

JUNG BAHADUR COAPSINGHA: JOHN COAPMAN, HUNTING, AND THE ORIGINS OF “ADVENTURE TOURISM” IN NEPAL

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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 60s.¹ 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 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,

¹ This article is derived from a larger work on the history of tourism in Nepal (Liechty forthcoming).

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 (*simha*) bravery (*bahādur*). 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 thousands of square kilometers 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 article tells the story of John Coapman’s pioneering role in a key sector of Nepal’s tourism trade. My goal is not to try and 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 wasn't 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 yet, 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,”² 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 life-styles of Oriental rajas (Alter 2000: 50). Coapman produced himself as part of the mythic package that he sold.

While unique, the contradictions that John Coapman embodied are also broadly representative of the lived contradictions faced by a generation of people whose lives straddled the colonial/postcolonial eras. For students of modern Nepali history, following Coapman's life across this transition helps to explain the links between Nepal's fame as a hunting destination in the global Victorian imagination with Nepal's fame as an adventure/wildlife destination in the global tourist imagination today.

Early Life

Coapman's parents were American Presbyterian missionaries in colonial Punjab. Born in 1927,³ he spent most of his early years in the Punjabi city

² 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: 158–172).

³ John Coapman passed away on 18 August 2013.

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 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, allowing him 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!⁴

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 300 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

⁴ Unless accompanied by a citation to a published or unpublished textual source, all quoted material in this article is taken from recorded interviews conducted by the author.

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.⁵ 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 remember 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 before returning to India. Through family connections with the owner of Coca-Cola (who supported Presbyterian mission work), Coapman got 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 available 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.

⁵ 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.

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 with 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)⁶

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.

⁶ 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.

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 fulltime 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* had 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.⁷ 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). 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,⁸ 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 fulltime hunting career.

⁷ In 1964 *Sports Afield* ranked the Marco Polo sheep “the No. 1 trophy of all time” (Delano 1964: 83).

⁸ 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.

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 cult-like 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 slaughter as when Viceroy Lord Linlithgow, on a visit to the Maharaja of Bikaner, shot 4,000 grouse before lunch (Jaleel 2001[1997]: 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 onwards it was customary for Rana Prime Ministers to spend the “*mīnpacās*,” or fifty coldest days from early December through late 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.⁹ After luring tigers into a designated area with staked buffalo calves, vast strings of 300 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.¹⁰ “The danger and heart-bursting excitement may continue for hours, until a succession of well-placed shots finally brings the thrill and nerve-tension to an end” (Smythies 1942: 42, cf. Morden 1929).

Interestingly, Jung Bahadur’s invention of the ring method in Nepal parallels a similar shift from hunting to “shooting” that was occurring at the same time among elites in Europe. The origins of “shooting” or, more specifically “driven shooting,” dates to “about the 1860s.” “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 who stood the other end” (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 Ripon¹¹ held the record of twenty-eight pheasants shot in one minute (Ruffer 1977: 46). He kept detailed tallies of his daily and yearly bag according to which,

⁹ 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[1940]: 184–185) and was also used in Ming China (Dryer 2007: 151).

¹⁰ 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).

¹¹ The 2nd Marquess of Ripon, son of the 1st Marquess, Viceroy of India in the 1870s.

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].

The one person most associated with the shift from hunting to “shooting” was Prince, later King, Edward VII (1841–1910) who “had neither the shape nor the temperament for the hunting field” (Ruffer 1977: 11). During the long reign of his mother, Queen Victoria, Edward was largely excluded from political power but came to personify the fashionable, leisured elite. Edward was a passionate (if not highly talented) shooter and “it was natural that society should exert itself in pursuits which its champion made fashionable.” “His personal tastes, and in particular his love of shooting, became the tastes of his smarter and richer subjects” (Ruffer 1977: 11, 19). Whether Jung Bahadur’s “ring method” was inspired by the craze for “driven shooting” in Britain (or vice-versa) is impossible to say but what is clear is the growing world-wide connection between elite privilege and the massive, expensive, labor intensive spectacles of “organized shooting.” 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 Bir 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, all from the back of his elephant (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 perhaps the most sought-after hunting destination in the world. In the early 1940s one British official penned what is practically a 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) 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 was to become John Coapman’s exclusive hunting preserve.

By the time that Evelyn Arthur Smythies wrote his book on big game hunting in Nepal – with assistance and encouragement from Juddha SJB Rana¹² – it must have been 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, it is interesting to consider how the Ranas thought about the role of big game diplomacy in a changing world. With their noses testing the shifting political winds, there is some indication that by the 1940s the Ranas were already considering 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 wildlife¹³ but by the 1930s the seeds of the idea that hunting itself could be a money maker for Nepali elites seem to have been planted.

Even more intriguing is the link between Prime Minister Juddha SJB Rana and American “White Hunter” Charles Cottar. 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, “His friend the Maharajah of Nepal even made his palace available to the Cottars and their clients for tiger shoots” (1999: 108). 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’ great-grandson and current owner of Cottar’s Safari Service in Kenya. According to Calvin, “Charles and probably more so Mike his son (my grandfather) was involved

¹² Smythies was for thirty years a British colonial forestry officer in the United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh) in northern India bordering Nepal. He eventually rose to the post of Chief Conservator of Forests, U.P., and was also appointed Forest Advisor to the Nepal Government in which capacity he had contact with, among others, the Rana Prime Minister Juddha SJB Rana. Juddha gave Smythies a copy of his illustrated hunting diaries (translated into English by none other than Pandit Lakshmi Prasad Devkota!) which became the basis for Smythies’ 1942 book on “big game shooting in Nepal.”

¹³ The first instance that I am aware of in which Nepali elites turned Nepali wildlife into cash was in 1922 when American animal buyer Frank Buck negotiated with Kaisar SJB Rana to purchase two live Asian rhinos for American zoos. The price – 35,000 rupees or 12,600 dollars – was substantial in its day (Buck 1930: 55). Buck also reported that the Ranas sold large amounts of rhino horn to “a Chinaman who traveled all the way from Canton to purchase them at Rs. 2,000 per mon (80 pounds) for medicinal uses” (Buck 1930: text on plate opposite p. 57).

in safaris in the early '30s in Nepal with Woolworth Donaghue and Babe White as clients amongst others. We have lots of old cine 35 mm film of the trip."¹⁴ Not only does this make Charles Cottar the first "White Hunter" to operate in Nepal, it also suggests that Juddha SJB Rana had already opened the Nepal Tarai to rich Americans for commercial hunting in the 1930s.¹⁵

One final fragment of related information can be found in a *Time* magazine article on the Joseph Satterthwaite mission to Kathmandu in 1947 during which formal diplomatic relations were established between Nepal and the United States. The article ends with a discussion of miscellaneous ideas raised by the Rana government for possible cooperation with the US. Along with technical aid, the Ranas "also talked about a project for a high-class tourist trade for tiger hunting" (*Time* 1947: 38).¹⁶ Building on their experiences with Charles Cottar (and possibly others), it is clear that the Ranas had a good sense of the money-earning potential of tiger hunting, especially when it came to rich Americans. 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.

Out of Africa

To understand the post-WW 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. But how did rich Americans get involved in African hunting? If Europeans traditionally associated hunting with elite privilege, in the United States before 1900 hunting was typically related to ideas of rugged frontier independence or to outright poverty. This started changing around the turn of the twentieth century as the US began succeeding the British as global hegemon. Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919) was arguably the first US president to embrace America's imperial destiny. From his flamboyant

¹⁴ Personal communication, 11 November 2010.

¹⁵ Charles Cottar's safaris in Nepal must have occurred before 1940, the year in which he died, gored by an African rhino (Herne 1999: 108).

¹⁶ In his own public account of the mission, Satterthwaite mentions that big game hunting was a topic of discussion with the Ranas, describing it as Nepal's "national sport" (1947: 38). The Ranas showed the American delegates paintings depicting daring hunting exploits, and even films taken on the Tarai, but Satterthwaite does not explicitly mention having discussed hunting tourism.

role in the US occupation of Cuba, to presiding over the brutal conquest of the Philippines, to annexing and building the Panama Canal, to "big stick" diplomacy and the "Great White Fleet," Roosevelt enthusiastically took up the "white man's burden"¹⁷ with all its colonial, paternalistic overtones.

One aspect of the imperial burden that Roosevelt embraced was the British elite pastime of big game hunting. Following in the footsteps of British royalty already hunting in Africa, Roosevelt, after leaving the presidency in March 1909, 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 1937[1910]: 7).¹⁸ 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 image of African hunting machismo in the American popular imagination.

In particular Hemingway's nonfictional account of his safari, *Green Hills of Africa*, 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

¹⁷ In fact Rudyard Kipling gave his famous poem ("The White Man's Burden") the subtitle "The United States and the Philippine Islands" explicitly linking US and British imperialism in a shared noble cause.

¹⁸ Roosevelt describes British East Africa as "a region in which nature, both as regards wild man and wild beast, ...does not differ materially from what it was in Europe in the late Pleistocene" (1937[1910]: 3). The exceptions are the British people he meets, "whether dashing army officers or capable civilians," who he says he felt he already knew "for they might have walked out of the pages of Kipling" (1937[1910]: 5, 6). 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.

competition, tossing back whisky in the cool of their tented camps, eagerly served by throngs of admiring natives. This mythic colonial lifestyle came to be associated with elite guided hunting, which John Coapman sought to personify and to market to eager clients.

Yet what colonialism made possible, decolonization began putting 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 anti-foreign, anti-colonial movements such as the Mau Mau Rebellion 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-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 weapons out of most Indian’s hands, reserved big game hunting for elites, and protected wildlife habitat (Byrne 2001: 81). Independent India was more interested in feeding people than in saving wild animals and after 1947 Indians set up hunting firms that advertised in US magazines promising “Tiger Guaranteed” or “No Tiger, No Fee” (Jaleel 2001[1997]: 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 the diehard trophy bagger 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 big game hunting was promoted. The earliest guide book mentions hunting as a “note-worthy” activity (Poudyal 1955: 2). Han Suyin’s (albeit fictionalized) account of the events surrounding King Mahendra’s coronation in 1956 mentions wealthy Americans who had come for Tarai safaris (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 guide book:

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. Even today, this traditional sport is continued with the same zeal and pomp as in the years of yore. (Elliott 1959: 108)

John Coapman claimed he was 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 WW 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 a bar in Calcutta,” said Byrne, “in the Casanova Bar in the Grand Hotel. 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.”¹⁹

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 the spring of 1953 Byrne *walked* from Darjeeling to Kathmandu (2001: 147) where he met with 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. The Foreign Secretary came to his house and we sat down and we told him what we wanted. 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. So that’s the permit I got! It’s like the king sitting down with you and writing you a letter.

¹⁹ In his book Byrne (2001: 138–145) describes his first meeting with Basundhara in more fascinating detail. There he tells of coming to the aid of a small, dapper, unknown South Asian gentleman who was being picked on by a drunken European bully at the Casanova Bar. After punching the drunk, knocking him out, and having him dragged off by hotel security, Byrne introduced himself to the stranger only to learn that he was a Nepali prince! Indebted to Byrne, Basundhara invited him to visit him in Nepal, and offered his assistance.

There was no department at that time. There was barely a government. Now it's not as simple as it used to be.²⁰

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 *Śuklā Phāṭā* (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 comprised 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” (Coleman 1989). On Tenzing Norgay’s recommendation, Slick hired Byrne and his brother to hunt for the Abominable Snowman or “yeti” in the high country of the eastern Nepal. “So we spent three years, coming down at Christmas time, staying in hotels, whooping it up for a week, and going back.” With no luck in the Himalayas, by 1960 Slick’s attention had shifted to hairy hominids closer to home. On his annual visit to Kathmandu Byrne got a cable from Slick asking him to come to the American northwest to search for “Bigfoot.” That project lasted for eighteen months until 1962 when Slick was killed in a plane wreck and his heirs pulled the plug on his eccentric projects, according to Byrne, “literally overnight.”²¹

Because Byrne’s hunting business had been on hold for five years after 1957, he was unaware of Coapman’s entry onto the scene in Nepal. The two first met by coincidence during Coapman’s brief stint at the 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

²⁰ Given that ministries did not exist when Byrne received his documentation, Coapman’s claim to have registered the “first professional hunting company via official Government of Nepal Ministries of Forest and Industries” may be true.

²¹ Byrne’s relationship with Slick is documented in Coleman (1989) and Byrne (1975) documents his adventures with “bigfoot.”

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. And 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. And 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. He never had a license. I don’t think he ever hunted.”

Perhaps what rankled Coapman’s acquaintances more than anything were his claims to intimacy with Nepal’s royal family, especially with King Mahendra. Coapman claimed he gained entrée through Indian princely families related to Nepal’s royals by marriage. Jim Edwards, who would go on to play a major role at Tiger Tops, spoke contemptuously about Coapman’s ties with the palace. In an interview, Edwards told me,

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.

Edwards was a young English adventurer when he arrived in Kathmandu in May 1962 having driven overland from Europe. In Kathmandu he met Charles McDougal, an American anthropologist with a passion for tiger hunting. Combining their skills – McDougal as hunter and naturalist, Edwards as publicist and manager – the two registered a professional hunting business (“Nepal Wildlife Adventure”) with the Nepali government in 1963. 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.”

Coapman’s ties to Mahendra are virtually impossible to verify but I pressed both Byrne and Edwards to explain how, if Coapman *did not* have a strong relationship with Mahendra, he managed in 1963 to acquire rights to

the famous Chitwan hunting tracts that were 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, too, 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.... I don't know how he first got permission to do these things in Nepal. So it might have been from Mahendra. I mean, I wouldn't know how he got permission. But to be fair, I wouldn't be a bit surprised. I mean he couldn't just walk into the king's house [and demand such a thing].

Certainly Coapman and Mahendra shared a love of hunting and likely formed a relationship on this basis. Mahendra was big game trophy collector 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 Alaska²² (Hutchins 2007: 14). Carrying on the Rana tradition, Mahendra mounted massive cool-weather 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 southern California so he could tour the Weatherby rifle company's headquarters. A photo taken at the Weatherby factory shows the usually ultra-morose Mahendra holding a Weatherby rifle with the closest thing to a smile on his lips that I have ever seen captured on film (Gresham and Gresham 1992: 62). Even a photo-op with Elvis Presley didn't elicit his pleasure the way talking guns with Roy Weatherby did.²³ Was Coapman responsible for Mahendra's fascination with Weatherby rifles? Was it mere coincidence that Weatherby hired Coapman

²² A massive polar bear rug (dotted with moth-balls) 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.

²³ See the photo of Elvis and Mahendra on the Wikipedia entry for "Mahendra of Nepal." Available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahendra_of_Nepal; accessed 12 June 2015.

within a year after the king’s visit? Only one thing is certain: I failed to find mention of Coapman in any reference about 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 that occurred during Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip’s official state visit to Nepal in February 1961 when Mahendra mounted the last of the lavish Tarai hunting parties in their honor. With a century of royal precedent to live up to, Prince Philip was in a quandary. As a prominent member of several UK-based wildlife conservation organizations explicitly opposed to sport hunting, he 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” (1972[1966]: 257–258). Briton’s royals flew to Chitwan, using a nearby airstrip specially constructed for them. 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 1972[1966]: 258)! While Mahendra hunted, Elizabeth shot photos and Philip happily convalesced while enjoying a tour of the area on elephant back.

As the era of environmental consciousness began to dawn, the days of big game trophy hunting were numbered. In fact some of the first to exchange guns for cameras were hunters themselves, because they clearly understood what rising human populations and habitat loss meant for the viability of wildlife stocks. Already in the 1930s famed British Indian “man-eater” hunter Jim Corbett had given up sport hunting for photography.²⁴ “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

²⁴ In the 1930s Corbett co-founded and regularly contributed to a magazine called *Indian Wild Life* in which he published pro-conservationist appeals (Booth 1991[1986]: 181) and he was one of the leading forces behind passage of the 1935 “Wildlife Protection Act” in India. In the later years of the Raj the British established a huge national park named for Corbett in the Himalayan foothills below Nainital where he had lived and hunted. The fact that this park is one of the few institutions that still retains its colonial name is testimony to the respect that Indians too have for Corbett and his work.

moved to British held Kenya in 1947 he set up Tree Tops – a game-viewing lodge, not a hunting business.

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 made a second well-publicized safari in 1953, and movie star William Holden (1918–1981) went on safari and fell in love with the Kenyan highlands. With the help of American oil billionaire Ray Ryan (1904–1977), in 1959 Holden purchased a huge old 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.²⁵

Two names notably absent from MKSC’s member roles were Herb Klein (the oilman hunter connected to Weatherby rifles) and his hunting companion Toddy 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 and before long ideas for a club/resort in Asia starting circulating. By the fall of 1961 (after Weatherby fired Coapman) Klein, Wynne, and Coapman were in Kathmandu wining and dining with the royals.

Toddy Lee Wynne (1896–1982) epitomized the vulgar but shrewd ultra-rich Texas oilman. 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 in real estate, as a suburban developer in Texas and overseas. A 20 June 1960 *Time* magazine article describes how Wynne and a partner spent 2.48 million dollars (a fortune at that time) for a piece of prime real estate in Hong Kong’s financial district, where they erected a twenty-five-story Hilton luxury hotel (*Time* 1960). That hotel and another in Bali were phenomenally profitable, earning Wynne a reputation as a savvy maverick investor. In comparison, the project Wynne dreamed up with Herb Klein and John Coapman in Nepal must have seemed

²⁵ Available at www.africantravel.com/tours/details/mount-kenya-safari-club/Kenya/; accessed 12 June 2015.

like a minor amusement. Klein and Wynne agreed to put up 100,000 dollars and make Coapman managing director of the proposed jungle lodge.²⁶

Tiger Tops represents a convergence of dreams. Coapman showed me a sketch of the main buildings he said he had drawn some years before the resort was built. It was probably an image like this that stoked Klein and Wynne’s fantasies of having their own (more or less) personal hunting resort on the Tarai, sour-grapes compensation for membership in the African club. What’s more, Coapman was realizing that it was time to get out of hunting. Much of his professional hunting was in India where, in the early 1960s, the government had begun enforcing wildlife protection laws, making it increasingly difficult for people like Coapman to operate.

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.²⁷

Coapman was also clearly inspired by Jim Corbett who had already shifted to low-impact wildlife tourism 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.²⁸ Though not well-known today, in the 1950s and 60s Corbett’s Tree Tops was famous²⁹ and the link between the two names

²⁶ Less clear is the actual ownership of the new business. According to Coapman, Klein and Wynne were fifty percent shareholders and he held the other fifty percent. 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 100,000 dollar investment back to Klein and Wynne, something he never accomplished.

²⁷ Personal correspondence, 15 July 2004.

²⁸ Personal correspondence, 21 April 2008.

²⁹ In February 1952 Tree Tops scored a massive public relations coup when then Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip of Britain visited the resort that consisted of guest rooms built on high stilts overlooking a jungle water hole where game congregated to drink at dusk and dawn. While the couple were in the “tree tops” on the night of February 5th, Elizabeth’s father King George VI died, leaving Elizabeth the defacto queen. Corbett, who had spent the night outside his guests’ door with a gun, 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)! Already in the news because of the royal visit, news of Tree Tops spread round the world because of this incident.

was clearly understood at the time (e.g., see Simpson 1976[1967]: 97) 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 him and he [Coapman] 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. It didn't bother me. On the contrary I was glad someone had the guts to even try it because Nepal wasn't easy in those days. It wasn't easy to get things done 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.

What's important to note here is the Africa connection. Coapman envisioned a system of safari parks and wildlife lodges similar to those established in Kenya and Tanzania even prior to their independence in the early 1960s. The formal incorporation of Tiger Tops in 1963 suggests that the Nepali government, and likely Mahendra himself,³⁰ also embraced to some degree Coapman's Africa-inspired vision of non-hunting tourism. Coapman registered Tiger Tops in Dallas and also with the Nepali government making Tiger Tops the first foreign firm ever registered in Nepal, a fact confirmed by others.

Coapman built Tiger Tops with what one later employee called an "African feel." Not only were the first buildings erected on tall stilts (as at Tree Tops, and for client safety, Coapman explained) but some were designed in a "rondoval" style, the round, conical-roofed style of house or hut now popular in resorts world-wide but with origins in Africa. Perhaps inspired by Boris' Yak & Yeti Bar at the Royal Hotel (see Liechty 2010), Coapman also installed a large circular fireplace in the main dining/lounge building. Most important though was the location, on a north-facing bank above one of the numerous channels of the always shifting Rapti River. Photos taken looking north from the main lodge in the 1960s show the blue Rapti River in the

³⁰ Mahendra continued to hunt tigers for the rest of his life but by 1970 even he was considering a total hunting ban (Gammon 1970).

foreground, green jungle stretching toward dark foothills, and the stunning white peaks of the Annapurna massif spanning the horizon, under a clear blue sky. Even Coapman's detractors describe this as "brilliant." Using carpenters and pit sawyers from Bihar and stone masons from Kathmandu, Coapman built Tiger Tops using entirely local materials. The lodge opened with just four guest rooms in 1964. Visitors arrived by plane, using the landing strip that had been constructed for Queen Elizabeth's Tarai adventure a few years earlier (Kunwar 2002: 83). There they were met by elephants that carried them through the jungle to the lodge.³¹

A key part of the agreement with Mahendra was the Chitwan area concession that the government made available to Coapman. But the *size* of that concession, and the *nature* of Coapman's control over it, is unclear. According to Coapman, "I was given tour, construction, and control rights for all the jungle south of the Rapti River, west to the Narianyi [sic] River and south to the Nepal-Bihar border and east some 20 miles up the Rapti River – a very vast area."³² Indeed this is a vast area (thousands of square kilometers), much larger than the current Chitwan National Park (932 sq kms) for which the Tiger Tops concession served as the basis. Jim Edwards claimed that Coapman was only authorized to operate within a five-mile radius of the Tiger Tops lodge. According to Edwards, when he and MacDougal led clients on hunts in the Chitwan area, Coapman "sent his men to cut our baits free when we were baiting for tiger. Coapman was that kind of a man – an all or nothing egotist. He considered it encroachment on 'his territory' which of course it wasn't."

Also controversial were some of Coapman's management decisions. One was the use of what is now called "prescribed fire," the seasonal burning-off of dead grasses and fallen timber to promote more vigorous fresh growth and better grazing for animals, and to reduce the likelihood of really destructive wildfires that occur when combustible materials accumulate. Prescribed fire is now a standard management procedure in many ecosystems around the world but in the early 1960s it was controversial. Coapman also banned the use of DDT across his concession, "thus making USAID and UN mad at me." Because endemic malaria stood in the way of opening up the Tarai to more intensive agricultural development, in 1954 the US began an aggressive

³¹ As one observer noted, Tiger Tops had "the only airport in the world where the passengers are met by elephants" (McDonald 2005: 116).

³² Personal correspondence, 15 July 2004.

mosquito eradication program, applying (more or less indiscriminately) tons and tons of DDT. By 1962 the disease was effectively suppressed (Mihaly 2002[1965]: 42, 152) but Coapman was ahead of his time in sensing the broader environmental damage that DDT was causing. Enlisting Mahendra's aid, Coapman managed to get the Chitwan area exempted from further DDT applications. Perhaps most controversial was Coapman's drive for "157,000 Nepalese hill tribe squatters to be moved out of my jungle area." According to Coapman, Henry Stebbins, the US Ambassador to Nepal, came personally to Tiger Tops to beg not to have these people evicted. "I assured him all was well and nothing bad would happen and America would not be blamed for this forced exit," writes Coapman, adding that it was Mahendra who gave the orders while also opening up other lands for these settlers.³³ Coapman argues that with people in the area it would have been impossible to control poaching, wildlife would have disappeared, and there would have been nothing left from which to create the eventual Chitwan National Park.

By early 1966 there were eight guest rooms and business was at a volume where Coapman decided to hire someone in Kathmandu to handle reservations and inquiries. Curiously, Coapman chose Elizabeth Hawley, an American expat who worked as a *Time-Life* and Reuters correspondent (McDonald 2005). Known for her prickly demeanor, short fuse, and low tolerance for BS, conflict between Hawley and Coapman was inevitable. Nevertheless, Hawley became the face of the operation in Kathmandu. In the late 1960s one visiting reporter called her "the *eminence grise* of the Tiger Tops Hotel" (Bernstein 1970: 8).

Coapman at Tiger Tops

"I tell you, John sahib has done many things, but nothing to compare with Tiger Tops."

Dil Das (in Alter 2000: 76)

Tiger Tops truly was John Coapman's crowning achievement. Using local craftsman, he literally materialized the luxury wildlife resort out of the trees and stones of the forest. But if Coapman could bring big ideas to life, he had trouble sustaining them. Memories of Coapman tend to the extremes: depending on how you knew him, he was either a "visionary" and dynamic entrepreneur or a hopeless manager of finances and human resources. As one acquaintance succinctly put it, "Coapman was a man you either loved

³³ Personal correspondence, 15 July 2004.

or hated, generally." Similarly, in our correspondence, Coapman seemed to divide a lifetime of acquaintances into two groups: "friends" and "enemies."

Perhaps Coapman's black-and-white worldview was the secret to both his success and failure. He cultivated a larger-than-life persona of almost mythic proportions. One person who knew him in Kathmandu in the 1950s and 60s recalled, "He was a very charismatic character. When he walked in a room he filled the room, literally and figuratively." As former employers, friends, and detractors all observed, Coapman was a big talker. He had "a reputation for speaking his mind in four-letter words." In a group, "There was no one to match his ability to tell a story or carry a conversation. When Coapman spoke...everyone listened, both because they were drawn in by the power of his narrative and because he would not tolerate distractions, interruptions, or criticism" (Alter 2000: 51, 52). Another long-time Kathmandu expat recalled, "We used to call him The Rhino, because he was *very*, you know...[narrows eyes, snorts aggressively, swings head side to side – laughter]. You didn't want him to come at you with his head lowered!" Coapman wanted not just respect from those he met, but a kind of admiration, even reverential awe. In relatively brief relationships with hunting clients or visitors to Tiger Tops, Coapman often found a receptive audience. But in more sustained dealings, few people put up with his posturing for long.

Certainly the patron/client dynamic facilitated Coapman's performance as an awe-inspiring White Hunter. A rich foreigner walking the jungle trails with him *wanted* to believe Coapman's stories, not only to get his money's worth out of the adventure, but because Coapman seemed to be the main thing standing between the client and mortal danger. The role Coapman wanted to play (brave and knowledgeable guide/leader) actually required a subordinate, and in the liminal world of the jungle many were willing to pay for the privilege, and thrill, of literally walking in Coapman's shadow.

Indeed, Coapman went to some lengths to construct the Tarai surrounding Tiger Tops as a danger zone and himself as protector. Whereas Corbett had put Tree Tops on stilts because of hippos in the nearby watering hole, Coapman's decision to do so was apparently for effect. Hippos are responsible for more unprovoked human deaths than any other large African animal but Nepal has nothing that would attack a person in a building (leopards may be an exception, but would drag one from a tree house as easily as from the

ground).³⁴ Said one person, Coapman “would go around with a rifle slung over his shoulder all the time and all the other men carried huge sticks to fend off marauding wildlife and it was all sort of, gung-ho, and sort of *Jungle Book* stuff. He had it [Tiger Tops] as a kind of ego trip, John Coapman did.” Another remembered how Coapman “used to go around with a rifle, shooting off all the time to scare the tigers away from the guests – the jeopardy factor. They do that in Africa a lot. That was all part of the show.” One visitor described a walk that he and Coapman had taken from the central lodge. On the way back Coapman pointed to tiger tracks on the trail and said that they had been stalked. Forty years later this visitor still had vivid memories of that perilous jungle walk though now he wonders if Coapman’s comments were merely for effect. One of my favorite descriptions of Coapman regards knives: “He could throw a knife and make it stick into that plant [pointing to a small tree fifteen feet away] without it touching anything else. Thhhhhhhunk!” It was this meticulous attention to flamboyant detail that made Coapman a compelling, commanding character, like something out of a Hollywood adventure film.³⁵ To be sure, part of the appeal rested on the solid ground of his decades of jungle experience. Even Jim Edwards, whose dislike for Coapman was vehemently reciprocated, acknowledged that Coapman “was a gifted naturalist – gifted. He could smell the smell of a tiger miles away.” The fact remains that much of the Tiger Tops mystique was built from Coapman’s well-cultivated sense of drama and his talent for constructing a client’s visit as a dramatic experience.

³⁴ This distinction between tigers and leopards, with the former shunning human structures but not the later, is one made by Byrne (2001: 254) and, before him, by Corbett (1991[1944]) who repeatedly noted that man-eating leopards were much more feared than man-eating tigers because the leopards would break down doors and drag victims off while tigers would only wait for their prey in the jungle.

³⁵ In fact Coapman does make a kind of appearance in a popular film, though one from France. The 1969 André Cayatte film “Les Chemins de Katmandou” (The Roads to Kathmandu) features a villainous American big game hunter that Coapman acknowledged, with some pride, was modeled after himself. In an interview (published online) the director Cayatte describes meeting an American hunting guide in Kathmandu in the late 1960s on whom he based the film’s villain. “Indeed there I met, in the flesh, the character of the father: an American who earned his living by organizing tiger hunts, a man in his forties but with a mental age of eighteen, charming, carefree, casual.” Available at <http://barjaweb.free.fr/SITE/ecrits/Katmandou/katmandou.html>; accessed 12 June 2015.

Like any drama, Coapman's Tiger Tops was based on a script that he shared with his elite clients. As Alter explains, Coapman's special talent was his ability to bring a kind of mythologized colonial adventure to life.

What made Tiger Tops successful...was not just the abundance of wild animals, but the exotic disjuncture of elite, postcolonial taste – soft pillows, cool drinks, comfortable chairs, old scotch whiskey, and fine dining – with the untamed, wild, and potentially dangerous environment of uncivilized Asia. To a degree, Tiger Tops re-created the colonial adventure in microcosm by giving those with wealth and power a chance to try and see themselves by looking – from very close up – into an untamed jungle. In this context, Coapman provided the persona of a real-life adventurer.

Coapman, scotch in hand, sitting beside the big open fireplace in the central lounge, would enchant his clients with tales of fantastic, dangerous adventure. One was never quite sure if Coapman was ever really telling the truth about anything, and yet there was always enough which was believable in his narrative to make one think that his fantastic experiences might just have happened. (Alter 2000: 51)

The point is that Coapman himself was a key part of the mythic colonial adventure he sold. The danger of this kind of double identity is that at some point Coapman apparently lost the ability to distinguish himself from the myth he had enacted, truth from the half-truths he told his clients and from the total fabrications increasingly needed to spin the mythical narrative of self that he came to embrace.

This is not to say that there were no real adventures, or real dangers, at Tiger Tops. One person who worked there with Coapman was Dil Das, Coapman's childhood friend and hunting companion from India. At Tiger Tops Dil Das occasionally worked as a guide. "I led tours, told people what to do, and showed people animals." "My job was simply to make those who had come to the park happy" (Alter 2000: 72, 76). Dil Das describes one occasion when a group of tigers stood in the path and roared aggressively as a group of terrified Japanese tourists cowered behind him. Armed only with a stick and a *khukuri* (a large, curved Nepali knife), Dil Das stood his ground. "I held onto the *khukuri* firmly while the others, the people on the tour, stood behind me. I told them to stand quietly. The tigers growled a lot.... The tigers ran into this grass and hid, and we had to go in after them. I pissed in my pants I was so scared" (Alter 2000: 74). Dil Das also described wild elephants causing trouble in the preserve. When wild elephants showed up it was the job of Champa Kali – a big, tame, tusked female camp elephant used for jungle tours – to scare them off. Recalls Dil Das, "They sharpened

her tusks and would give her four bottles of liquor to drink. I would tell her, ‘Champa Kali, leave some for me!’ She would leave me half a bottle to drink!” (Alter 2000: 76). Drunk, her handlers would send Champa Kali (likewise drunk) out into the forest to drive away the wild elephants!³⁶

During his years at Tiger Tops Coapman continued to benefit from the patronage of Nepal’s royal family, especially King Mahendra. In correspondence with me Coapman noted that “King Mahendra and his three sons came to Tigertops [sic] several times and Prince Basundhara [Mahendra’s younger brother] stayed with me several times. King Mahendra and Crown Prince Birendra sent many V.I.P. royalty guests to me at Tigertops.”³⁷ I was able to confirm this last point in an interview with a palace official who worked as a close aide to Crown Prince (later King) Birendra in the late 1960s.

It so happened that we had a guest of [Prince] Birendra, who was a member of the British royal family, Prince Richard of Gloucester. When Prince Richard came here, I called [Coapman] to the palace and told him, this is what we’d like done. I think that John Coapman, at least in the way he ran Tiger Tops at that time, certainly was extraordinary. Coapman was running the business and made a *brilliant* show of the elephants. He had the elephants do a wonderful performance and I know that Prince Richard was deeply impressed. [Coapman] did it so *brilliantly* that I went back to Crown Prince Birendra and reported well about him.

It’s hard to imagine a more glowing affirmation of Coapman if not from the royals themselves, at least from the palace. This report also confirms that, for whatever problems he may have had as a manager, Coapman could put on a show his guests would never forget.

By the late 1960s Tiger Tops was beginning to garner favorable press coverage. A 1967 *Time* magazine article notes the growing trend in tourism in Nepal and singles out Tiger Tops as “the most exciting of several new tourist hotels,” its exotic location “overlooking Nepal’s fabled tiger country”

³⁶ Dil Das also describes how hard it was to eat rice and vegetables when surrounded by lots of tasty animals and in particular the “lines and lines of wild boar” that roamed about. Not allowed to shoot anything, Dil Das recalled how occasionally a nice fat boar would chance to be run over by a jeep while he and his Nepali coworkers were out in a remote part of the preserve. “And what sister-fucking meat! I tell you, those Gurkhas are expert at this sort of thing. They got a cooking pot, filled it with meat, and fixed the boar right there. The next morning we left. We didn’t leave a single trace, not even any bones. This was my thievery there!” (Alter 2000: 77).

³⁷ Personal correspondence, 21 April 2008.

(Time 1967: 27). In 1969 *New Yorker* “reporter at large” Jeremy Bernstein published several long articles on Nepal that included glowing descriptions of Coapman and Tiger Tops. Bernstein expanded these into a book on Nepal (1970) that included a sizeable section on Tiger Tops. Tiger Tops even scored a three-page write up in *A Millionaire’s Guide to Exotic Places* (Dormann 1973). Based on a visit in the late 1960s, the author describes Coapman as “a jungle genius,” the resort “a paradise in the middle of one of the world’s wildest jungles,” and the total experience one that “conspires to make you feel like a visiting rajah” (Dormann 1973: 110–111). Clearly Coapman’s magic was creating priceless publicity.

Coapman’s Last Stand

Nevertheless, Tiger Tops struggled under Coapman’s management. According to Coapman, “The fatal problem I had at Tigertops [sic] and which was also endured by hotel pioneers at Katmandu...was the small numbers of tourists coming to Nepal in the 1960s.”³⁸ In fact high-end hotels in Kathmandu were flourishing in the late 1960s but, with most tourists on tightly scheduled package tours, those willing to spend the extra time and money to fly to the Tarai was indeed limited. By the time Nepal came into its own as a stand-alone destination, it was too late for John Coapman.

The seasonal nature of Nepal tourism was also a problem. The monsoon months (roughly June through September) are cloudy, wet, and hot on the Tarai. Plus, the rain-swollen Rapti River, across which tourists had to be carried on elephant from the landing strip, causing safety concerns. Tiger Tops closed during these months, but Coapman still had to pay a large staff, feed elephants, and maintain a Kathmandu office.

To make matters worse the Indo-Pakistan wars of 1965 and especially 1971 coincided with the peak tourism season and had a heavy impact on the always timid elite sector of the tourist market. Debts mounted. “My rich Dallas partners stopped helping,” said Coapman, “and I kept Tigertops going for years with my own money and efforts. It was a big financial strain and loss.” Then on 31 January 1972, King Mahendra died while tiger hunting near Bharatpur, not far from Tiger Tops.³⁹ “Thus I lost my main supporter

³⁸ Personal correspondence, 15 July 2004.

³⁹ Coapman claims that he was with the king when he died, a fact that I have been unable to either confirm or deny.

and friend,” said Coapman, and a month later, “I just gave up and left Nepal for Kenya.”⁴⁰

Dil Das also linked Mahendra’s death to Coapman’s demise at Tiger Tops. Mahendra “was a friend of John sahib’s,” he said, but “there was some kind of conflict going on....In the end he was forced out” (Alter 2000: 75). The conflict that Dil Das sensed was complicated and involved a number of other expats, Jim Edwards in particular. According to Coapman, “I had no problems with any Nepalese government or private Nepalese but many foreigners were jealous of my jungle control and success and tried to work against my interests.” Once he’d departed, Coapman said, “My Dallas rich partners sold my 50 percent Tigertops shares to enemies of mine who told many lies to try to prevent me returning to Nepal or re-take my Tigertops.”⁴¹

The relationship between Edwards and Coapman had always been strained, with Coapman sabotaging Edwards’ hunts and Edwards making off-season raids into the Tiger Tops camp where he sat in Coapman’s lodge and drank his whisky. But Edwards insisted to me that he was reluctant to take over Tiger Tops and did so only at the pleading of Coapman’s Texan partners, Herb Klein and Toddy Lee Wynne. But those who worked closely with Edwards at the time tell a different story – of Edwards aggressively courting the Texans and of various questionable, even underhanded, tactics he used to take control of the company. As one former colleague told me, “He went after it.”

Teasing out what happened requires some backtracking. In the mid-1960s Edwards had guided a Pan American Airlines executive on a hunt in the Tarai. Impressed with Edwards’ people skills, the executive offered him a job with Pan Am. With the days of trophy hunting numbered, in 1969 Edwards took the offer, working as a sales agent in New York before returning to Nepal in 1971 where he became Pan Am’s Kathmandu representative and resumed his business relationship with McDougal. While in New York City, Edwards gave a talk at the Explorer’s Club on “Wildlife in Nepal.” Afterwards, said Edwards,

Two Texans came up to me: Toddy Wynne and Herb Klein. They said, “Jim, we’ve heard interesting stories. You’re not a great hunter.” I said, “No, I’m more a camera man.” They said, “Oh we’ve heard of you through our manager there, John Coapman.

⁴⁰ Personal correspondence, 15 July 2004.

⁴¹ Personal correspondence, 15 July 2004.

Apparently you've been running down Tiger Tops." So at the end of the evening the Texans said, "Look, we've got our spies. We may be rich and own oil wells but we're not stupid. This guy [Coapman] has put in false claims for fire insurance; he's embezzling money from us. Not big money, he only has about three clients a day, it can't be big we're talking about but it's the principal of the thing."

According to Edwards, the Texans claimed they were Coapman's "bosses," not partners, and that "He [Coapman] never owned a single share." It's not clear what Edwards told the Texans but the outcome of the meeting was that Wynne and Klein offered him 20,000 dollars to return to Nepal to "do some research. It was purely out of ego. They felt that Coapman had kicked them in the face."

Armed with letters of authorization from the Texans, Edwards returned to South Asia in the fall of 1971 – with Tiger Tops reeling under mounting debt – and began poking around looking for dirt. In Calcutta he went to the firm's accountants and found that Coapman "had been embezzling the books." In Kathmandu he met Elizabeth Hawley who had been recently fired by Coapman from her position as office manager. Hawley told a tale of missing money, but also "unpaid salaries, dead elephants, a staff on strike, no credit in Kathmandu, and so on" (McDonald 2005: 102). Hawley also told him that the Nepali government was after Coapman for various unpaid fees and that "they wanted to grab him because of all the complaints from the creditors." In the meantime Coapman fired Bob Murphy (a former Peace Corps volunteer who worked as Coapman's Chitwan manager), rehired him, and fired him again. In a daze, Murphy went looking for Edwards. "He told me that around the campfire Coapman had issued orders to all his staff to kill me on sight. Quite funny," said Edwards. Murphy also told Edwards that Coapman was planning to leave the country, and that Edwards could take over Tiger Tops if he wanted to.

Before leaving, Coapman played his last cards in the desperate hope of keeping Tiger Tops out of the hands of his "enemies." According to Edwards, Coapman "went to the government and said, 'You can have Tiger Tops for nothing. As rightful owner, I John Coapman give you this Tiger Tops.' I even have that letter somewhere." But others I interviewed in Kathmandu who were close to Edwards said that the threat of "nationalizing" Tiger Tops was a "ploy or ruse" Edwards used to try to scare the Texans into cutting a deal with him. Edwards sent cables to the US claiming that Tiger Tops was in imminent danger of being taken over by the government. Even Peter Byrne

– the “yeti” hunter who claimed that Coapman was a “complete fraud” – got into the act. Byrne told me that in early 1972, “I went to Klein and started cabling back and forth saying ‘Do something quickly or the government will take it away.’ So they took it over.” After a long partnership during which he had taken Coapman’s side in several disputes (e.g., at the Weatherby company), Herb Klein finally pulled the plug on Coapman.

Coapman fled and the Texans cut a deal with Jim Edwards and his partner Chuck McDougal. Edwards and McDougal got sixty percent of the stock, and the Texans paid off half the creditors. Edwards told me that even then, he “still didn’t want the thing” [Tiger Tops]. But in what appears to be more of a parting insult than a genuine proposal, Edwards offered to bring Coapman back on board as “operations director,” with ten percent of the business shares, allowing him to “run the show, but under our control and management.” According to Edwards, Coapman responded with death threats.

With Coapman finally out of the way, Edwards and McDougal set about trying to pay off the resort’s many debts. Edwards estimated that they ended up spending about 200,000 dollars paying off creditors. “They used to come out of the woodwork – for years! ‘Coapman owes us this for wood. Coapman owes us that for rice paddy.’ He even owed money to a guy in Kathmandu for an elephant he’d borrowed.” Edwards got bar bills signed by Coapman to Tiger Tops “every time he went around India.” But soon, with business booming at the lodge, Edwards didn’t mind paying for Coapman’s drinks.

I figured that’s the least that we owed him. If he hadn’t fucked up, if he hadn’t made such a mess of things, I would never have been able to take over Tiger Tops, which was part of the jigsaw puzzle of my schoolboy dreams. So, thanks to Coapman. If it wasn’t for Coapman, we wouldn’t be here today, and you wouldn’t be sitting there.

Tiger Tops after Coapman

Edwards and McDougal quickly brought Tiger Tops back into the black. McDougal was an excellent naturalist and gave Tiger Tops strong wildlife tourism and conservation credibility (see McDougal 1977). Edwards was an enterprising businessman with skills as a manager. Aiming to expand the operation through more aggressive marketing, he re-hired Elizabeth Hawley in Kathmandu and, in 1974, hired a young English traveler and self-described “failed hippie” as a public relations specialist. Lisa Choegyal ended up working with Edwards for twenty-five years during which time

Tiger Tops prospered and grew enormously. A critical development was Tiger Tops’ merger with Mountain Travel, Nepal’s first trekking agency, founded by Jimmy Roberts in the 1960s. Today the parent company, Tiger Mountain, operates a whole constellation of eco-tourism enterprises across Nepal and South Asia.

Thanks to Edwards’ Pan Am connections, Edwards and Choegyhal enjoyed free air travel to the US (and eventually elsewhere) where they lectured on wildlife in Nepal and talked up Tiger Tops to anyone who would listen. Choegyhal had a knack for attracting “high-profile customers to the company” resulting in “a parade of stars”: Robert Redford, Henry Kissinger, Goldie Hawn, Jimmy Carter, and Hillary Clinton, to name only a few (McDonald 2005: 103). Tiger Tops continued to draw high-profile media coverage including the May 1978 edition of *Town & Country*, the shi-shi American jet-setter magazine. On the cover a model poses with an elephant against a backdrop of Tarai grasses, part of a photo essay entitled “Fashion Trek to Far-Off Nepal” (*Town & Country* 1978). Between high-end media coverage and celebrity visitors, before long, Choegyhal explained, clients were asking for Tiger Tops by name, rather than depending on travel agents to sell “the product.”

But for all of Edwards’ and McDougal’s contributions, at its heart Tiger Tops remains the institution that John Coapman envisioned and brought to life. Not only did Coapman pioneer jungle tourism but, as Lisa Choegyhal put it, his ideas have “trickled into the core of the Nepal tourism product.” Much of what Coapman established at Tiger Tops (from meal plans and accommodations, to resort layout and architecture) has become the unquestioned standard in dozens of other wildlife- and eco-tourism resorts around Nepal and around the world.

Coapman after Tiger Tops

According to Coapman during the 1960s senior members of the Hilton Hotel Corporation had invited him to develop game-viewing lodges in Africa similar to what he had created in Nepal. As the bottom fell out of Tiger Tops, in 1972 Coapman took up the offer and moved to Kenya. Coapman showed me photos of the two game lodges he constructed in Kenya’s Tsavo National Park. The Taita Hills Lodge and the Salt Lick Lodge are both still in operation: Salt Lick Lodge especially resembles Tiger Tops complete with another Boris-inspired circular fireplace. A full-page magazine advertisement from

the mid 1970s features head-shots of Coapman (in bush shirt and cravat) and another manager. “Hilton International hotels in Kenya are different enough to surprise anybody. Tom Letham [Nairobi manager] would be surprised if a herd of elephants wandered through his lobby. John Coapman will be surprised if they don’t.”⁴² Coapman told me that he promised Hilton only to get the lodges up and running and operate them for a few years. Whether his departure from Kenya in 1977 was entirely of his own accord is hard to confirm but appears likely.

By the late 1970s Coapman had moved back to Mussoorie in the Himalayan foothills where he had spent much of his childhood and most of his summers as an adult. There he built *Bāgh Derā*, or “Tiger Camp,” in the wooded countryside away from town, beyond the Woodstock School campus, near the home of his old friend Dil Das. Joseph Alter, a family friend of Coapman’s, describes *Bāgh Derā* as the perfect fantasy of a colonial hunting lodge with trophies covering the walls and floors, a garden planted with English tea roses, bookcases full of colonial literature, tables and niches with Indian statuary and mementoes, a huge stone fireplace, rustic accouterments and furnishings, each item “carefully chosen and carefully displayed.”

Everything evoked the nervous essence of imperial comfort, and the studied compulsiveness of colonial leisure....The house itself was a fantasy which many might dream of but which only Coapman had the temerity to build. Down to its last detail everything was a product of his imagination. (Alter 2000: 54)

In his early fifties, living by himself, hunting occasionally with Dil Das, and carrying on a strained relationship with the Woodstock School community, Coapman had come back to India to find himself. “He was trying to escape a legacy of fuzzy truths, and was searching, quite frankly, for some sort of meaningful life that was simple and down to earth” (Alter 2000: 51).

During these years Coapman dabbled with Indian religion, his quasi-Hinduism part of an effort to identify with his “native land.” Yet, having chosen to live only a few kilometers from friends and family in the conservative, missionary-dominated Woodstock School community, Coapman’s Hinduism was also a defiant snub to his own past. Coapman

⁴² From a Hilton Hotels advertisement that ran in a variety of publications, e.g., *Africana* (1973: 10).

was drawn to the community even as he rejected their criticisms as nothing but the ranting of “castrating, focus-frustrated missionary memsahibs.”⁴³

Coapman’s cabin and its proximity to his old school and community seem to encapsulate the contradictions at the root of his very existence in South Asia. Between the rich fantasy of a colonial past and the unpleasant reality of post-colonial India, and between the longing to identify with either America or India and the ongoing experience of alienation from both, Coapman seems to have had no tenable resources out of which to be, or claim, an identity. In the end, by 1980 the work of self-maintenance became so exhausting that Coapman “left India altogether and escaped the horns of a colonial dilemma” (Alter 2000: 66).

When I asked Coapman why he never returned to Nepal (or India), he explained, “I am a remnant of the ancient feudal order.” At Tiger Tops, “the king transferred his feudal authority to me, a well-known professional hunter,” and with that authority Coapman was able to command “the respect and fear [of] the local rural people and poachers....Thus feudal control continued [as it had when the royal family controlled Chitwan] and I never lost an important wild animal in ten years.” But after Mahendra died and Coapman left in 1972, “sixty to eighty percent of all rhinos, tigers, and most wildlife was killed/poached. Feudal control was gone.” In his last years Coapman watched the last vestiges of Nepal’s “feudal control” evaporate with the official demise of the monarchy in 2008. “I am glad that I am not now still in Nepal,” he said. “I would only live in The *Kingdom* of Nepal.”

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⁴³ Personal correspondence, 21 April 2008.

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