

How the Boy became The Old Man

*Robert Ruark's
Legacy*

By Terry Weiland

Late in his life, on a safari in East Africa with some American friends, Robert Ruark came to a startling conclusion.

"As I approach senility I find that I am the Old Man now," he wrote, "And I get my kicks out of not hunting, but of making it possible for other people."

At the time Ruark was only 42 – usually the prime of life for an active man, and for many writers the beginning of their most productive years. Not for Robert Ruark. Although he did not know it, he was nearing the end. Ruark's comparison of himself with his most enduring character – the Old Man of the Field & Stream columns – was more accurate than he knew. In seven years, he would be dead – worn out at the age of 49 from a lifetime of simply living too damned hard.

Robert Ruark was fond of adding things up. He liked to look at the word count from his typewriter each day. He liked to total up the number of miles flown, the number of column-inches printed, and the number of newspapers around the world that printed those columns. He was a man fascinated by accomplishment, and he was constantly looking for ways to measure and quantify the things he had done. And, truth to tell, he was fond of rubbing other people's noses in it.

On the wall over my desk, I have two shelves of books. One is devoted to Ernest Hemingway, the other to Robert Ruark. The Hemingway shelf is twice as long as Ruark's, but Ruark is no slouch: The shelf space required for one copy of each of his first editions is more than two feet long. These books – six anthologies, six novels, and one non-fiction masterpiece – were produced in the amazing span of just 15 years – a decade and a half in which Robert Ruark went to Africa on safari at least once and often twice a year, in which he circled the globe repeatedly, and hunted and fished from Kenya to Alaska to New Zealand.

"Christ," his autobiographical self wonders in *The Honey Badger*, looking at his own books lined up on a shelf. "When did I have time to make the trips, shoot the animals, drink the booze, chase the dames?" When, indeed.

That Robert Ruark was a driven man who spent half his life driving himself, and the other half trying to escape from his driving self, is neither a great insight nor a revelation. Even the question "why?" is no real mystery: Ruark was a poor boy from a small southern town who felt he had a lot to prove.

If there is a mystery, it is this: Why, almost 40 years after his death, does his writing still have such magic? There were other safari writers before, and there have been many since. Africa has changed, and safari has changed, forever and not for the better. By any meaningful measure, Ruark's work is out of date – "obsolescent if not obsolete" as he might have put it. Yet, for African hunters real and imagined, Ruark is still the name that symbolizes it all.

Why?

Robert Ruark was born in North Carolina, in the town of Wilmington, on December 29, 1915. Wilmington is an unremarkable community on the Cape Fear River, just upstream from the coastal town of Southport.

In many ways, Ruark was born in just the right place at just the right time. Inland from Wilmington could be found swamps and woods and fields, that harboured whitetail deer, wild turkeys, squirrels and – above all – bobwhite quail. The river and the surf that washed the coastline were full of fish. There was duck hunting in the fall and surf casting in the summer.

Ruark's maternal grandfather, Edward Hall Adkins, was a retired sea captain, and his Uncle Rob skippered the ferry that ran between the two towns. If a boy had any bent whatever toward the outdoors – and Bob Ruark did – there was unlimited scope for boyish adventures.

This was not Ruark's personal Garden of Eden, however. His home life was anything but peaceful. Both his mother, Charlotte, and his father, Robert Ruark Senior, had personal weaknesses that grew into serious problems as the years went by. His mother carried on a constant battle of wills with her mother-in-law, who lived with them, and a similar battle of the sexes with her ineffectual husband. Ruark was an only child, but it was not for want of trying. A succession of unproductive pregnancies were blamed on husband, son, in-laws, or any number of other causes. Dinner every night was a battlefield. Eventually, his mother took refuge in morphine, and his father in alcohol.

Repelled by it all, the young Ruark spent more and more of his time alone in the woods with a book and a shotgun, or on the river in a boat pretending he was Sir Francis Drake, or with his grandfather – later the model for the Old Man – at his home in Southport.

Bobby Ruark was precocious, and in spite of his later acerbic writings about his family, did not have a completely negative childhood. He ate regularly,

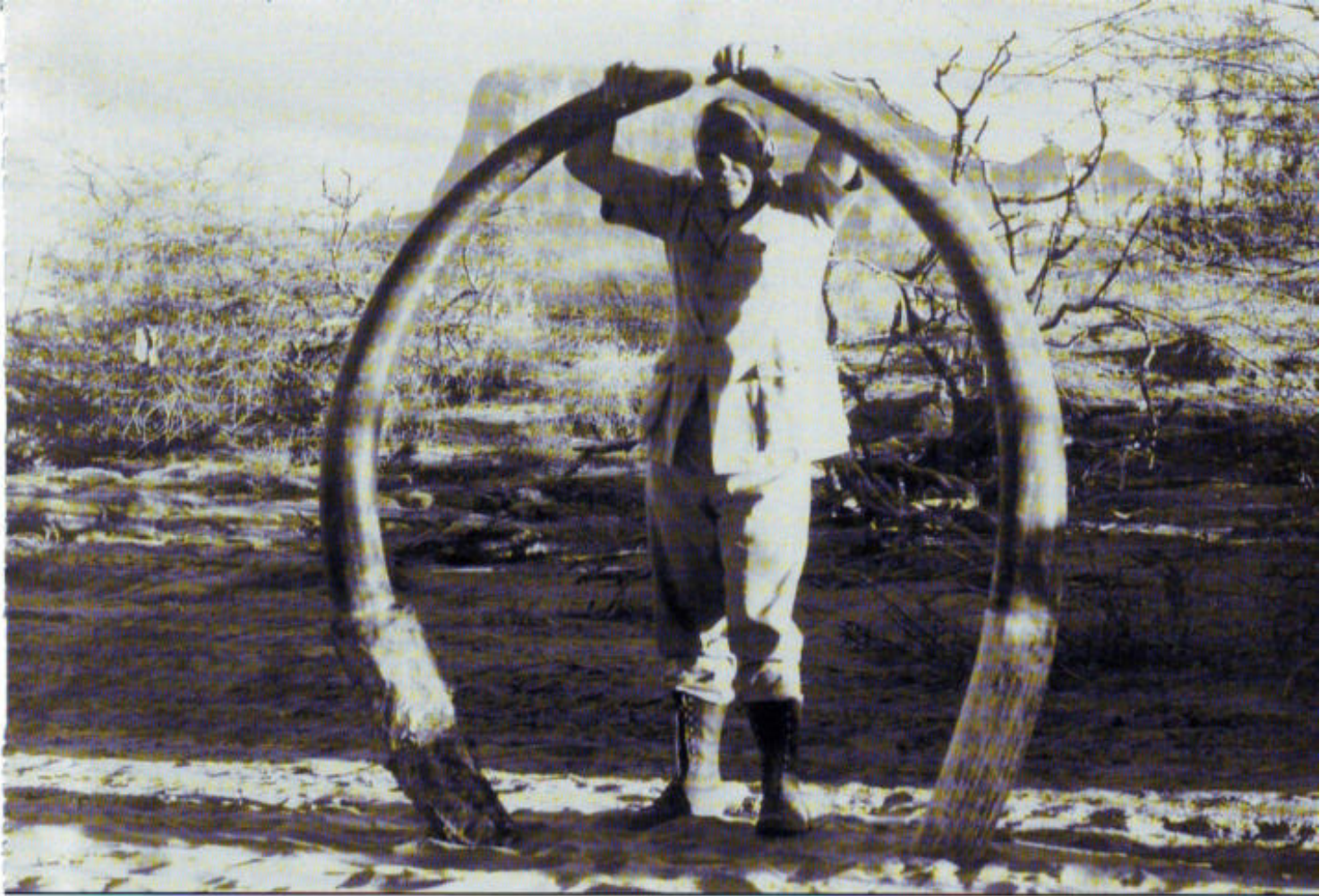


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"There are worse memorials to a great life than a book or a tusk."

and always had a place to sleep. His grandmother taught him to read at an early age – he could read well before he ever started school – and he devoured books like popcorn. His paternal grandfather, a ne'er-do-well named Hanson Ruark, had one redeeming quality: he adored books, and had a substantial library. With an all-consuming curiosity, Ruark went through the family supply of books like a wolf through a flock.

Years later, when he created the Old Man, Ruark combined the best attributes of both grandfathers into one admirable, well-rounded, and unforgettable character.

Young Ruark's bookishness did not stand him in good stead at school. While his teachers admired his abilities, his schoolmates did not. The fact that he was rather plump and had no aptitude for team sports did not help. Being ostracised by his peers made Ruark even more of a loner. He was a "hardened recluse," he later wrote, by the time he was 12.

But his grades were good – so good that he graduated from high school early and entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill when he was only 15.

It was then 1930, and two momentous events occurred that changed things forever. Ned Adkins died of cancer, leaving the family with little except debt, and the Great Depression descended on the land, wiping out anything that was left.

Ruark entered university with no money and few prospects. He managed to stick through four years,

however, and with no means to do much else, studied hard and graduated with honours. In his fourth year, having little idea what he wanted to do with his life, he began sitting in on a journalism class because he was in love with a journalism major. The professor took an interest in Ruark, saw that he had serious writing talent, and pointed him the right way when he graduated. Ruark never got the girl, but he got something worth far more: He found his calling in life.

Ruark went first to a small weekly newspaper in the Piedmont. When that job ended six months later, he pulled some family strings to get himself a berth on the tramp freighter *Sundance* as an ordinary seaman. He shipped out for Europe, survived three voyages under a tyrannical skipper, and a year later was back ashore, broke, unemployed, and barely 21, in Washington, D.C.

It was then 1936, and newspapers were not hiring. Still, Ruark found a job as a copy boy with the *Washington Daily News* and, a few lucky breaks later, found himself as a staff reporter covering everything from fires to football games. Along the way, he married a local girl from a well-to-do family. Virginia Webb and her parents and brother provided Ruark with the respectability that he craved on the one hand, however, the invisible bonds that hold a man in a family like that began to chafe almost immediately.

The pattern of truancy established in childhood, born of family turmoil and social ostracism, was to become a recurring theme, in his writing as well as

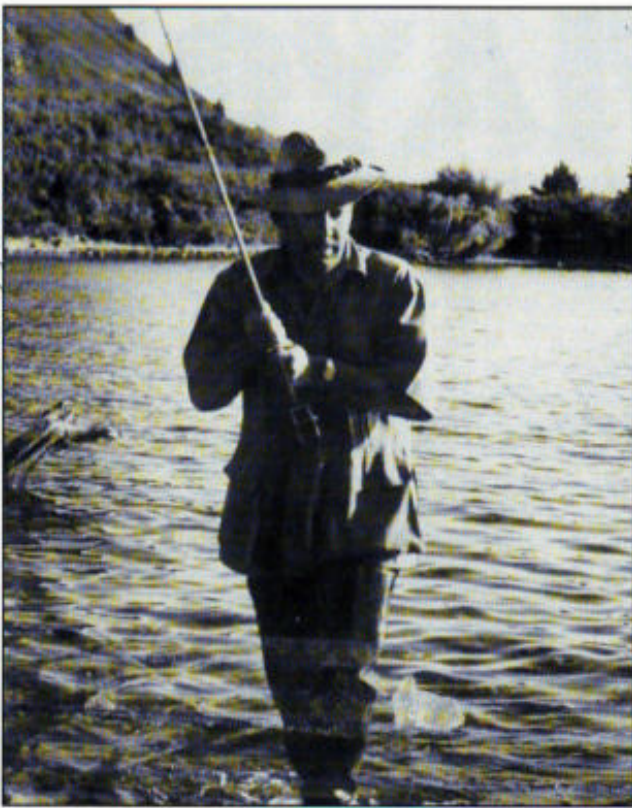
his life. Ruark called himself a "compulsive truant."

The first opportunity for serious truancy occurred on December 7, 1941, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and "we all went shopping for military suits." Ruark was covering a football game when he heard the news. A few months later, he received his commission from the Navy and was ordered to report for basic training. By the end of the year, Ensign Robert C. Ruark, Jr, was a naval gunnery officer commanding a unit of the Armed Guard aboard a freighter on the trans-Atlantic convoy run.

Although he tended to play down his accomplishments in the Navy, Ruark was immensely proud of the fact that he had been a serving officer, and saw action in several of the most hazardous theatres of war. The Atlantic convoys 1942–43, running munitions to England during the Blitz, are a curiously unsung part of the war, yet they were horribly dangerous missions in which merchant crews and their naval escorts faced packs of U-boats, Luftwaffe dive-bombers, winter gales, and the certainty of death if their ships were sunk.

Ruark survived two such convoys at the height of the Battle of the Atlantic, as well as one convoy into the Mediterranean. His ship, carrying a cargo of aviation fuel, was torpedoed in the Med; the torpedo failed to detonate, and the ship survived to make it home. Ruark dodged fate several times, and was eventually transferred to the Pacific, where he ended the war in Australia.

In later accounts, Ruark dismissed any idea of



Ruark reviews life after *Something of Value*:
 "Let's see...80,000 copies on the first two printings at five bucks a copy... Book of the Month Club... Adapted for Broadway show at the usual percentage... Then into an MGM movie for 350 G... 542 lays from assorted dames... Not bad for a year's work..."

personal heroism, but did acknowledge that he had been extraordinarily lucky to survive the war when so many of his friends had not. His wartime experiences appeared infrequently in his writing. A few recollections occur in his book about his first safari, *Horn of the Hunter*; the war plays a major role in the life of Alec Barr, Ruark's alter-ego in his last, autobiographical novel, *The Honey Badger*. But he never wrote a pure "war novel," and never traded on his war record. It was, for him, a very private matter – as it was with most men who saw and survived serious combat.

After the war, Ruark returned to his newspaper job in Washington, but it was a brief stay. Being the "meek morning editor" of the *Daily News* was no longer enough. Ruark had higher ambitions. He wanted a syndicated column, and he wanted to live in New York, where "the big money grows". In 1946, Robert and Virginia Ruark relocated to the Big Apple, taking an apartment in Greenwich Village, and Ruark embarked on the next – and in many ways most destructive – stage of his life.

With freedom to live as he saw fit so long as he met his daily deadlines, Ruark turned into a nighthawk who drank long, slept late, and lived large. This was the first real budding of the alcoholism that was to become almost his trademark. He haunted saloons, and wrote about their denizens in his column. By 1951, he was punishing his liver unmercifully and his nerves were frazzled. It was time for a change, and he knew it.

Since childhood, Ruark had been fascinated by

the idea of Africa, and a long safari. In 1951, the dream came true. He took Virginia and flew to Kenya for a two-month safari with Harry Selby, then a young, unknown professional hunter with Ker & Downey. That safari turned out to be a life-altering event for Robert Ruark. In Kenya, he saw a spectacular land that he loved instantly and for the rest of his life; in the Kenya settlers, he saw people living a life that he both envied and admired; in the animals, and the simple pursuit thereof, he saw the "hard, true life" that was the antithesis of his artificial existence in New York.

Robert Ruark returned home to write his account of the safari, *Horn of the Hunter*, and to plan his escape from what he now saw as a destructive prison.

At the time, Ruark was a modestly famous and very successful man. His column was syndicated across the country and his name was well-known. In 1947, he had

written a spoof historical novel, *Grenadine Etching*, which sold reasonably well. He followed this up with two anthologies of his newspaper column, *One for the Road* and *I Didn't Know It Was Loaded*.

As a journalist, he was a force. He had pioneered investigative journalism before the term became popular, and had several coups to his name, including a series on Frank Sinatra and mobster Lucky Luciano. Still, he was viewed more as a muckraking gadfly than a writer with any real literary potential.

The publication of *Horn of the Hunter*, however, was a complete change of direction.

It was a serious book, written straight and without gimmicks. It was Africa seen through the eyes of an eager newcomer with no pretensions and no literary reputation to live up to. As such, it was one of the most successful books of its type ever written. For Ruark the writer, Africa provided something that was beyond price: a vast subject that was really worth writing about. It was a subject to which Ruark largely devoted the rest of his life.

Horn of the Hunter appeared in 1953, and was an instant

best-seller. Ruark also wrote about Africa in his newspaper column – in fact, he had filed many columns from Africa while he was on safari. An accomplished magazine writer, he had also fulfilled a childhood dream of being published in *Field & Stream*, and in 1953, he began writing a continuing series about his childhood, hunting and fishing with his grandfather in North Carolina. The series was called *The Old Man and the Boy*, and it ran for the next eight years. Ruark was paid the unheard-of sum of \$1 500 per issue, an indication of both how good a writer he was, and the value of having his name on the masthead.

In October 1952, a series of violent attacks occurred in Kenya. Families on isolated farms were butchered, their animals slaughtered in grisly rituals, and their houses burned. The first Mau Mau atrocities attracted headlines around the world, and Robert Ruark immediately left for the land he already loved, to confront the bloody end of what he had viewed as heaven on earth. He wrote about the Mau Mau and its roots, about colonial society and African aspirations of independence, in a series of magazine articles and in his syndicated column.

Out of it also came his first major novel – *Something of Value*. It was published in 1955 and became a Book of the Month Club selection. It was both hugely successful and controversial, but in many ways it made Robert Ruark. He was now a literary name as well as a journalistic one, mentioned by many in the same breath as Ernest Hemingway. The comparisons with Hemingway, welcome at first, became burdensome and irritating as the years passed.

Ruark followed up *Something of Value* with a lacklustre potboiler called *Poor No More*, an "autobiographical" novel about the textile industry in the South. Although it drew on Ruark's young life, it was autobiographical only superficially. In many ways, it was Ruark's revenge on the people at home who had, he believed, looked down on his family and who now steadfastly refused to acknowledge that he had truly made good in the big city. His determination to prove himself, coupled



Ruark, the "one shot bwana, the mighty simba slayer".

with his nagging insecurity, only became worse as the years went by.

None of this was public, however. To the readers of the hundreds of newspapers that published his column, to readers of *Field & Stream*, and to the millions who read his novels, he was a successful and wealthy man who lived a life others could only envy.

Ruark went to Africa every year, sometimes twice or even three times. He also visited and wrote about hunting in Alaska, New Zealand, and India. He hunted tigers and Alaska brown bears. Curiously, though, his articles about these trips, while competent and readable, never had the magic that characterised his African material. Ruark was born to write about Africa.

In 1953, for tax reasons as much as anything, Robert and Virginia Ruark left New York and settled in Palamos, on the Mediterranean coast of Spain, east of Barcelona. Their villa there would be Ruark's home for the rest of his life.

As one African country after another moved towards independence, Ruark travelled the continent, covering the events as a journalist. In 1962, he published another major novel, *Uhuru*, a story set in Kenya and based around the murder trial of Peter Poole, a white man hanged for the murder of a black. *Uhuru* is a complicated work,

James Gichuru, a Kikuya politician whom Ruark had falsely named as a Mau Mau.

Harry Selby, Ruark's long-time friend and professional hunter, smuggled him to the airport on July 10, 1962, and Ruark left Kenya. He never returned, and he never saw Selby again.

Back in Spain, Ruark's life began to fall apart. His drinking had reached epidemic proportions; in 1963, he and his wife, Virginia, were divorced. Money troubles piled up. He spent his advances as fast as his publishers could send him the checks, and he fell behind in his obligations to provide manuscripts. Even his newspaper column, his bread and butter for years, suffered, and eventually the syndicate terminated his contract.

In June, 1965, Robert Ruark suffered liver failure. He was flown from Barcelona to London, where he died in hospital on July 1. He was only 49 years old.

The bare facts of Ruark's life and death do not begin to convey his importance as a writer at the time, as a prognosticator on Africa's future as a collection of independent nations, nor his continuing influence as a writer on Africa 40 years after his death.

Shortly after Ruark died, his last novel, *The Honey Badger*, was published. It was the autobiographical story of a New York novelist.

delivering about Africa's prospects, although uncannily accurate and far-sighted in retrospect, flew at the time in the face of both Cold War wishful thinking and a burgeoning political correctness. If the independent African emperor truly had no clothes, most Americans did not want to know about it.

Robert Ruark's name would have been completely forgotten but for one thing: as a hunting writer, he was in a class by himself. His most enduring fans were the people who had read his stories about safari, and animals, and Africa. While his novels did not exactly become collectors' items, there was a continuing market among used-book dealers for anything he had written about Africa.

During the African hunting boom of the 1980s and '90s, interest in Ruark picked up. Two more anthologies of his magazine writing appeared – *Robert Ruark's Africa, 1991*, edited by Michael McIntosh – and *The Lost Classics of Robert Ruark, 1995*. There was even a biography, *Someone of Value*, written by a retired American bureaucrat who, curiously, focused on Ruark's political writing and largely ignored the area in which his name really lives on – as a writer on African hunting.

Both of his African classics, *Horn of the Hunter* and *Use Enough Gun*, were reprinted by Safari Press.

Which brings us back to the question: What is it about Ruark's writing that is still so compelling, so many years later? The answer, I believe, is simple: Ruark saw Africa with a freshness and enthusiasm that still shines through. Even when his writing took on a world-weary tone and he was writing about how disgusted he was with the way things were changing, he still showed us a world the way we would like to remember it, the way we wish it still was.

Robert Ruark was always The Boy, seeing things for the first time, with an excitement he could barely conceal and wanted to share. Later in life, telling us this, he became for many of us, the Old Man, a source of wisdom and insight, pointing us in the right direction, but never lecturing, never condescending.

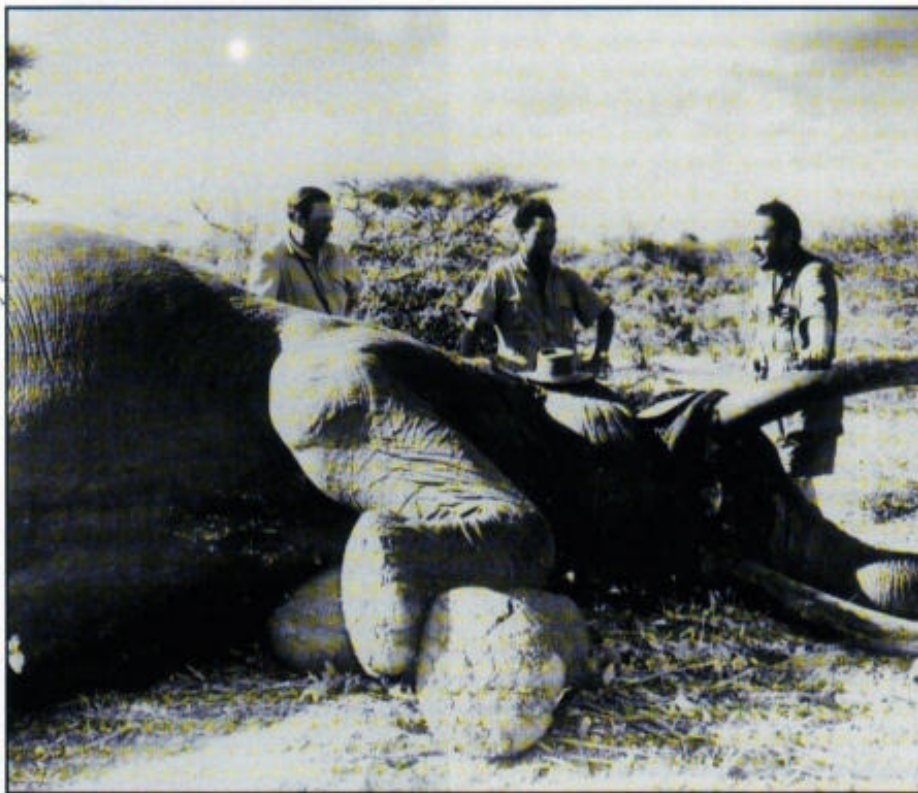
The world he wrote about may be gone forever, but the world he created is still with us, and will be as long as his books are read. A writer could not ask for much more.

Terry Wieland is shooting editor of Gray's Sporting Journal and the author of A View From A Tall Hill – Robert Ruark in Africa, published by Thorn Tree Press (thorntreepress.com).

Photographs courtesy of Trophy Room Books, which has recently reprinted Someone of Value, by Hugh Foster.

Photos for this article are from *Someone of Value: A Biography of Robert Ruark* by Hugh Foster. Available from Trophy Room Books, Box 3041 Agoura CA 91301. E-mail: trophyroombooks@msn.com and website: www.trophyroombooks.com

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With Selby during the 1953 safari. Ruark had moved from the highlands to the Northern Frontier District.

with considerably more depth than *Something of Value*. Calculated to infuriate African nationalists as well as their liberal apologists in Europe and the United States, *Uhuru* was the catalyst for Ruark's final departure from Kenya.

Although he later claimed that he was declared a prohibited immigrant because of what he wrote in the book, he actually left the country for the last time to avoid a process server attempting to serve him with papers relating to a lawsuit filed by Chief

Within a year or two, two anthologies of his work, *Use Enough Gun*, and *Women*, also appeared. And after that, nothing. Ruark was very quickly forgotten by mainstream America. His name carried enough cachet that his agent, heirs, and publishers tried to cash in wherever possible, but one by one his books went out of print. Only the collections of his Old Man columns, published in two volumes (1957 and 1961) stayed in print.

The message that Ruark had insisted on