

Animal Lives

Erica Fudge asks if, and how, a biography of an animal might be written.

WHY ARE THERE NO entries for animals in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (*DNB*)? Clearly, an animal's life can be recorded; but the concept of biography has always been applied uniquely to humans: the life hinted at in the word biography somehow refers only to *Homo sapiens*. Why?

There is a simple answer: anthropocentrism or the belief in the centrality and superiority of human beings. But this may be too simple. Perhaps, to write a 'life' is not just to present a series of 'facts' but to bear witness to that individual's potential to construct a life-story of him- or herself; to communicate through language the subject's own self-understanding (or misunderstanding). In these terms, the subject of biography is always potentially the subject of autobiography. But before making so large a leap, it might be worth thinking about the other ways in which animals are always to be denied access to the *DNB*.

The brief to contributors to the *Oxford DNB* requires 'standard factual components' that must appear in each entry. These would appear to allow for some animal 'lives'. I am going to attempt to write entries for a couple of animals, both of whom lived in England in the late sixteenth

and early seventeenth centuries. I do so not only with the hope of highlighting that recording such animals' lives may be possible, but more importantly with the hope of bringing to the surface some of the assumptions that underlie the creation of the human 'life'. Tracing the roots of these assumptions takes us back to the same Early Modern period: to René Descartes' statement 'I think therefore I am', and to his assertion of the human as a uniquely and essentially thinking being.

The first 'standard factual component' of the *DNB* 'life' is the obvious one, the one that organises the whole reference work: 'Name'. This is available for some animals, at least: we know, for example, that one of the bears at London's Hope Theatre in the 1650s was called Blind Bess. According to theatre historian Leslie Hotson, she was one of 'the most famous' bears of the age. This Bess may even have had a family name: she may have been the bear referred to as 'Besse Hill' by John Taylor the Water Poet in 1638. (The life expectancy of a brown bear is now twenty-five years, though I imagine that the torture of the bear in the Hope Theatre may have shortened her life expectancy somewhat. Zoo bears have been known to live for up to fifty years but it seems unlikely that Bess would have lived that long.)

A second *DNB* category: 'Full dates of birth (or, as a second best,

baptism), death, and burial, or floruit dates' is more difficult for animals (although exact dates can also be difficult for many humans in the past). In the case of Bess, we may not be able to offer a date of birth, and certainly will not find baptismal records; but we do have a date for her death: February 9th, 1656, when she was shot, according to the diarist Henry Townshend, by Colonel Pride's men.

Other of the personal details may be less relevant for the non-human: 'Title' becomes redundant (although the apocryphal story of the royal cut of meat dubbed 'Sir Loin of Beef' might suggest the possibility of a biography of meat: giving the truly dead a life, you might say). 'Physical appearance, character traits': for Bess we have no documentary evidence, but we might guess: brown, hairy, clawless, toothless, scarred, blinded, probably angry, aggressive, but maybe terrified. 'Places of birth (or, as a second best, baptism), death, and burial': we cannot name the place of birth (though Russia is a possibility) but know that she died in Southwark. 'Place of settled residence' we can offer – if settled is the right word for a bear's accommodation behind the Hope Theatre. 'Cause of death' is simple: execution by firing squad. There are the

A muzzled brown bear is baited by dogs, from the fourteenth-century *Luttrell Psalter*.





A woodcut of Morocco the Intelligent Horse with his owner Banks, performing arithmetic tricks in Elizabethan London (1595).

bare bones of a 'life' here, a 'life' that is representable in the form of an albeit brief *DNB* entry. There is even a contemporary epitaph from a 1660 text entitled *The Man in the Moon*:

Here lyes old Bess the ransome of
Prides fury.
Who was condemn'd without a Judge
or Jury.
A valiant Champion was she, many
prize
Gainst Butchers Dogs she won, till
that her eyes
She lost in service ...

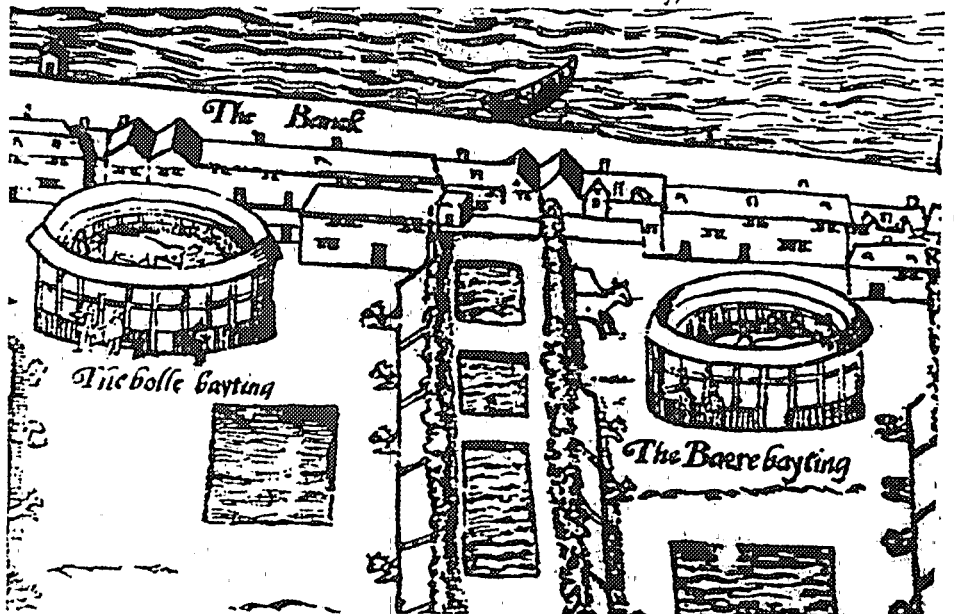
But even where sufficient detail of the animal's life is known, its entry into biographical record remains unlikely. Another example will make the point: Morocco the Intelligent Horse, who was a celebrity for over twenty years from 1588, and was referred to by, among others, Shakespeare, Jonson, Nashe, Dekker, and Markham. This horse could, according to these records, count the spots on dice, dance, pick a virgin from a Spaniard. But even Morocco, however, gets no entry in the *DNB*. The entry is given instead to his owner, Banks, a man with no recorded first name and dates (*fl.* 1588-1637) that reflect not his birth, baptism, death or burial, but references to him as the owner of the performing horse (though the longevity of Morocco's

career may point to the fact that more than one horse performed the tricks under the name). His entry in the old *DNB*, by Sidney Lee, brings together the numerous reports of the horse not the man in order to create the human subject's 'life'. The animal is the showstopper, the real celebrity, but for the biographer he is the object, not the subject, of the dictionary entry.

The reason for Morocco and Bess's exclusion becomes clear in the next two categories of the *DNB* 'life'. 'Family data' asks for full names and details of father, mother, spouse and so on. This is not possible for either Bess or Morocco. But even if such

information did exist it would not give more reason to include the animal in the *DNB*. Where full details of an animal's lineage are recorded – in the stud books that were so central to the horse-breeding industry in the eighteenth century and after, for example – that lineage is recorded not to place the animal as an individual in a family tree so much as in a bloodline. The thoroughbred remains the object of human breeding expertise, but it does not become the subject of a biography even though this vital information about the animal is recorded. And even when pictures of these thoroughbreds exist – as so many do – there is a question over their meaning. Are images of thoroughbred horses really 'portraits' or are they merely representations of expensive human possessions? The National Portrait Gallery, founded in 1856 to 'collect the likenesses of famous British men and women', includes footballer David Beckham, for example, but not the equally celebrated racehorses Nijinski or Red Rum. In a similar way the genetic material and medical history of Dolly the Sheep (1996-2003)

The bear- and bull-baiting arenas in Southwark; a detail from Agas' *Civitas Londinium* (dating from the second half of the 16th century).



have been recorded in exceptional detail, but even they do not offer 'Family data' in the way expected by the *DNB*. The data mark the recording of a scientific breakthrough, in which Dolly is merely the object of observation and not an actor in her own life.

But it is when confronted with the *DNB*'s next category, 'Career', that things get really difficult for the potential animal biographer. The discourse of biography, as set out in the *DNB*, allows for the recording of only the most extraordinary – possibly unnatural – of animals: those with occupations. For Bess a career trajectory for a *DNB* entry might be written in the following terms: 'baited bear then, sometime between 1638 and 1656, promotion(?) to blind bear (a job with specifications that included being beaten with whips perhaps weekly on a Thursday by members of the public)'. Likewise, we know that Morocco began performing his tricks in London in 1588; in September 1591 he was recorded giving shows in the provinces. In 1601, according to *Owles Almanacke* (1618), he climbed onto the roof of St Paul's Cathedral; the following year he is reported to have performed in France, and in 1609 one text records his appearance in Frankfurt. These achievements are ascribed to his owner in the old *DNB*.

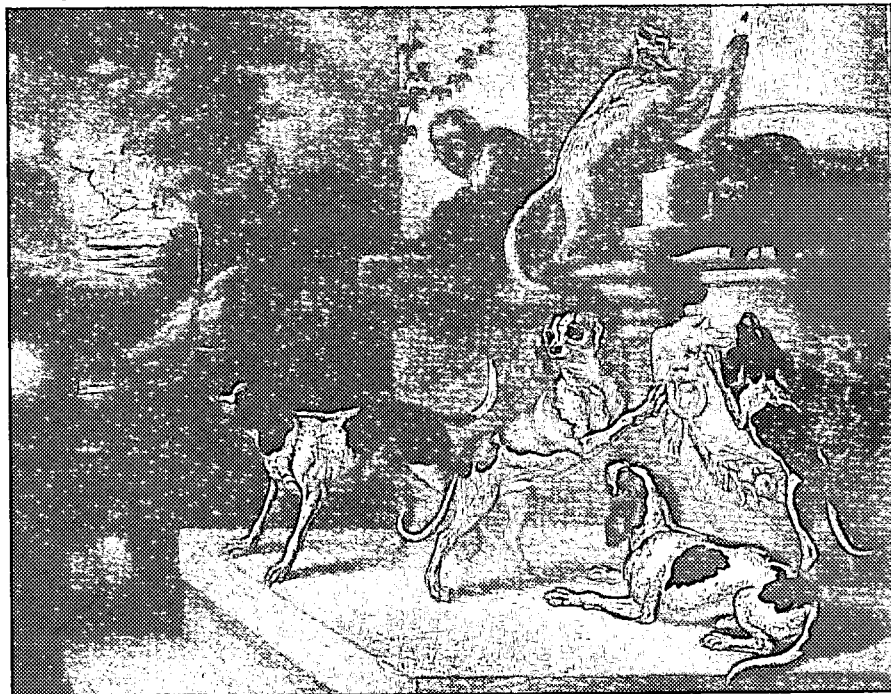
The designation of Morocco's star to his owner, and the exclusion of Bess from the *DNB* altogether, is based upon our understanding of the concept of a career. A career is something that we fashion for ourselves; that we work at with a sense of commitment. It is self-willed. This is why the most thorough animal 'lives' available to us are not factual but fictional ones – Anna Sewall's *Black Beauty* or Virginia Woolf's *Flush*, for example. In fiction an author can speculate about the animal's interpretation of events: can dramatise Black Beauty's understanding of his transfer from one human to another, or detail the spaniel Flush's experience of Elizabeth Barrett's courtship by Robert Browning. Because a real animal leaves us no comprehensible record of its thoughts and experiences, desires and intentions, it is impossible for us to write a factual biography in the same way. Animals' thoughts and intentions are unrecordable, and because of this

humans have historically asserted that they lack thoughts and intentions; self-awareness and self-will. In short, they have no career.

And so, even though Bess may have had something that might be represented as looking like a career, we should not call it one, as we cannot attribute any volition to her being sent into the bear pit to be beaten with whips. Likewise, even though Morocco had at least one European tour, he did not mastermind his own rise to fame. Banks, who presumably did, therefore gets the *DNB* entry. Other animals may appear to have an occupation, yet fall even further outside of criteria of the career. Being a rat-catcher is an occupation for a dog, and so is being

the Renaissance in Italy (1860). Burckhardt famously claimed that the Middle Ages were a time when 'Man was conscious of himself only as member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation – only through some general category.' That it was only 'at the close of the thirteenth century [that] Italy began to swarm with individuality.' Tony Davies has noted that Burckhardt read into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries 'a new and distinctively modern notion of human individuality ... demonstrably shaped by and inseparable from nineteenth-century conditions and concerns.'

Burckhardt may have exemplified the liberal humanist position that proclaims the autonomy of the indi-

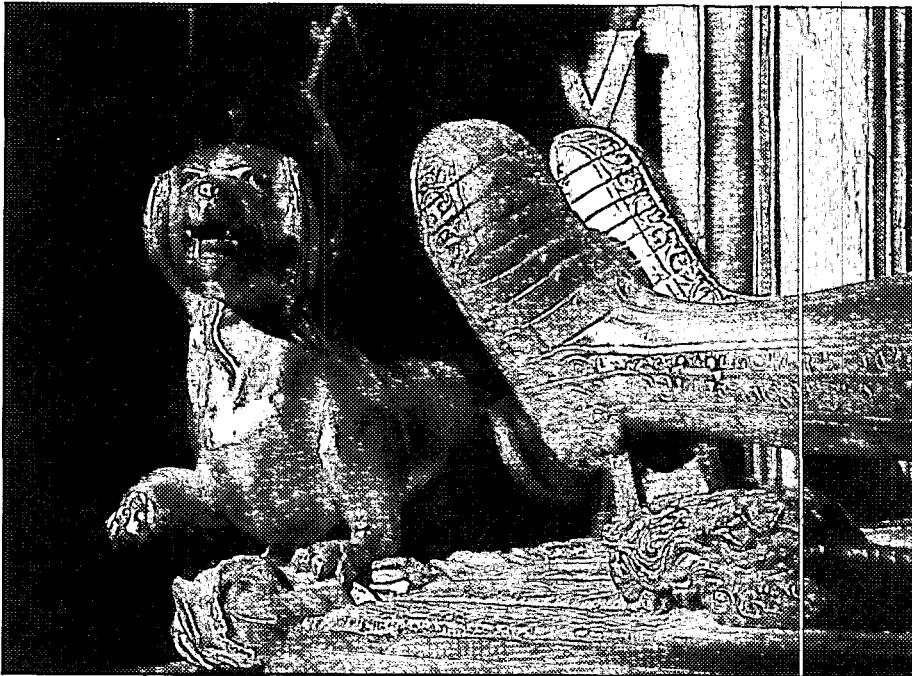


a pet. Both activities serve functions, and the pet may get an individual name and perhaps even a portrait. On the other hand, being a fox might involve being an annoyance to a farmer, but it is neither an occupation nor a career. It is a state of being: it is natural, and the element of volition is relegated to one of mere instinct. 'Instinct' is not a 'standard factual component' of the *DNB*.

With the assumption of volition underpinning one of the key categories of the biography entry, we may be discovering that the *DNB*, in both old and new versions, is following in the footsteps of one of the most influential studies of human selfhood of the nineteenth century, Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilisation of*

'Monkeys and Dogs Playing' (1661) by Francis Barlow, the earliest British-born animal painter. The dogs may be portraits of particular animals.

vidual but it did not originate with him. It is also found in Thomas Jefferson's American Declaration of Independence (1776) and Tom Paine's *Rights of Man* (1792). But the inscription of the human subject and construction of the self – and the absence of animals – in the discourse of the 'life' is somewhat older than this. The assertion of human individuality that lies at the heart of the modern biographical enterprise emerges fully in the mid-seventeenth century, in René Descartes' work on



Faithful friend: from a memorial in Westminster Abbey to Edward Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury (1561-1618).

'bio' but does not attempt to merely write the biographies of animals to make up for past absence. Instead it questions altogether the potential to write anyone or anything's 'life'. It questions, in fact, the nature of the 'life' altogether.

This tradition arguably derived from Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Scepticism* of c.AD 200. Philosopher Jonathan Barnes argues that this text saw a key shift within the Western philosophical tradition from metaphysics to epistemology; and in it Sextus set out some of the key assumptions of scepticism. He identified three schools of thought in ancient philosophy: '[t]hose who are

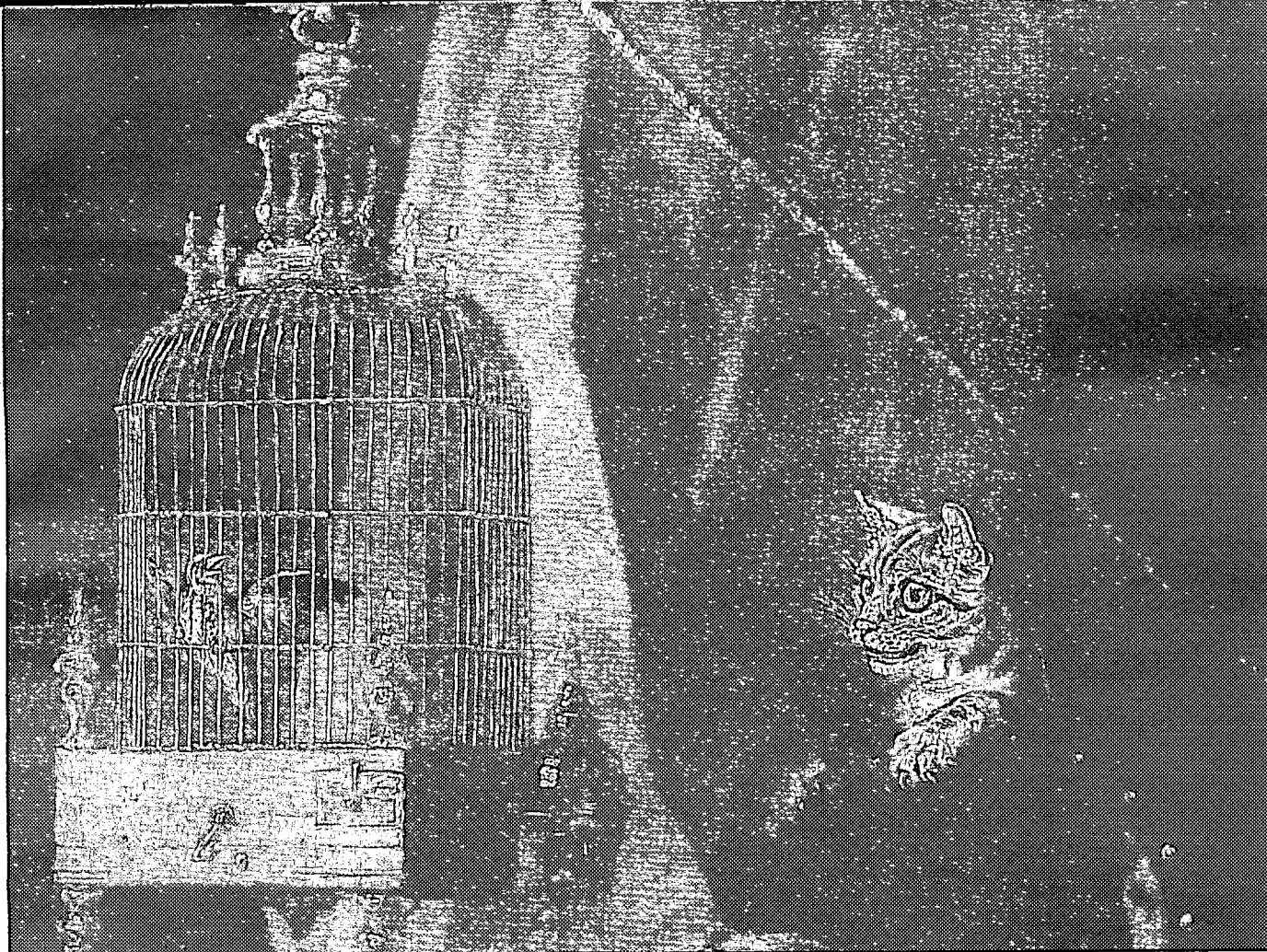
animal automatism and human individuality, autonomy and historical transcendence. He wrote in *Discourse on the Method* (1637):

I knew I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is simply to think, and which does not require any place, or depend on any material thing, in order to exist. Accordingly this 'I' – that is, the soul by which I am what I am – is entirely distinct from the body, and indeed is easier to know than the body, and would not fail to be whatever it is, even if the body did not exist.

Descartes' assertion of this essentially human separation of body and mind – which lies at the heart of the liberal humanist tradition that suffuses the *DNB* – did not exist in isolation, however. For historian of ideas George Boas, Descartes was reacting in part to writings that challenged such separation. Where the liberal humanist tradition that lies at the heart of the both the old and the new *DNB* may be traceable back to Descartes, a sceptical tradition can be read as both a prompt to Cartesianism and a true alternative to the humanism of the biography. This alternative tradition of biography takes a fuller note of the meaning of



Anne of Denmark with her dogs and horse, painted by Paul von Somer in 1617.



William Hogarth was an animal lover who included this detail of a cat and goldfinch in *The Graham Children* (1742).

called Dogmatists ... think they have discovered the truth; ... [the] Academics ... have asserted that things cannot be apprehended; and the Sceptics are still investigating.' The notion that a 'life' can be written relies upon a dogmatic belief in truth, in the facts being available to the researcher. A sceptical biographer might find writing such a 'life' more difficult.

Sextus's dismissal of dogmatism centred on the status of humans and animals. He countered the claims of the dogmatic philosophers by taking up and dismissing distinct dogmatic proposals. One example will suffice:

Democritus says that a human being is what we all know. But as far as this goes, we shall not be acquainted with humans; for we also know dogs – and for that reason dogs will be humans. And there are some humans we do not know – so they will not be humans. Or rather, as far as this conception goes, no-one will be a human; for if human is known by all humans, then no-one will be a human according to him. That this point is not sophistical but in line with his

own views is apparent.

Exploring the dogmatics' beliefs in the existence of a distinct being called a human, Sextus proposed a logical end to logic. He wrote:

But even if we grant that humans are apprehended, it is surely not possible to show that it is by humans that objects must be judged. For anyone who says that objects should be judged by humans will say this either without proof or with proof. Not with proof; for the proof must be true and must have been judged – and so have been judged by something. Now since we cannot say on the basis of agreement by what the proof itself can be judged (for we are investigating the standard by which), we shall not be able to decide the proof; and for this reason we shall not be able to prove the standard, with which our account is now concerned. But if it is said without proof that it is by humans that objects must be judged, this will be unconvincing. Thus we shall not be able to affirm that humans are the standard by which.

Pierre Charron put this slightly differently in 1601 when he asked a fundamental question about the need to perform a comparison of humans and animals:

But who shall do it? Shall man? He is a partie and to be suspected; and to say the truth, deals partially therein.

By implication, it is unsurprising that orthodox evaluations of humans and animals always assert the superiority of the human – it is, after all, always humans who are performing the evaluation.

This emphasis on animals remains central in Early Modern sceptics' questioning of human superiority. In the late sixteenth century, for example, Charron's friend and mentor Michel de Montaigne wondered about the subjectivity of his cat: 'When I play with my cat, how do I know that she is not passing time with me rather than I with her?' In the English text, *Sceptick, Or Speculations* (c.1590), attributed to Walter Raleigh when it was first published in 1651, we read:

For why should I presume to prefer my conceit and imagination, in affirming that a thing is thus, or thus, in its own nature, because it seemeth to me to be so, before the conceit of other living creatures, who may as well think it to be otherwise in each one nature, because it appeareth otherwise to them than it doth to me?

The author goes on to argue that

animals 'may be in the truth and I in error, as well as I in truth, and they err. If my conceit must be believed before theirs, great reason that it be proved to be truer than theirs.' All such statements derive ultimately from Sextus Empiricus, whose text was first printed in Latin by Henri Estienne in 1562.

All these writers discovered no foundation from which to judge truth from falsehood, and retired to what Barnes called 'suspension of judgment'. They commonly found that wonder, a turbulence of the mind, ceases, and peace reigns. Unable to prove the standard, the standards disappear. Applying this to the biography, name, dates, family data and career are all shown to be constructed in order to make the human itself.

If we apply the same sceptical state of mind to the assumption of the fox's lack of career, the animal's possession of mere instinct and the human self-conceit of its agency, we can begin, not to write the lives of animals – that would maintain the assumptions of biography – but to rethink the construction of the 'life' of humans. Where biographical writings like the *DNB* claim the existence of an individual, and therefore of a 'life', a sceptical view would hold up animals as an example of the limits of human knowledge – as the point at which our capacity as thinking beings breaks down. It would also argue that human individuality does not exist prior to writing, but is actually being created in the writing of the 'life'; and, further, that the exclusion of animals from such 'life' is fundamental to that creation.

Descartes, of course, found a more dogmatic way to answer these sceptics, even though he began his search with absolute doubt: 'I cannot share the opinion of Montaigne and others who attribute understanding or thought to animals', he wrote in a 1646 letter to William Cavendish:

I am not worried that people say that human beings have absolute dominion over all the other animals; for I agree that some of them are stronger than us, and I believe that there may also be some animals which have a natural cunning capable of deceiving the shrewdest human beings. But I consider that they imitate or surpass us only in those of

our actions which are not guided by our thought.

Unwilling to the end, animals lack the crucial element for a 'life'.

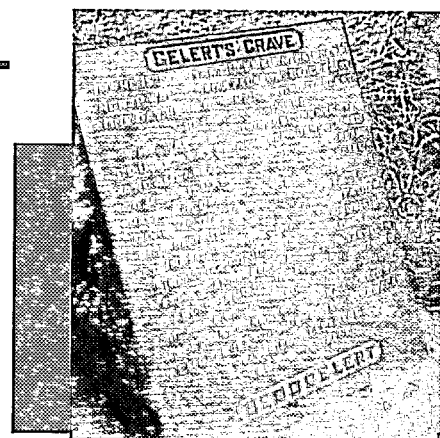
In this sense, the exclusion of animals from the *DNB* does not just mark the continuing anthropocentrism of history as a discipline. Rather it marks out the continuation of a version of human selfhood that is, and always has been, constructed out of, in exclusion from, and by the naming of animals. The *DNB*, in fact, seems to reverse what is often regarded as the original vision of dominion but in fact it has the same effect. Where Adam names the beasts in Genesis 2: 19-20 and so enacts his power over them, contemporary historians, by failing to give names to animals, also render them powerless.

Montaigne asked, 'What can anyone understand who cannot understand himself?'. His question emphasises the importance of the desire to 'write' the 'life' of oneself and consequently of others. But to those, like Montaigne, in the sceptical tradition, the inevitable failure of human understanding means that this is impossible, even if we are unwilling to admit it. Philosophers, Montaigne wrote, 'do not want to make an express avowal of the ignorance and weakness of human reason – they want to avoid frightening the children'. A modern sceptic might add that historians do not want to make an express avowal of the underlying philosophical violence of the human 'life' because they want to avoid frightening their readers into recognising the links between scholarship and the slaughterhouse.

FOR FURTHER READING

Jonathan Barnes, 'The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist,' *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philosophical Society* 208 (no.28) (1982), pp.1-29; George Boas, *The Happy Beast in French Thought of the Seventeenth Century* (1933, reprinted 1966); Tony Davies, *Humanism* (Routledge, 1997); Erica Fudge, *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture* (Macmillan, 2000); Erica Fudge ed., *Renaissance Beasts: Of Ahimals, Humans and Other Wonderful Creatures* (University of Illinois Press, 2004); Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (1960, reprinted 1979).

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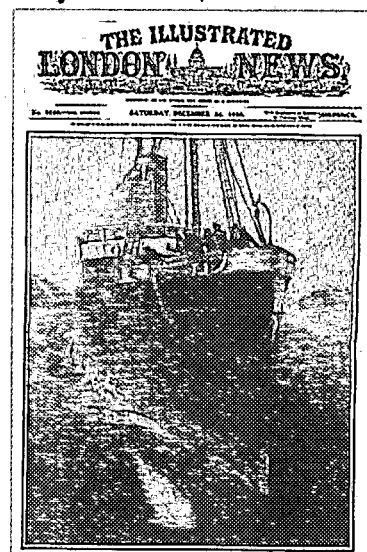


PELORUS JACK (fl. 1888-1912)

A Risso's DOLPHIN which, between 1888 and 1912, accompanied any steamer travelling outside Admiralty Bay and Pelorus Sound in New Zealand's Cook Strait. This dangerous channel is full of rocks, has strong currents and has been the site of hundreds of shipwrecks. But none occurred when Pelorus Jack was at work. There is no telling how many lives he saved. If he heard a boat's motor he would swim with it for twenty minutes or more, guiding it through the dangerous passage. He particularly liked steamers and quickly became famous, was seen by thousands of travellers, described widely in newspapers and shown on postcards. In 1904 a law was passed to protect him after a drunk tried to shoot him from a passing steamer, the *Penguin*. It is said that the only ship he never helped again was the *Penguin*, which was later shipwrecked with great loss of life.

He was last seen in April 1912 and rumours surrounded his disappearance, including that he had been harpooned by foreign whalers. However, recent research has shown that Pelorus Jack was an old animal who may have died from natural causes. His head was white and his body pale, both indications of age. The Risso's dolphin is a rare species in New Zealand waters, and it is possible he swam alongside ships for company in the absence of his own kind.

Pelorus Jack in the *ILN*, December 1910.



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