

TONY FITZJOHN

‘Hugely compelling  
and funnily written’

MARTIN CLUNES

‘A true African  
adventure of epic  
proportions’

BEN FOGLE

A photograph of a man, Tony Fitzjohn, embracing a lioness in a savanna landscape. The man is shirtless, wearing shorts and sandals, and has his arms around the lioness. The lioness is standing on its hind legs, leaning against the man. The background shows a vast, open savanna with scattered acacia trees under a clear sky.

# BORN WILD

The Extraordinary Story of One  
Man's Passion for Lions and for Africa

Tony Fitzjohn has spent over forty years reintroducing lions, leopards, rhinos and African hunting dogs to the wild. He is one of the world's leading field experts on the relationship between man and African wildlife.

He was born in England and worked for eighteen years with George Adamson of *Born Free* fame in Kenya's Kora National Reserve. Alongside his work with wildlife, he has built schools and education centres in Africa's most remote areas.

In Tanzania, where he now lives with his wife and four children, he has rescued Mkomazi, a 1,500-square-mile wasteland, and turned it into a highly successful game park. He has recently been invited by the Kenyan government to undertake a similar resurrection of Kora.

A maverick by nature, he has calmed down as he has grown older but is still well known for getting things done when faced with seemingly insurmountable problems. He was awarded the OBE by the Queen and the Order of the Golden Ark by Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands for his services to wildlife.

*Born Wild* is his first book.

# Born Wild

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*The Extraordinary Story of One Man's Passion for Lions and for Africa*

TONY FITZJOHN

*with* MILES BREDIN

VIKING  
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Aerial photograph of elephants on page 187 from Peter Beard, *The End of the Game*,  
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*Front endpaper*: With Gigi, Freddie and Arusha overlooking the camp

*Back endpaper*: George at sundown, Christian's Rock

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1. Kenya and Tanzania
2. Kora National Park
3. Mkomazi National Park



The funny thing about being chewed up by a lion is that they don't bite chunks out of you – they suffocate you. All that firepower and they use a pillow. I suppose I should be glad of it: two hundred kilos of fully grown lion pouncing on my back had already knocked the breath out of me. And when he put my head in his mouth and started to squeeze it wasn't long before I began to lose consciousness. Only when he clawed at my stomach did I wake up and my will to live reassert itself. It was just like that moment when you've been tumble by a big wave and lost your surfboard: abruptly the light pierces the swirling water and, realizing you want to live, you kick towards the surface. I pushed my fist above my head and into the lion's mouth. But I wasn't strong enough: he was going to kill me, the bastard. I can remember wondering, as I faded away, Which one was it? A wild lion or one of ours?

It was one of ours, Shyman, and it was another of ours, Freddie, that saved me. I had raised Freddie from a cub, but unlike that big thug Shyman, whom we'd never handled, he liked me. Freddie charged Shyman and distracted him just long enough for me to regain a bit of consciousness and get into the foetal position. Freddie went for Shyman at least four or five times as Shyman came back to grab some other part of me. Even then the bigger lion got me round the neck and started to strangle me. I went through the '*Reader's Digest* tunnel', my life ebbing away – the festering rubbish dump at the camp gates my last view of the world. I knew what was happening. And as the rest of me gave into the blackness I was furious about that rubbish.

I had been working with George Adamson – the Kenyan game warden who reintroduced lions to the wild, as described in his wife's book *Born Free* – for the past four years and it was he who dragged me from the lion's maw. Alerted by our foreman, Erigumsa, he came charging out of our camp armed only with a short stick. He found Shyman dragging me off in his mouth, my body trailing between his front legs, blood pouring from holes in my neck, shoulders and body. I was dead, as far as the Old Man was concerned. George charged at the lion and, with Freddie, managed to see off Shyman and pull me away. Without Freddie, I wouldn't have stood a chance. I'd been attacked by one lion and saved by another. I'd lost a tooth and one of my ears was hanging off. A hole had been bitten in my right shoulder and neck, which was large enough to put my fist through. It would be a couple of painful weeks before I was back on my feet but I consider it my closest shave yet and not much to have paid for the privilege of living with animals since the day in 1971 that George Adamson had taken me on.

Mine was a long journey to George's camp in northern Kenya but I feel as if it wasn't until I arrived there in 1971 that my life really started. That said, I was actually born in 1945, rather freer than I would have liked – on the wrong side of the tracks, at the end of the line. I was raised in Cockfosters, the very furthest north you can go on the Piccadilly Line. My mother was a bank clerk; my father abandoned her before I was born. One of tens of thousands who met a similar fate during the Second World War, she tried to bring me up on her own but it was very hard to do when there was no work, little food and a hatful of

stigma attached to dragging around a small boy without a father. When I was about seven months old she gave me up for adoption at the Church of England Children's Society. I don't know what happened to her and have never seen her again. I don't know either who my father was. I've been told he was highly decorated, married and in the RAF, but I'm really not sure; I can't remember whether that's true or wishful thinking, and I can't find out now because most of the Society's records have disappeared. My adoptive parents, though, I know all about. Leslie and Hilda Fitzjohn came and got me when my age was still measured in months. They took me to Cockfosters where they lived the kind of life I've been trying to escape from ever since.

My dad worked in a bank. He got on a train every day and went off to places like Greenwich, Covent Garden and Tooting. He had been in the Supply Corps of the Desert Rats during the war and had seen some pretty unpleasant sights during his five years in Egypt. When he got back, I'm told he just sat and drank for six months, staring at the fire and refusing to talk. Today you'd call it post-traumatic stress disorder but back then there were no words for it. Soon after he had recovered my parents had a tragedy. They had adopted a baby who settled down well and upon whom they doted. Six months later his mother appeared on the doorstep and asked for him back; she had just married a man who had lost his wife and four children in a car crash. My parents thought it was the only fair thing to do and handed the baby over, but they were shattered.

By the time I arrived on the scene, they were in much better shape. Dad was doing well at work and getting on better with my mum. She was an inveterate charity worker and always off doing something that involved wearing a hat – Mothers' Union, Townswomen's Guild or going to church. I suppose we were your everyday emerging middle-class family, the kind of people who appeared in those old black-and-white educational films, holidayed on the south coast and went to the Festival of Britain in home-knitted jumpers. We lived in a small semi-detached house in a road with hundreds of similar houses. Ours was smarter than the ones on the other side of the street because you could only just see the electric flash of the tube lines from our side, but they were all much of a muchness and there wasn't much of it I liked.

When I was two and a half or so we went to the orphanage again and, according to family legend, I picked out a sister, Margaret, who now lives a much more respectable life in the US than her brother. We don't know why my parents adopted. Maybe there was some physical problem or they just didn't have enough sex. I certainly never saw them at it but this was the 1940s and 1950s: sex was not something one discussed with one's parents. Ours was quite a strict and repressed household and our parents might have quarrelled but they loved us and the good far outweighed the bad.

Back then the end of the Piccadilly Line was also the start of the countryside. I used to go for long walks with our dogs Trudi and Judy in the fields that began just a few hundred yards from our house. I'd play in the woods and climb trees with my friend Alex Duncan, the local vicar's son. We had an air pistol and we'd go up to the top of his house and shoot at women's bottoms as they tottered by. Inevitably we were caught. I've got one of those faces that has difficulty concealing the truth: I worked that out at an early age and have always behaved better than I would have wished. I hate to think what I'd have got up to with a more innocent face.

One of my greatest loves was Scouting. It doesn't have a good image these days – all

paedophiles and sandals – but in the fifties it was a great way to escape and learn about the outdoors. By the time I finished school I had more badges than Idi Amin had medals. I loved Scouting and I kept on doing it right up until I left secondary school. We always had excellent Scoutmasters and the freedom of the outdoors was wonderful after the tight discipline that prevailed at home. All that practical stuff – knots, rope courses and the like – were fun at the time and have proved extraordinarily useful. I tie knots every day of my life and I knew more of them before I was ten. Although it's a dying pastime in England, Scouting remains hugely influential in Africa. Like so many other things here, it's just like it used to be in England in the fifties. It's taken very seriously: ministers will happily be photographed in shorts and woggle. They're always having jamborees, and Lord Baden-Powell even went so far as to die in Kenya. His grave was made a national monument by Kenya's Chief Scout, Daniel arap Moi when he was president. One of my oldest and most respectable friends is Kenya's Chief Scout today.

When I wasn't Scouting I was at school, but almost the only thing I recall about primary school is the rabbits. I don't know whether they were being bred for fur, the table or as pets but I loved looking after them. I didn't go so far as preparing them for release into the wild but I do remember that even then I liked animals and dares as much as each other. Indeed, in an unhappy combination of the two, I caught typhus after drinking from a puddle in the school playground and had to spend months in bed, staring at a naked bulb as the sweat poured off me. It was during this time that I came across a book that inspired me to go to Africa and work with the animals that I had already begun to love.

Absurd as it may sound, in this age of the Discovery and National Geographic Channels, the book that stirred me was Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan of the Apes* – one of the most inaccurate books ever written about the 'Dark Continent'. We only had a small bookshelf at home and it was full of condensed reads and books about war in the desert, containing black and-white pictures of men with their hands in the air. But hidden away at the back of the shelf was a paperback copy of *Tarzan* with a colourful cover. I read it over and over again. These were the days of Johnny Weissmuller and Cheeta down at the picture house, but it was actually the book that inspired me rather than the celluloid, although I always had a liking for Maureen O'Sullivan as Jane.

*Tarzan* fascinated me and inspired a lifelong love of Africa, its people and wildlife that endures to this day – even though I've eaten Africa's dirt, been shot at by its inhabitants and gnawed upon by its wildlife. I still find it hard to define what it is that I love about this place – the freedom, the challenge or the responsibility – but I know I love it with an almost painful intensity and I hate spending too long away from it. When I first read *Tarzan*, going to Africa became an imperative. And I also wanted desperately to be able to communicate with animals like my hero did. Rice Burroughs never set foot in Africa (in fact, William S. Burroughs has probably been a more reliable guide to me) and his descriptions bear no relation to what it actually looks like or what it's like to live here.

The first school I remember properly was Enfield Grammar, a couple of miles' bus ride from home. I must have driven my parents crazy when I was there: I was reasonably quick-witted but I did no work whatsoever. What I really concentrated on was stealing. I'm told that I was personally responsible for the installation of shoplifting mirrors in the local Woolworth's because we were always down there nicking stuff when we should have been a

school. It wasn't because we wanted the things we stole. It was the buzz and excitement we yearned for – Enfield was tedious beyond measure, Cockfosters with more dirt, black-and-white to my Technicolor imagination. At first my petty larceny had been pretty harmless but it was fast aggrandizing, fed by my constant urge for excitement and my unwillingness to turn down a dare. Borstal and prison were becoming ever more likely.

It was at about this time that my life began to change. My father had worked hard at the bank and had been able to buy our first car – a Vauxhall 10 I loved and whose engine I used to play with when I was not out in the fields with the dogs. He washed it religiously at weekends and it always sparkled like new. Having a car in those days was a big deal and that consciousness of their worth has remained with me all my life. The Trust that George and I set up has loads of vehicles now and I keep them on the road way longer than I should because of some inbuilt sense of thrift: every vehicle we've ever had in Tanzania is still in use, an absurd source of pride until I was told how much it was costing us.

Rationing in Britain didn't stop until 1954 when I was nine, and life wasn't easy even then. Nevertheless, Dad's grafting at the bank paid off when he was offered the managership of a new branch. We moved to nearby – but much posher – Southgate, and Dad joined the Rotary Club, an event that set me off on a completely new path. Instead of going to Borstal, I was packed off to Mill Hill, a smart boarding school on the outskirts of north London. They had an assisted-places scheme through which the school and Middlesex County Council would help to pay the fees of a few boys each year. A Rotary Club member had tipped him off about it. I don't know why they took me but I'm so lucky they did. Almost all of my trustees in the UK are Old Millhillians to this day, including my oldest school-friend, Bob Marshall-Andrews who was one of our founders and is now chairman of the George Adamson Trust.

It's fascinating to imagine how my life could have gone without the influence of Mill Hill. Would I have carried on looting Woolworth's and ended up in jail, or would I have got a proper job and kept off the booze in my middle age? Mill Hill taught me many great things but it was a way of life I was after, not a salary; I haven't received a salary since the day I met George Adamson in 1971. Bob said in a speech when I got my OBE that the idea of Mill Hill was to take people from very different backgrounds – the wealthy, the *nouveau riche*, the middle classes and the poor – put them through the system and spit them out as useful, serving, articulate members of society. Then he turned to me and said, 'With you, Fitzjohn, it all went terribly wrong.' I may not be quite what they were planning but I knew from the moment I got to Mill Hill that I had to make it work for me.

Mill Hill was an amazing place to arrive after thirteen years on the grimy streets of north London. It's set in 120 acres of parkland and has views as far as the Chilterns in one direction and much of London in the other. The school buildings were like nothing I had ever seen before – towering ceilings with intricate plasterwork, polished wooden floors and panelling everywhere. It was like something out of a film. The school had gymnasiums, theatres and science laboratories – all things that would be impressive today, but in the 1950s I'd been used to having very little indeed. I was terrified. It was all so alien: I had to fag for someone making his bed and cleaning his shoes, and I had to put up with a bit of bullying – but who doesn't? It didn't last for long. I was in the lowest class when I got there and right from the beginning I knew I had to get out of it and up to the next level. I had a great sense of privilege but was also conscious that this was my one chance. My schooling was virtually free

but even having to pay for the textbooks and uniforms was a burden for my parents, who had to scrimp to make sure I had what I needed and that my sister's fees at a convent in Whetstone could still be covered. All around me other children had things that I wanted. I decided what I had to do was: change my accent, get three A levels and play rugby for the First XV. The first two weren't too hard but I was a weedy little squirt, and although I could jump like a Masai on a pogo stick – very handy at line-outs – getting into the First XV was quite a struggle.

I really threw myself into the school. I worked hard at my studies and outside the classroom I was like someone trying to join the Marines. I did cross-country running, pull-ups in the gym, rope climbing, anything – as long as it hurt. Boys fill out naturally at that age but I was also very athletic – something that's stayed with me, which is lucky or I would never have been able to do half the things I've done. Tracking lions and chasing after leopards all day is exhausting work and I really needed to be strong.

The academic work was a struggle. I've always had problems remembering things, and although I was good enough to pass my A levels, universities weren't exactly clamouring for me to attend and there was no way I was getting into medical school. I did chemistry, zoology and physics with all the future medical students. My chemistry teacher put me in touch with the personnel director of Express Dairies, who took me on as a management trainee before I'd even left school. Most of my contemporaries walked straight into jobs too, but I didn't have the contacts they had so this was a lucky break, even if it wasn't Africa.

As in Cockfosters, I devoted plenty of time to the Scouts. We had the option of Scouting or the CCF at Mill Hill – an easy choice. Play around outdoors, doing what I'd always loved, or wear reject Second World War uniform and march around in circles while being shouted at by a retired sergeant major. I must have got every single badge they ever made but I never became a Queen's Scout. I have always had a problem with authority and becoming a Queen Scout required following rules.

By the time I reached my last two terms I'd achieved what I needed to get out of school and, with the Express job in the bag, I was able to play a little. Bob, who had left a year earlier, used to come and pick me up on Saturday night in his father's old Hillman Minx and we'd go cruising for girls. Unsuccessfully. But it was freedom.

I had loved Mill Hill but casting off the shackles of authority was still a great feeling. I went on a motorbike trip round Britain with a school-friend. We got into all sorts of trouble but it was a short holiday rather than a gap year so very soon I started work at Express. I travelled all over the country doing a variety of jobs as part of my training, from hotel management to a milk round in Muswell Hill, like Matt Monro who sang the Oscar-winning theme song for *Born Free*. 1963 was a great time to be young and in London and I had the best of both worlds. I was a management trainee in a huge and respected company at the forefront of Harold Wilson's 'burning white heat of technology' and I was also knocking on doors in a little blue cap in the early mornings. I soon learnt that all the clichés you hear about milkmen and housewives are true. I was having the time of my life.

As I stumbled from party to good time, Express were beginning to see the error of my ways. They battled away for two long years as I turned up late for work, took too much time off at the weekends to play rugby, grew my hair too long and showed a marked lack of interest in the dairy industry. Eventually they sent me on an Outward Bound course in a last



attempt to get me to show some leadership qualities. It was to be an eye-opener both for Express and myself.

On the course, we were divided into patrols named after polar explorers – ours for Lawrence ‘Titus’ Oates, known for his honourable death when, aware that his ill health was jeopardizing his companions’ lives, he told them, ‘I am just going outside and may be some time,’ before walking out into a blizzard. Being in the Oates patrol was another lucky chance akin to getting into Mill Hill. I’ve been such an ass all my life, chewing at the hand that feeds me and always getting bored, but every now and then I meet some incredibly good person who sees past the pain in their hand and totally changes my life. The man in charge of Oates patrol was one such. Campbell Whalley was just the man I needed to meet at the time. A former game warden in the Serengeti, he had lived the life I had always wanted to lead since reading *Tarzan* – an ambition I had let slide through laziness and a willingness to go with the flow. He was just the kick up the backside I needed. He told me fabulous stories about his life in the bush, the animals he had known, the battles with poachers, the solitary but hugely rewarding life. Blithely unaware of Macmillan’s ‘wind of change’ then sweeping across Africa I wondered what he was doing running an Outward Bound course on Ullswater for a bunch of misfits like me instead of running around the African plains. Early on in the course, he told me I should go to Africa if I felt I had to but added that I was thirty years too late.

Reading Campbell’s assessment of me at the time is a chastening experience. He was extraordinarily prescient, recognizing all the faults I have carried with me through life. He immediately spotted the way my nervousness makes me bluster and show off and, of course, that I had that knee-jerk horror of rules:

*Tony can, however, be very nervous as he showed when giving a lecturette that nevertheless was clear in its presentation and easily understood by the audience ... He only spoilt a good course for himself by being very critical of the staff in his first few days and not keeping his opinions to himself. He was also inclined to pull the rules of the school to shreds ... [he] gave an unfortunate first impression which we feel he must not give again no matter where he goes.*

However, he also saw a good side somewhere, commending me for leading by example and being kind to the weaker boys. Not good enough for Express, though, who fired me as soon as they read the report: ‘Well, thank God for that,’ said Campbell, in 2009, when I met up with him forty-six years later.

I was enthralled by Campbell’s tales of his time as a game warden and, although it took a while to happen, this was a significant watershed. My life in milk was over! I would run a game park in Africa. I would work with animals and, in honour of Titus Oates: I would work outside and I would ‘be some time’.

Deciding to go to Africa and actually going took a bit longer than I had hoped. I worked my way through a bizarre collection of jobs over the next couple of years that brought me into contact with everyone from former colonial governors to the Beatles. I loved the rock and roll, the rugby at the weekends and, most of all, the dolly birds, but it was the old game wardens and colonial administrators who appealed to me most. To me, they embodied real freedom and adventure, not the manufactured Carnaby Street variety. But what a time to be in London ... I had the best of it but my ultimate goal lay ahead of me.

In 1968 my opportunity came. Forget the Summer of Love, I was off to Africa with my maiden aunt Alice.

I first came to Africa by boat – the *Transvaal Castle* from Southampton to Cape Town. It was a proper old liner with all sorts of different forms of entertainment, and although it had just become a ‘one-class’ ship, the social dividing lines were still there until I met some of the wonderful ‘White Africans’ – the last hurrah of the Raj now working in independent Africa. Many would look after me and give me beds and a warm welcome in the years to come. I slept in a four-berth cabin – in steerage, right next to the propeller shafts – with a smelly and largely unintelligible group of Zambian tobacco farmers and miners, alcoholics to a man. It was a glorious trip. Of course I spent all my money before I even got to Grahamstown whence my aunt had relocated from England.

Bizarrely, I met the prime minister, John Vorster, on my first day there. He had just inherited the bloodstained helm of apartheid South Africa following the assassination of Hendrik Verwoerd and he was opening the museum in which my aunt, an artist, had been commissioned to paint murals. It was quite brave of him, considering it was the hated British 1820 Settlers Museum and he was a hard-line Boer. Vorster was just one of many apartheid-era South African leaders that I met in the next year or two. I’m afraid to say they were all disconcertingly nice. Reading about their exploits today, it is hard to equate the private people with their political actions. Vorster, for example, was a corrupt Nazi sympathizer responsible for the brutal suppression of those who opposed his rule, but he was a charming host and made a lovely cup of tea.

Alice had never recovered from the death of her brother, who was executed by the IRA in 1921 – a great shame as she was full of fun and truly kind. Whenever I’m feeling particularly sorry for myself I read the letter he wrote on the night of his death.

*Dear Mother, Alice and Dad,*

*When out walking to-day, Toogood, Glossop and myself were captured by the I.R.A. and have been condemned to be shot to-night.*

*The O.C. I.R.A. and his men have been very civil to us throughout and have treated us well. It is terrible to have to leave you all so early in life but it is fate and a soldier's life.*

*Always remember I died smiling, and believing in a life to come.*

*A thousand kisses and a last farewell. Au-revoir, Rob*

*Don't let this worry you too much.*

It always humbles me.

Back in 1968, I was not feeling sorry for myself at all but I was in pressing need of a job. I took my HGV licence and eventually found work as a bus driver in Cape Town, sometimes serving black areas and at others white. It was while I was there that I was shot at for the first time.

I had been having an affair with a lovely girl called Jane who, in a fit of madness, had confessed all to her husband. I was persuaded by a doctor friend, Richard Arnot – a ‘chap’ who was always getting people to do the decent thing – to go round and apologize. Never listen to a ‘chap’. I arrived to find Jane lying on the floor in a silver lamé jumpsuit, her husband John pointing a revolver at me. Obviously I apologized. But having been forgiven, I couldn’t resist shouting at John as I left. He fired out of the window, then ran down the street after me. Escape came in the form of a bus driven by one of my colleagues, who pulled over and yelled, ‘Hey, *soutpiel*. In trouble again?’ I sat on the back seat, panting like a dog and smiling broadly like Dustin Hoffman, but there was no Katharine Ross with whom to share the joke.

This was one of many events that encouraged me to get on with my life. I was in Africa and – rare in apartheid South Africa – I'd even made friends with a few Africans, but I was still very much in 1960s English mode and I might just as well have been back in the UK most of the time. I needed to make a move and decided to hitchhike up to Kenya where some friends were touring with a rugby team. This took longer than I'd expected but Kenya entranced me from the very moment I arrived. At last I had reached the Africa of my imagination. Even Nairobi National Park took my breath away.

The first place in Nairobi that I really felt at home was, inevitably, a bar. A long, narrow room, the Long Bar at the Stanley Hotel had a huge mural of the turn-of-the-century Nairobi railhead behind Abdi's forty-foot bar. Everyone went there at lunchtime – hunters, tour guides, businessmen, actors from the Donovan Maule Theatre, off-duty pilots, minor European royalty, people up from the coast, upcountry ranchers, politicians, polo players, police informers, con men, drug pushers and even a few bemused tourists.

There was no racism and no privilege there. Prince Alfie Auschberg rubbed shoulders and shared stories with Jimmy Kariuki, an engineer with East African Airways, and Bunny Allen, a genuine Romany with an earring who would talk to anyone – as long as she was a she. If you wanted a lift to the coast, someone was flying down. Never been on a hunt? Someone would take you. Short of a few bob? 'Never mind – it's on us.' Need a tie for the Stanley Grill tonight? 'Take mine.' Problem with Immigration? 'Talk to Macharia over there.'

The Long Bar was one of those defining places – like Carnaby Street or Haight-Ashbury and Woodstock. It perfectly encapsulated a time and place. It was a hard-drinking outfit, the Long Bar – in the daytime as, for some reason, it was always a bit seedy at night when we would follow the BOAC hostesses back to the Grosvenor. And it was in the Long Bar that I first met Ian Hughes. A tough, broken-nosed Welshman with a brain to match his courage, he invited me on my first safari. Unbelievably, after all this talk of *Tarzan* and wanting to run a game park, I'd been in Africa for almost a year and never been out in the real bush. Ian was in charge of a specialist anti-poaching unit based in Maralal that had responsibilities across northern Kenya. I jumped at joining him. Just getting to Maralal, a one-camel town on the edge of the Northern Frontier District (NFD), was an adventure but from there it got better and better.

No one was allowed into the NFD in those days unless they had a permit and an armed escort. But for us it was different: we were the armed escort. We set off from Maralal with a Land Rover and an old two-wheel-drive truck full of game rangers, a great rooster of dust billowing up behind us. We headed north up the eastern shore of Lake Turkana to Ileret on the border with Ethiopia. I had hitchhiked across Africa but had stuck to main roads and aircraft. This was my first time out in the wild and I already knew I was home – the sight of faraway herds of oryx shimmering in the desert air, the taste of the dust and the noise of the howling wind. The hot desert air smelt of battles and sex and a time long gone. I loved everything about it.

Ian taught me a huge amount about the bush and its inhabitants: how to interpret tracks, which animals made what noise and when to climb up the nearest tree (which, in the NFD, could be miles away). It would be years before I knew what I was talking about but it was Ian who set me on my way. I vividly remember hearing my first lion – that deep, deep sound with which I would become so familiar but that is not at all as you would expect. Lions do

not often roar *à la* MGM (that lion is yawning) but their resonant grunting makes the hair rise on your neck and completely fills the African night. 'WHO is the lord of this land? I AM, I AM, I AM ...' He roars, then grunts. Then listens.

It wasn't just Ian's knowledge of natural history that I absorbed. He knew all the tricks for keeping vehicles on the road – how to use a high-lift jack and fix radiators with tea leaves (not that it works! It took me ten years to find out that curry powder was best for small leaks). I loved it all – it was Scouting for grown-ups. Everything went wrong: we ran out of food, we got stuck, our vehicles broke down and we sorted it all out because we had to and was fun. There could have been no more perfect introduction to the bush.

When we got back to Maralal, I met the great explorer Wilfred Thesiger at his house there he would become something of a thorn in George Adamson's side in later years but was very helpful to me when I first arrived in Kenya. He asked me for a lift down to Nairobi and I almost killed him in the driving rain. The murram road south was a river of red mud, and after we had just hurtled off it sideways for the umpteenth time, he peered down his enormous nose and said, 'I haven't driven for over thirty years but if you'd like me to take over ...' Thesiger told me how Kenya was not as it used to be, that it was sad I hadn't arrived before the internal combustion engine ruined everything.

There were a lot of unemployed game wardens and former colonial servants around at the time, who would all tell me the same thing. Following independence, many of the old European wardens took early retirement or were not so gently squeezed out of their jobs so that Africans could be promoted. At first these were properly qualified people who deserved advancement. But as things got more corrupt, and the government became increasingly desperate to let fall a few of the fruits of independence on which its members were gorging, people were promoted on no merit at all. The national parks and, indeed, everything else suffered terribly as a result. One of the outcomes of the policy was the poaching wars of the 1980s and the wholesale slaughter of Kenya and Tanzania's wildlife.

One of the still-employed wardens I met was a wonderful man called Rodney Elliot, who kept an eye on me and fought my corner for years. Ian's boss in the NFD, he was an old-school gentleman, famous for his upright character and iron toughness. It was extraordinary that he talked to me at all. I was a long-haired albeit charming lout with questionable language but there was obviously something in me that he liked. He always defended me when I was up against the authorities and he wrote me a wonderful letter when I first arrived at George's camp, saying, 'I'm very glad that you've found a new assistant. I think you will find George Adamson to be an enterprising and reliable young man.'

On the strength of my success at Ullswater I had managed to swing a job at the Loitokitok Outward Bound School at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro. I was bowled over by its beauty. I can see the mountain from where I write today but I'm on the opposite side here in Tanzania. Kili rises out of the plains near Loitokitok with a drama that I've never seen equalled, a huge solitary volcano with a ruff of snow so perfect it looks fake. In those days, the Amboseli plains thronged with elephant, giraffe and all sorts of plains game. It was the Africa that I had always imagined. We used to get chased by the rhinos there, our hearts going like jackhammers as we cursed them for looking like rocks. You'd pay a king's ransom to be chased by a rhino in Amboseli today. Up on the mountain there were buffalo and bushbuck in the forest, Colobus monkeys in the canopy and all sorts of iridescent birds flitting among the

branches. And always the sentinel mountain in the background. I even ran to the top of 19,340-foot-high Kilimanjaro with a friend – we were three-quarters of the way back when my legs gave up and I couldn't move for five hours. We would have smashed the record but for that.

The Outward Bound School was fun too but, typically, I managed to have a fight with a well-connected student and was soon on my way back to Nairobi and the Long Bar. In Kenya at that time you could do anything you wanted and we did. There was almost no population pressure and the economy was booming. There was a wonderful feeling of freedom and hope then, one that fifty years of misrule has done its best to wipe out but which still lingers on as an impressive credit to the resilience of ordinary Kenyans. But all this fun required a bit of cash and I was no nearer to finding a job that I wanted to do. So when Ian asked me on safari again, of course I agreed.

Ian, a game warden pal of his and I set off in a £50 Volkswagen Combi for points north. We had a spectacular time, doing everything the hard way. We traversed the NFD and crossed the border into Ethiopia near Mega, where we decided to go through the bush rather than take the dirt road. We soon found ourselves lost in the elephant grass with only first and third gear on the van working. It's a long, hard climb from the deserts of southern Ethiopia to the highlands around Addis Ababa and we did them all at crawling speed. Indeed, we went so slowly that semi-naked tribesmen with huge Afros and ancient rifles ran faster than us. We scared them off by waving pistols in the air. At the top of the hill and seven hundred kilometres away was Addis Ababa, the hundred-year-old town built by the Emperor Menelik. It was a funny old place – Haile Selassie was still in power and the whole country was run on feudal lines. His modernization programme hadn't caught up with the eighteenth century let alone the twentieth, and it was no surprise when he was overthrown a few years later. No one would help us mend the Combi because we had neither the right papers nor enough money – until we went to see Brigadier Sandford, to whom we had a letter of introduction from Wilfred and whispered the magic name, Thesiger. Suddenly the Combi was being mended, spare parts became miraculously available and taxes were waived. We drove on through the Simien Mountains and the highlands of Ethiopia to Asmara in modern-day Eritrea. This fabulous little town could have been on the shores of Lake Como, all pastel colours and gentle curves. The Italians had colonized Eritrea and built streets lined with glorious art deco buildings in its highland capital – even the garages were works of art. I remember it most for ice cream, espresso and beautiful girls. Those, and the insane journey down to Massawa we took in a tiny little train that drops around 2,500 metres in 56 kilometres (as the crow flies). There we found an Italian trader who offered to put our VW bus on top of his load of green peppers as it made its way along the Red Sea to Alexandria. Initially we balked at this as too easy, but after further mechanical disasters we took him up on his offer – in the end another of his boats took us to Venice. By the time we reached Paris we were freezing cold and only had one gear left. We made the last stage of the journey with a Primus stove keeping us warm between the seats, then some madman stole the bus and set it on fire. It had been a great safari but once again I hadn't really thought things through.

I had agreed to go on safari. That we would eventually arrive in England hadn't dawned on me until we got there. Ian had a job in Kenya. I had nothing and was back in the place that I had managed only recently to escape. It was a bit bleak. I ended up back driving trucks

between Covent Garden and the airport, picking up goods being imported from Kenya. Occasionally I would get a short job at the Outward Bound School in Devon. I wrote to all my friends and acquaintances in Kenya asking for jobs and news, and even to Joy Adamson, whom I had met when doing a quick building job at the house next door to hers in Naivasha. She said she was looking for a secretary, a job I declined. No one else had anything they could offer me.

When I received a letter from Dawie du Plessis offering to fly me back to South Africa, I was amazed. I had known him in Cape Town but not very well. Nevertheless I accepted without hesitation and was soon on a BOAC Comet to Johannesburg, clutching a bag of rare records that he'd asked me to bring. We went out to his father's farm in the Orange Free State and were soon riding around bareback, mustering cattle and living a healthy life in the sun. Dawie's father was Sand du Plessis, the administrator of the Orange Free State, one of the most powerful men in South Africa. A lovely man, he said he'd get me a job in the South African national parks, but I told him I'd lost my heart to Kenya and turned him down.

One morning out at the farm I woke up hung-over and sore. I walked down to the kitchen where I was shushed into a chair and told to listen: there was a church service from the Bloemfontein Groote Kerke (Big Church) on the radio. I looked around as I listened quietly and realized I was sitting with more concentrated influence and raw power than I ever would again. The administrators of all the other South African states were on one side, with Sand du Plessis, Prime Minister John Vorster and President Jacobus Fouché opposite. It was that kind of house.

Later that day I discovered why Dawie had invited me out in the first place. He confessed as we were riding in the cattle: 'You know that trouble you had just before you left Cape Town? When that man tried to shoot you because you'd slept with his wife? That was my fault. I was having an affair with Jane, but because of my father's position I couldn't be seen to be the cause of her divorce. I've felt guilty for ages. I'm really sorry, *boetjie*.'

I couldn't have cared less. I had loved my time with lamé Jane and I was back in Africa again. Neither would it be the last I heard of my friend Richard Arnot, who had obliged me to do the right thing. A few years later he became front-page news when Nurse Helen Smith and a man with his underpants round his ankles fell to their deaths at a party Richard was giving in Saudi Arabia. I suspect it was a Foreign Office cover-up because there had been influential Saudis at the party.

I loved my time with the du Plessis, but now I was back in Africa, I knew that I had to get to the best bit: Kenya. It was with regret that I said goodbye to South Africa. I had stayed at the heart of Afrikaner country and found my hosts welcoming, gracious and fair. Prime Minister Vorster had been charming and generous on both the occasions I had met him. The people I couldn't stand in South Africa were the English-speaking whites who thought they were so much better than everyone else – the *soutpiels*. It was a relief to be returning to Kenya where in the post-independence euphoria, blacks and whites got on well, and there was an emerging black elite with whom one could drink and play.

I set off in May and hitchhiked my way up through Malawi, Rhodesia, Zambia and Tanzania, arriving broke and thirsty at the Long Bar in July. I still couldn't find a job doing what I wanted but there was plenty of little stuff that I fitted in between safaris and having fun to keep me solvent. I worked at the Djinn Palace on Lake Naivasha, a fabled old *White*

*Mischief* haunt that had fallen into disrepair. It had been bought by a Dutch family who employed me to fix up the boats and get everything going again. I worked on a farm for a while in Timau near Mount Kenya and visited Ian Hughes again in Isiolo. He was living in George and Joy Adamson's old house where they had raised Elsa the lioness. But I wanted to be out in the bush working with animals.

1969 was possibly the worst time to have such ambitions. Mwai Kibaki, Kenya's current president, was then the finance minister. In need of some popularity and well aware of the effect it would have on the economy, he was making life hard for non-Africans, particularly Asians, and it was becoming impossible to get a work permit without the right contacts.

I was chasing a job in Maralal and another with Glenn Cottar, one of the old hunters, but nothing was coming up, so when some friends said they wanted an extra pair of hands on a 'cruise' from Lamu to the Seychelles in an unsuitably gaff-rigged Arab dhow, I accepted at once. Even today Lamu is a fabulous island despite all the Eurotrash cluttering up the beach and a huge new port being built there. Back then it was paradise on earth. Before it became stopping-off point on the hippie trail it was a small island surrounded by powder-sand beaches; its coral reefs were home to myriad species of tropical fish. Marlin, barracuda and sailfish patrolled the deeper waters. An important trading port and seat of Islamic learning for centuries, Lamu has a unique architecture and there are still no cars on the island (except of course, a Land Rover for the district commissioner that doesn't really go anywhere). Back in 1970 it was like stepping back in time. Almost all of the boats were classic lateen-sailed dhows, and it's a pity ours wasn't. Barry White, whose boat it was, must have known a bit about sailing but I certainly didn't so it was something of a surprise when we pointed the boat south only to find ourselves swept up by the powerful current and deposited a hundred miles off Mogadishu to the north. We had to beat our way back south, nipping in and out of the reef that protects the coast of southern Somalia and northern Kenya. I spent my time on board reading *Bwana Game*, George Adamson's autobiography about his time as a game warden in the NFD. I loved it and knew I must meet him.

It was ten long days before we got back to Lamu and I decided enough was enough. There was the chance of a lift back to Nairobi so the next day found me drinking at the Long Bar with Hector Vaughan Ryall. I was complaining about being unable to find a job and telling him how I wanted to be George Adamson.

'I know what we'll do,' said Hector, whom I'd just met that day. 'We'll go to Naivasha and I'll introduce you to Joy.'

So, we bought some cold beers, jumped into his car and drove off to Naivasha. In those days it was a wonderful trip: you drove 1,500 feet up past Westlands and Limuru into the Gatamaiyo forest, then dropped down on to a road that had been built by Italian prisoners during the Second World War. They even built a tiny church there. But it's not the architecture that's so astonishing: it's the view. Fifty years later it still makes my jaw drop when I take the kids back to school nearby. There comes a point when you turn a corner and you can see the Rift Valley stretched out below you. Mount Longonot volcano rises from the valley floor and just along from it Lake Naivasha sparkles in the sunlight. It's immediately apparent why it's called the Rift Valley on that road – there's a sheer escarpment and the valley is marked by a series of lakes stretching north: Naivasha, Elementaita, Nakuru, Bogoria, Baringo, all the way up to Turkana, Ethiopia and its own Rift Valley lakes. There

was no pollution then, no flower farms with their plastic greenhouses, no people. The sight sobered us a little but we were still pretty drunk by the time we turned up at Joy's house, Elsamere, on the southern shore of the lake.

We parked the car and walked around to Elsamere's lakeside aspect. Joy was on the lawn with a monkey on her shoulder and an unsure smile on her face. She greeted us in her strong German accent and I asked her again for a job. She looked at me and Hector as if we were from another planet. 'I have nothing going,' she said. 'But I know my husband is looking for someone. His previous assistant has just been killed by a lion.'



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