

THE BEAR OR THE TIGER? NORAH VIVIAN CONTROVERSY

Corbett biographers, although sharing deep admiration towards Jim Corbett, still display quite different attitudes towards him. D.C. Kala had a full admiration for Corbett. He is not indicating any doubts in the credibility of Corbett writings, although he did mention some possible mistakes in the writings. Jerry Jaleel went even further in unconditionally trusting Corbett, not doubting even when the facts were clearly contradicting Corbett writings (for example, the date of killing of Chuka man-eater). Peter Byrne, who visited probably more Corbett hunting sites than any other Corbett biographer, expressed profound admiration for his integrity. Even in those cases when Byrne presented different versions of the events in his book (for example, killing of the Thak tigress), he does not expressly accuse Corbett of dramatising events.

Arguably the most direct criticisms towards the credibility of Corbett writings (and even his character) came from Martin Booth, who criticised Corbett for many discrepancies in his writings, and in some cases accused Corbett for deliberately changing details of his stories in order to make them more interesting to the readers. Here we are going to discuss one of such cases, when Booth used the memoir from Norah Vivian, Jim Corbett's good friend and fellow shikari (hunter), about the details of chasing the Chowgarh man-eater.

These are Norah Vivian's words told to Martin Booth in 1984 (from Booth, 1986: 246):

'We got there (Kala Agar) and were resting in camp - my husband was shaving - when there were great shouts outside. A woman had just been taken from a party of grasscutters a few hundred yards up the hill. She was up a rhododendron tree, cutting fodder branches, about six feet up. The tigress crept up and swept her legs from under her, knocking her down and crushed her skull. She was a young girl or woman, and was lying in grass in the open. My husband got permission - religious reasons - to sit up over the kill. He sat in a nearby tree for the rest of that day and night. Nothing. At 5am down, I walked to him with a cocked rifle. Got him down. We sent a note to Jim. The next night we sat up again over a young bullock - the woman was taken for her funeral. We saw a bear, not the tiger - we were not mistaken in this as Jim writes' She added, 'He was wrong in the story - it makes a better tale, doesn't it?'

Booth comment follows: "Norah Vivian was a good friend of both Jim and Maggie and her comments are not malicious. Indeed, when Jim finally shot the tigress on the afternoon of 11 April, he cut out from the tigress's neck, when skinning her, one of the 'lucky' floating

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bones that Indians regard as the ultimate talisman against tiger attack and, having this mounted in gold, gave it to Norah some time later as a scarf pin" . . . "What was more, Norah Vivian was an expert shikari herself and a crack shot who certainly knew a bear from a tiger. But Jim wrote in his story: 'There was no moon, and just as daylight was fading out and nearby objects becoming indistinct, they first heard, and then saw, an animal coming up to the kill which in the uncertain light, they mistook for a bear.'" Booth gives one more comment to put a fair dose of suspicion in Corbett's words: "Jim did not arrive until forty-eight hours later so how could he have assessed accurately the spoor marks of a bear on such ground?"

Norah Vivian continued: "The details and dates in his stories are sometimes questionable. Even the Chowgarh tigress story is not exactly as it was. He was not careful over some details.'

This is a quite big statement that goes not only against of Corbett writings, but his integrity as well. We have already discussed in detail the controversy that surrounds the final meeting scene with the Chowgarh man-eater (see a separate chapter on this topic in this book). We came to the conclusion that the central difference between the Corbett's letter to Maggie (which is considered the true description of events), written on the same day of the hunt, and the story, written several years later, was the shooting scene. According to letter, Corbett shot the tigress "in a heartbeat", and according to the story, Corbett turned extremely slowly in order not to alert the tigress. Booth (and generally Corbett critics) fail to take into account, that when writing a letter to his sister, Corbett might not wanted to reveal to his only living family member the scariest detail of the hunt, that he was at a full mercy of a man-eater. Critics are ready to believe that in that critical moment Corbett, who found himself standing with his back to the tigress, with his rifle pointing to the other direction, managed in a split second turn around (do not forget – without using his left hand!), and shoot the tigress who was ready to jump and was less than three metres away. And above all, according to Booth and other Corbett critics, for some reason, Corbett decided to conceal his amazing hunting feat from the readers. But let us go back to "bear vs. tiger" controversy.

Booth's comment, where he tries to clear up Corbett's name, sounds possibly even more offensive than the initial allegations: "Jim was not a charlatan. He did not seek glory nor to be what he was not. He was simply an expert and courageous hunter turned conservator turned popular author who, determined to give his readers their money's worth with a modicum of conservationist evangelising, twisted just a few little facts that his memory had already partially corrupted. His books are none the worse for it and, as they imply, he was undoubtedly regarded by many, from humble villagers to District Commissioners like Ham Vivian, as the Authority on the hunting of Indian big game in the mountains of the north."

The words "Jim was not a charlatan" to Jim Corbett fans might sound as offensive, as the statement that he "twisted just a few little facts" in order "to give his readers their money's worth." It is true, that Corbett said that he tried to give the readers their money's worth, but he said these words not to seek indulgencies for "twisting a few little facts" but to explain why he was always so "maddeningly detailed" (D.C. Kala) in all his descriptions. Yes, as a human, Corbett did have memory failures, and there are clear facts for this claim.

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Besides, we should not forget that in his private letter to Maggie he most likely tried to spare his sister from some of the scariest moments of his hunting, but this by no means gives us grounds to claim that he was deliberately changing the true and known to him facts in order to make his stories a better read.

So what can we say in the case of Norah Vivian controversy?

According to Vivian's words, Jim was wrong in asserting that that night, in a fading light, they mistook a tiger for a bear. Vivian was sure they made no mistake and the animal that appeared in darkness was indeed a bear. Jim, after examination the scene (two days later), came to conclusion that not bear, but tiger came that night to the kill.

Of course, we will never know for 100% whether it was a bear or a tiger. I can accept that Corbett might make a mistake, when he examined the scene two days later. But it is certainly very difficult to accept that Corbett knew it was a bear, and in order to "make a better story" he deliberately twisted facts. Let us make no mistake, that kind of "twisting facts" would not be a simple and harmless "hunter's tale" that we know too well from many hunters. Changing such a detail, particularly a deliberate change, would require some degree of internal corruption on Jim's side, and for sure, he would know that with this lie he would make his dear friends quite upset.

What most likely happened was that Vivians were sure the animal they saw was a bear. Jim, after examined the scene, came to the conclusion that the animal was a tiger. Jim and Vivians probably did not talk about this, but if they did, they probably did not agree with each other (Booth does not mention if Vivians discussed this disagreement with Jim). Who was right, Vivians in the fading light seeing a bear, or Corbett, finding tiger pugmarks at the scene 48 hours later, is difficult to say. Booth is absolutely right when he claims, that Vivian's were great hunters and crack shots, and Corbett also mentions this fact several times. But at the same time it is also an undeniable fact, that Corbett's expertise as a hunter was a notch higher. This was the reason Vivians send a note for Corbett after the unsuccessful night vigil above the human kill. Corbett arrived, and in about two weeks the man-eater was dead.

As the readers might have already guessed, it was not our intention to judge, who was right and who was wrong in recognising the animal that appeared in the fading light in Kala Agar on March 22, 1930. We have no conclusion for that question. But we do have a conclusion we can propose with full certainty, that Jim Corbett, as we know him, and as millions of readers and simple Indians know him, would have never twisted the details of his hunt deliberately in order to make it a better tale, and particularly on the expense of showing his dear friends in a bad light.