

AFRICAN TRAVELS

An exhibition at the Pitt Rivers Museum marks the centenary of the birth of Sir Wilfred Thesiger, explorer, writer and photographer. Curator Philip Grover ARPS explains its focus on Africa



Above: Berber riders at the annual Feast of the Throne celebrations. Morocco. 1968. © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

One of the greatest travellers of the last century, Sir Wilfred Thesiger is probably best known for his two extraordinary journeys across the Rub' al Khali, or Empty Quarter, the vast arid desert of southern Arabia, which he chronicled in *Arabian Sands* (1959), now considered a classic work of travel writing. Thesiger's haunting descriptions of the shifting sands and striking accompanying photographs have stirred many readers from their armchairs in the intervening years. But Arabia, and later his experiences living among the Marsh Arabs of southern Iraq, were interludes in a long life, the greater part of which was spent living and travelling in East and North Africa.

Born in 1910 in Addis Ababa, where his father was the British Minister in charge of the Legation, Wilfred Thesiger spent his boyhood in Abyssinia (now Ethiopia), and he retained a lifelong affinity with the country and continent of his birth.

In 1930, while still studying at Oxford, he attended the coronation of Emperor Haile Selassie, the only witness of the spectacle to be sent a personal invitation. Afterwards, he undertook his first significant expedition, traversing the dangerous and unexplored Sultanate of Aussa, to locate the place where the Awash River ended.

Administrative postings in the Sudan followed, as did later journeys through the Tibesti Mountains in

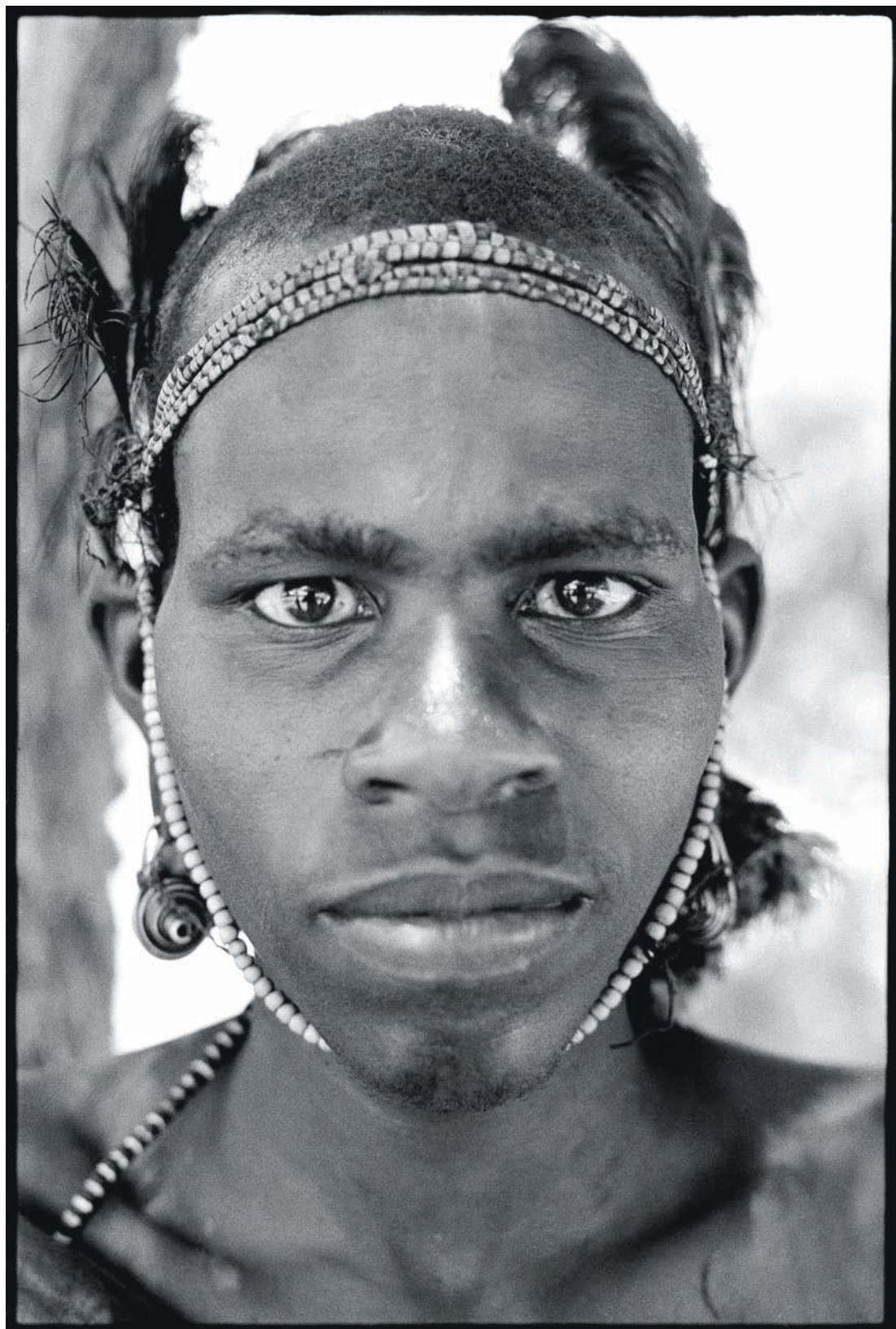
Chad and the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco.

When Mussolini's Italy invaded Abyssinia in 1935, Thesiger experienced this as a personal assault, and he served under Wingate with local 'Patriot' fighters to liberate the country during WWII, being awarded the DSO for his part in the capture of Agbar Fort.

Following his celebrated travels in Arabia and Iraq during the late 1940s and 1950s, Thesiger returned to Ethiopia in 1959, visiting the remarkable rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and thereafter he based himself for much of each year in East Africa.

By the late 1970s, he had settled permanently in northern Kenya, living among a close-knit group of the pastoral Samburu, whom he considered his adoptive family. Throughout this time, Thesiger was taking photographs, initially with an old box-camera inherited from his father, and subsequently with a Leica, which he upgraded at regular intervals but which always travelled with him.

As curators of an anniversary exhibition, Christopher Morton and I have favoured an approach other than that of a survey of highlights, an approach which has of course been taken before, both at the Pitt Rivers Museum in its first major exhibition of Thesiger's work, and by the man himself in later books including *Desert, Marsh and Mountain* and *Visions of a Nomad*.



Instead, this exhibition is the first to explore Thesiger's lifelong relationship with Africa. His very first published photographs were taken in Africa, appearing with a series of articles about his 1933–4 Awash expedition. Surprisingly however, his African pictures were never reproduced with the same zeal as his photographs of Arabia and Asia, which were superficially less appealing to publishers, if not to his readers.

Thesiger wrote about Africa and its importance to him, notably in his autobiography *The Life of My Choice*

(1987), but the visual evidence to a large extent remained unseen. The focus on Africa has therefore allowed us to explore a lesser known area of his photography, and to examine it in detail for the first time.

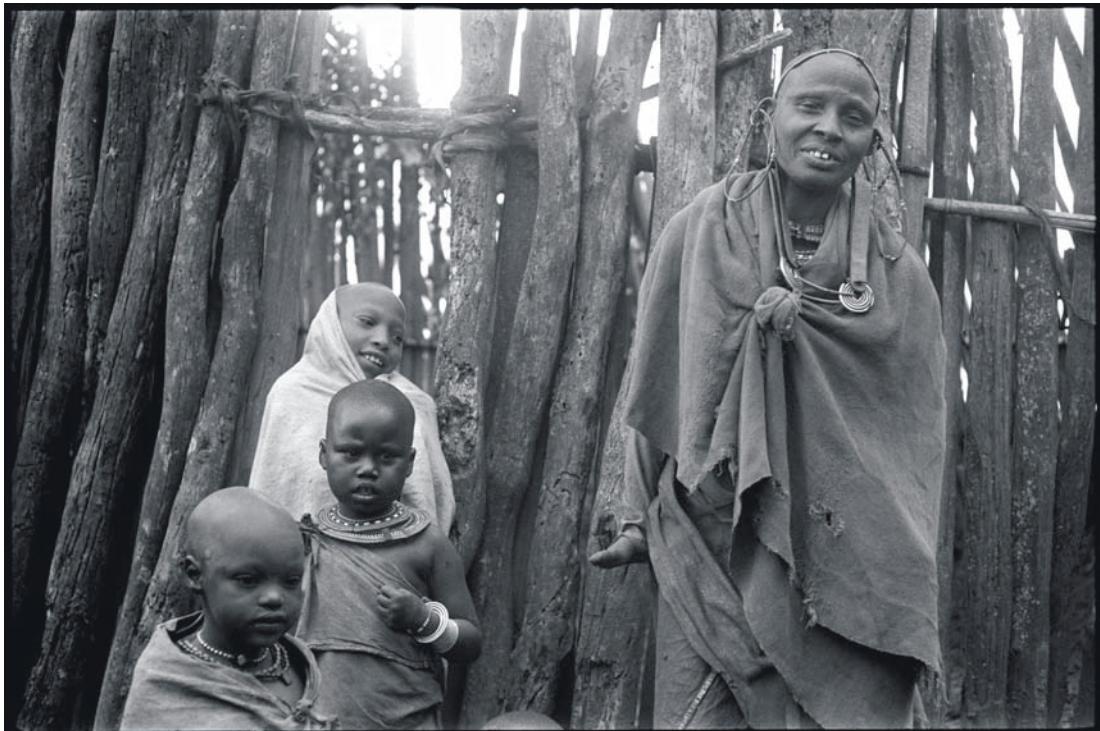
The photographs have been chosen as representative of many of the themes in his work, but they are undoubtedly also some of his finest and most striking images. Drawn from over 17,000 negatives, or more than $\frac{2}{5}$ of his photographic output, they span the greater part of his life, and show people and places in Ethiopia, Sudan, Morocco, Tanzania and

Left: Portrait of a Samburu youth shortly after circumcision. 'After this ceremony, the initiate became a moran', Thesiger noted. Near Maralal, Kenya. 1977. © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.



Above: Samburu dance.
Near Maralal, Kenya.
1982.

Right: A Maasai woman and children at the entrance of a protected settlement. 'Such stockades are built of juniper posts', Thesiger noted. Ngorongoro, Tanzania. 1963. © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.



Kenya; the last picture in our selection was taken near his home in Maralal in Kenya in 1983.

"I am certain that the first nine years of my life influenced everything that followed", Thesiger wrote in 1994, in the opening lines of his memoir, *My Kenya Days*. As he saw it, Africa set his life on its course, and it is therefore fitting that it should provide the focus for a centenary exhibition.

From his birth in Abyssinia to his final years in Kenya,

Africa provided more than bookends to a life, however, and Thesiger saw it very much as his spiritual home, declaring even that he hoped to end his days there.

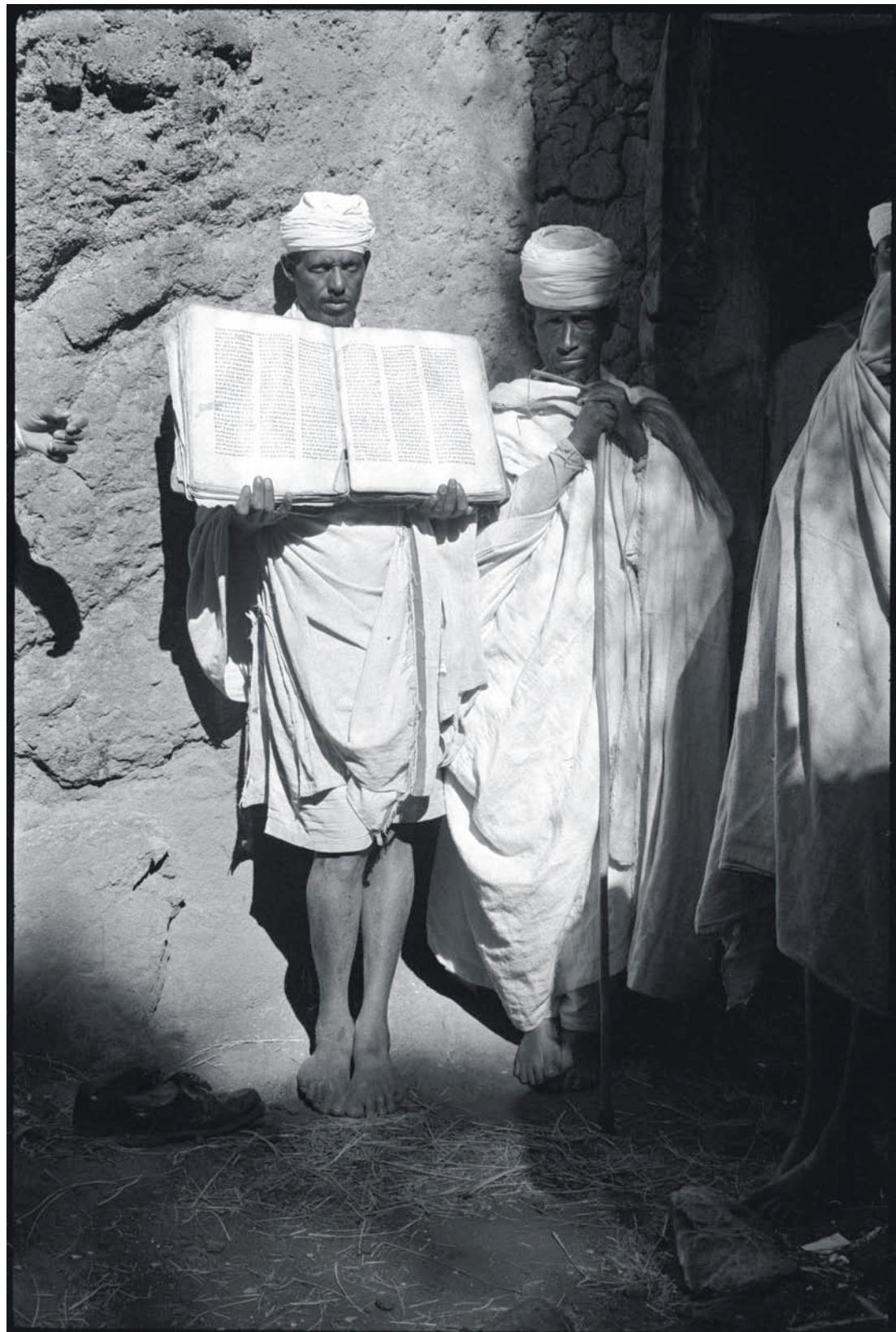
A lifetime's engagement with the continent provides the necessary biographical context, and makes possible a fresh examination of his importance as an explorer, collector and photographer; and these themes are more fully explored in our book *Wilfred Thesiger in Africa*, published to accompany the exhibition.

Taken over five decades, the African pictures also document Thesiger's development as a photographer, in particular as a portraitist. "Ever since my time in Northern Darfur", he wrote, "it has been people, not places, not hunting, not even exploration that have mattered to me most." Although known to a large extent for his often romantic images of landscape, Thesiger saw them as secondary, a setting for his portraits.

Appropriately for an ethnographic museum

therefore, the exhibition is also a celebration of the men and women depicted, and the diverse cultures they represent: the Afar, Konso and Boran of Ethiopia; the Nuer and Dinka of Sudan; the Berbers of Morocco; and the Samburu and Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania. *Wilfred Thesiger in Africa* offers glimpses of some of the most fascinating cultures and places on the African continent, seen through the lens of one of its most celebrated observers.

Philip N Grover ARPS



Left: Man holding a large bound volume of religious texts. Ethiopia has a Christian tradition which dates back to the fourth century.
Ethiopia. 1960.
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