

## Animal Encounters: Human and Animal Interaction in Britain from the Norman Conquest to World War I

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Krish Seetah

I must preface this review by saying that I feel the discussion of human-animal interactions has been lacking a book like this for some time. From the outset, this book is fundamentally *more* than historical in its impact. The topics discussed, and so vividly illustrated, are anthropological assessments for the modern world, using history as base data. There is an immediacy that will surely chime with a contemporary audience as we see our world increasingly sanitized of its non-human animals. For this reason in particular, the cut off point of the First World War is apposite given the subsequent mechanisation that impacted on both human and animal life. This schism marks more than just a break from 'traditional' roles, but in fact a transformation of human dependences on animals.

Chapter one offers a lucid insight into a species, the horse, which has perhaps slipped furthest from our modern collective consciousness when one takes into account its role in the medieval period. What becomes clear is that the horse was more varied in terms of its role in society, as well as its actual physical morphology. On reading the chapter, as has so often been done, one can't help but draw comparisons with the modern motorcar, which, as with so many material goods, made its way from luxury to mundane. With this transition both horse and car became more variable in form and function, could afford their owner great status, or none at all, and could command impressive price tags, or be more or less worthless and in fact incur financial cost for disposal. The chapter highlights facets of our attitude as humans towards an animal that was both essential and 'ubiquitous', spanning from an almost reverential respect for the racehorse to

abject neglect for the nag. While this is neither novel nor surprising, the details in the book are the critical feature in bringing this message to bear: 'Retirement was indeed a concept unfamiliar in the horse world, most working animals being driven until they dropped and buried where they died ...' (p. 23). The author weaves further complexity into the circumstances of British attitudes to equids by reference to the idiosyncratic aversion to horseflesh, not shared by those on the continent. Ultimately, this resulted in a lucrative business for British exporters of worn horses and specialist butchers and traders in places such as Belgium.

The multitude of roles played by the horse is a key aspect of this chapter; however, rather than present a laundry list, the author provides discrete and detailed accounts of the functional categories into which the horse found itself. Arguably as insightful and illustrative is the groundwork that precedes this section, with a number of lines of enquiry used to convey a more complete picture of how horse and human interacted. Firstly, we see the physical representations of a range of horse types, using such imagery as Fernley's 1840 *The Council of Horses*, and going back to depictions from the Luttrell Psalter. Added to these are descriptive accounts and illustrations of the various paraphernalia associated with riding and other functional activities. The development of different riding styles and fashions, and the variation between the genders is intertwined into this mix. We then see how British horse breeding, the essential component in creating types which in turn served the range of functions, was hampered by a lack of appreciation for the role of the mare in capturing and fixing desirable traits in the offspring. This led to a coveting of overseas stock, particularly the Barbary and Arab. Indeed, horse breeding, its detail and intricacy is a strength of this chapter in that it illustrates the depth to which the problem of poor stock was confounded by high rates of export and misguided breeding practices. The fact that this led to legislative intervention ultimately demonstrates the dependence of crown and commoner on the horse.

As with the horse, chapter two provides an insight into an activity that few of us will actively participate in: venery. Yet, the extent to which this formed part of life for the elite provides an interesting insight into 'them and us'. Of course, the commoner was often involved in the hunt, but in very different capacity and never taking part in the essence of hunting i.e. expressing power and control. As the chapter illustrates, the issue is far from a direct discussion of how humans hunt; the act of hunting is deeply social and has been widely used as a mechanism of social control for centuries.

Once again, it is the detail of the examples that is both illustrative and deeply thought provoking. The practice of effectively hobbling, through physical and permanent mutilation (the term used for this was *lawed*), the dogs' of peasants prior to allowing them to accompany their master into forested regions, speaks not only of the degree of social control of human and beast by the elite, but that the punitive mechanisms used to exert that control took no account of the animal. Humans interacting with each other seemed to invariably cause animal suffering. While royalty saw little difference between poachers and murderers, meting out similar punishments, during periods of civil unrest the peasantry took out their revenge on game species, at times decimating populations of local fauna.

Legislative control forms the backdrop to this chapter, with insight into the various laws governing game and hunting. Game keepers were instrumental in developing ideas of land and animals as property, although regulation waned through time with regard to rigid control and enactment.

In parallel with the previous chapter, details of dog typology gives an insight into varying functionality and the work that both horse and hound played in the capture of a remarkable array of fauna. This last point is crucial as it illustrates an underlying issue: while for those dedicated to the risky act of poaching, the driver was sustenance, food was the least of the reasons for venery for the elite. One strength of the chapter is the manner in which the variety of hunting styles, through time, are aligned alongside the different species that fell to the hunter, the associated practices of the different hunting traditions, and of course, the assortment of living hunting aids in the form of different hound types and human assistants. The hunting loop is neatly and effectively closed, whilst other lines of investigation are opened up, in the form of associated trades that were involved in the processing and progressive distribution of the animal's body following the initial and highly ritualised 'unmaking'.

Of all the chapters, the third includes descriptions of those activities (though not limited to these) that we now see as most abhorrent to our modern sensibilities. This chapter not only lays out the trajectory of the whys and wherefores of the blood sports, but also how legislation and the common sense of the day aligned to the detriment of numerous species. The text does a very good job, through historic narratives, of illustrating just how dispensable dogs, bulls and bears were in Britain up to the 1800s and how society was seemingly inured to animal cruelty and suffering. This is well balanced with a discussion of Britain's special role in the development of animal rights in that it was the first to enact prevention of cruelty laws in the modern period. As the author points out, this early act has had a lasting legacy for modern legislation around the world.

As before, important details are presented that paints a picture of the complexity of pit fighting, baiting etc. What might have been considered as the pastime of the few and far between in fact formed part of the fabric of everyday life: highly organised, involving all factions of society in one form or another and with a well-established place within the landscape of both town and country. This was particularly evident in the urban setting where extensive architecture was devoted to the blood sports.

The author takes us through the breadth and variety of fauna that formed part of these inhumane pastimes. One gains a rich impression of a set of activities with ardent followers who evidently devoted a great deal of time and effort in their pursuit. In tandem, we gain insight into the changing social psychology as it related to animals. In addition to a clear account of the development of each of the blood sports is an assessment of how the individual popularity of each came to wane, and ultimately how they all fell foul of the law. Given current estimates that certain blood sports, particularly dog fighting, have never been more popular on a global scale, this chapter provides a better understanding of the complexity of a set of activities that might have otherwise been consigned to history simply as an unpleasant and distasteful aspect of the past. While the chapter also includes balanced discussion on pastimes that do not focus on death and brutality, and in so doing adds important dimensions of the long standing role animals have played as part of our leisure time, what will remain with the reader is the bulk of the chapter: the cruelty humans can inflict in the pursuit of their own pleasure.

While the titles of the last two chapters are innocuous, 'The living larder' and 'Animals on the farm', they encapsulate both an incredibly diverse array of edible species, far beyond our modern palate, as well as arguably the most significant (at least economically speaking) strategy for faunal exploitation. These two chapters, discussed together here for the sake of brevity, both deal with consumption, but from different perspectives. In oversimplified terms chapter four focuses on wild species that are effectively managed to a greater or lesser extent, whilst chapter five deals with the truly domesticated fauna. I say this is an oversimplification because in both cases the author takes the time to tackle and detail not only the associated husbandry, but also facets of trade, exchange and commodification, and where appropriate, the rich ritual for each species covered.

Chapter four brings in aspects of social status, as evidenced through visual topography i.e. showing that you could, not just needed to, raise these food items, and illustrated with the example of siting of the dovecote and how this changed through time. One of the most intriguing cases discussed is that of the idiosyncratic

and conspicuous royal consumption of swans, and their classification as private property irrespective of where they occurred in the landscape. In nuanced detail we are presented not just with the legislative control of swans, but the ritualised mechanisms by which they were managed, including the use of markings to distinguish between the stocks of different owners. The end point of the swan's more intimate relationship with monarchy, though not quite completely dead, was the cessation of beak marking in 1997, drawing to a close what must be one of the most singular of British traditions. Chapter five is perhaps the most pragmatic in its stance; one particularly interesting aspect of this chapter is the early discussion of how agriculture and animal management developed. This section focuses on those involved in carcass processing, an established craft specialism, but which develops into a defined and lucrative trade; those involved in it serving as middle men between producer and consumer. The remainder of the chapter gives a species-by-species account of the main food domesticates, outlining how each provided primary, secondary, or both, products and was maximally exploited to this end.

In drawing this review to a close, one aspect that is apparent is that the chapters are never straightforward, which is a key strength. With the exception of the last chapter, which is more directional, in general the book takes common topics but develops them using new angles of enquiry and well-sourced evidence: complexity of form and function (chapter one); legislative control (chapter two); role in community life of rich and poor (chapter three); and social facets of animal management (chapter four).

One minor reproof is this: the book makes reference to the reduced role and interrelationship of humans and non-human animals. Indeed, this literally starts on the inside sleeve of the jacket. However, I think that while the overt visual politics (there is and was always so much more going on than simply viewing) of human-animal interactions are clearly less explicit in modern Britain, the fact remains that the significance of animals has not diminished. Their presence is screened, but their roles have taken on a myriad of forms that have no historic parallel. They still play a critical economic role; however, their social place and context, how they intersect with the most intimate aspects of modern life, and the manner in which they serve as proxy, mirror and substitute is still quite remarkable. I bring up this point in conclusion as this book, despite suggesting a diminished role, does a very good job of contextualising just how significant modern human-animal relationships are. It is illustrative of something far more fundamental than the way animals and humans interact. It provides a lens through which to view the extent and scale of how commercialism and commodification have impacted on day-to-day life, the degree and manner to which social responsibility has moved beyond the sphere of protecting human rights to protecting those of non-human animals and our continued dependence on animals for food and sustenance, fulfilled in a way far removed from what we might arguably still conceive as 'natural'.

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