
Alan George Windsor Root: 1937-2017

Tribute by Ian SC Parker

PO Box 1115, TOLGA, Qld 4882, Australia.
email: ipap@activ8.net.au

Born on the same day King George VI was crowned, two patriotic London Cockneys—Edwin (Ted) and Violet (Vi) Root—added their new monarch’s name to that of their new-born son. While his companions denied this gave him status, from an early age Alan’s self-confidence and ego was of a Royal order. So too was his sense of humour and penchant for practical jokes. For those close to him their abiding memory of ‘Rooty’ is not fame, but of laughter and the light-hearted aura that surrounded him. Bold, his wounds included a leopard bite in the buttocks, a hippo bite through his right calf and gorilla bite through his left thigh. Treatment from a burrowing viper’s (*Atractaspis*) fang into first his right and then his left hand left him sensitised to anti-snake serum. It nearly cost him his life when bitten by a puff adder (*Bitis*) and he collapsed in anaphylactic shock when given the anti-venine. Both snake bites arose not from boldness as much as carelessness, as he admitted. However, with limited space for obituaries in a scientific journal such as *Pachyderm* I orient my comments towards Root and science.

Alan left school at 16, something of a rebel, but basically because he was bored. He and his companions, the Forbes-Watson brothers (the younger, Nick was Alan’s soul mate) were more knowledgeable about natural history than their teachers. Alan’s self-taught grasp of natural history made him a formidable biologist as a teenager. In the same independent vein, he later taught himself photography.

He was an emotional man of many competences. Catching and keeping animals from boyhood (not always legally—though in those days’ laws were lax) among them I recall a cheetah, a baboon, a spring hare, and a collection of snakes in a large serpentarium. With his first wife Joan he ran a successful tour operation that they took over from her father and which later

they merged with a similar safari company run by Richard Leakey to be Root & Leakey Safaris Ltd. He caught more than 30 bongos for zoos that established the first breeding herds outside Africa. From this stock reintroductions are now being made back to Kenya where, once many, they have been hunted to the brink of extinction. He took up ballooning, flew one over Kilimanjaro and established Balloon Safaris operating in Kenya’s Masai Mara Game Reserve. In addition he was financially canny and prospered.

His fame arose from filming wildlife. In the words of David Attenborough: “Alan, almost single-handedly in my opinion, made wildlife films grow up”. His entree into this field was assisting an airline pilot, John Pearson, who wanted to make wildlife films, but didn’t have the time to do so. The completely untrained Alan was left to film the life cycle of lily-trotters (jacanas) for him. The result was shown on BBC TV. Despite this success, Pearson had to give up filming and Alan’s next job was working for Armand and Michaela Dennis, 1950s stars of ‘wildlife’ films. Following this he was employed by Dr Bernhard Grzimek and his son Michael in their ground-breaking study of the Serengeti’s ecology. Halfway through, Michael died in an air-crash, Alan stepped into his shoes, and, with Bernard, completed the project with a film *The Serengeti Shall Not Die*. It was awarded an Oscar, established Alan as a pre-eminent cameraman, set his heart in the Serengeti and was the base of a life-long, almost father-son, friendship with Grzimek. It also gave him a filming platform from which he produced about a dozen thirty minute TV films for the Frankfurt Zoological Society and the British company Survival Anglia Ltd. All were of conservation interest and included six months in Australia. The last of these films was taken in the Galapagos Islands.

His reputation as an exceptional cameraman who delivered stunning wildlife footage was now widely recognised. Yet Survival denied him freedom to assemble, edit or provide the narration for the wildlife stories he wanted to film. Frustrated, he broke with them and went to the BBC’s Wildlife Unit under David Attenborough. Recognising a kindred spirit, and better than most, able to appreciate Root’s unique grasp of biology, David contracted Alan to make three films that he could shoot, edit and write as he saw fit. Root had broken the glass ceiling between field cameramen and editors behind desks far removed from the wild. Thereafter he never looked back, planning, shooting, editing and scripting his films with total control. It made him *primus inter pares* among wildlife film makers,

proving that nature need not be presented as props around a personality. As he had maintained all along, people were fascinated by its intrinsic properties. This elevated him to the right hand of David Attenborough in the field of wildlife films. Yet all greats have their weaknesses and, oddly given his all-round competence, put him in front of a ciné camera and he came across as a ham to the point of parody (and delight of his friends).

His success had two pillars. One was his first wife Joan whose intuitive way with animals and powers of observation matched Alan's. Her handling of the logistics and the finances of film making were exceptional. In an outstanding partnership, her disinterest in personal promotion was the yin to the yang of his personality of chutzpah, showmanship and self-promotion. Yet underpinning all was his grasp of biology. All his films were scientifically valuable in their own right.

In his film of jacanas on Lake Naivasha, Root the scientist was the first to report males carrying chicks under their wings. In *Mzima*, filming the aquatic ecology of these crystal-clear Springs was a scientific thesis in itself. Alan's boldness led to finding that both hippos and crocodiles had a previously unknown Jekyll and Hyde behaviour: unapproachable above water, they were tolerant to the point of being touchable below it. *Baobab* produced new ornithological knowledge of behaviour inside a *Tockus* hornbill nest. *Castles of Clay* illustrated life in a termitarium, previously never seen, with great ingenuity and without fibre optic cables that now allow looking into previously impossible places. Making his final set of films in the Congo basin rain forests he filmed the Congo peacock (*Afroparvo*)—the first white man to see one alive in the wild. After his assistant Giles Thornton, Alan was the first white person to see live aquatic 'genets' (*Osbornictus*) and in filming them discovered their highly specialised and previously unknown fishing techniques. He produced new knowledge on the giant otter shrew (*Potamagale*) and water chevrotain (*Hyemoschus*). For example, while the chevrotain was associated with riverine forest and swampy areas, he illustrated it was as aquatic as a hippo, moving easily along the bottom in deep water, occasionally putting its nose above the surface for a breath. This, too, was not previously known. In overview, though much

new to science that Root produced went unreported conventionally in scientific media, his films are nonetheless permanent evidence of these findings and of his stature as a scientist.

In 2012 Alan wrote—*Ivory, Apes and Peacocks*—documenting some of his career. Despite favourable reviews, this venture disappointed him because so much of what he wanted to write about was left out. Having contracted an agent and publishing house, he re-experienced the early frustrations of his film career when he was just a cameraman: the professionals would make and market the end product. Now he was pressed to deliver to a schedule and accommodate the publisher's needs. Added to this was the commercial influence of his market in western animal-loving/rights groups who much admired his work, which made him avoid some historical facts.

Alan supported numerous conservation initiatives, most often from behind the scenes, particularly, through his influence with the Frankfurt Zoological Society. He put his greatest weight into issues concerning the Serengeti—to which he was committed above all other places. All too well aware of conservation's paradoxes and contentions, Alan avoided embroilment in arguments besetting the field. In his own words, not being able to right all the wrongs of the world, he limited his conservation contribution to illustrating the diversities, complexities and wonder of life to as wide a public as possible.

Making films with the scientific integrity he achieved calls for rare qualities. First is knowing and understanding animals. Next is having the time—and the money to afford time. Making his sort of film (e.g. the *Year of the Wildebeest* took two years in the field) is expensive. The present television, market for films, is tightly ruled by accountants cutting corners to maximise profits. Consequently, across the 21st millennium many 'wildlife' films have regressed back to being about a personality having adventures handling (often abusing) animals in an aura of spurious danger (epitomised by the deceased Australian Steve Irwin). Cheaper and quicker to make than filming wildlife *in situ*, this saddened Alan.

Yet, if his book and the emerging trend in 'wildlife' films disappointed him, he died happy in the family he and his third wife Fran had created with sons Myles and Rory. In a life of successes, he held this his greatest achievement.