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# Introduction

In 1898, railway manager and big-game hunter Charles Sheldon visited the Chihuahuan desert in search of antelope. His days were spent riding through the scrub, looking for his elusive quarry but seldom finding them; at night he would sit by the campfire and look forward to the next day's venture. "I can recall many delightful trips," he would write later, "riding for days over wide areas in search of these interesting animals, not all successful in finding and killing game, yet not one of them disappointing to him who had learned to love the desert."<sup>1</sup>

Charles Sheldon was in many ways a typical turn-of-the-century big-game hunter. For him, the hunt was about the chase, rather than the kill, and the test of the true hunter lay in the stalk, the willingness to transform leisured hunting into a kind of work. After all, it would have been far easier to lie in wait by a waterhole and pick off the antelope as they came to drink. Faced with that option, Sheldon, like many big-game hunters, preferred to be unsuccessful. He was also typical in that he was part of a cohort of hunters who shared a remarkably similar profile and background: white, native-born, Protestant, Ivy-educated, and from the East Coast north of Washington, DC. This group yielded almost all the Progressive-Era big-game hunters, the ones who are still remembered now—Theodore Roosevelt, George Bird Grinnell—and those, like Charles Sheldon and his bear-hunting wife, Louisa Gulliver Sheldon, who have been mostly forgotten.

And Sheldon was typical in another way: he wrote about his hunting. The elite big-game hunters were, as a group, avid writers. Roosevelt and Grinnell's exclusive hunting club, the Boone and Crockett Club, did not require its members to publish, but by 1903 roughly half of them had articles or books in print, and over half of those were on hunting. Their writing formed part of an emerging literary genre, the American big-game hunting narrative, that flooded the pages of turn-of-the-century periodicals, appearing not only in recreational magazines but also in such popular generalist venues as

*Harper's*, *Scribner's*, and *Collier's*. Over a century later, the connections that these authors made between hunting and writing are still so much part of our culture that some historians have read these narratives as transparent accounts of experience—as if, after spending days riding through the desert not seeing many antelope, it was the most natural thing in the world for Charles Sheldon to come home, write up the experience, and successfully place it in a published anthology of hunting tales.

Before the 1880s and 1890s, however, very few men were writing tales of big-game hunting, and those that did seldom published in generalist middle-class magazines.

And before 1880, very few middle- and upper-class men of the East Coast were going big-game hunting at all.

To make Sheldon possible, something fundamental in American culture had to shift. This book explores that shift, how and why it happened, and what its consequences were. Combining writing and publishing with their construction of a new meaning for the big-game hunt, Sheldon's cohort brought American readers with them as they pursued game into the American West and then north to Canada and Alaska, south to Mexico, and around the world to British East Africa, South Africa, and India. In their hands the hunting narrative became a place to discuss the meaning of empire for Americans, and what hunters' dependence on guides meant for racial hierarchies, and whether having new reasons to enter the wilderness meant having new reasons to save it. Conservation, imperialism, best-seller lists, and a global market in trophies all became linked to American big-game hunting in this era. So too did the personal identities of men and women struggling to define themselves to each other and to their society.

Examining these hunters, their hunting, and their narratives can thus offer new insight into American society in this period; it also calls into question assumptions that have been with us for too long. One of those assumptions is that hunting has no history, or none that is worth studying, because it has a stable meaning: in any era, it is about violence. The turn-of-the-century hunter-writers explicitly rejected this meaning for the hunt, however. Instead they crafted an interpretation for hunting that centered on willpower, self-denial, and self-discipline. Whether described as the big-game hunt, the still-hunt, the fair-stalk, or, in Roosevelt and Grinnell's memorable phrase, "manly sport with the rifle," refusing the easy kill and turning hunting into a test of a man's character was a new idea that emerged in this period. Also new was the idea that there was an innate link between manliness and

wilderness—that a professional man from the East Coast trying to prove himself could do so by going West and hunting there, for instance—and, while that idea remains part of popular culture today, it was also constructed in this period by these writers. Most innovative, however, and least obvious, were the new links these writers forged between hunting and narrative, because every time a new meaning for hunting was offered to readers in print, an underlying connection was being established between going hunting and writing about the experience. But why did so many turn-of-the-century big-game hunters publish? What was writing actually *doing* for hunters? And what did it do for readers?

The answers to these questions provide a new angle of approach to hunting, publication, and American culture at the beginning of the twentieth century—and it was the combination of these elements that gave the narratives both power and influence. It was no coincidence that both a new way of hunting and a new type of hunting narrative emerged in the 1880s. Both were responses to cultural changes at the end of the nineteenth century, and both represented radical breaks from the ways that big-game hunting by middle- and upper-class men had previously been understood and described in print.

In the decades before and immediately after the Civil War, there were very few middle- and upper-class Americans pursuing big game, and those that did seldom wrote narratives of their experiences.<sup>2</sup> The handful who did publish usually described their hunting as a leisurely pursuit, one among many pleasures of travel. Such hunters also didn't consider themselves confined to a single style of hunting but pursued game in a variety of ways, adopting whatever hunting techniques were most popular in the places they visited.

By the 1880s, however, changes in transportation, communications, and the nature of work itself meant that big-game hunting was becoming an ever more popular use of leisure time for a cohort of white, native-born, Protestant, middle- and upper-class men, mostly from urban areas of the East Coast. They went hunting, but in a different form than before. Now, wherever they went, they pursued game through the stalk, also known as the “still-hunt,” a time-consuming technique that required both patience and self-discipline from the hunter. They also wrote about their experiences, and in their narratives they argued that the stalk was the only correct way to hunt because it provided a meaningful test of the individual will, one that could reveal the truth about the hunter's inner character.

This was a new way of imagining what hunting could be used for, and it bore little relation to either the experiences or the narratives of their

predecessors. Instead, this new interpretation drew on a set of very traditional nineteenth-century ideals that linked manliness, character, and willpower, and that had been generated in a very specific context: the workplace of white, native-born, middle- and upper-class Protestants living in cities in the American Northeast. Those ideals posited a set of virtues—in particular self-control, perseverance, and patience—that were believed necessary for success and were derived from the exercise of the will over the passions and the body. These virtues, often called “the manly virtues,” were inseparably connected to rhetorics of both work and manliness. As a result, they were not located in hunting prior to the 1880s, or at least not in hunting done by men on vacation, who were leaving productive work to pursue game for pleasure. Those hunters were instead seen as engaged in a rather dubious form of leisure, and early accounts of their big-game hunting sometimes called not only their judgment but also their manliness into question.

By the 1870s and 1880s, however, the workplace as a site for demonstrating the manly virtues was becoming increasingly compromised. This was partly a result of industrial changes, of the growth of salaried jobs and the loss of workplace autonomy for many middle-class men, but it was also driven by the threats posed to traditional elites by new groups who contested long-standing hierarchies of political and economic power. In response, a cohort of elite men who hunted big game for pleasure began to frame their hunting as a site for the development and display of manly character. This idea was originally promoted by a handful of individuals, including Theodore Strong Van Dyke, Owen Wister, and Theodore Roosevelt, who argued in print that stalking big game was a test of will that revealed the truth about a man’s character, and thus “manly sport with the rifle” could complement or even replace work as a site for the display of the manly virtues. Big-game hunting in this reading was about willpower and self-control—and just as definitely *not* about violence or primitivism. By the late 1880s the leisured big-game hunt had been converted, through the process of narrative, into a new site for the display of the traditional manly virtues.

There was no rigid list of those virtues, no single formula that authors had to follow. The big-game hunting narratives that emerged in the 1880s invoked a loosely related group of cultural associations, all centered around manliness and willpower, but displaying considerable variation from one narrative to the next. Some writers connected their hunting to claims of Anglo-Saxon prowess. Others invoked science and exploration as ways to transform leisured hunting into productive work. Many claimed that there

was something uniquely American about their hunting, either by comparing it to the hunting of the pioneers or by contrasting it to British hunting. These associations were woven into the narratives over time, affecting both how hunters interpreted their own actions in the wilds and how their reading audiences understood the wider meaning of the hunt.

At the same time, by choosing to write about their hunting, this cohort had made a decision that immediately set them apart from the vast majority of professional and subsistence hunters in North America. It allowed them to corner the market. By 1900 “manly sport with the rifle” had become the dominant way in which big-game hunting by individuals was described in the American middle-class press. This dominance let writers promote certain associations with their hunting while downplaying those that might raise doubts among their audiences. The role of the guide, for instance, was problematic for many sportsmen, who found themselves attempting to display manliness by hunting in places where, as visitors, they needed assistance, often from nonwhite or mixed-race men who were very competent hunters themselves. A variety of ways of negotiating this challenge emerged in the narratives, but they all depended on controlling the public retelling of the hunt, rewriting whatever may have happened in the field in the context of the hierarchies of race and class most familiar to white middle-class reading audiences.

Consumption by those audiences was not just about rhetoric, however. It was also fundamentally about business. The same industrial changes that altered the nature of work in this period were also fueling a publishing explosion, a massive expansion of the book and periodical marketplaces that left them hungry for product and willing to pay for it. Big-game hunting narratives were valuable commodities in these markets, profitable for both hunter-writers and publishers. The end of the nineteenth century also marked a moment when people were beginning to identify themselves through what they consumed as well as what they produced, and the emerging national periodical market was an essential part of that transformation. Subscribing to a middle-class standard like *Harper's* or a recreational magazine like *Outing* connected readers to a national community of like-minded readers, writers, and editors, and that in turn had an impact on how Americans across the country understood the new meanings being given to the sportsmanlike still-hunt. And there were other connections at work as well, behind the scenes. The recreational press in this era was dominated by a handful of men in New York, many of them hunters themselves, who chose for social and economic

reasons to publish these narratives both in North America and through transatlantic publishing houses. They dominated the recreational media and controlled access to its presses, creating a nexus through which hunting narratives had to pass on their way to publication. Enthusiastically promoted by this powerful group of publishers, and advertised, marketed, and constantly anthologized and reprinted, by 1900 narratives of manly sport with the rifle were reaching hundreds of thousands of readers every month.

As the new meaning of the hunt achieved wide cultural currency—and as the financial benefits of selling such a story grew—big-game hunting began to attract writers distinct from the original group of elite hunters, including journalists and women, even as British hunters discovered in the American press a second, lucrative market for their tales of hunting and empire. As a result, by 1900 debates were erupting in print over the meaning of the hunt. What role should a hunter's wife play on a safari, especially if she turned out to be a good shot? Was it possible for women to be "sportsmen"? What was the relationship between the American interpretation of the hunt and the very different but equally popular imperial version being promoted by British hunter-writers? As narratives by dozens of authors jostled for space in the pages of *Harper's* and *Outing*, and as hunting narratives by women in particular shot up the best-seller lists, the hunting narratives became fertile sites for public negotiations over ideas about imperialism, national identity, gender roles, and even marital relationships.

This growing popularization came with a price. By 1900 big-game hunting was becoming a profitable and heavily commercialized part of a modernizing global tourist economy, even as both wilderness areas and game animals were rapidly diminishing. In response, the hunter-writers began to assert themselves as a political lobby for conservation using a two-pronged approach: deploying their considerable social and political power to support conservation, while interpreting their actions to the public through the national media. Members of the hunter elite brought political pressure to bear on governors and congressmen, created national parks, and wrote game laws that functioned at state, national, and international levels, restricting the activities of hunters across North America. They accompanied these actions with published pleas for conservation that were grounded in the same values and rhetorics as their hunting tales: appeals to manly self-restraint, to Americanism, and to the value of wilderness as a connection to the pioneer past. They also constantly assured readers that game legislation was *not* class legislation, while framing any opposition to game laws as the work of selfish



private interests, motivated by greed rather than by need. This was not always true, especially when it came to those hunting for subsistence, but the hunter elite's monopoly in the media gave them a voice with which no other single group could compete. Those whose hunting they restricted, in particular the thousands of market and subsistence hunters scattered across North America, had no comparable media platform; having never written about their hunting, they had no unified voice with which to argue their case. Nor were these restrictions being imposed only from the top down. Across the country, supporters of conservation reached out to the media, using the international reach of the recreational press to bring pressure to bear on both local hunters and local politicians. Together, the hunter elite and their reading audiences used a potent combination of political power and media access to shape conservation law, to restrict hunting throughout North America, and to preserve American wilderness and game in ways that remain with us to this day.

The following chapters provide the evidence for this argument: the changes to how hunting was interpreted; the cultural meanings given to the stalk and how those were challenged or negotiated by women, British hunter-writers, and guides; the business of publishing that underlay the narratives; and the wide-ranging consequences for American culture and conservation. Since the book focuses on original research, it might be helpful to note here that it contributes to the current historiography in several ways. First, the elephant in the room: the long-standing assumption in the historiography that there is a clear connection between turn-of-the-century big-game hunting and violence, primitivism, masculinity, the frontier, and war. A great deal of attention has been paid to the rise of what has been called "hypermasculinity" in the years after the Civil War: the emergence in American culture of a new vision of manhood that celebrated violence, martial ideals, primitivism, and the male body. Often positioned as part of a wider "crisis of masculinity" that confronted men as part of the rise of modernity—and the rise of the modern woman—the story of this new man found its roots in bloody tales of the frontier and made itself visible in the fiction of Jack London, in middle-class attendance at boxing matches and Wild West shows, and in men withdrawing to "dens" within their houses or setting off into the wilderness.<sup>3</sup> Big-game hunting, especially by elite men, has long been assumed to be part of this movement.<sup>4</sup> Much of the groundbreaking work on both men's history and cultural history in this period has folded hunting into wider arguments about hypermasculinity, with Theodore Roosevelt as the exemplar, and understandably so: if there were an

elephant in the room with him, he'd have shot it.<sup>5</sup> He lauded a certain vision of American imperialism, occasionally claimed hunting as a practice ground for war, and consistently posted egregiously large kill counts. He was also the only American elite hunter who did so.

The problem is not just that no other American hunter-writer of the time embraced hypermasculinity, however (and that there are very real limits to how far Roosevelt did); it's also that there were hundreds of such writers, and every one of them explicitly *refused* associations between their hunting and violence or primitivism. Instead, as noted above, elite hunter-writers mobilized traditional nineteenth-century ideals of a manliness based in self-discipline, self-restraint, and the primacy of the will, and imported that into hunting through an unyielding narrative focus, not on the kill, but on the stalk and what the stalk said about the character of the hunter. Offered the chance to mobilize hypermasculinity, many of the most influential and politically powerful men of the era preferred to tell a different story about themselves.

The hunting narratives they wrote show that from the 1880s into the 1920s there were powerful alternate ways to imagine the relationship of gender to hunting that proved useful to both male and female hunters, and immensely popular with readers. Seeing the work that the rhetoric of manliness did for these writers illuminates its nuances, in particular the ways that it allowed men to negotiate divisions within classes as well as between them: while hunting narratives often reveal male anxiety, it is almost always anxiety about other men of their own class with whom they worked and socialized. Recognizing that these hunters were promoting a version of manliness that was not founded in a rejection of the feminine can also help to explain both why so many men went hunting with their wives, and why so many female hunters embraced the narrative of the meaningful stalk. Without primitivism or violence in the rhetorical mix, hunter-writers like Josephine Peary and Grace Gallatin Seton could lay claim to this narrative by insisting that women, too, could display self-discipline and sportsmanship in the field. Over time, the nuances of this gendered rhetoric also had very real consequences for conservation, as hunter-writers insisted in print that wilderness and hunting were vital to American men and boys, in the process defusing or eliding long-standing associations between game legislation and class legislation. The rhetoric of manliness that they invoked remained robustly part of conservation literature well into the 1920s and was eventually adopted by groups ranging from the Boy Scouts to the Women's Clubs of America.

Recognizing the alternate version of manliness being offered in these narratives also raises questions about big-game hunting's relationship with other elements of the hypermasculinity story, especially idealizations of frontier violence and Anglo-American imperial fantasies.<sup>6</sup> Over the past few decades exceptionalist readings of the frontier have slowly been making way for more complicated and global histories, as well as for both transnational and transimperial readings. American big-game hunting is long overdue for such a repositioning, not only within North America but also in terms of Americans hunting abroad in the British Empire.<sup>7</sup> There was never a closed circuit in big-game hunting, at least not where elites were concerned—and, as time passed, many middle-class hunters from the East Coast found that improvements to transportation put hunting in Newfoundland and Canada within their grasp. The American West was also a prime hunting ground for British aristocrats almost as soon as the railways reached the Plains, and this transnational entanglement was only intensified by the development of transatlantic publishing houses, which provided markets for hunting stories throughout the English-speaking world.

Fracturing apart the long-standing connections among masculinity, violence, and the frontier allows us to pluck American hunters from their exceptionalist niche and position them instead as embedded in a set of transnational economies in which hunters, writers, and publishers all participated. Framing big-game hunting this way also moves guides from being “locals” unfairly exploited by visiting hunters into a very different position, that of highly skilled workers in a swiftly modernizing tourist economy that stretched from Alaska to Somaliland, and that was shadowed by the rise of a global market in trophies. It offers a new perspective on the economies surrounding hunting and the laws restricting it, which eventually crossed national and imperial boundaries alike. And it positions hunting narratives both as literary contributions and as desirable commodities in a transatlantic marketplace.

Such an approach also points toward some of the limits of transnational analysis, however. The economies underlying the hunt and its narratives may have been transnational in nature, but in print both American and British writers persistently framed their hunting in nationalist terms. Exploring the insistent focus on the American story of the “wilderness hunter,” even when the American in question was hunting in Somaliland or Kumaon, opens the way to ask what nationalist rhetorics were doing for hunters and how they were understood by readers. The combination of cooperation on the ground

and competition in print also meant that American hunting narratives had a complex and sometimes uneasy relationship with their British counterparts, one that drew on the rhetoric of Anglo-American solidarity that was part of discussions of imperialism in the era, but that also instructed readers that there was a single, and superior, “American” way to hunt, whether at home or abroad.

That hunting could have radically different national meanings even for men and women sharing the same guides, gear, and hunting grounds highlights the importance of context to understanding hunting, which is as culturally constructed as any other activity. That may seem obvious, but one persistent assumption in the hypermasculinity literature in particular has been that hunting is always primarily about violence.<sup>8</sup> Positioning “manly sport” instead as one among many ways to interpret the hunt places it in a more historical context, one that includes other, contemporaneous groups of hunters who have already drawn the attention of historians. Writers on women’s history, for instance, have explored the nuanced meanings of hunting for women throughout the Anglophone world, while historians of hunting in Canada and in the British Empire have thoughtfully examined the relationship of elite hunters with imperialism, conservation, nationalism, and ideas of nature.<sup>9</sup> Environmental historians focused on the United States have also examined hunting in context, especially the experiences of working-class and indigenous peoples, and in the process have created a rich tapestry of the variations, conflicts, and alliances that crisscrossed the nation at the turn of the century.<sup>10</sup>

The hunter elite mattered more than other American hunters, however. They shaped ideas about the meaning of wilderness, hunting, and conservation in the national media, and they used a combination of political power and reader support to write and pass legislation across North America that had an impact on everyone who hunted. The essential contribution of hunters to conservation thought, legislation, and the development of the national parks has long been recognized within environmental history, but even now strikes many readers as paradoxical.<sup>11</sup> This may be partly due to the spurious connections forged in the literature of hypermasculinity between hunting and frontier violence, but the vast majority of hunter-writers preferred to depict their hunting grounds as empty, unpopulated, and uncomplicated, and when they created parks such as Glacier and Denali they gave them histories to match. This aligns them far more closely with what we now think of as histories of wilderness than with histories of the frontier, even as it illuminates

the degree to which their vision of an exclusionary Eden continues to inform popular images of wilderness in America, and of the national parks in particular. Their rhetoric of wilderness remains part of our current conversations about the meaning of wild spaces for Americans.

Their most important contribution, however, was the role they played in the reversal in American middle-class attitudes toward conservation. Many historians, ranging from John Reiger to Karl Jacoby, have noted the ways in which middle-class Americans began to support game laws in the late nineteenth century when previously they had (generally) opposed them.<sup>12</sup> There was no single reason for that change, but the hunter-writers had a massive impact on the speed and direction that it took. As they mobilized their narratives and publishing connections on behalf of conservation, hunter-writers substituted a language of gender for that of class, reframing the meaning of game laws even as they linked their cause to already established rhetorics of manliness, sportsmanship, and Americanism. Such rhetorics in turn influenced the writing and implementation of conservation policies across North America.

All this is made even more interesting by the fact that national political influence was not the original goal of the hunter elite when they came to dominate the national media with their hunting tales; the intention to use their published stories as a platform for conservation came later. At heart, this book is about the emergence of a cultural hegemony surrounding hunting and conservation. That hegemony drew a great deal of its power from its mobilization of nineteenth-century ideals of self-controlled manliness that remained part of American cultural life well into the 1920s. It was created inadvertently as part of the process of giving elite big-game hunting a new, gendered meaning, and its consequences ranged from shaping ideas of what wilderness spaces should look like, to restricting hunting across North America, to affecting the ways that men and women imagined themselves, the communities they participated in, and the roles they played in the world. And from the beginning to the end this was about narrative and about social power, about who did and did not have access to the media, and about the roles those elements play in determining the outcome of conflicts over nature.

Finally, this book can also be understood as an argument on method. I would argue that nothing in these popular published hunting narratives can be taken as an unmediated description of events that actually happened, nor it is sufficient to analyze them solely for their literary content. Instead,

these narratives must also be placed into context as purposefully constructed commodities.<sup>13</sup> They were deliberately crafted by men and women who were writing in order to publish and who consciously designed them to appeal to an audience made up of potential readers, well-known editors, and popular publishing venues. Approaching the hunting narratives from this perspective demands an extra level of analysis, even as it raises new and intriguing questions. Charles Sheldon's antelope story, for instance, is a charming travelogue, but not much of a hunting tale at all; why, then, did he choose to submit it to an anthology of hunting narratives and why was it accepted? Why did so many hunters include anecdotes in their narratives in which they were outwitted by or even saved by their native guides? Whether such *events* took place or not, why would hunter-writers include them in narratives intended for a white middle-class reading audience? These questions will be answered in the following chapters, but here I want to suggest that positioning these narratives as having both a literary and a very real economic life can help us to better understand these tales and to account for the massive public demand for them. At the very least, it should help to explain why big-game hunting narratives became part of the way that hundreds of thousands of Americans thought about, wrote about, and publicly discussed gender, race, imperialism, wilderness, and conservation at the beginning of the twentieth century.

## A HELPFUL NOTE ON TERMS AND DATES

*Dates and Eras:* Like many US historians, I use “the Gilded Age” to refer to the period from the end of Reconstruction in 1877 to 1897, with “the Progressive Era” dating from 1897 to the Great War. Of course, nobody at the time divided their experience up neatly into eras, and I also use “turn-of-the-century” to indicate the two decades on either side of 1900 (so 1880–1920).

*Sanity-Saving Shorthand:* While I'll mention this in the text, I use the term “sportsmen-hunters” to indicate a very specific group: white, native-born, Protestant, middle- and upper-class men and women of the urban Northeast who stalked big game. This group exerted a massive influence on hunting, conservation, and American culture at the turn of the century due to their obsessive relationship with writing about the hunt, and they are the focus of the book. (Women hunters in this group were often referred to as sportsmen, so the term “sportsman-hunter” does not exclude them.)

If I refer to “big-game hunters” and don’t specify that I’m talking about different hunters than this group, then I mean the sportsmen-hunters. The same applies to big-game hunting itself. There were many other ways to hunt big-game animals and many other groups doing so, but, when it came to first-person narratives, the sportsmen-hunters and their pursuit of the still-hunt dominated the description of big-game hunting in the national press.



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