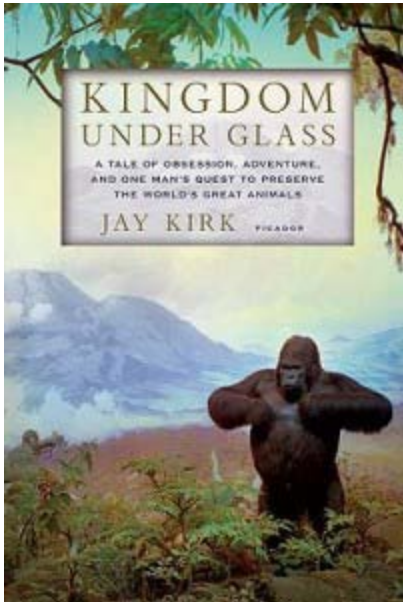




## BOOK REVIEW

# Nature and Empire

*Jay Kirk. Kingdom Under Glass: A Tale of Obsession, Adventure, and One Man's Quest to Preserve the World's Great Animals. New York, New York. Henry Holt and Company LLC, 2010. 400 pp. \$27.50 (hardback). ISBN 978-0-8050-9282-0. Reviewed by Matthew Schauer, University of Pennsylvania.*



Jay Kirk's *Kingdom Under Glass* examines the life and career of taxidermist/adventurer Carl Akeley. Kirk, a professor of creative writing at the University of Pennsylvania, follows Akeley on his life-long quest to perfect methods of the preservation and presentation of natural specimens, and to establish himself as an artistic talent within the burgeoning world of large-scale American history museums at the beginning of the twentieth century. The biography begins by examining Akeley's early days of preserving birds in his boyhood home in Rochester, New York, and his work in a taxidermy factory producing birds for women's hats in Brooklyn. In his early career, Akeley experimented with new techniques that aimed to reproduce the musculature and appearance of animals as if they were being viewed in the wild. He eventually achieved his first step towards prominence with his preservation of Jumbo the elephant for P.T. Barnum. Akeley parlayed this success into employment at the Field Museum in Chicago and the Milwaukee Public Museum.

During his work at the Milwaukee Public and Field Museums, Akeley began to elaborate on his experiments with support moulds, and developed the revolutionary methods of taxidermy which would grant him fame and the opportunity to create his magnum opus: the Hall of African Mammals at the American Museum of Natural History. In order to stock the Hall with specimens, Akeley undertook several long-term hunting expeditions to Africa, and eventually created an image for himself as an explorer hero among the general public. This image was accentuated by numerous brushes with death, including an incident in which Akeley killed an attacking leopard with his bare hands. Kirk portrays Akeley's obsessive quest to preserve nature in the face of the destructive influence of the modern world, as ultimately causing the dissolution of his first marriage, the destruction of his health, and his death in the Congo in 1926.



Akeley's expeditions were also in many ways representative of those of the typical English Victorian gentleman adventurer, as he traveled within colonial social circles and utilized preexisting systems of native bearers and outfitters within Africa. Kirk displays the degree to which Akeley was following in other's footsteps, in some cases literally, with descriptions of Akeley's party frequently coming in contact with other hunting expeditions, such as one led by his friend Theodore Roosevelt. The author also inserts a long and amusing description of the extensive "safari gear" sold to Akeley, that was created specifically by Silver & Edgington Ltd., to ensure Western-style comfort for travelers while in Africa. The most ridiculous of his examples being special mahogany cribs and cummerbunds especially designed for tropical use (124-125).

Carl Akeley was working within the milieu of a number of growing modern academic fields such as anthropology, museology, and several of the natural sciences. The necessary patronage of private wealthy donors was essential for the growth and survival of these fields. In order to gain sponsorship for his research, Akeley mingled with the intellectual and social elite of New York City. Akeley came in contact with a number of famous historical figures including the aforementioned Theodore Roosevelt, as well as Henry Fairfield Osborne, George Eastman, Carl Jung, and members of the Explorers Club such as Roy Chapman Andrews. Besides descriptions of these individuals, the majority of the chapters contain interesting asides that provide background information on a number of diverse topics. These topics include the construction of railroads in British controlled areas of Africa, Victorian ideas concerning the conservation of the natural world, eugenics theories, the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and the effect of women's fashions in New York on taxidermy at the turn of the century. Kirk uses this context to place his narrative of the life of Carl Akeley under the broad overhanging themes of cultural and natural degeneration, the preservation of endangered animals and societies, and the growth of the modern world.

*Kingdom Under Glass* is written as a narrative synthesized from an extensive variety of sources, and written with a "near-allergic avoidance of the subjunctive" (343) in order to create a novel-like readability. Kirk has written the book as a historical biography aimed at a popular audience. Therefore, he does not cite his sources explicitly within the text, but does include very in depth bibliographic essays for each chapter, including descriptions of all of his verbatim citations. The book is extensively researched, and Kirk uses contemporary published travelogues and memoirs written by his major figures of interest, including Carl Akeley himself, his first wife Mickie Akeley, Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Fairfield Osborn, and filmmaker Osa Johnson among others. He also uses a large variety of secondary literature, and non-published sources that he collected in a number of archives and museums worldwide, and through the family of Carl and Mickie Akeley.



Kirk also took a research trip to Rwanda to follow in Akeley's footsteps, although he avoids the temptation to frame the narrative with his own personal adventures in Africa.

Kirk's writing is clear and readable and he creates vivid depictions of the settings for Akeley's work, such as his exotic description of the Akeleys entrance into Nairobi, and his final ascent to view the gorillas in the Congo. Kirk self-consciously plays with the traditional narrative of the white hunter/adventurer. He adopts the breathless tone and style of a contemporary adventure narrative during a number of the hunting scenes, but also qualifies this view by including outside perspectives that portray Akeley and his fellow hunters in a critical light. The reader is not spared the brutality of the hunting and field dressing of the animals, or descriptions of the racism and rampant over-hunting present on these safaris. Kirk characterizes the safaris as symptomatic of the perception of Africa as a playground in which a hunter can prove his inherent white superiority and/or masculinity.

Kirk's descriptive prose works particularly well in scenes when he layers Akeley's actions with greater meaning such as his "eureka moment" while traveling on a trolley in Chicago (104), or the construction of a taxidermy animal being compared to the creation of a golem (53). Occasionally Kirk's creativity with his sources, takes away from what is in general a very informative, entertaining, and intellectually stimulating work. One awkward example are Kirk's comments about Akeley wishing to "pitch his tent" in the "soft crags" of his future wife, who happened to have had a mountain named after her (267).

The narrative viewpoint is shifted several times from Akeley to his wife Mickie in an effort to give the reader a differing perspective to the traditional narrative of the white male adventurer in Africa. By including the writings of Mickie Akeley, the reader gets a sense of domestic life in a safari camp and the combination of feelings of misery, isolation, monotony, helplessness, and fear that characterized the seemingly glamorous life of a safari wife. Kirk includes several poignant scenes in which Mickie nurses Carl Akeley back to health, and one in which she leads the native bearers by gunpoint at night to find her husband who had been gored by a charging elephant. Akeley is portrayed as a tragic figure, whose obsession ultimately leads him to ignore and emotionally abandon his wife. She then descends into madness and replaces her absent husband with a pet monkey that she kept in their New York apartment. Although Akeley's failure of health and subsequent death in Africa is attributed implicitly to his overwork, Kirk does give him a sense of redemption when Akeley is able to aid in securing a gorilla sanctuary in the Congo to compensate for his life of brutal hunting.



Akeley's experiences on his hunting trips and the intellectual underpinnings of his work reflect imperialism in both an individual and broad political sense. These safaris were into African lands that were under European imperial political influence. Ironically, Akeley's work involves a desire to document animal populations that are being destroyed by the effects of imperial expansion, such as the over-hunting of safari expeditions. Kirk also gives a sense of the white hunters' perception of their racial and cultural superiority, which theoretically gave them *carte blanche* to use the land, animals, and people for their expeditions and pleasure. This includes taking monkeys and gibbons as pets, in order to bring them as curiosities to New York cocktail parties (263).

Kirk does an excellent job of placing Akeley's work within a worldwide network of competitive preservation and museum display. Museums were demonstrative of a society's greater intellectual aptitude, and the capturing and mounting of a specimen allowed the museum and its patrons to lay claim to Africa as a conquered exotic land. The dioramas created by Akeley and his staff were to many museum visitors the only representation of Africa that they would ever see, giving him a distinctly powerful curatorial opportunity. Akeley attempted to reproduce the animals and their natural environment as precisely as possible, in an attempt to bring Africa to the people of New York City. African adventure is also shown as a method in which one is able to prove one's mettle, and according to Teddy Roosevelt, is a way to destroy animals, such as elephants, that impede the progress of civilization (183). Lastly, imperialism and power are depicted on an individual level within the structure of the safari. Kirk describes Akeley's ambivalence about his control over his native bearers, and he and Mrs. Akeley's difficulties in managing this position of perceived control. In one instance, Kirk describes how Akeley beat his gun bearer, who had shot at an elephant in an attempt to save Akeley. The man had saved Akeley's life, but by this action he had violated the set rules of the safari and was required to be punished. Akeley responds in this manner in order to maintain the perception that he was in control and "preserve his dignity." (228) This is similar to Orwell's famous contention at the end of his story "Shooting an Elephant", that he only shot the elephant to avoid looking foolish to the Burmese townspeople.

The typical criticisms for a popular historical biography, especially one that is not written by a professional historian, are that the author often elaborates too freely on the facts provided within the source texts in an attempt to make a work more entertaining to a general audience. Jay Kirk is quite cognizant of this critique and does his best to explain his source material, and is upfront about the words, thoughts, and actions that he attributes to the historical actors within his narrative. Although the lack of direct



citations, and transparent in-depth textual analysis does limit this work's worth as an academic text in some ways, *Kingdom Under Glass* still has a great deal of value for students of imperialism and the history of science, as an introduction to the major intellectual trends of the era. Akeley's life serves as an excellent illustrative example of the effect of empire on an individual in the early twentieth century. The book also is very successful in its primary purpose as a wonderfully written and entertaining depiction of Carl Akeley's life and of the history of museums, taxidermy, and African safari hunting in the early twentieth century.