



AFRICAN EXPLORERS

Lt Col Ewart “Cape to Cairo” Grogan (1874-1967)

Ah, the good old days, when a man would walk clear across Africa to win the hand of the woman he loved. Well, not exactly.



In Africa, Grogan's drive and endurance would earn him the Swahili nickname of “Bwana Chui”.



Grogan loved hunting elephant

The 22-year-old Brit, Ewart Scott Grogan, covered the first 1 700-mile stretch of the 4 500-mile journey in 1896 as a soldier in Rhodesia's Second Matabele War between the British East Africa Company and the Ndebele, reputedly serving as right-hand man to Cecil Rhodes. His tour ended in Beira in the new Portuguese colony of Mozambique, which he described as “Satan's own summer palace”. So ill that he was mistaken for dead, he swore never to return to Africa.

While visiting New Zealand in 1898, he met the lovely Gertrude Watt, and they fell in love at first sight. Gertrude, raised in a 40-room mansion, was the heiress daughter of the Scottish inventor of the steam engine, James Watt. Her stepfather would not allow her union to the Cambridge

dropout and soldier of fortune. But the tenacious and competitive character of this tall and handsome young man had been formed by summers of dangerous mountain climbing in the Swiss Alps – he summited the Matterhorn *twice*. In Africa, his drive and endurance would earn him the Swahili nickname of “Bwana Chui”.

To prove his mettle in a manner that would also make him wealthy and famous, the Cape-to-Cairo challenge was laid out between stepfather and suitor. Gertrude's wealthy aunt would help finance the quest – so long as her brother, the rather stout Arthur “Harry” Sharp (who was also 20 years older than Grogan), joined the expedition.

They set sail for Beira on 28 February 1898. Their arsenal for feeding and defending the safari initially consisted



The young Grogan as a soldier

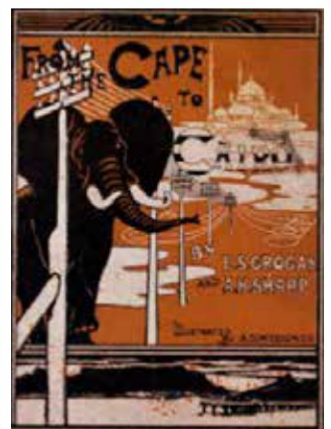
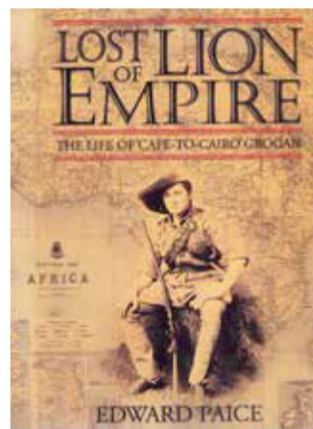
of two .303 double rifles and a “double .500 magnum,” for which, unfortunately, the supplier had shipped only expanding bullets when Grogan had ordered half solids. On top of it, the packages were mislabelled, so he did not discover the mistake until reaching northern Tanganyika. Another supplier shipped out one .303, “without so much as a cleaning-rod, much less a screwdriver or spare pin”. As for the expensive cartridge cases for his 4-bore, “the majority of them were badly split at the rim, sufficiently split to fill rapidly when held in water . . .” On his first shot, Grogan was knocked over a log two yards behind him.

Grogan would describe Sharp as “the greatest and most reticent of African Nimrods,” and “the hardest and most daring *shikar* who ever followed an elephant”. When Sharp called it quits at the headwaters of “Lake Niassa”, realising that reaching Cairo might take another two years, he left Grogan his double-barrelled 10-bore Holland & Holland Paradox, but took the 4-bore double for his march to Mombasa. As the number and strength of Grogan’s porters withered, he abandoned the heavy Paradox, “half of which is peacefully reposing under some scrub, while the other half is at the bottom of a mud-hole”.

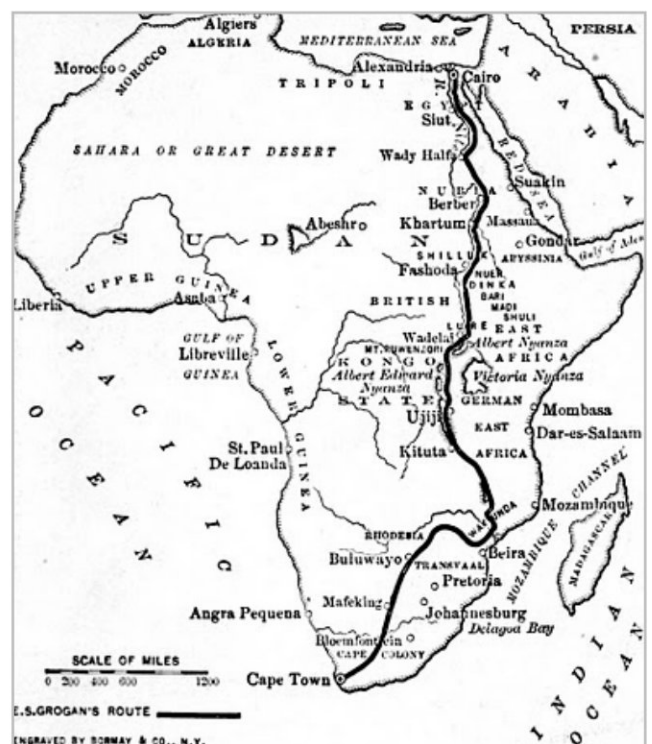
But love was actually only one of Grogan’s motives. In fact, he had been tasked with mapping a route for entrepreneurial Rhodes’s intended Cape-to-Cairo tele-

graph and railroad. In a later interview with the *New York Times*, Grogan claimed that he never intended to become an explorer, and actually first went out to Africa to hunt big game, then found himself volunteering to fight “an uprising of natives”. His second trip was ostensibly to bag a lion. In fact, Grogan and Sharp would bag 17 lions and ship three cubs back to England.

The hunting already started in today’s Gorongosa National Park, situated at the southern end of the Great African Rift Valley. Counting 40 000 to 50 000 head of game, Grogan dropped Sharp’s charging, wounded buffalo at his feet. He heard the lion’s “Wagnerian roar . . . permeating the whole universe, thundering, rumbling and majestic”. With his usual strongly salted humour, which is one of the great pleasures of his writing, he added, “Thousands of German [Wagner] devotees, backed by thousands of beers, could never approach the soul-stirring glory of one *Felis leo* at home.”



Left: Grogan’s multiple successful careers are captivatingly recounted in this book. Right: The book that made Grogan both rich and famous



Map of Cape to Cairo route

and “the exiled dervishes were fighting 2 000 Abyssinians, and the entire Sobat district was in revolt.”

In Belgium’s Congo Free State, Grogan encountered its utterly destitute peoples, some reduced to cannibalism. “They eat any man they can conveniently get hold of. Enemies captured in battle, men from other tribes picked up like so much game, and if they are in hard luck about human flesh they eat one another.” His porters begged him to turn back before reaching the Upper Nile, where they said, “All was wilderness, no food, no paths, all the people dead.”

They were right: “The whole country between Lado and Fashoda is one big swamp.” From 150 porters, he now had only 10 to cross the 400-mile marshes of southern Sudan called the Sudd, Arabic for “barrier” or “obstacle”. It was a “boundless sea” of eight- to ten-foot-tall, itchy, razor-sharp grasses and floating islands harbouring hippos and crocs. The very air itself stank from rotting vegetation, and “you could taste the fever”. Their diet of sun-dried hippo flesh resulted in scurvy; mosquitoes “sucked dry” two men; and there were hints of depression and even madness. When the party encountered the hostile, seven-foot-tall Dinkas, unprovoked, one speared one of Grogan’s last porters in a flash. But they backed off when Grogan demonstrated the effectiveness of his revolver on a marabou stork. Luckily, the Nile River had not been “lower than it had ever been within the memory of man”, or they never would have survived the three-month ordeal.

Starved, his clothes mere rags, his body ravaged by the sun, he led his caravan on, fulfilling his mission to map

and chart the way. At the end of their strength, with only a dozen cartridges left, the party stumbled upon an English officer of a sudd-cutting expedition from Fashoda! Grogan described the Upper Nile as “a desolation of desolations, an infernal region, a howling waste of weed, mosquitoes, flies and fever . . . I now have no fear of the hereafter.”

Grogan rarely demanded or grabbed supplies, and always either paid or traded with hosts and merchants what was due. While he openly admired some tribes, racism could taint his thinking. Still, his vivid descriptions of village life, native hunting methods, the landscapes, fauna and flora of these barely charted regions, made a genuine contribution to that period’s knowledge of Africa.

Although Grogan and Gertrude settled in Kenya, he put up his guns and donated his trophies to British institutions. His multiple successful careers are captivatingly recounted in Edward Paice’s *Lost Lion of Empire – The Life of ‘Cape to Cairo’ Grogan*; they included building Mombasa’s deep-water port and Nairobi’s fashionable Torr’s Hotel.

Although Grogan’s name is mostly forgotten today, he was elected a member of the Royal Geographic Society, and met Queen Victoria, Sir Henry Morton Stanley, Mark Twain, Woodrow Wilson, and Alexander Graham Bell. And his 1900 book, *From the Cape to Cairo. The First Traverse of Africa from South to North*, made him both rich and famous.

Grogan lived to be 93. His secret to longevity? “To smoke very heavily, to eat and drink very little, and not to take anything in life too seriously.”

(Brooke ChilversLubin is also the art columnist for Gray’s Sporting Journal.)

