

[Review] Peta Tait. *Fighting Nature: Travelling Menageries, Animal Acts and War Shows*. Sydney University Press, 2016.

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On October 23, 1903, William Temple Hornaday, the director of the New York Zoological Park, wrote to a Mr C. L. Williams, then responsible for ‘Hagenbeck’s Animal Show,’ which was touring the United States. At the time, the show was to be seen at the Grand Opera House in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, but it was missing one of its star performers, the famous lion-tiger hybrid ‘Prince’ who had been part of the show for over a decade, making his debut in the United States as part of Hagenbeck’s exhibit at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Prince was in New York instead of with the show because he was ill and it was hoped that the relative quiet and expert care available at the zoological park would help him recover. Alas, according to the letter, Prince ‘would require fully another month of convalescence’ before he would possibly be ready to ‘resume his work.’ ‘He yet feels so much under the weather,’ Hornaday writes, ‘that he lies in his den all day and never comes out willingly.’ In the end, Prince died in New York and Hornaday, following instructions from Williams, sent the carcass to a local taxidermist with instructions that the skin should be tanned for the purpose of making a rug, the claws should be removed, and, along with the skin, skull, and bones, sent to Williams, who could then be found at the Empire Theater in Frankford, PA.

I first came across Prince about 20 years ago when I was researching Carl Hagenbeck’s circus acts and his claims that he had developed a new way of training ‘wild’ animals through kindness, a method he contrasted sharply with the brutal training approaches used by others. Hagenbeck put together mixed groups of animals and the trainer, dressed in formal attire, did not threaten the animals with a chair, whip, or gun, but spoke softly to them and directed them with a guiding wand. The finale of the act in Chicago featured Prince, standing on his hind legs

in a chariot pulled around the arena by a hitch of tigers while two large black-and-white Great Dane dogs attended as ‘footmen.’ It was evidently an impressive sight, not least because it contrasted markedly with other animal performances in the period. In the end, I concluded that the animals trained by Hagenbeck and his staff were not only instructed through kindness; but I also concluded that animals presented in tableaux of snarls and lunges, cracking whips, and threatened iron bars and red-hot pokers, were often not as brutally treated as most observers supposed. What seemed to be happening is that two very different kinds of *performances* were being developed – one that claimed that animals, if treated with kindness, could become our friends; and another that emphasized the dangerousness of animals and the fearlessness of trainers who risked their lives entering the cage. Importantly, both kinds of exhibit had to be understood, I argued, as fundamentally theatrical.

In her *Fighting Nature: Travelling Menageries, animal acts and war shows*, published as part of the Animal Publics series, edited by Melissa Boyde and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, Peta Tait focuses on those animal acts that featured violence. ‘The contention of this book,’ Tait writes, ‘is that since aggression and violence underpinned the exhibition of animals and manifested overtly in the popular fighting acts and war shows, aggressive violence towards animals shaped public experience’ (4). Tait directs her attention to a wide variety of performances – from acts where a ‘tamer’ entered the cage of a ferocious beast and subdued it to shows that re-enacted scenes from famous wars and colonial hunts – to demonstrate how the theatrical violence of these kinds of exhibits can be understood within the context of a wider frame of violent behaviour toward animals and other humans. Tait even revealingly shows how the hooliganism, hoaxes, pick-pocketing, and other anti-social behaviours associated with traveling circuses were part of larger, brutal processes that underscored popular culture through the mid-twentieth century. Violence was central to the attractions, Tait contends, and the capacity crowds gave ‘tacit approval to the brutal process of shipping thousands of animals, dead or alive, across the world for gigantic entertainment spectacles’ (219).

The book is an enlightening read that provides a wealth of information about especially nineteenth-century animal performances. Although the focus is on the United States and Britain, and some might want more information about other traditions of the time such as bear

performances, the materials about British colonial performances were particularly interesting and the overall interpretive frame, which also allows for a deeper understanding of the behaviours of the audience, is quite compelling. However much Tait's approach, for example, leaves largely unexplained animal performances like that of Prince that did not display violence and brutality, her approach directly explains the rendering of the animal's corpse into a rug, a bag of claws, and some bones.

For Tait, circus performances, theatrical battle re-enactments, and colonial shows, have to be understood as part of a 'human fascination with conflict and war' (249), as outcomes of 'entrenched beliefs regarding the human right to hunt and exploit nature through warlike practices against other species' (253), and as part of human nature. The book is an important and timely contribution, especially as we watch the waning days of the 146-year-old tradition behind the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus.