Lady Lion Hunters: An Imperial Femininity

In *Hunters Three*, an 1895 novel by Thomas Knox, three young men hunting in Africa meet two English women pursuing elephants. That ladies would be hunting with only hired hands for an escort was ‘enough to take any man’s breath away’, but the men quickly recover and set to debating the more important issues: namely, how might they make the acquaintance of these independent women and what should they call them? Is an ‘amazon [sic] of the African woods’ a hunter or a ‘huntress’? Jack Delafield argues that, ‘in sport, as in science, there’s no distinction of sex,’ and after citing the precedent of female doctors concludes that, ‘hunting big game in South Africa is entitled to be called a science; anyhow, it requires a lot of science to succeed in it. She’s a hunter just as much as you or I.’ Interestingly, this unisex categorization of the women does not negate their appeal. By the conclusion of the novel, the three men have made them no less than four offers of marriage, two of which were accepted.

Knox’s declaration on the sexless nature of big game hunting stands at odds with the established histories of hunting, science and the Victorian period in general. His plot line and the men’s appreciation of the female hunters are not as absurd as one might imagine, however. While relatively few women hunted in Africa before the First World War, the reception of those who did was surprisingly positive. As with most Edwardian institutions, that acceptance came with qualifications. Women would never, for instance, be invited to join in the ranks of the illustrious Shikar Club, whose membership was made up of the most respected big game hunters of the day. As vacation hunters, however, they were able to pursue sport and adventure without marking themselves as New Women (the icons of the contemporary campaign to expand women’s rights, autonomy and activities) or eccentric spinsters; rather, they were simply sportswomen. Yet their successes in the hunting field did not
disrupt the association between the sport and contemporary notions of hardy masculinity either. In fact, in the early 1900s, African game hunting was celebrated for its ability to help regenerate white manhood.

This overwhelming association of hunting with white male power has steered historians away from an analysis of women hunters, but the underlying argument in this chapter is that precisely because this remained a man’s world, the actions and portrayals of even a few female hunters are essential for understanding the culture of the sport and the masculinity it supported. The narratives of women hunters and the contemporary representations of their sporting accomplishments are of interest in their own right, but they also open up a rich space for examining the ‘mighty hunter’ ideal, the appeal of hunting and the vision of the imperial African frontier in British culture. Several scholars have argued that women necessarily adopted masculine traits or authority when travelling in Africa, but the descriptions by and about women hunters offer a radically different perspective. Jack Delafield’s fictional assertion notwithstanding, there was a distinction of sex. Women hunters portrayed themselves and were portrayed by others in feminine terms, and their participation, therefore, signifies more than the acceptance of a few select women on the hunting fields of Africa. It represents the opening of hunting to femininity.

This chapter traces the emergence of women hunters, their acceptance and portrayal as feminine hunters, and the manner in which hunting was aligned with conventional femininity in the descriptions by and about them. Big game hunting has stood for so long as an archetype of masculine imperial power that it can be difficult to conceive of how the trope of the white hunter could represent anything but masculine dominance even when it was embodied by a woman. Yet, the authority and position of women hunters in Africa was constructed differently from that of men, by both the women themselves and their observers. Even the power women hunters had over porters and camp personnel was described in similar ways to the control British women exercised over colonial servants in the home. In sharp contrast to the domestic politics of settler societies, however, women on safari neither feared nor were represented as being in danger of sexual advances from African men. This extraordinary absence of black peril anxieties highlights the insights that can be obscured when only one aspect of the gender equation is considered and illustrates the distinctive connotations of the safari in Edwardian culture. Women hunters’ presumed safety demonstrates that—despite the expansion of colonial control, which many cited as opening Africa up to women—British culture continued to