Re-enchanting the Farm

What can the study of the past offer to debates about the ways in which we use animals in contemporary intensive, industrialised agricultural production today? That is a question that was constantly in my mind as I sat in the Essex Record Office reading thousands of wills from the early seventeenth century, seeking out details of the testators' relationships with their livestock. I was not alone. Historians have constantly wondered about the value of their work to current debates. One of our leading scholars, Keith Wrightson, for example, has suggested that social history is an attempt 'to appreciate the actualities of the distant past and the processes of development which shaped our own attitudes and practices, the ancestry of our every act' (74); that it has, in short, a direct link to present thinking, and to thinking about present thinking. Carolyn Steedman offers a slightly different sense of the writing of the past: historians, she proposes, can do something that many other disciplines cannot: they take their findings and animate them – literally give them life: 'We have always … written in the mode of magical realism. In strictly formal and stylistic terms, a text of social history is very closely connected to those novels in which a girl flies, a mountain moves, the clocks run backwards, and where (this is our particular contribution) the dead walk among the living.' (2001: 150)

What does it mean to make the dead walk among the living when some of those dead are cows, pigs, sheep, chickens? What animated, magical world might emerge then? And what might the historian be able to tell the present using their research as a guide? I want to suggest that what I found when reading the wills of the people in Essex was an enchanted world which was also wholly real for them; and that the actualities that they experienced are ones that made us but that we no longer have access to. Having a fuller sense of this loss, I think, is where the value of my research might lie for current debates as it can inform how we think about the future and our relationships with agricultural animals.

It is well established, and doesn't need a detailed archival study to make the case, that a crucial shift took place during the early modern period in England from the extensive, small scale farming practices of pre-industrial culture towards the intensive, mechanised world of agribusiness that dominates the market today. Where in the past the majority of husbandmen might have lived in households which included a few cows, some sheep, pigs and poultry for household provision, with, in a good year, some cheeses or calves to sell on; now production is in the hands of a few massive companies; herd sizes can be in the 100s; and outdoor living – 'free range' – is, for many farmers, a niche market, not a norm. This change is well documented. The data from the more than 4,000 Essex wills that I read does not reveal this shift (the short 15 year time period covered by the data doesn't allow for this), but what it does offer is a glimpse of a world of co-existence that reveals something different from what statistics about herd sizes can offer.

Wills, inevitably, focus on the distribution of possessions, but in doing this they offer insight into the world that produced them. Many wills deal in general terms – 'all my cows', 'my sheep'. But where they are enumerated, herd sizes appear to be small, as one would expect: the 1620 will of the Essex yeoman Christopher Bufford that includes 40 cows is unusual (the average is just over 3). But focusing on quantities will get us only so and other findings reveal something more – something that suggests in a very particular way that people's perception of their animals 400 years ago was not the same as ours is now.

Early modern people saw their animals as being part of what we might term an enchanted world. Not only creatures of material and economic value, livestock also possessed a meaning that went beyond use. This is most easy to explain by looking at the practice of bequeathing a lamb to a young child by a godparent which happens frequently enough to mean that it is worth pausing over. In this period sheep were frequently kept for wool production, not for meat, and so were potentially long term investments, but even in this context I suggest that the bequest of a lamb to a godchild does not carry only economic significance, with the legacy acting as an introduction to husbandry and being the beginning of a small business. I suggest that this bequest might also have more than material import.

In the baptism ceremony in *The Book of Common Prayer* the godparents were exhorted to 'provide that [the child] may learn the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments in the vulgar tongue … remembering always, that Baptism doth represent unto us our profession; which is, to follow the example of our Saviour Christ, and to be made like unto him.' In the Gospel According to John, Christ is recorded as declaring: 'I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine.' (John 10: 11-14) Here ownership is the beginning of a relationship (the shepherd knows and is known by the sheep), and it also brings particular responsibility. In the light of this, one way of reading the bequeathing of lambs to godchildren in wills might be to read it as extending the nature of the godparent-godchild relationship beyond the death of the adult in the partnership. Learning about shepherding was learning about living with care and responsibility – it encouraged the child in a very practical way, in fact, 'to follow the example of our Saviour Christ, and to be made like unto him.' Lambs, here, are much more than small businesses.

The more than material meaning of animals in what I am calling this enchanted world is extended to the killing of them as well – as it would need to be for that killing not to represent the cosmic failure of this worldview. In their deaths animals continue to mean more than food. Thus, the clergyman John Moore argued in 1617 that we should read meat as an invaluable reminder of human transience: 'So in our meats (as in a looking-glass) we may learn our own mortality: for let us put our hand into the dish, and what do we take, but the food of a dead thing, which is either the flesh of beasts, or of birds, or of fishes, with which food we so long fill our bodies, until they themselves be meat for worms?' From this perspective, a meat animal's death was not simply the fulfilment of its economic promise to the owner; it was also the fulfilment of its other-worldly meaning. So while people possessed lambs in order to remember their responsibilities, they ate meat in order to remember that they were themselves simply flesh. This is a world of human dominion, undoubtedly, but it is one in which that power should be exercised, perhaps paradoxically, with humility.

If this is what the animals meant to the humans of early modern England, what did this worldview mean for the animals? As participants in a wider web of meaning their experiences – from birth to death – were regarded as significant in more than economic terms. To put it simply, they were not only understood as things that should be counted, weighed, tested, costed, packaged, but were regarded as part of a larger understanding in which humans and animals were entwined in ways that made profit inseparable from accountability; that made the material and the immaterial part of the same conception. In this world care was not only exercised by the small farmer in a self-centred way because his animals were few and the loss of one devastating to the human family's wellbeing – this being the basis of the 'social contract' that Bernard Rollin has written about (1995: 5-6). This 'contract' was certainly likely to have been a cornerstone of husbandry in the early modern period –

providing for the animals that provide for you makes economic sense. But what Rollin does not recognise in his invocation of the past is that animals in pre-industrial farming also had meaning that emphasised not only the importance of good stewardship, but also something less material than that. When the Essex vicar Ralph Josselin wrote in his diary on 4 April 1652, for example, 'all my cows calved well through mercy', we should read this as his recognition that his animals' wellbeing was evidence of his own economic but also spiritual wellbeing. A merciful God grants a good man healthy cows. To treat these animals cruelly, to regard them simply as objects with financial value, would be to deny their place in the broader universe in which cattle are signs from God; in which meaning can be made with a pig.

Rollin, tracing the decline of the 'social', sometimes 'ancient contract' of husbandry in industrialised agriculture, has proposed that the 'restoration of husbandry to animal agriculture' is both prudential and ethical; and for this reason he calls for the 'renewing of our ancient contract with the animals.' (2008: 19) Such a call, I think, is unlikely to work. Changes in the law – however wished for, however much they can be read as having positive impact on animals' experiences – have not attempted to take up the question of the larger meaning of animals, and it is this larger meaning that was central to the existence and persistence of the practice of husbandry in the past. This worldview has gone: it is not simply scale that has been transformed in the modern world; animals have been disenchanted – turned into machines for the production of stuff. We cannot return to the enchanted view – to the actuality in which a bequest of a lamb was also a lesson in theology; in which a bowl of meat was a *memento mori*. It has gone. Our understanding is very different, but a link can be drawn between now and then, and this is where, I hope, an understanding of the past might offer a new way of thinking about how we might move forward in the present.

Where in pre-industrial agriculture the immaterial meaning of livestock was found in their relationship to an external divinity, in modern farming their immaterial meaning is to be found in the animals themselves. It is in animals' sentience, in their having what John Webster has termed 'feelings that matter,' (55) that their moral significance is frequently traced now. That animals are sentient is not a new idea, of course – the husbandmen of early seventeenth-century Essex knew their animals could feel pain and could experience their experiences in a way that was comparable to their own. What is new in modern thinking is that this conception of sentience is not understood as just one part of a larger enchanted view of animals.

The work of animal welfare scientists is showing in scientific terms (i.e. terms that are valued by agribusiness) that animals are sentient creatures. From this perspective, animals are understood to thrive best, for example, when offered the opportunity to exercise agency (Špinka and Wemelsfelder, 2011); when they are enabled to 'express normal behaviour' as the fifth of the Five Freedoms set out by the UK Farm Animal Welfare Council proposes. And while animals in extensive systems may be at risk of hunger, parasitism, predation and infection, they also, Webster writes, 'have the opportunity to make a constructive contribution to the quality of their own existence.' This, he suggests, might be more satisfying to them in emotional terms than experiencing an environment in which such threats are minimised while opportunities for the expression of agency are removed. (80) One response to such findings, of course, is to change how animals are housed. But practical responses might not be the only ones we might contemplate (and their cost might make some practical changes unlikely, however much the need for them is supported by scientific inquiry).

Webster also notes that overworked farmers become habituated to certain behaviours in their animals which they see every day: ‘the limping cow,’ he says, ‘is seen as normal.’ (132) As consumers we also are habituated to what we see all the time. This includes, as Carol Adams knew, our habituation to the pre-packaged meat in fridges that looks nothing like animals and that distances eating meat from the industry that produces it. But habituation can also include something as simple as what we think animals look like. A study of cows by Helen Proctor and Gemma Carder, for example, proposes that ‘backward’ and ‘hanging ear postures’ are indicative of a ‘low arousal, positive emotional state.’ (20 and 25) Their article includes photographs of four different ear postures. What is notable is how strange the ‘hanging ear posture’ seems and, by implication, how rarely we see relaxed cows. This, as Temple Grandin has shown, is perhaps not surprising – cows are prey species and so ‘have to be ever vigilant.’ (169) This is their normality. But when the alert state we are habituated to is recognised as not the only one that cows are capable of it ceases to be simply normal. It becomes something worth contemplating.

Education of producers and consumers is obviously crucial. The early modern worldview has been lost – because of increasing urbanisation; the displacement of the ‘emblematic worldview’ by empirical science (Ashworth); the increasing secularisation of aspects of culture. And I am certainly not calling for a return to seventeenth-century ways of living (such would be unpleasant, not to say impossible). But understanding what it is that has been lost might help to reorient how we use the findings of animal welfare science as we look to the future. Perhaps this crucial work, that is already having an important impact on legislation, might also be used further to impact a more popular understanding of animals. Understanding the meaning of a cow’s ear posture might become an element of what might be termed our ‘worlding’ of agricultural animals; our recognising that they, too, have worlds that are their own and that we might only be able to glimpse. Such a worlding might be a means of viewing ‘happiness’ not as some kind of marketing tool (see Miele), but as a real quality that animals can, but too seldom do not, experience. And it might also allow us to see that their happiness, and their needs and wants, but also their social worlds, interactions and fears, might not look like, or be driven by the same urges, as our own.

In an essay on animal agency, written for a history journal, the philosopher and ethologist Vinciane Despret makes a striking point about our view of dairy cows that can stand as an important pointer to how increased understanding of animals might change more than just our sense of their feelings. Humans, it seems, find in agricultural animals what they want to see: ‘when the cows go peacefully to be attached to the milking machine, when they do not kick up a fuss, when they go in order, when they take one another into account, when they move away from the machine after the milker has finished’ what we see, Despret suggests, is not their willingness to participate (a willingness that would be a manifestation of their agency). Rather, we see their mindlessness. (42-3) In a sense, we are dismissing the cows as agents here and are reading back from the meat onto the animal - from the object to the subject - and can be thus reassured about our consumer choices.

Understanding animals’ capacities in new ways is not only expanding our knowledge of them, it might also challenge our assumptions about what we might expect of them – and what we should expect, in return, from ourselves in our relations with them. This is not enchantment in the way that the bequest of a lamb was in the seventeenth century; but it is an enchantment in that it makes possible a worldview in which agricultural animals’ experiences are recognised as being as varied and interesting as those of the charismatic megafauna who we see on our television screens every

night. From such a perspective wondering about pigs' family relationships, cows' politeness to each other; sheep hierarchies and their value to the sheep would be not peripheral to agriculture, but central to our sense of what it should be. Gaining a better understanding of the meaning of ear postures might be the start of a very interesting – enchanting - conversation.

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