

[Review]

John Simons. *Obaysch: A Hippopotamus in Victorian London*. Animal Publics Series, edited by Fiona Probyn-Rapsey and Melissa Boyde, Sydney University Press, 2019. 226 pp.

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John Simons' riveting biography of a hippo invites the reader into the experience of Obaysch who was captured on the Nile in 1849 then became a 'star' animal in the Regent's Park Zoological Gardens in London. Obaysch is not just figured symbolically, politically and culturally, as so many historical animals are; Simons entices him from the archives to inhabit his own embodied narrative – a process which springs him from entrapment as a spectacle behind bars at a very particular time for British imperialism.

Obaysch has an ancestry in Britain: the last hippo in the interglacial British Isles, a hippo tormented in the amphitheatre in Roman London. Simons' unsentimental imagining of the hippos' sensations and feelings conveys the pathos of the animals' pain, alienation and death. Poignantly, the story of Obaysch does not begin behind bars but in his bloat with his mother. Their lives are not idyllic, however. Obaysch was born at a pivotal time for hippos who were being hunted as trophies used to barter diplomatic favour in the 'Great Game'. Large animals who were becoming rarer in Africa were primed for transportation to England. Simons skilfully renders the young, captured hippo 'an actor in his own life' (8). He analyses the differing accounts of the capture, comparing them with lurid sketches made at the time of humans hunting and being hunted by hippos. In Simons' interrogation of the archives he reads against the grain, analysing the euphemisms, the silences, the skimming over of narratives which can be surmised. He chooses novel strategies, tangentially describing historical events by inserting animals who would otherwise have been excised. In 1848 in Paris, for example, while

revolutionary marches proceeded nearby, a seal was displayed in a barrel. This strategy has the effect of minimising the central importance of human history while inserting an animal's experience.

From the very instant of his capture Obaysch was located in a performative space. Simons' rich narrative sets the accounts of the young hippo and his keeper Hamet within then-current socio-political prejudice – but these accounts are interlaced with Obaysch's own trajectory. Simons quotes contemporary media on Obaysch as a captive star attraction in the Zoological Gardens in contrast with alternative descriptions which did not gel with the jolly or 'twee' picturing of the hippo in *Punch* or *Illustrated London News*. Repeated denigrations in newspapers of the young hippo as 'lazy' or 'stupid' were ignorant of the fact that hippos are nocturnal animals who spend their days in water. Poor Obaysch had to be made to move, so Hamet, his keeper, would coax him into the water for visitors – an action that would have necessitated some violence, as Simons emphasises. The careful management of the hippo's image for the public interfered with any possibility of a natural life for him. The imperative to 'humanise' the captured animal meant that his aggression had to be concealed, as Simons' detective work clearly reveals. Obaysch was potentially violent, 'mad with grief and rage' (83), which we should recall, as Simons suggests, 'whenever we look at captive animals' (83) whose images have been systematically and heavy-handedly managed.

In his querying of the then-current public figuring of Obaysch, Simons contrasts the young hippo's life in the zoo with his putative natural life which renders his suffering and isolation even more tragic. After Obaysch was supplied with a mate, Adhela, the *Derby Mercury* describes him as a 'cowardly old fellow' (105) for not being able to stand up to the female hippo once she has given birth to a daughter. But again, Simons reaches beyond this categorising of Obaysch to a biological explanation of his defeat by a female hippo: he must have been undersized due to lack of proper nourishment. Certainly, his death at a very young age confirms this interpretation.

In the chapter on 'The Several Meanings of Hippos', the focus is more on hippos as symbolic creatures at the time and, in particular, on Obaysch as a mid-Victorian in London. Almost one percent of Britain saw Obaysch in his early weeks at the zoo. For these first visitors,

Simons argues, the hippo was an ‘existential encounter’ (135) rather than a media phenomenon. Obaysch featured in Dickens’ *Household Words*, but Simons shows, in an economic consideration of class and leisure activities for Victorians, that the cost of visiting Obaysch would have been prohibitive for members of the working class. Obaysch was set into different debates: the question (in divine discourse) was asked about what a particular animal was *for* (141). Within the civilizing mission and for the maritime British the hippos’ threat to water-borne transport meant that they were regarded as ‘ideological obstacles’ (144).

Simons shows how Orientalist aesthetic discourse functioned in relation to hippos and their keepers. Hamet, who was in reality from Sudan, was orientalised and represented as an Arab; similarly, Obaysch was depicted as Egyptian (and hence more tameable) rather than African. Subsequently when Obaysch ‘misbehaved’ in the zoo this characteristic was regarded as a display of the unruly African side of his character. Simons analyses how Obaysch was located within four Victorian discourses: those of science, sentimentalism, exoticism, and the colonial project of ‘taming’ used to frame his violence (151). Ironically, Adhela’s violence was more permissible as a female African. Simons mentions the wrongly gendered Huberta (celebrated as Hubert when she was alive; presumably a female hippo was incapable of such agency) who achieved the status of ‘public figure’ (173) for her legendary travels of over a thousand miles in the late 1920s. She journeyed from what was then Natal to the Eastern Cape in South Africa presumably in search of a mate, until she was shot by local farmers despite hippos being protected animals.

Simons’ sweep is vast. Alongside his in-depth research into the lives of hippos, particularly in the nineteenth century, Simons raises philosophical issues that have contemporary relevance – the zoo animal as liminoid, inhabiting a threshold between wild and tamed (152) – as he involves the reader in hippo narratives and the ethics of capture and captivity. In the final chapter, ‘A Bloat of Other European Hippos’, Simons compares Obaysch’s life to those of hippos in other zoos over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While some of these hippos are very long-lived, suggesting that care of these animals has improved, one questions, after all we now understand about Obaysch’s life, whether an extended life in a zoo is worth living for a captive animal.