BOOKS

A fair life of a great Warden

"Elephants at Sundown" by Dennis Holman, published by W. H. Allen, London, L978: Price in Kenya: Sh .....

IT was a routine flight for Billy Woodley, then warden of Kenya's Mountain National Parks. But not for me, a private tag-along observer.

We flew first above the waving bamboo forest of the Aberdares Range and down the gorge of a river, catching tiny, shimmering droplets of water on the wings from the largest waterfall in the mountains. In the high moorland zone, we seemed to hover over a grey herd of elephants only a few feet from their humpy backs. Then, quite suddenly, we finished the tour by flying straight into the flames of a forest fire which also needed Billy's personal attention.

A crowded hour for me, but as I said, routine for one of the truly great figures of the Kenya National Parks Service, now subject of a biography by author-journalist Dennis Holman.

Perhaps in more journalistic than literary style, Holman briefly covers Billy's childhood on the Athi Plains, then teeming with game. A fairly liberal, if not undisciplined life, in which shoes were for Sundays only and recreation for the ten-year old was hunting with a small-bore rifle for days on end. Inevitably, the young Woodley became an expert bush "academic" on local botany, zoology and nature in general.

To the uninitiated, Kenya's creepy-crawly wildlife is unmitigated horror, but for Billy it was all part of the natural life-style. Flying ants made a good meal; safari ants were useful for cleaning the house of rats, and so on.

Larger animals were also part of the domestic scene, of course — notably "orphan" Eleanor the Elephant whom he raised with his first wife Daphne (later Sheldrick). Even in those days, Eleanor was gentle and mannered enough to carry off an appearance at a Government House tea-party in Nairobi.

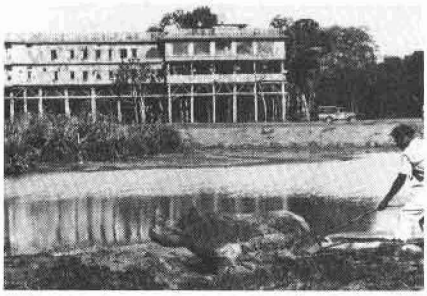
At that time, as a junior warden at Tsavo, his human interest was principally the Waliangulu "elephant people" across the borders of the park. He studied them closely, admired their unique hunting skills, and hunted them himself when they let fly their arrows at his park elephants. But that apart, his respect and interest in the Waliangulu ensured that the ethnology of this tiny tribe was not lost, like so much else, in forgotten local history.

In other ways, Billy's human relationships in Kenya were unconventional for the time. He fought in the "Mau Mau" Emergency in the early fifties, but then recruited captured "terrorists" as rangers for his Mountain Parks. Some friends in the still colonial establishment looked somewhat askance at him, but his action was justified in due course as he developed the rangers into about the most loyal and effective anti-poaching force in the parks service. His people could simply see, hear and smell better than any poacher in the dense









ONE of the less routine jobs for Billy Woodley, then Warden of Kenya's Mountain National Park — hand-hauling a rhino bogged down in the mud of a waterhole. In this instance, man management of the natural situation was successful. Pictures: Hanka Kawecka Lee.

Aberdares and Mount Kenya forests.

The line of the personal story is never lost through all this — the divorce, the second marriage (the present Mrs. Ruth Woodley), children, and a settled family life at Mweiga. But the emphasis is rightly on the events, anecdotes and personalities in Billy's consolidation and administration of the two parks.

This includes his handling of a special problem in the early days, which was the common fascination of Mt. Kenya.

Historically, the mountain is *Kirinyaga*, home of the Kikuyu god, and only recently yet another worshipper — an old woman — had to be brought down, half-frozen, from the glacier.

It was also a climbing challenge to Europeans right from the first "tourist" in the area, Joseph Thomson in 1883, who got half-way up before being chased away by the Maasai. The peak was finally climbed by Sir Halford Mackinder in the thirties, and from then on it was a major attraction for sportsmen from all over the world. For residents too, like three Italians who broke out of a prisoner-of-war camp in the forties, climbed the mountain, and broke back in again.

Later, after Kenya's Independence in 1963, the flow of "tourist-climbers" increased with the expansion of national tourism. Most of them confined themselves to the stiff hike to Point Lenana before the snow peaks, but others took on the hazards of the ice, sheer rock faces and bad weather in attempts at the twin 17,000-ft. summits.

There were a number of accidents, some fatal, and as a result Billy tried to organise his own Rangers as a rescue force. But he himself was still learning about the mountain, and it was difficult for him to persuade anyone in authority to see the need for fully trained and equipped rescue squads.

Then, in 1970, there was a dramatic incident on the mountain with the World Press reporting daily unsuccessful attempts to rescue an injured Austrian climber. Finally a crack Austrian team flew in and managed to bring the man down.

Thereafter, at Billy's instigation, the Austrian government helped Kenya set up and train a similarly skilled mountain rescue team from forty-two Ranger, Police and Mountain Club recruits. Initially, the training was carried out in Kenya and Austria by the Gross Glockner Mountain School, but later an American climber — Phil Snyder — took over through a staff appointment with Kenya Parks.

His team now consists of ten Rangers, led by a Kenyan, Duncan Karinga. They are provided with up-to-date equipment and, in season, carry out an average of three rescues a week.

Billy himself was general supervisor for all this, but he took a particular interest in the mysterious "mountain sickness", *pulmonary oedema* which can affect even the fittest climber above 14,000 ft. It is a dangerous affliction, in the lungs, and cannot be cured in its advanced stage; but through study and application, the Mt. Kenya team have been able to reduce fatalities.

His present concern, however, is back to wildlife, where it all started in Tsavo. And his first job is to clear the park of poachers so that at least in Tsavo West there will be rhino, as well as elephant, to watch at sundown for a few more years. With his experience and authority he can probably do it more effectively than anyone else, including the body of conservationists on the sidelines in Nairobi and abroad.

For these — us — the life of Billy Woodley is essential reading, for sheer enjoyment and for reference. Perhaps, in the telling by Mr. Holman, it is all a little too light and esoteric for outsiders. But not for us, for tag-along observers of a great conservationist for Kenya.

— **HANKA KAWECKA LEE**

Surprise quality on elephants

The Love of Elephants. By Neil Murray. Octopus Books Ltd. for Evans Brothers Ltd., London, 1977.

IN every bookshop we see masses of domestic and wild animal books, the majority of which bear sentimental titles, texts that thirteen-year-olds could produce and colour photographs that leave much to be desired — mainly because they are poorly reproduced, but sometimes even out of focus. They are also, often, hideously expensive.

Happily none of this applies to an unsung, full-colour photo-book I found on

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