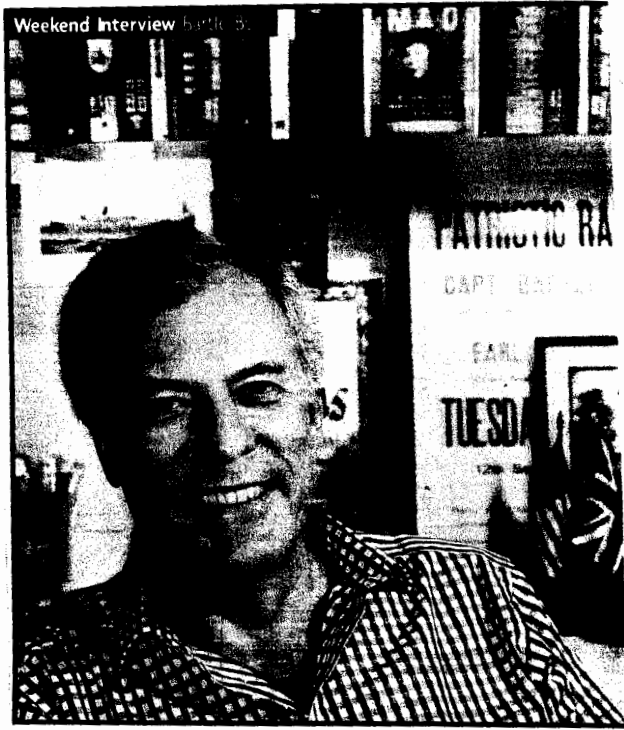


# A boy's own tale



From civil rights activist to colonial chronicler, the writer tells Anthony Haden-Guest that life has been one big adventure

**B**artle Bull's *China Star*, his recently published fifth novel, is set in the 1930s. It takes us briskly from Paris and Cairo to Shanghai and what was then called Ceylon. Along the way there are lashings of exotica and skulduggery, spiced with intermittent dollops of erotica and seductive nuggets of fact – "In Shanghai we sauté our centipedes in cold pork fat."

It is very much of a piece with Bull's earlier novels, set in the colonial world between the wars. These are not "literary" novels but neither are they popular novels in the dumbed-down sense. *China Star* is a sleekly written adventure tale in the tradition of Robert Louis Stevenson and John Buchan and, like those writers, the worlds he evokes are those in which he feels at home.

One reason for this is that, for a short period at least, he makes them his home. "While I'm writing, I always go to the country involved. There was a war going on in eastern Ethiopia when I was researching *A Café on the Nile* [his second novel] but

not where I was. I travelled overland from Ethiopia to the Kenya border through the Rift Valley, which is exactly the route my characters take when they flee the Italian army in 1935 and 1936."

For *China Star*, Bull spent two months in Sri Lanka in 2004. "I left on Christmas day," he says. "I try to fly then because the planes are empty. And the following day was the tsunami." He had been all along that coast under the tutelage of a close friend, Sir Christopher Ondaatje, brother of Michael Ondaatje, who wrote *The English Patient*.

Like Ian Fleming, a writer he otherwise resembles little, Bull likes to spice his pages with facts – some interesting, some unnerving. It is interesting, for instance, to learn in *China Star* that tea plants are plucked continually, rather than being harvested seasonally, but unnerving to discover from another novel, *Shanghai Station*, that during the Russian civil war, the Bolsheviks would flay the hands of the Czarist White Guards, so called because they would wear white gloves. "I love these

details," Bull says. "Even though I'm not a cook, I buy recipe books. I buy books on the birds, on trees."

He has been travelling in these exotic climes for more than four decades now. "I first went to Africa when I was writing my thesis at Harvard on the history of Rhodesia and Nyasaland," he says. "I stopped on the way in Kenya and I went on my first safari in 1959 with a hunter named Prince Sapiieha. That gave me an introduction to the African bush and the marvellous, romantic life you can have there."

Sapiieha's tales of the great white hunters persuaded Bull to write his first book, *Safari: A Chronicle of Adventure*, a history that begins in 1836. It's a richly nostalgic read but Bull is a conservationist as well as a hunter and slips into his prose a melancholy subtext: "In 1913 the basic £50 licence entitled a client to kill or capture two elephants, a buffalo, two rhinos, two hippos, two zebras and nearly 200 gazelles, antelopes and other species. Lions and leopards required no licence because they were classed as vermin."

Did he go on shooting safaris? "Yes. But I only shoot to eat. Birds and antelopes. My favourite thing is just to stalk the big stuff, like elephants and lions. And always to do it on foot. Not in the car."

Though his safari book began in the bush, his novels begin in the library. "First I read books. Then I always read three or four years of the English language newspaper of the place, largely on microfilm," Bull says. "In the case of my first book, it was the East African Standard, the English-language newspaper of Nairobi. There's a museum library in London [The British Library's newspaper collection in Colindale] where they keep the actual old newspapers and it took me three subway trains each day to get there and three to come back. And then you would have the head librarian Xerox a page you really cared about. For instance, about the military settlers who were drawing farms in lots out of a revolving drum to get a farm in Kenya in 1919 or 1920.

"Then I would try to find old friends and I would get their family photographs and their family diaries."

Interestingly, the recreator of these juicily nostalgic colonial milieux is a liberal democrat. Fresh out of Harvard law school in the mid-1960s, Bull campaigned against the implacably segregationist senator Strom Thurmond. A few years later he went to work for Robert Kennedy, then a New York senator. "He had organised a magnificent project for the biggest black slum in America, which was Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn," Bull says.

"He had a bunch of young lawyers like me helping to organise black corporations. The whole idea was to pick up Bed-Stuy without welfare and without a lot of government spending but to use the initiative of young blacks. One of the reasons I liked him was he wanted to help people but he did not believe in big government. That was very attractive to me. So I worked as a volunteer lawyer for him from 1966 to 1968. Then he ran for president and I quit my job as a young Wall Street lawyer and worked for him full-time. I was his New York campaign manager."

That particular future died when Kennedy was gunned down in California in 1968 but by then politics and publishing had wholly replaced the law as Bull's driving passions. He worked on campaigns for George McGovern, who ran for president against Richard Nixon in 1972, and former New York governor Mario Cuomo, among others. "I only once worked for a Republican – when I was New York chairman for Rudy Giuliani," he says, and that was because of a deep distrust of the Clintons.

It may seem paradoxical that a civil rights activist and a liberal democrat should so enjoy times and places where modern norms play little part. Bull dismisses such rear-view mirror political correctness. "One of the things you learn are the distinctions between the different types of colonialism," he says. "The Belgians had to be the worst. After them, perhaps, the Portuguese. But in many of the British and French territories, both in Asia and Africa, people were treated better than they ever had been before."

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'My first safari introduced me to the African bush and the romantic life you can have there'

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Bull's father was brought up in England and became a barrister and then, aged 33, a Conservative MP before war broke out. He was commissioned into the Coldstream Guards, fighting in Egypt and Libya ("in the famous break-out before Tobruk surrendered"). Meanwhile, his American wife swept her son and daughter back to New York.

A New Yorker Bartle Bull has remained. He lives on the Upper East Side and has a country house in Millbrook, a horsey enclave that is practically a secret society compared with the media-lapped Hamptons. When I first came to know him in New York years ago, Bull was publisher of the rambunctiously in-your-face counter-culture weekly, *The Village Voice*. It was acquired by him and another well-heeled young democrat, Carter Burden, from the founders Dan Wolf, Ed Fancher and Norman Mailer in 1970. He had only been a minority shareholder in the *Village Voice* so had to go along when Burden decided to sell in 1976. He then started up a magazine for firefighters, *Firehouse*, which sold as many copies as *The Voice*. He sold it in 1985 and set to work on writing *Safari*.

We have lunched sporadically over the years so I know he tends to steer clear of the restaurants of the moment, preferring the city's few "keepers", *boites* such as *Le Veau d'Or* or *Gino*, where he has a regular table and where I conducted this interview. Inevitably, perhaps, he also frequents Elaine's, the Manhattan-to-the-bone bistro where there are photos of the likes of writer Hunter S. Thompson on the wall and a bust of the *Paris Review* editor George Plimpton on a shelf, both men gone now, like that specific lost New York in which Bull grew up.

So much for the past; looking to the future, Bull is cock-a-hoop that his son, Bartle Jr, is working on a non-fiction history of Mesopotamia. Meanwhile, Bull is researching another novel. This sees him creeping closer to the present and is set in Yugoslavia-as-was and North Africa during the second world war. "I was in Bosnia five or six years ago," he says. He spent seven weeks there, working in refugee camps. "I was there for Christmas and new year - we were singing and weeping." Further details will probably require another lunch at *Gino*.