

Gentle giants

Wayne McCallum

JACOB SHELL

*Giants of the Monsoon:
Living and Working With Elephants*
W.W. Norton & Company: 2019

With news reports and satellite images documenting the ongoing demise of Southeast Asia's tropical forests, it can seem remarkable that the world's second largest terrestrial animal — the Asian elephant, its African cousin is the largest — somehow survives in the remoter corners of the region. Yet persist they do, a wild population of 40,000 animals, clinging on, an echo of a bygone age when they, rather than bulldozers and chainsaws, held sway over the subcontinent's tropical climes.

In 2003, my work took me to the Elephant Hills of southern Cambodia, where, before I arrived, I entertained visions of pachyderms gazing at me through my kitchen window. Alas, upon arriving, I quickly learned that the rangeland elephants were gone. Later, working in the nearby Cardamom Mountains, I occasionally crossed paths where elephants had bedded down for the night, the piles of dung and crushed vegetation were their signature mark.

Today it is the moist and dense rainforests of northern Myanmar that support some of the largest populations of the endangered animal, an existence that is owed in part to the importance of the elephant to the region's teak-harvesting economy. These elephants and the relationships they share with their human masters form the centrepiece for Jacob Shell's *Giants of the Monsoon*.

Shell is open about what drew him to write his book, attributing it to a fascination with the various peculiarities and intricacies in the mahout-elephant relationship in this remote corner of Myanmar. Foremost of interest to him is the routine of turning the elephants out to roam free through the surrounding jungle at the end of their working day. It is a habit, he postulates, that serves both parties — saving the mahouts from the lengthy task of finding food for their animal charges while, from the elephants' perspective, permitting them to go about their natural pursuits through the twilight hours. This ritual, alongside others observed by the author, coalesces around his book's central thesis, namely that only by being practical and pragmatic in the relationship between humans and elephants can we hope to conserve the animal into the future.

On the surface this utilitarian argument might raise the ire of those who hold to moral or intrinsic rationales for conservation. Yet, as Shell rightly points out, these values and the conservation strategies they have borne have failed to stem the shrinkage of elephant habitat and populations across Asia. Moreover, in the author's defence, it is clear that he is inspired by a genuine desire to find a path that ensures the continued survival of the Asian elephant. In this endeavour, Shell joins numerous other writers and conservationists seeking viable pathways for preservation in the Anthropocene.

Beyond this contention, much of Shell's account is given over to stories and personal encounters garnered from months spent in remote northern Myanmar, observing the details of daily life in a world where elephants remain a central part of village life. Among these is the story of how, during the Second World War, elephants ported refugees — fleeing the advancing



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Japanese — through the dense jungles of north-west Myanmar across to the safety of nearby India (it is a story that Vicki Croke's *Elephant Company* tells in more detail).

Away from historic events, one also learns of the different techniques mahouts use to manage their animals, including the singing of lullabies — passed down through generations — to calm distressed and moody elephants, as well as how the animals themselves use different tricks to fool their masters in calculated efforts to add time to their night-time rambles (one such trick involves the elephants stuffing their bells, which their owners use to locate them in the forest, with leaves and mud). Shell is also fascinated by the ability of elephants to navigate through the jungle, finding and following pathways without human instruction. This ability provides the background to one of the more tragic tales recounted in *Giants of the Monsoon*, an incident during the Second World War when, after a deadly case of friendly fire, the bodies of killed mahouts were picked up by the surviving elephants and ferried through the dense jungle to their village homes many miles away.

The wonder in these stories compensates for what is perhaps the author's greatest weakness: his tendency to bring together observations and alleged "facts" — in reality informed speculation — to opine arguments that require more rigorous examination. This is especially so when he goes beyond his discipline, human geography, and starts theorising on matters that are more biophysical in nature. A case of scientific overreach perhaps or of overenthusiasm for a subject, it does imply the need for caution when approaching some of the assertions in the book.

This aside, *Giants of the Monsoon* deserves a heralded place alongside William deBuys (the saola) and Peter Matthiessen (the snow leopard) for the human light it shines on Asian wildlife; one leaves the final page with a new-found respect and awareness of its subject. In achieving this, Shell reveals a passion and devotion for the Asian elephant, values that remain crucial to the continued survival of this animal and the places where it still roams. □

Wayne McCallum is the author of *A River and A Valley Far Away*

P O E M

The Seer

Lorong Ah Soo Market

There he knelt,
laying out his implements
on a sheet — a knife,
paper, some lemons —

as the circle
tightened around him,
sleeve-to-sleeve
under the thin awning.

The first, who
asked about his daughter
went away believing,
holding his answer

like a charm
and soon the change
began to appear, a miracle
in the borrowed bowl.

Of all the wonders
done that morning, in the lie
of the makeshift shade,
it seemed only

the most ordinary
thing for the planets,
not far above, to draw close,
leaving their orbits,

stand still, and for
a vanishing hour, crane
their necks over an old
faithful star.

Theophilus Kwek