



# Frederick Courteney Selous

## *The Man Teddy Roosevelt Called "The Greatest Big-game Hunter in the World"*

By Rolf D. Baldus

*Nowadays, that title is often interpreted negatively – back then it was a compliment.*

In fact, Selous had never been a big-game hunter in the sense of hunting to collect rare trophies; he would better be described as a naturalist. The number of his elephant kills was modest when judged with the yardstick of his day: 106 in 25 years, and not even one 100-lb tusk. His fame had other sources: He lived in a time during which the exploration and colonization of Africa by European powers reached its final phase. With his books, Selous tapped into the *Zeitgeist* of the English-speaking world, making him one of the most popular travel and adventure writers.

Selous was born into a wealthy family in 1851 in London. As a child he enthusiastically read books about Africa, including the works of David Livingstone, Richard Burton, and the hunter-authors, William Cornwallis Harris and William Finnaughty. From 1866 onwards Selous studied at Rugby, an elite private school where he was known for his athletic, rather than academic, achievements. He hid a small-calibre rifle in a barn to shoot animals for his school's natural history society, of which he was chairman. But an academic career wasn't Selous's thing and he left school at 18 without graduating. His family sent him to Switzerland and then to Wiesbaden, Germany, to complete his schooling, but an argument with a Hessian forestry warden, sparked over a relatively harmless poaching affair, made him escape to Vienna.

Selous's father gave him money to set up in South Africa, and in 1871 he arrived at Algoa Bay in present-day Port Elizabeth. His favourite rifle, a Reilly breech-loading double barrel .577 Snider, was soon stolen. He travelled northwards towards the Transvaal, bagging a few antelope on the way. But not until he was north of Pretoria did he find the untouched landscapes and wild animals that had fascinated him as a child. In spring 1872, together with friends, Selous set up an ox-wagon train for

Matabeleland, following in the tracks of the elephant hunters to what is now Zimbabwe, where he presented himself to the king of the Matabele, Lobengula.

Lobengula laughed at the 20-year-old Selous, but eventually allowed him to hunt elephant in his territory, saying: "You can go where you want, you're just a boy!" His first season of hunting he made an excellent profit of 300 pounds and decided to earn his living as an elephant hunter.

After getting into several dangerous situations, he wished he'd never had anything to do with his 4-bore Hollis muzzleloader because "its recoil was frightening," affecting his shooting. One time while hunting elephant, the percussion cap failed and his helper mistakenly added a second round of gunpowder. Selous described the scene: "*Taking a good sight for the middle of the shoulder, I pulled the trigger. This time the gun went off – and I went off too! I was lifted, from the ground, and turning round in the air, fell with my face in the sand, whilst the gun was carried yards away over my shoulder...*"

In the following years there were few elephants and many diseases. He lost equipment and ivory and was almost trampled by a female elephant. His financial reserves and enthusiasm dried up, he returned to England in 1880, and wrote of his experiences in his book, *A Hunter's Wanderings in Africa*. But the Dark Continent wouldn't let Selous go and he returned to South Africa intending to farm. Unsuccessful, he returned to Matabeleland to hunt for the British Museum.

Selous also wanted to make a name as an explorer, and was eventually awarded by the Royal Geographic Society for his endeavours. An expedition to what we now call Zambia was eventful: His caravan was attacked, half his men were killed,

and the rest fled. Alone, without weapons, maps or a compass, he trekked hundreds of kilometres into Mashonaland.

Selous became one of the first 'White Hunters' of his day, receiving payment to accompany hunting expeditions, including for a friend of Cecil Rhodes, the Premier of the Cape. This connection to Rhodes – one of the richest men in the world – opened a new chapter for Selous. Rhodes received a Royal Charter for the regions to the north of the Limpopo, which fitted into his plans to connect the Cape to Cairo under the British Crown. Rhodes planned to found a colony in Mashonaland and hired Selous, who had often commented on the region's economic potential in his books and lectures, in 1890, although he was later accused of having sugarcoated the situation out of loyalty to Rhodes and his own economic interests.

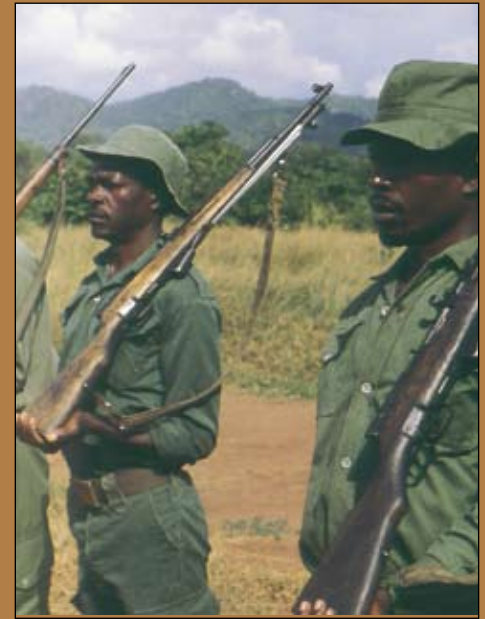
Lobengula worriedly watched Rhodes's actions. Both Rhodes and Selous knew that a war with the Matabele could easily end in disaster. But through his hunting expeditions Selous knew of ox-wagon trails into eastern Zimbabwe – far from Lobengula's kingdom – and the pioneers he led reached present-day Harare without problems. The colony

Rhodesia was founded, although Lobengula continued to hold onto power in the west.

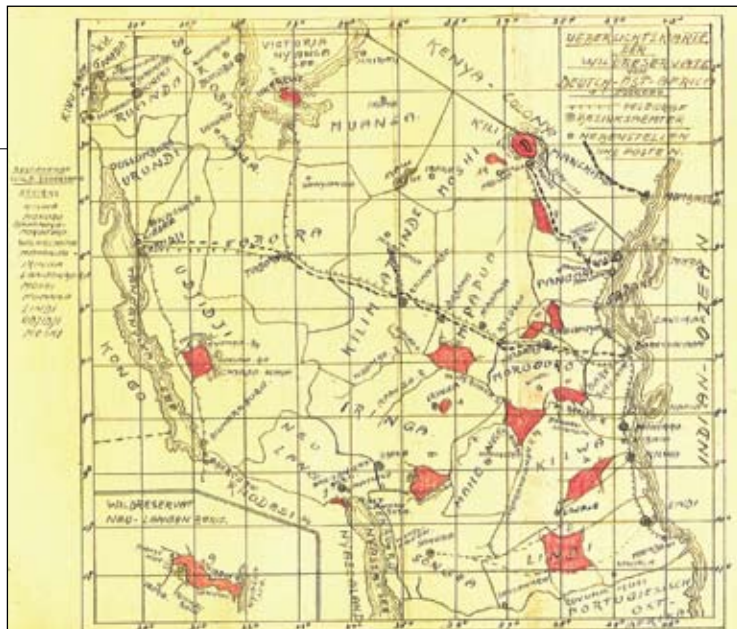
Selous worked for Rhodes's Chartered Company for three years and received shares of de Beers stock as compensation, which freed him from financial worries. He wrote his second book, *Travels and Adventures in South East Africa*, and returned to England in 1893, married Gladys, and gave popular speeches about his adventures.

In 1893 there was confrontation between the Matabele and the Rhodesian settlers in Mashonaland. Selous took part in the fighting and was injured by a slug in his chest from a muzzleloader, which cost him his place in the Shangani Patrol. This proved to be a lifesaver when the Matabele wiped out the patrol. When they were defeated, the area became part of Rhodesia, and Selous bought land in Bulawayo.

In 1896 he lived on his farm with his wife. This would be his last year in Southern Africa, because of the Matabele and Mashona uprising and the Jameson Raid. With Rhodes's knowledge, a mercenary unit led by his acquaintance, Leander Jameson, attacked the Boer Republic of the Transvaal. Since gold had been found near Johannesburg the



*The Game Scouts that patrol the Selous Game Reserve today, pictured here, have nothing to do with the 'Selous Scouts' - the Rhodesian army commando regiment founded in 1973 by the white minority regime and disbanded in 1980 by Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe's dictator/president to this day.*  
Photo: Rolf Baldus



*This hand-drawn map (ca. 1911) shows the Mobero Game Reserve where Selous was killed, (in the map about 1 cm south-east of the Rufiji River near the reserve's southern boundary.)*

*Photo: Rolf Baldus*

number of foreigners had multiplied in the republic, but they did not enjoy the rights of citizens. Rhodes and Jameson attempted to start a revolt with the unhappy foreigners, so that mercenaries could come to their aid. They failed, and the Boers dealt with them swiftly. Cecil Rhodes had to step down as Premier in Cape Town.

Selous, who had always nurtured a good relationship with the Boers, was disgusted by Rhodes and Jameson. The Mashona uprising that same year had almost cost him and his wife their lives. Together with the settlers Selous fought against the insurgents. When, during a Matabele attack, his horse threw him and bolted, he found himself in a seemingly hopeless situation, but a friend was able to save him. He had always believed the Mashona would welcome the new settler regime, having protected them from Matabele attacks; but hatred for the settlers apparently outweighed their fear of the Matabele.

Deeply disappointed, he returned to England in 1896 to settle down in Surrey at his property, Heatherside, and dedicated himself to writing, lecturing, and living the life of an English country squire. His books were even read by Theodore Roosevelt, resulting in a lifelong friendship. Selous and Gladys had two sons and lost a daughter at birth. A strong critic of British policy in Southern Africa who sided with the two Boer Republics of Transvaal and Orange Free State, Selous did not set foot on African soil for years to come. When he did, it was in East Africa – a natural paradise and new English colony.

Towards the end of his time in office, in 1908 President Roosevelt asked Selous for advice for his East African safari. Although Selous accompanied Roosevelt from Naples, Italy, to Mombasa, he did not join him for the hunt because “his party is so large, and I don’t want to be with a crowd.”

When World War I broke out in 1914 Selous volunteered for military service at age 62, and was turned down. He then tried to join the Legion of Frontiersmen, an East African mercenary troop that his friend Driscoll was setting up in Kenya. He then contacted the War Office directly with his request to be drafted. Lord Kitchener supposedly turned down the application, reasoning that Selous would be no help at his age.

At the start of the war several thousand Germans were living in German East Africa, which shared a long border with British Kenya. They were defended by the colonial force, the *Schutztruppe*, consisting of several battalions led by German officers and a core

of several thousand well-trained native soldiers, called ‘askaris.’ Commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, they marched into Kenya despite being outnumbered 1 to 8.

London’s War Ministry sent troops from India to Tanga, north of the German capital, Dar es Salaam. But they were horribly defeated, which gave Driscoll’s plan to found a private army in Kenya renewed strength. At age 64, Selous was accepted in February 1915 as a lieutenant and company leader. In May, Driscoll’s Corps, now called the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers, was integrated into the regular army and landed in Mombasa. But they were an undisciplined mob, nicknamed ‘the old and the bold.’

Their first mission against a German radio station on the eastern shore of Lake Victoria was successful despite heavy losses. Except for sinking the cruiser *Königsberg* in the Rufiji Delta, it was a rare British victory. After Selous’s promotion to captain, Roosevelt wrote to him: “It is simply first class to have you a fighting officer in the fighting line.”

By early 1916 only 450 of the original 1,100 Fusiliers were in a condition to serve. Selous received a Distinguished Service Order medal for, as *The Times* wrote, his “conspicuous gallantry, resourcefulness and endurance.” In December his unit marched southward under the command of the South African politician and former general, Jan Smuts, now leader of 30,000 South African soldiers as well as Englishmen, Rhodesians, and the King’s African Rifles.

Lettow-Vorbeck’s *Schutztruppe* was never stronger than 12,000 men and had been almost completely cut off from reinforcements. The British troops moved through German East Africa, achieving many territorial victories but no meaningful ones. Von Lettow-Vorbeck continually managed to escape when surrounded and to inflict large numbers of casualties on his opponents.

At the end of the year, the fatigued armies faced each other at the Mgeta and Rufiji Rivers. There were heavy battles to the south-east, where Smuts was implementing a large landing to take the Mgeta front from behind and surround Lettow-Vorbeck. It was the rainy season, the area a swamp, and malaria rampant. With the Fusiliers reduced to 170 men, Selous wrote home for the last time: “We are on the eve of an attack on the Germans out here. Our forces are terribly depleted, principally from sickness.” A bloody battle in the village of Beho-Beho ensued.

There are different versions of how Selous died. One source says he left cover under heavy fire in order to spy out the enemy positions with binoculars, and was hit in the side, turned around, and received a deadly headshot. Another soldier said there was a half-hour gap between the first and second injury. But different eyewitnesses agree that a sniper killed him, although some also talked about machine-gun fire. However, Lettow-Vorbeck did not have sharpshooters amongst his troops; his soldiers were just well trained and used every chance for target practice.

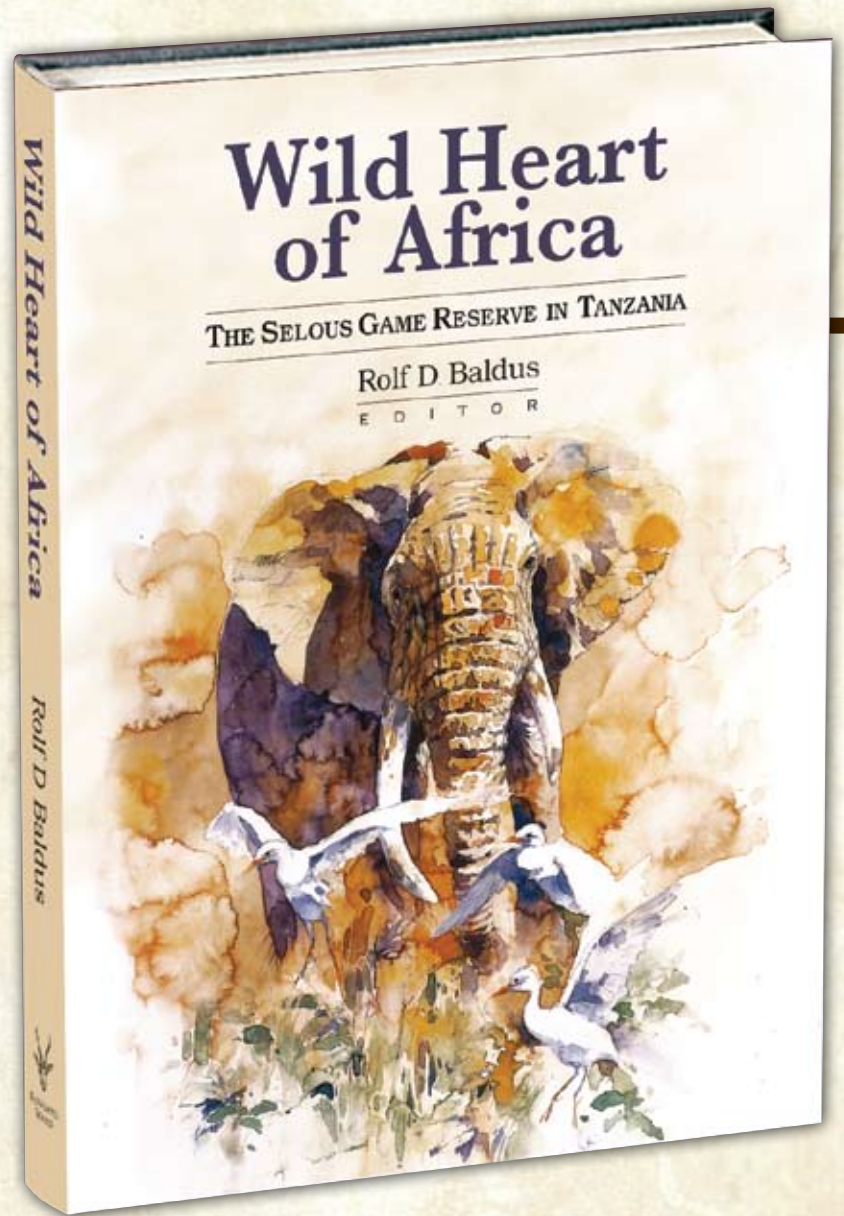
Selous was buried where he fell – at the edges of a grassy plain – a wooden cross marking the grave. For the naturalist and hunter, there could be no better place, with elephants, lions and antelopes moving around his gravestone that reads: **Captain F.C. Selous DSO, 25<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers, Killed in Action 4.1.17.**

Selous died the last great African adventurer. Although his trophies can be seen at the London Museum of Natural History and a bust of him stands in London, his most beautiful memorial is the Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania.

*For more about Frederick Courteney Selous, his weapons, and the game reserve and Scouts named after him, go to our website: [www.africansportinggazette.com](http://www.africansportinggazette.com)*



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Paul Stones



# *The Wild Heart of Africa*

*Edited by Rolf D. Baldus, with contributions from 20 authors  
Reviewed by Brooke ChilversLubin*

*Hunters around the world know for whom the Selous Game Reserve is named. But now everyone else with an interest in the protection and management of Africa's wildlife and its fragile future can get the full story of the Reserve – and the men who made it.*



*Rolf Baldus, contributor and editor of Wild Heart of Africa, brought together some 20 authors with a real knowledge of the Selous Game Reserve. Here he is dressed for a television documentary as the governor of German East Africa during the First World War.*

Let's get one thing straight. His name is spelt Frederick Courteney Selous. That's my contribution to getting the history of Captain F. C. Selous right. While this 275-page marvel *always* gets it right, few reviewers do (and I won't name names).

Although the majority of the Selous Game Reserve was established in 1896 by the governor of German East Africa, Hermann von Wissmann, making it Africa's oldest reserve, it was named after our fallen hunter and hero only in the 1920s. Today, after sometimes shrinking and sometimes expanding, it is Africa's largest protected area, encompassing some 50,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Its wildlife populations count – in approximate figures – 70,000 elephant, 120,000 Cape buffalo, several thousand 'big cats,' hippo, and over half a million antelopes including 10,000 Roosevelt sable antelope, plus kudu, eland, Lichtenstein's hartebeest, Nyassa wildebeest, and **zero** full-time human beings.

Baldus, who was the German manager of the Selous Conservation Programme and spent 13 years working with the Tanzanian Wildlife Division, takes us through the area's earliest history. He also documents the region's impressive man-eating lions, and was able to obtain permission from the grandson of German wildlife painter Wilhelm Kuhnert (1865-1926) to print excerpts from his unpublished 1905 hunting diaries; the book is also sprinkled with his art.

Ludwig Siege gives us the history of hunting the Selous, from James Sutherland through General von Lettow-Vorbeck provision-hunting for his troops; and, of course, the colonial wardens, like 'Iodine' Ionides and Brian Nicholson, without whom there would be no Selous Game Reserve today. He also covers the story of the long battle with poaching.

But hunters who have visited the Selous know this is no Serengeti-like paradise: late rains, early rains, high grass, and river crossings have their own special challenges. PH Rolf Rohwer's chapter on what the client should expect on a Selous hunting safari is better than all the outfitter brochures combined.

Although the book should be read from beginning to end by every *ASG* reader, I suggest hunters take photocopies of the chapters on the Reserve's birdlife and trees with them on safari. Any PH worth his weight in US\$ (about the cost of a 28-day full-bag Selous safari) should be able to point out martial eagles and carmine bee-eaters, as well as *Terminalia*, *Combretum* and *Brachystegia* species, because hunting clients should be knowledgeable bushmen, too.

There is more, much more to this fine book, which includes some 400 photos; the old black and white ones are of especial interest to 'Yesteryear' addicts like me. *Wild Heart* is also beautifully enhanced by the numerous light-drenched watercolours of contemporary wildlife artist Bodo Meier, who captures the Reserve's heartbreaking sunsets and the magical markings of its wildlife. The quality and originality of his work is a very welcome change.

The hunting community can congratulate itself (and thank Nicholson for his foresight) for the money it generates to benefit local communities and wildlife from the 'hunting-only' blocks south of the Rufiji and Ruaha Rivers, because few tourists come to the Selous after the more awesome landscapes of Tanzania's 'Northern Circuit.' Yet hardly a tourism guidebook mentions this much overlooked fact that deserves to be known by all.

*The Wild Heart of Africa* is published by Rowland Ward and is available for US\$65.00 plus shipping. Go to [www.rowlandward.com](http://www.rowlandward.com) ☺

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