

# After the ‘king of beasts’: Samuel Baker and the embodied historical geographies of elephant hunting in mid-nineteenth-century Ceylon

Jamie Lorimer <sup>a,\*</sup> and Sarah Whatmore <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Department of Geography, King's College, London, Strand, London WC2R 2LS, United Kingdom*

<sup>b</sup> *School of Geography, Oxford University Centre for the Environment, South Parks Rd, Oxford OX1 3QY, United Kingdom*

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## Abstract

This paper draws on and develops a range of concepts and methodologies from ‘more-than-human’ and animal geographies to map some embodied historical geographies of elephant hunting in mid-nineteenth-century Ceylon. It focuses in particular on the exploits of Samuel Baker and some of his contemporaries. The paper attends to the attachments, crossings and ethics that passed between hunted and hunting bodies to flesh out the colonial visions of these ‘seeing men’ of empire. It critically engages with existing work on hunting and colonial natural history by examining interwoven human and nonhuman experiences, exploring elephant hunting as a collection of embodied and co-evolutionary processes with complex material histories. Drawing out the importance of embodiment, affect and intercorporeal exchange the paper then reflects on the performance, epistemology and ethics of hunting practice and traces the role played by a code of sportsmanship in orientating and legitimating the ethical sensibility of hunting. In conclusion the paper details what is gained from this style of embodied historical analysis which unsettles any simple spatio-temporal territorialisation of (post-) colonial historical geographies.

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [jamie.lorimer@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:jamie.lorimer@kcl.ac.uk)

It is a curious sight and the grandest in the world, to see a fine rogue elephant knocked over in full charge. His onset appears so irresistible, and the majesty of his form so overwhelming, that I have frequently almost mistrusted the power of man over beast; but one shot well placed, with a heavy charge of powder behind the ball, reduces him in an instant to a mere heap of flesh.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

For Samuel Baker – settler, big-game hunter and raconteur in mid-nineteenth-century Ceylon<sup>2</sup> – elephant hunting was an exhilarating and distinguished sport. Baker explained how he was first drawn to the island as a young man in 1845 by ‘the descriptions of its sports, and of hairbreadth escapes from elephants’.<sup>3</sup> His popular accounts of his exploits ran through several editions and served to fix Ceylon as a place for elephants and hunting in the imagined and colonial geographies of his audience. Dismissing rival claims for the lion or the tiger, Baker crowned the elephant the ‘king of beasts’ – the noblest adversary most worthy of ‘sportsmanlike’ pursuit. Many agreed with him and by the end of the century the combination of dramatic land use change and hunters’ slaughter had dramatically reduced the elephant population (Fig. 1).

This paper draws on and develops a range of concepts and methodologies from ‘more-than-human’ and animal geographies to map the embodied historical geographies of elephant hunting, as expressed by Samuel Baker and some of his contemporaries in mid-nineteenth-century Ceylon. Recent studies of the colonial histories and forms of natural knowledge of this period have begun to contextualise and flesh out the disembodied visions of what Mary Louise Pratt has termed the ‘seeing men’ of empire.<sup>4</sup> This paper contributes to this material and embodied turn by attending to the intercorporeal attachments, crossings and ethics that passed between hunted and hunting bodies.<sup>5</sup> It critically engages with existing work on hunting and colonial natural history by attending to both human and nonhuman embodied experience. Drawing out the importance of affect and intercorporeal exchange the paper then reflects on the performance, epistemology and ethics of hunting practice and explores the role played by a code of sportsmanship in orientating and legitimating the ethical sensibility of hunting.

In contrast to the interconnected activities of natural history, forestry and nature conservation, hunting has received surprisingly little attention from historians and historical geographers. The most notable exception to this is John MacKenzie’s *Empire of Nature*. In the preface to this work, MacKenzie explains that in the post-1945 period the big-game hunter became something of

<sup>1</sup> S.W. Baker, *The Rifle and the Hound in Ceylon*, New Delhi, 1999, 253 (original published 1892).

<sup>2</sup> The island was renamed Sri Lanka in 1972, after achieving independence from the British in 1948.

<sup>3</sup> S.W. Baker, *Eight Years Wanderings in Ceylon*, New Delhi, 1999, 2 (original published 1855).

<sup>4</sup> M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London, 1992. See also V della Dora, Mountains and memory: embodied visions of ancient peaks in the nineteenth-century Aegean, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 33 (2008) 217–232; F. Driver and L. Martins, Visual histories: John Septimus Roe and the art of navigation, c. 1815–1830, *History Workshop Journal* 54 (2002) 144–161.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Attachments, crossings and ethics’ is the subtitle to J. Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Princeton, 2001.

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