

Kenya, late October 2007, a little while before the short rains arrive to fill the gullies and freshen the dry plains; just two months until this most peaceable of African nations would explode in a fury of rioting and tribal conflict, fuelled by claims of election vote-rigging. Out of a still blue sky, a little two-seater plane drops smoothly down over the flat tops of acacia trees towards a neat airstrip, scattering a herd of hartebeest and one lone and stately eland. Waiting in an open-top Jeep are Michael and Nicky Dyer, owners of Borana Ranch in Laikipia: 32,000 acres of rabbit-coloured grassland, rocky outcrops and whistling thorn containing 2,000 head of beef cattle, several hundred giraffe and elephant and three prides of lion.

Michael limps across to the plane, one hand outstretched in welcome, the other gripping a hospital crutch, the legacy of a recent motorbike accident. It is a short drive to the homestead: a low timber and drystone house of deep verandas with basket chairs swinging from hooks, book-lined rooms with polished floors and comfortable sofas. There are guest rooms in a separate wing and a cookhouse across the lawn; there is cold ginger beer and wine and a lunch of spinach tart, green salad and freshly baked bread.

On the face of it, little distinguishes the Dyers' generation of white landowners from their settler predecessors. They run huge farms, employ black domestic staff and plentiful farm labour. They play polo with their white neighbours and send their children to public schools in England; they fly private planes and socialise in town at the fascinatingly retro Muthaiga Club, with its tennis lawns, uniformed servants and members-only bars.

And in the 45 years since Kenya won independence from its colonial masters, little had come along to disturb the privileged lifestyle of the European families who chose to stay on, encouraged by the country's first black president, Jomo Kenyatta. There had been plenty of dispute over land and property since then, but always between ethnic groups, with patronage going to the tribe of whoever was in government. Kenyatta's hands-off policy towards white settlers was continued by subsequent presidents Daniel Moi and Mwai Kibaki, and even in the bloodletting earlier this year when the homes and smallholdings of tribal enemies were torched and their occupants killed, the white-owned estates were left untouched.

But the Land Reform Bill currently being debated by Kenya's coalition government could bring an abrupt end to the free run enjoyed by the landowning elite of both colours. Proposals backed >>

PORTRAIT: GUILLAUME BONN; JANE WHEATLEY



The Dyers in Borana, from left: (back row) Bimbi, Martin, Sophie, Nicky, (front row) Tony, Rose, Charlie, Michael and Zara, holding baby Elsa. Right: Nicky Dyer sorting beads with local women

HAPPIER VALLEY

Kenya's latest generation of white landowners has worked hard to put something back into the country, setting up local schools, hospitals and promoting conservation in place of big-game hunting. Now, Jane Wheatley reports, a new land reform bill could put an end to it all



<< by the reformist, progressive minister for lands, James Orengo, include the restitution of “historical injustice” – in which tribal lands were handed to settlers and, after independence, to black politicians and businessmen – and are vigorously opposed by both European and African landowners, including President Kibaki, with vested interests in preserving the status quo. By contrast, Kibaki’s rival in last year’s elections, Raila Odinga, now sharing power in an uneasy truce, supports a radical redistribution of land rights. “This is our constitutional moment,” land and security expert Njoki Wamai told me. “If only our leaders would stop being selfish.” But in an e-mail to me, Michael wrote: “The proposed land policy, if it were to go through in its present state, would be ruinous to Kenya’s economy.”

Michael and his younger brothers are at the forefront of a radical re-thinking of attitudes towards land use, wildlife and the black community. Where sheep and cattle ranching were once pre-eminent, game animals were shot as pests and for sport, and Africans were, at best, treated with feudal paternalism, now tourism is the cash cow, conservation is the new creed and the Dyers’ Masai and Meru neighbours are getting a share of the action.

The story begins at the close of the First World War: the British Government was handing out land in East Africa to soldier settlers, and the Dyer brothers’ maternal grandfather, Will Powys, drew a favourable block of several thousand acres around Kisima spring in the foothills of Mount Kenya. He went to work for an established farmer, took his pay in trees, stock and machinery, and in 1927 set off with sheep, a horse, a mule, and a bullock wagon to make his new home. Powys stayed on after independence, having accumulated several farms and a thriving family business.

“We were lucky to reap the benefit,” admits his grandson, who took over Borana, next door to the mother farm, Kisima, in 1984 after graduating from agricultural college. “I was full of ideas,” he says. “It didn’t rain for 18 months, 700 cattle died; that was my introduction. No matter what I did, we couldn’t make money.” In a similar predicament at neighbouring Lewa Downs, his cousin Ian Craig found resorted to borrowing money from his butcher to stay alive. Craig then used his skills as a hunter to earn a living, guiding rich Americans on game shoots. “One day,” Michael tells me, “Ian found himself sitting up on the Matthews Range with a friend, watching a herd of elephant being slaughtered in front of them. It was an epiphany: his family set up wilderness trails for the first tourists and we realised that we all had to change.”

Today, Lewa is an internationally renowned wildlife conservancy, and the discreetly luxurious, £300-a-night Borana Lodge caters for top-end tourism – the first such establishment to be built in Laikipia: “No other ranches were doing it,” says Michael. “Now there is hardly one that doesn’t. We still take cattle ranching extremely seriously here, but in a good year it brings in around £75,000, while turnover from the lodge is more like £600,000.” Visitors want to see plentiful wildlife, so cattle numbers have been reduced and they are no longer corralled in timber *bomas* at night: “This saves on tree cutting,” explains Michael, “and they are more mobile, creating a nitrogen-rich footprint which brings in zebra, waterbuck and guinea fowl. We lose a few cattle to lion, but we ignore it and let lion do their thing.” At first, he says, he had a hard time persuading his uncle that they were sitting on such an asset: “He is a cattle man – he’ll shoot anything that competes with his stock or preys on them. At one point the zebra were all but wiped out. I remember when the last rhino was shot in the forest.”

Michael’s neighbours, the Laikipia Masai, are pastoralists – goat and cattle herders who took no more kindly to wild animals than his uncle – so he suggested that they, too, should turn an adversary into an asset. “I knew when we went into tourism



‘YOU ARE MORALLY OBLIGED TO SHOW YOUR LAND IS CONTRIBUTING’

there would be planes and rich people coming for the wildlife, and if we didn’t get the community involved there would be animosity and envy. We said, ‘Look: this is what we are doing, why don’t you have a go?’” With Craig, Michael steered his Masai neighbours through an application for title to the land they had occupied for generations; then, with funding from an American foundation, helped them set up Il Ngwesi, the first community-run tourist lodge in Kenya – there are now a dozen more – managed and staffed entirely by Masai with profits returning to the community. Until then, the Masai were the only people without legal ownership of land: “Maybe because they think it’s theirs anyway,” says Michael. “They’d been shafted by whites and again, after independence, by the Kikuyu [Kenya’s dominant tribe], who embraced the modern world years ago.”

Lunch is long over, the table cleared, but Michael props his bandaged leg on a chair and presses on: he tells me about his steer-fattening scheme – Borana fattens Masai cattle for them for a few shillings a head, then takes them to the abattoir to show what the market will pay for a good beef animal. “Population growth has put enormous pressure on grazing land,” he says. “It needs a cultural shift to recognise the value of the ‘virtual cow’ – money in the bank – rather than a whole lot of thin animals on the ground.” There are

plans to acquire more land for a model community ranch to generate further income. “The Masai are very good at guiding, hospitality and wildlife management,” he explains. “Ideally, they should be making money from tourism and spending it in >>

From top: Nicky in Borana; Mugomone school, where Kisima farm has started a food programme and built a kitchen

<< more fertile areas, growing food to feed themselves.” So, social engineering on quite a scale? “Well, but you want them to adapt,” he says. “To make use of their biggest asset, which is wildlife and natural resources.”

Next day, I visit the lodge at Il Ngwesi to meet its manager, James Kinyaga, a smiling, self-assured young man dressed in the traditional scarlet cloth and beadwork of his tribe, and we sit on the deck with tea watching waterbuck drink at the pool below. When the idea for the lodge was suggested, they were suspicious, he says: “At first we were afraid that Ian and Michael had a plan to take our land. The white man had a bad history of grabbing land round here. It took us a year and some months and hundreds of meetings to get everyone to trust the idea.” Ten years on, the lodge has won many awards, security guards keep poachers out, grazing is restricted except in times of drought and wildlife is abundant. Flying here, I saw a herd of 20 elephant – the lure that keeps the tourist beds filled: “Elephant is the new cow,” says Kinyaga serenely.

On the way back from the lodge, Michael flew me over the Ngare Ndare forest: 25,000 acres of cedar, rosewood and African olive with a milky blue, glacial meltwater pool at its centre. For years, pastoralists grazed their cattle in the forest and cut down trees to make charcoal; wildlife would come out at night to attack crops and cattle, and owners took their complaints to Michael: “We’d end up shooting an elephant or a buffalo, but not really resolving anything,” he says. “So we put a fence around the forest and formed a trust to manage it.” There is a tree nursery which provides bursaries for schools; charcoal burning is banned, but the Masai can go in to graze their animals and collect firewood as long as there is no negative impact. The project is funded with European Union money: “The West has been a consumer of resources,” says Michael. “Why shouldn’t it pay for protecting such a treasure? Maybe an industry giant will want to fund it for carbon offset.”

Finding money for such schemes does not seem to present a problem: Africa, after all, has never been more fashionable, the perfect place to atone for sins, past and present. “People like to have a stake in the place,” says Michael. Like Richard Branson, who came as a guest to Borana, and ended up contributing £165,000 to another ambitious project: a £700,000 wildlife corridor linking the forest to Mount Kenya, eight miles to the south. There has always been seasonal movement of wildlife between these two great eco-systems, but land enclosure and development has meant that migrating herds of elephant and buffalo create havoc, crossing two main roads and crushing fences and crops. Now the route across Kisima up to the well-watered slopes of the mountain will be fenced off: “A stairway to heaven,” Michael calls it. “The mountain will sustain wildlife long after global warming starts to bite on the plains.”

But not all schemes are so grandiose, and not all attract donor money: I spent the next morning with two nurses, Joyce and Pauline, in their mobile clinic, funded and run by Nicky, which delivers primary healthcare, immunisations and ante and post-natal care to neighbouring villages, most of which are a 7-8 mile walk from the nearest medical aid. On the way, we stop at a small hut, standing unadorned on a flat, treeless plain, to look in on a patient: Jennifer had complications with her last baby, which was stuck in the birth canal. Summoned by mobile phone, the Jeep took her to hospital several hours’ drive away along roads badly eroded by recent heavy rains; both survived. Squatting on the mud floor, Jennifer hands over the baby’s record card inside its dusty plastic cover. As we leave, she presses a bag of six eggs into my hands. I look aghast at Joyce and



'THE WHITE MAN HAD A BAD HISTORY OF GRABBING LAND HERE'

Pauline, who shake their heads: refusal of a gift is not an option – even from a woman who appears to have nothing.

A mile further on, the nurses set up shop in an empty building. Babies are brought to be weighed and vaccinated; a woman with a chest infection presents an empty bottle to be filled with antibiotic; another complains of a recurring STD. “We have cleared it up before,” says Joyce, “but her husband is sleeping with other women and keeps re-infecting her.” Maria Paramashu is a regular visitor, and with Joyce interpreting, she tells me that the clinic has made a big difference. “We used to have to go over the hill a very great distance; we were afraid of wild animals, and anyway, people might be too sick to walk, so sometimes they would die. It was hard to take the children so far, so they would not get their immunisations. Also, we had to have the money for medication; now the nurses know us and they give credit – maybe we sell a goat so we pay next time.”

One of the clinic’s most popular services with the women is the contraceptive implant, Depo-Provera. It gives them a break between babies, but since the number of children, like the number of cattle, is a mark of status for Masai men, they keep it a secret from their husbands. Grace, who is 39, is the mother of six children: the last one is nearly three and there will be no more, she says firmly. Do the men know why their women don’t get pregnant? “They suspect,” >>

Clockwise, from top left: James Kinyaga; supporters of land redistribution advocate Raila Odinga going to an election campaign rally; Pauline (left) with a patient at the clinic

KENYA

THIS COULD END THE FREE RUN OF KENYA'S LANDOWNING ELITE



<< she smiles. "But there is no proof, no pills to find, nothing!" That morning, I ask Stephen Nyausi, father of seven, why it is important to have many children. "Because if they are well and strong they can help with the sheep and cattle and with growing maize and potatoes, then the family will be rich," he tells me.

Nyausi is a supporter of Raila Odinga's Orange Democratic Party: "Why should white people have our land?" he asks. It's a question that might have come closer to the top of the agenda had Odinga emerged the clear victor in the presidential elections six weeks later. Even so, many people told me then that his main headache would not be white ownership, but arranging a fairer redistribution of land between Kikuyu, Kalenjin and his own Luo tribe in the central highlands and the area around Mombasa on the coast – both some distance from Laikipia.

When Nicky comes to collect me from the clinic at midday, there are still a dozen patients waiting; will they all be seen? "Every last one," she says. "We never leave anyone out." On the way home, we stop to deliver materials to a group of women whose beadwork is sold through tourist shops. I lean against the Jeep and watch them – several dark heads and Nicky's blonde one bent over bags of beads – arguing about colours and designs. As well as the clinic and the beadwork enterprise, Nicky has set up a tannery and leather workshop for blind and disabled Masai men. Some of the profits go towards medical expenses and support for local children.

Borana supports five schools on its boundary and sends two of the brightest children each year on to secondary education: "We pay for tuition and books, but not accommodation," Michael tells me later. "If parents invest in their kids, they are more likely to support homework during the holidays rather than make them herd goats all day." Visitors to Borana often ask if they can donate to such projects: the help is welcome, but the key, says Michael, is commitment. "If one of us didn't stay engaged and enthusiastic, these things would founder quite easily." Being named "Best for Poverty Reduction" at last year's Virgin Holidays Responsible Tourism Awards, run in conjunction with *The Times*, was a much-needed boost.

From left: Margaret and Zipporah of the Mwachiri and Orphans Women's Group; a nurse in the mobile clinic weighing a baby

Next day at Kisima, where Charlie and Martin Dyer run a 10,000-acre mixed farm of intensive floriculture, sheep, arable and forestry, there is tea on the veranda of Martin's house, with its spectacular views down through forest and plain to the Ololokwe mountain range in the distance. There are his wife Sophie and their three children; his parents, Rose and Tony; Charlie with his blonde Swedish wife, Zara, and their new baby. There are framed photographs of children on ponies and a neat row of Wellington boots by the front door. It is all very comfortable and English and a far cry from the scenes I'd witnessed in the Masai villages.

"It is a privileged life," concedes Jonathan Moss, Kisima's farm director. "And we have a responsibility to our neighbours over the fence. We spend a significant proportion of our budget – 18 per cent of revenue – on infrastructure that in a Western business environment would be funded by government: local roads, water, health and education." Kisima has just started a food programme for the local primary school, and the foundations are being laid for a second school nearby. The neighbours are Meru – mainly subsistence farmers with, at most, 50-70 acres of closely cultivated land. That morning, says Moss, he had ordered extra fertiliser to boost yields. "We buy it in volume for ourselves at half the price it would cost them, and they pay us back when they sell their crops."

Early next morning, as Martin drove me to the farm, there were women planting Kisima's seed potatoes – "They can take the little ones for their own use, and we wait until the small growers have sold their crop before we put ours on the market," says Martin – and several older ladies bent over beside the dam that provides water for the rose houses, cutting grass with a sickle for their goats. Later in town, I meet Margaret and Zipporah of the Mwachiri and Orphans Women's Group, a co-operative of widows (Mwachiri means someone who toils by herself). Their goats are raised for meat, but Kisima bought them a Toggenburg stud goat, whose progeny will provide milk and precious income. Zipporah invites me to her 60sq yd smallholding, where she keeps her goats and a cow and grows peas and beans. The Toggenburg has already covered several of the group's goats. "He has a nice life," giggles Margaret.

On my last day in Kenya, at Sunday lunch with Dyer family friends, I tell the man sitting next to me how struck I've been that so many of these community schemes are not just about top-down aid but capacity building; helping people help themselves. "He's just buying them off," the man says slyly, glancing across the table to make sure his host is listening. Michael looks mildly irritated, then smiles and pours the man another glass of wine. There is, after all, some truth in what he says: a measure of enlightened self-interest, old-fashioned *noblesse oblige* that the Dyers would have learnt at their mother's knee, a little hubris, certainly, and a belief in land and wildlife conservation as a key to Kenya's future prosperity.

It is a year now since that lunch party, and the political landscape has altered: claims that socialist presidential candidate Raila Odinga of the Luo tribe had been fraudulently robbed of victory by his Kikuyu rival led to bloodshed and violence the like of which had not been seen for decades. The tribal warfare and dispossessions of earlier this year did not reach Laikipia, tourist numbers have begun to build again and few people seriously envisage a Zimbabwe-style meltdown with evictions of white farmers. But land reforms currently on the table include severely restricting the acreage of single land holdings and limiting tenure to 99 years instead of 999, and landowners, both black and white, are lobbying hard to amend or scrap these and other elements of the bill. Even if they succeed, there will remain a need to justify ownership of large tracts of land. "If you're sitting on 32,000 acres," says Michael, "you are morally obliged to show it contributing to the nation. As long as we're here, we're in it for the long haul." ■