Bless the beasts and veterinarians

Wrestling with Rhinos: The Adventures of a Glasgow Vet in Kenya
By Dr. Jerry Haigh
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REVIEWED BY ELIZABETH ABBOTT

Wrestling 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 metamorphizes into one that would have been much better titled Killing Elephants.

Just as 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 neighbors. 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 relocation.

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 terrorizing Rwanda? Farmers had had to exterminate all the elephants. But 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.

Innocent, a small, imperious elephant, was a problem. 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 teenage elephants died, and five calves, quickly tied by ropes anchored to the legs of their dead relatives, survived. Soon Rwandans started chasing elephants into 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 camouflage-wearing woman 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 a storm when he declared milk cows so scrummy 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 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 was 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 stunning image of himself with his arm inside a consignated rhino’s rectum and closeups of dead elephants, including one whose trunk 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 a subtext — a record of conservation attempts and failures. It is also a tender account of how Haigh met and married Dr. Jolande van der 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.