

# Alan Franks on how author Dalene Matthee found the villains of land exploitation in Africa

## A forest killed for greed

Down in the depleted Knysna Forest in the Southern Cape of Africa there are just three elephants left from a once great herd, and total extinction is imminent. They are the last descendants of the majestic creatures who roamed the densely wooded area of land between Cape Town and Port Elizabeth, and whose decline was started by greed for timber and ivory during the nineteenth century.

Like so many epics of land exploitation, Knysna's boom years became a source of fantastic stories in which fact and fable became less distinguishable with each passing year. It was the desire to establish the facts, and in particular to find out what happened to the population of Dutch-descended woodcutters, that led the Afrikaaner writer Dalene Matthee to embark on several years of research.

The book, *Circles in a Forest*, duly appeared in South Africa in April, sold out its first print run within three weeks, and has already been bought by nine other countries.

Visiting England this week for the first time, Mrs Matthee, aged 44, has the bemused look of a pools winner. Meeting her, it is not hard to understand how she barged aside the considerable opposition to her research-

es. She talks with great spooning gestures of the arms, as emphatic as the Afrikaans vowels. The whole manner is designed to make a point.

The author's thesis has the clearest possible sense of victim and villain. The *houtkapper*, or woodcutter, falls into the first category, as does the elephant, and the wood-buyer into the second. I am afraid the British are at the heart of the problem again: "Let's get this clear from the start, this difference between the cutter and the buyer. The cutters were the poorest, the most hard-working of people, and their labour was appallingly exploited. George Rex, who came over from England in the 1820s, he was the first destroyer of the forest. It was from the time he started milking the forest for its timber that the damage was done."

It was with the old veterans of cutting communities, men now in their 80s, that Mrs Matthee took to the forest to do

her painstaking research on the minutiae of plant and animal life. "You can't just go into the forest. You have to ask its permission first. Yes, it sounds absurd, but it's true. I used to go in and say to it: 'I'm here again. I'm back. I'm glad to be back.' And then I'd explain to the forest how far I'd got with the book, and tell it exactly which area I was intending to work in that day."

There is a romantic element in her approach, certainly but there is also the formidable aggression of one who is smoking out an atrocity, albeit 100 years after it began.

She describes this mix of motivations as follows: "I woke up one morning with this almost dream-like sensation. You could call it a meditation I suppose, except that I don't meditate. It was a feeling, no, a certainty that this...this great computer - call it God, call it Nature - had planted enough for man to have his railway sleepers and his ships and all the rest of it, but that he is *not allowed* to take any more. Simply *not allowed*."

One Wednesday morning, she was working in the files of a private museum belonging to the English of Knysna. When a woman curator discovered that the novel was going to be written in Afrikaans, suddenly

all access was withdrawn: "She just said 'Sorry, we can't give you any more information.' My immediate reaction was to say 'Look, lady, I always get what I want.' I discovered that the next day, Thursday, there was another woman on at the museum. So I went along and

said I was a history teacher doing a project with my children about the gold in the forest. Immediately all the files were opened. I got my files in the end."

*Circles in a Forest* by Dalene Matthee is published on August 30 by Viking (£8.95)