

BOOK REVIEWS



Stanley Johnson

Voyage within and voyage without

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THE MAN-EATER OF PUNANAI

By Christopher Ondaatje

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LET ME DECLARE an interest straight away. I know Sir Christopher Ondaatje and his wife Valda. On more than one occasion my wife and I have been to dinner at Glenthorne, their extraordinary house set below the North Devon cliffs, with a spectacular view over the Bristol Channel to the Welsh coast-line and the Brecon Beacons beyond. From time to time I have met Ondaatje in London, usually at the National Portrait Gallery or the Royal Geographical Society. This is not surprising since Ondaatje has played a major role in restoring the fortunes of both institutions. His magnificent benefactions have led to a major re-modelling of the NPG, and to the creation of the great Ondaatje Theatre at the RGS. No one who knows Ondaatje would say that this is a man who likes to hide his light under a bushel. He must be over seventy now but he is lean and fit, poised – or so it seems – to take off at any moment for the jungles of Central Africa or the Arabian desert sands.

All public figures have private lives, though the inner man or woman is often well concealed. What makes Ondaatje's book *The Man-Eater of Punanai* so rewarding is the sense that the author has decided very deliberately to lift the veil. The result is intriguing, fascinating and often moving.

Ondaatje is the descendant of an old Dutch colonial family which first made its fortune in Ceylon in the 17th century. Both his grandfather and his father were tea planters there and Ondaatje seems to have led an idyllic existence for the first twelve years of his life before being sent away as a boarder to Blundell's, the

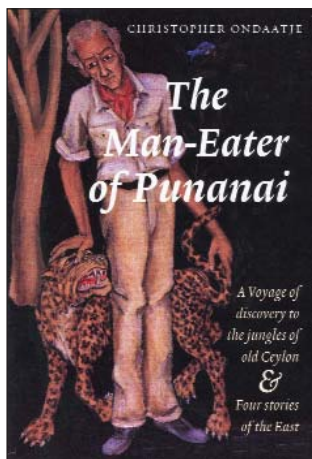
Devon public school, at the age of twelve.

Ondaatje has recounted elsewhere the story of his time at Blundell's. This may not quite have been *Tom Brown's School-days*, with 'fags' being roasted on the day-room stove, but it obviously came quite close. We are reminded of this in *Man-Eater*, and of the sudden traumatic shock the now sixteen-year-old boy experiences when word comes from Ceylon that his father's business has failed, and the money has run out. Ondaatje leaves school abruptly, emigrates to Canada, marries and makes his fortune.

Ondaatje is able to focus, not on the whole sweep of his life (which would have been repetitive in view of his other publications), but on one crucial two-week period when he drives around the island with his father seeing the sights. Of course, in Ceylon those sights are very special: the jungles, the wildlife, the tea estates, the ancient ruined cities. The memories and impressions of people and places which the twelve-year-old carried away with him to England must have filled his school tuck-box to overflowing.

Ondaatje writes in his Prologue:

When I was a boy in Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was known until 1972, my father took me on a trip round the island. It was probably the highlight of my life up until then, and it was certainly the last thing we did alone together. The year was 1946, I was twelve, our lives were about to change dramatically, and we would be separated forever. For me the change meant school in England, a financial career in London, and the makings of a considerable success in Canada. For him it meant disgrace, drink and death. ▶



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The prose may be sparing but the poignancy shines through. Forty-four years later Ondaatje goes back to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to retrace the journey he made with his father. Had he ever seen his father again after he left for England? I suspect not. When Ondaatje writes 'we would be separated forever' I am sure he means what he says.

For me, *The Man-Eater of Punanai* rings true as much as the story of the Voyage Within as the Voyage Without. Ondaatje's return to Ceylon coincides with a spike in the violence of the decades-long civil war between the Tamil 'Tigers' and the Sinhalese government. The first-hand insights Ondaatje provides into that conflict are even more revealing in the light of recent events and the apparently ruthless obliteration of the Tamil 'rebels'. The photographs which illustrate almost every page of the book are superb. If, even today, there is so much wildlife to be glimpsed in the island (leopards, elephants, sambar, peacocks, crested eagles etc), one can only wonder what abundance the Ondaatjes – *père et fils* – must have witnessed.

But for me the real pay-off comes as Ondaatje tries to come to terms with what has happened to his father and his family. 'It was', he writes,

not just lack of time and pressure of work that had prevented my return to this place for more than forty years. Shame had kept me away too. Because I was ashamed of what had happened to my father and our family, I never wanted to return as a nobody ... I had to hold back my tears when, after two hours [visiting the old family bungalow] we descended the steep, rough, winding road back down to the Pelmadula valley.

It must take a lot, I suspect, to make Christopher Ondaatje cry, and even more to admit it. As we grow older, most of us no doubt wish that we had got to know our parents better. Usually, it is too late for us to do much about it. Ondaatje's voyage of discovery succeeds on many levels. ■

Stanley Johnson's memoir, Stanley I Presume, has recently been published by Fourth Estate / HarperCollins.