woman much younger than himself and setting up a small private museum at his home in Worplesdon in Surrey. He was a knowledgeable and dedicated naturalist, and his vast collections of butterflies and birds' eggs were presented to the Natural History Museum, where there is a magnificent bronze

bust of him in the entrance hall: a handsome man, with a Van Dyck beard and a slouch hat, looking rather like General Custer. Percy Powell-Cotton would undoubtedly have 'jawed' with Selous at meetings of organisations such as the Royal Geographical Society in the early 1900s.

Then there was Arthur Neumann, a different character altogether, who has been described, with a remarkable absence of irony, as 'a sensitive, introverted elephant-hunter.'^{*} Neumann was a prime example of the solitary wanderer, troubled, romantic, suspicious of friendship. He was almost exactly the same age as Selous, born in 1850, the son of a Bedfordshire vicar, and like Selous leaving England for South Africa in his late teens. In the same year that Selous was digging for diamonds in Kimberley, Neumann was planting coffee-bushes in Natal. But he too quickly switched to trading and hunting, and he too cultivated the friendship of a warrior chieftain – in his case, the king of Swaziland, whom he persuaded not to join the Zulu campaign against the British which led to the massacre at Isandlwana in 1879.

By the late 1880s Neumann had moved from South Africa to East Africa, lamenting that there was no game left in the south of the continent, and in the 1890s was exploring the mountain ranges inland from Mount Kenya and north towards Abyssinia. His account of his solitary wanderings around the shores of Lake Rudolf can be seen as a model for Percy Powell-Cotton's own account of his Abyssinian journey a few years later.

And in his writing style too Neumann may well have influenced the succeeding generation. He came up with what strikes the modern sensibility as extraordinarily purple and bizarre passages of wilderness mysticism: 'I take damned little interest nowadays in shooting any other beast but the elephant. Nothing else thrills me, but the spell of the elephant is as potent as ever. Him I worship...'

'Worship': an extraordinary word to use in this context. One is reminded of the line of poetry by the disgraced Oscar Wilde: 'Yet each man kills the thing he loves...'^{*} It was written at the same time as Neumann was writing his memoirs (*Elephant Hunting in East and Equatorial Africa*, published in 1898). The currents and eddies of the late Victorian subconscious were clearly very turbulent, and once again one might suggest that this purple wilderness mysticism was part of a mood of *fin de siècle*, of world-weariness. As we have seen, the Major was himself given to somewhat high-flown writing in his sporting books, and of course he too came under the 'spell of the elephant' when he switched his collecting attention from the Himalayas to Africa. Within a few years he was publishing an account in the Christmas Annual of *Wide World Magazine*^{*} of his encounter

with the largest elephant ever shot by a European. A grainy photograph shows its carcase sprawled like a collapsed house, the gigantic tusks like broken roof-beams.

There is one other hunter-collector in Africa who should be mentioned as perhaps influencing the young Percy Powell-Cotton, particularly in his determination to set up an edifying museum where trophies and curios might be displayed. William Cotton Oswald was of the generation before Selous and Neumann (he was born in 1818 and died in 1893) and, through the Cotton family of East India Company merchants, had connections with the Far East. Like Selous, Cotton Oswald is reputed to have been a model for a Victorian literary figure: he was educated at Rugby School, where he was a contemporary of Thomas Hughes, the author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, who is said to have used his schoolmate Cotton Oswald as the basis for the fictional portrait of Young Brooke, the clean-cut friend of the book's hero.

Muscular Christianity was very much the background to Cotton Oswald's friendship with Dr Livingstone, whom he met when he was sent to South Africa after spending the first part of his career with the East India Company in India. In 1849 they mounted a joint expedition in search of a rumoured great lake in the middle of the Kalahari Desert, and their discovery the following year of Lake Ngami opened up the interior of the continent with its practical demonstration that the Kalahari could be crossed by ox-wagons. But this very process of opening-up the northern frontiers of South Africa also had the effect of extinguishing the animal wealth of the region, and by the time he returned to England a few years later Cotton Oswald was complaining that 'Africa is nearly used up. She belongs no more to the Africans and the beasts...' It is striking that this complaint was being made by Cotton Oswald decades before Neumann the elephant-hunter was saying the same thing about the entire southern half of the African continent.

This 'Nimrod of South Africa', as Cotton Oswald was called, was one the first to recognise the moral and environmental complexities of the hunting imperative as it operated in the African wilderness. The private museum which he opened at his home in Groombridge in Kent was an early foray into what today would be called environmental education. During the 1880s he frequently spoke about his time in Africa at meetings of the natural history societies which were springing up across the country, and an entry in his wife's diary for 1882 sums up the evangelical nature of her husband's attempts to focus the minds of the younger generation: 'On Sunday afternoon we had to receive and entertain 16 young fellows from the Technical Institute at Tunbridge Wells...intelligent, well-behaved lads, with a great capacity for tea, sandwiches and cake. William gave a delightful lecture on Africa and they went away happy...'*

From these three examples of Percy Powell-Cotton's forerunners as adventurers in the African wilderness, we can trace more general influences upon the hunter-collectors of his own generation, as well perhaps as specific influences on Percy himself. Selous was a heroic figure to be emulated in the service of the imperial mission. Neumann was a loner, much like the Major, who – though affable and sociable when at home in England – always seems to have been content, when in the wilderness, to be the solitary white man leading a hundred or so African porters. And Cotton Oswell was a veteran explorer who returned to England to set up a private museum where the fascinating and 'alien' nature of Africa might be made familiar to the country's youth.

But fore-runners not only set an example: they also represent a challenge. And it is clear that, for Percy and the other amateur collectors of his generation (there were by now dozens of wealthy young men venturing out from Europe on safari each year) the desire for celebrity spurred them to try and surpass the achievements of their predecessors. What is more, it led to intense rivalry between the collectors themselves.

In the early years of the twentieth century, Percy Powell-Cotton seems to have considered one individual in particular, James Harrison of Brandesburton Hall, Yorkshire, as a competitor for public attention.* Both were from the landed gentry; both were militia officers of the same rank (although Harrison, of the Yorkshire Hussars, went on to become a Lieutenant-Colonel whereas Powell-Cotton's rank of Major was frozen when his battalion of the Northumberland Fusiliers disbanded after the Boer War); and their exploring careers, focussed on the same area of Central Africa between the Upper Nile and the headwaters of the Congo, ricocheted off each other in the decade following 1900.

It was Harrison who was one of the joint leaders, with a wealthy American William F. Whitehouse of Rhode Island, of the expedition to Abyssinia which Powell-Cotton had joined in the autumn of 1899; and it was Harrison with whom he had fallen out by the time they arrived in Addis Ababa, leading him to go off on his own through the northern mountains. The circumstances of their disagreement suggest there was a growing divergence between those like Powell-Cotton who considered themselves scientific collectors, and those – like Harrison, it seems – who regarded Africa as the equivalent of an enormous deer-park, where game of all kinds was to be driven and killed as in the '*grands battus*' of the autumnal pheasant-shoots in England.

One of the first press cuttings in the Abyssinian file in the archive at Quex Park is from the *Court Journal* of 21 October 1899. 'Mr J. Harrison and his friends Mr.

Whitehouse, Mr. Powell-Cotton and Mr. Butter who are leaving on Wednesday next on an exploring and hunting expedition in North-East Africa, are to be entertained at a farewell dinner in town the day previous...All going well, the length of the trip should extend to eight or nine months...'

All does indeed go well for the first few weeks. Judging by Percy Powell-Cotton's diaries, the atmosphere on the sea-journey to Aden seems to have been one of japes and jollity. He has nicknames for his companions, 'Jay-Jay' for James Harrison, 'Billy-Boy' for the American William Whitehouse, 'Ghee' for Arthur Butter – a play on his surname using the Indian term for a cooking oil. The wealthy bachelors embark at Marseilles, go ashore to watch the cricket at Port Said, and stroll along the steamer's deck quizzing the other passengers. 'JJ recognised a fine tall handsome woman on board as a girl he had known in town 2 years ago as Marie Peterhof. Now travelling as Miss Notting under the care of Captain Maxwell a gunner...'

The jollity continues through November as they make their way inland from the Red Sea coast towards the highlands of Abyssinia. Much mirth is caused when a village headman whom they are entertaining with absinthe and soda ('with savages, as with children, the short cut to the heart is through the stomach...') claims that a buffalo hide drying beside the campfire belongs to his prize ox, which had strayed off some weeks previously. 'At our feet lay the lake, stretching away with its fringes of tall rushes, brilliantly-plumaged birds of all kinds were flying down for their evening drink...' and a line or two later, as though to fulfil the readers' expectations, comes the anticipated reference to 'the stillness of the African night...'

But within a few weeks the genial atmosphere has soured. There is enmity between the two native trackers employed by Harrison and Powell-Cotton, perhaps reflecting their sense of the rivalry between the principals of the expedition. In mid-December a total eclipse of the moon frustrates the expedition's attempts to get near a herd of buffalo. Two days later comes the incident which seems to have convinced Powell-Cotton to go his own way.

Early in the morning he comes upon the tracks of a herd of elephant in a small stretch of forest. He reports to Harrison, who insists that the entire party should have a chance to shoot at them. They fan out, each to their own hunting ground, as though strolling towards the butts on a grouse moor. The chaos which follows is caught with surreal urgency in Powell-Cotton's scrawled diary entry, which contains all the noise, confusion and panic of the sultry afternoon of Tuesday 19th December 1899 in the Hawash river-valley of southern Abyssinia.

Noise: the shouts of the porters who had climbed to the top of the forest trees, the trumpeting of terrified elephants, the sharp slamming of rifle fire.

Confusion: hunters sprinting through the forest, camp-followers blocking their aim, shots fired at random, maimed and dying elephants crashing away into the forest.

Panic: a wounded animal charging down a ravine, its passage marked by the swaying of the forest trees, a rifle breech snapped open at a time of maximum peril as an elephant charges to reveal it had not been re-loaded by a bearer.

The diary entry for that day concludes: 'Very bad, back camp, JJ and I had words appropo of shooting elephants and he had 2 bulls & 3 cows, Ghee and Bill a bull each, din, dressed bearer's cut foot, bed 9.30...'

This kind of indiscriminate slaughter, with hunters and hunted milling around in the forest in dangerous confusion, did not accord with Percy Powell-Cotton's ascetic stalking style. There were no scientific 'curios' among the dead elephants, no large bulls with tusks of notable size to be measured and reported back to the naturalists in London. Even the meat would be wasted. 'As none of the natives here eat the flesh, it seemed a pity to have killed so many and I was sorry to take part in the hunt. However, as my companions were naturally pleased at bagging their first tusker, I was the only one dissatisfied with the day's work...'

In the recollection of those who knew him, Percy Powell-Cotton was a thrifty man. He detested waste, and his care with money and resources verged on parsimony. It is clear the episode of the elephant hunt disturbed him profoundly, and his diary hints at a sense of shame when he visits the killing grounds the next morning to find the carcasses buzzing with flies and torn by vultures. Despite the bluff tone of his Abyssinian memoirs – to the modern reader terms like 'bagging', 'tusker' and 'day's hunting work' seem extraordinarily coarse – it is possible to discern in his acid description of the hunt and its aftermath the first stirring of a conservationist instinct which was still driving him into the wilderness when he was frail and old to collect zoological specimens which would reflect the wealth and diversity of the natural world. Given the scientific importance of the zoological collection he had amassed by the end of his life, it is regrettable – from today's conservationist stand-point – that he came from a generation for whom there was no contradiction between discovering and identifying rare animals and killing them.

The differences between Percy Powell-Cotton and James Harrison deepened as

they approached the imperial capital. The first diary entry for the new century reads: 'Mon. Jan 1st 1900 off 7.30 after row with JJ about his way of running things, reach Brit. Agency's compound 11.45...' It is probable that, later that day, Powell-Cotton took the British Resident on one side and expounded his plan of going off on his own to the northern mountains, leaving Harrison and his companions to travel south-westwards towards Lake Rudolf, as originally intended.

For the Resident, who knew Powell-Cotton from an earlier hunting trip along the Red Sea coast, the plan would have accorded well with the pragmatic diplomacy required to deal with the Emperor Menelik. If two English sporting expeditions were permitted to depart from the capital, protected by passports and roaming at will through uncharted regions, it would be a useful demonstration of Britain's continuing influence in the country.

Through the first half of 1900 there are sporadic newspaper reports from 'the Anglo-American expedition' led by Harrison and Whitehouse of its progress towards Lake Rudolf (now known as Lake Turkana, at the northern end of the Great Rift Valley). And there are 'notes from Capt. Powell-Cotton' on his lone journey up through the mountains to the Red Sea coast. But it is James Harrison who arrives back in London first, and, perhaps to Powell-Cotton's chagrin, is mentioned in the President's report on the exploring year to a meeting of the Royal Geographical Society in November:*

'...there had been remarkable activity in the exploration of Africa this year. Major Gibbons had followed Mr. Grogan from the Cape to Cairo. Mr. Moore had returned after his important investigation of the Central African Lakes. The Society's gold medallist M. Foureau had safely returned after his wonderful journey across the Sahara. Mr. Harrison had brought home an admirable map of the region between Lake Rudolf and Addis Ababa...'

Percy Powell-Cotton recovered publicity ground over the next couple of years with the favourable press reception of his Abyssinian memoir *A Sporting Trip*. And within the exploring establishment, that freemasonry of wilderness wanderers who were concerned to demonstrate the scientific validity of their hunting activities, he gained considerable credit from the lengthy appendix written by the accomplished zoologist Walter Rothschild ('the Honourable Walter Rothschild', no less*) who, after examining the specimens brought back from the northern mountains, concluded that Powell-Cotton's collection of thirty-five Abyssinian species was 'undoubtedly one of the finest brought out of Abyssinia...'

Off went Percy Powell-Cotton again in 1902, to East Africa and Uganda, in search of a fabled Five-Horned Giraffe and its elusive forest-dwelling cousin the Okapi. When he returned he set about writing the second of his books *In Unknown Africa*, which was one of the publishing sensations of 1904, with a gushing capital-lettered trail for its serialisation in the *Illustrated London News**: '...His adventurous journey from which he has just returned...among many illustrations and depictions may be mentioned those dealing with THE CAVE-DWELLERS...NEWLY DISCOVERED TRIBES...THE EXPLORER'S NARROW ESCAPE FROM THE WARLIKE DODINGAS...AN ELEPHANT CEMETERY...RUINED VILLAGES OF THE MASAI...'

Off too went James Harrison, in a series of expeditions (he also announced that he was on the trail of the fabled Okapi) to the Congo Free State, the vast territory at the heart of the African continent which was the private possession of King Leopold of Belgium. It is clear the Belgian king was encouraging European sportsmen to visit the country in the hope of deflecting growing criticism of the harshness of his rule of the country, which produced enormous revenues from its rubber estates. Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*, which centres on the moral abnegation of white colonial rule in a country similar to the Congo, was published in 1899; while Sir Roger Casement's official report for the British government on human rights abuses in the Congo appeared in 1904. That was the year that Harrison made the first of his journeys to the Congo, announcing on his return that he was 'a strong believer in the administration of the Congo Free State, which he considers humane and beneficent...'

Exploration became showmanship* with the return of Colonel Harrison (by now the newspapers were using his militia rank in their accounts of his adventures) from his second journey to the Congo Free State in 1905. It was one of the sensations of Edwardian England, and represents an extraordinary development in the popular perception of the Dark Continent. For Harrison returned, not with the relics of the fabled Okapi, but with six aboriginal Mbuti people – four men and two women – from the Congo rain-forest.

'Pigmies coming to England' ran the headline in the *Daily Mail* of April 13 1905... 'Explorer's Story: Adventures among the forest dwarfs...' but a week later was sounding a note of caution: 'Foreign Office withholds consent...' A few days later the *Daily Mirror* carried grainy photographs of Harrison in the gardens of a Cairo hotel flanked by the four downcast Mbuti men: '...Colonel Harrison, the well-known explorer, with four of the strange pigmies he brought from the Stanley Forest and hopes to land in England. The pigmies, who vary from 3ft. 8 in. to 4ft. 6in. in height and from eighteen to thirty-four years in age, are staying in

Cairo, as the Foreign Office has not yet given permission for them to be brought to England...'

In vain did the Aborigines' Protection Society campaign against the exploitation of the Mbuti people by Harrison ('...the pigmies are in the category of curious little animals who have been beguiled into captivity ...their captors expect profit from making a show of them to gaping crowds of sightseers who boast of a higher civilisation...What is this but a base form of slavery?...'). A counter-campaign was waged in favour of their admittance by the *Mail* and the *Mirror*, which reported in due course that the Foreign Office had telegraphed to Cairo 'asking if the little folk were healthy and wished to come to England. The committee of medical men who examined them were divided as to whether the climate of England would be likely to affect their health...But it is hoped they may be brought to this country when our weather has improved...'

And so, on 1st June 1905, Harrison is photographed by the *Mirror* on his arrival in England flanked by the two Mbuti women, barefoot, dressed in long gaberdine surcoats, and looking – to the modern eye – extraordinarily dignified in their sombre bewilderment. Around the photograph on the page of pasted cuttings in the Quex archive, the headlines read: 'Pigmies to be exhibited...Strange little beings from Darkest Africa...Fond of Cigars...' Five weeks later the *Daily Express* carried the headline 'Little Brown Men at Buckingham Palace' and reported how 'the pigmies from the Central African forest danced before the Queen yesterday at a garden party given in celebration of Princess Victoria's birthday...'

They stayed on in England for two years: in the summer of 1905 they appeared at the London Hippodrome displaying their hunting dances, and then went on to tour the provincial theatres. Fees were charged for members of the public who wished to visit them at James Harrison's country seat. The last of the related cuttings in the Quex archive is a double-spread in the *Daily Chronicle* of April 23, 1907 headed 'The Pigmies in Yorkshire.' Sombre, bewildered and dignified as ever, they are shown in a series of grainy images set in and around Brandesburton Hall: 'A Walk with Village Girls' ... 'A Lesson on the Piano' ... 'Bows and Arrows in the Garden' ... 'How to Dance the Cake-Walk.'

Later that year, pining for the warm Ituri rain-forest at the start of their third English winter, the six Mbuti people were taken back along the Nile to their home in the heart of Africa.

While they had been in England as the hapless guests of Colonel James Harrison, his fellow-explorer and rival Major Percy Powell-Cotton had been in the Ituri

rain-forest with his young bride on their honeymoon. There the newly-weds' systematic study of the forest people in their ancient habitat would have been more in accordance with the concerns of the Aborigines' Protection Society, and might even have earned their approval.



An African Romance

Any research into the Major's singular career might start with an examination of the folders of typed transcripts of the pocket diaries that he carried everywhere throughout his life. In this thick stack of foolscap the researcher might hope to find clues to the way the Major thought and felt. Here might be found the notes for what - if his adventures were indeed a kind of presentation in the imperial theatre - might be considered his personal script. But the researcher faces a problem, in that introspection was clearly not one of the qualities of an imperial hero. The Major, a taciturn man, was not inclined to confide his innermost feelings, even if he was fully aware of them, to these stiff accounts of passing time.

Occasionally, however, his guard slipped, and in the same way that a broken twig or a disturbance in the earth will reveal to a hunter the presence of an elusive quarry, so the researcher learns to be on the alert for some minor inconsistency in the Major's jotted diary entries. In the journals for 1904, for instance, he records the events of a few months spent in England after he came back from an expedition to East Africa and the swampy land around the headwaters of the White Nile.

Just after his return he talks in a matter-of-fact way about a Miss Slater, a secretary in the India Office who was helping him prepare his book *In Unknown Africa* for publication. Within a month or two she has been invited to work on the manuscript at the Major's home at Quex Park. A few weeks later, 'Miss Slater' has become 'Hannah' in the diary entries. And so it goes on with increasingly frequent and familiar references to her until some months later what the diary hints at, but fails to reveal openly, is announced in the press cuttings kept elsewhere in the archive. A notice in *The Star* newspaper's society column in October 1905 tells of the engagement of 'Major PHG Powell-Cotton, the well-known explorer, collector of curiosities and heir to the Quex estate.'

The Major was almost forty by this time, approaching middle-age. One is tempted to think that the reason he made all his solitary journeys abroad as a young man was to get away from the inward-looking society of East Kent, with its perpetual speculation about whom he might marry. But time spent in the wilderness was time passing. Time accounted for in the commonplace diary entries ('break, tiff, jaw, din, bed...') was time pressing. There was the ancestral expectation of another Heir of Quex.

Hannah Brayton Slater* was fifteen years younger than her fiancé. She was a farmer's daughter from Suffolk who, exceptionally for a young Victorian woman from a rural background, had gone to Prussia as a teacher at the age of nineteen. She then studied at the University of Berlin. Perhaps it was her spirit of adventurous scholarship which kindled the spark between herself and the grizzled sunburnt older man who at the time was enjoying extraordinary celebrity as an explorer. And of course he was extremely wealthy, 'a lord of broad acres and a stately home' as a contemporary society magazine described him.

Nevertheless, in the view of their son Christopher, there was a clear discrepancy in their social backgrounds as well as in age. This he felt was the reason for their unconventional wedding and honeymoon, which the Major turned to good effect by having it presented in the newspapers as his latest production for the imperial theatre, with his new bride as his co-star.

Rather than subject his fiancée's family to the expense, gossip, curiosity and potential snubs of a wedding reception held in England, the Major set off once again for Central Africa as soon as he had proposed, heading southwards from the Mediterranean along the Nile. His fiancée, accompanied by a chaperone who would in due course act as a bridesmaid, travelled out by steamship to join him in East Africa in November 1905.

They were married in Nairobi, and the chaperone travelled home carrying an account of the wedding, which appeared in the Christmas edition of *Queen* magazine: 'the ladies arrived at the quaint little English church, set in its well-kept garden, gay with petunias, in a native carriage with driver and boy in khaki drill-suits and turbans. The bride's travelling costume consisted of a blue serge skirt, cream net blouse, and a Panama hat...'

Immediately afterwards the couple set off westwards at the head of a line of porters towards King Leopold's Congo Free State.* There they plunged into the Ituri rain-forest, the original home of James Harrison's Mbuti pygmies (who were by this time appearing twice-nightly at the London Hippodrome). As with all his expeditions, the Major ensured that the press kept up to date with his progress. A Reuters report for May 1906 stated that a letter had been received from the explorer and his wife at Makala in the heart of the forest, where they proposed to remain for a month or so in a final attempt to secure specimens. It added that 'Mrs Powell-Cotton is the first European woman to penetrate the Ituri basin, and the progress of the expedition has created much interest among the pygmy and other forest tribes. Their camp has been thronged daily with natives curious to see the "white woman with the long hair."'

Versions of this report appeared in a dozen British newspapers during the next few days, and according to the seriousness of each journal, so different aspects of the report were emphasised. Some of them chose to dwell on the scientific purposes of the expedition, and the anthropological studies by the Major and his wife of the forest people. They took with them recordings of European voices laughing, singing and whistling and played them to the pygmies to observe their reactions; and then in due course they recorded the pygmies themselves singing and dancing.

The newspapers stressed the Major's search, as a collector of zoological specimens, for the mysterious jungle beast the Okapi. The existence of this creature - pursued without success by James Harrison the previous year - had only recently become known about, and as we shall see later, many of the strands of post-Darwinian tension ran through the scientific establishment's debate about the Okapi in the early years of the twentieth century.

Other newspapers applauded the honeymoon couple as examples of British pluck and hardihood. The phrase 'Dark Continent' - its perils emphasised by capitals D and C - figured strongly in these journals. But all of them, without exception, returned to the subject of Hannah's long hair and the admiration it caused among the pygmies. As the months passed, and as more reports filtered back along the safari routes, so the Powell-Cottons and their novel honeymoon assumed a kind of mythic status.

In the imagination of the imperial public, the Major's bride sat in her tented pavilion in the midst of the forest, surrounded by diminutive attendants and combing her hair like some woodland goddess. It is an image rooted deep in the English psyche, with Shakespeare's Forest of Arden magically situated in the middle of Africa, so that the Ituri rain-forest becomes the setting for an arcadian idyll. It has resonances of Spenser's *Fairy Queen* and Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, with Hannah cast as Titania or Maid Marian in Sherwood Forest.

Meanwhile, her husband, a grizzled Oberon, stalked through the jungle in stern pursuit of scientific game. 'An African Romance' is how the *Manchester City News* described it, reassuring its readers that 'Major and Mrs Powell-Cotton will soon be on their way home after a honeymoon without parallel...'

But the idyll has imperial echoes as well, and it contrasts benignly with James Harrison's extravagant publicity use of his own earlier sojourn in the Ituri forest, which culminated in what was in effect an abduction of the six Mbuti people for exhibition in England. When the Aborigines' Protection Society protested against their exploitation in April 1905, it argued that the responsible scientific approach would be to study the forest people on their own ground: 'Surely the interests of science can be sufficiently and much better served by the researches of competent observers in the native haunts of these poor little creatures, and surely the multitude ought to be satisfied with the picturesque reports of travellers in the same haunts...'

A year later, it was indeed as competent observers of the forest people in their native haunts that the Powell-Cottons were presented to the British press. The Major stalked through the Ituri forest under the expert guidance of the Mbuti trackers, and Hannah took notes on the language and customs of the women who crowded round the entrance to their tent. But she was also - so the impression was conveyed - showing how the domestic proprieties of civilisation should be established even in the wilderness. One of the syndicated articles on which she collaborated on her return was headed 'Keeping House in the Boundless Wilds.' Here was a kinder, gentler aspect of Empire; a maternal global entity setting an example to the childlike people for whom it had taken responsibility.

The newspaper readership at home in England is encouraged to imagine the scene.

It is late afternoon in the boundless Ituri forest. The Major emerges from the trees, dismisses his trackers, and whistles jauntily to his earnest young wife inside the tent. She greets him, asks how his day has been, and marvels at his adventures. Later, they dine by the light of kerosene lamps to the sound of Caruso singing

'Vesti la Giubba' on the gramophone cabinet set up at the entrance to their tent. A young Mbuti girl peeps round the tent-flap and asks Hannah what the man in the box has done to offend the Major, that he should be thus imprisoned and commanded to sing.



'Punch' and Penny Dreadfuls

The Powell-Cottons returned home in the spring of 1907. On their journey back from the Congo to East Africa, another report was to provide scope for journalistic marvelling. Perhaps it was inevitable that a lion would be involved, for the Victorian and Edwardian public expected a lion story from any African traveller, much as an underwater explorer today is sure to be asked about sharks and stingrays.

The most blood-curdling of all such lion stories concerned a pair of travellers on the East Africa Railway in the 1890s. A large male lion leapt through the window of their sleeping compartment and attacked and killed one of them. The first the traveller in the lower bunk knew of the attack was when he woke to find the lion's hind legs planted firmly on his chest, the better to chew on his companion in the bunk above.*

The Major's encounter with a wounded lion has all the features of a script specially written to satisfy the imperial audience. The facts of the encounter

are straightforward. The honeymooners' camp near the lake which was then called Albert Edward - after the Prince of Wales - was besieged by prowling lions. One evening the Major shot a large male and, thinking the animal was dead, he approached it. The lion immediately sprang up and attacked him. Hurling his gun into the lion's mouth, he turned to run, but was carried to the ground by the weight of the animal, which started to claw his back. One of his trackers ran up and beat the lion across the muzzle with a stick until it released its hold long enough for another of the Major's bearers to seize a gun and dispatch it for good.

The facts as reported by a press agency may have been straightforward, but the story lent itself to multiple adaptations in the many newspapers which carried the story. Underlying the entire encounter, of course, there was the symbolism of the contest between an Englishman, at that time considered by the imperial public to be at the pinnacle of diplomatic creation, and a lion, simultaneously king of the jungle and heraldic embodiment of Britain's power and self-regard.

And of course there were various heroic sub-themes: the loyalty of the Major's native bearers (what a very positive example for those colonial people who were becoming restive under Britain's imperial rule); the fear and admiration of the young wife as her husband protected her from savage beasts; and there was also a 'fancy that' factor, in that the incident took place on Friday 13th and involved the thirteenth lion in the Major's hunting career. There was even a suggestion in some of the radical journals of a growing conservation-mindedness, with more than a hint of satisfaction that, at last, brute nature was fighting back in the form of the resurgent lion.

However, what made this particular encounter memorable, and gave extra scope for facetious humour, was the fact that the Major was saved from a really serious mauling by the presence of a folded-up copy of the fashionable magazine *Punch* in the back pocket of his safari jacket. A 'Bystander' column carried a cartoon of Leo leaping onto the recumbent explorer with the words, 'By Jove, Major, there isn't a wag in England who'll fail to let off a jape about this when you tell it.' And sure enough, all of *Punch's* competitors in Grub Street lined up to let off their japes: notably the humorous journal *John Bull*, which carried a sour little reference to 'Major Cotton, who when attacked by a lion in Africa, was saved by a copy of "Punch." ...Just like the rest of us, the poor beast could not get through it!'

Just as the image of Hannah as a fairy queen appealed to the poetic side of the English imagination, so the folded-up copy of *Punch* in the pocket of the Major's safari jacket chimed with the facetious humour of the times: what devil-may-care style it represented, what heedless panache, like a whiff of pipe-tobacco and a gust of laughter from the smoking-room of the Traveller's Club.

The episode even featured in the 'penny dreadfuls', the tabloid press of Edwardian England. In a Sunday edition of the *Illustrated Police News*, for instance (a news-sheet printed on lurid pink paper, which carried line-drawing illustrations of sensational news events to edify those members of the public who could not read) there is a linked pair of drawings headlined 'Attacked by a Lion.' The Major and his bearers are shown approaching the recumbent beast, only to be taken aback as it revives and launches itself at them. On either side of this dramatic scene there are depictions of other news events which have caught the populist editor's eye. 'A Gamblers' Duel' shows two card-sharps pulling revolvers from their holsters; 'Ice Fatality in Darlington' shows a hapless figure drowning in a frozen pond; 'They Fought like Furies for the Love of a Man' features two young women, stripped down to their voluminous underwear, swiping at each other with cut-throat razors.

By now, the publicity scene was well and truly set for the couple's return from Africa. Their progress homewards in the spring of 1907 was notified to the public via the newspapers. During a prolonged sojourn in Rome, where Hannah recovered from a series of diseases contracted in the rain-forest, they gave extensive interviews, and gathered the events of the past eighteen months (which until now had only been reported by Reuters on a sporadic basis when the Major had sent back his occasional reports) into a full-scale narrative.

In late 1907 an American agency in Cleveland, Ohio syndicated a series of articles co-written by Hannah and the agency's Paris correspondent, who interviewed her on her way home to England, under the title 'My Honeymoon through the Trackless Jungle'. It was illustrated with many of the photographs which the couple had taken during their travels. The advertisement for the series showed a picture of the new bride looking fetching in a riding-coat and an over-large solar topee.*

This syndicated series returned frequently to the subject of the Major's encounter with the wounded lion, but for the American public there were no facetious references to the copy of *Punch* in the Major's back pocket. Everything was cast in heroic terms. 'Black-Maned Lion Engages Explorer in Fight for Life' ran the headline, a photograph showed the dead beast laid out like a household pet snoozing by the fire, and Hannah's role in nursing her husband back to health* was held up as an example for every young bride.

There is a somewhat fanciful postscript. At the time when Hannah's account of married life in the jungle was being syndicated to newspaper readers in America's Mid-West, a jobbing writer called Edgar Rice Burroughs was trying to make a living as a journalist in the prairie city of Chicago. A few years later the first of his many

Tarzan books appeared. There is of course no proof of a direct link between the Powell-Cottons and *Tarzan of the Apes* (indeed, the Major, a grizzled middle-aged explorer, bore a much closer resemblance to the eccentric professors who feature in so many tales of jungle adventure than to the naked figure swinging through the treetops) but there are a number of themes common to Hannah's tabloid account of her real-life jungle honeymoon and the setting of the first Tarzan story.

There is the English upper-class background. Tarzan, the jungle child, was the heir of the aristocratic Greystoke family; Hannah's husband the Major had been the Heir of Quex. The Powell-Cottons' re-touched photographs and drawings of life in the rain-forest resemble the graphic illustrations on the covers of the first Tarzan books, which were themselves the model for much later pulp fiction.*

Most striking of all is the resemblance between the figures of Hannah herself, 'the white woman with the long hair', and Tarzan's jungle bride Jane. Both of them conjure up a compelling popular image of a fairy queen shimmering in a leafy pavilion while her bridegroom stalks the forest like a lord of creation. At the start of the twentieth century, the Powell-Cottons' performances in the imperial theatre coincided with the dawn of the media age.

'My husband sank on one knee, rifle at shoulder, while we sheltered in the sand behind...' (Hannah Powell-Cotton, writing in 1907).

'Jane wondered if there was another man on earth with whom a woman could feel so safe in the heart of the savage African jungle...Even the lions and panthers held no fear for her now...' (*Tarzan of the Apes*, 1912).



DISPLAY



of this African gallery,' announces the Major as he continues to address his guests. 'You must all come back and see it when it's finished. And now, my dear, shall we go back to the fire...?'



Tarpaulins and a Steam Trolley

The firm of Rowland Ward Ltd, whose premises at 167 Piccadilly were called 'The Jungle', was one of the pivots of the interlocking social, sporting and scientific circles in which well-to-do collectors like the Major moved in the years before the Great War. Its large shopwindow, where the latest examples of the firm's dramatic taxidermy were always on display, was one of the sights of the West End.

At Rowland Ward's emporium, the collector could find not only craftsman-taxidermists to set up trophies, but experts in safari preparation with whom

to talk over forthcoming travels. The firm stocked specialist equipment which might not be available at the Army and Navy Stores, the other London saleroom which catered for wilderness expeditions. In its Sporting Library, Rowland Ward's firm offered a publishing outlet for any travellers who might wish to see their memoirs in print. The Major's *Sporting Trip through Abyssinia* took its place alongside *Sunshine and Storm in Rhodesia* by Frederick Selous and *Big Game Shooting in Cooch Behar* by that Indian state's Maharajah.

At a time when there were dozens of taxidermists registered in the London trade directory,* Rowland Ward, the head of the firm which bore his name, was the most celebrated. In pursuing his profession, he was continuing a family tradition. His father Henry had worked in America with the ornithologist John James Audubon, whose great work *Birds of America* could be seen as the start of a cultural trend by which national territories began to be defined in environmental terms by their flora and fauna. In the same way, an imperial-environmental ideal was projected by the Major and other collectors as they laid claim in lordly fashion to the exotic animals of the lands under British rule: the 'Empire of Nature' as it has been called.

Rowland's elder brother Edwin was also a taxidermist, the first member of the family to receive royal patronage when in 1872 he mounted the head of a wild white bull shot by the Prince of Wales in Northumberland. He also set up the head of the horse on which Lord Cardigan hurtled towards the Russian guns in the Charge of the Light Brigade (the horse was called Ronald) and went on to produce entire servants' quarters of stuffed bears on their hind legs acting as dumb waiters for fashionable households. The bears held out trays on which guests deposited their empty glasses.

In his autobiography, which was published a year after his death in 1912, Rowland Ward laid claim to being the originator of the idea that taxidermy should re-create the appearance of the living animal in a process which was akin to sculpture, which he had studied as a young man. 'My ambition was to begin at that point in taxidermy where the old school had left off. Instead of merely stuffing the skins of animals with quite a secondary regard to shape, I determined to study nature and adapt it, in connection with modelling, to the taxidermist's art...' He advocated applying mud, wax and plaster to the maquette onto which the skin was to be placed so as to correspond to the underlying muscle and sinew of the animal. He spent hours at the London Zoo studying tigers, rattling their cages and stepping back to sketch their ferocious snarls ('It is a curious fact that much of the expression on a tiger's face is gained by the disposition of their whiskers...')

Most significantly, in terms of Percy Powell-Cotton's ambitions for the exhibits in his private museum at Quex Park, Rowland Ward can be seen as the pioneer of large diorama displays. In Percy's youth, he would have visited exhibitions in which Ward had set up dramatic jungle scenes. At the Colonial and Indian Exhibition at Earl's Court in 1886, when Percy was twenty, Ward had no fewer than four exhibits, ranging from a violent scene in which an elephant is being attacked by a group of tigers to a general evocation of Indian flora and fauna, with antelopes, pythons and crocodiles artfully disposed among the jungle reeds - which had been collected by Ward's assistants from the Norfolk Broads. Over ten thousand visitors came to see the exhibition on August Bank Holiday and empathise with the beleaguered elephant ('Oh, the poor thing..! Don't cry, Hermione...') and thereafter Ward's work was forever to be associated with the notion of 'jungle' scenes, giving him the trademark and title for his later premises in Piccadilly.

It is quite likely that these early diorama displays by Rowland Ward planted the idea in young Percy's mind of one day assembling his own museum of artfully mounted taxidermic sculptures. This was, of course, even before he began to go abroad on his sporting expeditions. Ward's jungle displays attracted considerable press attention ('The visitors were lost in admiration of Mr Rowland Ward's masterly designs, modelling and general arrangement...The scene is rendered with true magic power' - *The Daily News*) and it was clear that there was money to be made, as well as social standing to be gained, from the impresarioship of such amazing and edifying taxidermic curiosities.

By the time the middle-aged Major came to plan his own diorama displays in the years before the Great War, the firm of Rowland Ward Ltd occupied a unique position between the sporting and scientific establishments. In part, its position served to mitigate a growing tension between the management of the Natural History Museum at South Kensington - which was still an administrative part of the British Museum - and the gentlemen-amateurs of the British sporting establishment. In his second book *In Unknown Africa*, Percy Powell-Cotton expressed chagrin at his failure to secure the blanket endorsement of the Natural History Museum before setting out on his journey to East Africa in 1902. For its part, South Kensington was becoming overwhelmed by the scale of the vogue for wilderness collecting,* with rather too many travellers returning with the carcasses of animals which they then proposed to donate to what was rather grandly thought of as 'The National Collection.' As a result, South Kensington was increasingly reluctant to sponsor expeditions, or even to write in advance of a gentleman-traveller's departure to colonial officials asking for their co-operation. The colonial administrators were often expected by some of the

travellers to suspend the game laws to permit the hunting of a particular animal on which the collectors might literally have set their sights.

This tension between the scientific and sporting establishments led to protests, and during the Major's absence in Africa in 1905 before his jungle honeymoon, there was acerbic correspondence in *The Times*, with the collectors' case being put by Lord Hindlip – who tried to get the Major involved from afar, writing to the Major's sister asking her to get a message to him asking for his support* – and the Natural History Museum's counter-arguments being put by its combative Director Edwin Ray Lankester.* On the one hand, the collectors argued that they were acting out of patriotism in collecting on behalf of the nation (citing the fact that other European nations were constantly augmenting their national collections) while South Kensington countered with the more subtle argument that advances in laboratory science made 'taxonomic' examination of carcasses less important.

As with all such newspaper controversies, that particular storm blew itself out, but it remained a cause for rancour. A couple of years later, in 1909, the issues were raised in more sensational form with reports of the safari undertaken in East Africa by a former President of the United States. Theodore ('Teddy') Roosevelt celebrated the end of his Presidency by going to Africa with his son Kermit to hunt and collect game animals on behalf of America's leading scientific body the Smithsonian Institution. The British Governor of East Africa was prevailed on to issue them with special licences - in effect suspending the game laws - much to his subsequent regret. The statesman and his son blazed away, exceeding their allotted quotas, and rarely making a clean kill because Teddy was short-sighted and Kermit was impulsive and inexperienced. The father and son despatched over five hundred animals between them, not including those they shot to feed their porters. Among the trophies were nine Northern White Rhinoceros, already an endangered species in East Africa.

Press reports of the safari led to a revival of the controversy, with even the collectors' lobby in Britain distancing themselves from the former President.* Frederick Selous, the doyen of white hunters, who had organised the safari for the Roosevelts, was severely embarrassed, and one is reminded of the distaste with which Percy Powell-Cotton recorded the aftermath of the elephant slaughter in Abyssinia when he decided to part company with James Harrington. One wag at the Traveller's Club commented that it was only the death of another 'Teddy' which saved the entire wildlife of the African continent from extinction: Edward VII died in 1910, and the former President had to break off his safari to attend the funeral in London.

'The Jungle' at 167 Piccadilly was able to channel off the occasional tensions between the sporting and scientific establishments to the benefit of its own shareholders. It already had close links with the Natural History Museum because it prepared many of the Museum's specimens for display, but it also benefited from the desire of the amateurs to see their trophies displayed to best effect in their private collections. Richard Lydekker, a pre-eminent natural historian of his day and highly respected both by staff at South Kensington and by the gentlemen-amateurs, had close links with Rowland Ward Ltd and produced a series of definitive guides to the game animals of the world for publication by the firm's Sporting Library. Lydekker also wrote regularly for the sporting journal *The Field*, and in its pages he would frequently summarise his examination of the relics of animals brought back by amateur collectors. Sometimes he would pronounce that the animal was sufficiently distinct a specimen as to merit including the enterprising discoverer's name in the Latin scientific description (as he did with *Giraffa Camelopardalis Cottoni* in 1904). The proud discoverer would then commission Rowland Ward to set up the specimen in the finest manner possible, and would be charged accordingly. It was a cosy relationship between experts, amateurs and taxidermists, and the collector's satisfaction at appearing in the pages of *The Field* - and in due course having a magnificent taxidermic sculpture to show his friends - did much to mitigate a sense of rebuff if an earlier offer to donate it to the Natural History Museum was declined.

On the whole, Percy Powell-Cotton's relations with the Natural History Museum were affable and constructive, and as we shall see later, by the end of his collecting career he had received many formal letters of thanks from its Trustees for the specimens he donated. But his dealings with Rowland Ward in the years when he was planning the layout of his private museum were closer still.

His last collecting expedition before the Great War was to Portuguese Guinea in 1911. Until then, as the files in the Quex archive show, he was in constant correspondence with Rowland Ward about the new Central African Gallery, and these letters reveal many of the qualities I had come to associate with him. They show his quartermasterly attention to detail, his frugality, his sometimes peremptory sense of command. Let us end this sketch with a selection of extracts from their correspondence in the autumn of 1909 about the transport to Quex Park of a prize specimen being prepared in the workshops in Piccadilly:

1st Sept 1909 RW to P-C (*enclosing a sketch of an elephant with scribbled dimensions*):
 'We return your measurements of the Elephant by later post, as your letter has crossed ours giving the size of the stand. The Giraffe heads and Lion are in hand.
 PS The railway company quote 31/10 owner's risk, exclusive of labour, for the

animals to Quex, minimum one ton. Kindly instruct us your wishes, as we are rather pressed for room at Piccadilly just at present.'

4th Sept 1909 P-C to RW: 'I am much obliged for the drawings with dimensions of the Elephant. I shall now be able to get on with the floor ready for his arrival. I notice that the width across the ears is given as 7 ft 3 in, so that I take it the ears are half forward, and if this is so, I think the cow's ears had better be almost flat back, otherwise I shall not have room for her.'

6th Sept 1909 RW to P-C: 'With reference to the Elephant, the ears only project very little, as you will see the depth of the animal through the body is over 6 ft. We await your further letter re account, as intimated. PS The Rhinos have left today and we trust will arrive safely.'

8th Sept 1909 P-C to RW: 'I was a bit disappointed with the account. As mentioned I was in doubt whether I could take all the large animals in hand this year as I have had very heavy expenses to meet lately. However, you pointed out the advantage of doing the work in the summer months, and of course I should like to see the thing complete. I understood that there would be no objection to letting part of the account stand over for a year, so that I propose spreading it over my next three rent audits.'

9th Sept 1909 RW to P-C (*the Major has decided to send the Quex estate steam trolley to collect the elephant from the taxidermists' workshops in Piccadilly*): 'Re Elephant. We note your remarks as to trolley dimensions but it is the 'overhang' from wheels and the vibration to a skin which is not by any means sound. However if you decide on sending it, we will do our best to have it as safe as possible for the journey.'

14th Sept 1909 P-C to RW: 'I am despatching my engine driver on Monday morning to arrive early Tuesday. Please let me have the address from which he is to fetch the Elephant. I am sending another waterproof sheet.'

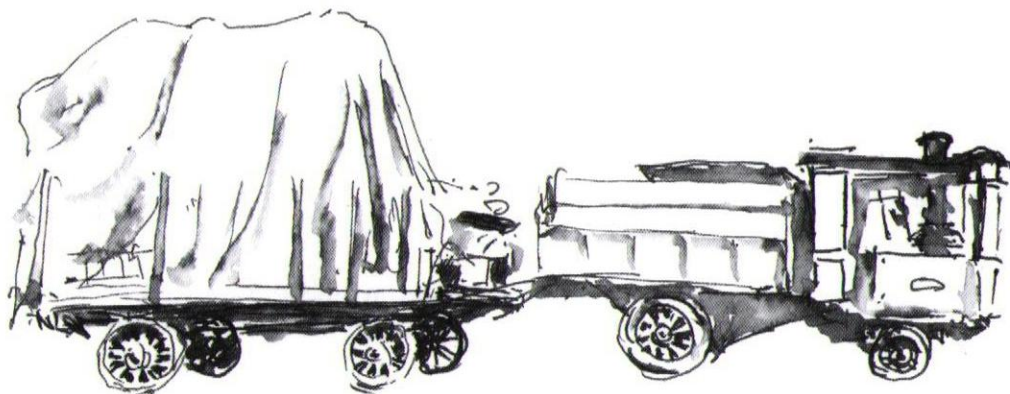
18th Sept 1909 RW to P-C: 'When the trolley arrives, be good enough to see that there is a sheet sufficiently large to go clean over the animal, in case of rain, the sheet we have received from you covers the specimen as far as the neck only.'

19th Sept 1909 P-C to RW: 'Owing to the very late harvest, rick sheets are difficult to borrow at the moment. I hope, therefore, the one sent today, together with the one you already have, will answer the purpose. I am also sending an old carpet to put over the Elephant first to keep damp off. I trust the trolley will arrive to time.'

I am sending by it (at this point the Major goes on to list other animals which will be loaded onto the steam trolley for its journey up to London and left at Piccadilly for repair and taxidermic preparation) Topi - face damaged coming down, Hyaena, Aard wolf, 2 jackals. All these last four I should like the skulls taken out of.'

21st September 1909 RW to P-C: 'The Elephant has left today, and we trust will reach you safely in due course. Your man had lost his paper with the heights of bridges (*ie along the Old Kent Road: the trolley would have chugged its way up to London through Canterbury and along the former Roman highway Watling Street*) but judging by the Giraffe sent earlier, it should give no trouble. The trolley is not at all a good thing for the job. The Topi we will put right, and do our best with the skulls of the remaining 4 animals safely to hand.'

23rd September 1909 P-C to RW: 'The Elephant arrived quite safely last evening, having made an excellent journey. Today we got it into position in the museum, and the head, the only part I have uncovered so far, looks very well. Would you please let me have any bits of elephant skin which were not used.'



The Major's Collecting Expeditions

Youth

- 1889-1890 India, Baltistan, Ladakh, Kashmir (part of the Round-the-World Trip)
- 1892-1893 Kashmir, Ladakh, North India
- 1894-1895 Baltistan, Ladakh, North India
- 1895-1896 Somaliland and Ogaden, East Africa
- 1896-1897 Central Provinces of India
- 1897-1898 Baltistan, Ladakh, Tibet, North India

Fame

- 1899-1900 Somaliland and Abyssinia, East Africa
- 1902-1903 British East Africa and Uganda
- 1904-1907 Lado Enclave, Congo Free State and Lake Edward, Equatorial Africa
- 1911 Portuguese and French Guinea, West Africa

Consolidation

- 1920 Algeria, North Africa
- 1921-1922 Angola, Portuguese West Africa
- 1923 Corsica and Sardinia
- 1924 Abyssinia, Arussi and Sahatu Mountains
- 1924-1926 Nigeria, Lake Chad, French Equatorial Africa
- 1926-1927 French Congo, West Central Africa
- 1928-1929 South Cameroon, West Africa
- 1930 Morocco, North Africa
- 1931-1932 North and South Cameroons, West Africa
- 1932-1933 Southern Sudan
- 1933-1934 Red Sea Province, Sudan, Italian Somaliland

Recessional

- 1935 Tunisia, North Africa
- 1935 Zululand, South Africa
- 1936 Morocco, North Africa
- 1937 South West Africa and Angola
- 1938-1939 Tanganyika Territory, East Africa

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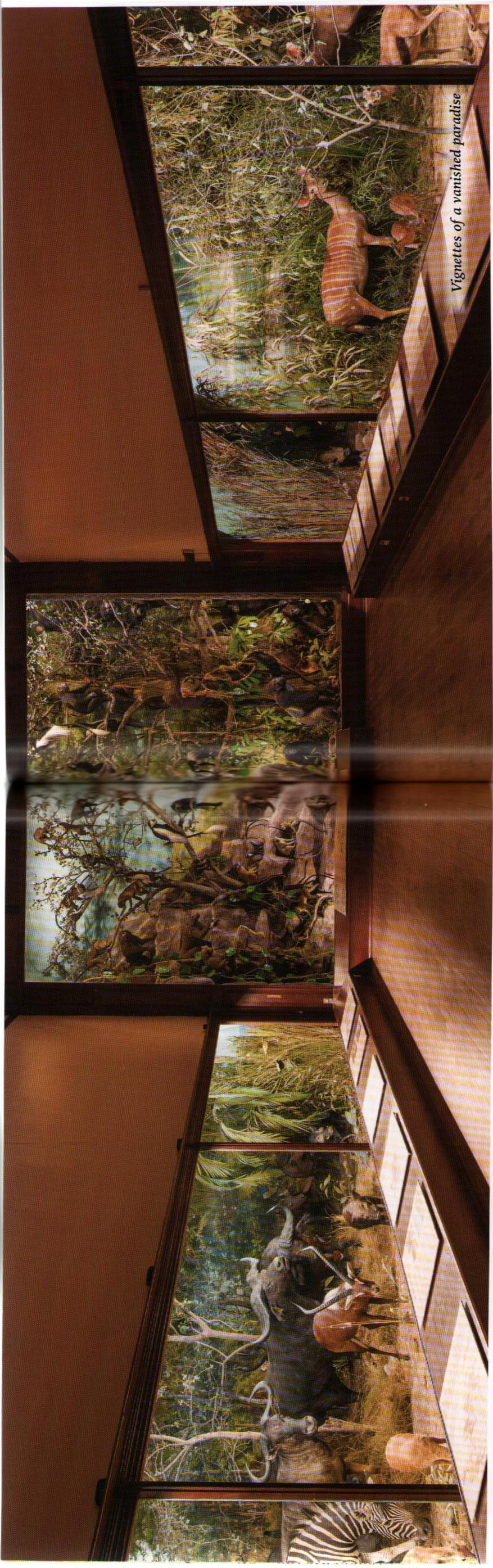
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Modern Nimrod: portrait of Major Percy Powell-Cotton 1908



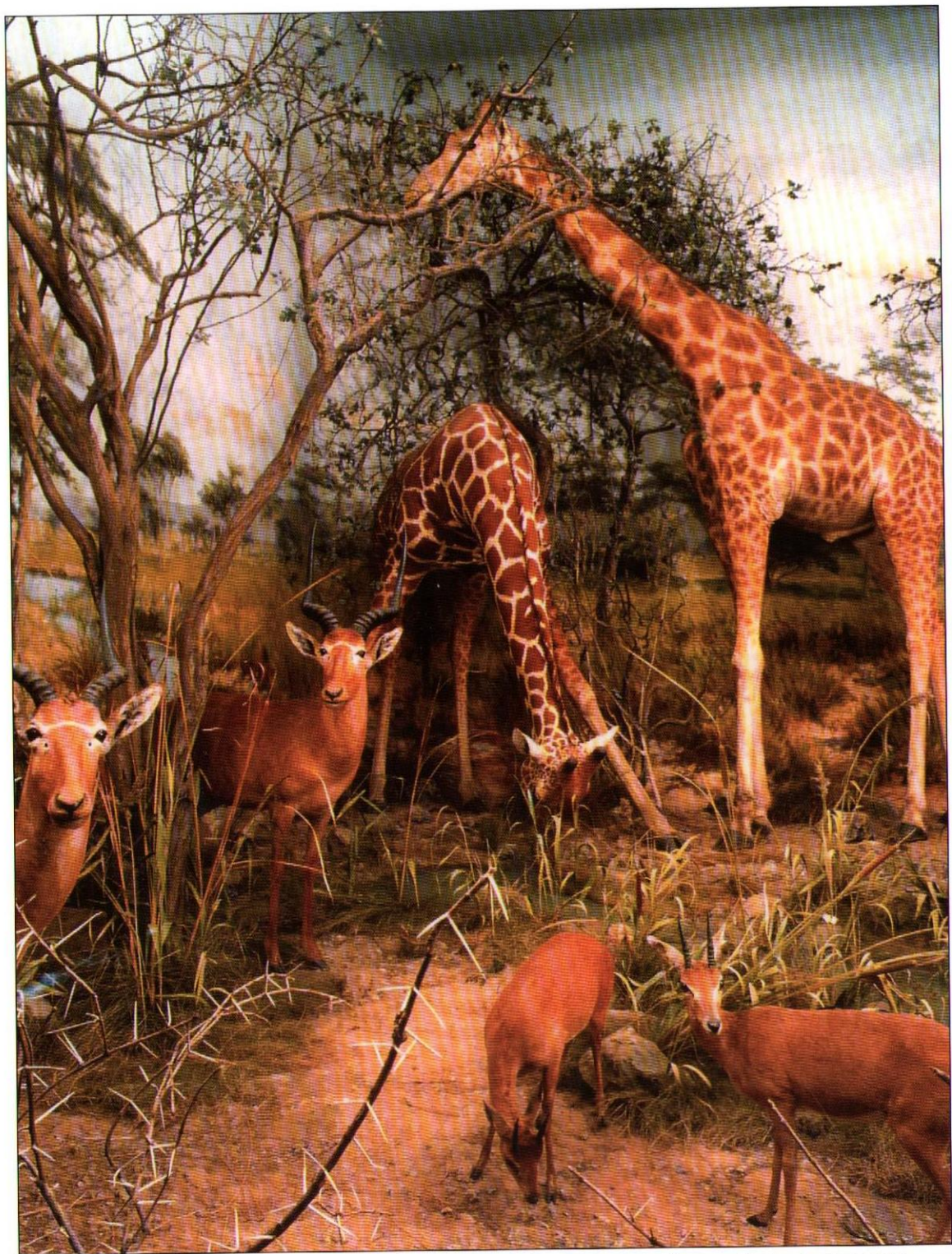
Central African Diorama



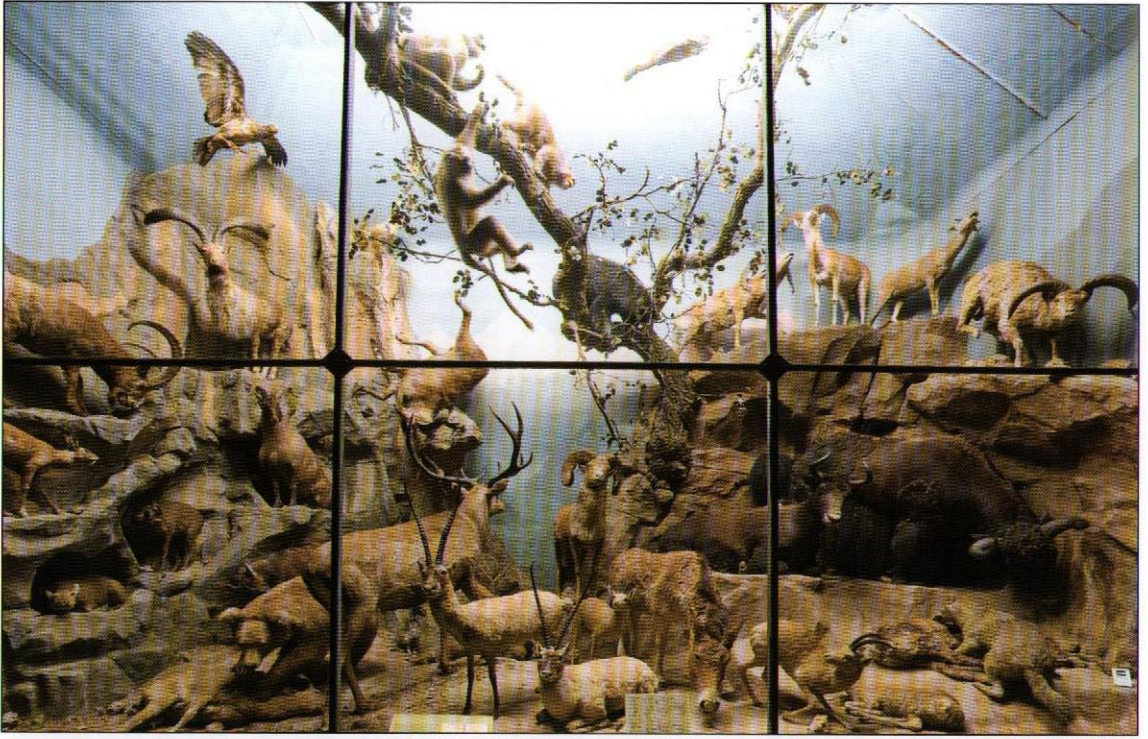
Vignettes of a vanished paradise



Sporting and scientific trophy: the lion and the buffalo in the PC Museum



Animals of the African Savannah: diorama display in the PC Museum



Magic Casements: Kashmir Gallery



Zebra and other animals at the waterhole

