

[Review]

The Routledge Companion to Animal-Human History.

Edited by Hilda Kean and Philip Howell, Routledge, 2019. 560 pp.

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Nick Brandt's dramatic photograph on the front cover of this volume is a rich metaphor for the endeavours encapsulated in this book – elephant footprints fade into an empty, dried-up landscape, possibly once a lake. Elephants have passed this way, but how to understand or even recreate their embodied agencies? Some sunlight and possibly a dust devil lurk on the upper left. The trudging prints head off towards a darkened sky where the silhouette of hills is hinted at. How is it possible to capture the histories of these elephants, their embodiment in an environment which has surely dried up because of human-engineered climate crisis? How to convey the experience and stories of these great beings when all that remains are images of their footprints or stories about their footprints in the archives? To what extent could they be actors when their lives are limited by human destructiveness? What relationships did they have with indigenous peoples?

Kean and Howell have put together an extraordinary collection which will be a classic text not only for animal-human history in particular, but for human animal studies in general. With the proliferation of debates included and furthered here *The Routledge Companion to Animal-Human History* will inspire scholars well-versed in human animal studies as well as researchers and students beginning such studies. The *Companion* reminds us of the topicality of animals in history – and in the present, although animal bodies and their materiality are ubiquitous if often wilfully unseen. The agency of animal flesh (pangolins, bats, farmed animals) in the provenance of Covid-19 is making headlines as I write this review. Yet, as Abigail Woods shows in 'Animals

in the History of Human and Veterinary Medicine’, animals have always been present and influential in zoonoses. The actual agency of animals and the question of to what extent it is even possible to recuperate historical agencies loop through this volume.

In the rich introduction Kean and Howell speak of their intention to foreground ‘to what extent animals are involved as agents in social processes, and to explore the relationship between artistic practice and quasi-historical features’ (5). While acknowledging the attendant difficulties of animal-human history, they will ‘construct an explicit exposition of the way in which the “sentience” of creatures becomes part of an historical method’ (5).

Different historical methods are debated in Part I, *Animals and the Practice of Human History*. A number of essays, in line with the editors’ intention to provide a ‘guide’ and a ‘resource’, very usefully set out theoretical parameters. Mieke Roscher, in ‘New Political History and the Writing of Animal Lives’, proposes that within a political context such a practice of history needs to engage with the material animal body as well as the figuring of the animal. Like Roscher, Kean, in ‘Public History and Heritage: A Fruitful Approach for Privileging Animals?’, underscores the imperative to include material animal bodies but questions what sort of agency commemorated animals can accrue and to what extent viewers of animal monuments may turn their attention to the present day animal. Jan-Erik Steinkrüger, in ‘Wildlife Conservation as Cultural Memory’, deconstructs human memories which may occlude human cruelty, complicity in the extinction of species or deny the histories of indigenous peoples. Other essays in this section deal with the ghastly histories of animals abused in scientific experimentation, animals deployed in South African nationalism, and animal matter in museums.

In Part II, *Problems and Paradigms*, Howell, in one of the key theoretical essays in this volume, considers ‘Animals, Agency, and History’. Notions of agency are traced through philosophy, social theory and social history. The essay with its delineation of ascribed agencies, agonistic animal agencies and assembled agencies could open up debates in transdisciplinary human animal studies modules. Howell’s negative perceptions of ‘biographies’ of animals which do more to efface the animal are to the point. Yet John Simons’ *Obaysch* (reviewed this volume)

is a consummate exception, in its contrary interpretations of archival material and its imagining of a hippo’s living experience. Jennifer McDonell’s comprehensive essay, ‘Representing Animals in the Literature of Victorian Britain’ foregrounds Vinciane Despret’s notion of ‘interagency’ (234). The fresh analysis of classic fictionalised animal autobiography and the gendered dimensions of sentimentality in relation to animals is instructive.

Further essays in this section extend to the significance of visual culture in animal-human history, representations of Adam and Eve as simian, exhibiting animals, tenderness and violence in Georgian England, emotional attachment to animals, and birdsong and emotions in Britain. Space precludes this review from paying these essays the attention they merit.

Discussions in Part III, Themes and Provocations range widely – from breeding and breed, hunting animals, eating animals, to a reconsideration of Margery Kempe’s vegetarianism. In the persuasive ‘Animals in and at War’, Gervase Phillips suggests that no consideration of war can be complete without including the presence and suffering of animals. The imperative is to take into account the ‘voice’ of animals – their resistance and co-operation (428) as well as their ‘emotional states’ and their agency (430). Phillips favours a neo-Darwinian methodology in which animals are knowing subjects.

Philip Howell’s succinct, concluding ‘The Triumph of Animal History?’ raises central issues in methodology and in the putative institutionalisation of animal history. The proponents of critical animal studies would argue, of course, that this is not to its advantage. Howell considers the provenance of animal history in connection with environmental history and in its uneasy relation with critical theory as well as, on the other hand, advocacy. In relation to the future of animal history Howell lists the problems of integration into “‘big history’ or ... “deep history”” (530), proposing, instead, an engagement with natural science and natural history in what he terms ‘biosocial history’ (531). This ‘fully relational approach’ (532) which he suggests with some reservations, incorporates animal and human embodiment as well as the ‘existence’ of plants and things. Animals are always already agentic in this future imagining of animal-human history – and as they are in this substantial, edifying *Companion*.