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Frederick Courteney Selous (1851-1917), one of the most famous big-game hunters of his era, plied his trade in Africa, North America and Asia Minor.

near-death experiences: the Regent's Park disaster on January 15, 1867, when 49 people died while skating on a lake when the ice cracked. Selous found himself floating on a piece of ice. With a presence of mind and courage that stayed with him, he calmly spread his weight and crawled across the broken slabs safely to the shore.

His father, wanting his son to become a doctor, now sent him to Germany to continue his education. Unfortunately, Selous took more interest in the ducks than books. He eventually fled the country to escape prison after punching an official who disturbed him while out on an egg

hunt. His continental sojourn was ultimately cut short by the Franco-Prussian War, which broke out in July 1870.

INTO AFRICA

So now came a decisive moment in his life: with £400 from his father, and 300lbs of baggage, he caught the steamer to Port Elizabeth in South Africa. He arrived on September 4, 1871. He was 19. He set out by oxcart on a 440-mile journey to the Diamond Fields in what is now Kimberley in the Northern Cape determined to make his mark as a hunter.

It was not an auspicious start: he

didn't see any animals for the first nine days, when he noted: 'Shot a hare; the first thing I shot in Africa.' He also bagged an antelope. 'One might as well look for game in Hyde Park,' he grumbled. Soon he found his feet and made his way to Matabeleland in modern day Zimbabwe, where the local king granted him permission to hunt, a privilege not previously given to a westerner.

That first season he shot 450lbs of ivory – worth up to £50,000 in today's money – and he returned to Southampton first class. But this was a way of life that just like the elephant on which it depended, was quickly ▶

The life and times of Frederick Courtney Selous

Hunter. Explorer. Naturalist. The lasting legacy of Frederick Selous and his influence on both hunting and conservation cannot be overstated, as Alec Marsh reports.

Were you to walk past the diplodocus in the entrance hall of the Natural History Museum in London and head up the main staircase – passing a marble Charles Darwin at the landing on your way – you might soon notice the statue of a man who, to modern eyes, doesn't quite belong. For a start, he's armed with a rifle and wearing the wide-brimmed hat of the bushman. Bill Oddie this is not. This man's a hunter.

Immortalised in bronze – in a bust paid for by public subscription no less – is one of Britain's greatest national heroes, Frederick Courtney Selous. And the reason he takes pride of place at the Natural History Museum is that over the course of his life he contributed up to 5,000 specimens, including hundreds of mammals, to the museum's collection. 'Hunter, explorer and naturalist' it declares on the wall next to him.

Were you now to head to the museum's mammal galleries, where the signs tell you that the colouring of the specimens has faded over the years, there's a good chance that the very lion, zebra or antelope you are looking at once found itself in the gun-sights of Frederick Courtney Selous. And such were his achievements in exploring previously unknown stretches of Africa – much in what today we

know as Zimbabwe – that Selous was awarded the Royal Geographical Society's Founder's Gold Medal in 1883. Other winners include the African explorers Livingstone, Stanley and Speke, and the polar pioneers Scott and Amundsen.

NO ORDINARY SCHOOLBOY

Selous's story didn't quite start this way, however. When he first went to Africa in 1871 aged 19, it was his exploits as a big-game and ivory hunter – he shot elephants with a four bore single barrel black powder muzzleloader – that

“He took the
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drop out of it.”

were to bring him fame and fortune. Dubbed the 'Mighty Nimrod' or 'Great Hunter' by the press, within 15 years he was to provide the inspiration for the fictional Allan Quatermain, hero of Ryder Haggard's best-selling novel *King Solomon's Mines*. It sold out.

Born to a well-heeled family in London's Regent's Park in 1851, Selous was inspired by the tales of explorers from an early age and had a determined passion for nature. Aged

around 10, he was found sleeping on his dormitory floor with the windows open wearing only his nightshirt. Selous's friend and biographer J.C. Millais recalled: "On being asked the cause of his behaviour, he replied: 'One day I am going to be a hunter in Africa and I am just hardening myself to sleep on the ground'."

At 14 he went to Rugby School, where his housemaster was the legendary Frederick Temple (later Archbishop of Canterbury) whom Selous told on his arrival: "I mean to be like Livingstone." Unlike most boys he wasn't joking. Indeed, a typical letter home at this time revealed his passions: 'I am reading a new book by Mr Livingstone,' he wrote to his mother. 'It is very interesting and is about the discovery of two great lakes. Send me two catapults.'

Later he took a rifle to school that he kept hidden at a local farm, according to his recent biographer Stephen Taylor. Soon, however, he lost the rifle while fleeing a gamekeeper on a nearby estate but the weapon was returned after he wrote to the landowner. A great athlete at school, he was a noted rebel and rule-breaker, yet also founded Rugby's Natural History Society. Known as 'Zealous' by his contemporaries, this, clearly, was no ordinary schoolboy.

Next came the first of his many

Big-game hunters



The unveiling ceremony of the Selous memorial at the Natural History Museum in June 1920.

dying out in southern Africa. After returning to the continent and having three tough years in the later 1870s, he realised that the game was quite literally up. He wrote to his mother, saying: 'I shall now give up hunting elephants as it is simply impossible to make it pay.'

Instead he became a writer: *A Hunter's Wanderings In Africa*, published in 1881, became an instant bestseller, and stands alongside dozens of periodical articles and eight further books that he wrote in his lifetime. During the 1880s he continued to hunt big game, not least for collectors and museums, and he also undertook explorations of the African interior.

Ultimately he became embroiled in Cecil Rhodes's grand imperialist project – the creation of Rhodesia – during the 'Scramble for Africa'.

NOBLER CREATURES THAN US

In this time Selous confronted and shot all of Africa's big game. Of these the one he prized most highly was the lion, which he judged the most dangerous, if wounded. 'One of the most notable characteristics of the lion is his roar, which is one of the grandest and most awe-inspiring sounds in nature,' he wrote. In 1876, aged 22, he discovered just how awe-inspiring when shooting his first lion. He had wounded it the

night before and was stalking it the following morning, armed with his single-barrel muzzleloader. Suddenly it was before him: 'I was so close that I had not even time to take a sight,' he recalled, 'but, stepping a pace backwards, got the rifle to my shoulder, and, when his head was close upon the muzzle, pulled the trigger and jumped to one side. The lion fell almost at my very feet.' Pegged out (from which the colloquial expression arises), the beast measured 10' 3".

On another occasion, when hunting a wounded full-grown male, the lion confronted him – and Selous's ice-cold calm saved him again. With no time

to reload, he eyeballed the beast: 'Had I turned my back on it and tried to mount my horse, it would have sprung on me,' he wrote later. 'I believe that my standing quite motionless in some way disconcerted it and caused it to give up its charge at the last moment'. Selous accounted for 31 lions during his career.

A CHANGE IN FOCUS

Late in his life he offered the following advice for wood-be lion hunters: 'Large-calibre rifles are certainly not necessary,' he opined. 'Should I ever kill another of these grand brutes, which I am afraid is unlikely, it will be with one of the new small-bore rifles.'

After lion, he ranked elephant and buffalo as the most enjoyable quarry on account of the danger of hunting them, and on at least one occasion he came close to death when elephant hunting. With a party of guns on horseback shooting at a herd of some 60 or more elephant on the gallop, Selous personally accounted for five from a total bag was 22. Then a wounded cow charged him – and his exhausted horse could only manage a trot.

The elephant dashed horse and rider to ground and leaped on them. 'I was half stunned by the violence of the shock,' he recalled. 'The first thing I was aware of was the very strong smell of elephant. At the same instant I felt that I was unhurt and that though I was in an unpleasant predicament, I still had a chance for life.' Somehow the elephant, still over him, had not crushed him.

As the years passed and he saw the plains of Africa being denuded of life, his views changed radically. Always a committed natural scientist – he would search for butterflies or other insects after a morning's hunting – Selous continued to regard killing game for survival while in the wilds as essential. However, he came to strongly oppose hunting for skins or ivory and wrote: 'How to preserve all the species of beautiful wild creatures from ruthless

“Selous came to strongly oppose hunting for skins or ivory.”

slaughter and speedy extermination is surely one of the most pressing problems of the day. There is only one way in which to preserve wild game from extinction, and that is by the timely formation of national parks, within boundaries of which all wildlife shall be sacred.'

After his marriage to the beautiful young Gladys Maddy in 1894, Selous spent more time in Britain, whereupon he 'took seriously to the shotgun', according to Millais. 'After 20 years he became quite a good shot, certainly above average,' recalled Millais, who accompanied Selous pheasant shooting at Tatton Park in Cheshire. 'Selous shot brilliantly and quite as well as any of the other guns, who were accounted first class shots. We killed over 1,000 pheasants that day, and Selous took down the high birds with a speed and accuracy that I think astonished even himself. He was like a schoolboy in his joy'.

Selous also spent many happy days on the moors at Swythamley Park in Staffordshire, shooting driven grouse as a guest of Sir Philip Brocklehurst. 'Selous killed for the first time 20 birds at one stand,' added Millais. 'He was in the seventh heaven of delight.'

But he was still far from done with Africa: or perhaps it's fairer to say that Africa was not yet done with him.

With the outbreak of the First World War, though now in his sixties, this lean man of action was determined to get his slice of the action. Appointed Captain Selous of the 25th battalion, Royal Fusiliers – nicknamed the 'old and the bold' on account of their ages – he went out to fight for the Empire in British East Africa and died

of his wounds during a fire-fight. His corporal recalled: 'When Captain Selous was asked if was wounded he stated that it was nothing very much and insisted on going on.'

Where he fell mortally injured now lies within the Selous Nature Reserve in Tanzania, which is bigger than Denmark and the largest nature reserve in the world. He would surely have approved.

"He was a man if ever there's been one that took the sponge of life and squeezed every drop of moisture out of it," says Dr Jim Casada, a historian and outdoorsman who has edited two anthologies of Selous's writings. "He was very much ahead of his time in respect of conservation; he was a gifted amateur natural historian and made a significant scientific contribution; he was an adventurer for all seasons."

Among Selous's many friends was the US President Theodore Roosevelt, who turned to him for guidance on planning his own African adventure in 1909. For Roosevelt, Selous was the greatest of men: "I greatly valued his friendship," he declared, "I mourn his loss; and yet I feel that in death, as in life, he was to be envied." 🦋

Auction note



A rare presentation silver-mounted walking cane made from rhino horn shot by Frederick Selous in Zimbabwe in 1872 will go under the hammer at Holt's in London on June 30. Lot 1095 has an estimate of £15,000-£20,000. Under CITES regulations, export for this item is only authorised within the EU. For more information, visit holtsauctioneers.com.