

KELLY ENRIGHT

OSA AND MARTIN

FOR THE LOVE OF ADVENTURE



*Osa and Martin* tells the story of legendary filmmakers and adventurers Osa and Martin Johnson, who, from the 1910s through the 1940s, brought the jungles of Africa and the South Pacific to millions of Americans on reel after movie reel. All the while, Osa did her best to create a home for them in the wildest of places.

But beyond their work, equally if not more fascinating is their relationship to each other. Instead of living predictable lives, Osa and Martin were always seeking the next daring exploit. Osa did not simply accompany her husband on his explorations—she was the heroine and the heart of those adventures. “I have had the right sort of woman to take along with me into the desert and jungle,” said Martin. “If ever a man needed a partner in his chosen profession, it has been I. And if ever a wife were a partner to a man, it is Osa Johnson.”

Back in America, Martin found respect among the scientific community and was even offered membership in the world-famous Explorers Club. Osa became one of high society’s most admired women, respected for her intrepid spirit as well as her inimitable fashion sense. Both became influential voices in the field of wildlife conservation.

In *Osa and Martin*, Kelly Enright brings this amazing couple fully to life. She chronicles their journey from a honeymoon among cannibals to safari camps in lion country. In doing so, she captures the true spirit of two people who explored and delighted in the world around them as that world, in turn, transformed them.



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*To my husband, may our adventures be as timeless*



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## PREFACE

I was a graduate student in search of a research topic a number of years ago when a mentor told me of a zebra-striped book she had picked up in a used bookstore. She told me what she knew of the woman who wrote the imaginatively titled *I Married Adventure*, and I was hooked. I searched the library for a copy of the book, knowing that it would not be difficult to find, given its unusual cloth case, among the bland brown and black bindings on the shelves. Indeed, it stood out among its neighboring travel narratives much like the black and white stripes of a real zebra stand crisp against the dustier hues of the African plains.

As I dipped into her life story, this woman, named Osa Johnson, immediately captured my imagination. She was not simply a wife accompanying her husband on his explorations, but the heroine and the heart of those adventures. She lived in such a different world that I wondered how I might make sense of her life—how, for example, could she shoot at an elephant on one page of her narrative and cuddle one in her living room several pages later? But as I learned more about Osa and her husband, Martin, I found them to be remarkably relatable. The honesty and candor found in Osa's books endeared her to me. Her occasional outbursts (born from an independent and stubborn mind) and Martin's sometimes unsympathetic but very male reaction struck me as very real. They seemed like the best of companions; a couple who nurtured and challenged each other in both their private and public lives.

I was also intrigued by the fact that while their work contributed to science, they were not high-minded academics. They were middle-class Americans who did not consider themselves above catering to that audience. They had no pretensions. Even after Osa was named one of the world's best-dressed women, she



On their last African adventure, Osa and Martin seem as adoring of each other as on the day they wed.

continued to hunt and fish in safari clothes instead of confining herself to high-fashion celebrity.

Even though they were not scientists by training, they were caught up in the wave of the conservation movement that was emerging in the early twentieth century by virtue of being in the right place at the right time. During the end of the 1800s, familiar animals dwindled in numbers or completely disappeared. In the United States the extinction of passenger pigeons and near-extinction of American bison brought awareness to the idea that animals needed protection from overhunting and habitat degradation. Yet hunting for sport remained a conservation strategy. Within what we now broadly call the “conservation movement,” a sharp divide existed between “conservationists” and “preservationists.” The former, led by the gun-toting adventure seeker Teddy Roosevelt, sought to conserve resources without prohibiting their use. Thus, conservationists regulated landscapes to make

the most of available resources while maintaining natural places. Roosevelt proclaimed the value of nature, sport, and hunting in creating strong, rugged, individualistic American men. Preservationists, on the other hand, wished to set aside natural places and wildlife populations so that they might remain unspoiled by humans. Expressed most eloquently by the gentle wanderer John Muir, preservationists viewed nature as a refuge and a solemn place of spiritual renewal.

Martin and Osa first went to Africa, it seems, with little awareness of these domestic conservation conversations. To outdoorsmen in the 1920s, Africa meant hunting safaris. The British colonial government regulated the hunting of some of the top trophy animals, and the Johnsons, like most other visitors to British East Africa, obtained proper permits from the authorities in order to participate. Throughout the era, hunting preserves and permits became increasingly more regulated, though then, as now, such regulation was difficult to enforce in vast, wild places.

By the time Martin and Osa visited Africa the second time, the hobby of “hunting with a camera” instead of a gun was rising in popularity. The image of hunting as a masculine undertaking remained, but the idea of searching for wildlife simply to observe it was growing as well. Thus, when Osa and Martin seem a little trigger-happy in their early days in Africa, they are reflecting typical American ideas about the nature of wild adventures. Through further contact with those intimately involved in regulating and studying wildlife—and in observing the reduction of game numbers themselves—Martin and Osa evolved into more astute observers of nature. We must think of them as reflective of their era and read with an eye to their growing sentiments toward nature. In their works, the meaning of adventure changes from hunting and near-death encounters to glimpses of wildlife in situ and an appreciation for moments of serene observation. In part, their lives and this book are a story of an evolving conservation ethic.

While the Johnsons were typical of their contemporaries in their representations of adventures with animals, they were also typical in the images of native peoples they put before audiences. The racial stereotypes embraced for entertainment purposes in their commercial films are, at times, difficult for today's viewer to watch uncritically. If you read Martin and Osa's books, however, you'll find their attitudes toward native people surprising in a different way. Their relationships with the many Africans they employed as porters, cooks, houseboys, trackers, and gun bearers show admiration for individuals and even attempts to impress them and gain their respect on their own cultural terms. What the films reveal is an attempt to cater to audience expectations. The comparison between book and film shows the Johnsons were quite open-minded in their dealings with different types of people they met on their travels.

What many people (myself included) find most compelling about Osa and Martin, apart from their work, is their relationship. Instead of living predictable, workaday lives, they seemed to be always at play. Though they sometimes revealed the hardships and trials of their chosen lives, it is this playfulness that brings them to life. You can tell by the way they looked at each other in their more casual portraits that they were having fun. You can also tell that they adored and admired each other. They had the kind of love that inspired each other to live as fully as possible. Other biographers have tracked their travels and described the behind-the-scenes details of their professional lives, and these works have been invaluable to my research in outlining geographies and explaining discrepancies. These biographies, however, do not flesh out the development of their experiences in and thoughts about the natural world, nor do they impart to the reader the spirit of Osa and Martin's adventures and personalities, or the full picture of their relationship.

This biography follows their increasing awareness toward wildlife and wild places. In writing it, my hope is to convey the

## PREFACE

true spirit of Osa and Martin, not as static or flawed celebrity personalities, but as two people who explored and interpreted the world around them as that world, in turn, transformed them. Mark Twain famously proclaimed that travel is death to ignorance. Martin and Osa experienced the horizon-broadening effects of travel firsthand and brought those visions back, hoping to share their love of adventure as well as their respect for unfamiliar places, people, and animals.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My own small adventures inspired much of my interest in Osa and Martin, and those who have shared such adventures contributed to this fascination. My brother, Jeffrey Enright, made the one willow tree in our Jersey City backyard into a wilderness and, along with other adventurous friends, transformed Florida campgrounds into worlds ripe for exploration. While the only wild animals we faced were armadillos, these young wanderings instilled in me the sense, if not the fact, of adventure.

My parents, Dennis and Patricia Enright, expanded my sense of the world when I was very young, taking me to see the pyramids at Giza, German castles, and Venetian canals. Through them I learned that travel is not just the monuments but the moments—the chill of the Egyptian desert at night, the crunch of real French bread on Parisian streets, and the glow of a campfire under summer snow in the Sierras.

My husband, Christopher Imeson, has heroically indulged my penchant for exploration—from crumbling roadside attractions to seaside Mayan ruins. Whether hiking mountain peaks or diving coral reefs, we have found each other, like Martin and Osa, willing partners in adventure.

The staff at the Martin and Osa Johnson Safari Museum in Chanute, Kansas, welcomed me more than once to their archives and assisted my research even from a distance. Museum director Conrad Froehlich provided insights into the Johnsons' world—both past and present. Curator Jacqueline Borgeson guided me through the archives, patiently responded to numerous queries, and quickly turned around photographs for publication. Her work has been invaluable to my own.

When I learned of an editor who had already heard of Martin and Osa, I hoped she would share my passion for their lives.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Holly Rubino has supported and guided this project from its start. Her careful editing and thoughtful questions helped crystallize my ideas, and her enthusiasm for Osa and Martin has no doubt helped make this book what it is.

## INTRODUCTION



Martin and Osa were true partners who took turns manning the camera.

In 1932, the same year that Amelia Earhart made the first female solo flight over the Atlantic, a female reporter for the *Wichita Sunday Eagle* wrote an article entitled “Do Women Make Good Explorers?” In it, she posed the questions: “Are women too temperamental to be good explorers? Do they have the physical strength to march endlessly through hot deserts, or the courage to face the perils of the African jungle? Can they calmly follow their leader into the unknown recesses of dark Africa and accept stoically the hardships and dangers which can turn strong men into weak-kneed pawns in the hands of the mighty jungle?” No, replied established male explorers, lurching at what we can only assume is



Osa's natural charm contributed to their success on expedition and on the silver screen.

the Explorers Club in New York City (which did not allow female membership until the 1980s). “One woman,” said these men, “can cause more trouble on an exploring expedition . . . than a whole horde of wild elephants, a tribe of wild and blood-thirsty savages, or a dozen lions and tigers ready for food.” Women, they asserted, desire too many frivolities on expeditions, bringing an excess of luggage filled with “fine clothes and makeup.” Although the men acknowledged that a woman might hold her own when faced with a moment of grave danger, she would not, they insisted, have the emotional fortitude to withstand months of “trifling little things” necessary to travel in the world’s jungles.

To all this Martin Johnson told the reporter, “You don’t know my wife.” She had, he continued, “showed the most remarkable courage of any person I have ever seen in the jungle.” Osa Johnson, the reporter claimed, was the first woman given a hunting license in Africa and had “faced more wild beasts in their native habitats than any white explorer, with the exception of her husband.” Martin, however, did allow that perhaps not all women were fit for exploration, proclaiming Osa’s strengths while questioning if many other of the female sex would have done the same.

“Boots and pants and a clean shirt or so . . . and I’m ready,” retorted Osa to the claim that women bring too much luggage on an expedition. “Of course, I do like a tooth brush,” she admitted, “but I can get along perfectly well without a compact or lipstick.” Furthermore, she argued, since she was smaller than her husband, her luggage was actually more compact. On the other hand, Osa did seem, on film at least, concerned with her appearance. She was acutely aware that she was judged for her beauty, fashion, and charm, as well as for her derring-do. In her lifetime she was considered among British East Africa’s most beautiful women and voted one of the world’s best dressed.

Though Osa dismissed the comments as “silly prejudice,” she pointed out that the skeptical New York gentlemen “have in mind a high-heeled, silk-stockinged young flapper”—a wholly different kind of woman than herself. The newspaper article in which this discussion took place defended female courage as not having had a chance to prove itself: “Mrs. Johnson has proved to the world that women do have the bravery of men—but they often don’t get a chance to show it, except when a mouse runs across the room.”

In her life’s travels Osa had many opportunities to prove her courage. Whether face to face with lions or chasing pests from the corners of the bedroom, she stood as the ideal wife for an exploring man. She was also the perfect partner for a man seeking celebrity. Osa was the star of Martin’s films, as well as his companion in

making them. Her on-screen charm drew in many viewers, while her real-life charisma charmed press and sponsors alike.

In the course of their twenty years of traveling together—from 1917 to 1937—Martin and Osa Johnson made ten commercial films and more than seventy lecture films. Between them they published 120 articles in publications ranging from the journal of the American Museum of Natural History and *Forest and Stream* to the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Cosmopolitan*. They inspired a comic strip and a kids' club. Osa created a line of clothing—and another of stuffed animals. Advertisers posted their faces in magazines hoping to boost sales of tea, soda, beer, batteries, flashlights, cameras, refrigerators, and beauty products.

Martin and Osa saw their lives as a partnership. The survival of their marriage despite perils, disease, work, and celebrity is quite astonishing. Many exploring couples did not last as long. “I wouldn’t think of going any place without Osa,” said Martin. “By taking my wife along, we can continue the companionship of our married life, even though we are not in the comforts and luxuries of civilization. We are pals and co-workers, and that is more than a lot of married people can say.”

Whether in the jungles of Borneo or on the African plains, Osa clung to her role as housekeeper. Even in places Osa knew they wouldn’t stay for very long, she “fussed about the house—quite as if [she were] settling down for at least a year—cleaning it, reorganizing it, routing the deadly scorpions out of the corners, teaching the cook some of the dishes which [she knew] were good for Martin, and between times prowling around the garden with [her] .22 and polishing off the somewhat too numerous snakes.” Hunting was part of her normal housework. As homemaker, she was also provider. And providing in the wilderness meant hunting, not walking to the butcher’s shop. Osa, who named her autobiography *I Married Adventure*, believed that despite wedding such a rootless lifestyle, her marital duties included making a home wherever they went. “I doubt that ever a woman lived who had a

stronger instinct for homemaking than I,” she confided, “or a man with greater need for a home than Martin.”

After a brief revival of their films in the 1950s, the Johnsons were all but forgotten. Osa’s books remained on the market through that decade as well but disappeared for nearly three decades before being republished. Osa’s stuffed animals and clothing are now difficult to come by. Even the Martin and Osa Johnson Safari Museum and archive that preserves their memory—located well off the main interstate through Kansas in Osa’s hometown, Chanute—contains only a small collection of such paraphernalia. The Johnsons’ unique blend of Hollywood celebrity and scientific contributions have perhaps made their legacy difficult to pin down. While their raw footage and observations contributed to wildlife studies, and their commercial films circulated in the world of entertainment, they had been marginalized as bit players in the histories of both wildlife study and film. In recent years, the Johnsons’ contributions to wildlife documentary filmmaking have been more recognized, but their work does not tell the whole story of Osa and Martin’s adventurous lives.



## CHAPTER 1

# MARTIN'S FIRST ADVENTURE

*Like all sailors, we did not love the sea. It was the eternal menace.*

—MARTIN JOHNSON

Of the two native Kansans, it was Martin who first set his sights on adventure. He came by his wanderlust honestly. Martin's father, John Alfred Johnson, had immigrated as a child to the United States from Sweden with his family in 1851. He worked as a newsboy in Chicago and New York before moving to the Black Hills to drive a mule team. Given the assignment of transporting buffalo hides to Gen. George Armstrong Custer's army who were stationed on the plains fighting Native Americans, John then enlisted in the army. In 1880 he married Lucinda Constant, and they settled in Rockford, Illinois, where he began work as a foreman at the Rockford Watch Company. Lucinda was the descendent of late-eighteenth-century settlers from Virginia whose family had moved slowly west—first to Ohio, then Illinois, and finally Missouri, where she was born. Their son, Martin Elmer Johnson, was born on October 9, 1884. After five years in Rockford, John grew restless once again. When he saw advertisements for the growing Kansas town of Lincoln, pitched as the perfect frontier town, full

of health, fresh air, and opportunity, he and Lucinda packed up their infant son and headed west.

Lincoln was a farming community connected to the Union Pacific Railroad that had reached a population of just over two thousand by the time the Johnson family arrived. They found a place to live in town and rented a shop where John set up a jewelry store. Martin began school in a one-room schoolhouse that became increasingly packed with students as Lincoln's population continued to grow. Not inspired by what he considered repetitive and boring lessons, Martin secretly read Frank Merrill dime novels (his parents did not approve of them) but mostly turned to the outdoors for stimulation. He often ran home from school to hop on his horse and ride past the developing farmland and what remained of the native, undeveloped prairie.

One classmate remembered Martin playing with what was possibly his first camera, saying he was a "boy genius with photography." Martin had taken a photo of his friend's girlfriend and put it onto the face of his watch, which his friend found truly impressive. The pair often swam in the Verdigris River and were the victims of bullies throwing their clothes in the water until Martin challenged them to a fight and rounded up enough pals to scare off the aggressors.

Displeased with the stillness of home and school life, Martin grew restless. He frequently skipped school and ran away from home several times, hopping the train out of Lincoln, usually showing up at the homes of Lucinda's family in the Midwest. Martin finished grade school in Independence, Kansas, and at the age of fourteen, he ran away from home once more. This time, however, he made his way to Chicago, where he found a job taking care of valuable horses—each worth \$250—headed to Liverpool, England. With his expenses fully paid by his employer, Martin must have felt like a boy on vacation rather than a hired hand. First he rode the train with the horses to Detroit; from there he took a ferry to Niagara Falls. He was impressed by the waterfall

so familiar to him from Eastman Kodak pictures. He toured the Kodak factory, then traveled with the horses to the East Coast to prepare for the overseas trip.

When they arrived in Jersey City, New Jersey, where the horses were to be stabled until boarding the ship, one fell sick and delayed Martin's anticipated trip to Manhattan. Other business on the west side of the Hudson River kept him in New Jersey until the next day, when he finally arrived in the heart of New York City. Martin went to the famous landmarks of the day—the Brooklyn Bridge, the Statue of Liberty, Wall Street, Trinity Church, the Flat-iron Building, and Broadway. "Gee but N.Y. is big," he wrote to his parents, telling them of riding ferries, subways, and elevated lines and "so much more my head is in a whirl." New York impressed him more than Chicago. There, he did not have to dodge burning cinders flying in the air. "[E]very thing is so clean and such tall skyscrapers that the tallest ones in Chicago would look like midgets to the side of them," he mused.

Martin wrote this letter to his parents on stationery he lifted from the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. "What do you think of the bluff I am putting up?" he asked them. "I just walked in the Waldorf-Astoria and don't pay any attention to the millionaires around me." Brash and confident, Martin had only just begun his travels. But he was proud of how far he had come. "[W]ell you were amazed were you," he asked them, "well—you will be further amazed now—be prepared—I ship for Liverpool early Monday morning with the same horses."

Martin crossed the Atlantic Ocean, tramped around England and Paris, and then returned to the United States. In September he was back in Independence working for his father, whose shop had just begun to carry the latest Eastman Kodak cameras. It was not long, however, before Martin found another outlet for exploration. Seeing an open call for a South Seas expedition with famous adventurer and writer Jack London, Martin quickly sent in an application. London telegraphed Martin and asked if he could

cook. Eager to impress, Martin replied yes (even though he could not), and in December he arrived at the writer's home in Oakland, California, and began preparation for the expedition.

Still lacking a high school diploma, Martin now turned to London, his new mentor, to receive all the education required of a young adventurer. Never one to sit still for a formal education, London had left the University of California at Berkeley after only one semester. Even London seemed to see the young man, now in his early twenties, was about to embark on a lifetime of explorations. He wrote to Martin's younger sister, Freda: "It is true that I have stolen your brother away from you. But then he wanted to be so stolen, to go on the long voyage, to behold the fire people, and the tree people, and the people of the great swamp, and the great forest. And if he be not eaten by cannibals, I will return him safely to you."

At the time, Jack London was already the country's most popular adventure writer. He had published his classic novels *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, and dozens of magazine articles. Along with his wife, Charmian Kittredge London, he had designed and built a boat on which to sail to the South Seas. They called it the *Snark*, after an imaginary animal in a Lewis Carroll poem. To Martin, the *Snark* was "a mere cork of a boat." What's more, the crew included no experienced navigator, engineer, sailor, or cook (though the latter was Martin's official role). It consisted of the Londons; Paul H. Togichi, a Japanese immigrant and London's personal servant; Charmian's uncle, yachtsman Roscoe Eames; and Stanford University athlete Herbert (Bert) Stolz.

London conceived of the journey as fodder for his writing and imagination. Most practically, he hoped to publish several articles on the lives of the native people of the South Seas. He wanted to take an anthropological angle—though anthropology was still a young discipline at this time. London had read detailed descriptions of native peoples in the adventure books of his favorite writers, Capt. James Cook and Joseph Conrad. It is likely he became

intrigued by the discipline on his 1894 visit to the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, which hosted the first major anthropological installation in the United States. It introduced the public to foreign cultures and highlighted the "advance" or "evolution" of civilization, ranking non-Western peoples as more "primitive." In addition, the fair hosted a colorful display of native peoples going about their daily routines as best they could. Leading anthropologist Franz Boas (who would start up the Anthropology Department at Berkeley just a few years after London dropped out) curated a Northwest Coast village there. The public found such living exhibits entertaining but, by most accounts, were more amused than educated.

According to Martin, London's agenda was not inflected with this sense of superiority or spectacle. "He would treat of their domestic problems," Martin explained, "social structures; problems of living; cost of living as compared with the cost in the United States; education; opportunities for advancement; general tone of peoples; culture; morals; religion; how they amuse themselves; marriage and divorce problems; housekeeping, and a hundred other topics." London wanted to create an authentic record of the lives of South Seas peoples. As always, however, London also had a more romantic goal: He hoped to find adventure. Whatever that adventure might be, he would write it down. "Well," he joked, "if we're boarded by pirates and fight it out until our deck becomes a shambles, I don't think I'll write about it. And if we're wrecked at sea, and are driven by starvation into eating one another, I'll keep it quiet for the sake of our relatives. And if we're killed and eaten by cannibals, of course I shan't let the American public get an inkling of it."

On April 23, 1907, crowds gathered at the docks of San Francisco to see off the famous writer and his unlikely crew. All of London's bohemian buddies were there, including the poet George Sterling, college football coach James Hopper, and the artist Xavier Martinez. The *Snark* broke from the dock and sailed