

# Visions in the Wilderness

by Jan Morris



**Sand Rivers**  
by Peter Matthiessen  
The Viking Press  
240 pp., \$19.95

In Tanzania, south of the railway the Chinese have built from Dar-es-Salaam to the Zambian frontier, north of the Mbungu country, there lies the Selous Game Reserve, named for the great hunter Frederick Selous, established by the British during their mandatory rule of Tanganyika, and now the biggest, wildest, and least-known animal sanctuary of all Africa. The Selous is larger than Maryland, nearly four times as large as the Serengeti, and most of it remains to this day virtually unknown to human beings.

Into this remarkable geographical anachronism, this epitome of the organic ideal, there went in August 1979, as a member of a small safari, one of the human race's most meticulously processed representatives, the writer Peter Matthiessen, whose every word is refined, whose ideas have been sieved through countless layers of dialectic, and whose very emotions (or so it seems from his writing) are subject to stringent moral and intellectual analysis.

With him too went Brian Nicholson, self-nicknamed Mister Meat, a former game warden of the Selous and *homo sapiens* of a very different kind, who smoked too much, who clacked his false teeth, who had shot 1,300 elephants in his time, who made naughty racist jokes and perpetuated discredited colonialist attitudes.

The confrontation between these three doughty imponderables—Nature in the Raw, Award-Winning Author, Old Meat Man—provides the

theme of *Sand Rivers*, a book that looks at first like just another ecological travel-tract, but is actually a cunningly planned, and movingly resolved, sort of allegory.

The book starts appallingly, after a first paragraph that might have been composed by Johnboy to conclude an episode of *The Waltons*. Improbably inspired by a young British Member of Parliament, Tom Arnold, Matthiessen and the celebrated wild-life photographer Hugo van Lawick join a small expedition into the Selous under the leadership of Nicholson, who left Tanzania after independence and now flies airplanes in Kenya. It would be, said Arnold, who is also a theatrical producer, "the last safari into the last wilderness." That dread phrase sets the tone of the book's beginning, and will send the *aficionado* of these texts stumbling dispiritedly along the long, long trail of Last Safaris, across the successive borders of Last Wildernesses, all the way back to Alan Moorehead's original zoological exploration of East Africa, *No Room in the Ark*, which first pricked the ecological conscience 30 years ago.

It is almost *déjà vu* at first. There waits the statutory Baron (no East African animal book is complete without its European nobleman). There stalks the compulsory eccentric (Nicholson was not only direct successor to the unspeakable snake-man C.J.P. Ionides, the real creator of the Selous, but also his frank disciple). The photographs are, as usual, marvelous. The obligatory references to the Leakey family are properly in place. The porters perform their *ngoma* dance as they have in every East African book since *How I Found Livingstone*.

What is worse, Matthiessen takes an age to assemble this dire *mise-en-scène*.

Before we even light the campfires we have to learn all about Tom, Ken, Rick, Maria, and Philip—how Brian met Melva in the first place, why David has not arrived yet, what happened to the previous owner of Karen's car (eaten by lion), where the Nicholsons' married daughter is living now (Bangkok).

Matthiessen is not one for elisions, still less for snap judgments. He may be able to sum up young Philip, summer-camp style, as "a likeable blond boy and fanatical fisherman," but it takes him a long, long time to decide what he feels about Brian Nicholson.

Here the allegory creeps in. Nicholson is a bitter man, it appears, cynical about all forms of progress. He carries a rifle at all times in case some bloody animal jumps him, views Tanzanian independence with mordant skepticism, would decidedly not vote in favor of ERA, and seems to take conscious pleasure in offending people of more tender sensibilities.

Matthiessen, on the other hand, might have been bred by Sierra Club out of Friends of the Earth, with mid-wifely encouragement from *Roots*. He is firmly on the side of everything good, like wildernesses, women, and black Africans. He is horrified at the idea of taking a gun to go *bird-watching*, and wants only to think the best of everyone, beast or man, black or white.

But oh, what problems of morality and interpretation beset the kindly ecologist in incorrigible old Africa! The very nature of innocence is at risk! When is a tourist not a tourist? When is a poacher not a hunter? Is the culling of thousands of elephants in the interests of conservation morally more justifiable than the murder of thousands of rhinos in the pursuit of aphrodisiacs? Is an animal of an Endangered Species more precious in the sight of God than a

poor run-of-the-mill warthog?

Then again, is there not an ethical ambiguity to the very idea of artificial wildernesses in a world so short of food and living space? Should the Ngindo really be prevented from earning a decent living out of ivory tusks, or eating a nourishing Selous buffalo now and then? What about Nicholson's dictum that "out in the bush, man is still a part of nature, and what he does is mostly for the better"? If a wilderness is

tween its three chief characters: the land itself at once so harsh and so harmonious; Mister Meat, playing the devil's advocate of this inquiry; Matthiessen ever struggling on, physically and figuratively too, in search of some reassuring denouement.

And the metaphor of it all, so rigidly controlled, so subtly disguised in trivia and introspection, comes to a head in the final part of the work, when Matthiessen and Nicholson set out with a

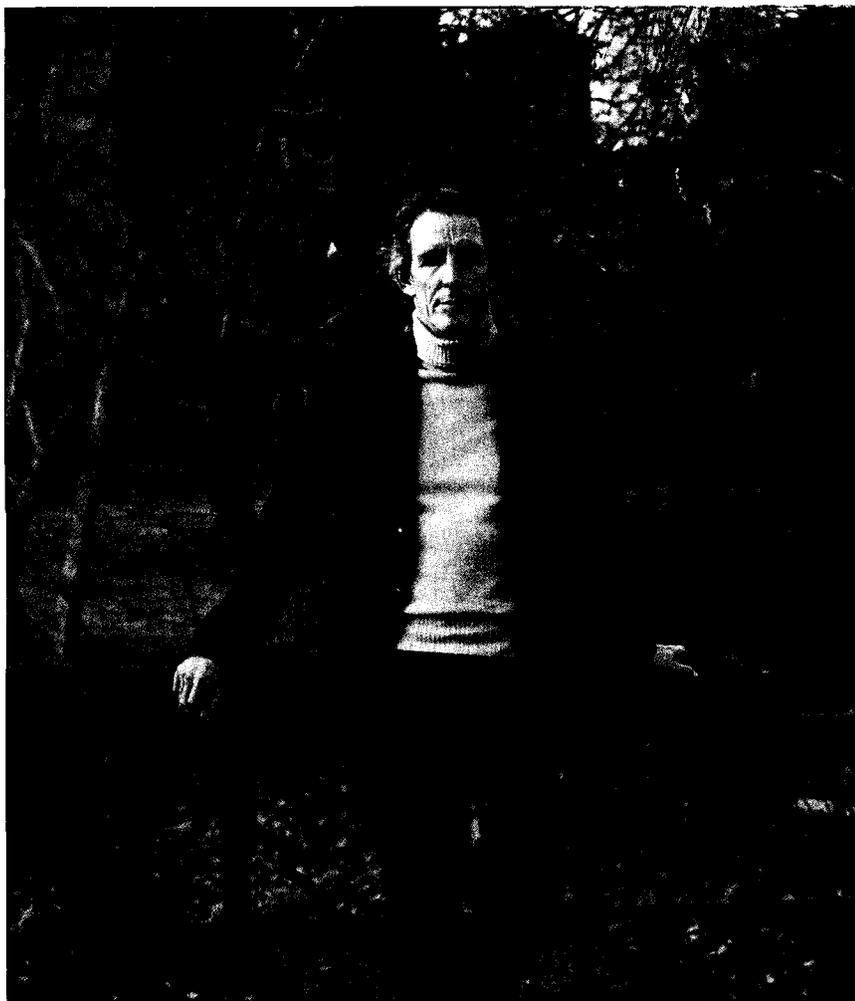
development of his technique may well be as much instinctive as contrived. But whether deliberately or not, a haunting sense of reconciliation—between man and man, between man and landscape, perhaps between man and history—informs the final pages of this deceptive and remarkable work. Nothing much happens really, on this particular Last Safari: The great reserve does not teem with wild life, it seems, quite as it used to. The elephants show themselves reluctantly. The leopards roar off-stage. The moments of excitement fizzle out.

Nothing much happens until Matthiessen, Nicholson, and their porters stumble almost face to face upon a rhinoceros and her calf, couched in a grove of saplings beside the track. It is a breathtaking moment. We freeze, and marvel at the sight. "In the morning sun, reflecting the soft light of shining leaves, this huge gray creature carved of stone is a thing magnificent, the ugliest and most beautiful life imaginable...." The porters scatter, the white men cautiously back away, their hearts in their mouths. The animal stands immobile for a moment, hunched and threatening; and then, even as they watch, settles gently down again in the shade of her retreat, her calf at her side.

It is the climax of the book, and superlatively done. The beauty and wonder of it, the fear, the strangeness, the silent reproach and restraint of the great beast—all possess some arcane element of serenity and revelation. "That was worth the whole safari," Matthiessen says to his companion, and it turns out that the two men have come to a wry and wary understanding of each other, even a degree of friendship.

We do not return to camp with the author and the game warden. Instead we are left at the end of the book still in the deep wilderness, following a winding river somewhere or other, I am not sure where, as though the tangled purposes of the whole enterprise, the perplexities and the antagonisms, the very woods, swamps, and savannahs of the vast reserve, have all been dissolved and redeemed in the imagination. ■

An inveterate traveler, Jan Morris is the author of *Destinations*, among other books.



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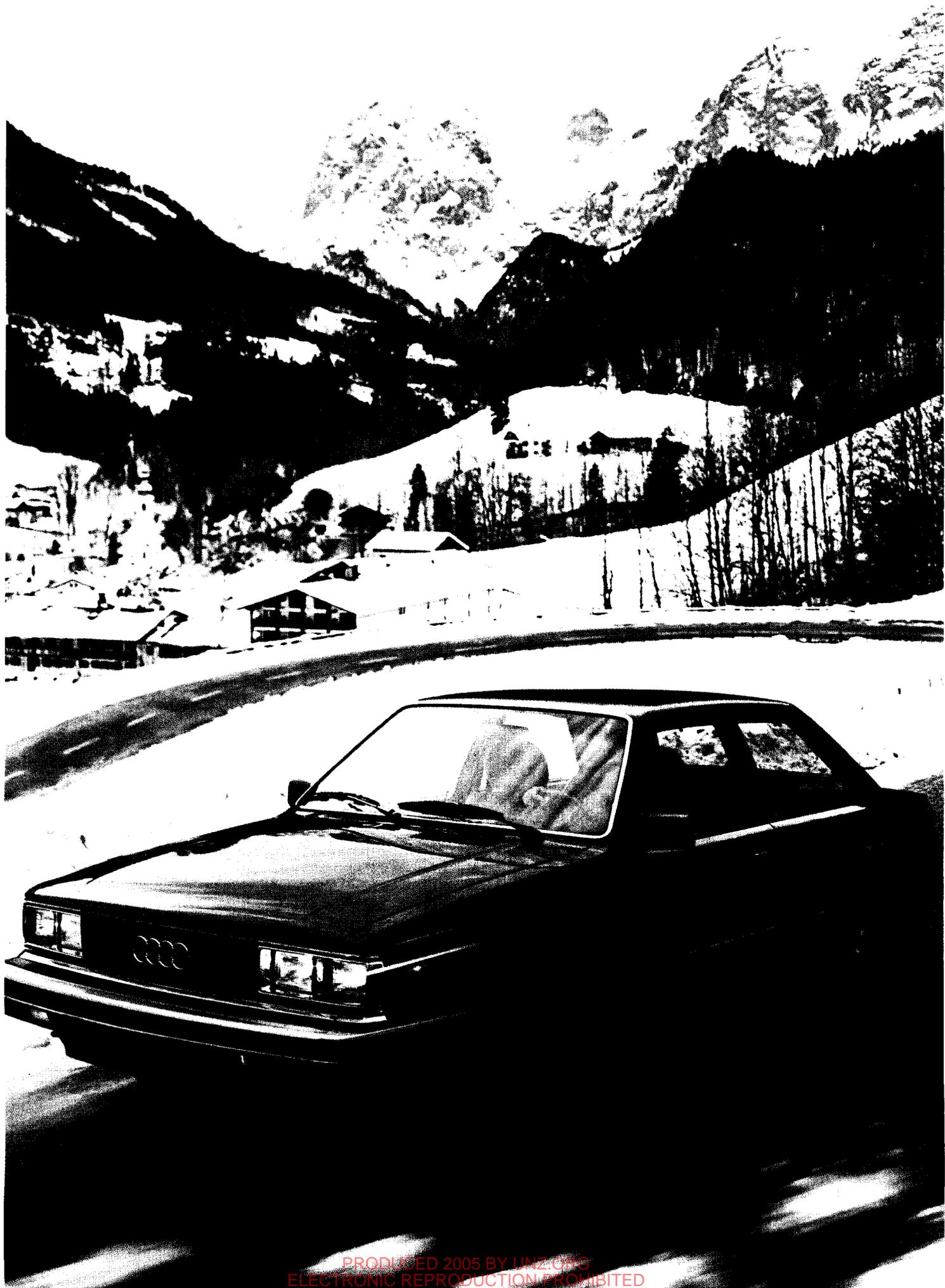
Matthiessen, on the side of everything good, wants to think the best of everyone.

really to be a wilderness, what are Matthiessen, Nicholson, and the others doing in the Selous anyway?

Matthiessen does not identify these several riddles, but one by one they surface from his narrative. And as they did so, page by page I realized that *Sand Rivers* was a far better book than it pretended. Its parable reveals itself slyly, as gradually one perceives the mingled tensions and attractions be-

handful of porters on a foot safari into the deepest part of the reserve. Rick, Ken, Tom, Maria are all left behind at camp, and with them remains much of Matthiessen's psychological baggage. The writing becomes simpler now, the thoughts less earnest, the story altogether grander.

Is there a moral to the fable of *Sand Rivers*? I don't know, and perhaps its author is uncertain himself, just as the



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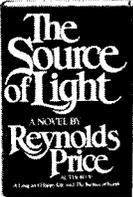
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# A Minor Faulkner

by Benjamin De Mott



**The Source of Light**  
by Reynolds Price  
Atheneum,  
320 pp. \$12.95

**H**utchins Mayfield, hero of *The Source of Light*, is a 25-year-old Southern prep schoolteacher with literary ambitions who's ceased for the time being to wish he was in Dixie. At the start of the book he's discovered saying farewell to old family haunts and retainers in North Carolina and environs, just prior to leaving for a two-year stay at Merton College, Oxford. Much of the subsequent narrative focuses on Hutch's first experiences of Europe (Rome, Wales, and the Scilly Isles, as well as Oxford), and upon various homosexual and heterosexual attachments he forms on foreign soil. The guilt induced in the hero by his flight is intensified by the death of his father (Hutch returns home to bury him), by his girlfriend's troubles (she aborts a child that may have been Hutch's), and by the not-so-veiled chiding of a number of loving elders who write him long letters ruminating about his clearing-out. But Hutchins Mayfield hangs tough: The book's closing scene shows him discussing Lewis Carroll in a pub with his Oxford tutor, and one concludes that, no matter what new pressures are exerted on him, he's likely to keep to his own schedules of self-development in the immediate future.

A fifth novel by an author who won fame with his first book, *A Long and Happy Life*, published nearly 20 years ago, *The Source of Light* continues a family saga begun in *The Surface of Earth* (1975). And there's much to admire in its pages. Reynolds Price has

an unplodding imagination; he's perfectly capable of diverging from conventional realism long enough to describe a visit by the ghost of Robinson Mayfield to his son Hutch's bedside—the purpose of the visit is to bestow a blessing—or a moment when Hutch himself, thousands of miles distant from his father, is so powerfully touched by a premonition of the man's passing that he's brought to his knees to pray there'll be no pain.

In addition to the family feeling and



Price—"no freshness or surprise."

sense of the past that mark the novel, there's an intelligent awareness that one effect of integration will be to make blacks and whites strangers to each other. (The book is set in the mid-Fifties, on the eve of the civil-rights struggle.) I particularly liked the author's readiness to savor interruptions of the narrative business at hand (space is made, for instance, for two highly enjoyable cameo appearances by the actress Vivien Leigh). And the

structure of values throughout is admirable. *The Source of Light* is a 300-page narrative wherein absurdist savagery has no place and the idea of gentleness as a value isn't once mocked—which is to say, it's a rarity.

It's not, though, speaking bluntly, a compelling or exciting work of fiction. One failing is that the novelist merely assumes that the question whether his hero quits Europe or stays is momentous, but never demonstrates that it is. I was troubled too, by Price's difficulty in finding distinct voices for his characters. Nearly everybody in the book—from Southern preppies to Dilsey-style servants, to Oxford stonemasons, to liberated American women—speaks a lingo best described as Southern-clever-wry, and in time the sameness of the speech becomes disconcerting.

Finally there's the Faulkner problem. Significant differences exist between Hutchins Mayfield and Faulkner's young masculine heroes—and between Faulkner's old people and Price's—and between Faulkner's literary allusions (the Bible and Keats) and Price's (the Bible and Shakespeare)—and between Faulkner's conviction of the uniqueness of the Compsons and Price's conviction of the uniqueness of the Mayfield clan. But while the differences exist, I'm afraid they're not as noticeable as the resemblances. The overall impression left is that of a fictional world rendered indistinct by the spreading shade of the great Faulkner tree; no action or person or style of utterance quite manages to achieve energetically independent being. Dignity and intelligence are always visible in *The Source of Light*; what's missing is the quality of freshness and surprise that makes novels novel. ■

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