

# Bless the beasts and veterinarians

## Wrestling with Rhinos: The Adventures of a Glasgow Vet in Kenya

By Dr. Jerry Haigh  
ECW Press, 390 pages, \$23.95

REVIEWED BY ELIZABETH ABBOTT

**W***restling with Rhinos* is an intriguing title, suggesting a Gerald Durrell-type memoir, and until the final few chapters, this is precisely how it reads. Then, as veterinarian Jerry Haigh describes one of his last assignments in Africa, his book metamorphosizes into one that would have been much better titled *Killing Elephants*.

Just before he moved to Saskatchewan to take an appointment in the Department of Large Animal Clinical Sciences at Western College of Veterinary Medicine, Haigh accepted an assignment from Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana, whose 1994 murder precipitated the genocide of Tutsis by his Hutu tribesmen. This goal of this "fascinating" project, outlined in the chapter A President's Difficult Decision, was nothing less than to cull all Rwanda's elephants, shooting the adults and capturing only some of the smallest calves for translocation.

Habyarimana, who seized power in a 1973 coup d'état, was responding to his overpopulated nation's ongoing battles with the elephants who vied with humans for survival. As the surging human population drove the elephants into ever-shrinking areas, they raided villages for food, trampling crops and, occasionally, killing people.

Ironically, a request from the African Wildlife Foundation for Rwandan government money to fund Dian Fossey's gorilla conservation efforts spurred Habyarimana to rid Rwanda of elephants. How, he demanded, could he help gorillas when elephants were tormenting Rwandan farmers? He had to exterminate all the elephants. But who was skilled enough to do the job? Not Rwandan soldiers, uncertain marksmen who would leave wounded rogue elephants running about. Enter Scottish veterinarian Haigh and his expatriate colleagues in Kenya.

The plan was simple. Helicopters would herd the elephants toward them. Two men would shoot the adults, while Haigh and another man would capture and tranquilize the babies. The first attempt took 90 seconds. Seventeen adult and teenaged elephants died, and five calves, quickly tied

by ropes anchored to the legs of their dead relatives, survived. Soon Rwandans stripped the corpses of everything: tusks, skin and flesh.

This and future culls succeeded because the matriarch, who made all her family's decisions, was shot first, followed by any adult females who might take her place. The other elephants then huddled together helplessly, easy targets for skilled rifles. "Within ten days," Haigh recalls, "apart from a few solitary old bulls [and 27 youngsters in captivity], there were no plains elephants left in the southern part of the country."

There was another casualty: Lee Lyon, a "gorgeous" California camerawoman who called elephants "beautiful people," and who died when an infuriated adolescent elephant smashed her to death with his forehead.

Haigh understands that his story of the elephant cull will shock and repel many readers who revere this "charismatic megafauna." However, he justifies it on the grounds that "when the wildlife are destroying homes, terrorizing the community, and killing people, there is only one solution."

In Canada, Haigh adds, marauding elk or wolves may damage a hay crop or kill a few sheep. In Africa, however, the majestic elephants, competing for survival with humans, damage crops, forest plantation trees and seedlings, destroy rural houses and sometimes kill their inhabitants. No wonder, he writes, so many Africans see them as the enemy.

Haigh's book is about far more than elephants, though. It is a lively and detailed glimpse into the life and thoughts of a dedicated and down-to-earth young veterinarian as he experienced Kenyan life until the Africanization of large, mostly white-owned farms cost him much of his client base, and he emigrated to Saskatchewan.

Kenya's president, Jomo Kenyatta, raised starving milk cows so scrawny they looked "like coat racks," because they had to rely solely on what they could forage. But he refused to castrate any of his bulls because, "I enjoy a good jump myself now and again."

Haigh met and was unimpressed by Joy Adamson, another Kenyan celebrity. When her famous cheetah, Pippa, died from the effects of a broken leg, he wondered if Adamson's failure to provide bone-meal supplements had contributed to Pippa's fragile bone structure.

On the other hand, Haigh marvelled at how African herders controlled enormous herds of cattle

with minimal effort. They knew each animal by name, noticed instantly if one is missing, and somehow trained them to queue up in neat lines at waterholes.

From time to time, Haigh actually had to wrestle with rhinos, to examine, treat and capture them for transport to U.S. zoos. This program was an attempt to counteract the large number of rhinos killed by poachers who wanted to sell their tusks, and it succeeded in saving some rhinos who have survived and procreated.

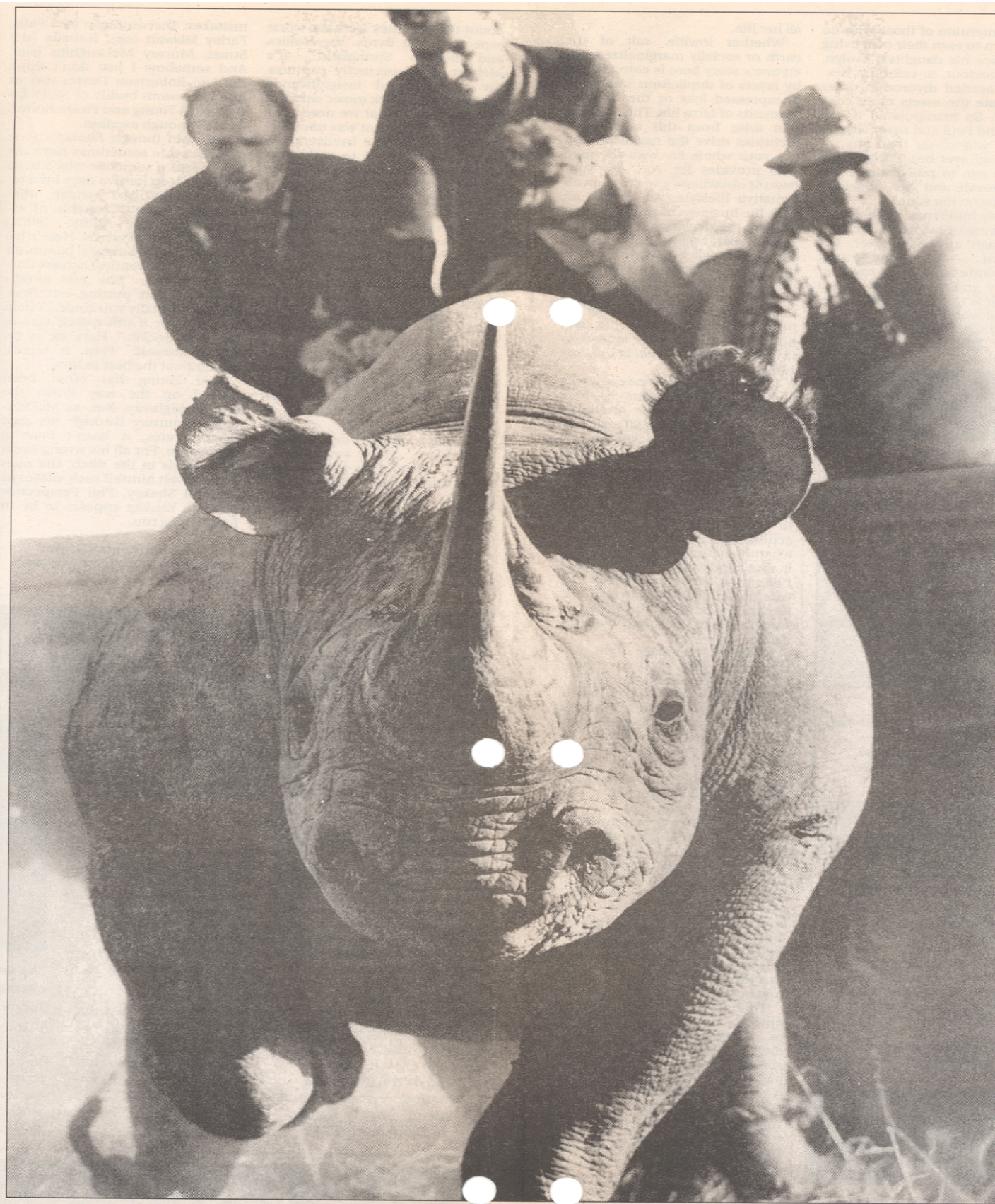
Haigh's knowledge of Kenya includes childhood memories — he was born and, for a short while, raised there — and he includes an interesting glossary of the Kiswahili language, with instructions about pronunciation. *Wrestling with Rhinos* also boasts spectacular photo spreads, many in colour, including its splendid front cover flap. Haigh's photo collection includes everything from charming family vignettes to a grinning image of himself with his arm inside a constipated rhino's rectum and close-ups of dead elephants, including some whose trunks had been savagely mutilated in snares set by villagers to trap other animals.

Each chapter is also prefaced with 19th-century-style summaries. Two of my favourites: "Help for a small boy with a dramatic case of poisoning is found in a veterinary textbook; a disease moves from an animal to a man; the newsboy, a wedding, and a honeymoon." And, "I find a strategically located new office in town. A fine old horse is put to sleep. During a visit to examine some cattle my wedding-present watch is stolen. Too late, I remember my father's account of a similar theft 30 years before. One of Jo's patients self-medicates with leftover dog pills."

Altogether, *Wrestling with Rhinos* is an important and finely crafted document about a knowledgeable expatriate's perceptions of and experiences in Kenya, and — as subtext — a record of conservation attempts and failures. It is also a tender account of how Haigh met and married Dr. Jopie van de Riet, a medical doctor raised in India by Dutch parents. Afterwards, their lives were so entwined that she sometimes helped him with his animal patients, and he was pressed into service when Jo needed a caesarean section to deliver their second child.

Elizabeth Abbott, dean of women at University of Toronto's Trinity College, is author most recently of *A History of Celibacy*.





Jerry Haigh and crew try to catch a rhino: Program attempted to counteract the large number of rhinos killed by poachers.