THE HUNTER: A Story of Bushman Life (1926) is an ethnological and ecological story of the wilderness environment and the San hunters (or “Bushmen” as they were called in the colonial era). It rightly deserves reconsideration as a landmark novel intended to raise consciousness in South Africa and elsewhere concerning the plight of these marginalized people. With a gentle hand and hearty gusto, Glanville entertains and educates his readers about San life, its joys and pains, rituals and problems: “Whether the Bushman followed the game into the desert, or whether he was driven west with the game by the Kafirs first, and then by the whites, is a matter that does not touch the main tendency to drift west, away from the country most suitable for the crops and the herds of the newcomers.” He evokes both their grim struggle for existence and their unbeaten spirit: “We go being driven—out of the fat into the lean; from the flowing river into the drying pool; from the grass to the thorn; from the soft veld to the sand that shifts with the wind.” His use of San adages and locutions—such as “ears turned to their heels” to describe watchfulness in pursuit—and his elegantly spare storytelling sculpt a poetry of place into which his readers willingly enter, emerging with an enhanced awareness of human “commonalities” that transcend social differences—preeminently, an impulse for artistic expression, joy in nature’s bounty, playfulness, bravery, and an indomitable independence: “Freedom to live their life in their own way by their own skill as hunters outside the paralysing discipline of civilization was what they demanded, though it confined them to the desert and wore them down as the sandstone is worn by the attrition of wind, frost, and sun and rain.”

The People, the Land, the Animals

Although missionary or travel accounts of the San peoples are generally nonfictional, they sometimes blur the line with fiction when using dramatic techniques. In these narratives, social, geographical and historical commentary become forms of personal and pictorial observation, reflection, and social critique. Such ethnological elements underlie the fictional works of Glanville’s predecessors as in W. C. Scully’s Between Sun and Sand: A Tale of
an African Desert (1898) and AVendetta of the Desert (1898) as well as Henry Anderson Bryden’s “A Bushwoman’s Romance” in his Tales of South Africa (1896). In an attempt to shape social attitudes concerning these unlettered people through the covertly polemical means of a novel, Glanville’s narrative recalls a similarly provocative story of the breaking up of Native American culture, Ramona (1884) by Helen Hunt Jackson (also a sympathetic, nonnative author), who did politically for Native Americans what Glanville’s novel aspired to do for the San, combating current indifference or bigotry. At the time he wrote, Glanville was clearly aware that the abilities handed down within traditional hunter-gatherer families were slipping out of mind in the next generation of San youth; successively fewer clansmen lived off the land as did their ancestors. Yet even after this novel, San displacement continued until the 1960s. Within South Africa public appreciation of the San did not occur until Laurens Van der Post’s The Lost World of the Kalahari (1958) and The Heart of the Hunter (1961), based on San stories from Wilhelm Bleek. Even so, Van der Post’s work, as several present-day critics observe, diminished the San as simple “children of Nature,” albeit “mystical ecologists.” Yet more than three decades previously Glanville had defended their full personhood, understood perhaps poetically as the original soul of mankind, fresh from the fallen Garden.

Glanville’s arrière pensée bears on how, over against the forces of political change, a displaced, indigenous people can maintain or reclaim their fragile culture in its relation to the land and its animals. Telling the story of their precolonial displacement in the 1820s by the Nguni-Sotho communities on the centennial anniversary, Glanville fulfills Barbara Kingsolver’s injunction that fiction writers “tell the truth, but tell it slant”—thus his all-tribal account (with just a distant echo of the invading Boers as hunters) is designed to comment implicitly on the early twentieth-century struggle of the San with a new and very different oppression, that of the Anglo and Afrikaner settlers. Their early nineteenth-century expulsion from rich hunting lands foreshadows the contemporary San predicament in which their personhood was being increasingly fragmented and erased through a lack of appreciation by racial stereotyping of “modern versus primitive” and by rapid industrial expansion and the emergence of globalized markets—a new political order that threatened to finish the destruction of their culture. Glanville hoped to generate respect for this despised people by contrasting their habits and habitats both with their precolonial warlike adversaries and, tacitly, with modern society which, like the earlier oppressors, was failing in humane tolerance and, even more broadly, in guardianship of the earth. Glanville believed that San life must preserve contact with the land and avoid outside forces of cultural dissolution—manifest earlier in the Zulu nation builders of the 1820s who were happy to eject or kill them and, at
the time of writing in the 1920s, by the white settlers who aspired to make “useful citizens” out of them. To be truly beneficial, cultural borderlands must facilitate humane and constructive affinities among different ways of belonging for different purposes.

Among the San, the unique vernacular features of their pre-colonial landscape provided a cultural framework and psychogenic equilibrium. Viewed as a repository of inherited wisdom, the physical landscape had no spiritual dissociation from their cultural topography; rather, there is a continuum (almost identity) between both structural schemata which comprised for the San a single natural-spiritual fabric. The land becomes a creator of moral wisdom—each rock, constellation, or tree a cultural space filled with the dim presence of ancestral spirits, of myths, stories and dreams. Glanville’s description of a baobab tree anticipates what current ethnobotanists call a “cultural keystone species,” owing to its unaltered persistence through time and its connection with the San’s daily lives (after their migration to Namib-Naukluft it becomes the sturdy, slow-growing koekerboom). Every such keystone species is its own cultural space with its own tribal life stories or information about the land. Glanville writes:

Each tree standing immense in the woods on his widespread roots would be an object familiar to generations of hunters. They would become landmarks and signposts of the history that played its little part in their vicinity, and any single tree of more than usually vast girth would be widely known.

Karu remembered such a tree. His grandfather had been born within the wall of the enclosing bark, for the trunks of old baobabs become hollowed through the decay of the inner layers of fibre, and he remembered also the refreshing draught.

Merely by naming such particular things or places, tribal elders conserved and renewed social values and traditions.

Among the wilderness animals “the springbok entered most into their everyday life,” writes Glanville. Like the keystone baobab, this migratory antelope, owing to its value within the daily lives of these indigenous peoples, is also a keystone species, later to be described in W. C. Scully’s Lodges in the Wilderness (1915) and also in S. C. Cronwright-Schreiner’s The Migratory Springbucks of South Africa (1925) in which the author (Olive Schreiner’s husband) observes that “the days of the great treks have passed.” Both Cronwright-Schreiner and Scully imply that an increased population and the forces of economic consumption, the fencing of livestock, hunting, rinderpest and drought put an end to their treks as part of the overall disintegration of the Karoo ecosystem. Inasmuch as the date of The Hunter is the mid-1920s, this recent eradication of antelope migrations becomes highly relevant to a progressive San cultural disintegration as seen by Glanville. If the baobabs are living presences rooted in the earth, constructed of inner
and outer layers and growing to a nearly miraculous age, the antelopes and
their cycle of migrations, previously unbroken from time immemorial, like-
wise had witnessed to forces of nature emblematic of the constant presence
of residual memories and lifeways.

The history of hunting in Africa, which is complexly in the background
of Glanville's treatment of his subject, ranges from aboriginal bow, arrow,
assegai, and feet through the colonial flintlock, cartridge firearm, and horse
up to the postcolonial telescopic rifle and motorized vehicle. Colonialism
in the Eastern Cape had been inaugurated by resettlement of surplus pop-
ulation and by demand in the nineteenth century for raw materials in met-
ropolitan Europe. At the height of this era H. Rider Haggard observed in
“A Zulu War-Dance” (1877) that “when the strong aggressive hand of Eng-
land has grasped some fresh portion of the earth’s surface,” despite “a spir-
it of justice in her heart and head,” all the game gets shot: “All around rose
the great bush-clad hills, so green, so bright in the glorious streaming sun-
light, and yet so awfully devoid of life, so solemnly silent. It was indeed a
sight never to be forgotten, this wide panoramic out-look, with its tower-
ing hills, its smiling valleys, its flashing streams, its all-pervading sunlight,
and its deep sad silence.”3 The implicit analogy Haggard draws between the
wild animals and the tribal warriors (who themselves had previously ban-
ished the San) is genuinely disturbing—the imperialist annihilates the for-
mer and emasculates the latter:

As he stood before us with lifted weapon and outstretched shield…. an
emblem and a type of the times and the things which are passing away, his
feet resting on ground which he held on sufferance, and his hands grasping
weapons impotent as a child’s toy against those of the white man,—he who
was the rightful lord of all,—what reflections did he not induce, what a moral
did he not teach!4

Ironically, the unforeseen defeat of the British at Isandlwana is still a bit
more than a year in the future; nevertheless, Haggard remains essentially
right about changes under imperialism.

Given our current awareness of racial/colonial oppression and its envi-
ronmental impact, the professional hunter in the nineteenth and earlier
twentieth centuries has become something of a villain, dedicated to death
and trophies,5 but Glanville’s settler heritage would have recognized in the
deaths of the hunted animals legitimate benefits for urban dwellers and colo-
nial farmers to whom uncurbed predators were a grievous burden. Apart
from that indefensible excess popularly called the “testosterone-enhanced
glory of killing big, beautiful things,” one must consider several facets of the
issue. First, the necessary protein supplied both to the indigens and Euro-
pean settlers by big game; second, the by-products that hunting supplied
for tribal uses and for export to Europe (feathers, furs, wool, leather, ivo-
ry—though ultimately much of this came from domesticated animals) that provided local revenue; third, the benefit to game herds when not wantonly decimated, which today we would term conservationist culling or sensitivity to the welfare of game through control of populations; fourth, the opening up of lines of communication by hunters between communities and into unexplored territories; and fifth, the supply of biological specimens for scientific study or to educational exhibitions and museums.

Glanville’s youth had been a time of midcolonial transition for hunters under British rule: game laws (amusingly disregarded by Verna in Bertram Mitford’s *Forging the Blades*, 1908) and licensing fees as a new source of revenue were introduced. (In the precolonial phase the lesser and paramount chiefs had dispensed hunting permission to outsiders, San excepted.) This and the introduction of mandatory guides were belated attempts at conservation. The era became one of opulent safaris for royalty and for aristocrats of stage and screen, for tycoons of business, for wealthy sportsmen, and even for writers, as Hemingway’s “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” would suggest. (Isak Dinesen’s husband, Bror Blixen, was Ernest Hemingway’s guide; Dinesen’s lover, Denys Finch-Hatton, was also a professional guide—with a Gypsy Moth for scouting elephants from the air.) This phase ended in the postcolonial era with the stricter but not-always-enforceable hunting bans of the 1960s and 1970s, owing to a growing human population and concerns about the devastation of species. (On private game reserves, however, one may still kill big, beautiful, and even rare creatures—gestating females usually excepted.) Though Glanville did not live to see it, this new phase also coincided with a belated campaign to return the San to their native lands. The ecologically praiseworthy fact about the San was their balance between wildlife and human requirements, with hunting undertaken not as a feature of recreational affluence but for the most persuasive objectives: food, bone, skins, sinew, tallow. The San left no scars behind on their surroundings, only their art.

The Hunter

*The Hunter* is concerned with a period known as the Mfecane, an era of war and starvation among tribes during the 1820s–1830s at the time of Mzilikazi’s revolt against Shaka. Glanville suggests these troubled intergroup relationships were a primary cause of the San being driven out of central southern Africa toward the thin resources and severe drought of the Kalahari, where they were still subsisting when Glanville died. Even for centuries before the Zulu and Matabele, these Stone Age people living conjointly with the animals and the seasons had suffered aggression because as hunter-gatherers they pillaged the animals and crops of other African tribes. Particularly after the arrival of Europeans at the Cape they were exploited
or massacred, so that already by the 1870s they were facing extinction both through the “glottophagy” or “eating up” of their language and through dispossession from their landscape stocked with their stories, music, dreams, and rituals. If Glanville does not exactly anticipate here Louis Liebenberg’s thesis in *The Art of Tracking, the Origin of Science* that the origin of modern science lay in folk-scientific principles of classification and interpretation by hunter-gatherers engaged in tracking, he nevertheless documents the complex intellectual-creative abilities of the San as hunters, which Liebenberg claims was a crucial step in the evolution and development of early man into modern man. As in the “wisdom written in the fields” (“Ukutwasa”) or as read by Dick on leaves in the book of nature (*The Lost Heiress*), so the San apply to animal behavior and tracking a non-Western literacy of reading the signs on rocks and vegetation, in the night sky, and remembering names, stories, and ethnobotanical wisdom pertaining to each place: “Though he had no literature, the veld was his book, vivid with life.”

In writing this story, Glanville as author frequently introduces his personal observations and opinions, providing the narrative with some essay-like qualities in such chapters as “In the Ways of Peace” and “The Joy of Life” that complement its story line. He mentions W. H. Hudson, who previously had quoted Glanville on the serpent’s strangeness in the *Fortnightly Review* of 1894, as inquiring about “whether the native instinctively turned to the north and slept with his head always in a fixed direction.” Although Glanville had access to historical sources, he essentially explores this episode in Bushman history by means of imaginary individual lives. *The Hunter* is in particular the story of Dakwyn and his clan who begin a westerly pilgrimage to a new homeland. (Both Dakwyn, whose name is pronounced *Diä + cerebral click + kwain*, the terminal syllable nasal, vowels rough and deep, and his father Kabbo, whose name is pronounced with an initial lateral click, are San names taken from actual storytellers of the 1870s whose portraits are in W. H. I. Bleek and L. C. Lloyd’s *Specimens of Bushman Folklore, 1911.*

Seeking to live in peace, but driven from their traditional hunting grounds into a hostile desert by Shaka and by Mzilikazi, they do not lose life’s *élan vital*—the joyfulness that predominates over fear and the resilience it engenders. Perhaps for personal reasons rooted in his boyhood, Glanville stresses the joy in nature and in the Bushman life which is strongly contrasted with the Zulu’s and Matabele’s warlike lifeways, particularly their “organized killing” in battle that, for the Bushmen, “shook them to the centre.” The most mystical parts of the plot stress, almost like William Wordsworth returning to the environs of *Tintern Abbey*, a wisdom found in certain places; and that directly or indirectly through such places an enhanced mental awareness allows the hunter to dream paths leading through the wilderness to his prey. Further, an almost mystical *gnosis* or clairvoyance—“messages of
the air”—enables the hunter to recognize and to escape threats before they occur, “presentiments” as they are called here: “he tapped the air for view-less messages that brought him news of intimate friends, or warning of danger to be avoided, or of meat to be stalked.”

Dakwyn contemplates “setting up his own house” in marriage to Suolla, who has won a chief’s assegai, kills a leopard, concocts a new food formula for expeditions, rescues Dakwyn and finds water in a desert. The San are not organized in bonded social groups much beyond the extended family unit; but courtship, as Western culture understands it, requires social structures at a higher level. Bryden’s “A Bushwoman’s Romance” is undoubtedly the best account as to how Glanville’s South African contemporaries understood San romantic relationships which progressed rapidly in very few encounters from eye contact to preference to a seemingly casual mutual acceptance. Dakwyn and Suolla’s relationship illustrated an even shorter route to romance: selection of a long-term adopted member of the family circle, again with a degree of undemonstrative inevitability. With no flocks to draw upon, either a modest dowry is offered by the male (Bryden’s Kwaneet is expected to offer as bride price his brass cartridge case used as snuffbox) or, as in Glanville’s tale, Dakwyn must prove his ability as a hunter by clearing the scourge of an old lion—indicative that he will be a good provider and his family will not become a social liability (and, as Glanville notes, this carries for his readers a subliminal echo of the chivalric hero’s supreme ordeal).

Among the most powerful scenes in Dakwyn’s hunt for the king of beasts is the incident in which the lion jams him into a tree as dead meat, an episode that Glanville found in Bleek’s Specimens of Bushman Folklore as told by “Díá[click]kwain.” Glanville recognized in the fabric of this San legend an understructure of reality, so that by using the identical details but eliminating oral repetitions and the fantastical conclusion he is able to return legend to heroic reality. Dakwyn’s rite-of-passage hunt is a high point of the story’s suspenseful descriptive powers: “the lion came raging through the water, mouth open, and at ten feet distance the third arrow was on its way, and this time flew into the open mouth and bit deep in the back of the tongue…” No less important than Dakwyn is Suolla. Their match presents a strong parallel to Sol Plaatje’s Mhudi (1930), generally considered the first novel in English by an indigenous African writer. Like Suolla, Plaatje’s titular figure of Mhudi is a visionary answer to the Barolong’s victimization by Mzilikazi in the 1830s—and to their struggle to regain a lost national/cultural identity only to lose it again in the oppression of European contact that culminated nearly a century later in the Native Lands Act. Both are iconic mothers of their communities, pragmatic centers of survival. Perhaps this is because in San folklore women are often more resourceful than men, even independent of them—but on this feminist topic, Glanville is silent.
Notes

1. The San (hunter-gatherers) and the Khoi-Khoi (pastoral) are both “first peoples” of southern Africa, the last aboriginals.


4. Ibid., 102.

5. Brian Herne, in *White Hunters: The Golden Age of Safaris* (New York: Holt, 1999), 6–7, claims that Lord Cholmondeley hired a guide and a Somali hunter to lead safaris in East Africa—the dark-skinned Somali became the “black hunter” and Alan Black, the white-skinned guide, was called the “white hunter.” Nobody really knows who put the “great” in the Great White Hunter label for a professional huntsman in Africa, but the adjective is usually considered to have appeared during the early period of moviemaking when safari adventures were popular. But earlier H. Rider Haggard’s Allan Quatermain is described, quite unironically by the titular heroine of *Maiwa’s Revenge* (1888), as the “great white hunter” (106 ) and elsewhere in the story he is the “mighty white hunter” and the “great white man” (54, 69).


8. See note 20 in text of *The Hunter*. 