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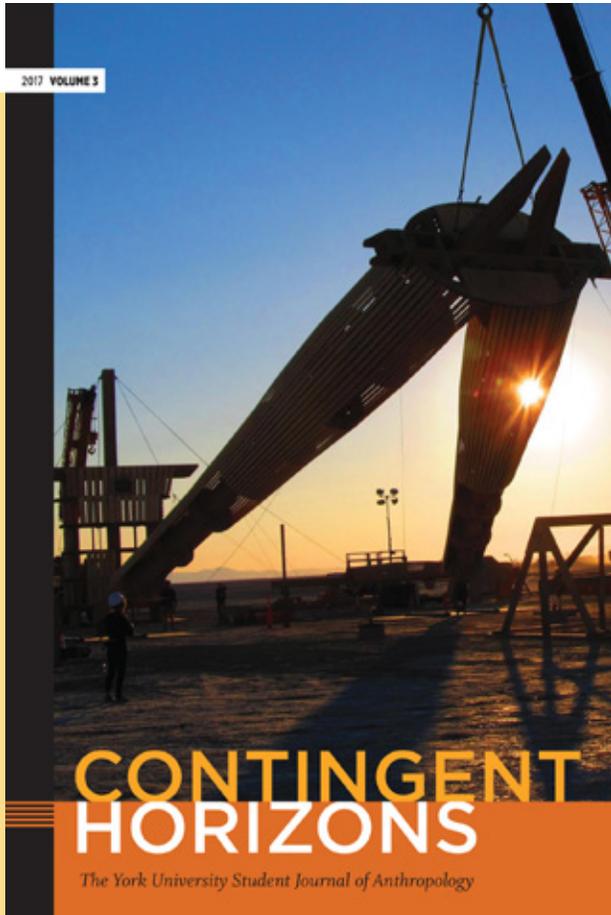
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“Man Eaters”: The myth of wild Africa

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“Man Eaters”

The myth of wild Africa

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The stuffed “man-eating” lions of Tsavo, Kenya are one of the Field Museum of Natural History’s most popular exhibits. However, in Kenyan museums the story of the lions is nowhere to be found. The narrative of these “man-eaters” (who ate over 100 people) and the heroism of the British soldier who killed the lions and rescued the railway seems to be primarily a Western construction. This story of the modernity of a British railroad held up by a savage wilderness intrigues audiences even today. I will discuss how that story plays into the popular belief of a wild, but conquerable, Africa.

KEY WORDS colonialism, museum displays, taxidermy, safari, first-person narratives

Between the towering Grecian pillars of the entrance to the Chicago Field Museum of Natural History, through the brightly flashing ticket booths, past the snarling skeleton of a T. Rex affectionately named “Sue”, lies the entrance to the Field Museum exhibit titled *Mammals of Africa*. By following the path worn into the swampy-green carpet by thousands of feet every year, visitors wander down serpentine, shadowy hallways filled with the taxidermied corpses of dozens of species of buffalo, gazelles, and wildebeest. The animals, stuffed to the brim with every possible preservative, stare back at onlookers with eyes made of coloured marbles. Behind the glass of hundreds of display cases an Edenic variety of forms crouch, climb, snarl, and swim, each one carrying on as if it had never been cut open and stitched back together. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of this lifeless zoo –or more accurately, library– is that every one of the hundreds of animals on display, as well as the countless specimens the museum keeps in storage, tells its own unique story. Visitors are made especially aware of this fact upon arrival at the last display in the exhibit. At first the exhibit’s grand finale seems an underwhelming sight; the case is relatively barren compared to the jungle greenery that grows and twists around every other scene. The animals, two lions, are maneless and small, and their skin appears to be stretched tightly over their stuffed insides like a poorly-fitted suit. Despite their relatively unimpressive stature, visitors crowd around the display to read the riveting story of how these two lions, called “The Man-Eaters of Tsavo”, killed and ate 135 railway workers in what is now Kenya. There is something unique about this story, which separates it from all the other displays in the exhibit. The story of their attacks and eventual capture



PHOTO: CASSIE FANCHER

“Man-eaters of Tsavo”

exploits, as well as the bodies of the lions themselves, have painted a picture that appeals to a British and American idea of Kenya and Africa as a whole. Both Patterson’s account and the display at the Field Museum in Chicago serve to craft a narrative of Africa as a wild land, ready for conquest.

Patterson’s book, *The Man-Eaters Of Tsavo* (1907) was the definitive account of Africa at the beginning of the 20th century, building upon earlier colonial travel and adventure texts set in the African continent, as well as those set in the Americas and Asia.¹ It quickly gained recognition as an adventure story for young men and something of a “how-to” book for hunters. The book described not only Patterson’s trials with the lions, but also gave vivid descriptions of big game, railway construction, and Patterson’s interactions with the “natives”. It became widely acclaimed by both the British and American press as the “Best of Lion Stories” (1909:6). One newspaper asserted that, “No boy’s book of imaginary adventures published this season is likely to make its reader hold his breath more than this modest but veracious record” (“The Man-Eaters of Tsavo” 1907:459–460). The book’s thick description and tales of danger appealed to younger readers, as well as reinforced ideas that Africa was a land of mystery and wonder, whose environments and people were radically different than those of Great Britain. The lions themselves represented an untamed wilderness that many British and American city-dwellers had never experienced. Newspapers played on this confrontation between industry and nature, as one paper wrote, “The two man-eaters . . . waged a savage, though intermittent warfare against the railway and all connected with it at Tsavo, and indeed, in the end actually succeeded in putting a stop to all railway works for a period of three weeks” (1907:23). Another emphasized the danger that workers faced even within the comfort of their beds, “[The lions] forced their way into camp, entered tents and huts, and night after night, in pitch darkness, the camp was aroused by the screams of men being carried away” (“Lion Attacks” 1912:6).

These descriptions added to the growing fame of Patterson’s story and attracted adventure-seekers and big game hunters from the U.S. and Great Britain.

Patterson and the Uganda Railway

In May 1898, Colonel John Henry Patterson arrived at the port in Mombasa on the east coast of what is now Kenya. Patterson was confident in his abilities as both an engineer and a hunter, and was eager to learn about the exotic Africa he had heard so much about. His biographer describes him as having “the gift of the gab, a lively sense of humour, a friendly nature, and an air of command, reinforced perhaps, by the Bible he carried in one hand and, no doubt, by a gun he held in the other” (Brian 2008:7). He would be able to make good use of both his Bible and his gun over the coming months in Kenya. The other talents described by his biographer would also prove useful in his job as a bridge engineer for the Uganda Railroad.² Patterson was assigned to build a bridge over the unpredictable and flood-prone Tsavo River. He was selected due in a large part to his experience building bridges in British-controlled India. The experiences he had in India obviously affected his first impressions of Kenya, as he wrote, “Contrary to my anticipation, everything looked fresh and green, and an oriental glamour of enchantment seemed to hang over the island [of Mombasa]” (Patterson 1907:1).

This “oriental glamour of enchantment” would become something that Patterson constantly referred back to, especially as he compared his ordeal with the Tsavo lions with his experiences hunting tigers in India. Here, Edward Said’s discussion of “Orientalism” may help to explain Patterson’s attitudes and actions. Said wrote that, “Knowledge of the Orient [defined by Said as a European conception of the East], because generated out of strength, in a sense creates the Orient, the Oriental, and his world” (1977:4). In Patterson’s case, Kenya was an example of the Orient, and his existence there necessarily took a position of power and paternalism. Patterson therefore, was unable to view Kenya, the railway workers, or Africa more broadly, through any other lens than as that of a European colonizer, and throughout the *Man-Eaters of Tsavo* Patterson’s “Orientalist” viewpoint would color his writing again and again, especially when it came to Britain’s role as both a colonizer and protector of Kenya’s wealth and people.

The Uganda Railway was central to Patterson’s and Britain’s ideas of their role within Kenya. Being built shortly before World War I, it served to solidify Britain’s dominance over the region, and to secure resources which were being threatened by German colonization of the same area. The railway’s construction was also couched in a rhetoric of the need for African progress and protection. As Charles Miller—author of *The Lunatic Express*—states, the railway was meant to aid not only Britain’s immediate interests, but also to determine “the future of Uganda” (1971:253). From Miller’s perspective the railway would help to civilize the continent and bring prosperity in its wake. He claims that the railroad served as “a visible expression of British humanitarianism” (255). The perceived humanitarian mission of the railroad is seen repeatedly throughout Patterson’s narrative. He views the lions not only as a threat to himself and the railway workers, but also as a threat to the civilizing mission that the railroad represents. It should be emphasized that from the perspective of Patterson, the Uganda Railway management, and Great Britain,

the killings were not a tragedy due merely to the loss of life, but rather that every delay they caused in the building of the railroad was longer the region went without Britain's guiding hand. This is the confrontation described in *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo*, not one of the lions against the workers, but a battle between the savage wilderness of Africa and the modern civilization of Great Britain.

"The Reign of Terror"

Shortly after arriving at the Tsavo River where the bridge was to be built, Patterson started to hear stories of "man-eating" lions that had killed several workers. He initially dismissed the deaths as the fault of other workers, concluding that "some scoundrels from the gangs had murdered them for the sake of their money" (Patterson 1907:10). However it would quickly become apparent that these were not isolated incidents. Two male lions had developed a taste for the railway workers, repeatedly sneaking into tents under the cover of night and dragging unfortunate victims into the brush, where their screams could be heard across the camps. Patterson set about to dispatch the lions quickly and with as few work delays as possible. He began to spend his nights perched in various trees around the sites of previous lion attacks, only to hear screams coming from another part of the camp as the lions continually evaded him. In fact, they were so successful in their hunts that Patterson speculated that, "[The lions appeared], to have an extraordinary and uncanny faculty of finding out our plans beforehand, so that no matter in how likely or how tempting a spot we lay in wait for them, they invariably avoided that particular place and seized their victim for the night from some other camp" (1907:12). Patterson was frequently impressed by the intelligence of the lions, and both he and the rest of the workers began to believe that there was some supernatural quality about them. This was reinforced by the numerous close calls Patterson had while hunting them. Once he had one of the lions in his sights within several yards of himself, only to have his gun misfire and the lion escape (47). Additionally, the lions were enormous³ and maneless,⁴ their unusual appearance lending further credence to the belief that they were something supernatural. The workers took to calling the lions "devils"; and believed that they were immune to human weapons. Patterson himself often refers the lions as "demons" and "monsters" (12, 17). In attempting to express the fear that gripped the railway camp, Patterson writes:

Their methods then became so uncanny and their man-stalking so well-timed and so certain of success, that the workmen firmly believed that they were not real animals at all, but devils in lions' shape.... They were quite convinced that the angry spirits of two departed native chiefs had taken this form in order to protest against a railway being made through their country. (20)

It can be guessed that Patterson also felt some of this same "superstition" about the lions. He admits in his book that although he believes the workmen were much more afraid and irrational than himself, that the lions "certainly ... seemed to bear charmed lives" (47). These quotes suggest that Patterson may not have been as confident of his abilities to capture the lions himself and also that he may have ascribed some of his own doubts to that of the more "superstitious" workers.

Word quickly spread that two "demons" were terrorizing a British railway. The railroad managers, in an effort to stop the attacks, offered a 200 rupee reward to anyone shooting a lion within one mile of railway track on either side of the line. As a result of this and also the notoriety that would result from bringing down the notorious "man-eaters", dozens of big-game hunters flocked to Tsavo (Patterson 2004:24). They all left empty-handed however, as the lions proved too elusive. Meanwhile the attacks continued. Over the course of nine months the lions killed a documented 28 railway workers and an unknown amount of other local inhabitants, including porters and "gun-boys" who weren't officially employed by the railway. The exact total of their kills is up for debate. Patterson claims that 135 people were killed by the lions, although how he came to this conclusion is unknown. However studies of the lions' hair and skin have suggested that it is more likely that they only consumed around 35 humans, not including the people they killed but didn't eat (Yeakela et al. 2009:19,040–19,043).⁵

Regardless of the total amount of casualties, it is clear that the lions had a large impact on the railway, the workers, and Patterson. Hundreds of workers fled the construction camp, throwing themselves in front of a supply train until it slowed enough to jump on. Then they left Tsavo and its "devils" far behind them. As a result, construction of the Tsavo bridge came to a complete halt. What was expected to be a quick and relatively inexpensive bridge-building project was delayed for nearly three weeks. In the meantime, Patterson was clearly frustrated and the camp and its inhabitants were totally at the mercy of the lions' attacks. He dubbed this time the "Reign of Terror" (1907:33). If the papers were correct and this was truly a battle between the railroad and the lions, the lions were winning handily.

Part of Patterson's narrative during the "Reign of Terror" also emphasized the great personal danger he put himself in. Although his book is written several years after Patterson's time in Kenya, a strong sense of fear can still be felt in his descriptions of the numerous close calls he experienced with the lions. This feeling of personal danger is something that was central to the narrative that Patterson was creating. In order for the British humanitarian efforts to come across in the story, every occasion in which Patterson willingly put himself in danger to kill the lions needed to be emphasized. It should not be forgotten that Patterson, as a British engineer for the Uganda railway, probably had the least to fear from the lions. His shelter was the most well protected by bomas, or large thorn fences, and he nearly always carried a gun, something that saved his life on several occasions. The workers on the other hand weren't allowed to be armed in the camp except with permission from railway executives like Patterson. Understanding Patterson's relative safety compared to the workers should not however, dismiss the immediate danger he experienced in his first-hand experiences with the lions. Instead it dispels the myth that Patterson was somehow protecting the railway workers by putting himself in harm's way.

In one of these dangerous encounters, Patterson and the camp doctor spent the night at the site of one of the previous lion attacks. They lay out in a covered goods wagon so that if the lions attacked they would only be able to come from the front. Late that night they heard a large body land softly inside their boma fence. One of the lions was close, but in the pitch darkness Patterson and the doctor couldn't see more than a few feet in front of their faces. It was the closest Patterson had been to being able to shoot one of the lions that had been terrorizing the camps, but it was also the closest he had been to being the

lions' prey. Nothing happened right away, and for two hours the two men sat in silence, knowing that the lion was mere feet away but being unable to see it. After two hours of agonizing silence, Patterson began to discern a dark object moving stealthily around the wagon, in his excitement he turned to tell the doctor what he saw. At that very moment the lion emerged from the darkness and sprung at the wagon. Patterson describes the sheer luck that saved him and the doctor from the lion's lunging claws:

"The lion!" I shouted, and we both fired almost simultaneously—not a moment too soon, for in another second the brute would assuredly have landed inside the wagon. As it was, he must have swerved off in his spring, probably blinded by the flash and frightened by the noise of the double report which was increased a hundredfold by the reverberation of the hollow iron roof of the truck. (20)

The next morning, Patterson found a bullet lodged in the ground inches from the lion's paw-print. It was one of his best opportunities to capture one of the lions and he would not have another chance for several months.

In early December, more than eight months after his arrival at Tsavo, and with railway construction still at an almost complete halt, Patterson would get another shot at one of the "man-eaters". At this point he had been spending most of his nights perched in trees straining his eyes against the darkness, and his days constructing traps to capture the "dreadful monsters". One night he had his workers construct a large wooden scaffolding called a machan next to the body of a mule that the lions had only partially eaten. As there were no trees to sit in near the mule, he was determined to stay in the machan that night. He believed that the lions would come back to finish their meal. Late after midnight Patterson was delighted to hear the sound of a large animal moving in the thorny bushes near the body of the mule. His delight quickly turned to fear however, as he slowly realized that the lion had noticed him, and that it had begun to hunt him as it had so many workers before. He writes, "the hunter became the hunted . . . the lion began stealthily to stalk me! For about two hours he horrified me by slowly creeping round and round my crazy structure, gradually edging his way nearer and nearer" (48). For a time Patterson had an uneasy standoff with the lion, until it suddenly exposed itself directly underneath the machan, readying itself to pounce. Patterson fired his gun directly into the lion's side causing it to let out "a most terrific roar" (49) and it leapt away into the thorny underbrush where Patterson could hear it growling and crashing through the thorns. He fired repeatedly into the thicket where he could hear it trying to escape until the movement and then its growls stopped entirely. The next morning Patterson put together a crew to search for the remains of the lion. Soon they found it dead, still with a snarl on its face. Although the workers celebrated with "an especially wild and savage dance" (50). Patterson writes that he allowed himself only a brief moment of relief before reminding himself that a second lion was still on the loose.

Patterson's description of how he positioned himself in relation to the railway workers is telling of the rest of the book. Whereas he writes the workers as superstitious, flighty, and irrational, in his own internal dialogue he comes across as both brave and logical, never losing sight of his duty to protect and think for the workers, who he calls his "children" (50). This dynamic will be discussed later in the paper.

The second lion made its presence felt in the days following the first lion's death. It continued to prowl the camp sites looking for easy prey and any joy that Patterson may have felt due to killing the first "man-eater" quickly dissipated. There was every reason to believe that the second lion would prove just as elusive as the first, and Patterson had only been able to kill one lion in nine months of attempts. However, just a few weeks after he shot the first lion, Patterson would get a shot at the second. He and his "gun-boy" named Mahina were spending the night in a tree by the site of one of the lion's previous attacks. The tree didn't have much cover around it and before long Patterson could see the lion arrive and begin to stalk them, moving through the underbrush and trying its best to remain hidden. Patterson writes that the lion's stalk "showed that he was an old-hand at the terrible game of man-hunting" (54). As the lion got closer however, Patterson was able to get a clear shot, and fired a bullet into the lion's chest. The bullet, although obviously wounding the lion, didn't kill it, and it immediately turned and fled. Patterson and Mahina waited until daybreak and then set off in pursuit of the lion. Before walking a very great distance they could hear its growling through the bushes. Patterson fired a shot in the direction of the growls and the lion instantly came bounding out into the open snarling and charging at Patterson and Mahina. Patterson stood and fired, knocking the lion down with the first shot, but it wasn't killed and was quickly back on its feet and resumed its charge. At that point, Patterson writes, "The terror of the sudden charge was too much for Mahina, and . . . [he was] well on his way up a tree. In the circumstances there was nothing to do but follow suit" (55). If it hadn't been for the fact that one of Patterson's shots had apparently broken the lion's hind leg, both Patterson and Mahina would likely have been followed into the tree and killed. As it was, the lion was unable to reach the two of them and Patterson continued to fire down onto the lion until it fell to the ground, apparently dead. Patterson climbed down to inspect his kill, at which point the lion jumped up and attempted to charge Patterson again. Mahina came to the rescue firing two shots into the lion's head, which finished him for good. The lion, even in its dying moments, "died gamely, biting savagely at a branch which had fallen to the ground" (54).

Why Lions?

The story of the Tsavo lions not only serves to tell a thrilling narrative of danger and adventure, it also has become embedded in the American and British perception of Africa and the place of colonial powers within the continent. But why are lions the central focus of this narrative? What makes the fact that these killers were lions so important to this story? Part of the reason certainly has to do with the fact that the lions hunted down, and then ate, their victims. The intentionality of the approach has consequences for the ways the lions are imagined. In his book *Monsters of God*, David Quammen writes that large cats "were part of the psychological context in which our sense of identity as a species arose" (2003:1). The idea of humans as prey is something that is both terrifying and thrilling and has given an air of the sensational to this story. But it is not simply the danger of this story that has made it so popular and powerful—it is also what the lions have come to represent.

Unlike elephants, water buffalo, or rhinos, the lions in this story represent a wilderness that is both violent and entirely untameable. Patterson's cause is seen as a just one because there was no alternative to killing the lions. They could not be calmed or contained, and

any efforts to trap them were met with failure. Additionally, the lions were filled with nothing but hatred for humans. Patterson writes early on in his book that “nothing flurried or frightened them in the least, and except for as food they showed a complete contempt for human beings” (1907:14). So not only were the lions an untameable nature, they were also a nature that would continue to do damage if not entirely eradicated. Patterson demonstrates this through his descriptions of how the lions continued to fight even after being shot, such as when the second lion dies “gamely, biting savagely at a branch” (54).

If the lions in Patterson’s story represented the wilderness to a British and American audience, then the railway was the material manifestation of progress and civilization in the region. In the introduction to *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo*, Patterson looks back at his time in Tsavo and illustrates the successes of the railway as he sees it:

The railway, which has modernised the aspect of the place and brought civilisation in its train, was then only in the process of construction, and the country through which it was being built was still in its primitive savage state, as indeed, away from the railway, it still is. (ix, sic)

In this way, the battle that was being waged at Tsavo wasn’t seen by Patterson, the Uganda Railway, or Great Britain as a battle of the lions against the railway workers; it was seen as something greater than that. The story of the “man-eaters” was a battle of civilization against wilderness. The victor would determine, as Miller has said, “the future of Uganda” (1971:253). Therefore, the tragedy of the lion attacks wasn’t the loss of life, but that civilization was being delayed by the wilderness. Every day that the bridge over the Tsavo River was held up was another day that Kenya would go without the civilizing, humanitarian influence of Great Britain.

Patterson’s account puts special emphasis on any example of the literal battle between nature and the railway that he can find. In the case of the lions he dedicates an entire chapter to the way in which a train carrying a British official was delayed until well after nightfall by “an enormous lion standing on the station platform” (1907:40). In another instance, Patterson relays the story of a lion, which was not one of the two “man-eaters”, that actually climbed on top of the station house and began ripping apart the roof in order to get at the station master inside. The emergency telegraph that the station master sent reads, “Lion fighting with station. Send urgent succour [help]” (158, sic). These instances make it explicitly clear that although Patterson and the workers were on the front lines, the battle was a much larger one.

Not only does the story call upon crisis between the civilization of Britain and the wild “savage state” of Africa, the lions in the story also reflect themes familiar to British and American audiences not only because of travel and adventure literature of the time, but also for their relation to biblical, Greek, and Roman mythology. Writing shortly after Patterson had killed the lions, the London-based newspaper known as *The Spectator* makes these comparisons painfully obvious:

The parallel to the story of the lions which stopped the rebuilding of Samaria must occur to every one, and if the Samaritans had quarter as good cause for their fears as had the railway coolies, their wish to propitiate the local deities is easily

understood. If the whole body of lion anecdote, from the days of the Assyrian Kings till the last year of the nineteenth century, were collated and brought together, it would not equal in tragedy or atrocity, in savageness or in sheer insolent contempt for man, armed or unarmed, white or black, the story of these two beasts. ("The Lions that Stopped the Railway" 1900:11)

The Samaritan lions to which the newspaper refers are from the biblical story of God's punishment of the region of Samaria, which was in the ancient empire of Assyria. The lions in the story are called by God to destroy the Samaritans because they still practiced their heathen ways. By drawing comparisons between these two stories, the newspaper is not only tying the narrative into a broader history of empire; it is also implying that the lions are a punishment and that in the process of destroying the lions the British must also save the Africans that live along the railroad from their "savage state", of which the lions are a natural consequence. The lions are the most dangerous animals God or Nature has to punish Man.

Nor was this story only compared to that of the Bible. The article also compares Patterson himself with mythical heroes of Greek mythology, especially Hercules ("The Lions that Stopped the Railway" 1900). In the legend of the "Twelve Labors" of Hercules, he must perform a number of tasks, one of which is the killing of a seemingly indestructible lion, which had been plaguing the land of Nemea, in central Greece. This lion was reportedly immune to mortal weapons, much like the "man-eaters" were mythicized to be. Hercules tracked it to its lair, and forgoing the help of other warriors, goes in alone and strangles the lion with his bare hands. In many paintings and texts ("The Nemean Lion" 2015).

In Patterson's story, his own role as a solitary hero is vital and relates in many ways to the stories of Greek heroes such as Hercules. No matter how many "gun-boys" or porters he may have had by his side while the lions were stalking him, he still describes himself as alone against the beasts. This is evidenced especially by his description of the cowardice of the average railway worker. He writes of the courage required to continue working on the railroad: "the bravest men in the world, much less the ordinary Indian coolie (the workers), will not stand constant terrors of this sort indefinitely" (1907:37). Instead, the responsibility is on Patterson to brave the lions and the wilderness alone. He writes about stalking the "man-eaters": "The silence of an African jungle on a dark night needs to be experienced to be realized; it is most impressive, especially when one is absolutely alone and isolated from one's fellow creatures, as I was then" (47-48). This account plays on the romanticized idea of a white man all alone against the wilderness. It harkens back to the solitary heroes of Greek myths and also fits into the more modern ideas of "independence" and "survival of the fittest" of British and American Social Darwinism. This way, the story was not only built on older foundations of Greek heroism, but also plays into the major themes of capitalism, self-sufficiency, and progress.

"Scoundrels and Shirkers"

Of course, Patterson was very far from being alone. According to his own records the camp at Tsavo had between several hundred and 5,000 workers living at it at any one time

(1907: 33); however, these workers are often described at best as “careless” (65) and at worst as “scoundrels” and “murderers” (32). The vast majority of workers were brought in from British colonial India; in total over 30,000 Indians worked for the Uganda Railway before its completion in 1901 (Miller 1971:290). These workers were far from their homes and families and were working in conditions of low pay, extreme heat, and constant lion attacks. It makes sense that many might, and did, refuse to continue to work. Patterson however uses instances of worker rebellion as an opportunity to demonstrate the superiority of British rule. A central point of his narrative is the domination of British civilization over the less-civilized people of the world.

Once, when confronted with a “mischief-maker” who claimed to be bed-ridden and unable to work, Patterson started a fire under the worker’s bed, causing him to leap up out of pain and run out of the camp hospital, thus proving that the worker didn’t actually need to stay in bed. According to Patterson the other workers who saw this exclaimed “Shabash Sahib!” meaning “Well done, sir!” (1907:28). He uses this story to prove that with a firm hand the “mischief-makers” could be easily dealt with and would respect British authority.

Several days after this occurrence, Patterson was faced with a workers’ mutiny in response to the brutal system of “piece-work” which he had instituted, in which workers were deducted pay for any infringement or failure to produce a certain quota. According to Patterson, as he went to check on workers that were excavating stones for the bridge foundations, they surrounded him and advanced upon him with shovels and crowbars. At that point he jumped upon a rock and began lecturing them in Hindustani, a language from Northern India. He writes that:

The habit of obedience still held them, and fortunately they listened to what I had to say. . . . I said I knew quite well it was only one or two scoundrels among them who had induced them to behave so stupidly. . . . They all knew I was just and fair to the real worker; it was only the scoundrels and shirkers who had anything to fear from me. . . . Finally I called upon those who were willing to return to work to raise their hands and instantly every hand in the crowd was raised. I then felt for a moment that victory was mine, and after dismissing them, I jumped down from the rock and continued my rounds as though nothing had happened. (32)

After the mutiny Patterson called the railway police to Tsavo and had the ringleaders arrested. All were found guilty and sentenced to various terms of “imprisonment in the chain gangs” and Patterson was “never again troubled with mutinous workmen” (32).

Not only does Patterson position himself as a strict taskmaster, he also repeatedly creates a paternalistic relationship with both the Indian workers and the various local people that he encounters.⁶ When discussing his repeated efforts to kill the lions, he writes, “This constant night watching was most dreary and fatiguing work, but I felt that it was a duty that had to be undertaken, as the men naturally looked to me for protection” (36). In this way Patterson is the protector, in addition to the boss, of all of the workers. He, like many other colonizers at the time, calls most of the Africans in his employ “boys”, and “children” (87). At the end of *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo*, Patterson describes the paternalistic attachment he had formed for these “children”: “Towards the end of 1899 I left for England. A few days before I started all my Wa Kikuyu⁷ ‘children’, as they called themselves, came in a

body and begged to be taken with me. . . . They only wished to continue (to be) my ‘children’ wherever I went” (164).

This aspect of Patterson’s narrative does almost as much to create Britain’s position in the world as his account of the lions. He attempts to demonstrate the ways in which Indians and the local people that he encounters are naturally subservient to the British, but also how it is Britain’s job to “civilize” the more “savage” areas of the world.

The Legacy of the “Man-Eaters”

The Man-Eaters of Tsavo had a large influence on how Africa was perceived in America and Britain. It was especially popular among big-game hunters and “preservationists”, who were interested in taxidermy and creating game-reserves. This included one of the biggest names in safari expeditions at the time: former president Theodore Roosevelt. He was enthralled with Patterson’s account of the “man-eaters”, raving, “I think that the incident of the Uganda man-eating lions . . . is the most remarkable account of which we have any record” (Selous 1907:xi–xiii). Roosevelt was so moved by the story and impressed by Patterson’s heroics that he decided to plan his own safari trip across Africa. This trip was planned with the help of Colonel Patterson, as well as many other big-game hunters of the time (Patterson 2004:29). It was, in Roosevelt’s opinion, a resounding success, in which his party collected 5,000 specimens of large mammals alone, as well as thousands of other species. Many of the specimens he collected are now on display next to the “Man-Eaters of Tsavo” at the Field Museum (“Celebrating 100 Years”). Roosevelt’s renown as a big game hunter made his endorsement of Patterson’s book all the more influential. Thanks in a large part to the praise of Roosevelt and other big game hunters,⁸ *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo* would quickly become the definitive account of African lion hunting.

Due to its role as a primary foundation for British and American perceptions of Africa, *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo* has inspired numerous adaptations into other mediums. One of the most popular of these was the 1996 film *The Ghost and the Darkness*. The movie starred Hollywood superstar Val Kilmer as Colonel John Patterson. In the movie the aspect of the lions as monsters is heavily emphasized by naming the lions “The Ghost”, and “The Darkness”, and with explicit mention that the lions hate Patterson most of all. The themes of industry versus nature are also very prevalent throughout the movie. At one point, the only way to flush the lions out of hiding is by burning down the jungle in which they hide; only then could Patterson kill the lions and continue building the railroad. In case the symbolism was not explicit enough, Patterson’s personal servant named simply “Samuel” (created specifically for the film), explains, “Some thought they were the devil sent to stop the white man from owning the world” (1996). Of course, the “devils” are eventually defeated and the movie concludes with a triumphant image of the train crossing Patterson’s bridge, providing a symbolic victory of British (white) civilization over nature (1996).

The movie introduced a whole new generation of American viewers to the story of the “man-eaters.” Despite being produced more than a century after the attacks, it included many of the same themes that *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo* created and perpetuated. One of its major themes was the idea that Africa is a uniform place. The movie (which is ostensibly set in the same location as the actual lion attacks) was filmed in the Songimielo game-reserve in South Africa, with primarily South African actors, while no mention of

Kenya is made in the entire movie. Rather, Africa is seen as “just a place”, as Patterson’s character says at the beginning of the movie. Likewise, the theme of British dominance is strongly present. In an especially telling scene, Patterson proclaims upon completion of the railroad that “the prize is nothing less than the continent of Africa.” For viewers of the film, it is obvious that white civilization has won, and that Africa, portrayed as a single, uniform place, is better off because of British influence.

The Lions at the Field Museum

Upon his return to Great Britain in 1899, Patterson had the pelts of the “man-eaters” made into rugs, which he kept on display in his home for 25 years. After serving in World War I, Patterson took the rugs on a lecture circuit through the United States. He visited museums in New York, Ohio, Detroit, and the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago (Patterson 2004:29–30). At the Field Museum, the museum’s president Stanley Field was so impressed by the story that he offered to buy the rugs off Patterson for the sum of five thousand dollars, which Patterson accepted. Patterson was also promised that his son would be allowed to have a job as a curator at the museum (1907:28).

Ever since, the lions have held their honorary place at the end of the *Mammals of Africa* exhibit. They stand both as the rulers over the animals of Africa, as well as an educational display about Africa itself. As the contemporary curator of the lions, Bruce Patterson (no relation to John Patterson) has written, “Public education is a principal goal of natural history museums” (9). Bruce Patterson’s book documents the story of his trip to Tsavo, Kenya, in order to learn the “truth” about what happened to the “man-eaters” (2004). The “truth” that he uncovers has been adapted into the display of the lions, including the potential whereabouts of their lair, and the reasons for their “man-eating” behavior.⁹ This ever-expanding “truth”, presented by the accumulation of these curated “facts”, is extremely important for evaluating how the lions are seen by the viewing public, as well as the ways in which knowledge is created and cultural relations are understood. Stephanie Moser has written of the ways in which the “interpretive” nature of museum displays allows for seemingly unbiased presentations of concepts such as “civilization, progress, race, and gender” (Moser 2010:23–24). Similarly, Martin Hall has written that museum exhibits come to stand in for “authenticity” within a simulated environment (in this case the Field Museum’s depiction of *Mammals of Africa*) and reflect the audience’s already held conceptions of reality (2006:70–101). Hall goes on to characterize museums as “essential projects of modernization” (2006:7). In Hall’s view, not only are museums knowledge creators, they create a very specific form of knowledge: that of the self. By crafting a narrative of civilization against wilderness, the Tsavo Lions exhibit gives audiences an “unbiased” view of their own identity as modern, dynamic, and civilized, in contrast to an image of primitive, static, and uniform African wilderness.

Within the educational goals of the Field Museum, the act of taxidermy plays a large part. Upon arrival at the Field, the bodies of the lions were in “less than prime condition” as a result of being on display as rugs for so long (Davies 1926:449). Curators and taxidermists worked painstakingly to recreate the size and postures of the lions, however the damage to the pelts was significant. The placard accompanying the display is one of the few in the whole museum to actually apologize for the appearance of the specimen inside.

It informs visitors that the lions would have appeared larger in real life, and that their lack of manes is a result of the climate in which they lived. This is done to assure visitors that although the taxidermy on these lions isn't perfect (possibly implying that all of the other taxidermies are perfect), it is the most accurate representation of the lions that could be reasonably expected. This presentation of an unbiased “reality” or “truth”, is something that the museum strives for in its displays. As Donna Haraway has written:

Taxidermy was about the single story, about nature's unity, the unblemished type specimen. Taxidermy became the art most suited to the epistemological and aesthetic stance of realism. The power of this stance is in its magical effects: what is so painfully constructed appears effortlessly, spontaneously found, discovered, simply there if one will only look. Realism does not appear to be a point of view, but appears as a “peephole into the jungle” where peace may be witnessed. (1984:34)

In the case of the “man-eaters”, the realism of pacificity is not shown so much as the realism of violence and danger. By making the lions appear “hyper-real”, the museum creates a display that shows a “truth” that is more accurate than anything Colonel Patterson's book could present. Because the book is seen as one man's interpretation of the events, its story can be read as flawed or biased. But the museum makes every attempt to appear impartial and unbiased while the act of taxidermy preserves things as “they really were.”

The “truth” and “reality” of the lions make their story resonate even with visitors that have never been to Tsavo, Kenya or seen a lion in the wild. David Quammen predicts that after all big cats are eradicated from the face of the earth, “people will find it hard to conceive that those animals were once proud, dangerous, unpredictable, widespread, and kingly, prowling free among the same forest, rivers, estuaries, and oceans used by humanity” (2003:15). However this very process of forgetting is something that the art of taxidermy in the Field Museum attempts to delay. The thousands of people that pass by the “Man-Eaters of Tsavo” exhibit every year are reminded that there were once animals that were “proud, dangerous, unpredictable, and kingly,” (*Mammals of Africa*, Chicago Field Museum) and that they lived, and were defeated, in Africa. As Haraway writes, the exhibition of these taxidermied animals is “a practice to produce permanence, to arrest decay” (1984:57). Through the process of taxidermy and display at the Field, visitors will continue to be reminded of the danger of the wilderness and Africa for generations to come. The museums present as fact an image of a wild and savage Africa, and therefore, much as Said (1977) has theorized, have created a knowledge of Africa as singular and unchanging, consumable and understandable for European and American audiences.

Ultimately, this is not a story about Kenya, or even one about Africa. This is a story about British and American conquest of these places. It is a narrative created by white British men, and is perpetuated and repackaged for modern day audiences by American institutions such as the Field Museum in Chicago. It plays into the historical themes of the “savage state” of Africa, and the humanitarian efforts of white men, creating stories that uphold ideas of white superiority and conquest. Both Patterson's work *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo*, as well as the display at the Field, create an image of British and American influence in Africa that is presented as fact and ignores the historically coercive and destructive forces that these countries have enacted on the continent. When confronted with the story

of the “man-eaters”, it is easy to get swept away in the danger and heroism of Patterson’s tale without taking a critical eye to his description of British colonialism or his place in Kenya. But it is important to acknowledge the ways in which these stories have helped to foster an idea of the “self” by “Othering” Africa. By critically analyzing and deconstructing this story and its representations, it is possible to begin to unpack the ways in which a seemingly benign institution like the Field Museum of Natural History helps to perpetuate the colonialist and imperialist attitudes found in *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo*. Only by doing this could the “Man-Eaters of Tsavo” cease to be one of the foundation myths for British and American conceptualization of Kenya and Africa as a whole.

Notes

- 1 For examples of this sort of literature see John Smith, *Generall Historie of Virginia* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books., 1629) in the Virginia colony and Dean Mahomed, *The Travels of Dean Mahomed* (Cork: J. Connor, 1794. 2 Vols) in India. It should also be noted that *The Man Eaters of Tsavo* (1907) was published less than a decade after Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), a fictive text that would nonetheless colour colonial perceptions of the African continent for hundreds of years.
- 2 The “Uganda” Railway is somewhat of a misnomer as the entirety of the completed railway runs through what is today Kenya. However, at the time the region that is today both Uganda and Kenya was known simply as “Uganda”.
- 3 Patterson measured the lions at 9’8 and 9’6 respectively from nose to tail and over 3’6 at the shoulder: extremely large for lions. The lions appear small in the display at the Field due to their unique taxidermy which will be discussed later.
- 4 Maneless lions are common in this part of Kenya even today, probably due to the intense heat of the region. However, Patterson and the workers had no way of knowing this, making the lions’ appearance seem strange and unnatural.
- 5 The study by Yeakela et al. (2009) concluded that the lions could have consumed between 5 and 72 people over the nine-month period. This was based on the amount and types of protein found in their hair and skin. The median amount was 34.7 humans consumed, far below Patterson’s estimate of 135 people.
- 6 Including the Maasai and Kikuyu. He devotes extensive portions of his book describing the tribes that he met and their unique appearances and habits, as well as the potential for conversion and civilization of each group. See: *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo* Chapter XI and xxi.
- 7 Here Patterson is referring to the Kikuyu tribe. The Kikuyu people remain one of the largest ethnic groups in contemporary Kenya.
- 8 This included F.C. Selous, who wrote the foreword to *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo* (1907).
- 9 Bruce Patterson (2004) suggests that “man-eating” behaviour is usually caused by injury or old age. However, both of the “Man-Eaters of Tsavo” were young, healthy lions. Their taste for humans may have been developed by eating the remains of people that died on the slave-trade route that ran through Tsavo. “Man-eating” behaviour, as Bruce Patterson has shown, is a habit-forming activity; once the lions began to eat people, it became the principle energy source in their diet.

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