

[Review] Mieke Roscher, André Krebber, and Brett Mizelle, editors. *Handbook of Historical Animal Studies*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021. 637 pp.

David Herman

animalcultures@gmail.com

In their introduction to the volume under review, ‘Writing History after the Animal Turn? An Introduction to Historical Animal Studies’ (1–18), which uses Harriet Ritvo’s 2007 article ‘On the Animal Turn’ as a key reference point, the editors describe as follows the main goal of and broader rationale for the book:

the discourses of human-animal studies and historical animal studies, just like all the other disciplines involved in the reevaluation of the lives of animals and our relationship with them, past and present, are not identical. Rather, they inform one another. What we aim at with this handbook, then, is to gather and make accessible the contribution of historical research to the field of human-animal studies as well as the contribution of human-animal studies to the study of history. History as a discipline and scholarly venture, in other words, can no [more] ignore animals than animal studies can history. (3–4)

As the editors and also a number of the contributors underscore, however, to bring about this rapprochement between animal studies and history, it is not enough to study ‘the lives, experiences, and deaths of animals [as] a powerful lens to understand and explain human histories, ideas, and practices’ (3), even if in the recording and interpretation of history humans remain ‘an omnipresent factor’ (4). Rather, animals’ own histories must take centre stage, to the fullest extent possible – given that the discourse of historiography is inescapably mediated by human perspectives.

In a well-known aperçu from *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests that the always-human-mediated nature of access to nonhuman lives is, in effect, epistemologically fatal: ‘If a lion could speak, we couldn’t understand him’ (‘Wenn ein Löwe sprechen könnte, wir könnte ihn nicht verstehen’) (223). I return to the implications of the present handbook for Wittgenstein’s claim – and for the larger questions about human-animal relations with which it intersects – at the end of this review. First, however, I consider how the volume’s organization and contents, as well as specific ideas and approaches developed in individual chapters, bear on what work by Ritvo (‘Animal’; *Animal Estate*), Erica Fudge (*Animal*, ‘What Was It Like’), Brett Mizelle, and other scholars has shown to be a key methodological problem for historical animal studies: namely, how to avoid anthropocentrism in writing the history of nonhuman animals vis-à-vis institutions, attitudes, and practices that have themselves evolved along anthropocentric lines. As a whole, the volume suggests that a strategy for achieving this aim is to use the evidential record, in all of its formal and material diversity, to build foundations for different, more inclusive narratives of what has happened. The goal is to create conditions for – and begin telling – historical counternarratives that disrupt dominant accounts, which are also all too often accounts premised on human dominance. In this way, historical animal studies can further the project of doing justice to a multispecies past – a project just as imperative as, and inextricably interlinked to, that of clarifying and honouring humankind’s obligations to more-than-human communities going forward.

The volume helps foster anti-anthropocentric historiography of this sort by multiplying pathways into – and interpretive frameworks for – the histories under investigation, thereby denying pre-eminence to any one way of narrating the history of animals and human-animal relations. The editors note that in compiling the handbook they sought to eschew human-centered epochs and embrace ‘new ways of thinking periodization that are more attentive to animal perspectives’ (17). Thus, Part I of the volume, ‘Timelines’, contains chapters organised around humans’ domestication of animals (rather than, say, the shift from BCE to CE) as a main temporal marker. Chapter 1, a contribution by Erica Hill on ‘Zooarchaeology’ (21–35), covers what can be gleaned from the archaeological record about animals and human-animal interactions during the pre-domestication period, whereas chapter 2, Abel Alves’s

‘Coevolution’ (37–51), focuses on the process of domestication itself, discussing how it has changed not only the animals subject to human control but also *Homo sapiens* itself. For its part, chapter 3, Etienne S. Benson’s standout contribution on ‘The Posthuman’ (53–66), considers issues that have become especially salient in the wake of more recent forms of theory and practice – for example, biotechnological developments that, ‘even if they provided powerful new tools for redirecting evolutionary processes, did not allow humanity to completely control the biological life of other species or of its own’ (57); advances in the field of ecosystem ecology, including research on the microbiome demonstrating ‘that “human nature” is something fundamentally produced by interactions with nonhumans’ such as bacteria in the gut and on the skin (60); and studies on comparative and ecological psychology, on distributed and embodied cognition, and on emotion vis-à-vis rationality suggesting convergence between human and nonhuman minds (61–64). It should also be noted that, in a manner that promotes cross-comparison between chapters within and across the various parts of the volume, each of these contributions and the ones that follow are divided into the same basic sections: an introduction providing an overview of the main research questions to be explored, a discussion of important topics and themes related to the subject of the chapter, and an analysis of the implications of the animal turn for the questions, topics, and debates covered. At issue, in this last connection, is the shift from anthropocentric understandings of animals – and of animals’ place in history – to biocentric understandings. The animal turn is one consequence of rejecting an assumed hierarchical separation between human beings and the rest of the biosphere and embracing, instead, the premise that there is a fundamental continuity between human and nonhuman forms of life (for further cultural-historical context on this shift, see Margot Norris 1–25).

Other features of the volume give rise to multiple entrance points for histories that have always been more than human, including its allocation of chapters to different dimensions of historiographic study. Thus, with Part I having used domestication to generate alternative timelines for considering animals’ place in history, Part II foregrounds issues brought to light by a regional approach to animals and human-animal relationships across time; it contains chapters on ‘American Studies,’ ‘African Studies,’ ‘Australasian and Pacific Studies,’ and ‘(East) Asian Studies.’ Part III explores how the focal concerns of different historical fields – including social

history, cultural history, economic history, and the history of science, among others – can be used to suss out yet other aspects of the multispecies past. Titled ‘Historical Approaches,’ Part IV appears to overlap Part III in some respects; for example, the placement of Anna-Katharina Wöbse’s chapter in this section raises the question of why environmental history should be considered an approach but political history a field, particularly at a time when our current environmental crises are increasingly recognised as having their roots in developments such as the industrial revolution. Yet Part IV, too, affords novel perspectives on more-than-human histories, drawing on the resources of animal geography, multispecies ethnography, postcolonial theory, feminist accounts of intersectionality, material culture studies, and work on visual culture and art history as well as the history of emotions to establish important foundations for future work in this domain of inquiry. Contributions in this section outline ways to probe what might count as evidence for claims about nonhuman modalities of experience; to explore questions about the scope and nature of animal agency, both in their own right and vis-à-vis issues of agency raised by inequities among human groups; to map out, through longitudinal research, transformations of human-animal relationships across different epochs; and to use a rethinking of species hierarchies to destabilise once-settled assumptions about the proper subjects and methods of historical inquiry itself.

The chapters in Part V then shift the focus from approaches to historical research on animals to specific topics on which any number of those approaches might be brought to bear. These topics include pet-keeping, hunting, the exhibition of animals in zoos, museums, and circuses, and the use of animals in agriculture, experimental science, and warfare. Last but not least, it should be emphasised that the volume’s index functions not only as a navigational aid for the book but also as a means for tracing un- or underexplored threads in historical animal studies to date, affording access to cross-chapter pathways for future research. These pathways are marked in the index via concepts (agency, biopolitics, ecosystem, pest, urbanization); animal classes (insects, mammals) and species (bee, flea, mosquito, bat, cheetah, seal); relevant historical figures (Aristotle, P. T. Barnum, Walter Benjamin, René Descartes, Charles Darwin); and cultural-ethnic traditions (Amerindian, Indigenous, Native American) and historical events

(Civil War, Industrial Revolution, World War I), as well as periods (antiquity, the Middle Ages, modernity, the Renaissance) and particular literary and cinematic animals (Black Beauty, Moby Dick, Rin Tin Tin).

In the parts of the volume described in the previous paragraphs, a number of individual chapters deserve to be singled out as especially productive contributions to the (still-emergent) field of historical animal studies. In Part II, Barbara R. Ambros and Ian Jared Miller's illuminating chapter on '(East) Asian Studies' (117–30) is particularly noteworthy. The chapter explores distinctive regional inflections of a variety of institutions and practices – from hunting, fishing, and whaling to animal domestication and sericulture – in an effort to 'stymie the universalizing tendencies of Euro-American histories of the "animal"' and show how the subjects 'at the center of animal history [are] always best understood as the contingent result of changeful cultural and historical processes' (117). Standout contributions to Part III include, among others, Helen Cowie's 'Cultural History' (147–64), Heinrich Lang's 'Economic History' (181–95), and Mitchell G. Ash's 'History of Science' (259–74). Defining cultural history as the project of 'recovering the mentalities and ideologies of past societies and exploring how their members interpreted and understood the world around them' (147), Cowie discusses how research aligned with this general project can shed light on the role of animals in symbolism, religion, and art, in understandings of socially deviant behavior, and in responses to cross-cultural encounters. In his chapter, noting that 'animal contributions to human economy have for the most part not been valued as labor' (181), and highlighting the methodological gap in economic history when it comes to 'grasping the difference between nonhuman animals and objects' (188), Lang works against the grain of human-oriented characterisations of economic performances through a discussion of several key topics: animal power in the context of agricultural history, the place of animals in urban economic environments, and the history of animal trade and animal markets. Ash, meanwhile, uses the history of science to explore what he describes as an oscillation between the objectification and the humanisation of animals – between the tendency to treat animals as things and the tendency to admit some privileged species within (or at least near) the domain of the human (see also, in this connection, Fudge, *Animal* 8). His discussion covers the

role of animals in natural history as well as laboratory science, nonviolent research on animals in evolutionary biology and ethology, and more recent animal-focused work in fields ranging from biotechnology to climate science.

Likewise, three chapters in Part IV deserve special mention. Dominik Ohrem's 'Feminist Intersectionality Studies' (341-55), in addition to providing a useful thumbnail history of this general theoretical approach, discusses how contributions to historical animal studies, in particular, 'have taken up intersectionality's key analytical focus on the complex synergies between vectors of difference and power' – and thereby broadened the intersectionalist purview to include questions of animality and human-animal difference (347). Defining material culture as 'the study of tangible objects that can be used to understand the past in ways that are distinct from textual, visual, and aural sources' (357), Kit Heintzman's 'Material Culture Studies' (357-73) uses wool, ivory, and shellac, among other examples, to trace out animal histories as well as histories of human-animal interactions. The section on shellac (370–72), an insect-derived resin used to coat furniture and manufacture 78-rpm records, among many other artifacts, makes for especially interesting reading; it models the benefits of maintaining a focus on the specific animals involved when studying the history of animal-derived products and related consumption practices. Sarah D. P. Cockram's 'History of Emotions' (409–22) also makes for fascinating reading. This chapter uses an epistolary exchange between a fifteenth-century Italian marquis and his spouse about their dog to explore issues raised by attempts to interpret, from a distance of nearly six-hundred years, the couple's emotional response to the animal's being lost and then found. Reviewing universalist as well as constructivist accounts of emotions across time and space, Cockram suggests how examples like the Italian couple's correspondence require further research on how 'things happening have caused emotions in or about animals' and also on how 'things have taken place because of emotions about animals or as a result of animal emotion' (420).

Finally, in Part V, Andrew Gardiner's 'History of Veterinary Medicine' (493-507) explores the changing practices of veterinarians – for example, with respect to the species most frequently treated and the range of treatments offered. Underscoring the benefits of an animal-attentive approach to this area of historical study, Gardiner links that approach to emerging

research on animal biographies (see Krebber and Roscher), scholarship using oral histories to document veterinarians' encounters with nonhuman patients and attempts to engage with animal subjectivities. Veronika Settele's insightful 'History of Agriculture' (525-37) begins by identifying a double blind spot: animals are not typically studied under the rubric of agricultural history, and animal histories do not generally attend to agricultural animals. Settele notes several factors that may be responsible for this dual omission, including the difficulty of reconciling an animal-rights focus with an approach to historiography foregrounding large numbers of farm animals rather than particular nonhuman creatures, and the literal disappearance of animals due to industrialised factory-farming methods that keep animals inside stables and barns for their entire lives (526-27). The author then uses the topics of breeding, keeping and handling, and slaughter and eating to highlight how a focus on animals in agricultural contexts can both inform and be informed by a general historiographic approach that Susan Nance describes in the following terms: "[seeking] out the activities of nonhumans as factors of historical causation in a necessarily interspecific past" (Settele 535, quoting Nance 7). For her part, Janet M. Davis develops a methodologically innovative analysis in 'History of Animal Fights and Blood Sports' (587-602), arguing, in a way that links back to Ohrem's chapter in Part IV, that animal historians need to connect a variety of 'gruesome cultural forms [such as dogfighting and cockfighting, foxhunting, and horseracing and rodeo] to broader intersectional questions concerning identity formation, anthropomorphism, animal agency, and civilizational progress' (588). In the last chapter of the volume, 'History of Animal Collections/Animal Taxonomy' (603-17), Andrew Wells broaches key conceptual issues bearing on historical animal studies. Noting the multifariousness of collections of animals, ranging from individual pets to the repositories of natural history museums and the inhabitants of nature reserves, Wells asks 'what counts as an animal: Do the taxidermically preserved remains of a creature, for example? What about a fossil, the geological shadow of an animal that decomposed millennia ago?' (603). Examining four historically significant forms of animal collection – namely, cabinets of curiosities, museums, menageries, and zoos – the author goes on to explore far-reaching

questions related to the chapter's main subject, including the scope and limitations of animal agency, the history and implications of systems of animal classification, and the cultural role of taxonomy-challenging groups such as hybrids and monsters.

In short, situated at the intersection of reflexive scholarship on historiography and the animal turn, the handbook as a whole seeks not only to promote new models for historical animal studies but also to use those models to revisit foundational historical concepts, topics, and approaches from a vantage point that decenters the human. These two aims are interconnected, or rather recursively interrelated. Decentering the human in contexts of historical study can give rise to new ways of documenting and engaging with nonhuman agents as well as more-than-human situations and events, and those new historiographic strategies and tactics can, in turn, provide further leverage for resituating *Homo sapiens* within the domain of animal life. Both of these interlinked aims support the larger project of dismantling established species hierarchies with a view toward building new, biocentric foundations for cross-species communities. In these communities, the logic of exceptionalism gives way to modes of practice based on affiliation and respect, and animal others, rather than being relegated to the margins of history, take their place as coprotagonists in more-than-human narratives about the past.

As my phrasing here suggests, entering into such transhuman communities entails a different way of encountering Wittgenstein's speaking lion, who becomes, from this altered perspective, an agential subject capable not only of having but also of presenting, of telling, a history. It should be noted that the lion appears in a section of the *Philosophical Investigations* devoted to critiquing the tendency to construe mental activity in terms of inner 'private objects'. Instead, the philosopher seeks to embed mental states such as thoughts and intentions in what he describes as language games – or ways of using particular forms of expression for specific purposes – that are in turn embedded in larger forms of life. In making his assertion about the speaking lion, Wittgenstein assumes that the gap between humans' and other animals' (in this case, lions') forms of life will remain impossibly wide, such there could be no way to bridge the language games or expressive regimes used on either side of the species divide. This gap, one might conclude, is the cost of the philosopher's solution to the problem of other minds – his shift from talk of the mind in terms of a private, interior domain to an account based on

how interlocutors use ways of speaking in contextually situated domains of practice. Arguably, however, Wittgenstein's own framework for analysis suggests grounds for disputing both the presupposition of his aperçu – namely, that lions (among other animals) are speechless – and the claim it is used to support – namely, that what makes lions' minds unreadable is not that they are interior and private, but that they caught up in forms of life that are unbridgeably distant from humans' ways of living (for further discussion, see Herman, 'Animal' and *Narratology*, 202-32).

As the handbook demonstrates (in parallel with other contributions to the broader field of historiography), one way to bring others' forms of life into the domain of the comprehensible is through documentation, interpretation, analysis – that is, through historical study. In this sense, the volume under review, coupled with ongoing research on animals' histories, whether at the individual, population, or species level, helps make nonhuman forms of life legible and interpretable, by documenting what animals have done, where they have lived, and how their legacy has both molded and been molded by humans' own individual, group, and species histories. To put this point another way, lions do speak – through individual and coordinated behaviors, through vocalized and other signals, embedded in leonine ways of being in the world and it is possible, through scrupulous attention to their histories as individuals and members of groups, to learn how to understand them. Historical animal studies is an umbrella term for such painstaking documentation and interpretation, which provides a basis for modes of cross-species interchange that evolve over time, via the mutual shaping of nonhuman and human forms of life. In building critical foundations for an anti-anthropocentric historiography, then, the *Handbook of Historical Animal Studies* furnishes means for understanding the speaking lion – and the animal's place in a history that includes but extends beyond the human.