WILFRED THESIGER

ALEXANDER MAITLAND

THE LIFE OF THE GREAT EXPLORER

‘A perceptive and gripping biography, a tribute to one of the last great explorers and an evocation of a vanished world’

DAILY MAIL
Wilfred Theisger

The Life of the Great Explorer

Alexander Maitland

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For Margaret
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INTRODUCTION

‘Even now, after so many years, I can still remember Wilfred Thesiger as he was when I first saw him,’ was how Thesiger suggested I might begin his biography. To this he had added: ‘The rest is up to you.’

I met Thesiger for the first time in June 1964 at his mother’s top-storey flat in Chelsea. He was then aged fifty-four. He was sunburnt, tall, with broad shoulders and deep-set grey eyes. As we shook hands I noticed the exceptional length of his fingers. He wore an obviously well-cut, rather loose-fitting dark suit. I remember clearly that he smelt of brillantine and mothballs. He spoke quietly, with an air of understated authority. His voice was high-pitched and nasal; even by the standards of that time, his rarefied pronunciation seemed oddly affected. He had a distinctive habit of emphasising prepositions in phrases such as ‘All this was utterly meaningless to me’.

He moved slowly and deliberately, with long, ponderous strides; yet he gave somehow the impression that he was also capable of lightning-fast reactions. Later, I heard that he had been a source of inspiration for Ian Fleming’s fictional hero James Bond. Whether or not this was true, Thesiger, like Bond, was larger than life; and like Bond, he appeared to have led a charmed existence.

He introduced me to his mother, Kathleen, who had retired early to bed. Cocooned in a woollen shawl and an old-fashioned lace-trimmed mobcap, she lay propped up on pillows, with writing paper and books spread out on the bedcover within easy reach. Thesiger left us alone for a few minutes while he carried a tray with a decanter of sherry and glasses to the sitting room. It was then that his mother offered me the unforgettable advice: ‘You must stand up to Wilfred.’

Thesiger preferred to sit with his back to the window, in the dark shadow of a high-backed chair. At intervals he fingered a string of purple glass ‘worry beads’ that lay on the small table at his elbow. He talked energetically and fluently in reply to enquiries, but he himself asked few questions, and instead of taking up a fresh theme he sat quietly, staring at me, until I questioned him again. When I could think of nothing to say, or to ask, he reached again for the purple beads. Meanwhile he scarcely had touched his thimbleful of sherry.

His mother’s flat, to which Thesiger returned for two or three months every year, was like a catalogue raisonné of his life and travels. Danakil jilis in tasselled sheaths hung beside framed black-and-white Kuba textiles from the Congo. There were silver-hilted Arab daggers and ancient swords in silver-inlaid scabbards. Medals honouring Thesiger’s achievements as an explorer and, in his youth, as a boxer were displayed in velvet-lined cases. A portrait of Thesiger painted in 1945 by Anthony Devas hung on the right of the sitting room fireplace. On the wall opposite, three tall glass-fronted cabinets held part of his collection of rare travel books devoted to Arabia, Africa and the Middle East. His mother had brought the cabinets to London in 1943 from their former home in Radnorshire. Thesiger commented proudly: ‘I can’t begin to imagine how my mother knew they would fit into this room. It was remarkable how she did this. But, there again, my mother is a very remarkable person.’

In a cupboard in Thesiger’s bedroom were stored the sixty or more landscape-
format albums of black-and-white photographs which he often described as his ‘most cherished possession’. As far as I remember he did not produce these albums during my first visit, but over the years I became very familiar with the wonderful images they contained. Only some time later did he show me his collections of travel diaries, notebooks and annotated maps describing his journeys. Not until some years after she had died did he encourage me to read letters he had written, many from outlying places, to his mother, who to her eternal credit preserved them with care, as she had preserved those Wilfred’s father had written a generation before.

One memory stands out from the vaguer recollections of that first visit. To my surprise, as I was leaving Thesiger took out a pocket diary, consulted it for a moment and said: ‘If you’ve nothing better to do next Sunday, why don’t you come along and we’ll cook ourselves supper. My mother’s housekeeper is away for the night, but we can heat up some soup and scramble an egg or two.’ He grinned and added: ‘That’d be fun.’ This unexpected invitation marked the beginning of a friendship that lasted for almost forty years.

I have heard it said that Thesiger was very straightforward, uncomplicated, easy to get to know and to understand. To some people he may have appeared like that; and of course, everyone who met him (whether they knew him intimately or hardly at all) received a slightly different impression. But even his oldest friends, who had known him since his schooldays, could not quite agree about certain seemingly paradoxical aspects of Thesiger’s character and temperament. Most of them, however, accepted that he was a veritable maze of contradictions; and, if the truth be told, in some ways his own worst enemy. Like the Bedu of the Arabian desert, he was a man of extremes. He could be affectionate and loving (for example towards his mother), yet he was capable of spontaneous, bitter hatred; he was either very cautious or wildly generous with his money and possessions; he was normally fussy and meticulous, but he could be astonishingly careless and foolishly improvident; he relished gossip, yet was uncompromisingly discreet; his touching kindesses contrasted with sometimes appalling cruelty. He denied being possessive and criticised others who were, including his friend the writer T.H. White, and his own mother, who was by nature possessive – as indeed he was himself. Being possessive, and yet desperately needing to be possessed, was part of Thesiger’s chronic sense of insecurity, which resulted from traumas he suffered during his childhood in Abyssinia and England. His vices were fewer, less extreme and yet more conspicuous than his many virtues. The greatest of these – immense and selfless bravery, compassion, determination, integrity and creative energy – enabled him to achieve his outstanding feats of exploration and travel, and to record them with a matchless brilliance in his photography and in his writing.

Thesiger’s craggy features and tall, gaunt frame were a gift for the painter or sculptor. His earliest adult portraits were sketched in pencil on menu-cards by (probably inebriated) friends at Oxford’s ‘bump suppers’. Gerald de Gaury drew him in 1943, and Anthony Devas painted his portrait in oils at the end of the Second World War. In 1953 Fiore de Henriques sculpted Thesiger’s head in bronze, a powerful image, like Devas’s excellent portrait, which nevertheless romanticised him. In contrast, three portraits painted by Derek Hill in 1965 showed Thesiger, then aged fifty-five, very much as I had first seen him, and indeed as he really was. Although he
portrayed the man who had survived dangerous journeys through Abyssinia, the Sahara and Arabia, a decade hunting African big game, and four years’ intense fighting in the war, Hill also captured a defensive, shy, vulnerable side of his sitter’s complex personality, a side that Thesiger normally kept hidden.

In old age Thesiger was painted, sculpted and photographed by artists and photographers fascinated by his achievements and his weathered features, whose creases, folds and crenellations by then resembled ancient tree-bark, or elephant’s hide, or rock, more than the surface texture of an ordinary human being. These later portraits celebrated him as the patriarch of modern exploration and travel, and as a living legend to which they gave substance. Only when his visitors were greeted by a grey-haired, elderly gentleman in a dark suit or country tweeds did many of them realise how, in his books, Thesiger had been frozen in time, like the age-defying images of tribal men, women and children he had photographed more than half a century before. Although Thesiger’s last portraits cast him in old age, the finest bridged a widening gap between his wander years and the present; and to his increasingly iconic status they paid due and worthy homage.
The Emperor Menelik’s ‘New Flower’

In 1901 an English traveller, Herbert Vivian, described his recent journey through Abyssinia in a book which included impressions of the capital Addis Ababa as he first saw it, less than a decade after the Emperor Menelik II had established the town. ‘I looked round incredulously, and saw nothing but a few summer-house huts and an occasional white tent, all very far from each other, scattered over a rough, hilly basin at the foot of steep hills. That this could be the capital of a great empire, the residence of the King of Kings, seemed monstrous and out of the question.’ More than twenty pages of Vivian’s book *Through Lion Land to the Court of the Lion of Judah* were devoted entirely to Addis Ababa, whose name in Amharic means ‘New Flower’.

Vivian described the remote setting; the tents and primitive thatched huts of the British Agency (as he called the Legation) in its mud-walled compound; tribesmen arrayed in striking costumes; the huge marketplace, trading in exotic spices and other varied produce, brass and silver ornaments, livestock and weapons, which reminded him of an Oriental bazaar or conjured up images of medieval England. ‘To appreciate Addis Ababa,’ he wrote, ‘it is necessary to realise that this strange capital covers some fifty square miles, and contains a very large population which has never been numbered. Streets there are none, and to go from one part of the town to the other you must simply bestride your mule and prepare to ride across country. Three-quarters of an hour at least are necessary for a pilgrimage from the British Agency to the Palace, and as much again to the market. On either of these journeys you must cross three or four deep ravines with stony, precipitous banks and a torrent-bed full of slippery boulders.’

Lord and Lady Hindlip visited Addis Ababa in 1902, during their big game hunting expedition in Abyssinia and British East Africa. In his book *Sport and Travel*, Hindlip wrote: ‘The squalor of native African towns and villages is apparent everywhere…Menelik’s capital is nothing but a collection of huts…surrounded on nearly three sides by mountainous country.’ Hindlip’s scathing remarks were echoed in 1905 by Augustus B. Wylde, a former Vice-Consul for the Red Sea: ‘The place cannot be called a town but a conglomeration of hamlets and huts with hardly a decent house to be seen anywhere. The whole area is nearly tree-less and very disappointing.’

In his autobiography *The Life of My Choice*, published in 1987, Wilfred Thesiger conjured a rather more vivid and more sensual image of his birthplace, which had changed apparently very little by the time his father and mother arrived there, only a few years after Vivian, the Hindlips and Wylde, in December 1909. He did this very skilfully, introducing his parents and placing them at the centre of the stage, sketching the embryonic, sprawling township of Addis Ababa, its wild surroundings and multicultural population, and the social and political chaos into which Abyssinia had lapsed, from 1908, after Menelik had been incapacitated by the first of several strokes.

Thesiger wrote:
Addis Ababa consisted of a series of scattered villages grouped on hillsides with open, uncultivated spaces between. Menelik’s palace crowned the largest hill; nearby a jumble of thatched huts and some corrugated-iron-roofed shacks clustered round the large open market. Nowhere were there any proper roads. [In his north Abyssinia diary, dated 1960, Thesiger commented on 12 May: ‘Menelik’s gibbi [palace] was on a small isolated hill below the present town.’ And on 13 May: ‘[It occupied] a surprisingly small area on the top of the hill… He used to sit under a tree and watch his cattle being watered, with a telescope.’

When Thesiger visited the site of Menelik’s palace in 1960, he had found ‘almost no sign of it’.]

Abyssinians of any standing travelled everywhere on muleback, followed by an armed mob of slaves and retainers, varying in number according to the importance of their master. Galla, Somali, Gurage, people from the subject kingdom of Kaffa, negroes from the west, mingled on the streets with their Amhara and Tigrean overlords; but it was these latter who dominated the scene, imposed their stamp upon the town and gave it its unique character. Wrapped in white toga-like shammus worn over long white shirts and jodhpurs, they set a fashion which over the years was copied by an increasing number of their subjects.

The clothes, the buildings, the pitch and intonation of voices speaking Amharic; the smell of rancid butter, of red peppers and burning cow dung that permeated the town; the packs of savage dogs that roamed the streets and whose howling rose and fell through the night; an occasional corpse hanging on the gallows-tree; beggars who had lost a hand or foot for theft; debtors and creditors wandering round chained together; strings of donkeys bringing in firewood; caravans of mules; the crowded market where men and women squatted on the ground, selling earthen pots, lengths of cloths, skins, cartridges, bars of salt, silver ornaments, heaps of grain, vegetables, beer – all this combined to create a scene and an atmosphere unlike any other in the world…

Almost certainly, Thesiger’s detailed descriptions of Addis Ababa were not based entirely on childhood memories, but on notes and recollections of visits he made later, between 1930 and 1966, no doubt clarified by reading his father’s correspondence and the many books about Abyssinia he had collected over the years. Having painted this colourful backdrop to his life story, Thesiger gave a perceptive résumé of the Abyssinians’ character: ‘Encircled by British, French and Italian territories, they were intensely proud of their age-old independence and very conscious that their forefathers had been among the earliest converts to Christianity. Consequently they were both arrogant and reactionary, while the past three hundred years had made them suspicious and obstructive in dealing with Europeans. As a race they had an inborn love of litigation and suffered from inherent avarice. Yet they were naturally courteous, often extremely intelligent, and always courageous and enduring.’

A year after Menelik’s first, paralysing stroke, ‘Conditions in Addis Ababa and in the country as a whole were already chaotic… They were soon to become very much worse. In and around Addis Ababa murder, brigandage and highway robbery increased alarmingly; in restoring order, public hangings, floggings and mutilations had little
effect. The town was filled with disbanded soldiery from Menelik’s army, and on the hills outside were camped the armies of the various contenders for power.’

Here, at the heart of Menelik’s remote African empire, threatened by anarchy and bloodshed, Thesiger’s father took up his official duties at the British Legation in December 1909. He and his young bride, who was four months pregnant, adjusted to married life in these primitive surroundings as they waited anxiously and eagerly for the birth of their first child the following year.
In March 1911, nine months after the birth of their eldest son, Wilfred Thesiger’s father wrote in a romantic mood to his wife, who was then in England and pregnant for the second time: ‘What a wonderful thing it is to be married and love like we do, and all has come because you once said “yes” to me in a hansom and gave yourself to me.’

Captain the Honourable Wilfred Gilbert Thesiger was aged thirty-eight and Kathleen Mary Vigors was twenty-nine when they married on 21 August 1909 at St Peter’s church, Eaton Square, in the London borough of Westminster. The ceremony in this fashionable setting was conducted by the Reverend William Gascoigne Cecil, assisted by the Reverend Arthur Evelyn Ward, whose marriage to Kathleen’s younger sister Eileen Edmee took place in November that same year. The Thesigers made a handsome couple on their wedding day. Kathleen’s slender build and radiantly healthy complexion, set off by luxuriant waves of auburn hair, perfectly complemented Wilfred Gilbert, who stood over six feet, and was lean and muscular, with broad, sloping shoulders. His gaunt, rather delicate features, still sallow after two years’ exposure to the African sun, were clean-shaven except for a heavy moustache, and his dark-brown hair was brushed from a centre parting. Like his late father, General Lord Chelmsford, Wilfred Gilbert Thesiger was reliably discreet, formal and pleasantly reserved.

Wilfred Gilbert and Kathleen’s was the third wedding uniting two generations of their families. Handcock sisters, who were first cousins of Kathleen’s mother, had married distinguished younger sons of the first Lord Chelmsford. In 1862 Henrietta Handcock married the Honourable Alfred Henry Thesiger, a Lord of Appeal and Attorney-General to the Prince of Wales. The following year, Henrietta’s elder sister Charlotte Elizabeth married Alfred Henry’s elder brother, the Honourable Charles Wemyss Thesiger, a Lieutenant-General in the Hussars. In August 1909, witnesses to the Thesigers’ marriage included Kathleen’s widowed mother Mary Louisa Helen Vigors, Wilfred Gilbert’s elder brother Percy Mansfield Thesiger, and Count Alexander Hoyos, a Secretary at the Austrian Embassy and a friend of the bridegroom. In his autobiography, Wilfred Thesiger portrayed his father as ‘intensely and justifiably proud of his family, which in his own generation had produced a viceroy, a general, an admiral, a Lord of Appeal, a High Court judge and a famous actor. Intelligent, sensitive and artistic, with a certain diffidence which added to his charm, he was above all a man of absolute integrity.’

Wilfred Gilbert painted in watercolours, wrote verse and also played the cello. By his early thirties he had already had a distinguished career in the Consular Service, and had been awarded a DSO in the Boer War. Perceptive studio portraits by Bertram Park, a society photographer in Dover Street, London, highlighted these compatible yet contrasting facets of his life and character. On the one hand, Park captured the thoughtful, determined expression of a soldier and administrator accustomed to
authority; on the other, he evoked the introspective, wistful gaze of an artist and a poet.

Thesiger described his mother Kathleen as attractive, brave and determined, a woman who had dedicated herself to her husband ‘in the same spirit shown by those great nineteenth-century lady travellers Isobel Burton and Florence Baker…ready to follow [him] without question on any odyssey on which he might embark’. A photograph of my mother at that time [also taken by Bertram Park] shows a beautiful, resolute face under waves of soft brown hair…Naturally adventurous, she loved the life in Abyssinia, where nothing daunted her. She shared my father’s love of horses and enjoyed to the full the constant riding. Like him, she was an enthusiastic and skilful gardener…Since she was utterly devoted to my father, her children inevitably took second place. In consequence in my childhood memories she does not feature as much as my father; only later did I fully appreciate her forceful yet lovable character.

When he wrote about his father’s family, Thesiger saw no reason to include the generations of ancestors before his grandfather, the famous general and second Lord Chelmsford. He defended this, saying: ‘The Life of My Choice was about me and the life I had led. My father and, later on, my mother were tremendously influential and I was fascinated by what my grandfather had done. These things affected me, but I can’t have been affected by relatives living at the time of Waterloo. To suggest that I might have seems, to me, utter nonsense. It would never have occurred to me to spend months studying my ancestors, to see whether or not there might be any resemblance between some of them and myself.’

Whereas later generations of Thesigers have been well-documented, little is known about Johann Andreas Thesiger who emigrated from Saxony to England in the middle of the eighteenth century and in due course established the Thesigers’ English line. According to family records, Johann Andreas, now usually known as John Andrew, was born in Dresden in 1722. He married Sarah Gibson from Chester, and fathered four sons and four daughters. John Andrew died in May 1783, and was survived by his wife, who died almost thirty-one years later, in March 1814. John Andrew was evidently intelligent, amenable and hardworking. Although the young Wilfred Thesiger scoffed at efforts to prove similarities between his remote ancestors and later generations of his family, John Andrew’s sons, like their father, had been clever and diligent. His great-grandson Alfred Henry, who became a Lord of Appeal and Attorney-General, was described as ‘extremely industrious’, while Alfred Henry’s nephew Frederic, the first Viscount Chelmsford, was known to work ‘very hard’, as was Frederic’s younger brother, Wilfred Gilbert Thesiger.

In The Life of My Choice, Wilfred Thesiger underlined his father’s tireless capacity for hard work: ‘By December 1917 my father badly needed leave. The altitude of Addis Ababa, at eight thousand feet, was affecting his heart. He had been short-handed, overworked and under considerable strain.’ As for Thesiger himself. He was once described by his lifelong friend John Verney as ‘the world’s greatest spiv’. Yet when writing a book he often worked for as many as fourteen hours a day, and even in his eighties his powers of concentration and his ability to work long hours for weeks at a time appeared to be undiminished.

From the time he arrived in England, John Andrew Thesiger earned his living as an amanuensis or private secretary to Lord Charles Watson-Wentworth, the second Marquess of Rockingham, who led the Whig opposition and twice served as Prime
Minister, in 1765-66 and again in 1782, the year he died. As well as his native German, John Andrew evidently spoke and wrote fluently in English, and possibly several other languages besides. His eldest son Frederic, we know, understood Danish and Russian.

We can only guess what John Andrew might have looked like. It is tempting to picture him as above average height, thin and wiry, with lantern jaws and a prominent nose. These characteristics recurred in later generations of Thesigers: for example General Lord Chelmsford, the actor Ernest Thesiger, and Ernest’s first cousin Wilfred, whose large, skewed, three-times-broken nose became his most famous physical hallmark. But the assumption that John Andrew’s looks and build were inherited by his descendants may be quite wrong. His eldest son, Frederic, who appears life-size on one of the four cast-bronze memorial panels at the base of Nelson’s Column in Trafalgar Square, bears no obvious resemblance to other male Thesigers descended from his younger brother’s family. Neither Frederic’s looks nor build matches the gaunt, hawkish Thesiger model. He has a rounded face, a thin, expressionless mouth and an inconspicuous straight nose. He is neither stout nor very lean. It is difficult to judge his height, which seems about the same as Nelson’s; but the sculptor, J. Ternouth, may have exaggerated Nelson’s height to achieve a more dramatic effect.

Before he enlisted in the Royal Navy, Frederic served with the East India Company’s fleet in the Caribbean. He rose to Acting Lieutenant aboard HMS *Formidable*, commanded by Admiral Rodney, at the Battle of Saintes, off Martinique, in 1782. Praised by Rodney as ‘an excellent and gallant officer’, he later served with the Russian navy during the war between Russia and Sweden. The Empress Catherine II (Catherine the Great) awarded him an Order of Merit and, in 1790, a knighthood of the Order of St George. He became adviser to the First Sea Lord and was promoted commander, then captain. In 1801 Frederic served as ADC to Lord Nelson at the Battle of Copenhagen, when his knowledge of Danish enabled him to translate Nelson’s letter, accompanying a flag of truce, which Frederic presented to the young Crown Prince of Denmark. The bronze relief in Trafalgar Square shows him handing Nelson the Danes’ letter of surrender. Whilst the Royal Navy had profited from Frederic’s experience in the Baltic, no further offer of an active command was forthcoming. There appear to have been no obvious reasons for this. Depressed, disillusioned, without prospects or a wife and family of his own to console and distract him, Captain Sir Frederic Thesiger committed suicide at Plymouth on 26 August 1805, two months before Nelson was fatally wounded at the Battle of Trafalgar.

Sir Frederic’s younger brother Charles and his London-born wife, Mary Anne Williams, had six children, including two boys who died in infancy. Frederic, the third son – the late Sir Frederic’s nephew and namesake – witnessed, as a thirteen-year-old midshipman, the seizure of the Danish fleet at Copenhagen in 1807. He resigned from the navy, having become heir to his father’s estates in the West Indies, and afterwards studied law. He was called to the Bar in 1818 and recommended to King’s Counsel in 1834. In 1844 he was appointed Solicitor-General and was knighted. As a Member of Parliament he represented Woodstock, Abingdon and Stamford. Having twice served as Attorney-General, on 1 March 1858 Sir Frederic Thesiger QC was created the first Baron Chelmsford of Essex.

Sir Frederic’s noted attributes – ‘a fine presence and handsome features, a
beautiful voice, a pleasant if too frequent wit, an imperturbable temper, and a gift of natural eloquence’ – must have stood him in good stead as a barrister and a politician. In any case, the Thesigers’ progress in less than three generations, from the arrival in England of their gifted German ancestor to achieving an English peerage, had been by any standards remarkable, and amply justified the optimism and ambition implicit in their family motto, Spes et Fortuna, ‘Hope and Fortune’.

Lord Chelmsford’s son and heir, the Honourable Frederic Augustus Thesiger, was born on 31 May 1827. After serving in Nova Scotia, the Crimea, India and Abyssinia, as General Lord Chelmsford he commanded the British force during the Kaffir and Zulu wars. In South Africa he earned a lasting notoriety when over 1300 of his troops were massacred by the Zulu army at Isandhlwana on 22 January 1879, known afterwards to the Zulus as ‘the Day of the Dead Moon’. Thesiger wrote in The Life of My Choice: ‘In the Milebrook [the house in Radnorshire, now Powys, where he and his brothers lived from 1921 with their widowed mother] were assegais and other trophies brought back by my grandfather after he had shattered the Zulu army at Ulundi in 1879 – but I never begrudged those peerless warriors their earlier, annihilating victory over a British force on the slopes of Isandhlwana.’ Despite having ‘shattered the Zulu army’ and won the war, Chelmsford was blamed for misleading intelligence and confused orders which had led to the massacre. He consequently returned to England with his reputation permanently tarnished. Thesiger wrote in 1940: ‘I have just finished the book about my grandfather and the Zulu war. [This was Lord Chelmsford and the Zulu War (1939) by Major the Hon. Gerald French DSO, which Percy Thesiger, Wilfred’s uncle, had given him in November 1939.] I found it most interesting. It seemed to be a very complete justification of his strategy in that war and a vindication of his generalship...I had not realised that the criticism had been so personal and so venomous. What does emerge very clearly is that he was a great gentleman, and that he won the respect and affection of those who served under him. He must have been a great and charming man and I wish I had known him.’

Fascinated all his life by his grandfather’s controversial role in the Zulu war, Thesiger, at the age of eighty-six, visited Isandhlwana and saw for himself where the massacre had taken place. In South Africa he met the Zulu leader Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who presented him with a Zulu knobkerrie, a shield and a spear. Thesiger said afterwards: ‘I found Buthelezi impressive. It moved me to have met him like that more than a century after Isandhlwana. There we were: Buthelezi, the grandson of Cetewayo, the Zulu king; and myself, the grandson of Lord Chelmsford, whose army Cetewayo’s warriors half-destroyed, and who finally destroyed them at Ulundi.’

On 9 April 1905, while he was playing billiards in the United Services Club, Lord Chelmsford died of a heart attack at the age of seventy-seven. Thesiger said: ‘My grandfather and my father died instantaneously, so that they could have felt nothing. When it’s my turn to push up the daisies, that is how I should wish to die.’

Wilfred Thesiger’s father, Wilfred Gilbert, was the third of Lord and Lady Chelmsford’s five sons. He was born at Simla on 25 March 1871, four years after Frederic Augustus Thesiger married Adria Fanny Heath, the eldest daughter of Major-General Heath of the Bombay Army. Their eldest son, Frederic John Napier, was appointed Viceroy of India from 1916 to 1921; in 1921 he was created the first Viscount Chelmsford. Harold Lumsden Thesiger, their fourth son, died in India, aged
only two and a half months, in 1872.

‘For some reason,’ Thesiger wrote, ‘my father was educated at Cheltenham [College], whereas his brothers [Frederic, Percy and Eric] were educated at Winchester.’ Wilfred Gilbert had twice failed the Winchester entrance examination, despite receiving extra tuition at a crammer in Switzerland. As a boy he had been delicate. Above average height, he was handsome and slender, and his expression was wistful, perhaps melancholy. In 1889 and 1892 he was examined at Francis Galton’s Anthropometric Institute in South Kensington, which was equipped and supervised as part of the International Health Exhibition. Galton’s laboratory measured ‘Keenness of Sight and of Hearing; Colour Sense, Judgement of Eye; Breathing Power; Reaction Time; Strength of Pull and of Squeeze; Force of Blow; Span of Arms; Height, both standing and sitting; and Weight’. A student of ‘hereditary talent and character’, and founder of the Eugenics Society, Galton espoused the theory of ‘right breeding’, which the high achievers produced by successive generations of Thesigers appeared to confirm.

An illness, possibly rheumatic fever, had drained Wilfred Gilbert’s energy and left him with a permanently weakened heart. Though he was a ‘well conducted boy’, his school reports describe him as ‘languid and unattentive’ – failings conspicuous in the younger Wilfred Thesiger, who confessed to having a limited attention span and who wrote that he had proved ‘an unreceptive boy to teach, disinclined to concentrate on any subject that bored me’. Wilfred Gilbert’s poor performance in French and German (which had once been his family’s first language) prompted a master’s opinion that he ‘was not a linguist by nature’. While at Cheltenham he began to write poetry. His poems suggest that he was prone to depression or melancholy. Many are preoccupied with death, and evoke a sense of futility which later seemed at odds with his private and public roles as husband, father and staunch representative of the Crown.

Wilfred Gilbert’s career in the Consular Service began in Asia Minor, where he served at Lake Van from 1895 to 1898 ‘as a secretary to Major [later Colonel] W.A. Williams RA, Military Vice-Consul’ at the time of the Armenian massacres. He earned a mention in despatches and wrote letters which were keenly observed and often vivid. Many of them presaged others written years later by his son Wilfred, on topics that included hunting, photography and travel. In July 1896 Wilfred Gilbert wrote: ‘I want very much to see more of the country…a good pair of ibex horns still haunts my dreams.’ And in April that same year: ‘If ever I come out here again I shall certainly bring a camera.’ Romantically careless of time and place, he wrote on ‘the 20 somethingth of August 1896’ from Garchegan, ‘somewhere in the mountains’: ‘It is a glorious life this, living in tents and moving from place to place.’ Of the conflict between Armenians and Turks he saw nothing worse than a skirmish, like ‘a music hall battle’, in front of the consulate. Once an Armenian banker who lived nearby ‘sent over to say some revolutionists were in his garden and were going to murder him’.

Wilfred Gilbert spent much of his time at Van gardening, sketching, reading, riding and shooting. He learnt Turkish, and took charge of the household. Thesiger wrote: ‘My father made a number of watercolour sketches of [Kurdish tribes in their ‘spectacular garb’] that fascinated me as a boy but have since disappeared. At Van he was very conscious of past greatness, when kings of Assyria ruled, fought and fell
among these mountains.’ Wilfred Gilbert remarked in a letter: ‘even a short
description of these districts written by a certain Marco Polo, which we have here, is
perfectly up to date’.24

After Van the had been nominated Vice-Consul at Algiers, but he was posted
instead to Taranto in southern Italy. There he monitored exports of olive oil and red
wine, and compiled an encouraging report on Calabria’s mother-of-pearl industry.
Having written poems inspired by the sea, at Taranto Wilfred Gilbert became a keen
yachtsman. He also took up fencing. According to Signor Ferri, his fencing master:
‘Correctness, thundering attack, and the highest intelligence, distinguish him on the
platform.’25 Even if ‘thundering attack’ was overdone, it sounded better than
Cheltenham’s less flattering comments that Wilfred Gilbert was ‘not of much power’
in the classroom and ‘lacked scoring power at cricket’.26 Thesiger did not share his
father’s fencing talent: at Oxford he ‘was noted as much for the extraordinary and
often furious contortions of his blade in fencing – a pastime at which he was never an
adept – as for his lightning successes in the ring’.27

‘During the Boer War,’ Thesiger wrote, ‘[my father] joined the Imperial
Yeomanry as a trooper, but was soon commissioned and later promoted to [temporary]
captain. He fought in South Africa from March 1900 until October 1901 and was
awarded the DSO.’28 Wilfred Gilbert’s DSO was for general service, not, as in his son
Wilfred’s case, for an outstanding act of bravery. After the war he considered
becoming a District Commissioner in the Transvaal, but instead rejoined the Consular
Service. In 1902 he was sent as Vice-Consul to Belgrade. The following year he was
left in charge of the Legation when the Minister was withdrawn after the brutal murder
of King Alexander and Queen Draga by an anarchist group known as the Black Hand.

King Alexander’s successor, Peter I (like Wilfred Gilbert’s father), suffered from
‘a sort of shyness and inability to make small [impromptu] remarks to everyone’.29
Wilfred Gilbert understood this difficulty, yet could not resist describing, tongue-in-
cheek, preparations for the coronation: ‘the king has been practising in the palace
garden how to get on horseback in his robe and crown with his sceptre in his hand, for
he is to ride back in all his glory; and the ministers are having little loops sewn on their
best clothes in anticipation of the orders they expect to receive...For two days it has
drizzled and all the Serbian flags are gradually fading into limp rags in which the red,
blue and white have run into each other to such an extent that by Wednesday they
promise to be little more than mere smudges of colour not of the cleanest.’30

After Belgrade, Wilfred Gilbert was posted to St Petersburg, where, to his relief
he was not ‘bothered with too many social duties’.31 He looked forward to playing
golf at Mourina, an hour’s drive from the city, and reassured his now widowed mother:
‘I am awfully lucky in servants, having just got a treasure in the way of an office boy
and with a jewel of a cook and Collins [his former batman in the Imperial Yeomanry]
am really in clover.’32 This was fortunate, since Wilfred Gilbert’s later postings, in the
Congo and Abyssinia, were to prove very stressful; and, at Addis Ababa, potentially
dangerous.

Like his father, Thesiger grew up to be ‘justifiably proud’ of his family. By this he
meant proud of the Thesigers. He adored his mother and got on well with her relatives,
but her family did not greatly interest him. He said: ‘The Vigors were landed gentry
with estates in Ireland. They achieved nothing of consequence, whereas every
generation of my father’s family produced somebody who was outstanding.’

Whenever Kathleen Mary Vigors thought of Ireland, she pictured Burgage, her childhood home near Bagenalstown and Leighlinbridge, in County Carlow, where she had been brought up with her sister and brothers until she was eight. Some photographs of Burgage taken in June 1939 show the house and part of the estate, with meadows that slope from terraced lawns down to the River Barrow. Supposedly written at Burgage, Cecil Frances Alexander’s popular hymn ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’ praised the ‘river running by’ and the ‘purple-headed mountain’ – possibly Mount Leinster, which could be seen from the ‘Butler’s Terrace’. Thesiger said: ‘When we came back from Addis Ababa [in 1919], we went to Burgage and we were there for a bit. Burgage was desperately important to my mother. There was this love of Ireland and the Irish. She was passionate about Ireland, and yet she had seen so little of it.’

The Vigors originated either in France or Spain, and were among the many Protestants who fled to England in the sixteenth century. The Irish branch of the family originated with Louis Vigors, who became vicar of Kilfaunabeg and Kilcoe in County Cork in 1615. In the family records it is said that Louis Vigors’s son Urban served as chaplain to King Charles I. A later Vigors, Captain Nicholas Aylward, contributed important papers to the Linnean Society and published an essay titled ‘An Enquiry into the Nature of Poetic Licence’. Though severely wounded in the Peninsular War, he won distinction for his ‘scientific attainments’. Together with Sir Stamford Raffles he helped to found the Zoological Society of London in 1826, and served as the first of its secretaries. Nicholas Vigors’s stepbrother, General Horatio Nelson Trafalgar Vigors, was born in 1807, two years after the battle which his forenames celebrate so comprehensively. He served for some years in the 1850s as the acting Governor of St Helena, having previously commanded the island’s tiny regiment.

In *The Life of My Choice* Thesiger sketched this Vigors grandparents briefly: ‘My maternal grandmother was an undemonstrative and rather prudish woman, whereas my grandfather was rather a rake, a confirmed gambler and obviously excellent company. My mother remembered him with affection all her life.’ Thesiger later explained that he described Thomas Vigors, his grandfather, mainly from Kathleen’s reminiscences. He recalled: ‘When I was a boy, my Vigors grandmother seemed to me a formidable, rather frightening figure. I think, in fact, she was very attached to my mother. They got on well and Granny [Vigors] was always kind to us.’

Kathleen’s father, Thomas Mercer Cliffe Vigors, was born in 1853 at Perth in Western Australia. Her mother, Mary Louisa Helen Handcock, was the elder daughter of Colonel the Honourable Robert French Handcock, a younger son of Lord Castlemaine of Moydrum Castle, County Westmeath. Thomas Vigors married Mary Louisa Handcock on 4 April 1877 at St Stephen’s church in Dublin. He inherited the Burgage estate in County Carlow when his bachelor uncle John Cliffe Vigors died in 1881. Kathleen, her sister Eileen Edmée and their brothers Edward and Ludlow Ashmead were brought up at Burgage until their parents separated about 1888. The comfortable Georgian house, with ivy-covered walls surrounded by large gardens, fields and woods, gave them a childhood as idyllic as Wilfred Thesiger’s early years at Addis Ababa. By coincidence Kathleen’s upbringing at Burgage ended when she was eight, the same age Thesiger would be when, to his dismay, he found that ‘we were
leaving Abyssinia for good, that we should not be coming back’.  

The difference was that Thesiger’s father and mother were happily married, whereas Kathleen’s parents had been hopelessly incompatible. The strained relationship between Thomas and Mary Louisa deteriorated until a separation became inevitable. When Mary Louisa found Thomas in bed with one of the housemaids, he excused himself laconically: ‘If one is going to appreciate Chateau Lafitte, my dear, one must occasionally have a glass of *vin ordinaire.*’ Taking her children with her, Kathleen’s mother went to live in England. She divided her time between Roe Green House at Hatfield in Hertfordshire, and the Vigors’s London flat, 18 Buckingham Palace Mansions, where Thesiger and his brother Brian stayed occasionally as schoolboys. Kathleen, Eileen, Edward and Ashmead had been born in London. They continued to visit their relatives in Ireland, including their father, who died in January 1908, the year before Kathleen’s wedding.

We do not know how or when Thesiger’s parents first met; but they were already corresponding, rather formally, by the time Wilfred Gilbert arrived at Boma, in the Belgian Congo, in December 1907. For some reason Thesiger avoided this subject, although in private he would discuss, quite openly, other more sensitive aspects of his life. Being so close to her eldest son, it seems inconceivable that Kathleen did not tell him anything about her courtship with his father. He could have written much more than he did about his parents (and, indeed, about himself) in *The Life of My Choice.* But instead he devoted many of its pages to less personally revealing themes, such as Abyssinian history, in a book that his publisher’s editor described as ‘magnificent, yet strangely impermeable’. Wilfred Thesiger had often been described as ‘enigmatic’. His autobiography merely confirmed this, and at the same time encouraged readers to speculate about the undisclosed details of his private life.