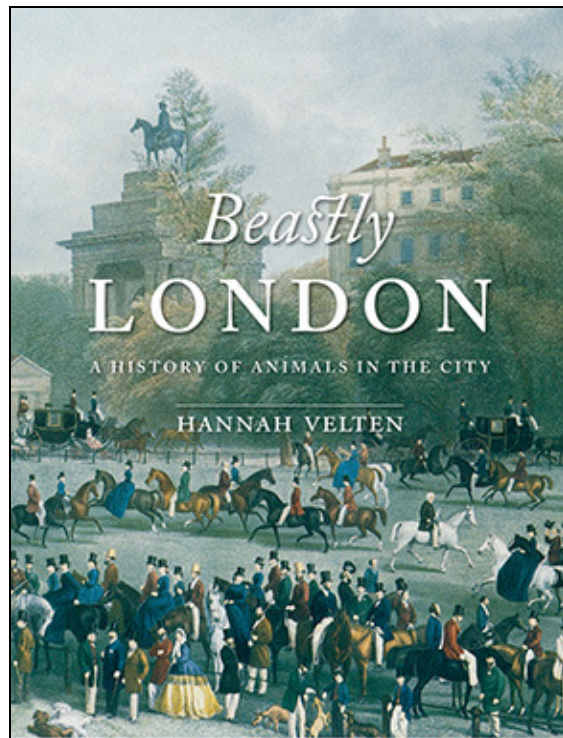


Reviews

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Londoners and Other Animals

Hannah Velten, *Beastly London: A History of Animals in the City*. London: Reaktion Books, 2013. 288 pp. \$50.00 (hb).



Beastly London is Hannah Velten's third book published by Reaktion; she is also the author of *Cow* (2007) from Reaktion's Animal series and *Milk: A Global History* (2010) from its Edible series. Like the books from those series, *Beastly London* is an attractive volume printed on thick, lustrous paper and liberally peppered with illustrations (121 total, 34 color), although its larger size (250 × 190 mm) and two-column page layout make it a slightly more cumbersome read. Arguably the most ambitious of Velten's Reaktion trio, *Beastly London* sets out to reveal "the rich heritage of the animal inhabitants of London from Roman times to the present" (7) and to highlight "the role [animals] played in shaping the economic, social and cultural history of London"—a role that general histories of the city have largely ignored (8).

To some extent, *Beastly London* confirms John Berger's controversial thesis (although Berger is not cited) about the disappearance of animals in modernity and the consequent impoverishment of human experience.¹ Velten portrays the close proximity of humans and the animals they used for food, transportation, and entertainment in medieval and early modern London, the explosion of interest in and use of animals in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the rapid decline of the city's animal population — and consequently, its impact on Londoners' lives — in the 20th century and beyond. Yet while Velten sometimes echoes Berger's nostalgia for a time of more intimate human/animal relations — for example, when she contends that “London has lost some of its rich character with the withdrawal of animals” — her frank descriptions of the seemingly boundless violence and exploitation that these relations have entailed for nonhuman participants throughout the city's history makes it difficult to regret animals' absence in present-day London (7). Indeed, the book at times reads as a catalog of the horrors to which Londoners have subjected animals whom they have variously regarded as food, tools, status symbols, amusements, moneymakers, nuisances, threats, or objects for experimentation, prompting Velten to conclude that “if one asked the past animal inhabitants if they would return to city life, they would most likely refuse” (245).

Chapter 1 examines perhaps the most pervasive form of human/animal relations in London's history: the use of livestock animals for food. Much of this chapter focuses on Smithfield Market, which since “about AD 950” (15) fed Londoners' “seemingly insatiable” appetite for animal flesh (13). Prior to the advent of railways and refrigeration, country drovers brought cattle, sheep, pigs, geese, and other slaughter-bound animals to London on foot from all corners of Britain and Ireland. London drovers met these animals at the outskirts of the city and completed their journey to Smithfield using sheepdogs and iron-tipped goads. A typical market morning, Velten explains, saw 600-plus salesmen negotiate with buyers who employed their own drovers to transfer purchased animals to private slaughterhouses. Smithfield became widely regarded as a nuisance in the mid-18th century, when urban expansion brought Londoners into unwelcome and often dangerous proximity with cruel handling practices and rampaging animals. Further, population growth and the resulting increase in demand for meat made the market rapidly outgrow its 4¾ acres (“Islington Market” 343). An 1833 addition of “just under 2 acres” did little to resolve the problem, and the Smithfield Market Removal Act of 1851 spelled the end of Smithfield as it had

existed for centuries, although it still operates today as a wholesale market (Velten 22). Velten also looks beyond Smithfield to London's history of backyard agriculture, noting the home-raised pigs, fowl, rabbits, and pigeons who provided "protein and pocket money" to London families — and whose living conditions were often no better than those suffered by the temporary residents of Smithfield (28).

The latter half of the 19th century saw a dramatic decline in London's livestock population, but Velten observes that this "void ... was filled by an increase in the numbers of working animals" required to support the city's "burgeoning economy" and growing human numbers (42). Chapter 2 is devoted to these animals — especially horses, who provided the main means of transporting people and goods within the city until the early 20th century. Despite one horse lover's insistence that the equine inhabitants of Victorian London had "a humanizing effect on the population," readers of Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* will be familiar with many of the inhumanities Velten recounts (43). From the fashionable carriage horses whose heads were held unnaturally high by bearing reins to the omnibus horses (scarcely mentioned by Sewell) whose bodies were ravaged by long hours of pulling a massive, awkward load with "frequent stops and starts" (52), the vast majority of London horses were plainly "unfortunate animals" (50). Some equines fared better, as Velten points out: dray horses and carthorses pulled heavy loads but enjoyed ample rest during loading and unloading, while costermongers' donkeys — according to writers like Henry Mayhew and Charles Dickens — were often prized and kindly treated (64). These exceptions notwithstanding, routine abuse of working animals prompted the 1824 founding of the Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (later the R[oyal]SPCA), and abundant cruelty kept the group busy pursuing prosecutions for the rest of the century and beyond.

While Chapter 2 focuses largely on Victorian-era horses (with the final few pages devoted to dogs employed for cart-pulling and police work), Chapter 3 offers a wide-ranging account of Londoners' use of animals for sport, from the amphitheatre contests likely held in Roman London to the perennially popular pastimes of hunting, fighting, and baiting to the less violent sports of racing, show jumping, and polo. A theme throughout the chapter is the use of sporting animals to reinforce the human social order. Hunting enthusiast Henry VIII declared much of the modern West End his private hunting grounds and used the area for hawking with his prized gyrfalcons, whose position atop the "bird hierarchy" (just above the peregrines flown by lords) affirmed his royal status (90). In medieval and early modern London, members of all social classes delighted in the baiting of bulls, bears, and other animals, but by the mid-

18th century, the public view of this bloody amusement had shifted to “abhorrence. No longer was it a formal sport patronised by the wealthy, but it was supposedly perpetrated by the lowest in society” (98). Members of Parliament who opposed the first anti-baiting legislation in 1800 worried not about the demise of baiting but about the possibility that “bans on hunting and shooting ... (sports of the aristocracy!)” would follow (103). Indeed, as Velten intimates, public disapproval of animal-based sports seems to have been motivated less by humane sentiments than by class associations, as evidenced by the reputation of greyhound racing “as a poorer form of sport than horse racing” in the 1920s (113).

The aforementioned sports represent just a few of the ways in which animals have served to entertain London’s human populace. In Chapter 4, Velten spotlights animal entertainers, beginning with the largely transient population of performing bears, monkeys, horses, and cockerels who accompanied minstrels through the streets of pre-Norman and medieval London (119). Such acts persisted into the 19th century, when they were decried in news articles like an 1869 report on “The Performing Bear Nuisance” (123). Other popular displays, like “happy families” (collections of animals “supposed to be sworn enemies living peacefully together in one cage” [123]) and “*lustus naturae*: unusual or deformed animal exhibits” (125), revealed Londoners’ fascination with the bizarre. And while such spectacles did little to challenge longstanding assumptions about human superiority over the brute creation, “learned animals” — horses, pigs, and dogs trained to mimic human intelligence by “solving” arithmetic problems and “spelling” words — afforded Londoners glimpses of the mental capacities of other species from the 16th century onward (126). The latter half of this chapter focuses on the advent of the circus in (Philip) Astley’s Amphitheatre in the 18th century — an apt transition into Velten’s discussion of exotic animals in Chapter 5, as the exhibition that was to become the first modern circus began as an equestrian spectacle and gradually expanded to include exotic species like elephants, tigers, lions, leopards, camels, zebras, giraffes, ostriches, kangaroos, and polar bears.

Although Astley’s was demolished in 1893, and despite growing concerns about cruel treatment of performing animals, the allure of and trade in exotic animals continued to thrive. Chapter 5 (for me, the most depressing) chronicles Londoners’ centuries-old practice of keeping and displaying exotic animals, starting with the unfortunate early occupants of the Tower of London’s Royal Menagerie. These animals — lions, other big

cats, elephants, and more — typically lived short, miserable lives in cramped cages. During the “bloodthirsty” James I’s reign, the Tower lions were also subjected to baiting (147). Outside the Tower, exotics displayed at fairs, inns, and coffee houses for the viewing pleasure of affluent Londoners experienced similarly horrifying conditions. The city’s first rhinoceros, exhibited in the 1680s, was “led with a ring through her nose” and died after two years (149). Many exotics’ early deaths, Velten notes, were undoubtedly brought on by inappropriate diets: another rhino ate breakfasts of “rice and sugar” (150), and the diet of the Tower’s first zebra included “bread, meat and tobacco” (152). Beginning in 1770, a menagerie in the Exeter ‘Change gave ordinary Londoners the opportunity to view exotic species. However, the danger this collection posed to Londoners — as well as the cruelty it entailed for animals — became tragically apparent in 1826, when a beloved elephant named Chunee became unmanageable and had to be destroyed. After refusing numerous arsenic-laced offerings, he was gunned down in a heartrending scene (depicted in one of the book’s color illustrations) that lasted over an hour and left his body riddled with more than 150 bullets (157). As Velten speculates, nearby residents probably welcomed the subsequent demolition of the ‘Change “with relief” (158), although London’s “poorer classes” would not have a ready means of viewing exotics for two decades (170). The Zoological Gardens (later London Zoo) opened in 1828, but access was restricted to Zoological Society fellows until 1847.

In Chapters 6 and 7, Velten turns to the categories of animal most frequently encountered in present-day London: pets and wildlife, respectively. Chapter 6 begins with an overview of exotic pet-keeping, which, like the trade in specimens for menageries and other displays, flourished in the 19th century. In the 20th century, wealthy Londoners continued to acquire exotics, “return[ing] with unlikely pets from India and other parts of the Empire” (182) or, until the 1970s, purchasing head-turning companions from the (in)famous Harrods department store “Zoo” (183). The Dangerous Wild Animals Act of 1976 curtailed such practices. Turning to more conventional companion species, Velten compares the varied fortunes of the city’s dogs and cats. At one end of the welfare spectrum were the indulged pets of the elite and the valued companions of the working class and poor, while at the other end were the stray dogs and cats who lived in continual danger of losing their hides to skimmers, being killed as suspected plague or rabies carriers, or finding themselves strapped to a vivisector’s table. The situation for strays and pets of the poor improved in the late-18th and 19th centuries with the introduction of animal shelters and veterinary hospitals. Several clinics offered free and low-cost services for struggling pet owners, while the Home for Lost Dogs (later the Battersea Dogs and Cats Home) undertook the immense

task of aiding the city's homeless animal population. As Velten acknowledges, "refuge" at Battersea often meant certain death, but many animals thus avoided worse fates, and the shelter — still in operation — "has over 150 years of good work to its credit" (211). Velten, of course, also devotes a significant portion of this chapter to the much-studied rise of numerous types of animal fancy (bird, rabbit, dog, and cat) during the Victorian era, as well as the eugenicist and animal-welfare concerns they provoked.

Finally, Chapter 7 describes the diverse relationships that have existed between Londoners and wildlife. Like other major cities, London has historically attracted scavengers, and Londoners have either appreciated these fellow urbanites for their role in disposing of the city's waste or maligned them for their associations with disease and destruction. Thus, for example, ravens and kites enjoyed legal protections in early medieval London, while rats were exterminated as "vermin" and fell below the radar of Victorian-era humane movements despite being used for baiting and fighting (108). Other animal immigrants have been similarly unwelcome, like the cockroaches unwittingly imported from the West Indies, while some, like the marine mammals who occasionally swam up the Thames, were greeted with spears or gunfire by Londoners eager for their meat and blubber. Perhaps the most complex relationships between Londoners and wildlife have involved native and long-established species like foxes and many types of bird. Wild birds, Velten explains, have "forged a relationship with the city's inhabitants based on scraps of food," yet this relationship has also required birds to "be wary [of] people requiring a meal, a pet or a sporting target" (223). And while many Londoners throughout history have enjoyed the sights and sounds of their feathered neighbors, others have perceived them as a nuisance, as recurring disputes about pigeons and sparrows demonstrate. While Velten underscores the dearth of wildlife in present-day London, the chapter ends on a hopeful note as she points to recent efforts to make the city and the once-noxious Thames more hospitable to animal inhabitants.

As I have endeavored to demonstrate through this representative (but by no means exhaustive) overview, Velten's wide-ranging and accessible book is an invaluable resource for scholars and others interested in human-animal studies, urban studies, and British history. Its broad historical scope and non-chronological structure means that it is, at times, a disorienting read as Velten's topic- (rather than period-) centered chapters require her to transport the reader abruptly from, say, the 20th-century greyhound track

to the 12th-century jousting contest (114). This mode of organization also makes it difficult for Velten to provide “a snapshot” of “the heaving mass of animals” that inhabited London at any one historical moment, and readers primarily interested in a specific period of London’s history will have to sift through a great deal of material to piece together this image (7). However, what might from one angle be viewed as a limitation is simultaneously a testament to Velten’s impressive range as a historian, and her chapters collectively reconstruct a city that, for centuries, teemed with nonhuman life. *Beastly London* thus makes a unique and important contribution both to our understanding of the rich array of human/animal relations and to the study of British history, literature, and culture.

1. See “Why Look at Animals?” John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 3-28.

Work Cited

“Islington Market.” *The Farmer’s Magazine* May 1836: 343.