

**BELL, W.D.M. (KARAMOJO)**  
**FIRST EDITION BOOKS**  
*A Chronological Synopsis*

	TITLE	PUBLISHER	DATE
	<b>THE WANDERINGS OF AN ELEPHANT HUNTER</b>	Country Life, London. Issued with a dust jacket	1923
	<b>KARAMOJO SAFARI</b>	Victor Gollancz, London. Issued with a dustjacket. Also, issued in the US by Harcourt Brace and Company, New York in a dustjacket the same year.	1949
	<b>BELL OF AFRICA</b>	Neville Spearman, London. Issued posthumously with a dustjacket. Also issued in the US by Charles T. Bradford Co. Boston, 1961	1960
	Considered by many to be the most outstanding elephant hunter of all time, we have included below a brief biography of Bell for your further information about this extraordinary hunter		

*NOTE: This information has been obtained from sources deemed reliable, but is not guaranteed.*

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## W.D.M. Bell and His Elephants

By **James Passmore**

Walter D.M. Bell has become a legend among elephant hunters due to his great success in the ivory trade during the golden age of hunting in East Africa. He is known as “Karamojo” Bell because of his safaris through this remote wilderness area in North Eastern Uganda. He is famous for perfecting the brain shot on elephants, dissecting their skulls and making a careful study of the anatomy of the skull so he could predict paths of bullet travel from a shot at any angle in

order to reach the brain. Using mostly 6.5mm and 7mm caliber rifles, he was an advocate of shot placement over big bore power for killing efficiently.

Modern writers on the internet and in magazine articles have tended to refer to him and his tally of elephants in this vein, "He shot most of his 1000 elephants with a 7x57mm rifle" or words to that effect. In fact, Walter Bell killed 1011 elephants with a 7x57 in the course of his career. Since most people refer to him for his small caliber prowess and his elephant tally I thought I would try and break it down, because there are a great number of people quoting what "Karamojo Bell" did or didn't do and I have noted a common tendency in the last few years to play down what he did with small caliber rifles. Perhaps this is in direct relation to the resurgence in popularity of magnums and the larger safari rifles. Craig Boddington is quite apt to mention the "few hundred elephants" that Bell took. (Mr. Boddington, I believe, is an erstwhile heavy rifle enthusiast.)

Bell recorded all of his kills and shots fired. It was a business to him, not pleasure, and he needed to record expenditures.

- He shot exactly 1,011 elephants with a series of six Rigby-made 7x57mm (.275 Rigby) rifles with 173 grain military ammo.
- He shot 300 elephants with a Mannlicher-Schoenauer 6.5x54mm carbine using the long 159 grain FMJ bullets.
- He shot 200 odd with the .303 and the 215 grain army bullet.
- He went to a .318 Westley Richards for a while, which is a cartridge firing a 250 grain bullet at about 2400 fps, but found the ammunition unreliable and returned to the 7mm.
- He also recorded that one of the reasons why he favored the 7x57 was that the ammunition was more reliable and he could not recall ever having a fault with it. Whereas British sporting ammunition, apart from the .303 military ammo, gave him endless trouble with splitting cases.
- The balance of his elephants were shot with this .318 and his .450/400 Jeffrey double rifle.
- He wrote about being able to drop an elephant with a light caliber rifle if he shot it in the same place that he would have shot it with a heavy rifle.
- It was unmentioned, but understood, that 7x57 ammunition cost a tenth the price of large caliber .450/400 Jeffrey cartridges and money is always a factor in business.

Just out of interest, I will mention that to judge ammunition expenditure and his own shooting, he calculated an average. He discovered that with the .275 (7x57mm) he fired an average of 1.5 shots per kill. This means that half the time he only needed one shot. That is a fair performance for such a large number of elephants killed and considering that it is common today to fire an insurance shot, anyway.

It is also interesting to note that, although Bell is the most famous proponent of using small caliber "nitro" rifles for large game, he did not discover the technique, nor was he its earliest advocate. Well known hunter Arthur Neumann, for example, had been shooting elephants with a .303 Lee Metford rifle for years before Walter Bell got into the business.

WDM Bell is forever associated with the John Rigby & Sons Mauser rifle and the .275 Rigby cartridge. ".275 Rigby" was the British designation for the German 7x57mm Mauser cartridge. This cartridge propelled a .284 caliber, 173 grain bullet at around 2300 fps and the bullets he used for elephant brain shots were full metal jacketed solids. He declared once that a soft point bullet had never sullied the bore of his rifle. It is interesting to compare these ballistics with what is commonly regarded as essential performance today.

The Rigby Mauser was just that, a Mauser action rifle in sporting configuration, half stocked and finely finished. The actions were made by the Mauser Company in Germany and Rigby had the rights to sell them in England. The Mauser action was the darling of the sporting world at the time and Bell was obviously a man who appreciated fine rifles; he bought the best. For most of his life, he was an advocate of the bead front blade and express rear sights. However, in later years he used an aperture sight as well as early telescopic sights. His last .275 Rigby rifle was sold by his widow (after his death in 1951) to the writer Robert Ruark, who later presented it to Mark Selby, son of the famous white hunter Harry Selby. A constellation of famous African names converged around the ownership of this rifle. Interestingly, it is a half stock, take down rifle with early telescopic sights and a trap made out of the grip cap to store cleaning gear.

Shot placement for the tricky brain shot on elephants required good marksmanship. Bell constantly practiced by dry-firing his rifle. He always carried his own rifle, eschewing gun bearers (another plus for the lightweight Mauser), and picked pretend targets of opportunity as he traveled, dry firing at a distant rock or bird. He believed that this was the single practice most beneficial to a hunter.

He was a great proponent of the bead foresight and it was his drawings, with which he illustrated his first book *Wanderings of an Elephant Hunter*, that explained to me how to use a bead front sight properly. You should hold the bead low in the notch so that your elevation is constant and open both eyes so that you can see through your hand and rifle with your non-shooting eye.

As a further example of marksmanship (if brain shooting a great many elephants isn't enough), Bell used up the remainder of his unwanted .318 ammunition by shooting flying birds over an African lake. Spectators believed that he was using a shotgun and were amazed to find that he was actually using a rifle.

I will make the point that unlike many African writers (Peter Capstick jumps to mind), “Karamojo” Bell doesn’t seem to have been particularly threatened by an elephant, rogue or otherwise. Nor did he have to “turn a charge” or anything like that. The prose in his books has none of the trumpeting about the manly virtues of facing grisly death upon which Capstick built his writing career and that has been popular ever since Hemingway went on a couple of hunting trips. (Hemingway was disappointed when he shot a lion and it just died, and that’s all.)

A great many people have tried to explain away Bell’s elephant hunting success by asserting that he didn’t need to hunt in thick cover and could shoot elephants from long range, the implication being that somehow the behavior of African elephants must have been different back then. This is untrue, as any reader of his books will find. Mr. Bell hunted hard, walked thousands of miles, ran down elephants and was a very cool marksman at close range.

One does not walk down an elephant in uncharted African wilderness with a tool one regards as marginal and Bell had complete confidence in his ability to harvest elephants with the Rigby Mauser. It was his business and also his hide at stake, especially considering that the amount of money to be made was considerable. To put his efforts into perspective, he wrote of one day when he tracked and shot nine elephants. He estimated that he had earned 877 pounds sterling from the ivory harvested from those nine kills. After one expedition he returned with ivory worth over 23,000 pounds sterling. That was a vast sum of money and converted to today’s currency equivalent it would make your eyes water. One does not risk that kind of money and effort on a questionable caliber.

Walter Bell left Scotland a young adventurer obsessed with hunting, traveling to the North American Yukon territory to try to cash in on the gold rush and make his fortune. It did not pan out and he joined the Canadian forces sent to fight alongside the British in the Boer War in South Africa at the turn of the 20th Century. Taken prisoner at one point by the Boers, he later escaped. When the war was settled, he stayed on and bought his way into elephant hunting, outfitting his first safari on foot into East Africa. He later confessed that he had only joined the army in order to get to Africa.

Bell made himself into a successful elephant hunter not just because of his skill with a rifle, but also due to carefully maintained good relations with the local people in the territories through which he traveled. He was always ready with gifts for chiefs and kings; he bought hunting permission from them. One of his best ideas was to post a reward for any African who gave him information on the whereabouts of good elephants. He soon had a flood of elephant sightings coming in and he was as good as his word, readily paying for the information.

When the Great War (World War I) broke out, he became a pilot flying in Tanganyika (Tanzania). He was known for not flying with an observer, because the observer obstructed his view when he tried to shoot enemy planes down with

his .450 elephant gun! He later served in Greece and Italy and was twice decorated.

After the War, Bell returned to ivory hunting, traveling by canoe into then uncharted African wilds after legendary herds of large elephants. He made his last expedition in the early 1920's.

He retired to Scotland a wealthy man; there is no unhappy or overly dramatic ending to his story. He lived unscathed through all of his adventures to enjoy the wealth he had made with his rifle.

Except that, Mr. Bell was not your normal retired chap. He steps once more into history during World War II, sailing his yacht *Trenchmare* to the shores of Dunkirk in 1940 to help evacuate the besieged Allied forces from the beaches at the age of sixty.

Walter Bell spent his later years writing, practicing art and bird hunting on his Scottish estate. (One imagines with a fine "London best" double gun.) He created water color paintings and ink drawings of red stags in the Highland tussock as well as paintings of splendidly depicted elephants on the savannah, made with an eye for anatomical detail and an appreciation of the body language of the African elephant. He used them to illustrate his books.

He made it clear in his books what he would use if he returned to Africa. With a lifetime of elephant hunting behind him, he felt he could put his finger on the perfect caliber for the purpose. Strange as it may seem, it wasn't his trusty 7mm Mauser. He seems to have matured and gone for a heavier rig. Any .30 caliber capable of sending a 250 grain bullet at about 2500 feet per second would do nicely as an elephant gun, thank you, old boy.