

Too Close to the Sun: The Audacious Life and Times of Denys Finch Hatton

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Denys Finch Hatton was adored by women and idolized by men. A champion of Africa, legendary for his good looks, his charm, and his prowess as a soldier, lover, and hunter, Finch Hatton inspired Karen Blixen to write the unforgettable stories in *Out of Africa*. Now esteemed British biographer Sara Wheeler tells the truth about this extraordinarily charismatic adventurer.

Born to an old aristocratic family that had gambled away most of its fortune, Finch Hatton grew up in a world of effortless elegance and boundless power. Tall and graceful, with the soul of a poet and an athlete's relaxed masculinity, he became a hero without trying at Eton and Oxford. In 1910, searching for novelty and danger, Finch Hatton arrived in British East Africa and fell in love—with a continent, with a landscape, with a way of life that was about to change forever.

Wheeler brilliantly conjures the mystical beauty of Kenya at a time when teeming herds of wild animals roamed unmolested across pristine savannah. No one was more deeply attuned to this beauty than Finch Hatton—and no one more bitterly mourned its passing when the outbreak of World War I engulfed the region in a protracted, bloody guerrilla conflict. Finch Hatton was serving as a captain in the Allied forces when he met Karen Blixen in Nairobi and embarked on one of the great love affairs of the twentieth century.

With delicacy and grace, Wheeler teases out truth from fiction in the liaison that Blixen herself immortalized in *Out of Africa*. Intellectual equals, bound by their love for the continent and their inimitable sense of style, Finch Hatton and Blixen were genuine pioneers in a land that was quickly being transformed by violence, greed, and bigotry. Ever restless, Finch Hatton wandered into a career as a big-game hunter and became an expert bush pilot; his passion that led to his affair with the notoriously unconventional aviatrix Beryl Markham. But Markham was no more able to hold him than Blixen had been. Mesmerized all his life by the allure of freedom and danger, Finch Hatton was, writes Wheeler, "the open road made flesh."

In painting a portrait of an irresistible man, Sara Wheeler has beautifully captured the heady glamour of the vanished paradise of colonial East Africa. In *Too Close to the Sun* she has crafted a book that is as ravishing as its subject.

Like Denys Finch Hatton, Sara Wheeler was educated at Brasenose College, Oxford. Her books include *Terra Incognita: Travels in Antarctica*; *Travels in a Thin Country*; and *Cherry: A Life of Apsley Cherry-Garrard*, all available from the Modern Library. When not traveling, Wheeler lives with her family in London.

Chapter 1 OUT OF TRIM

I saw him first fingering a pistol in a Nairobi gun-shop, with the casual interest that men of action will show for such toys, and well I liked the look of his scholarly appearance, which had also about it the suggestion of an adventurous wanderer, of a man who had watched a hundred desert suns splash with gilt the white-walled cities of Somaliland. -Ilewelyn powys, *Black Laughter*, 1925 When he heard that denys finch hatton had been killed on the plains of Africa, Alan Parsons reflected that his friend had been "like one of his forefathers of Elizabethan days—a man of action and a man of poetry." It was the first Sir

Christopher Hatton who had raised the family to the sunlit uplands of the English aristocracy, and they languished there through the pleasant centuries while their nation prospered. Denys inherited the charm of his Elizabethan ancestor, but not his taste for the gilded baits of conventional success. A Northamptonshire man, ruffed and sharp-bearded, Sir Christopher had worked his way into court and dazzled Queen Elizabeth with his dancing. She showered him with money and honors until he was Lord Chancellor. At thirty-five, he was able to purchase Kirby Hall in East Northamptonshire, one of the great Elizabethan houses, a model of proportion replete with cupolas, pergolas, and ninety-two fireplaces. But Sir Christopher had many mansions, and for five years he was too busy to visit Kirby. By the time Denys was born three centuries later, the family was heading in the other direction (down), as his uncle George, the eleventh Earl of Winchilsea, had gambled away several fortunes. After disposing of most of the family paintings, he sold the lead from the roof of Kirby Hall. His widowed stepmother, meanwhile, was quietly bringing up three sons and a daughter at Haverholme Priory in Lincolnshire. Frances "Fanny" Rice became the tenth earl's third wife in 1849; their second son, Henry Stormont, was Denys's father. At Haverholme, Henry and his siblings grew to love the pared-down landscape and the winds that sped across the flatlands freighted with the chill of the North Sea. The three boys went out with their uncles, shooting partridge in the gravel pits, pigeons in Evedon Wood, and rabbits everywhere. They caught pike up and down the Slea and dace in the section between Haverholme Lock and Cobbler's Lock, and played golf and cricket in the park. (In the untroubled 1860s, the Priory had its own cricket team.) After boarding school Henry went up to Balliol, the Oxford college favored by the ancestral earls. At nineteen, his hollow-cheeked Renaissance face was framed by sideburns the color of sweet sherry. His nose was long and sharp, his eyes deep-set, and a prehensile mustache dipped and clung to his chin below his lower lip. Finch Hattons were speculators and adventurers. By the 1870s, young men from the landed gentry had started heading south to Australia-many were hired as jackaroos on the cattle stations-and after a year Henry gave up on Balliol and steamed to the subtropical northern tip of Queensland. He rode a horse down to Mackay, a huddle of shacks quietly sweltering among the sugar plantations 150 miles north of the Tropic of Capricorn. There he joined a maternal uncle who had sailed to Australia six years earlier. Knowing little of sugar, the pair determined to set themselves up as stockmen, and reconnaissance took them to the well-watered cattle country around Mount Spencer, forty-five miles inland. They purchased four hundred square miles of bush, at first sleeping on canvas stretchers in a hut overlooking a lagoon. Henry had a table for his tin basin and a fragment of looking glass balanced on a pair of nails driven into a post. At night, he read in the sallow glow of a fat-filled jam tin wicked with a twist of tweed from his trousers. The lure of the frontier was in the blood, and within a year Henry's younger brother, Harold, had arrived in Queensland to assist the fledgling family firm. On his first night, he found an eleven-foot carpet snake coiled in his cot bed. But it would have taken more than a snake to deter Harold, a figure of buttonholing vigor and the most voluble of the Finch Hattons. With his brother and his uncle, he turned Mount Spencer into a comfortable village of houses and huts, and the station into a going concern with twelve thousand cattle and a permanent staff of stockmen and boys. It was hard work all around. Simply chopping timber for fences was a Sisyphean task that involved pulling a crosscut saw and swinging a maul under a vertical sun, the thermometer often reaching 110 degrees in the shade. "But if a man is thoroughly sound," Harold wrote,

"... it is odd if he does not look back to the time when he was splitting rails for ten hours a day as the happiest in his life." A man with a powerful sense of public duty, Harold was quickly appointed a Queensland magistrate and later became the voice of judicial authority at the goldfields, granting (or, more often, refusing) alcohol licenses. He was a model of moral seriousness and egregious self-confidence-an imperial beau idéal.* In his spare time, he learned to throw the boomerang; he included this among his achievements in Who's Who ("only white man who could ever throw the boomerang like the blacks of Australia"). He never married. In later years, he was close to his nephews and nieces, and Denys, the youngest, worshipped his uncle Harold, the archetypal man of action. Denys loved hearing stories of the magnificent landscapes, dizzying scale, and hazards innumerable that characterized the pioneering experience of the white men who battled the Australian bush in the last decades of the nineteenth century. For those made of the right material, it was a Garden of Eden. Thirty-five years later, Denys was to find a similar paradise on the plains of East Africa. DENYS'S MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER, Helen, had married Admiral of the Fleet Sir Henry Codrington, KC, in 1849. His father had captained the Orion at Trafalgar. After fifteen years of marriage, the admiral sued for divorce on the grounds of his wife's multiple adulteries. The Codringtons had been living in Malta, where Sir Henry held the position of admiral-superintendent of the dockyard. Since its acquisition in 1814, Malta had been one of the great British naval bases and the home of the Royal Navy's Mediterranean fleet. Perks of the job included a high-specification gondola, and at the divorce trial in London the gondolier testified that when Lady Codrington was escorted home by a certain officer he regularly observed his vessel "getting out of trim" due to excessive movement in the cabin. Day after day, jurors heard a litany of alleged activities, including a lesbian affair and flights from private detectives-all subsequently recounted in minute detail in the pages of The Times. It was the soap opera of the moment, and through the dog days of summer in 1864 the denizens of the Establishment gasped for the next installment. The admiral, suggested Lady Codrington in a robust counterattack, had once entered her bedchamber and groped her lady companion. Lawyers read out copious extracts from diaries and letters and, in his summing-up to the jury, the judge expressed his concern that they should not be influenced by the sheer number of charges brought against Lady Codrington-"so many imputations of criminal intercourse . . . all more or less sustained by evidence." He pointed out that even a thousand weak links did not make a strong chain. But the jurors thought the links were strong enough, and on November 23 they found Lady Codrington guilty. Her daughters, Denys's mother, Anne-known as Nan-and her sister, Nell, were eleven and ten. The admiral got his decree nisi. But the verdict was disputed, and, to the delight of the nation, the case rolled on. Like one of the admiral's ships in full sail, it took a long time to stop. The two little girls, meanwhile, were shunted among relations, friends, and governesses, absorbed enough in the private world of childhood but uneasily aware of the hostilities that lay beyond its frontiers. Their mother had emerged from her husband's testimony as a figure of lewd vulgarity. In reality, Helen Codrington, hemmed in by an existence over which she had no control, had chosen the only means of self-renewal available to her. She could not leave, so she tried to make staying tolerable; it was her way of seeking a better world. The affair was never spoken of in the family, even after many years. Denys never knew his grandmother; she died before he was born. It was a pity, as in him she would have found an ally at last. He had her affinity for waywardness, and his heart, too, never settled. HENRY FINCH HATTON met Nan

Codrington when he returned from Australia on leave in 1879. Three years later, when both were thirty, they married. The bride had copper pre-Raphaelite hair, aspin-white skin, and large gray eyes that sheltered under broad red brows. Her friends were artists and musicians, and she brought a gentle bohemian glamour to the closed and traditional Winchelsea clan. She was intimate with Ellen Terry, an actress of the grand manner who had won the country's heart during her twenty-four-year stage partnership with Sir Henry Irving. Known to her circle as Nellie, Terry was five years older than Nan and devoted to her—a stream of genuine affection plain to see amid the thespian gush. In her memoirs, Nellie said that once, as she was preparing to play Beatrice in a new production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, she "began to 'take soundings' from life for my conception of her. I found in my friend Anne Codrington what I wanted. There was before me a Beatrice—as fine a lady as ever lived, a great-hearted woman, beautiful, accomplished, merry, tender. When Nan Codrington came into the room, the sun came out." Many would later note the same ineffable specialness in Nan's son De...

Other Books

Circling the Sun, NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER · NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY NPR, BOOKPAGE, AND SHELF AWARENESS · "Paula McLain is considered the new star of historical fiction, and for good reason. Fans of *The Paris Wife* will be captivated by *Circling the Sun*, which . . . is both beautifully written and utterly engrossing."—Ann Patchett, *Country Living* This powerful novel transports readers to the breathtaking world of Out of Africa—1920s Kenya—and reveals the extraordinary adventures of Beryl Markham, a woman before her time. Brought to Kenya from England by pioneering parents dreaming of a new life on an African farm, Beryl is raised unconventionally, developing a fierce will and a love of all things wild. But after everything she knows and trusts dissolves, headstrong young Beryl is flung into a string of disastrous relationships, then becomes caught up in a passionate love triangle with the irresistible safari hunter Denys Finch Hatton and the writer Baroness Karen Blixen. Brave and audacious and contradictory, Beryl will risk everything to have Denys's love, but it's ultimately her own heart she must conquer to embrace her true calling and her destiny: to fly. Praise for *Circling the Sun* "In McLain's confident hands, Beryl Markham crackles to life, and we readers truly understand what made a woman so far ahead of her time believe she had the power to soar."—Jodi Picoult, author of *Leaving Time* "Enchanting . . . a worthy heir to [Isak] Dinesen . . . Like Africa as it's so gorgeously depicted here, this novel will never let you go."—*The Boston Globe* "Famed aviator Beryl Markham is a novelist's dream. . . . [A] wonderful portrait of a complex woman who lived—defiantly—on her own terms."—*People* (Book of the Week) "Circling the Sun soars."—*Newsday* "Captivating . . . [an] irresistible novel."—*The Seattle Times* "Like its high-flying subject, *Circling the Sun* is audacious and glamorous and hard not to be drawn in by. Beryl Markham may have married more than once, but she was nobody's wife."—*Entertainment Weekly* "[An] eloquent evocation of Beryl's daring life."—*O: The Oprah Magazine* Kenya—Fiction . I. Title. PS3563.C383495C57 2015 813'.54—dc23 2015011091 This book contains an excerpt from the forthcoming book *When the Stars Go Dark* by Paula McLain . This excerpt has been set for this edition only and may not reflect ..."