

## BIOGRAPHY OF A BIG GAME HUNTER IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

*Big Game Hunter: A Biography of Frederick Courteney Selous.*

By Norman Etherington.

Marlborough, UK: Robert Hale, 2016. Pp. 224. \$39.95, hardback (ISBN: 9780719808289).

doi:10.1017/S0021853719000574

**Key Words:** biography, hunting, Southern Africa, imperialism.

Frederick Courteney Selous was one of the most famous big-game hunters of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras and he has already been the subject of several biographies. None were written by historians, however, and with this latest offering, Norman Etherington has produced a more nuanced narrative still aimed at ‘the general reader’ (15). Digital databases enable Etherington to introduce some new details to a well-known story, but his primary contribution is a deft and engaging contextualization of Selous in terms of imperial politics and culture. Non-specialists will learn much from *Big Game Hunter* and will enjoy it. African specialists, on the other hand, may be more struck by the instances when even a critical biography such as this one falls into the trap of reifying the great white hunter mythos.

A significant strength of this biography is the attention Etherington gives to Selous’ public and private identities and how Selous-the-hunter crafted a ‘literary persona that everyone took for the real’ man (95). Etherington foregrounds the sources he used to construct his narrative and contrasts the lingering image of Selous as a simple, honest hunter with evidence that shows the man, his actions, and his aspirations in a very different light. He also pulls back the curtain on Selous’ narratives by considering the process Selous used to write his immensely popular travelogues and the literary license he likely took in doing so.

Despite the critical eye that Etherington brings to Selous’ narratives, he allows a few problematic tales of African actions to pass unchallenged. For instance, Etherington probes one of Selous’ lion stories and concludes that he ‘must have concocted’ the specifics using ‘his own memory... [and] imagination’, showing he could spin ‘an exciting yarn’ (55). Yet, five pages before that discussion, Etherington relates Selous’ tale of getting lost and nearly dying of thirst without questioning it, leading him to assert that the ‘Bushmen’ who were paid to find Selous neglected to do so and instead recounted ‘a cock and bull story’: they claimed that Selous’ tracks indicated that he had headed for the nearest town (50). Had Etherington questioned the details of that story and asked why the men might have lied — if they in fact did so — it would have opened up a valuable discussion of resistance strategies and imperial tropes, thereby showing readers why we must examine Selous’ claims about Africans’ deeds or motives.

On a broader scale, there is a curious silence around the issue of racism. In the index, Etherington points to two pages that contain evidence of Selous’ racism, but he does not address them as such in the text (144, 214). In the Introduction, Etherington notes that Selous’ third book ‘reads today like a racist apologia for conquest,’ but otherwise ‘racist’ is a word he applies to other settlers (11). Etherington even contends that Selous knew better than to act like ‘a racist white farmer’ when hunting far beyond the pale of colonial

control (58). It is true that Selous generally recognized the limits to his power in African-controlled territories, but without a frank discussion of his racist beliefs and actions, such statements reinforce the popular notion that white hunters served as comparatively benevolent imperial liaisons.

Devoting more attention to the men Selous hired may have helped address this imbalance. Etherington provides fine descriptions of the African politics and leaders who controlled access to good hunting grounds. He also explains in the final chapter how the ‘great white hunter’ myth extracts [Selous] from his historical context’ and erases the contributions of the ‘guides, interpreters, wagon drivers, porters and shooters’ who worked for him although readers gain little sense of these men or their relations with Selous (244). Specifics are hard to uncover, but providing examples of Selous’ complete reliance on these individuals’ expertise, the dynamics of camp life, and the factors, such as firearm diffusion, that induced people to work for European hunters in this era would have given readers a sense of these individuals as complex actors.

Etherington is in his element when he describes the politics of imperial conquest and the varying strategies employed by African kings and chiefs during this dynamic and dangerous era. These sections offer impressively concise and clear descriptions of imperial machinations and African agency. Together, they give the biography depth and make it a notable contribution to a field filled with hagiographic narratives. This review has focused on the biography’s lapses, because it was written for African specialists, who are most likely to be struck by those elements of the text. In all other respects, Etherington has provided readers with a well-researched and highly contextualized account of Selous’ life and the many narratives generated about it.

ANGELA THOMPSELL

*The College at Brockport, State University of New York*

## HISTORY OF A SOUTH AFRICAN CITY

*Welcome to Greater Edendale: Histories of Environment, Health, and Gender in an African City.*

By Marc Epprecht.

Montreal, Chicago: McGill-Queen’s University Press (McGill-Queen’s studies in urban governance series, 5), 2016.

Pp. xiii + 336. \$110.00 hardback (ISBN: 978-0-7735-4773-5); \$34.95, paperback (ISBN: 978-0-7735-4774-2).

doi:10.1017/S0021853719000586

**Key Words:** South Africa, urban, environment, governance.

Published in the McGill-Queen’s studies in urban governance series, *Welcome to Greater Edendale* is an ambitious cross-disciplinary book spanning nearly two hundred years of history that focuses on the peripheral city of Greater Edendale and the policies and policy-makers that made it. From the outset, Epprecht positions himself as the historian on a project team working in Greater Edendale on a case study investigating ecosystems and human health in South Africa. His brief, as he understood it, was to ensure that the principal researchers ‘properly contextualised’ their findings. This role informs his approach to