



INTERVIEW WITH THE FILMMAKERS

Nature and Empire

Interview with Jay Kirk, the author of Kingdom Under Glass: A Tale of Obsession, Adventure, and One Man's Quest to Preserve the World's Great Animals, by Matthew Schauer, University of Pennsylvania, July 2011.



BARBARY LIONS (PANTHERA LEO LEO) IN MUSÉUM NATIONAL D'HISTOIRE NATURELLE À PARIS.

You have been very successful writing in a number of different genres. What drew you to writing a work of history and to Carl Akeley in particular?

It was just a happy accident. I first ran across Akeley's name while working on a story for Harper's. It was an investigative piece about all of these inexplicable sightings of mountain lions in the eastern U.S.-- inexplicable because the eastern mountain lion (aka cougar, puma) has been extinct since 1888. It was the first story I wrote that got me into the whole natural

history thing, and it was in the midst of spending a lot of time roaming mountainsides in Appalachia with game wardens and amateur cougar experts, and reading a lot of historical natural history stuff, that I read this bit in passing about the "famous taxidermist" who had once "Strangled a Leopard with His Bare Hands." That grabbed my attention and I started poking around, and very quickly realized I had a book on my hands.

What role do you see imperialism and global empire as playing in Akeley's life and explorations?

As Akeley came into his own, America was just becoming an empire. So that theme is very much a part of the book. As is often the case, the people on the ground, who are right in the midst of major cultural change, do not realize that they might embody the zeitgeist, and I always felt that was the case with Akeley. I don't think he was conscious of it, even as he went about assuredly playing his role. Just consider, if the colonization of Africa were not taking place, he would never have been given the job to go over and "preserve" samples of the species that were being mown down due to the habitat loss and overhunting that was a direct result of the settlers' efforts to tame the land. I think it's also illustrative to know that Akeley's boss at the American Museum of Natural History, Henry Fairfield Osborn, who was, as it happened, a tireless advocate of eugenics, overtly referred to the business of the museum's "expeditions" as working in tandem with the imperial business of the Western powers and the acquisitions he made as "conquests."



How did your own travels to Africa affect the writing process? Do you think that it helped you better understand Akeley's experiences?

When I went to Rwanda, I not only got within six feet of a 500-pound mountain gorilla, but I had the very unsettling experience of getting lost in the bush. I guess I should have been tipped off when my guide started saying things under his breath like "this road is bothering me," and "this road keeps appearing and disappearing." In the latter case, by nightfall, a goat herder led us back to safety. Both experiences certainly gave me a flavor of what might be described as Akeley's daily routine.

What value do you perceive *Kingdom Under Glass* has for students and scholars of history?

I would hope that the history student reading *Kingdom Under Glass* might at the very least take something from the epigraph I chose from Eric Foner who says that: "Works of history are first and foremost acts of the imagination."

How do you think Akeley would perceive modern day Africa?

I think he would be pleased, in some ways, that at least a few of the species that he feared would be extinct within a few decades are still thriving, or, if not thriving, at least alive and fighting. He was confident the elephant would be completely exterminated, and, as of this writing, although the elephant does face enormous ongoing pressures, it is not yet on the list of extinct species. Nor is it on the list of endangered species, as is the Asian elephant, though the African elephant is listed as "threatened." He would feel bittersweet. He would be happy to see that the protections he personally initiated for the mountain gorilla, in the Virungas, continue to this day, and that the mountain gorilla, though no less endangered than it was in his time, is also still alive and has also become one of the great symbols of conservation.

Do you perceive Akeley as more of a hunter or a conservationist?

I think, to be honest, he was a preservationist. His main mission was to preserve in his dioramas an image of these species that he and his overlords at the natural history museum believed were doomed (due to the encroachment of "civilization" in Africa). Later, he became an accidental conservationist, but this was after a long period of time where he had become an almost obsessive and remorseless hunter (in the name of his art), then a remorseful hunter, then a conservationist who still killed on the side when it served his preservationist purposes.



What do you think is Carl Akeley's ultimate legacy?

The dioramas are nice, but, hands down, his ultimate legacy is saving the mountain gorilla.

Do you plan on writing more historical work?

I do. In fact, I am currently working on a long and twisted piece for Harper's about the Hungarian composer Bela Bartok, who himself was a collector and preservationist of folk music, starting around 1905. He then transmogrified these peasant melodies into his own compositions. Bartok's story is, in many ways, intimately connected to the fall of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

Some of Carl Akeley's taxidermy work still exists today, although taxidermied exhibits have in general fallen out of popularity in modern Western museums. How do you think his exhibits and life resonate differently with a modern audience, as opposed to those that might have heard of his exploits and viewed his exhibits in the early twentieth century?

When a modern audience gets the whole story they realize that it is not one so much about changing attitudes toward nature – which, of course, it is – but is more about how those attitudes were transformed by changes in technology. Superior motion picture photography killed the diorama. That was part of the reason I loved Akeley's story so much, because he not only did the diorama thing but he had a major hand in reinventing the motion picture camera. In a way, he killed off his own beloved art form by inventing a new one.

A number of very compelling and well-documented historical figures besides Carl Akeley are present in the work, such as Martin and Osa Johnson, Theodore Roosevelt, and George Eastman. How did you select your source material and was it difficult to choose which secondary figures to explore in greater depth in the work?

All of the secondary figures you mention played a huge role in Akeley's life, so they were natural to include in the narrative. But they also, in different ways, illuminated the bigger themes of the story and embodied the period of history in large and obvious ways. As for source material, given how I really wanted to have the characters feel as original and authentic as possible, I stuck pretty close to the primary sources of correspondence and speeches – especially with Roosevelt, since I mainly wanted to have him speak for himself: which he did so well and so endlessly!