

A History of Attitudes and Behaviours toward Animals in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain. Anthropocentrism and the Emergence of Animals

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The title and sub-title of this work promised much, suggesting – to this reader at least – that we would be presented with a monograph that could help take forward the growing international and inter-disciplinary scholarship on the animal – human historical relationship. The study of non-human animals within the humanities and social sciences has developed dramatically in recent decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, Keith Thomas's *Man and the Natural World*, Brian Harrison's study of animals and the state in 19th-century England, and F. M. L. Thompson's professorial inaugural lecture on Victorian England as a horse-drawn society notably helped establish non-human animals as a subject worthy of incorporation within existing modes of historical enquiry.⁽¹⁾ This incorporation of animals within existing discourses was similar to strategies adopted for new historical work in other fields, most notably feminist history. Sheila Rowbotham's ground breaking *Hidden from History. 300 years of women's oppression and the struggle against it* helped establish women as subjects of historical enquiry.⁽²⁾ However, it also moved forward the overall content and approach of historical research.

In similar vein there has been much recent work starting to explore different ways in which animal histories might be constructed. In her important 2002 essay 'A left-handed blow: writing the history of animals' Erica Fudge drew on ideas of Walter Benjamin to suggest a 'different organizing structure' of historical writing in relation to non-human animals.⁽³⁾ Unsurprisingly, such an approach not only recognised that to question an anthropocentric view of the world would challenge the status of the human but that different materials and historiographical approaches would be needed to think in new ways about the animal-human relationship.

Certainly much innovative work has emanated from an inter-disciplinary approach as exemplified, for instance, by the work of the Animal Studies Group such as *Killing Animals* or the AHRC-funded British Animal Studies Network series of seminar discussions embracing researchers from many fields including geography, science, anthropology, art, literature, history, media, and philosophy.⁽⁴⁾ In complementary vein journals such as *Society and Animals*, *Anthrozoos*, or a new journal from Palgrave on animals and ethics have developed the field.⁽⁵⁾ Recent books such as the six-volume series *A Cultural History of Animals* or the Reaktion series on individual animals, under the general editorship of Jonathan Burt, have been attempts to present in different ways imaginative and innovative approaches to the animal-human relationship.⁽⁶⁾ Accordingly, irrespective of the particular emphasis in Boddice's monograph, I was anticipating a work that drew on recent scholarship and attempted to take forward debate in interesting ways. Unfortunately, I was to be rather disappointed.

Boddice declares of his *own* work that 'the book provides the most complete account of human-animal relations in this period of British history yet produced' (p. 24). The author thus does not see his work as provisional, or part of an ongoing process of developing knowledge in the field. In his keenness to promote his 'originality' Boddice often omits discussion of books that cover similar aspects of his own subject, for example, Christine Kenyon-Jones' discussion of bull baiting in parliament or boldly declares that there is 'no comprehensive history of vegetarianism' (p. 24) overlooking James Gregory's innovative study of 19th-century vegetarianism.⁽⁷⁾ Clearly, there are always books that could be read or avenues followed and choices need to be made but when a writer declares his own work to be definitive he does rather set himself up to be challenged! As Boddice makes explicit, he sees much of the recent work in animal studies as invalid. Those who have been influenced, for example, by Richard Ryder's seminal work on 'speciesism' are summarily dismissed: 'the concept, to all but a few convinced apostles, is scarcely credible' (p. 341).

Historiographically, far from being forward-looking this is a conservative book. Boddice states in the introduction that his 'own view on animal ethics will remain strictly off the table [sic], except where I feel I can identify methodological weaknesses in contemporary thinking, with regard to its approach to history' (p. 3). The idea that animals should be made the subject of historical thinking is rejected as 'anachronistic' arguing that the history of 'human-animal relations ... is a window onto the history of human thought' (p. 4). Accordingly, there is no attempt to look for new materials to explore the animal-human relationship. Thus Boddice discusses Brian Harrison's 1970s article on the RSPCA as a vehicle for 're-mining the evidence' (p. 159). The definite article is important here. The materials used by Boddice here are similar to those of Harrison: minute books of the RSPCA and so forth, conventional archival material. Accordingly, the approach is one that takes materials as a given. Nor is it the case that new questions are necessarily posed. Rather Boddice believes that his role is to challenge the 'deployment of erroneous historical evidence' (p. 13). Employing the language of detection, 'evidence' suggests that the historian's role is secondary. However, as Carolyn Steedman has argued, in archives 'there isn't in fact very much there' – what matters is how an historian uses material to imagine the past.⁽⁸⁾ Boddice's approach, however, suggests that there *is* a consensus amongst historians about the appropriate materials for the writing of history. However, much work in the field has tried to go beyond conventional material. Many of those working in the animal-human studies field have grappled with approaches from different academic disciplines and the value – or not – of representation and the visual. However, such concerns have little place here.

Boddice constructs himself as a de-bunker of 'myths and inventions' that he characterises as 'bad history' (p. 350). Yet, in somewhat contradictory vein, he concerns himself not only with the campaign to eradicate bull-baiting, in which the RSPCA played a prominent part, but suggests that 'the elimination of the practice only consigned it to memory. It is interesting to see how bull baiting figured in the minds of those who could remember it' (p. 216). Despite a passing and de-contextualised reference to the work of Raphael Samuel, an historian who concerned himself with the way in which the past was remembered and re-configured as history or heritage, Boddice does not explore this potentially different way of approaching his subject (p. 219).

Having defined his work as the most complete account yet Boddice is then obliged to see the work of other writers in very stark and critical ways, often comparing them, unfavourably, to his own analysis. The effect

of such a methodology that tends not to look for nuances of approach might be illustrated by discussion of Joseph Wright's painting, *The Experiment on the Bird in the Air Pump* (1768). Its striking lighting and puzzling narrative has attracted many writers keen to explore the different possible readings of the image. In his discussion of Wright's painting, Stephen Daniels, for example, makes much of the role of the bird struggling in the pump from which air is being excluded, saying, 'the bird lies apparently lifeless, a horror-struck girl shielding her eyes from the spectacle of death'. In her recent excellent study *Picturing Animals in Britain c. 1750–1850*, Diana Donald starts her book with an extensive analysis of the same painting since, she says, it 'encapsulates many of the ambivalences and contradictions in human attitudes towards other species' with which her book is concerned. In doing so she acknowledges that the behaviour of the woman and the girls, looking away from the bird itself, 'is not open to a single, unproblematic reading' while suggesting that the 'girls perform the work of sorrow and pity on behalf of the whole human race'. The painting, she declares, leaves the spectator with a moral dilemma. In my own analysis of the same painting I too emphasised multiple readings suggesting that simultaneously the viewer was presented with different readings of the cockatoo as an 'exotic object of spectacle, valued pet, subject of scientific research'. I argued that the painting was both a narrative of experimentation and contemporary attitudes towards it but also about the role of sight in this process. I have referred here to three different analyses of this Wright painting to indicate both the attractions it continues to have for historians but also to note the multiple and nuanced readings that the image has attracted.⁽⁹⁾ For Boddice, however, analysis is much more straightforward. 'The life of the bird is inconsequential. Kean gets it wrong when she highlights the explicit reference to the choice of whether to acknowledge cruelty or to turn away ... The consequences for the animals seem rather secondary' (pp.101–2). A similarly didactic thrust permeates the text as a whole.

Although Boddice acknowledges that 'there is a significant gap between the history of ideas and the history of practical applications and implications of those ideas' (p. 8) he nevertheless devotes the first half of the book to 'de-bunking myths' around the history of ideas (p. 350). He places much emphasis on unpacking philosophical texts and criticising the way in which a plethora of scholars have analysed them. Boddice has chosen to adopt an approach in which historical or philosophical interpretations and readings of other writers are either 'right' or 'wrong'. Thus important writers such as Keith Thomas, Peter Singer, Gaverick Metheny, E. S. Turner, Mary Midgeley, James Serpell, Tom Regan and Matt Cartmill are duly castigated for not quoting a passage in full from Bentham (p. 126). However, Boralevi earns some praise since, 'To be fair to Boralevi, she has read more than the significant quotation in question (something I often doubt of other scholarship in this field)' (p.127). This emphasis on scrutinising philosophical texts, however, tends to contradict Boddice's own claim that 'charting the history of philosophy tells us nothing about the ways successful ideas were mitigated in practice, nor about the social, political and cultural factors brought to bear on them' (p. 8). Moreover, given that he argues that change did happen in the 18th and 19th century and different definitions of cruelty towards animals did develop Boddice might have devoted more time in the first part of the book to explorations that went beyond analyses of philosophers.

Several historians have argued that the sight of 'farm' animals on the streets of London, then the largest city in the world, was an impetus for Martin's Act of 1824 that gave limited protection under the law. For the first time it became punishable by fines and imprisonment to wantonly and cruelly 'beat, abuse or ill-treat' certain animals. In due course campaigns to close down Smithfield market as a live cattle market gained ground. Much of this *was* based on the impact on human feelings, as a patron of the Animal Friends' Society explained, 'The increasing instances of cruelty in our streets have now risen to such a height that it is impossible to go any distance from home without encountering something to wound our feelings'. However, this campaign was not only about injured human feelings. Indeed the same Animal Friends' Society patron also writes about a 'poor' donkey whose rider was 'beating it with as stick as large as my arm most violently on the side'.⁽¹⁰⁾

The sight both of real animals and their representations, I have argued, helped change people's attitudes towards treatment of animals. While Boddice acknowledges this as a focus for discussion he concludes that 'an aesthetic sensibility gave rhetorical form to a moral sensibility. The substance of the latter has to be critically assessed in the light of the former' (p. 43). Much emphasis, however, was placed by campaigners

on the value of experience and of witnessing, drawing on religious rhetoric. As Reverend Haweis speaking at the RPSCA annual general meeting of 1875 argued, ‘Every one of us is bound to open his eyes and see what goes on in our London Parks ... amongst these poor dumb creatures ... and put our eyes in the place of their eyes when we make large demands upon them for our pleasure of defence ...’.(11) The act of seeing, as Jonathan Burt has persuasively argued, not only gave an impetus to animal welfare reform but was a forward-looking project, creating animal welfare – and the formation of the modern animal – as part of modernity. (12) The importance of sight was recognised by campaigners against vivisection in particular who drew on visual imagery such as the paintings of Landseer to juxtapose images of dissected dogs. Boddice argues that Frances Power Cobbe’s campaign to make public what was behind close doors failed ‘precisely because the general public’s experience with vivisection was at best an experience of the second order only. The argument about demoralisation was far less persuasive without the ocular evidence that it was taking place’ (p.350). This statement seems to contradict, however, some of his earlier comments that devalue the impact of experience and sight.

A theme of the second part of the book is the notion that campaigns against cruelty to animals were often about human concerns. Although non-human animals are prominent in the book’s title and chapter headings, such animals seem to play a minor part in the book. Thus, despite evidence to the contrary, Hogarth’s series the *Four Stages of Cruelty*, the reader is told, was not primarily about cruelty to animals but humans. It was apparently, in this instance, cruelty to humans ‘which principally activated Hogarth’ (p 15). Hogarth himself declared, ‘The prints were engraved with the hope of, in some degree, correcting the barbarous treatment of animals. The very sight of which renders the streets of our metropolis so distressing to very feeling mind. If they have had this effect and checked the progress of cruelty, I am more proud of having been the author, than I should be of having painted Raphael’s Cartoons.’(13) However, Boddice chooses simply to emphasise the impact of cruelty on the human mind arguing that the maltreatment of animals was not vilified for its own sake (p. 99). Richard Ryder, the prominent author and campaigner, and a frequent target of Boddice, also recognised that Hogarth was seeking to prevent the cruel treatment of animals. Ryder, however, is castigated for having apparently missed ‘the emphasis’ in suggesting otherwise (p. 99).

The idea that many campaigns that protected animals were also about human concerns is not new. Some historians, for example, have argued that parliamentary discussions against bull baiting were within a context of regulating human behaviour. McMullan has also shown that the law which prohibited dogs pulling carts in London did not benefit the dogs since most were killed by their owners as they were too expensive to be kept as pets.(14) While many of the changes in definition of cruelty and treatment of non-human animals *were* related to human concerns, it is too sweeping to imply that campaigners were not concerned with the position of animals as such. In a 1829 publication of the SPCA, for example, the treatment of sheep driven to market or pigs whipped to death, dogs being vivisected, cats thrown into the Tower of London ditch to starve or drown in heavy rains *are* all seen as cruel practices towards animals. While a more benign treatment of animals is seen as a mark of growing civilization it is also the case that, the SPCA argues, humans ‘owe them protection’.(15) However, Boddice has little truck with the idea of nineteenth century individuals or particular organisations actually seeing *animals* as a focus for concern and better treatment. Thus in his criticism of modern philosophers and campaigners he castigates Stephen Clark who refers to the ‘iniquity of nineteenth-century practice in vivisection’ for looking at such vivisection from a ‘presentist point of view’ (p.12). This ignores the strength of opposition to vivisection that did exist in that century and which was particularly critical of the use of dogs in experiments. Some campaigners suggested that experiments on animals would lead – and indeed had already led in some instances – to experimentation on vulnerable humans and also argued, ‘ Will the man who has learnt to hear without pity the moan of a tortured dog or the cry of a cat in anguish care very much for the pains of our little ones?’ But dogs themselves, who formed a living part of the Victorian household as well as a symbolic role of fidelity, were seen as sentient beings that should not be dissected by scientists.(16)

The writing of animal-human history is topical and Boddice has undertaken extensive archival work. I remain to be convinced, however, that this work significantly adds to – or challenges imaginatively – current thinking and research.

Notes

1. Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (London, 1983); Brian Harrison, 'Animals and the state in nineteenth-century England', *English Historical Review*, 88 (1973), pp. 786–820; F. M. L. Thompson, *Victorian England: the Horse-Drawn Society* (Bedford College, University of London, 1970).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden From History. 300 years of Women's Oppression and the Struggle Against It* (London, 1973).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Erica Fudge, 'A left-handed blow: writing the history of animals', in *Representing Animals*, ed. Nigel Rothfels (Bloomington, IN, 2002) p. 6.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. The Animal Studies Group, *Killing Animals* (Champaign, IL, 2006); <[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. <[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. *A Cultural History of Animals*, ed. Linda Kalof and Brigitte Resl (6 vols, Oxford, 2007); <[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Christine Kenyon-Jones, *Kindred Brutes. Animals in Romantic Period Writing* (Farnham, 2001); James Gregory, *Of Victorians and Vegetarians: The Vegetarian Movement in Nineteenth-century Britain* (London, 2007).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Carolyn Steedman, *Dust*, (Manchester, 2001), pp.66–88.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Stephen Daniels, *Fields of Visions. Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States* (Princeton, NJ, 1993), p.53; Diana Donald, *Picturing Animals in Britain c.1750–1850* (New Haven, CT, 2007), pp. 3–26; Hilda Kean, *Animal Rights. Political and Social Change in Britain Since 1800* (London, 1998), pp.15–17.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Letters from Frances Maria Thompson, *The Voice of Humanity*, as quoted in Kean, *Animal Rights*, p.60.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. RSPCA, *RSPCA Annual Report* as quoted in Hilda Kean, 'The Moment of Greyfriars Bobby: the Changing Cultural Position of Animals, 1800–1920, in *A Cultural History of Animals: In the Age of Empire*, ed. Kathleen Kete (Oxford, 2007), p. 29.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Jonathan Burt, *Animals in Film* (London, 2002), p. 35.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. John Bowyer Nichols, *Anecdotes of William Hogarth*, as quoted in Diana Donald, 'Beastly sights? The treatment of animals as a moral theme in representations of London, c.1820–1850', *Art History*, 22, 4 (November 1999), p. 526.[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. Kean, *Animal Rights*, p.32; Kenyon-Jones, *Kindred Brutes*, pp.79–108; M. B. McMullan, 'The day the dogs died in London', *The London Journal*, 23, 1 (1998), pp. 32–40.[Back to \(14\)](#)
15. Lewis Gompertz, *Objects and Address of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals* (London, 1829).[Back to \(15\)](#)
16. Kean, *Animal Rights*, p.103.[Back to \(16\)](#)

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