

Book review of Man Hunt in Kenya by Ian Henderson and Philip Goodhart

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MAN HUNT IN KENYA. By *Ian Henderson*, with Phillip Goodhart. (New York: Doubleday. 1958. Pp. 240. \$3.95.) Also under title THE HUNT FOR KIMATHI. (London: Hamish Hamilton. 1958. 21/-.)

Man Hunt in Kenya is a fascinating and well-written book about the last important operation against the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya. Its British title is more precise; Dedan Kimathi was the undisputed leader and guiding spirit of the largest and most dangerous Mau Mau gangs, and this story shows how he was also a master of bushcraft of the highest order. The fact that it took 10 months to capture Kimathi even in the Mau Mau's dying days in 1956 gives some indication of the problem the security forces set for themselves when they elected to make an all-out effort to get him one way or another.

Phillip Goodhart, British Member of Parliament for Beckenham, who prior to his election had been covering the Mau Mau revolt for the London *Daily Telegraph*, has written a three-chapter Background for the book, and apparently collaborated with Ian Henderson, its principal author and actor-throughout its preparation. But the Background does not make clear to the unfamiliar reader the origins of the mass rebellion, the character of its heyday in 1953, and its dwindling course to the end of 1955.

One might argue that the main reason the Mau Mau revolt got out of hand was a collapse of British intelligence in the Kikuyu reserve. Its system of African informants had pretty much broken down. Only a handful of Europeans—among them notably Ian Henderson of the Kenya Police—knew how to speak Kikuyu and had any meaningful contacts with the tribe. It had been known since 1950 that, in addition to the overt political resistance centered around Jomo Kenyatta and his Kenya African Union, a secret society was at work among the Kikuyu; but it is doubtful that Kenya officials really had any indication of the seriousness of the Mau Mau oath-taking or of how widespread it had become. In 1953, after the outbreak of the Emergency, everyone was taken aback by estimates that 90 per cent of the million-odd Kikuyu had taken some kind of Mau Mau oath. The British have relied successfully for centuries on a system of indigenous informants and infiltration agents, usually supplemented, however, by officials with a firm grounding in the language and culture of the indigenous people. This combination had

been allowed to deteriorate in Kenya, and the Government had lost intimate contact with what was going on in the Kikuyu Reserve.

At the height of the nightly Mau Mau raids for food and vengeance on Europeans and Africans alike, a period studded with incidents like the Lari Massacre of March 1953, when some 150 loyal Kikuyu men, women, and children were wiped out in a single night because the local chief was friendly to the Kenya Government—during this time a retired British Army colonel argued most persuasively with me that one Russian saboteur could have brought the Colony to its knees in two weeks. It certainly was true that communications, water supplies, radio stations, etc., were all woefully unguarded. Why the Mau Mau failed to strike at these vulnerable spots remains one of the mysteries in what must be counted among the strangest rebellions in the history of the British Empire.

Later in 1953 the security situation began to improve. The introduction of British troops and the strengthening of the Kenya Police and Provincial Administration began to reduce the Mau Mau gangs in number and put them on the defensive. Operation Anvil, the massive operation in April 1954 around Nairobi directed by Sir Richard Turnbull, now Governor of Tanganyika, led to the detention of some 30,000 Kikuyu, thus strangling a crucial Mau Mau source of money and supplies. Most important of all, the Kenya Government organized an effective group of tribal policemen known as the Kikuyu Guard. It was the Kikuyu Guard's denial of food and support for the Mau Mau gangs that began to tell. No longer were large gangs able to run roughshod through the Kikuyu reserve stealing and plundering. The years 1953 and 1954 also saw a prodigious collection of intelligence from detainees at the various screening centers. The processing of this intelligence gave the Kenya Government details on the people involved with Mau Mau gangs, a catalog of the bestial Mau Mau oaths, and frequently step-by-step outlines of past rebel operations.

By the beginning of 1956 the movement had about run its course, and the security situation had improved so radically that a major action to eliminate Kimathi, the last important Mau Mau leader still at large, was all that was needed. The natural leader of this operation was Superintendent Ian Henderson, whose record during the Mau Mau revolt was truly outstanding. In 1954 he had made repeated unarmed trips into the forest to negotiate surrender terms with Mau Mau gangs. These talks were abortive, but they demonstrated the man's skill and bravery,

and won for him the George Medal. Born and raised in Kenya, Henderson was in fact about the only British official who could have led the Kimathi operation.

Henderson's book is particularly vivid in portraying the incredible Alice-in-Wonderland world in which most of the hunt was conducted—the primitive jungle lore of tracking and survival, the thin irrational line between friend and foe, the minglings of bestiality and childish magic. In the almost impenetrable forest wild game was as much of a problem as any offensive action by terrorists, and Henderson suggests by indirection that the only effect of the much-vaunted RAF bombings of the forest was to make the wild beasts even more dangerous than usual. He gives us a good picture of what life is like in the middle of a tropical rain forest: the Aberdare Range rises to over 13,000 feet and when the sun is not shining it can be extremely inhospitable.

The importance of witchcraft both to the Mau Mau and to the Government teams of ex-terrorists is well illustrated. Two puff-adders falling out of a tree on the back of a collaborator, though they glided away harmlessly, were such a bad omen that they threatened to stop one whole operation. Kimathi's insistence on praying to the Kikuyu god Ngai while facing Mt. Kenya under a wild fig tree meant that one could pinpoint for ambush the dozen or so fig trees to which he would go.

Ironically, Henderson had had to leave the jungle hunt to be presented to Princess Margaret at a tea party at Government House in Nairobi on the very day Kimathi was captured, and was called away from that elegant atmosphere to interrogate Kimathi at Nyeri. Contrasts like these are introduced into the story with a minimum of flamboyancy, and with the traditional British understatement which characterizes the whole account.

One aspect of the operation that still defies full comprehension is Henderson's success in inducing Mau Mau terrorists to change sides and go back into the forest to hunt down their one-time friends. Time and again Henderson converted or at least recruited individual terrorists and sent them armed and supplied with government weapons and provisions to seek out the gangs they had just left. Although some leniency was promised them in return, there was never any suggestion that they would not still be liable to prosecution for the crimes they had committed. One of my strangest impressions from this period I got during a visit to the Athi River Detention Camp in 1954, where several

Mau Mau detainees described in some detail to our party their individual roles in the terrorist movement and their participation in several murders. Their psychology is a mysterious one to the Western mind, and Henderson's success in handling them is fascinating and confusing.

The direction and control of the Kimathi operation remained in the hands of the European officers; but it is obvious that no European, not even Henderson, would ever have been able to live and fight in the forest with the same skill as the Mau Mau terrorists. Ultimately, therefore, success in wiping out the last remnants of the Mau Mau gangs rested in the hands of these ex-terrorist recruits. Dedan Kimathi emerges as one of the masters of self-preservation. Henderson shows how extremely knowledgeable as trackers and hunters the last few Mau Mau terrorists had become. As masters of the African bush he rates them higher than the Wanderobo, a tribe of hunters who are excellent in the forest and have traditionally been regarded the finest hunters in East Africa.

I would agree with Henderson that "Kimathi was hardly a political figure, but he was a criminal of the first rank." Goodhart's assessment that "if the Kikuyu are the Germans of tribal Kenya, Kimathi was their Hitler" is patently overdrawn. Still, his stature as a leader, even in 1956, and the possibility of his dying a martyr were reason enough for mounting the operation against him. With his death on the gallows at Nairobi Prison the last active spark of the Mau Mau rebellion was gone. Much of the credit for this accomplishment must go to Ian Henderson, and he has written a first-rate book about it.

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