

Sdant r Afrika¹

Mitt liv som Storviltjgare

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The author is born in Pretoria 1915. The book was published in 1954² and the Swedish translation I found in the shed next to our cottage was published already in 1955. According to the author he has been a hunter of big game for sixteen years, a duration of which he was proud, as the average life expectancy of that dangerous occupation was only eight years in the bush.

What is the pleasure in hunting? It seems almost universal, at least among men, similar to the fascination that is exerted by sports. If there would be more game out there, there would be even more hunters. Yet big game hunting is something of the past nowadays. People who before would pay good money to shoot an elephant, or a lion, now are content on going on Safaris. But still in the fifties and sixties it was prevalent and socially acceptable. The author lists five kinds of hunters in Africa. Three of the kind, namely those in search of biltong³, ivory, or skin. Those have no respect for nature and wildlife and will eventually bring about its extermination. Then there are people who are employed by governmental agencies to cull and control populations, and finally there are those, who like the author, find in hunting a way of life. The latter are of course in a minority, and it should be acknowledged that the damage they do is minimal compared to what is perpetrated by more industrial approaches. The fascination of hunting, even to those not approving of it, is clear. For one thing biologically humans make up a species of hunters and gatherers, and even among those people who would never think of hunting animals, traces of that instinct are still prevalent even in modern urban life. What else is shopping? Leaving home to bring back goodies⁴.

Of course a more literal enactment of the ancient passion requires other components. A love of weapons for one thing. A lethal weapon is of course an extension of your sexual organ. It gives you power and status and makes you self-reliable in the bush. Modern technology has made this status far easier to attain. Almost anyone can learn to handle a gun and kill with it. It takes more skill, dedication and courage to do the same with a spear. Another component is a love of outdoors, to live simple, at least for short periods, This is also part of the ancient heritage of the human species. A hunter loves the pursuit. In fact as every serious hunter, who does it for the sport not to keep body and soul together,

¹ Original title 'African Fury' also the title of a film produced by the author

² Which I found out through googling. The activity did, however, not turn up anything more on the author.

³ Dried meat from the bush. Everyone is chewing on it, the author reports

⁴ The pleasure is obviously in the getting, most people soon tire of their acquisitions, just as game is no longer of any interest when eaten and consumed

will sooner or later learn, it is the pursuit that matters, not the final killing. The author is by his own admission, no exception. After each kill he grows more and more sorry. The killer learns to love and respect his victim. More and more he starts to regret the taking of life. What sticks in his memory is the exertion and the suspense as well as the quiet contemplative pleasures of being out in the wild. Of sitting by a campfire in the middle of the night and be lulled to sleep by the noises of animal life around. But such pleasures are of course heightened by being part of a project. A trip becomes more interesting if it has a goal. The object of killing has an obvious sublimation, namely that by shooting by camera rather than the gun. This is what has happened to most of the big game hunters in the last fifty years. This does not mean that hunting has ceased. Such people were only a minority, there are still four categories of hunters left. Sadly the authors pessimistic predictions seem to have become fulfilled. Rhinos, those, in the words of the author, gigantic anachronistic creatures were already protected in the 40's but are now almost entirely wiped out. Ivory hunting has proved to be the demise of the elephants, The author has some lyrical passages about primordial life, which he describes in contradictory terms. It was both an Eden and a ruthless struggle for the fittest. Over and over again he comes back to the fact that being killed instantly by a hunters bullet is a far more merciful death than would otherwise be the lot of wild animals. His advice is to only kill the weak and ousted animals, those who no longer live in social contexts. Of course a clear and consistent policy of hunting would in no way endanger the vitality of wild life. But in spite of all kinds of government regulations and licensing this has never been achieved. One has to give the elite hunting community credit for their interest in preservation, be it on wholly selfish grounds.

The book was written in the early fifties and report on events which mainly took place in the 40's. As such it has some historical interest and can supply some instruction of the same. The author, of Lebanese extraction, grew up in South Africa. There is very little reference to a racially divided society. He refers once to a colleague who had to overcome his distaste in shaking the hand of a black native, when introduced to a chief. The author does not seem to be burdened by such prejudices. In the Swedish translation there is constant reference to 'infdingar' the Swedish word for 'natives'. The Swedish word is definitely more disparaging than the English counterpart, which I assume is the one used in the original. There are frequent references to 'boys', meaning young native boys assisting in the hunts. The author writes respectfully of the chiefs, but the natives at large make up a rather anonymous bunch, occasionally sentimentally endowed with virtues, such as intuition, which modern civilized man seems to have lost in the process. The feats of skilled tracers among the natives are admiringly documented; on the other hand so were the feats of his own hunting dog⁵. The natives follow faithfully the leader, the white man with his gun, but when the prey is about to come out, they flee for their lives, chattering

⁵ Racial attitude to wild natives is a bit ambiguous. Appreciation is not the same thing as racial blindness, on the contrary. The documentary filmmaker and photographer Leni Riefenstahl is a case in point. During her extended life she was able to migrate from doing propaganda movies for the Nazis to documenting Masai hunters and warriors. The latter does not necessarily bespeak any discontinuity as to her sentiments. Also the well-documented fondness of the Nazi brass for their dogs gives lie to the naive assumption that people who love animals, especially dogs, are more human and understanding than others.

like apes. Maybe something about them not being armed may account for such behavior.

The book consists, apart from some chapters on early life and why and how the author began his career, on a series of vignettes from hunting expeditions. Some are recounted in detail, others get a more perfunctory treatment. Although the book is divided into chapters, apart from the introductory, one gets the feeling that the order of the stories is totally haphazard as is the particular chapter they happen to be put in. It clearly is the case of the born raconteur sitting by the camp fire in the tepid tropical night spinning his yarn to a captive audience. Oral presentation is very different from written. There are far more people capable of the former than the latter. There is of course drama in recounting the crucial episodes, but what counts in a narrative, as well on the hunt, is not so much the climax, as the road to it. Every time the author fires a bullet it hits its target right away, penetrating the brain and causing instant death. What you want to get a feel for, as in the hunting stories by a Hemingway, is the feel, the scenery, the mood. The skill of the author cannot measure itself up to those of a Hemingway, even if the feats of the latter are not always that impressive. What shines through is that Africa was for about fifty years or so an Eden and a playground for the very rich, to which the likes of the author provided essential service. What has happened to this continent after the colonial period? The author writes almost approvingly of the skirmishes between warring natives which kept the population down to sustainable levels⁶. The last fifty years have seen dramatic growth in population, in spite of poverty, misery and war⁷. Indeed, from a purely sentimental point of view, evoking African life of the colonial period, is an exercise in nostalgia; especially if you give priority to nature and wildlife. But without the latter what would Africa become? A mere dustheap on which the human surplus is being dumped.

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⁶ Sustainability is a fashionable concept nowadays, but it is not clear whether its callous aspects are fully understood and recognized

⁷ War is dramatic and thus conducive to news reporting. One should not, however, exaggerate its impact on the life of the average African, the vicissitudes of which are of a far more mundane character.