

Jung Bahadur Coapsingha: John Coapman, Hunting, and the Origins of Adventure Tourism in Nepal

By the time I met John Coapman at his home in rural Florida in December 2010 I had already spent more than a decade collecting information on his life and work in India and Nepal during the 1950s and 1960s. Looking at Coapman it was not hard to imagine the huge, intimidating man so many had described—a man known for incredible stamina and tracking skills, for handling the heaviest rifles with ease, and for instantly commanding attention—even though in his eighties he was stooped, walked with a cane, and complained of heart trouble. I was excited to finally meet this famous character from the early years of Nepal tourism: tiger hunter, friend of kings, and pioneer of jungle adventure tourism. But I was also nervous.

From previous correspondence with Coapman, and from stories told by people who had known him through the years, I knew the man I was spending the next twenty-four hours with wasn't just notoriously short-tempered and opinionated, but was known for an inflated self-estimation and a tendency to mythologize—perhaps outright fabricate—his past and accomplishments. Of those left in Nepal who had known Coapman, few expressed friendship and some still grew red-faced with contempt at the thought of him. I was prepared for an irascible old man, but not for the aversion

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5 John Coapman, Dec. 2010. Photo by Mark Liechty.

and pity that washed over me as Coapman stared me straight in the eye and told me things I knew to be untrue. I was never sure whether Coapman was cynically manipulating me, or if he genuinely believed the heroic autobio(hagio)graphy he had constructed. I arrived hoping to clear up numerous discrepancies in the story I was writing; I left John Coapman realizing that the myth *was* the story.

Accordingly, John Vernon Coapman grew up in late colonial India where he became an avid hunter, moving in the circles of India's former princely elites who shared his passion for big-game hunting. Through them, Coapman met Nepal's royal family and developed close ties with King Mahendra, another passionate hunter. For decades the two hunted together and Mahendra bestowed upon him the honorific title "Jung Bahadur Coapsingha" in recognition of Coapman's lion-like (*singha*) bravery (*bahadur*). In the late 1950s Mahendra also granted Coapman the right to hunt professionally in the Nepal Tarai, and in the early 1960s designated him the sole administrator of a vast tract of lowland jungle. Coapman was given exclusive proprietary rights over and hunting privileges within this concession in the Chitwan region, an area comprising hundreds of square miles of some of the best tiger habitat in South Asia. From 1958 to 1963 Coapman led wealthy foreign clients on "big-game safaris" in "his jungle," mainly in pursuit of tigers, the ultimate South Asian trophy animal. In the face of dwindling wildlife stocks, in 1963 Coapman abandoned professional hunting and implemented his vision for a new kind of jungle adventure. With wealthy backers, and the king's blessing, Coapman designed, built from scratch, and managed Tiger Tops, an exclusive jungle lodge that was, arguably, the first luxury eco-adventure tourism establishment in the world, and which today remains the standard for high-end tourism destinations in Nepal. Although Tiger Tops was an outstanding resort, its "fatal flaw" was its isolation and the low volume of tourists coming to Nepal in the late 1960s. By the early 1970s Tiger Tops was under pressure from creditors. In January 1972 Coapman's friend and benefactor King Mahendra died while hunting tigers with Coapman near Chitwan. A few months later Coapman left Nepal to set up two similar game resorts in Kenya. Tiger Tops was transferred into the hands of new owner/managers, and John Coapman never again returned to Nepal.

This tale is as frustrating as it is fascinating. Coapman's role as visionary founder and early manager of Tiger Tops is unquestionable. But nearly every other detail in the above account—largely provided to me by Coapman himself—is virtually impossible to verify and openly questioned by detractors. Perhaps the only indisputable thing about John Coapman is that he left behind a trail of acrimony and controversy, a path littered with (what Coapman refers to as) "enemies." This chapter tells the story of John Coapman's pioneering role in a key sector of Nepal's tourism trade. My goal is not to try to separate the man from the myth but to consider Coapman's pursuit of himself *as myth*.

Newly "opened" to the world in 1951, Nepal was a frontier from which some looked forward, eager to propel Nepal into the modern world, while

others looked back to an exotic, romanticized past. For John Coapman Nepal after 1951 was not a promising new Asian democracy but perhaps the last remaining Indian princely state. Like the British earlier, Coapman viewed Nepal as the feudal fiefdom of a ruling royal family, little different from those of the Indian maharajas he hobnobbed and hunted with. But after independence in 1947, princely India had been reduced to a shadow of its former glory. A self-described feudalist, Coapman saw Nepal as the last refuge of feudal statehood in South Asia, a place ruled by a manly native aristocracy, not yet overrun by impotent bureaucrats, or worse, the puffed-up, know-nothing, degree-holding foreign “experts” who challenged his authority. Coapman was attracted to Nepal for what he imagined it *still was*—not for what it *could be*.

Adopting the role of “white hunter,”¹ Coapman embodied a potent colonial myth. Like Kipling’s Kim, Coapman was that impossible, deeply alienated creature: the foreign native. Born of American parents, raised in India, and fluent in numerous Indian languages, Coapman (like Kim) promised his clients (the fantasy of) perfect access to all kinds of natives from the lowliest peasants to native elites. The white hunter transformed the inscrutable and dangerous Orient into an adventure with trophies—a tiger rug or equally awesome photographs. For sale were fantasy adventures full of tigers, perfumed jungles, docile natives, whisky, hunting machismo, and the lifestyles of Oriental rajas (Alter 2000:50). Coapman produced himself as part of the mythic package that he sold.

Early Life

Coapman’s parents were American Presbyterian missionaries in colonial Punjab. Born in 1927,² he spent most of his early years in the Punjabi city of Ambala and Mussoorie, the British Indian “hill station” in the Himalayan foothills north of Delhi. At Mussoorie he attended Woodstock School. High above the heat of the plains, its buildings spread out across a forested mountain side, the Woodstock campus and community was where missionary families retreated, often for large parts of the year. Mussoorie, Woodstock, and the Tehri Garhwal hills became the home base that Coapman returned to nearly every year between 1929 and 1980.

Among Mussoorie’s prime attractions for Coapman was hunting. The

1. The idea of the white hunter—a crack-shot foreign guide with deep local knowledge hired to lead hunting expeditions and protect clients—originated in British East Africa in the early 1900s (Cameron 1990:158–72).

2. John Coapman passed away on August 18, 2013.

wooded mountain slopes stretching hundreds of kilometers to the east, west, and north were full of small game (deer, mountain goats) as well as more exotic animals like leopards and the occasional tiger. Hunting was a common pastime for Indian and expat staff at Woodstock and Coapman acquired his first gun, a 22-calibre rifle, at age six. Already bending rules, as a teenager Coapman registered several rifles with the colonial government, which allowed him to legally keep the guns with him at school while boarding, to the annoyance of school administrators.

Even in an environment where many men and boys hunted, John Coapman soon stood out. From an early age Coapman lived for hunting. As one family friend remembered,

Coapman was the fastest person at Woodstock by far. He would go hunting in the morning to Pepper Pot [a hill about ten kilometers away] and come back in time for school. This was known. He would get up at three or four in the morning, go out and shoot a *ghoral* [a small mountain antelope], and bring it back. All these stories . . . I mean, if you didn't *know* they were true . . . Well, they *are* true!

His size helped: even as a boy Coapman was well on his way to being a truly enormous adult. In his prime he stood around six feet four inches (almost two meters), weighed over three hundred pounds (> 136 kg), had “hands the size of dinner plates,” and was unusually strong. One fellow hunter recalled that for Coapman any gun was small, even the heavy big-game rifles that were difficult to hold in firing position, *especially* after scrambling up a mountainside or through a jungle. Others remember Coapman's phenomenal eyesight, able to spot the speck of a moving animal on a brown hillside hundreds of meters away. His vision, strength, and countless hours of practice meant Coapman shot with amazing accuracy. Later in life even those with nothing positive to say about him were in awe of Coapman's marksmanship.

Coapman's obsession with hunting meant that he spent almost as much of his boyhood in the countryside among Indians as in school with his fellow foreigners. His closest friend was a Garhwali hill man named Dil Das.³ About the same age, they grew up hunting together and remained close friends and hunting companions for forty-five years. Roaming the hills with Dil Das and other Garhwalis Coapman picked up local dialects but also local lore and superstitions surrounding hunting, including making offerings to local spirits related to animals and hunting. Friends re-

3. Joseph Alter, who also grew up at Woodstock, has written a biography of Dil Das in which his relationship with Coapman figures prominently. See Alter 2000.

member Coapman as a thoroughly hybrid individual: a complex mixture of American and Indian yet never fully one or the other.

After graduating from Woodstock School in 1946, Coapman went to college in the US but didn't last long there before returning to India. Through family connections with the owner of Coca-Cola (who supported Presbyterian mission work), Coapman landed his first job in the early 1950s with a Coke distributor in Karachi and later Coca-Cola itself when they established operations on the subcontinent. It's not clear what Coapman's work entailed, but his later claim to have been "CEO of Coca-Cola India" seems unlikely, given this letter from the Coca-Cola Corporation:

We were not particularly satisfied with Mr. Coapman's performances in India and Pakistan. . . . We personally found him to be a most charming individual and a good talker. However, he continually displayed an immaturity which resulted in a failure to perform as well as was considered necessary. . . . [E]fforts to improve his value to our company were unsuccessful. (Gresham and Gresham 1992:37)

Hunting contributed to the failure of Coapman's first job and first marriage. Coapman's Garhwali hunting companion Dil Das recalled how, during his Coke years, Coapman spent every free moment hunting across north India. One Christmas, rather than spending the holidays with his wife and children, as his wife requested, Coapman went hunting with his buddies. Dil Das implies that repeated episodes like this ended Coapman's marriage (Alter 2000:82) and Coke must have felt equally jilted.

Around this time Coapman began seriously contemplating a professional hunting career. Demand for experienced hunting guides was on the rise and few could match Coapman's skills, cultural fluency, and ability to bridge East and West. But Coapman's transition was gradual. Fired by Coke, in 1958 he took a job with the Kellogg Development Corporation of Cleveland, Ohio, but with an interesting twist. His contract allowed him to work for the US firm six months a year, leaving him the other half year to hunt with clients in South Asia. It's not clear when Coapman first worked as a paid hunting guide but in 1958 it became his official part-time business.

One measure of Coapman's seriousness as a hunter is that in his early twenties he became an early adopter of American-made, custom-built, high-powered Weatherby rifles (Gresham and Gresham 1992:36). Compared to other rifles, a Weatherby shot smaller bullets traveling at much greater velocity. Some hunters feared that smaller slugs wouldn't kill large game, but Coapman and others soon showed that a Weatherby rifle—extremely accurate at very long distances—could deliver a well-placed shot

that would bring down just about anything. Coapman corresponded with Roy Weatherby and, when he began his professional guide service, Roy Weatherby referred potential clients.

Coapman's guide business began taking off but his job with Kellogg was less successful. According to the owner of the Kellogg Development Corporation,

John wasn't like an average employee. Your first impression of him is fine, but he is very young and immature in many ways. He seems to have dreams of grandeur, and just can't come down to earth and face reality in the business world. . . . We just couldn't get any effort out of John. He feels he already knows everything and he won't take instructions. (Gresham and Gresham 1992:37)⁴

Fortunately Coapman was able to quit his Kellogg job (before being fired) to take up what must have seemed like a dream job as sales manager at the Weatherby Company headquarters in southern California in August 1961. Again, Coapman negotiated a contract that allowed him to spend part of every year in South Asia pursuing his career as a professional hunter and guide.

Coapman owed his Weatherby job to Herb Klein. A Wisconsin native who made a fortune in the Wyoming oil fields (Klein 1953:ix), Klein became a virtually full-time big-game hunter and by the 1950s was one of the most famous sportsmen in the US, regularly featured in magazines like *Field and Stream*, *Outdoor Life*, and *Sports Afield*. By 1971 *Sports Illustrated* christened Klein "the dean of all big-game hunters in the world today" (Kraft 1971). Combining business and leisure, in the 1940s Klein invested heavily in the struggling Weatherby rifle business, becoming half owner of the firm. It was Roy Weatherby who recommended Coapman when Klein wanted to add the Marco Polo sheep to his trophy collection.⁵ Fluent in Urdu and with ties to the Mir of Hunza, Coapman was one of few Westerners capable of taking clients into the rugged mountains of northern Pakistan where the rare sheep were found. In late 1959 Coapman took Klein into the Pamirs (Klein 1960), and in January 1961 he led Klein on a tiger hunt in Nepal (Klein 1963). Klein praised Coapman's skills at night hunting, calling him "the best I have worked with in my life" (1963:78).

4. This passage, and the one above from Coca-Cola, is from a biography of Roy Weatherby (Gresham and Gresham 1992). I am treating these as excerpts from actual documents acquired by Weatherby who claims to have written directly to Coapman's former employers when he began to doubt Coapman's employment claims. Not having seen the actual letters, these texts need to be treated cautiously. On the other hand, people who knew Coapman well acknowledge that the accounts ring true.

5. In 1964 *Sports Afield* ranked the Marco Polo sheep "the No. 1 trophy of all time" (Delano 1964:83).

Coapman made such a good impression that Klein, with Roy Weatherby's consent, hired Coapman. A big, charismatic professional hunter devoted to Weatherby products—who could be a better salesman than John Coapman?

According to Weatherby, within weeks he knew there were big problems. He found Coapman “headstrong and argumentative” and virtually impossible to work with. Coapman got into “heated arguments” and was insistent on his own views and plans (Gresham and Gresham 1992:37–38). Klein favored giving Coapman the benefit of the doubt but less than four months into the job—with Klein in Africa on safari—Weatherby terminated Coapman's contract,⁶ leading as well to a falling-out between Weatherby and Klein. Citing differences in management styles, in 1962 Weatherby respectfully asked Klein to sell his shares of the company to another investor, which he did at a substantial profit. Managing to retain Klein as a patron, Coapman returned to South Asia to begin his full-time hunting career.

The History of Big-Game Hunting in South Asia

To understand Coapman's career as a professional hunter and guide, it is necessary to look briefly at the emergence of big-game hunting—in South Asia and elsewhere—especially as it pertains to Nepal.

From the days of lion-spearing Assyrian kings onward, killing big, scary animals has been a part of elite culture, often tied to claims of heroic (even godly) powers and authority (Allsen 2006). Yet it is arguably British colonial culture that took this elite obsession to an extreme, turning big-game hunting into a cultlike form of symbolic mastery, masculinity, and conspicuous consumption (Collingham 2001:124). But hunting in colonial South Asia often depended on the cooperation of the Indian “native aristocracy.” Having annexed all of the prime, taxable agricultural land in India for themselves, the British left large tracts of marginal jungle lands as native states ruled by closely controlled (and obsequiously loyal) rajas and nawabs. These princely states, along with government-controlled forest tracts along the southern flanks of the Himalayas, were the subcontinent's prime hunting zones. By the late nineteenth century it was standard practice for Indian princes to bond with their colonial overlords in elaborate hunting parties. These often resulted in almost unbelievable

6. In a 2010 interview Coapman had little to say about the Weatherby episode aside from that Klein had hired him to “run Weatherby” and “get it straightened out” when it was struggling. He told me that he was able to do this in a year and then left.

slaughter as when Viceroy Lord Linlithgow, on a visit to the Maharaja of Bikaner, shot four thousand grouse before lunch (Jaleel 2001:182). But, as Allen points out, “it would be wrong to think of these as sporting occasions: they were an essential part of the rituals of the state, necessary displays of power by princes made largely impotent by the Pax Britannica” (1977:93).

Among the “princes” made impotent by British paramountcy were the Ranas of Nepal who, as a means of defending their tenuous sovereignty vis-à-vis the British, took the ritual of organized hunting to unprecedented extremes. With game stocks dwindling elsewhere, Nepal’s Tarai lowlands acquired almost mythical status among British hunting elites, especially for its tigers. One of the most coveted invitations was from the Rana prime minister to attend one his elaborate winter hunting camps. From the 1870s onward invitee lists read like a who’s-who of British colonial officialdom and royalty including viceroys and kings. From Jung Bahadur onward it was customary for Rana prime ministers to spend the *minpacas*, or fifty coldest days from December through January, hunting in the Tarai (Adhikari 2001:157)—thereby avoiding the cold of Kathmandu while enjoying the best weather in the lowlands when malarial mosquitoes were inactive. More than just social occasions, hunting parties with British guests allowed Nepalis to accomplish diplomatic objectives (Cox 2010) without needing to allow ritually contaminating foreigners into the Kathmandu Valley (Liechty 1997).

Jung Bahadur Rana was the first to organize large-scale hunting parties, spending thirty-one seasons in the Tarai and dispatching over 550 tigers (Smythies 1942:38). He is also credited with inventing the “Nepal Ring Method” using hundreds of people and elephants to encircle game.⁷ After luring tigers into a designated area with staked buffalo calves, vast strings of three hundred or more elephants would set off to form a ring around several square miles. On command, elephant drivers would direct their animals inward, driving game into a smaller and smaller area. On their own elephants, the shooting party would then proceed into the “ring,” attempting to flush and shoot tigers. Frequently several, even up to six, tigers would be trapped in one ring.⁸ “The danger and heart-bursting excitement may continue for hours, until a succession of well-placed shots

7. Using elephants may have been new but the ring method, using large numbers of people, dates back to at least the Mongol era (Prawdin (2006:184–85) and was also used in Ming China (Dryer 2007:151).

8. Juddha SJB Rana further perfected the ring method by having bearers erect “walls” of cloth hung on poles and stretched around the inner ring. The walls fooled most animals into thinking they were trapped, allowing the elephants to go off and constrict another ring while the raja was shooting in the first. In this way Juddha could enjoy six or seven rings per day (Smythies 1942:44).

finally brings the thrill and nerve-tension to an end” (Smythies 1942:42; cf. Morden 1929).

Interestingly, Jung Bahadur’s innovations in Nepal parallel a similar shift from hunting to “shooting” taking place among European elites. The origins of “driven shooting” date to around 1860. “Previously gentlemen had walked through woods and shot pheasants as they flew away. Now it was the estate workers who did the walking, driving the pheasants towards the gentlemen” (Ruffer 1977:11). Many British elites transformed their rural estates into shooting venues, raising thousands of game birds and employing hundreds of beaters. At the “big shoots” invited “big shots” could wreak unprecedented carnage. Lord Ripon⁹ held the record of twenty-eight pheasants shot in one minute (Ruffer 1977:46). He kept detailed tallies according to which between 1867 and 1923 he killed 556,813 animals (including nine tigers and two rhinos shot in Nepal while a guest of the Ranas) (Ruffer 1977:135). Whether with Jung Bahadur’s “ring method” or the British craze for “driven shooting,” there was a growing worldwide connection between elite privilege and these massive, expensive, labor-intensive hunting spectacles. For elites, “the organized shoot was ideal—its pleasures were admirably exclusive and wonderfully extravagant” (Ruffer 1977:11).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries no one put on a bigger “big shoot” or offered a more spectacular hunting “bag” than the Ranas of Nepal. In 1876 Jung Bahadur hosted Prince Edward and in 1890 Bhir SJB Rana hosted Crown Prince Albert Victor. In 1911 Chandra SJB Rana hosted George V who, after his Imperial Coronation Durbar in Delhi, departed posthaste to Nepal for the biggest “big shoot” ever. Chandra constructed a huge luxury tent city for the king and his entourage (excluding Queen Mary, left to mull in Agra) and assembled a record herd of 645 elephants to ring game. In ten days the king alone shot twenty-one tigers, eight rhinos, and innumerable other animals (Fortescue 1912:201). Visits by royalty and other dignitaries continued apace for the coming decades (see, e.g., Ellison 1925), each occasioning widespread press coverage, making Nepal the most sought-after hunting destination in the world. In the early 1940s one British official penned a veritable hymn to Nepal’s famed Chitwan jungles:

Chitawan! the famous big game reserve of Nepal and one of the most beautiful places in the world. Chitawan! an area of mystery and romance, known by repute to many white men, but seen by so few. Chitawan! a name synonymous (to those who know)

9. The Second Marquess of Ripon, son of the First Marquess, Viceroy of India in the 1870s.

with the acme of big game shooting, reserved for the sport of the Maharaja and his distinguished guests, an Emperor, a Prince, a Viceroy. (Smythies 1942:80)

Less than two decades later Chitwan had become John Coapman's exclusive hunting preserve.

By the 1940s it was clear to the Ranas that British power on the subcontinent was waning and their own political future was in jeopardy. With the Tarai long having served as a kind of interface between Nepali elites and world powers, the Ranas began rethinking the role of big game diplomacy in a changing world. With their noses testing the shifting political winds, the Ranas began opening the Tarai to a new global elite, namely, rich Americans. Already in the 1920s the Ranas had started making money off of Nepal's wildlife¹⁰ but by the 1930s the seeds of the idea that hunting itself could be a moneymaker for Nepali elites seem to have been planted.

The link between Prime Minister Juddha SJB Rana and American "white hunter" Charles Cottar is evidence of this new direction. Having moved to British East Africa in 1910 to pursue his passion for big-game hunting, in 1919 Cottar established "Cottar's Safari Service." It was so successful that he began leading hunts elsewhere, including Nepal. There, according to Herne (1999:108), "His friend the Maharajah of Nepal even made his palace available to the Cottars and their clients for tiger shoots." Herne cites unpublished Cottar family documents but I was able to confirm the gist of his claims in a personal communication with Calvin Cottar, Charles's great-grandson and current owner of Cottar's Safari Service in Kenya.¹¹ Not only does this make Charles Cottar the first white hunter to operate in Nepal, it also suggests that the Ranas had opened the Nepal Tarai to rich Americans for commercial hunting in the 1930s. In 1947 Rana officials talked openly with American diplomats about promoting "a high-class tourist trade for tiger hunting" (*Time* 1947).¹² The nexus between tourism, tigers, and rich Americans was well-established in the minds of Nepali elites in the decades before John Coapman finally brought them together with the establishment of Tiger Tops in the 1960s.

10. For example, in 1922 Kaiser SJB Rana sold two Asian rhinos to an American zoo buyer for 35,000 rupees or 12,600 dollars—a substantial amount at the time (Buck 1930:55). The Ranas also started the disastrous policy of selling rhino horn to Chinese buyers "for medicinal uses" (Buck 1930: text on plate opposite p. 57).

11. Cottar reports having "lots of old cine 35 mm film" of his grandfather's trips to Nepal in the 1930s. Charles Cottar died in 1940, gored by an African rhino (Herne 1999:108).

12. In his own public account of the mission, Satterthwaite mentions big-game hunting as a topic of discussion with the Ranas, describing it as Nepal's "national sport" (1947:38), but does not explicitly mention having discussed hunting tourism.

Out of Africa

To understand the post–World War II, American-led boom in big-game hunting we need to take a brief detour back to Africa. That the first white hunter in Nepal (Charles Cottar) was American and had arrived via Africa is no coincidence. As the US gradually replaced Britain as the global hegemon, Americans increasingly took up “the white man’s burden” of colonialism along with imperial pastimes like big-game hunting. Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919), arguably the first US president to embrace America’s imperial destiny, was also an inveterate big-game hunter. Following in the footsteps of British royalty, after leaving the presidency in March 1909 Roosevelt set out on an enormous safari to British East Africa. Though not the first American to hunt in Africa, Roosevelt’s widely publicized shooting of elephants, rhinos, lions, and leopards captured the public’s imagination and fed American fantasies of colonial machismo. Inspired by Roosevelt, in 1910 Charles Cottar went to Africa to hunt and soon made a career out of leading fabulously rich American tycoons and movie stars in search of big game. A young Ernest Hemingway pored over Roosevelt’s 1910 safari memoir, *African Game Trails*, entranced by stories of close encounters with “the most dangerous of the world’s big game” (Roosevelt 1934 [1910]:7).¹³ During his own much-publicized safari in 1934, Hemingway intentionally hired the same white hunter that had guided Roosevelt (Ondaatje 2004:23), and was aware of walking in the footsteps of British royalty (Hemingway 1963 [1935]:142). If Roosevelt’s safari “persuaded many wealthy sportsmen from around the world to try their hand at big-game hunting” (Ondaatje 2004:45), Hemingway’s African safari (and the books, short stories, and Hollywood film adaptations that came from it) fixed an indelible image of African hunting machismo in the American popular imagination.¹⁴

Yet what colonialism made possible, decolonization spelled an end to. With the loss of India—Britain’s “Jewel in the Crown”—to independence in 1947, other gems soon fell, including British East African colonies where violent antiforeign, anticolonial movements made an African safari a much less pleasant prospect for rich Americans. It is in this context that Nepal, newly opened but still a more-or-less feudal state with a quasi-

13. Roosevelt describes native African culture as equivalent to “Europe in the late Pleistocene” (1937 [1910]:3). He has nothing but admiration for the British and German colonials he encounters and there is not the faintest hint of any critique of colonial rule.

14. Hemingway’s nonfiction account of his safari, *Green Hills of Africa* (1935), had a huge impact on Western “sporting culture,” laying a blueprint for American fantasies of manly adventure and quasi-colonial mastery: the white bwanas and their sage white hunter engaged in manly competition, tossing back whisky in the cool of their tented camps, eagerly served by throngs of admiring natives.

colonial ethos, began attracting the attention of hunting elites in search of an authentic mythical experience.

John Coapman and Professional Hunting in Nepal

By the time Coapman registered his firm Royal Nepal Shikar in Kathmandu in 1958 he was already leading clients in India and Pakistan. But Britain's departure from India also ended laws that had kept guns out of Indian hands, reserved hunting for elites, and protected wildlife habitat (Byrne 2001:81). After 1947 Indians set up hunting firms that advertised in US magazines promising "Tiger Guaranteed" or "No Tiger, No Fee" (Jaleel 2001:183). With wildlife stocks rapidly dwindling in India, Nepal was seen as the last South Asian region with relatively intact jungle ecosystems and big-game hunting potential. Already famous in big-game hunting circles, the Tarai region's reputation continued to grow once Nepal opened to foreigners. For wealthy hunters in search of a tiger skin, Coapman provided a valuable service and access to an otherwise inaccessible place.

Nepal tourism began slowly in the early 1950s but from the start guidebooks promoted big-game hunting as a "note-worthy" activity (Poudyal 1955:2). Han Suyin's (albeit fictionalized) account mentions wealthy Americans on Tarai hunting safaris in the mid-1950s (Han 1973 [1958]:143). A 1960 Royal Nepal Academy tourist pamphlet describes particular fauna as being "of great attraction to hunters" (RNA 1960:12). The most enthusiastic pitch for Nepal hunting tourism is in a 1959 guidebook.

Nepal affords a variety of wild animals in the annals of big game that are unique in the world of shikar trophies, and can rightly claim to be the best hunting grounds of the universe. It has, perhaps, the most celebrated reserves, for herein distinguished guests from all over the world have partaken of the privileges. (Elliott 1959:108)

John Coapman claimed to be the first foreigner to register a hunting business in Nepal but in fact that distinction goes to Peter Byrne, another self-described white hunter. Irish by birth, Byrne served with the British Royal Air Force in South East Asia during World War II. Following the war he joined a tea company in northern Bengal where he worked from 1948 to 1953. Relatively unencumbered with work, Byrne spent much of his time walking the hills, honing his hunting skills, and eventually contemplating a career as a professional hunting guide. On weekends the company flew their tea to Calcutta and it was there that Byrne met Nepal's

Prince Basundhara, brother of King (then Crown Prince) Mahendra. “I met him in the Casanova Bar in the Grand Hotel,” said Byrne. “When I was a planter we’d fly down for weekends. All the tea gardens shipped from Calcutta. So that’s how I met Basundhara. The Grand Hotel—we all stayed there.”¹⁵

Byrne and Basundhara hit it off and when the prince learned of Byrne’s hunting dreams, he offered to help get him licensed for hunting in Nepal. In 1953 Byrne *walked* from Darjeeling to Kathmandu (2001:147) where he met Basundhara.

So Basundhara, he needed someone to write a permit. But of course there was no Department of Wildlife. So he sent for the Foreign Secretary. . . . Basundhara told him [the Secretary], “Write something down for Peter and get it stamped and signed.” So the document I have, which is framed at home, is written by the Foreign Secretary, to allow me to hunt for ten years and to be renewed after ten years. . . . There was no department at that time. There was barely a government.¹⁶

Along with the permit Byrne received a Tarai hunting concession located in the farthest reaches of western Nepal (2001:145). Because the area, known as *Sukla Phanta* (or the White Grass Plains) was closer to Delhi than Kathmandu, Byrne operated his business from the Indian capital only ten hours away by road. Starting with advertisements in US magazines like *Field and Stream* and *Outdoor Life* (Byrne 2001:157), Byrne built up a clientele of “mostly rich Americans: Californians and Texans.”

Although it now seems stranger than fiction, in 1957 Byrne met Tom Slick, the eccentric Texas millionaire with an obsession for “cryptozoology” (see chapter 3). On Tenzing Norgay’s recommendation, Slick hired Byrne and his brother to hunt for the Abominable Snowman in the high country of the eastern Nepal. “So we spent three years, coming down at Christmastime, staying in hotels, whooping it up for a week, and going back.” With no luck in the Himalayas, on his annual visit to Kathmandu in 1960 Byrne got a cable from Slick asking him to come to the American northwest to search for “Bigfoot.” That project lasted until 1962 when Slick

15. In his book Byrne (2001:138–45) describes this meeting with Basundhara in more fascinating detail. There he tells of coming to the aid of a small, dapper South Asian gentleman who was picked on by a drunken European bully at the bar. After punching the drunk and having him dragged off by hotel security, Byrne learned that the stranger was a Nepali prince! Indebted to Byrne, Basundhara invited him to visit Nepal and offered his assistance.

16. Given that ministries did not exist when Byrne received his documentation, Coapman’s claim to have registered the “first professional hunting company via official Govt. of Nepal Ministries of Forest and Industries” may be true.

was killed in a plane crash and his heirs pulled the plug on his eccentric projects, according to Byrne, “literally overnight.”¹⁷

Because Byrne’s hunting business had been on hold for five years after 1957, he was unaware of John Coapman’s entry onto the scene in Nepal. The two first met by coincidence during Coapman’s brief stint at Weatherby headquarters in southern California where Byrne went to visit Herb Klein in 1961. After a pleasant lunch, Klein told Byrne, “I’d like you to meet one of my managers.”

So Klein left and Coapman and I sat down and had some coffee together and we talked, or at least *he* talked. And he told me that that he was a hunter in Nepal. He said he had been hunting there many years and he said that his specialty was man-eating tigers. Whenever there was a man-eater, the king sent specially for him. He had permission from Herb Klein to leave the factory at any time and go to Nepal and hunt a man-eater. I asked how many he had shot to this date, and he said, “Oh, seven or eight”—as if you wouldn’t remember how many. So he went on and on and on about his association with the king, and his many safaris, western Nepal, eastern Nepal. And then time came and we were standing up and he asked, “So what do you do?” and I said, “Well, I’m a pro hunter in Nepal—15 years.” He looked at me. And then he walked away.

I made a terrible enemy of him because I bluffed him. And he came out here [to Kathmandu] and he bad-mouthed me back and forth all over the place. But a lot of people quickly saw through him. He’s a phony, a complete phony.

When I told him something of Coapman’s version of the story, Byrne insisted “Coapman never had a license here, no. Coapman was a complete fraud. . . . I don’t think he ever hunted.”

Perhaps what rankled Coapman’s acquaintances more than anything was his claim to intimacy with Nepal’s royal family, especially King Mahendra. Coapman claimed he was introduced to Nepali royals by Indian princes related by marriage. Jim Edwards, who later played a major role at Tiger Tops, spoke contemptuously about Coapman’s ties with the palace.

You’d be sitting having a cup of tea at the Royal [Hotel in Kathmandu] and Coapman would drive up and the first thing he’d say is, “Oh, I’ve just had tea with the king, I don’t need any.” Things like that, all the time. Several times the king wasn’t even in the country and Coapman would have had dinner with him.

17. Loren Coleman (1989) documents Byrne’s relationship with Slick, and Byrne (1975) documents his own adventures with “Bigfoot.”

In 1963 Edwards teamed up with Charles McDougal in their own professional hunting business, Nepal Wildlife Adventure, with McDougal as hunter and naturalist, and Edwards as publicist and manager. Unlike Peter Byrne, who dismissed any and all of Coapman's claims, Edwards acknowledged that Coapman had a reputation for being an excellent hunter and was making good money guiding wealthy clients. But as for Coapman's claims of being close to the king, that was "bullshit."

I pressed both Byrne and Edwards to explain how, if Coapman *did not* have strong ties with Mahendra, he managed in 1963 to acquire rights to the famous Chitwan hunting tracts controlled by the royal family. All Peter Byrne could say was that Coapman blustered his way into it.

He was a talker. He was a hell of a talker. He was a man who exuded enormous confidence. He was very big. He had people jumping all over the place, but it was all lies. Oh, he could talk to people. He had a great presence.

Jim Edwards finally conceded that Coapman must have had ties to Mahendra.

Look, in the long run, Mark, if he was a friend of King Mahendra, great. Why not? I mean he could have been. I mean I'm sure that Coapman met him a couple of times. . . . So it might have been from Mahendra. I mean, I wouldn't know how else he got permission. . . . I mean he couldn't just walk into the king's house [and demand such a thing].

Coapman and Mahendra likely formed a relationship around a shared a love of hunting. Mahendra collected big-game trophies and may have hired Coapman even before 1958: many South Asian elites did, from the Raja of Kotah to Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (Alter 2000:82). Mahendra hired other professional guides: he hunted lions in Africa (Kraft 1965) and grizzly and polar bears in Alaska¹⁸ (Hutchins 2007:14). Like his Rana predecessors, Mahendra mounted massive cool-season hunting parties in the Tarai, one of which was written up in great detail in *Sports Illustrated* (Kraft 1965). On an official visit to the US in 1960 Mahendra went out of his way to visit the Weatherby rifle company's headquarters. A photo taken at the factory shows the usually morose Mahendra holding a Weatherby rifle with the closest thing to a smile that I have ever seen captured on film (Gresham and Gresham 1992:62). Even a photo

18. A massive polar bear rug (dotted with mothballs) still dominates the grand reception hall of Kathmandu's former royal palace, now a public museum. There are also dozens of other aging big-game trophies on display.

op with Elvis Presley didn't elicit the pleasure of talking guns with Roy Weatherby.¹⁹ Was Coapman responsible for Mahendra's love of Weatherby rifles? Was it mere coincidence that Weatherby hired Coapman within a year of the king's visit? All I can say is that I failed to find mention of Coapman in any reference concerning Mahendra and hunting.

Founding Tiger Tops

Tiger hunting in Nepal wasn't officially banned until after Mahendra's death in 1972, but already by the early 1960s signs of big-game hunting's demise were evident. Perhaps most telling was an incident during Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip's official visit to Nepal in February 1961 when Mahendra mounted the last of the lavish Tarai hunting parties in their honor. Faced with a century of royal precedent, Prince Philip was in a quandary. A prominent member of several UK-based wildlife conservation organizations, Philip could neither turn down Mahendra's invitation nor be seen killing endangered animals. As Peissel reports, "Newspapers in England openly attacked the royal party for participating in a shoot that not only was cruel and outmoded but that also taxed the budget of a small, underdeveloped country" (1966:257–58). Briton's royals flew to Chitwan but on the morning of the big shoot Prince Philip arrived at breakfast sporting a large bandage on his trigger finger, the result of a mysterious accident the night before (Peissel 1966:258)! While Mahendra hunted, Elizabeth shot photos and Philip convalesced while enjoying a tour of the area on elephant back.

As the era of environmental consciousness began to dawn, the days of sport hunting were numbered. In fact some of the first to exchange guns for cameras were hunters themselves, aware of what rising human populations and habitat loss meant for the viability of wildlife stocks. Already in the 1930s legendary tiger slayer Jim Corbett had given up sport hunting for photography.²⁰ "The taking of a good photograph gives far more pleasure to the sportsman than the acquisition of a trophy," said Corbett (1991 [1944]:236). When Corbett moved to British Kenya in 1947 he set up Tree Tops—a game-viewing lodge, not a hunting business.

19. See the photo of Elvis and Mahendra on the Wikipedia entry for "Mahendra of Nepal."

20. Corbett (1875–1955) grew up near Mussoorie a generation before Coapman and became world-famous for stalking man-eating tigers which he described in his best-selling *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (1944) (later a Hollywood movie [Jaleel 2001]). Corbett was also a pioneering conservationist (Booth 1991 [1986]:181) and a leading force behind passage of the 1935 Indian Wildlife Protection Act. Today a huge Indian national park is named after Corbett, a rare honor for a British colonial.

Even so, the allure of big-game hunting was still strong, especially for nouveau riche Americans who, eager to inherit the colonial pleasures of the erstwhile British, continued to shoot trophies in Africa. Hemingway took a second well-publicized safari in 1953. Movie star William Holden was so smitten with African hunting that, with the help of American oil billionaire Ray Ryan, in 1959 he purchased a huge colonial estate and established the Mount Kenya Safari Club (MKSC). Now a fancy resort, the MKSC was originally an exclusive club and (according to its website) a “Mecca for the international jet set” with a member list that read “like a Who’s Who of royalty, aristocracy, and the rich and famous” including Ernest Hemingway, Bing Crosby, Conrad Hilton, and Winston Churchill.

Two names notably absent from MKSC’s member roles were Herb Klein (the oilman hunter associated with Weatherby rifles) and his hunting companion Toddie Lee Wynne. Leading members of the Houston-based Shikar Safari Club, Klein and Wynne had applied for membership only to be turned down because, according to Jim Edwards, “there were too many Texans.” Still stinging from this humiliation, in 1960 Klein met Coapman to discuss ideas for a club/resort in Asia. By the fall of 1961 (after Weatherby fired Coapman) Klein, Wynne, and Coapman were in Kathmandu wining and dining with the royals.

Toddie Lee Wynne (1896–1982) epitomized the vulgar but shrewd ultra-rich Texas oilman. The owner of American Liberty Oil Company, he lived in a vast pastel-pink mansion in Dallas, was a co-owner of the Dallas Cowboys football team, and vacationed on his private island in the Gulf of Mexico. Already rich from oil, he amassed further fortunes as a real estate developer in Texas and overseas. A June 20, 1960, *Time* magazine article describes Wynne’s 2.48 million dollar investment (a fortune at that time) in prime Hong Kong property where he erected a twenty-five-story Hilton hotel. That hotel and another in Bali were phenomenally profitable, earning Wynne a reputation as a savvy maverick investor. In comparison, the project Wynne and Klein dreamed up with John Coapman in Nepal must have seemed like a minor amusement. Klein and Wynne agreed to put up one hundred thousand dollars and make Coapman managing director of the proposed jungle lodge.²¹

Coapman had begun sketching plans for a resort in the early 1960s and it was probably images like these that stoked Klein and Wynne’s own dreams of a quasi-private hunting resort on the Tarai, sour-grapes com-

21. According to Coapman, Klein and Wynne were 50 percent shareholders and he held the other half. But according to Jim Edwards, who claimed to have seen the original documents, Coapman’s ownership of half the company’s shares was made contingent upon his repaying the original hundred thousand dollar investment, something he never accomplished.

pensation for membership in the African club. Coapman also realized that it was time to get out of hunting.

I stopped hunting professionally in 1963 because big game hunting in Asia was coming to a close, not because of serious hunters, but because of poachers, population explosion, destruction of mountain and jungle forests by human pressure, and forest cutting. I knew tourism and photography were the only possible future for me. I also preferred the wild animals over my clients who were mainly poor hunters. (Personal correspondence, 7/15/2004)

Coapman was also clearly inspired by Jim Corbett who had already shifted to low-impact wildlife tourism in Africa a decade earlier. “When I came up with the name Tigertops [*sic*] I was thinking Tree Tops for Kenya and Tigertops for Nepal,” said Coapman (personal correspondence, 4/21/2008). Though not well-known today, in the 1950s and 1960s Corbett’s Tree Tops was famous²² and the link between the two names was clearly understood at the time²³ and a savvy decision.

By the time Jim Edwards arrived in Kathmandu in May 1962 Coapman was talking up his new ideas.

Boris introduced me to [Coapman] and he was telling about some grandiose scheme where he was going to take over the whole of Nepal’s wildlife for the government, and the king was his best friend. Complete bullshit. He was going to take the whole of Nepal’s wildlife and turn it into Africa—like with wildlife lodges and that kind of thing, safari parks. He was going to be asked by the government to manage them. And when I heard that I was quite pleased. . . . I was glad someone had the guts to even try it because Nepal wasn’t easy in those days . . . unless you were actually royal, or had royal contacts, which we *all* did. Coapman knew everybody in town. I knew everybody in town. Boris knew everybody in town. So it wasn’t a secret that you knew people. You either knew people or you didn’t. Frankly, you either knew people or you didn’t exist.

Important here is the Africa connection: Coapman envisioned a system of safari parks and lodges similar to those already established in Kenya and Tanzania. Government approval suggests that Mahendra himself likely

22. In 1952 Tree Tops scored a public relations coup when then Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip visited the resort. While the royals were in their “tree top” game viewing platform on the night of February 5th, King George VI died, leaving Elizabeth the defacto queen. Corbett joked that “for the first time in the history of the world a young girl climbed into a tree one day a Princess and . . . climbed down from the tree the next day a Queen” (Booth 1991 [1986]:249)! News of Tree Tops spread round the world.

23. E.g., see Simpson 1976 [1967]:97.