The Trouble with Lions: A Glasgow Vet in Africa

Author: Sleeman, Jonathan Mark

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The Trouble with Lions: A Glasgow Vet in Africa. By Jerry Haigh, The University of Alberta Press, Ring House 2, Edmonton, AB, T6G 2E1, Canada. 2008. 462 pp. ISBN 978-0-88864-503-6. C $34.95 (paper).

Review by Jonathan Mark Sleeman

It was with great anticipation that I accepted the request to review Dr Jerry Haigh's new autobiography. I have heard Dr Haigh lecture several times; he is always entertaining, and my hope was that his writing would be equally enjoyable. I was not disappointed. Professor Emeritus of Zoological Medicine at the University of Saskatchewan's Western College of Veterinary Medicine, Dr Haigh has spent a considerable amount of his career in sub-Saharan Africa, and this book documents that time spent working on lions in Africa. *The Trouble with Lions* spans more than four decades—from 1965 to the present—and is divided into four sections. The first describes his time as a recent veterinary graduate working both for the government and as a private practitioner in Kenya. The second section discusses the bush-meat crisis in western Africa, i.e., the unsustainable commercial hunting of wildlife, especially primates, and the third spans a single year, focusing particularly on lions in trouble (or getting into trouble)—the inspiration for the title of the book. The fourth section covers his more recent trips to Africa as a teacher and chaperone for Canadian veterinary students taking an educational trip of a lifetime to Uganda.

For me, Haigh's early experiences were particularly fascinating. Kenya gained its independence from British Colonial rule in 1963, and Dr Haigh arrived (or I should say returned, since he was actually born in Kenya during World War II) as a young, eager veterinarian shortly thereafter. He immediately embarked on a mission to provide veterinary assistance to as much wildlife as possible, and in relating those events and experiences, he takes us on a roller coaster ride of rhino immobilizations, roan antelope translocations, and lion film stars. We are introduced to a variety of colorful characters and hair-raising close encounters along the way. My initial thought was that these stories were a trifle clichéd, but it rapidly dawned on me that many of the procedures he described, and the anesthetic drugs he used, were being applied for the first time on wildlife species. This was the material the clichés were built upon—truly pioneering stuff. It is also clear from this book that Dr Haigh focused on the human-livestock-wildlife interface in these early days, long before the One Medicine-One Health approach became fashionable. Haigh's personal experiences provide perspective on an historic chapter of African wildlife veterinary practice; however, I would have enjoyed broader analysis and commentary. Being a person of European descent in immediate post-colonial Kenya was surely not without its social and political baggage. I would have been interested to learn how those dynamics impacted the man and his work. What where his personal motivations? What personal issues did he face? What did his wife and children think about the author's love affair with Africa? What sacrifices did he and his family have to make? Some of these are, perhaps, uncomfortable issues to address, but that background would have added greater depth to the book.

I cannot have the same criticism about the second section of the book with its well-researched and detailed account of the bush-meat trade in western Africa and its impact on wildlife populations. A vivid description of hacking through dense rainforest to dart forest elephants is particularly riveting, and one shares in his shock and grief when the second elephant they manage to capture is found dead shortly after darting.

In the third section, Haigh details his experiences in Africa during a sabbatical leave from the University of Saskatchewan in 1997, visiting various projects in South Africa and Namibia with his long-suffering wife, Jo. Although the projects were certainly interesting, this section reads more like a travelogue, lacking the personal connections he had with Kenya and other parts of Africa. On the other hand, we do encounter one fascinating "surprise connection," which I will not elaborate upon so as not to spoil the surprise for future readers!

Haigh's discussion of the plight of the African lion, and his use of the lion as a symbol for the precarious future for Africa's wildlife, is very insightful. A central theme throughout the book is the complex relationships between humans, their livestock, and the wildlife, which is often seen as a direct threat or a competitor for resources, and—in the case of lions—"mainly, of course, for our cattle."

However, out of this complexity emerge simple and elegant solutions, as we see in the case of the Maasai "morans" or young warriors, who traditionally hunt lions as part of a ritualized ceremony marking the passage from boyhood to manhood. As a result of innovative conservation-education programs many of these morans have formed the Lion Guardian Programs; they have been converted into paid conservationists, community educators, and role models for future generations. However, Haigh also uses lions to illustrate how human activities have resulted in the spillover of domestic animal diseases such as bovine tuberculosis and canine distemper into lion populations, with devastating consequences. The plight of lions also provides an example of the need for local communities to derive financial benefit from conservation through sustainable, consumptive, and nonconsumptive utilization of wildlife—something the author firmly believes in.

In the fourth section, the author thoroughly entertains us with the highlights of several educational trips to Uganda that he organized to provide Canadian veterinary students with firsthand knowledge of Africa's wildlife conservation issues. For many of the students it was their first trip to Africa, and obviously a life-changing experience. Dr Haigh guided and instructed these students as they worked with Ugandan colleagues, immobilized kob, steered clear of tame elephants, witnessed the results of poaching, and encountered the lingering resentment of local people over Uganda's colonial past. Haigh's fatherly approach is very endearing. By the thoughtful telling, we get the impression that the author may well have experienced Africa anew through the eyes of his students. Or perhaps with age and experience come enhanced powers of observation and reflection? Either way, this narrative offers a refreshing and uplifting ending to the book. The description of those students working to help local schools is very moving. Again, my one minor quibble is that I would have liked more discussion of the sociopolitical context, especially since courses like this for expatriate students could be construed by some as "neocolonialism." A discussion of how this course helps Uganda further its development and manage its wildlife would have given the book an even greater relevance.

Dr Haigh has a folksy, easy-to-read writing style. The book is infused with humor, often with a schoolboy bent (I lost count of the number of times the word "testicle" was used). The writing and content is technical enough to engage those of us familiar with wildlife diseases and veterinary medicine, but not overly so, such that readers of any profession can enjoy this book. Although the book contains some minor grammatical and factual errors, and I would have found larger, more detailed maps more useful, these are minor criticisms, and do not distract inordinately from the value of the book. I would recommend *The Trouble with Lions* for an entertaining but worthwhile read from one of the pioneers of wildlife veterinary medicine. It would make a great companion on a long flight, or a long layover (to Africa, perhaps?), or for someone wrapped up in front of the fire on a cold, prairie-winter's night dreaming of warm, exotic locales.

Jonathan Mark Sleeman, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, Richmond, Virginia 23230, USA. (jonathan.sleeman@dgif.virginia.gov).