

# INTREPID TRAVELLER

## K. C. GANDAR-DOWER

Stashed away in the stores of London's Natural History Museum is an old lion skin. The staff will tell you it's that of a normal juvenile animal but to one man, K. C. Gandar-Dower, it was evidence of Kenya's legendary Marozi, or Spotted Lion. Travel writer **Duncan J. D. Smith** tracks the journeying of this intriguing but forgotten English adventurer

**K**enneth Cecil Gandar-Dower (1908-1944) could only have lived in the first half of the 20th century. Known to his friends as plain Gandar, he was born to independently wealthy parents' at home in Regent's Park, London. As a boy he read avidly the adventure novels of H. Rider Haggard and displayed an early if undisciplined talent for writing. This was honed at Harrow, where in 1927 he won a medal for an essay on Shakespeare, whilst also writing for *The Harrovian* with his chum, dramatist Terence Rattigan.

Of his early years Gandar-Dower would later write that "We have all had our day-dreams of adventure...I seem to be one of those unfortunates who is driven by devils to put them into practice". For Gandar-Dower, the first real adventures were of the sporting variety. At Harrow he proved himself skilled at most moving ball games. After securing a scholarship to study history at Trinity College, Cambridge, he went on to win athletic blues in billiards, tennis, real tennis, Rugby Fives, Eton Fives, and rackets. Considering the fact that he was also editing the *Granta* literary magazine and chairing the Trinity debating society at the same time, it is remarkable he only narrowly missed taking a First Class degree.

The versatile Gandar-Dower represented Cambridge in six sports, winning several trophies in the process. He later became a leading tennis player, competing at Wimbledon and the French Open, where he was nicknamed "The Undying Retriever" for his ability to cover enormous distances! His greatest success came at the 1932

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Queen's Club Championships in London, where he defeated Harry Hopman in three sets. That and the fact that he won the British Amateur Squash Championships in 1938 made him one of the few sportsmen to have represented their country in more than one discipline.

**Dreams of adventure**

The peripatetic energy, indomitable spirit and contagious enthusiasm displayed by Gandar-Dower at Cambridge would define the rest of his life. Indeed, upon graduating his dreams of adventure took a new turn. His own words take up the story: "For years a yearning had been coming over me. Every boy has dreams of adventure, and for most, unfortunately, they must remain only dreams, until at last they die away and are forgotten in the humdrum middle years...But shortly after leaving Cambridge I began to realise that for me it was possible to transmute them into reality."

The dream this time was to fly. Accordingly, in March 1932, with the help of ex-R.A.F. friend Angus C. S. Irwin, Gandar-Dower took flying lessons. The following month he purchased a second-hand, two-seater, Puss-Moth monoplane, and in May successfully passed his flying test. Then in June he cemented his flying relationship with Irwin by entering the demanding King's Cup Air Race from Brooklands to Scotland and back again. The pair finished a very respectable fourth.

So it was that in October of the same year, with little more than a couple of parachutes, a pair of inner tubes, and a "haversack containing a few collars, handkerchiefs, shirts, sun-helmets and the proverbial toothbrush", the pair flew 7,000 miles from London to Madras, with Gandar-Dower taking the controls for 1,700 of them. Setting out from Heston in Middlesex they called in at Paris, Ajaccio, Tunis, Tripoli, Benghazi, Mersa Matruh, Cairo, Amman, Baghdad, Basra, Karachi, Bombay,

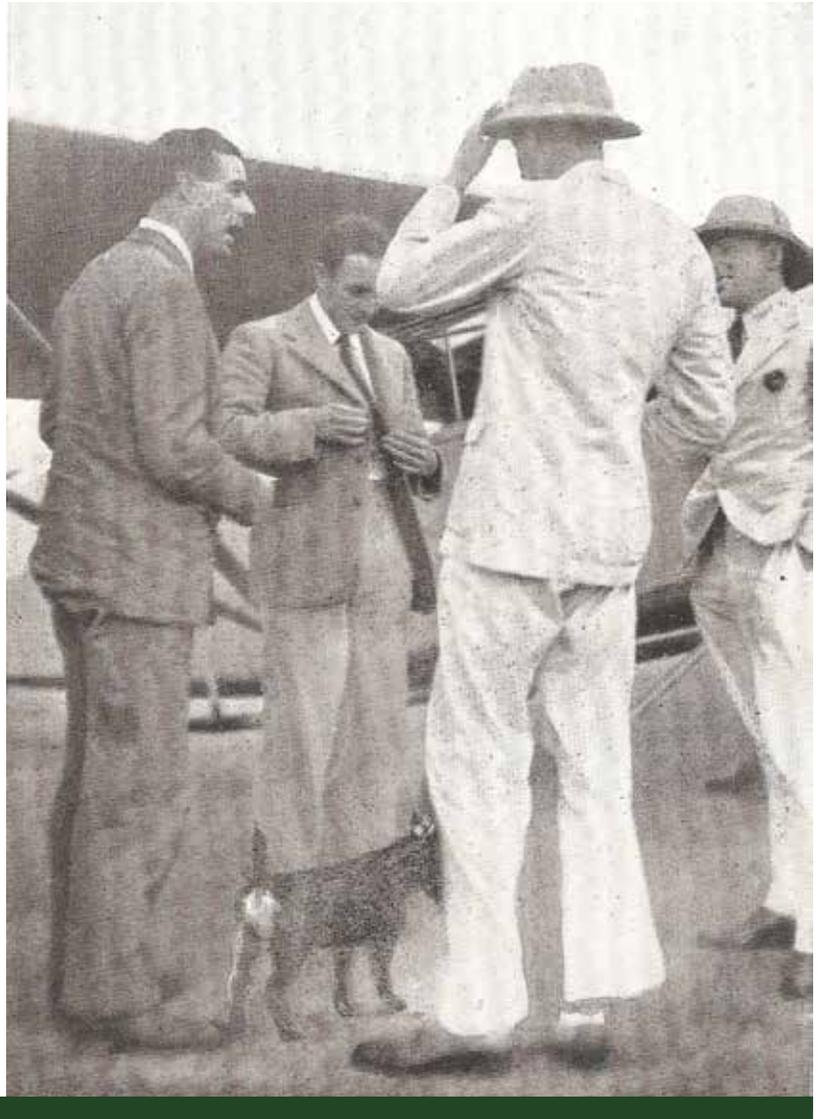
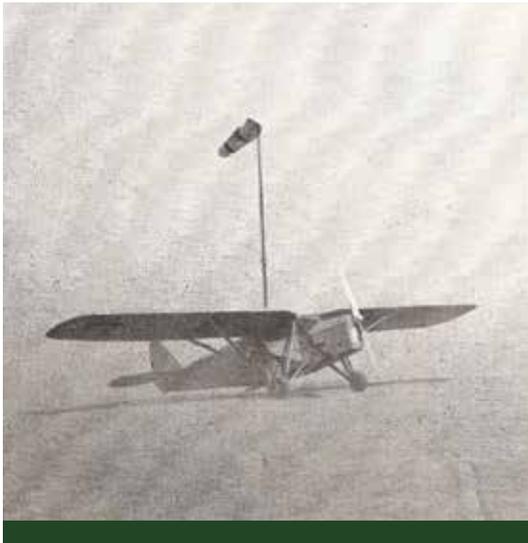


**Left: Kenneth Cecil Gandar-Dower: sportsman, aviator, explorer, pacifist and war correspondent**

**Above: Gandar-Dower's sporting achievements celebrated in a 1939 R. & J. Hill Ltd. Celebrities of Sport cigarette card**

**Above, top right: Gandar-Dower, the consummate sportsman**

**Right: Sportsman Gandar-Dower showing an early interest in transport**



and Poona. They landed successfully in Madras a fortnight later.

Undertaken just for the fun of it, Gandar-Dower recounted the experience with amusing vividness in his first book *Amateur Adventure* (1934), noting that he didn't dare tell his mother of the journey for fear of worrying her. These, of course, were the days before cockpit radios and GPS, when flying depended on compass, observation and luck. The book conveys not only Gandar-Dower's great joy in the enterprise but also the magnificent impression of landscapes seen from the air. Although afterwards he admitted with characteristic diffidence that "we only beat the ship by a couple of days", he and Irwin were actually among the first pilots to make such a flight. They celebrated their success by hunting tigers for a month in India, a

reward offered by Irwin's father as an incentive for them to arrive in one piece!

**Pursuit of the spotted lion**

Flying had given Gandar-Dower a taste of the adventurous life he craved. So with money no great obstacle, and still only twenty six years of age, he set off in late 1934 on a safari to the equatorial mountains of Kenya. Initially he sought simply the thrill of seeing and photographing Africa's big game in its natural setting. Quickly, however, the trip developed into a quest "for animals that hovered between the rare and the fabulous."

One of these fabled creatures was the Marozi, or Spotted Lion, a creature seemingly quite distinct from the leopard or the normal East African plains lion, first reported by locals during the early years

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Above: Gandar-Dower (2nd on the left) and Irwin (left) being greeted in Madras by two colonial administrators - and a dog!

Above, top left: Gandar-Dower surveying the pyramids during his 1932 flight to India

Above, bottom left: Gandar-Dower and Irwin's Puss Moth during a sandstorm at Mersa Matruh, Egypt

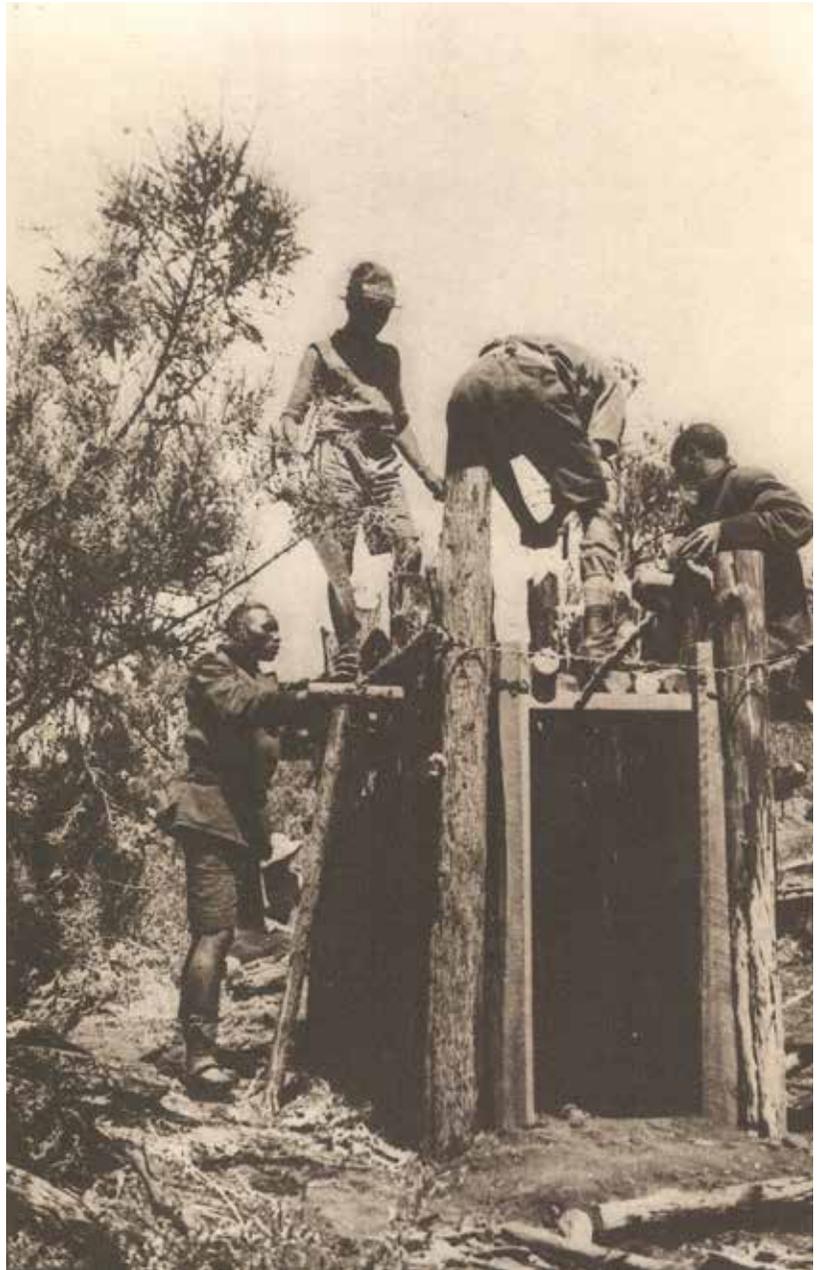
of the 20th century. As with his flight to India, however, Gandar-Dower was barely prepared for the task ahead: "Mine was not a promising situation when I found myself stranded in Nairobi. My only assets were a love of Rider Haggard and a vague half-knowledge of what I wished to do...Yet I could not speak Swahili. I had no friends in Kenya. I had scarcely taken a still photograph (that had come out) or fired a rifle (except upon a range). My riding was limited to ten lessons, taken seventeen years previously when I was nine, on a horse which would barely canter."

Help came in the guise of Raymond Hook of Nanyuki, who had been in Kenya since 1912. A veteran safari guide, farmer and hunter, he not surprisingly was sceptical of Gandar-Dower's quarry. For his part, Gandar-Dower believed in the Marozi's existence but wondered how on earth he would find it in two thousand square miles of wilderness. To ready himself for the challenge, he made an independent expedition to the Masai Mara, where he saw a plains lion and shot it. The slaying had a curious effect on him though, and filled with remorse he stripped naked and ran off into the bush as penance. He wanted to know how he might feel being vulnerable to a predator.

The main evidence to support Gandar-Dower's belief in the Marozi dated back to 1931, when a farmer named Michael Trent shot two lions, a pubescent male and female, at an elevation of around 10,000 feet in the Aberdare Mountains north of Nairobi. The skins bore dense rosette-shaped markings over the legs, flanks and shoulders of the type normally only found on cubs, and so were retained as curiosities. So unusual were the skins that they came to the attention of the Game Department in Nairobi from where one was dispatched to London's Natural History Museum (the one still languishing in the stores today). Additionally, in the same year, a game warden, Captain R. E. Dent, reported seeing four more mature yet apparently spotted lions at a similar altitude.

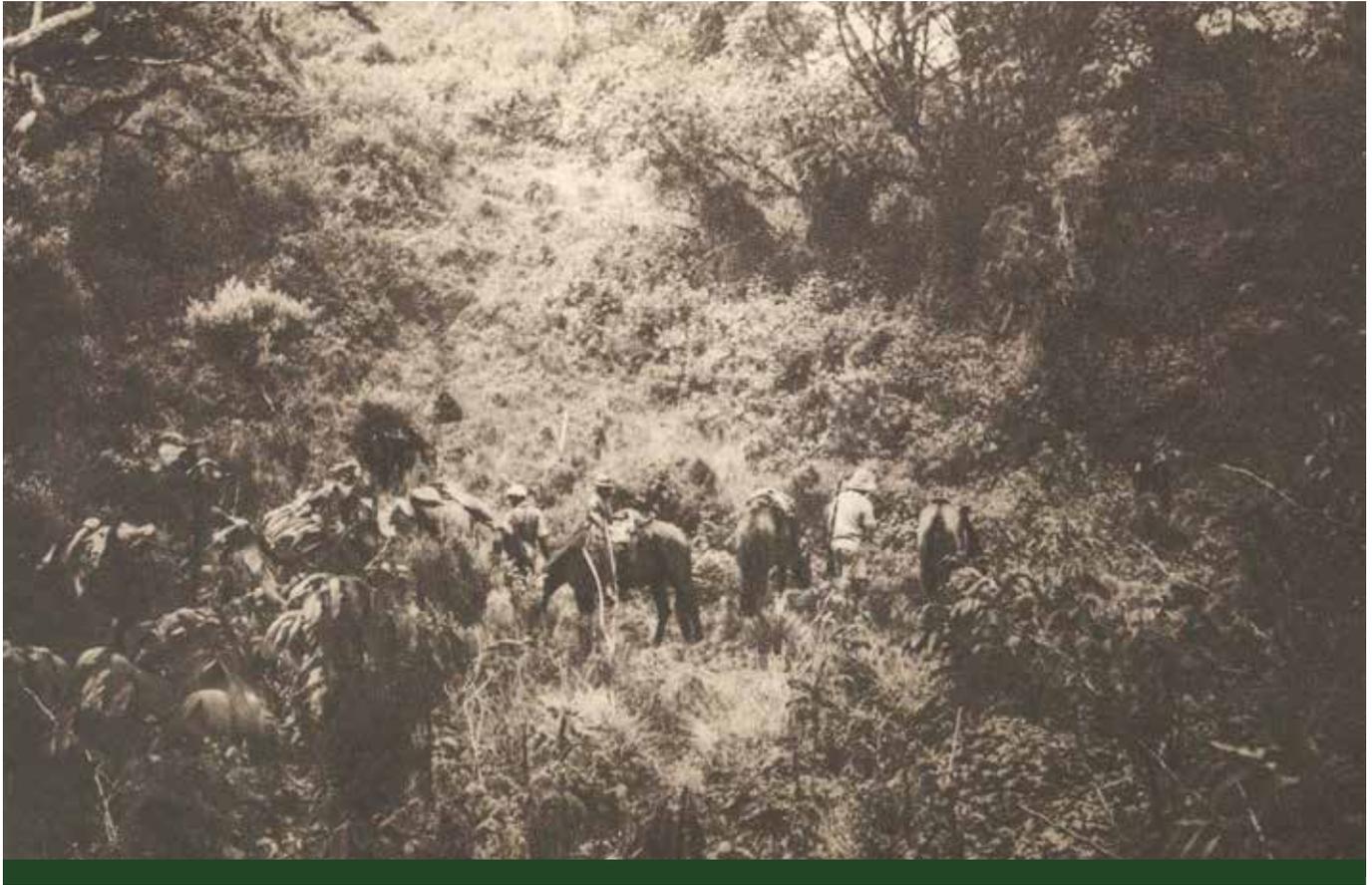
### A living legend?

Gandar-Dower's expedition set out in early 1935 but despite trekking for miles through difficult



terrain, no-one spotted a living Marozi (though tantalisingly locals claimed that they missed a pair by just a day). But they did find two sets of possible Marozi tracks at an altitude of 12,500 feet, where lions rarely if ever tread, the largest

Above: Building a trap to catch the elusive Marozi



of which were bigger than those of a leopard but smaller than those of an adult Plains lion. This certainly suggested the possibility of a distinct, dwarf species of lion living at high altitude (shades here of Hemingway's *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*). Appearing to follow a trail of buffalo, it was posited that these might have been the tracks of a hunting pair. It was certainly enough to convince Gandar-Dower that the Marozi existed but as he wrote in his book *The Spotted Lion* published in 1937, it was "the difficult nature of the country and the rarity of the beast" that prevented the creature's official zoological classification as a newly-discovered species.

Needless to say, Gandar-Dower's book generated numerous alternative explanations for what he saw high in the mountains of Kenya. Was the creature perhaps a Leopon, a cross-breed of leopard and lion? Unlikely considering the fact that Leopons have only ever been recorded in captivity and even then, are born sterile. Was it perhaps an abhorrent specimen of lion, like the white lions seen near the

Kruger National Park in 1975? Again, this seems unlikely considering the high-altitude forests favoured by the Marozi. Alternatively, were the creatures just leopards, or a trick of the light, or even pure fantasy fabricated by locals to attract white hunters?

Back in England Gandar-Dower's claims gained traction in a report on the Natural History Museum's skin penned by renowned zoologist R. I. Pocock, a former superintendant at London Zoo. He stated categorically that the skin came from a young male (certainly not a cub), but one that was smaller than a normal young lion and with a noticeably shorter mane. The detractors persisted though and certain members of the British press dubbed the adventurer "Gandar Dour" for failing to see the funny side of his exploits. The last sighting came in 1948, when the splendidly-named G. Hamilton-Snowball reported a pair of Marozi high in the Aberdares. Since then all has been quiet suggesting that the Marozi either died out or else never existed in the first place.

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**Above: Maroziland - the high dense forest where Gandar-Dower hoped to catch his Spotted Lion**

**Right: Gandar-Dower with two of the cheetahs he raced at Romford Greyhound Stadium in the mid-1930s**




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**Armed only with twenty Leica cameras, a determination to harm no living thing, and an ability to laugh at themselves, they went into the strange, dark, fantastic world of the Central African forest where more famous explorers had taken their fully equipped expeditions before them**

#### **Racing cheetahs**

Although the Gandar-Dower expedition failed in its primary goal of securing a Marozi, it did manage to scale several volcanoes and to map numerous mountains. Most significantly it made one true discovery: the sighting of a previously unreported lake on the slopes of Mount Kenya. Gandar-Dower announced the discovery in a paper entitled *New Lake on Mount Kenya*, published in

the Royal Geographical Society's *Geographical* journal for November 1935. Unfortunately, although the name Lake Gandar seemed fitting, the East African Mountain Society opted for Lake Mittelholzer instead, in honour of a Swiss aviator pioneer and photographer.

Gandar-Dower it seems was destined to leave his mark in more novel ways. Keen to share the speed and grace of cheetahs with his countrymen, in 1936 he and Raymond Hook imported a dozen of them, which they quarantined and then raced at Romford Greyhound Stadium in Essex. Agreeing to go fifty-fifty on any profits, they hoped to do well out of the unusual venture. One cheetah named Helen managed to break the existing record for 355 yards held by a greyhound, covering the distance in less than 20 seconds at a speed of 55mph. This somewhat eccentric venture soon came to an end though, following complaints not only from fearful local residents but also other track owners, who felt their attendance figures might be impacted. Additionally, the cheetahs had a habit of cutting the track corners and instinctively stopped running the moment the electric hare fell outside their personal kill zone. Gandar-Dower also raised a few eyebrows by walking a two-year-old cheetah called Pongo up to the bar of the Queen's Club on a leash!

On a more serious note, it was during the late 1930s that Gandar-Dower's penchant for cynicism took flight in a pair of satirical works about the parlous state of his homeland and Europe just prior to the Second World War. *Inside Britain – An Internal Scrapbook, a Satirical Account* (1937) and *Outside Britain – A Guide to the Grave New World* (1938) were written in collaboration with his closest friend and fellow Harrovian, William James Riddell, a British champion skier and fellow amateur adventurer. One review of the books described them as being “clairvoyant in their political speculation”.

#### **One last adventure**

In 1938, with the Munich Conference over and war now looming, Gandar-Dower and Riddell headed to Africa together, knowing full well that a new global



conflict would destroy forever their romantic notion of the 'back of beyond'. Riddell's recounting of the trip in his book *In the Forests of the Night* (1946) explained their motives, tongue firmly in cheek:

"There was a time when it was considered that young men who suddenly left England for a year and headed for the Back of Beyond, for no other purpose than to explore places and shoot things, could only be excused as being either eccentric or badly crossed in love – or both. When we set out from England in 1938 we could only lay modest claims to the former of these".

Rather more prosaically the book's dust jacket described the book as "the story of how two Englishmen, amateurs in the art of both big game hunting and photography, set themselves the task of taking close-up photographs of African animals...Armed only with twenty Leica cameras, a determination to harm no living thing, and an ability to laugh at themselves, they went into the strange, dark, fantastic world of the Central African forest where more famous explorers had taken their

fully equipped expeditions before them." Whatever their motives, the trip offered the two men a great adventure, and "that was all we wanted".

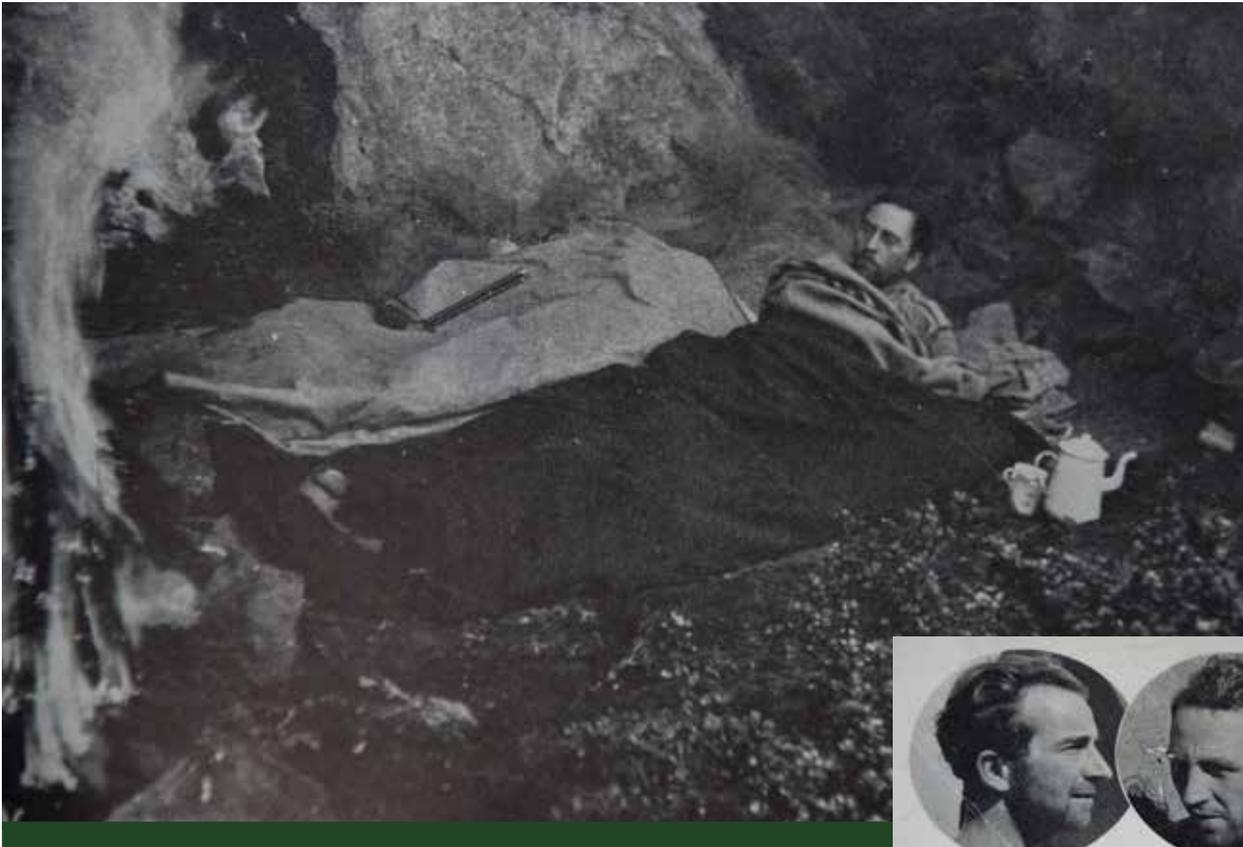
Using mostly flash bulbs and black cotton trip wires, the men produced a series of remarkable photographs reflecting the tension and beauty of the equatorial forests at night. Those of the Bongo, an elusive forest antelope, and the Giant Forest Hog were probably the first ever taken of those creatures in their natural habitat. They also took plenty of unremarkable pictures of themselves by accidentally snagging the trip wires prompting Gandar-Dower to remark in his usual self-effacing manner, "If it goes on like this we may have to revise the whole expedition. We might even find it better to hand the whole thing over to the animals and have them take a series of intimate shots of white men at work." The pair's ultimate goal was the Belgian Congo, (later Zaïre, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) where they hoped to photograph mountain gorillas – and it was there that they heard of the outbreak of the Second World War.

Left: The skin in London's Natural History Museum believed by Gandar-Dower to be that of a Marozi

Above: A selection of books written by Gandar-Dower, including his best-known work *The Spotted Lion*

Right: Gandar-Dower in his sleeping bag during his 1938 expedition into the forests of Central Africa with fellow author and explorer James Riddell

Right, inset: James Riddell (left) and Gandar-Dower



### Back into Africa

Riddell headed back up the Nile en route to England to support the war effort although he ended up staying in the Middle East. Gandar-Dower meanwhile travelled to Nairobi to offer his talents as a press liaison officer between the local population, the military authorities and the Kenyan government. When the job came to an end he returned home, hoping to find work as a war correspondent or to be employed abroad by the Ministry of Information. While waiting he undertook research for Tom Harrison of Mass Observation, another fellow Harrovian and adventurer with whom he planned an aerial survey of an unexplored mountain region in New Guinea.

But it was not to be and Gandar-Dower was soon off again only this time alone, returning to Kenya once more as press officer. It was in this role, armed with little more than his camera and typewriter, that he witnessed the East African Campaign of 1940–1941, including the Allied liberation of Italian-occupied Ethiopia (then called Abyssinia).

Greatly attracted by the country's native charm and scenery, he compiled an anthology of stories and reports, told or written by friend and enemy

alike, soldiers and generals, prisoners-of-war and traders, natives and strangers. The result was *Abyssinian Patchwork* (published posthumously in 1949), a fascinating portrait of the country, which despite being the only African nation untouched by 19th century Colonialism was the first to be invaded in the Second World War – and the first to be liberated. Around the same time, he also authored the official and laudatory account of British rule in Eritrea and Somalia, *The First to be Freed*, following the collapse of the brutal Fascist Italian administration.

Gandar-Dower's war effort continued on September 10th 1942 with the Allied assault on Vichy-held Madagascar. Together with the Second Regular Battalion of the East Lancashire Regiment, he arrived at the seaport of Mahajanga on the island's north-west coast in a troop-filled landing craft. Under heavy fire he leapt from the vessel carrying his typewriter, umbrella, and bowler hat! This and numerous other episodes, concluding with the peace signing at Ambalavao on 6th November, are recalled in his book *Into Madagascar* (1943) (as well as in *The King's African Rifles in Madagascar* written for the East African



Left: Gandar-Dower died in 1944 when the SS *Khedive Ismael* (pictured here in a period postcard) was torpedoed on its way to Ceylon

Command). Despite the seriousness of the subject matter, once again Gandar-Dower brought his trademark gallows humour to the proceedings, noting that the 19th century Malagasy Queen Ranavalona I had “a passion for sewing her subjects up in sacks and making use of the first-class facilities offered by her capital in the matter of vertical drops”!

Back in Nairobi, with the fighting in Africa all but finished, Gandar-Dower suddenly found life intolerably safe. In one of his last letters he wrote: “I can’t stand this. I must do something more adventurous.” Thus, on 6th February 1944 he boarded the troop ship SS *Khedive Ismael* in Mombasa bound for Colombo, Ceylon and new adventures in the Far East. On 12th February, while approaching Addu Atoll in the Maldives, the ship was hit by torpedoes from a Japanese submarine and sank in three minutes. Of the 1511 passengers aboard, only 214 were plucked safely from the shark-infested waters. Gandar-Dower, aged just thirty-five, was not among them.

### To Die Right Well

Gandar-Dower was one of the last of England’s independent romantic adventurers. His world was largely extinguished by the Second World War, and his style of adventuring instead became the

more rational preserve of the scientist. Gandar-Dower’s old Harrow housemaster, the Rev. D. B. Kittermaster, summed up his former pupil’s character best in the introduction to *Abyssinian Patchwork*. He was, he wrote, competitive yet generous, loving yet agnostic, ambitious yet altruistic, the most loyal of friends and a pacifist determined to survive the war. Yet he wouldn’t have safety on any terms, forever running headlong towards danger.

But it is undoubtedly Gandar-Dower’s own words, written in a prescient poem aged just twenty-one, that sum up best his mercurial personality. He pictures himself flying through unknown skies to discover below him, in an uncharted sea, the enchanted island of his dreams, only to crash into the waves before landing. “I shall not see the glory fade,” he writes “The vision pass away, Or mind and muscle shrink dismayed Beneath a slow decay...At least, I shall have died right well.” ●

Several safari companies offer tours of the Aberdare Mountains, now protected as the Aberdare National Park. They take in soaring peaks and bamboo forested valleys, home to eland and Bongo respectively. Sadly a Marozi sighting is not part of the itinerary. Discover more about travel writer Duncan J. D. Smith at [www.duncanjdsmith.com](http://www.duncanjdsmith.com).