

*Animal Encounters: Human and Animal Interaction in Britain from the Norman Conquest to World War One*, Arthur MacGregor: Reaktion Books, £40. 512pp.

Hunting the otter, it seems, is an endeavour that cannot be done alone. One needs other people, other animals, and tools. Not only does the hunter require ‘an assembly of residents from the area in order to gather local intelligence on where otters are most likely to be found’. He also needs ‘varlets from the kennels’ with hounds to sniff out holes, and implements to dig the otter out, with, in the later part of the period surveyed here, the ‘Wallace patent hunting tool’, a purpose made spade and hammer in a leather carrying case which was, according to the advertisement, ‘Especially useful for Otter-hunting’. The kill would come through an attack by the hounds, or ‘the hunters might get some sport with their spears’, which might be ‘conventional hunting spears’ or ‘multi-pronged tridents’. Alternatively - and less sportful - a basket trap might be used which would better preserve the animal’s pelt for the fur trade. And by the nineteenth century ‘metal gin-traps with sprung jaws were also used’ which caught the otter as it entered the river, dragging it down and drowning it. Whatever the method, the otter died.

The stuff that was central to ‘human and animal interactions’ is the pivot for MacGregor’s study. Tracing a history across a millennia in Britain, what he shows - in intricate itemizations - is the massive investment of time, goods, and ingenuity that was often required. ‘Duck decoys,’ for example, are specially dug curved ditches covered by tunnels of netted hoops, that tempted the birds into cul-de-sacs in which they were easily caught. They must have taken massive amounts of labour to construct when they appeared in the seventeenth century. And in his late nineteenth-century discussion of badger-digging, Sir Alfred Pease suggests a need for eleven different implements, ranging from an ‘ordinary gardening or rabbiting spade’ to ‘holdfasts [a kind of large pair of pliers] with which to seize the badger’. Engaging with animals, we see again and again in this book, is a serious enterprise.

MacGregor focuses on five (somewhat overlapping) areas, with a chapter each on the important role of horses in human history; hunting; sports and pastimes; animals as the ‘living larder’; and farming. He makes the familiar case that we have lost contact with animals, a story underlined by the fact that he doesn’t analyse pet ownership (another interaction that has produced its own industry that would have been a very interesting addition here). What he does offer, though, is a lengthy overview of the ways and means by which humans used animals. The list-like structure can be repetitive, and it can lead to unintended comic juxtapositions: a brief overview of the disappearance of cranes, bustards and capercaillies from many areas of Britain is followed immediately with a discussion of bird-lime. The loss of species flows seamlessly into the killing of more: ‘Perhaps the simplest way of taking small birds without the need for any of the sensitive and intricate devices that skilled hunters deployed ...’

The detail that MacGregor includes, often providing lengthy quotations from original sources, also leads the book to read somewhat like a ‘how-to’ manual (I have a feeling I might be a better otter hunter having read *Animal Encounters*). And it is long - over 500 pages - and sometimes the detail is overwhelming, but the overwhelming nature of the detail is, I suspect, MacGregor’s point. What he shows is that, not only did animals propel industrial development - pulling carts, providing manure to aid soil

fertility, and food for the table - they also themselves created the need for new industries. The picture he paints is of a vicious (often very vicious) circle in which animals were present as beings for human use, and little more. What is missing, and would have added an interesting layer to the book, is a sense of the complexity of the attitudes to animals that underpins all that he discusses. They might have been objects for use, but they were simultaneously perceived as intelligent beings: a clever trap is needed only when an animal is perceived to be smart enough to see through lesser methods. These objects could think, and only glimpses of this complexity emerge here. But MacGregor's book will be a useful source for anyone studying the material history of human interactions with animals in the past.

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