

[Review] Patricia Sumerling.

*Elephants and Egotists: In Search of Samorn of the Adelaide Zoo.*

Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2016

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Reviewed by **Christine Townend**

University of Sydney

This book, as the sub-title suggests, largely concerns the history of an elephant, Samorn, who, as a gift to Australia from the king of Siam, resided at the Adelaide Zoo from 1956 until her death in 1994. The book may appeal to readers who are interested in the way that a zoo works, or in the history of zoos. In places the book offers a great deal of detail, for example long descriptions of the disagreements between ‘egotists’ on the board of the Adelaide Zoo, or about the negotiations to procure Samorn. However, it provides an interesting glimpse into the functioning of the Adelaide Zoo and the governing board of that time. Although Sumerling has focussed her book around the history of one particular elephant, Samorn, she has also included in her story information about the three elephants that preceded Samorn at Adelaide Zoo, information about animal traders, the purchase of elephants, and the quarrels of the zoo governance.

The non-chronological structure is at times hard to follow. The book begins with an account of how Samorn dies by falling into a moat, and that indeed other zoo elephants have also died in moats after bars and fences were ‘done away with’ (3). Chapter Two discusses the present day Adelaide Zoological Gardens, and then regresses to a history of this establishment from 1840 to the present day, including the elephants which pre-dated Samorn, and what happened to them. Chapter Three also discusses the previous elephants of Adelaide Zoo; Chapter Four discusses hunters and animal traders. Chapter Five, sub-titled ‘A Siamese Elephant Hunt’ delves into the history of elephant capture in (what was then called) Siam, and also contains a rather long discussion on the author’s obtaining of a visa and subsequent visit to

Thailand to carry out further research into Samorn's history – the inclusion of this story may be intended to mirror the search for the elephants.

It is not until Chapter Six that the reader is told about the arrival of Samorn at the Adelaide Zoo in 1956. Chapters Eight and Nine discuss a prolonged and involved dispute of the Adelaide Zoo Board. The new director, William Gasking, 'wanted to modernise the antiquated Adelaide Zoo'(3) but found great resistance from the zoo council and in particular the zoo's president, Fred Basse. Eventually Gasking was dismissed by the zoo council. The two chapters which discuss this dispute and governance of the zoo are (perhaps overly) complex, although they may have been included to illustrate how fragile is the governance of a zoo in relation to the welfare of the animals contained therein. If Sumerling is intending to write a disguised critique of the way in which zoos are run and animals treated, then clearly there are reasons for discussing the attempts of reformists who were repelled in their efforts to improve the zoo.

It is however frustrating that Sumerling offers little direct engagement with the ethics of zoos. She denounces the fact that many species are threatened with extinction, yet remains surprisingly silent on whether she believes zoos are a solution or not, and on the philosophical question of whether zoos should exist at all. For example, why, in such a carefully documented account, does she only briefly mention the well-known problem of 'zoochosis', the psychological problems associated with animals kept in confinement? '[M]ore commonly zoo animals exhibit signs of extreme depression and related psychological conditions as they struggle with the confines of their captivity' (Collins Dictionary). Another important point which she largely glosses over is that 'In the more reputable zoos around the world free contact by staff has mostly been replaced with 'protected contact' (174). To me this is one of the greatest tragedies of keeping elephants in zoos. I am opposed to imprisonment of wild animals in zoos, as 'the only thing that the public learns from zoos is that it is okay to keep wild creatures in cages' (Kymlicka). But it seems to me even worse when intelligent, active, social animals are not allowed contact with human beings, no longer allowed to lovingly embrace the keeper, who is indeed a poor substitute for a herd, but at least some sort of animal comfort. Having raised this point, Sumerling offers no opinion. Only in one place does Sumerling discuss the herd environment in the wild, when she refers to the fact that the female elephants have 'very close relationships within a matriarchal hierarchy' (130).

From reading between the lines, I suspect that Sumerling endorses zoos as saviours of species threatened with extinction, and that she does not consider the feelings of elephants as important as the survival of species and their protectors – the zoos – no matter how many failings zoos may have. I reach this conclusion, firstly because Sumerling emphasises at the beginning and conclusion of the book that many species are threatened with extinction, and yet she does not refer to the feelings, intelligence and sensitivities of elephants or other zoo animals who suffer behavioural deprivation due to lives spent in confined conditions. Although Sumerling does describe the shooting of the elephant, Lillian, at Adelaide Zoo in 1956 as a ‘legal execution’ (34) and although she states: ‘who can say what torrid emotions were going through the keepers’ minds’ (35) she ignores speculation on how Lillian may have felt, not only in the run-up to her execution, but in her years of imprisonment. Sumerling is interested in the suffering of the humans, not the elephants. She writes: ‘At 24 years of age, Lillian, in very poor health, was old before her time,’ and, ‘she had developed stiff joints in her legs and had poor feet unresponsive to the treatment of sodium salicylate’ (32). Did Lillian suffer? There is no speculation as to whether she felt pain; only speculation about the possible distress of the zoo-keeper who felt affection for this elephant.. Today it is known that the small bones of the feet are important in stimulating other skeletal bones. If the pads of an elephants’ feet are thickened due to a life on cement, this can result in arthritis, as can constantly standing on cement, being unable to travel through the jungle or corridors that elephants have used for centuries in their migratory movements. Such comment is lacking in Sumerling’s account of Lillian’s health.

This is not to say that Sumerling has not exposed many of the past short-comings of Adelaide Zoo, and, in passing, the short-comings of other zoos. It is possible that the author hoped to highlight the problems of keeping intelligent animals such as elephants in zoos by recounting, without comment, various failures in the zoo system, for example, Sumerling throws in the comment that ‘With Miss Siam being the first elephant at the zoo, it is unlikely that any of the zookeepers had experience looking after such creatures’ (18). She also criticises the zoo mentality when discussing one particular elephant Mary Ann, who died from peritonitis and enteritis caused by a twisting of the bowel, in 1934. She had been ‘the goose to lay the golden eggs’ paying entirely for her keep through the rides she gave (23). However, having read a whole book about a zoo and its governance, as I reader I would like to see Sumerling’s position on zoos themselves stated clearly.

In conclusion, *Elephants and Egotists* is a thoroughly researched book into a period in the history of Adelaide Zoo. It provides a useful insight into zoo management, and draws attention to the fact that animals imprisoned for public entertainment can suffer significantly, even if it does not engage with broader questions about the ethical status of zoos in general.

## Works Cited

<http://www.collinsdictionary.com/submission/12354/Zoochosis>

Kymlicka, Will. 'Animals and Social Justice.' Public Lecture, University of Sydney, August 2014.