

Pondering Pondoro: *A Practical Ballistician, Far Ahead of his Time*

By Terry Wieland

John Taylor was undoubtedly a strange man. But we'll get to all that in a moment.

I first encountered Taylor in the 1960s as a gun-struck teenager who devoured books before breakfast. Madly in love with the theory of big-game hunting, if not yet the actual practice, I scoured the book lists for those that touched on my interest and met my rather strictured finances.

Ray Riling was the reigning gun-book distributor of the time, with a list published in *Gun Digest*. There I found two titles that piqued my interest, both by an unknown (to me) named John Taylor: *African Rifles and Cartridges* and *Big Game and Big Game Rifles*. The former cost \$10, the latter \$6.50. Since Africa was to me, at that time, but a name, both economics and taste dictated that I buy *Big Game*.

Two weeks later I received a slim volume by return post and was immediately disappointed. There were few photographs and little in the way of ballistics charts. The chapters were written in a funny archaic English. Worst of all, it dealt only with African hunting! Nowhere was there a reference to mountain sheep or elk - my then-current unrequited passions - and Taylor's buffalo was not a bison but some black critter with drooping horns. Through that book, I learned that in East African parlance, 'big game' was the Big Five. Anything that did not charge, stomp, gore or devour was mere 'plains game.'

However, a book was a book, and undeterred, I began to read. Forty years later, I haven't stopped.

John Taylor hooked me as only one other writer (Robert Ruark) has ever done, and between them they planted in me the seed of Africa-madness. Taylor also introduced me to double rifles, and ignited a passion that has flickered occasionally, but never died. John Taylor's Africa was a world I never imagined, and not until many years later did I become aware of the controversy surrounding him. But by that time, I didn't care. I still don't.

Jack O'Connor once dismissed John Taylor as a 'remittance man,' as if that explained everything. For those not up on Victorian snubs, the term refers to younger sons who were banished to the colonies to avoid family embarrassment, and supported thereafter by monthly remittances from the family banker.

Others sneered at Taylor's acknowledged penchant for young Africans, both male and female, and still others argued that he was an ivory poaching rogue, all of which is undoubtedly true to some extent.

The question is: So what? In terms of Taylor's legacy, which consists mainly of the two books mentioned above, what difference does it make? None.

Unlike other writers in recent years, I come not to bury Taylor but to praise him - not for his life and conduct, but for these two great books on rifles. They were monumental then and are no less relevant now. Whatever else Taylor was, he knew rifles and he knew practical ballistics, and *African Rifles and Cartridges* is every bit as valuable today as it was when he published it in 1948.

John Taylor was born in Ireland in 1904, either the illegitimate son of an upper-class Englishman or scion of a well-to-do Irish family, depending whose account you believe. He fled the auld sod and eventually made his way to Africa in the 1920s, where he embarked on a career that reads like something out of Rider Haggard. Alan Quatermain had little on Taylor, if one can believe everything one reads which, realistically, one should not.

Sifting through the list of truths, possible truths, and probable lies, one can fairly conclude that Taylor did, indeed, live through the 1920s in the Rhodesias, north and south (later Zambia and Zimbabwe respectively). He was employed variously on a mission farm, served in the British South African Police (which, in spite of its name, was Rhodesian) and was dishonourably discharged there from.

Taylor then found employment on ranches throughout the region as a lion killer, and it was at this time that he was allegedly awarded his African name, Pondoro, which means 'lion' in the Chinyungwe language of Zambia.

During this period, he became acquainted with the Rhodesian professional hunter, Fletcher Jamieson, a friendship that lasted many years.

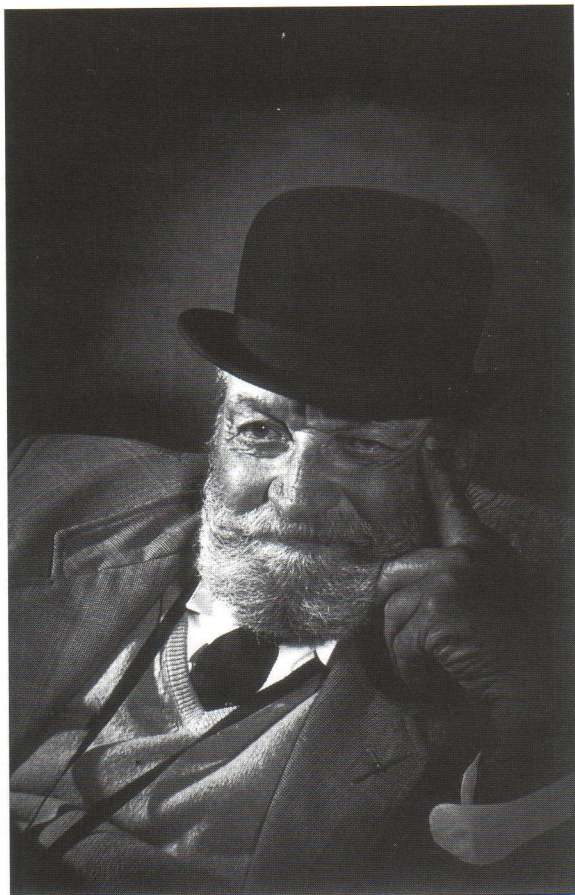
There followed a brief emigration to the Antipodes, where he worked on sheep farms in Australia and New Zealand, and a sojourn in New Guinea poaching birds of paradise. Now there's an item for your résumé!

By the 1930s, John Taylor was back in East Africa, and this is when he began acquiring the experience and the material that would fill his books. In Kenya in the 1930s, a PH hunted a wide variety of game. Although he is known primarily as an elephant hunter, Taylor made his living shooting 'on control,' the British term for clearing wild animals from land slated for agriculture, as well as dispatching man-eaters and stock-killers of all types (lions and leopards, mostly), and problem animals such as black rhino and Cape buffalo. Naturally, Taylor hunted and killed many antelope for meat, for himself and to feed his retainers and farm workers.

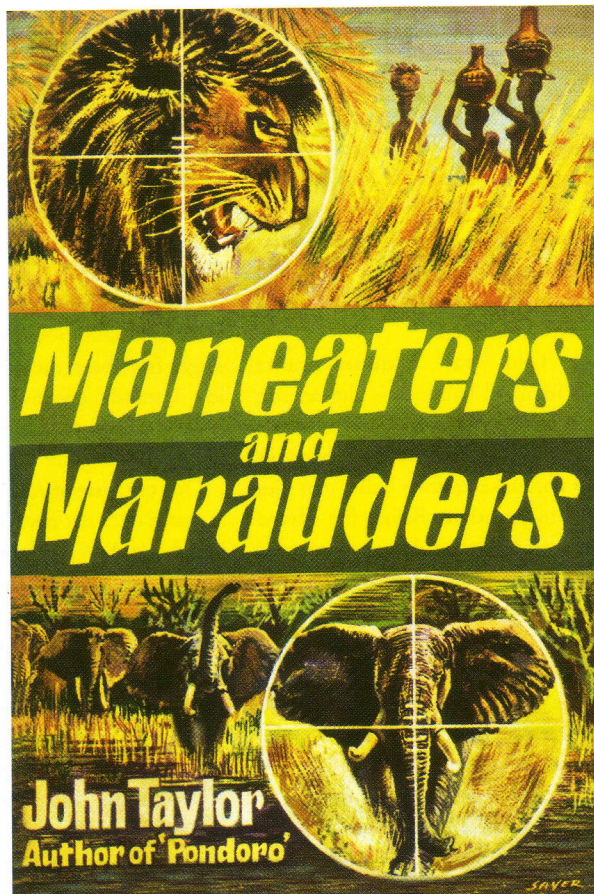
It is difficult to comprehend today the breadth of experience a PH could acquire in the Africa of the early 20th century. No one setting out as a hunter now could even come close.

One area of professional hunting Taylor never pursued was guiding safaris. The 1930s were the golden age of safari hunting, with such luminaries as Ernest Hemingway hunting with Philip Percival. It was well past the era of the big-name professional ivory hunters, such as W.D.M. Bell, and elephant hunting was closely regulated. Yet this was the game Taylor pursued. Not surprisingly, he soon ran afoul of the authorities.

Taylor's infamous ivory-poaching raid along the Tana River led to his banishment from



John 'Pondoro' Taylor, born in Ireland in 1904, was the author of two books: African Rifles and Cartridges and Big Game and Big Game Rifles. He is known for devising a formula for determining 'Knock-Out Values' - a mathematical designation of killing power. Photo courtesy of Safari Press, www.safaripress.com



John Taylor, author of Pondoro, also wrote Maneaters and Marauders, his last hunting title, published now by Safari Press.

British East Africa, and he spent most of his latter career in Mozambique. During World War II, he hunted for meat for the troops. Struck by malaria, he spent his convalescence writing *Big Game and Big Game Rifles*, published in 1948. Shortly after, a much-expanded book, *African Rifles and Cartridges*, was published by Thomas Samworth, followed by *Man-Eaters and Marauders*, an account of hunting the big cats, and *Pondoro: Last of the Ivory Hunters*, his autobiography, in 1955. Taylor even ventured into the realm of fiction with a novel, *Shadows of Shame*.

In 1957, under mysterious circumstances, John Taylor was deported from Kenya and spent his last years in London. He was living in a rooming house there when, in 1969, he died of a lung ailment.

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Of Taylor's books, *African Rifles and Cartridges* is his unquestioned masterpiece - a book that deserves to remain in print as long as men hunt in Africa. What sets it apart is the depth of knowledge and research devoted to rifle and cartridge performance and terminal ballistics.

In 1948, there was no shortage of books about African hunting. Hunting memoirs were common, and most devoted at least a

chapter to 'this is what I used, and what you should use' comments by men who, while they often had substantial hunting experience were, to quote Jack O'Connor, 'shy on ballistic sophistication'.

This was not true of John Taylor, who made a life-long practice of digging bullets out of animals to see how they had performed. He also used a wide range of rifles and wrote from personal experience of seeing them work (or not) on everything from leopards to elephants. In those instances when he did not have experience, he said so. He confessed, for example, to never having hunted with a .505 Gibbs, and his comments about that cartridge were based on the testimony of other hunters as well as his knowledge of ballistics.

Along the line he devised a formula for determining 'Knock-Out Values,' a mathematical designation of killing power. As he explained, it was not killing power so much as 'knock-down' power, although he never provided the actual formula that he used to arrive at his values. This caused considerable consternation over the years, with some high-velocity proponents dismissing Taylor's assessment as hocus-pocus, and others sticking to the more familiar foot-pounds of energy.

After his death, different authorities tried to reconstruct Taylor's formula, assuming that if

they knew what the factors were, they could determine exactly how valid his values were. I never could see the concern, since nothing in Taylor's table of values was too surprising. The .600 Nitro Express was the biggest at 150.3 KO value, while the .577 NE was 130 and the .500 NE, 90. Cartridges in the .450-.470 class had KO values very close to one another, around 70. Logic alone dictates the table would not be far out of line.

The problem with kinetic energy, measured in foot-pounds, is that it places too much emphasis on velocity, which distorts the result. Energy calculations begin by multiplying bullet weight times velocity squared.

Taken to an extreme, it would be theoretically possible to push a 45-grain .22-calibre bullet fast enough to give it the same energy as a 500-grain bullet from a .458. Yet, unlike the .458, the .22 would never, under any circumstances, be a good Cape buffalo load. A formula capable of such gross distortions at the extremes will render smaller ones along the way, which raises questions about its real value.

So Taylor devised his Knock-Out Value, which multiplies the weight of the bullet in grains, times velocity and bullet diameter, divided by 7000. This gives a useful number, but only in the sense of comparing it with other numbers - the 150 KOV of the .600 NE versus

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the 90 of the .500 NE. It does not measure anything tangible in the way kinetic energy measures foot-pounds. It is, as Taylor notes, a 'value.' But, it is a quite useful value.

Were a beginner to ask which is the better way to judge dangerous-game rifles, I would recommend Taylor's because, while it is not perfect, it is not misleading.

A related field was terminal bullet performance. Terminal ballistics is the science of what happens when a projectile hits its target. On a really big animal, all the kinetic energy in the world will not make up for a bullet that flies apart and fails to penetrate. Before the advent of copper-jacketed bullets, a debate raged over bullet weight and design; after jacketed bullets became standard, the debate faded away, as if a copper jacket solved the problem for all time.

It did not, of course. Taylor understood this and wrote about it in some depth. He judged cartridges on the basis of actual bullet performance, not paper ballistics. At the time, all British ammunition for big rifles was either proprietary or, in the case of cartridges like the .470 NE, which were 'in the trade,' consisted of just one or two loads from Kynoch.

A hunter took what he could get, and a

poor bullet in a particular cartridge would tar not only the cartridge but also the rifle and its maker. Taylor took particular care to discuss the bullet, its construction, and even its shape. For example, he noted that solids in the .470 NE always had a distinctly cone-shaped nose, compared to the more rounded forms of the .476 NE and 500/465, and suggested that might have been the reason he had found them less instantly effective over the years. Today, it is conceded that the best solids have either radiused or slightly flattened noses.

One criticism of *African Rifles and Cartridges* is that it does not cover more modern cartridges like the .458 Winchester. This is true, but only to a point. A foot-per-second is still a foot-per-second; a grain of lead is still a grain; a bullet that holds together at 2100 fps is the same now as it was then.

And so, for the serious student of cartridge and bullet performance on the largest game, the lessons Taylor imparts are just as valid when applied to the .458 as to the original .450 Nitro Express.

In 1993, I set out to read *African Rifles and Cartridges* from beginning to fascinating end, every single word, including the chapters on

using handguns in Africa, on sights and sighting systems, and even the sometimes irritating 'auctor-lector' sections, which can be seen as quirkily endearing or archaically infuriating. I read everything - and by the end I appreciated just what a tour de force the book really is.

Last year, working on a book of my own (*Dangerous-Game Rifles*, Countrysport Press, 2006), John Taylor's two rifle books were among a handful of reference works on which I relied heavily.

And so we come back to John Taylor himself - pederast, outcast, maybe outright criminal. In his biography, *A Man Called Lion*, Peter Capstick presented every dark side, and even intimated that Taylor was more than a little bit of a fraud. Coming from Capstick, such an allegation is ironic.

Nothing written about Taylor takes away one bit from the value of his unchallenged experience as a big-game hunter, which he poured into his two books and which live on, a half-century later, as the best two books ever written on rifles, cartridges, and the hunting of dangerous game in Africa.

Undoubtedly, John Taylor was a strange man. But, in his own way, a great one. 🇳🇬