

Jo Hockenhull

Donkey tales: A story of pride and prejudice

Jill Bough, *Donkey*. Animal Series. London: Reaktion Books, 2011. 198pp. £9.99, \$19.95

In the UK, when you think of donkeys you think of beach rides as a child or of Eeyore from *Winnie-the-Pooh*; childhood memories of happy times. It is only later that your thoughts may turn to the harsh working life that is the reality for many donkeys worldwide. Donkey numbers are falling in developed countries, with those that remain typically kept as companions or for breeding. Yet these donkeys form the minority. In other parts of the world the donkey is a common sight, living out the vital role the species has played since its domestication as a working animal, beast of burden, means of transportation, and a crucial source of livelihood for many.

Jill Bough does not pull any punches in the opening of her contribution to the Reaktion Animal Series, *Donkey*. By the end of the first paragraph she has firmly established that donkeys are not only “among the most used, and abused, animals in history” (7), but also that despite their valuable contribution to human society, both past and present, “we know remarkably little of their lives or their stories, or even their welfare” (7). As a welfare scientist with a lifelong soft spot for donkeys, my interest was immediately piqued. Donkeys are often overlooked in the field of animal welfare research, which tends to focus on certain facets of the animal population — those kept on farms, in zoos, or as companions within the home. Donkeys do not fit easily into any of these categories from a western-world perspective. While the welfare of working donkeys is increasingly being studied, our knowledge and understanding of the donkey as a species is far behind that of other domesticated animals. When considered at all, it is often as a smaller, longer eared relation of the horse rather than as an entity in its own right with unique physiology, needs, and behaviors. With this in mind, Jill Bough’s book provides a welcome source of information with an unashamedly pro-donkey slant.

It is a sad reflection on human nature that despite the centuries of service donkeys have provided us they are still often viewed with contempt and derision. This is most visible in the numerous comparisons made with the other domesticated equid, the horse. Donkeys have been treated as a common and inferior relation of the horse throughout

history. At its most basic level this comes down to the difference in status of those who employ them, reflecting the divisions engrained within society; donkeys tending to be “the beast of burden for those who could not afford a horse” (54), and for women, with horses more traditionally associated with men and the wealthy upper classes. Donkeys were even employed on ancient trading routes to carry water for the horses that carried the precious goods, rather than being entrusted to carry these goods themselves (49).

Yet donkeys are remarkable animals, supremely adapted to the arid environments in which they evolved. They are able to work for longer, in dryer areas, with less food and water than horses, mules and oxen (8). They are less prone to disease, and as the Roman commentator Columella so eloquently put it, they are slower to “break down” than any other animal used for ploughing (52). Their stoic, steady nature, while a cause of derision, is also a characteristic that has made the donkey so successful in their employ by humans.

The book consists of five chapters, excluding the introduction, each covering a different aspect of the role and influence of the donkey in human society. Chapter 1, “*Equus asinus*: origins, domestication, breeds and characteristics,” sets the scene, starting with the African wild ass, the ancestor of the domestic donkey. The donkey is the only domestic species that originated in Africa and its domestication pre-dates that of the horse and the camel (27). Since then, selective breeding by humans has led to the development of a staggering (and to me unexpected) 185 different breeds of donkey, each suited to different jobs and environments (32). In addition to their use as working animals, donkeys have also been prized for their meat and their milk at different times and locations throughout history, perhaps most famously in ancient Egypt providing milk for Cleopatra’s bath (39).

Chapter 1 also introduces the mule; the horse-donkey hybrid which typically possesses the best characteristics of both parents, the strength of the horse and the hardiness of the donkey (43). Mules tend to occupy an intermediate ground between donkey and horse, often but not always lacking the status of a horse yet not demeaned to the extent of the donkey. As such, the author includes mules in her consideration of the influence of the donkey on human society throughout the remainder of the book.

Donkeys in human history, mythology, and religion are covered in Chapter 2. This chapter charts the rise and fall in changing attitudes towards the donkey throughout history to the present day. Donkeys have been portrayed in various ways throughout

the ages: respected for their religious significance by the early Egyptians (62) and later the Christians (73), and used to symbolize sex by the Minoans (66). The demonization of the donkey began in the late Kingdom of ancient Egypt and grew from there, with the donkey coming to symbolize all that was bad (65). Yet, despite the enduring derision, it was in defence of a donkey that the first ever animal welfare prosecution was made, somewhat ironically given the paucity of welfare research undertaken on donkeys today. Bill Burns was convicted and fined for animal cruelty in the UK in 1822. The donkey in question even appeared in court in order to show the wounds that had been inflicted (56). This was a dramatic turnaround for an animal previously treated as the lowest of the low. Although opinions towards the donkey did not change overnight, this was a significant step towards changing public perception not only of the way that donkeys were treated by humans, but animals in general.

Chapter 3, entitled “Donkeys and mules colonise the Americas, Australia and South Africa,” portrays the critical role donkeys and mules played in colonization and their subsequent contribution to colonial societies. The importance of donkeys and mules at these times is often overlooked. When they were no longer of use, donkeys and mules were commonly turned loose and left to fend for themselves in these alien environments (78). The qualities of the donkey that were so valuable to the colonizers enabled them not only to survive, but often to flourish in their new environments. The long-term implications of the colonizers’ “use and discard” policy are being felt today, something those of us in the UK are generally unaware of. Herds of feral donkeys are considered a major pest, particularly in parts of the US and Australia, where they are perceived as competition for the cattle that have become the new animal of value to the human population. Strategies have been developed to control and/or exterminate them. In some places these are more contentious than others. In the US public opposition was so great that legislation was subsequently passed to protect the free-living burros; by contrast, the citizens of Australia appear unaware or indifferent to the eradication of their feral donkey populations (96).

The sacrifice made by donkeys and mules in the service of humans throughout history in times of war is the subject of Chapter 4. Similar to their role in colonization, the importance of the donkey during war is frequently overlooked, with the contribution made by the horse being more commonly celebrated. From carrying water for Roman troops, to transporting guns and wounded soldiers in the First World War, and more recently (and I feel horrifically) being used by the Taliban in Afghanistan as walking bombs, donkeys and mules have been immersed in practically every war fought since their domestication in some role or another.

On a lighter note, Chapter 5 explores how donkeys have been portrayed through the ages in literature, film, and art. Yet, there is a seriousness here too with the recognition that “how we perceive and represent animals will ultimately affect our treatment of them” (130). This statement has perhaps never been as significant as it is when applied to the donkey, especially in the western world where attitudes towards them are often “confused and contradictory” (129). The donkey featured highly in Aesop’s fables, where it was typically depicted as foolish (131), and Shakespeare frequently used the term “ass” to describe stupid or clownish figures in his plays (134). However in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries attitudes began to change as animal welfare became a major social issue (154). More recently, positive traits of the donkey are increasingly being recognized and depicted — as loyal companions like Eeyore in *Winnie-the-Pooh* (142) and Donkey in *Shrek* (143).

Donkey concludes with a timeline of key donkey events spanning from 8000BC to the present day. This remarkable history follows no consistent attitudinal pattern; for example, the UK legislation passed to enforce lunch breaks for working donkeys on Blackpool beach in 2005 is followed by the mass slaughter of thousands of feral donkeys in Australia in 2009, but it brings home just what a story of contrasts donkeys have had during their long association with humans.

I found Jill Bough’s account of the donkey and its association with humans both easygoing and informative, and although at times the writing is somewhat awkward, I found it a good read. What really struck me, however, was the western perspective taken throughout. While this bias is understandable given the author’s background, it would have been interesting to learn more about our use of, and attitudes towards, donkeys in those regions of the world where they are most common today and still have an important role to play. This oversight leaves the reader with many questions — how are these modern day working donkeys depicted in the culture and art of their human societies? — perhaps opening the door for volume 2? In conclusion, while this may not be the book for you if you are seeking a view of donkeys’ history and role within human societies worldwide, *Donkey* is a richly informative and enjoyable read for a donkey fan.