

New Price  
8 More Pages

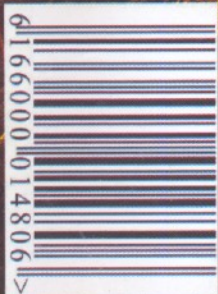
# OLD AFRICA

STORIES *from* EAST AFRICA'S PAST

## AFRICAN TWILIGHT – FISHER & BECKWITH

Polish War Refugees | John Muhato | Bird Names

Wildlife Vet | Audrey Taylor | Entebbe Raid



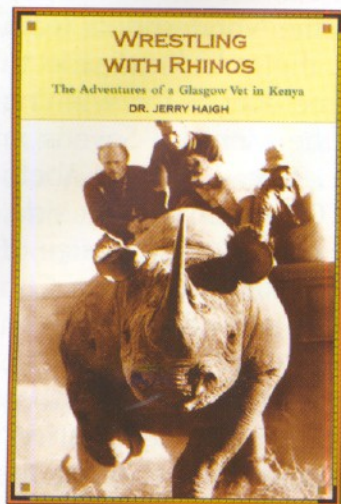
WIN!  
2 nights for 2 at  
SATAO CAMP  
PAGE 52



# WRESTLING WITH RHINOS

## THE ADVENTURES OF A GLASGOW VET IN KENYA

by Dr Jerry Haigh



*Beginning with this issue, we are offering an Old Africa condensed version of Jerry Haigh's book **Wrestling with Rhinos**, with a new instalment in each issue for the next year or more. You can order the full book from the author's website [www.jerryhaigh.com](http://www.jerryhaigh.com) or from [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).*

### Chapter 1 The New Graduate

**1965** The transition from my cushioned college days to my veterinary career in Kenya began with a bit of a jolt. Less than a month before, I had nervously boarded a plane in Scotland. Now I stared up at the head of a giraffe some ten feet above me, wondering how I was going to examine his swollen foot, which was about the size of a dinner plate. With some trepidation I bent down and gingerly felt around the foot. When the animal did not kick out, I slipped a finger between the two enormous hooves.

In 1965 there was a shortage of giraffes, lame or otherwise, in Glasgow. This animal brought home the realization that despite five years of veterinary education I was still a greenhorn.

Normally, to examine a dairy cow, one would catch her in a headstall and get on with it. This giant patient needed a different approach. The owner, Tony Parkinson, had climbed a ladder set in front of the pen, and the giraffe had limped around the side and entered its own stall. As it stood there chewing on the fodder, I continued my inspection. The foot was obviously swollen. If the patient were a cow, I would have picked up the foot, taken out a hoof knife, scraped the dirt off the sole, and checked for cracks, sharp objects or other causes of trouble. But there was no way I'd be able to try that with this character.

My finger emerged from between the hooves, bringing with it an unmistakable sickly-sweet smell, known to every large animal vet all over the world. The black muck I'd found more or less clinched the diagnosis of foot rot, giraffe or not.

The opportunity to revisit the country of my birth, and work as an intern for a year in the Kabete veterinary college, had arisen several months before my graduation from the veterinary school at Bearsden, near Glasgow, and I had seized it gladly.

I'd been in Glasgow for six years. Prior to that, after living my first few years in Kenya, I'd had a typical 'military brat' childhood, constantly moving from one army house to another. From the age of nine I had been educated in British boarding schools, while my father was posted to Germany, English army towns, and trouble spots like Cyprus and Suez. After twenty-some years in the Highland Light Infantry, my father had followed me to Scotland, where I'd joined veterinary school.

My decision to try and get into veterinary school had followed upon my boyhood ambitions, first, to be a zookeeper, and then to be a farmer. From the age of 12, veterinary medicine had been the single option.

The chance to go to Kenya came out of the blue. The professor of medicine at Glasgow, Ian McIntyre, was also dean at the school in Kabete, just outside Nairobi. The program in Kenya was new, and when I heard they had internship positions I applied.

I had a few faint memories of my early years in Kenya, often getting them mixed up with family stories. One pseudo-memory was my mother's account of the time she heard me screaming fit to burst after eating a bright red pepper in the garden, having mistaken it for a tomato. Definite mind's eye images included being fascinated by stately giraffes as they peered, seemingly legless, at the car over treetops or loped away in seven-league strides.

I saw the familiar face of my former classmate Jimmy Duncan, part of the group of interns that had preceded me, across the barrier outside the



customs hall at the Nairobi airport. "I hope you've brought your tennis racquet. You're playing with me in a club tournament tonight."

As we turned right at the T-junction leading from the airport road into town, I was startled to see the swaying forms of three giraffes not more than 400 yards away. Jimmy explained they were inside the Nairobi National Park. Soon we neared Fort Smith and Kabete, where the veterinary college was located.

After dropping off my luggage at the flat I was to share with an intern who would arrive later, I reported to Dr McIntyre. Dean McIntyre greeted me in his brusque fashion, standing up and limping slightly on his built-up shoe. His high domed forehead and receding hairline gave the appearance of a huge intellect.

"Good morning Haigh. I trust you had a good flight. Take a couple of days to get yourself organized. You can start work on Monday."

A colony of bright yellow weaver birds busily built nests in a roadside tree. Superb starlings fussed around the car park and trees at the clinic, and I marvelled at their gaudy red-and-blue uniforms, with a white crossbar on the breast.

Thiongo brought us lunch. A gap-toothed, wizened old Kikuyu, he acted as houseboy-cum-cook for Jimmy and the two other ex-Glasgow interns, Paul Sayer and Hugh Miller, who shared the flat. After lunch, I hit the sack for a nap. Jimmy warned me to be ready for tennis by 4:30. I awoke when he pounded on my door. "Let's go, Jerry. Are you not ready yet?" I struggled into my shorts and we were soon off to tennis at the local Vet Lab Sports Club, a handy two minutes' drive away.

One of our opponents that evening was Tony Parkinson. His tennis owed little to coaching, but a great deal to the power of dogged determination and a natural athletic flair.

"So you're another of these Glasgow vets," he said. "You must come down and meet my family and see our collection some time. We're just on Lower Kabete road."

"What sort of collection?"

"Well, right now we've got some wildebeest and a couple of giraffe. Also half a dozen zebra."

"What are they for?"

"Tony and his partner, John Seago, are animal trappers, otherwise known as zoological collectors," said Jimmy. "They catch animals for zoos and translocate them out of settlement areas."

I was soon embroiled in my work. My first weekend, I was left on duty with the field service unit. Early on my first Saturday morning, Lawrence

Gitau arrived at my door just as I finished breakfast and told me that we had a call to assist a young heifer having trouble delivering her calf. The farmer's messenger piled into the back of the Land Rover, on top of the several boxes of drugs and equipment that Lawrence had already packed, and we drove off. We left Kabete, turned right where a road sign read Limuru and Naivasha and began a steady climb.

At this stage my Kiswahili was rudimentary, but I had undertaken to learn two new words a day. Before I left Scotland, my mother had bought me a 1964 copy of **Up Country Swahili**, the updated version of the book that she had used herself 26 years earlier. My father had dug into his phenomenal memory banks and written out four foolscap pages of useful Swahili phrases with their English translations. He had not been in Kenya for over 18 years, but he still remembered the language clearly and spoke it fluently.

I needed to learn work-related words. I asked Lawrence, "What's the Swahili for a rope, and for a cattle crush?"

"Rope is *kamba*, crush, *munanda*."

"*Kamba*, rope; *munanda*, crush," I repeated to myself, like a mantra, as we drove along.

After leaving the main road we followed a series of rutted lanes that twisted and turned between tall hedges of pale green plants. Suddenly we had a spectacular view over the wall of the Great Rift Valley. I asked Lawrence to stop. Immediately below us a patchwork quilt of small farms continued down the hill and I could see a volcano-shaped mountain in the hazy distance. Lawrence told me it was called Suswa.

Soon we pulled in through a gap in the hedge and found a small farm with two grass thatched-roofed houses, and in a corner the outdoor lavatory. The walls of all three were made of mud caked on a woven patchwork of thin sticks. The farmer emerged from one of the houses, wiping his hands on a cloth.

"*Jambo daktari*." (Good morning, doctor.)

"*Jambo mzee*." (Good morning, old man. "Old man" is a term of respect, whatever the age of the man.)

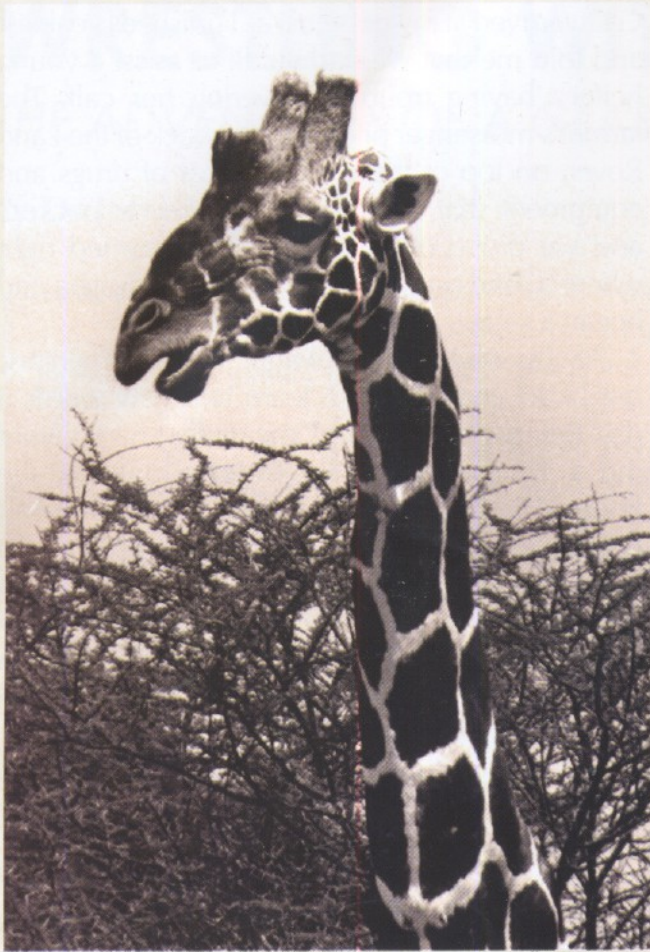
"*Habari*?" (What news?)

"*Mzuri. Habari yako*?" (Good news. What is your news?)

"*Mzuri, lakini*..." (Good news, but...)

The "but" could be anything from a minor inconvenience to a major catastrophe. A small cross-bred Ayrshire heifer was standing in a homemade crush. It was plain that the *lakini* in





*The giraffe, sixteen feet from top to toe, towered ten feet above my head. Photo by Henk Faberij de Jonge.*

this case was pretty serious, and the heifer had no chance of delivering a live calf. Lawrence asked a couple of questions in the Kikuyu language and found out that she was only 18 months old. Somehow she had come into season at a very early age, and one of the local bulls had picked up the chemical signals and done all too efficient a job.

Things might have been all right if the calf had decided to exit from the birth canal in the normal feet-first position, but there was an ominous lack of feet showing, and the head that had appeared was already swollen.

"What a way to start one's solo career," I thought to myself. "No chance of success with a Caesarean section, no chance of getting at the legs, and only one option." Lawrence, too, knew what must happen. Twenty minutes later the calf was on the ground in two parts, and the heifer was walking stiffly back to her grazing spot, relieved of the burden, but alive, at least. This was the only consolation we had as we headed back to Kabete.

About four weeks and several more games of tennis after my arrival, Tony Parkinson and I chatted at the bar, and he said, "We have a

lame giraffe down at the animal yards. Would you have time to pop down in the morning and have a look at it?"

Here was an opportunity to get a hands-on experience with the towering animal of my early memories. That's how I wound up finding that familiar black muck in a very unfamiliar giraffe hoof. At least there were no stones or sharp objects embedded in the crack between the hooves.

"I can't be 100 percent sure," I said to Tony, "but it looks just like foot rot in cattle. I'm glad you've caught it early, before it gets up into the joint." I offered my hand for him to smell. He sniffed, and curled up his nose. Foot rot is also known by the more expressive name 'foul-of-foot.'

Trusting to luck, and realising that a giraffe is basically an elongated version of a cow, with its four stomach compartments, its cloven feet and its habit of chewing the cud, I worked out a dose of antibiotic based on Tony's knowledge of its weight. Standing on the bottom rail of the chute and reaching up a couple of feet above my head to give a penicillin injection was a novel experience, but the patient hardly noticed. I later learned that giraffe skin was the favoured material for bucket manufacture among the peoples of Kenya's northeast, because it is both durable and thick. Luckily my needle was razor sharp and long enough to penetrate the tough hide. My next challenge was to persuade this less-than-domestic animal to let us apply some sort of poultice.

"We need to get him to stand in hot water and Epsom salts for at least 20 minutes, twice a day." I explained.

"Don't worry Jerry. I'll dig a pit below the feed bunk, big enough to take a rubber feed bowl, and we'll get him to stand in it when he comes for hay and pellets," said Tony.

When I visited my tall patient a few days later, the giraffe showed no sign of lameness and the swelling in his foot had gone right down.

Unwilling to sell anything except a perfect specimen, Tony obtained permission from the game department to exchange this animal for another one, and a month later he took the fully recovered patient back to the Northern Frontier District where it had been captured.

*To be continued...*