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C. J. P. Ionides: A Commemoration

Fifty years ago, on the night of 22 September 1968, C. J. P. Ionides (Fig. 1) died in Nairobi Hospital, as a result of complications following the amputation of both legs. His death was marked by a diary note in the British literary magazine *The Spectator*, (Anonymous[a] 1968) and obituaries in both *The Times* and *The Observer* (Anonymous [b]; Richardson 1968), two of the United Kingdom's most venerable newspapers. It was a surprising indication of the respect and affection that the public held for this slight, elfin-like reclusive naturalist and herpetologist, a man who had spent the previous 25 years living in the remote woodlands of southern Tanzania, collecting reptiles, in particular highly venomous snakes. A man of steely determination, he was single-minded in pursuit of his hobbies, initially hunting rare mammals, and then collecting reptiles. He never married. As a young man he was in love, but faced with the dilemma of either marrying the girl or devoting himself to hunting, cold bloodedly chose hunting.

Known to his family as “Bobby” and to his friends as “Iodine,” Constantine John Philip Ionides was born in Hove, United Kingdom, on 17 January 1901. The son of a prominent surgeon in Brighton, Ionides was British but of Greek descent. He was educated at the famous Rugby School, where he got into trouble after a search of his study (for stolen money, of which he was innocent) revealed, among other things, a sawn-off shotgun, two pistols, six rabbit nets, a cosh, and several animal skins; the rebellious young man was a prolific poacher and enthusiastic trainee taxidermist. But the tradition of Rugby School was that no cognizance could be taken of things in a pupil's study, other than the specific items being searched for.

His initial career was checkered. He enlisted in the British Army, trained at Sandhurst, and was posted to central India in 1922. Never a model officer, as he wryly recounts in his 1965 autobiography, “the day I was not called a bloody young bastard I was concerned for the health of my superior officer.” But he did a lot of hunting; he shot two rogue elephants, and in India he also handled and kept snakes for the first time. On his leave, before returning to Britain, he went to Kenya on a hunting safari. It was a pivotal journey, opening his eyes to the African continent. Back in UK, he applied for secondment to the Kings African Rifles, a colonial regiment drawn from East African troops, and in 1925 was posted to Dar Es Salaam, in Tanganyika Territory (now Tanzania).

He only lasted two further years in the military. Ionides was no soldier, and also upset the deputy commanding officer's wife. Ionides objected to her joining the troops' Swahili classes, due to the “earthy” terms they would need to learn; enraged, she pressured her husband into writing a highly critical confidential report. This had the desired effect. Ionides resigned his commission and became an ivory poacher and a professional hunter. Over the next six years, between taking clients out to shoot big game, he poached elephants, playing the border between Tanzania and the Congo. In 1932 he was lucky to survive an attack

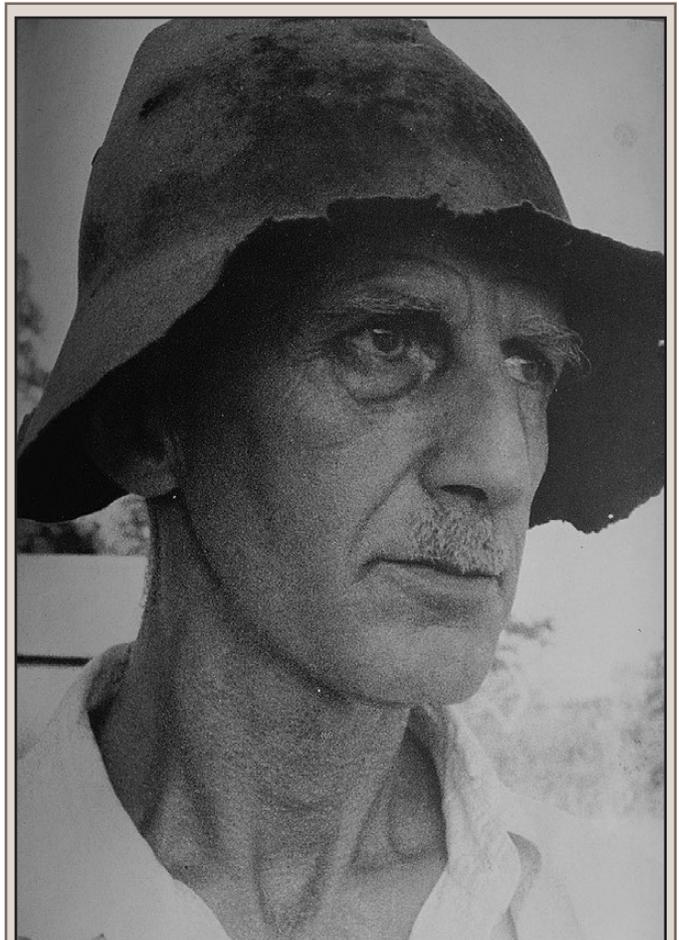


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FIG. 1. C. J. P. Ionides and his “magic hat,” an ancient ‘Terai,’ and a fetish believed by many to be the source of his legendary snake-handling ability (1962).

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by a cow elephant that had been wounded by a local hunter. She attempted to stab him with her tusks and kicked him about; miraculously, Ionides' only damage was to the hearing of his left ear. He was left partially deaf, although, as he dryly commented in his autobiography, this sometimes proved useful.

In 1933, Ionides joined the Tanganyika Game Department. For an admitted poacher, this must sound, as the man himself said (Ionides 1965), like a gangster saying that all he ever wanted to do was become a policeman. But he rationalized it by stating that his knowledge of poaching would be invaluable to the department. And it was. A game ranger's business was preventing poaching and dealing with problem animals. And problematic some were. Apart from minor nuisances like fruit-stealing baboons and potato-thieving warthogs, Ionides found himself dealing with crop-raiding and rogue elephants, and man-eating lions and leopards. Killer leopards in Tanzania usually took children. One that Ionides hunted killed 18 children before he finally trapped it. A rogue elephant, wounded by an incompetent Englishman with an army .303 rifle, killed 28 people before Ionides shot it. With his protégé Brian Nicholson, Ionides was charged with keeping elephants out of the massive, British-government funded sugar cane farming scheme on the Ruaha River; they had to shoot 600 of the huge beasts. Such slaughter nowadays would be greeted with horror. But in the 1930s in Tanzania, elephants and other big game were seen merely as a dangerous nuisance, preventing development. A similar agricultural scheme in Kenya in the 1940s saw the professional hunter John Hunter and his men shoot over a thousand black rhinoceros (Hunter 1952). No one had any idea that in the future, visitors would pay good money for the privilege of seeing such animals. But Ionides and Nicholson were later instrumental in the creation of the Selous Game Reserve, a massive conservation area in central Tanzania.

At the time, Ionides' interest in reptiles had not blossomed; his ambition was to make a mounted collection of Africa's rare mammals, and during periods of leave he hunted these. He spent all his free time and money in pursuit of trophies, from Malawi to the Sudan, often undergoing many days of desperate hardship to obtain his quarry. Ionides was a hunter of the old school, scorning such practices as following his quarry by vehicle or shooting over a bait; nor would he ever take the shot unless he could see enough of his quarry to be certain of the outcome. He went into the field on foot and kept at it; a Yellow-backed Duiker (*Cephalophus silvicultor*) that he shot in the Mau Forest of Kenya took him 49 days in the high-altitude cold and wet. His specimens, expertly mounted by his friend Norman Mitton, for years formed the subjects of dioramas at the National Museum in Nairobi. Despite changes in layout, some are still on display; the Okapi he shot in the Ituri Forest remains prominent in the central hall and has been seen by many thousands of Kenyan schoolchildren.

Ionides re-enlisted in the Second World War, in the Kings African Rifles, his old regiment. His expertise was recognized, whatever misgivings the authorities may have had about his previous service. He was given an independent command and sent to sort out insurrection in Somalia and Ethiopia. The Italians had withdrawn from much of Somalia, but before departing had thoughtfully given the Somalis rifles, and instructions to make trouble for the British. Ionides, trying to deal with armed young men in northern Somalia stealing their neighbors' stock and shooting up all and sundry, solved the problem in a novel way. He ordered his company to round up and incarcerate all the young women from the nearby villages, he then sent a message to the

local youths: "return the rifles or I'll let my sex-starved troops loose on your women." Most of the guns came back, although in order to get all of them, Ionides also had to threaten to hang the local Sheikh.

Discharged from the military in 1943, Ionides was asked by the paleoanthropologist Louis Leakey if he could collect snakes for the display at the Museum in Nairobi, where Leakey was the curator. The request re-kindled Ionides' interest in reptiles. As well as the spectacular snakes that Leakey wanted for his display, Ionides began systematically collecting smaller reptiles, started a correspondence with Charles Pitman (author of the 1938 pioneering *A Guide to the Snakes of Uganda*) and donated specimens to various museums. He struck up a friendship with Arthur Loveridge, Africa's most eminent herpetologist, and regularly sent material to the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard. Loveridge repaid the compliment by naming several new species after Ionides, and wrote regular bulletins describing his collections (Loveridge 1951, *et seq.*).

In 1956 a series of thromboses in his right leg led to surgery and the surgeon's verdict that his long-distance walking days were over; there would be no more rarity hunting. Ionides was bitterly disappointed, but philosophical. "Luck is not a word I like to use," he said. "Let us just say that nature played a little practical joke" (Ionides 1965). But his misfortune was herpetology's gain, for he then threw himself with gusto into fieldwork. He settled in southern Tanzania, initially at Liwale and then at Newala near the Mozambique border, caught local reptiles and made collecting forays all over eastern Africa. He captured huge numbers of snakes around Newala. In a short paper (Ionides and Pitman 1965a), he describes collecting 973 Green Mambas (*Dendroaspis angusticeps*) and 689 Gaboon Vipers (*Bitis gabonica*) over a seven-year period. His personal notebooks list the totals of dangerous snakes he collected; in his lifetime he caught, among others, 6633 green mambas, 2159 Gaboon Vipers, 210 black mambas, 312 North-east African Carpet Vipers, and 386 Black-necked Spitting Cobras. The majority of these were sold to zoos, snake parks, and venom research institutes worldwide; the smaller non-commercial specimens were donated to museums.

During these years, Ionides lived an idyllic herpetological life; relaxing, smoking, and reading in his bungalow until a snake report came in, whereupon he and his assistants travelled quickly to the locality, caught the snake, paid the fee and returned to base. If the reptile was some distance off the road Iodine was wheeled in a single-wheeled chair to save his legs. In the wet season, his assistants routinely turned ground cover, collecting the smaller species. From time to time he loaded his truck with his collecting team and their retinue and travelled to other parts of East Africa in search of venomous species. He visited the Aberdare Mountains in Kenya in pursuit of the Kenya Montane Viper (*Montatheris hindii*), Lake Tanganyika in pursuit of the Banded Water Cobra (*Naja annulata*), and northern Kenya looking for North-east African Carpet Vipers (*Echis pyramidum*). He also made expeditions to Al Abr, in the Hadramaut in Yemen in 1965; there he collected 10 Arabian Horned Vipers, *Cerastes gasperettii*, and to Thailand in 1966, with Jonathan Leakey, where he collected 16 King Cobras (*Ophiophagus hannah*).

Ionides was a purist where snake collecting was concerned, insisting that snakes reported to him were not restrained in any way. He was known to refuse to catch snakes that had been trapped under a basket, for example. He taught himself snake catching; at Nairobi Snake Park we used a modified version of the snake sticks that he designed. Fifty years later I have yet to

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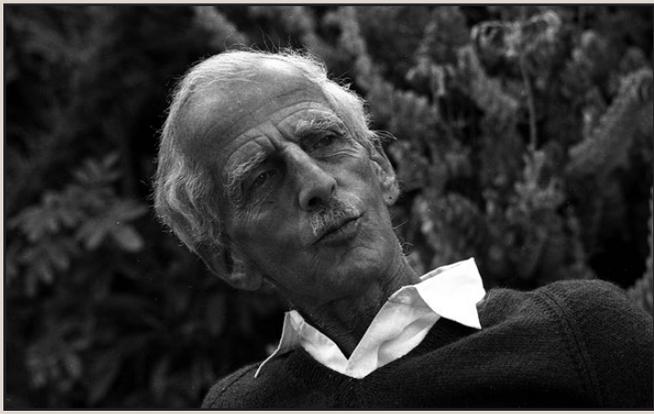


FIG. 2. Ionides in Nairobi, Kenya in 1966, after his return from Thailand. He wore the same brown sweater for 25 years.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BIO-KEN ARCHIVE



FIG. 3. Ionides and James Ashe with a big Blanding's Tree Snake (*Toxicodryas blandingii*) at Nairobi Snake Park, 1965. A cast of this huge specimen is still on display in the National Museum in Nairobi.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BIO-KEN ARCHIVE



FIG. 4. Ionides and James Ashe discuss the new Mount Kenya Bush Viper (*Atheris desaixi*), in the Quarantine/Research backroom at Nairobi Snake Park, 1968.

see a better stick. Ionides developed the “reverse-bag technique” for bagging a big deadly elapid snake, whereby the handler puts their hand into the inverted bag, grasps the head through the bag and then reverses it, the snake’s body is then pushed into the bag, and when it has been tied the handler releases the head.

The 1960s were a remarkable time in East African herpetology. Jonathan Leakey, Louis Leakey’s eldest son, had set up the Nairobi Snake Park and then started his own snake farm at Lake Baringo in Kenya. Subsequent curators of the Nairobi snake park included the husbandrist Cecil Webb, and then the dynamic and charismatic herpetologist James Ashe. Iodine always stopped at Nairobi Snake Park when he passed through the capital, and spent time with James. It was there that I first met him, in 1966, I was an impressionable 13-year old and he certainly made an impression on me. He had time for anyone if they were interested in natural history, and his conversation was precise, scintillating, and inspiring (Fig. 2). Away from home, he invariably sat in an old-fashioned folding deck chair that he took everywhere with him. All were welcome at the snake park; to spend an afternoon drinking tea and in herpetological conversation with Iodine, James Ashe (Fig. 3), and often an eminent visitor like Joy Adamson, Jonathan Leakey or the Tsavo wardens David Sheldrick or Bill Woodley, was like an afternoon in Paradise. You went home inspired to do herpetology. I once turned up with a Cape Wolf Snake (*Lycophidion capense*) that I was unable to identify, and Iodine talked to me for half an hour, pointing out the salient features and explaining how to distinguish between it and a dangerous burrowing asp (*Atractaspis*). He himself had twice been bitten by these innocuous-looking, but dangerous little snakes. Ionides suffered 13 bites in total from dangerous species, almost all, as he self-deprecatingly noted, the results of carelessness and inexperience. One bite, however, was from a night adder that he forced to bite him, to test his immunity after undergoing a traditional local immunization involving plant concoctions, rubbed into razor cuts on his limbs. No symptoms resulted.

In the mid-1960s, Iodine’s leg problems became worse. Nevertheless, he continued travelling and collecting. In 1967 an American Peace Corps volunteer, Frank DeSaix, had found a new species of bush viper at Chuka on the southeastern slopes of Mount Kenya, later named *Atheris desaixi*, and in early 1968 Iodine travelled there and collected one (Fig. 4). In July of 1968 he mounted an expedition to Chesegeon, north of Lake Baringo in the Kerio Valley in Kenya, with Peter Nares, one of Jonathan Leakey’s field team leaders. It turned out to be his final safari. He collected 27 Black Mambas in the valley, taking his lifetime haul to over 200. But on 5 August Nares heard a scream from Ionides’ tent, and found him lying on the floor in agony. Medically evacuated to Nairobi, both his legs were amputated above the knee. Ionides received many visitors, and joked about his snake-proof legs. But his surgical wounds did not heal, complications set in, and he died on Sunday, 22 September 1968. His remains were cremated after a service at the Greek Orthodox Church in Nairobi. His ashes were buried in a grave near that of the pioneer Frederick Courtenay Selous, in the magnificent Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania, the haven that he had helped found.

There are three books about Ionides. The first, *Snake Man* (1960) by the writer Alan Wykes, is very readable and well written. It was Wykes’ best-selling book and brought the snake hunter to the public’s attention. But Ionides detested it—he described it to Ann Mitton Simon, daughter of his old friend Norman Mitton, as “filthy tripe”—as it sensationalized both the man and his snakes, which was anathema to this most accurate of naturalists. Any herpetologist reading *Snake Man* might guess at this, for Wykes opens with an incident where a Green Mamba enters a hut at night and kills eight people; Ionides then catches it. In another story Wykes describes Ionides sitting in the dark on a long-drop toilet at night when a Black Mamba crawls across

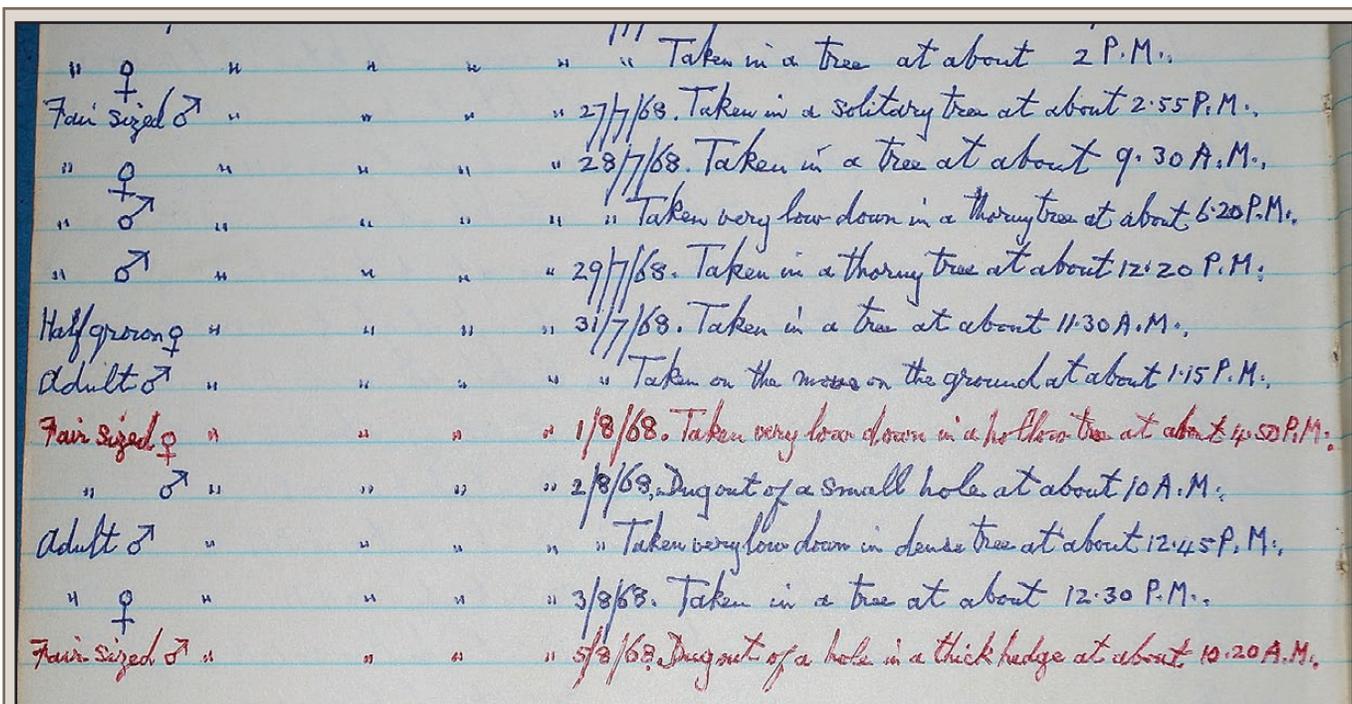


FIG. 5. Final Black Mamba entry in Ionides' notebook, written with a ballpoint pen. All of Ionides' records save these final expedition notes were written in an elegant longhand with an old-fashioned dip pen with a steel nib that he dipped in blue ink.

his legs. Both stories are fiction; mambas are diurnal snakes. The second book, *Life with Ionides*, by the acclaimed British author Margaret Lane, was published in 1963, and describes her three-month visit to Ionides' home in southern Tanzania. Like many others including the American writer John Gunther and the photographer Sally Anne Thompson, Lane made the long pilgrimage down to Newala, drawn by the magnetism of her subject. Lane was a beauty, and her affection for Ionides, manifest in the book, has led to rumors that there was something between them, although Iodine once commented gruffly to James Ashe that he felt her book made him seem somewhat unhygienic. The third book, published in hardback as *A Hunter's Story* (1965), and in softback (1968) as *Mambas and Man-eaters*, was his autobiography, although the writer Dennis Holman did most of the editorial work and kindly insisted that it was published under Iodine's name alone. This is a super book, and conveys something of the true nature of the man, his motives, his wry humor, rigorous accuracy, and the sheer excitement of the chase. He tells a gripping story. But it must be read with the zeitgeist in mind; Ionides' attitudes to women and black Africans were often anachronistic.

Ionides is mentioned in a number of other books. Not everyone approved of his collecting activities or manners. In 1980, the famous Kenyan writer Elspeth Huxley published *Nellie; Letters from Africa*, an edited version of her mother, Nellie Grant's, Kenya letters. Iodine had camped at the Grants' farm at Njoro in 1959, on the hunt for Kenya Horned Vipers (*Bitis worthingtoni*). Nellie wrote "I have the great snake catcher staying here... He is a bit round the bend. He asked for chameleons... [twelve] were brought to him. I said... what were the chameleons having for tea and they were all dead! It made me feel sick.... He is very deaf and boring." She mentioned that Ionides disliked fridges, newspapers, and the radio, and other writers have commented on his contempt for what he called modern gadgets. He wrote with an old-fashioned ink pen, and hated ballpoints, although he used

them in the end, his final mamba entries in his notebooks are in ballpoint pen (Fig. 5).

Sadly, the man himself published little, save a few nature notes (Ionides 1953; Ionides and Pitman 1965a, b, etc.) At his death he was working on a guide to the reptiles of East Africa; three of his notebooks form a draft manuscript. But it was never completed. He died before he could research the species he was not familiar with. The incomplete manuscript, kindly made available to me by Jonathan Leakey, contains much remarkable material; he noted in 1953 that shovel-snout snakes (*Prosymna*) ate reptile eggs, but this was not reported in the literature until the 1980s. He found Hinkel's Red-flanked Skinks (*Lepidothyris hinkeli*) in the Kakamega Forest in 1963, although the first specimens were not formally recorded there until the 1980s. This reluctance to publish (Arne Schiøtz [2004] called it the "Nairobi Museum Cramp") has bedevilled East Africa herpetology. I'm not complaining; the fact that Ionides, James Ashe, Alex MacKay, and Jonathan Leakey hardly ever put pen to paper opened the path for others to do so. But Iodine's legacy rests with the many thousands of crucial specimens that he donated to museums. His fieldwork clarified our knowledge of the distribution of the East African herpetofauna; for that and the stimulating memories of a genuinely larger-than-life naturalist, he will be endearingly remembered.

Acknowledgments.—I thank my old friend Jonathan Leakey, who kindly made available Ionides' field notebooks, and Julia Leakey and Dena Crain, who organized this. Joy MacKay, Bob Drewes, Mark O'Shea, and Sandra Harwood supplied press cuttings and photographs. My thanks are also due to Royjan Taylor and Nic Cahill of Bio-Ken Snake Farm, for kindly allowing use of material from the Bio-Ken archive. This commemoration is dedicated to the memory of the late James and Sanda Ashe, of Bio-Ken, Watamu, Kenya, for many years of stimulating support to herpetology in East Africa.

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