

## Chapter 18

### Mouse-Eaten Records

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#### Gnawing away at Humanity

In his *Defence of Poetry* of c.1579 (first published 1595), Sir Philip Sidney ([1579] 1966: 29) argued that knowledge should lead to ‘virtuous action’, its aim being ‘well-doing and not ... well-knowing only.’ Of all kinds of writing, he proposed, poetry could achieve this best because it was able to go beyond nature: it could represent worlds in ways that were not limited to what was present in reality, and so could inspire new possibilities. The poet, Sidney wrote, ‘makes a Cyrus’ (‘a figure of manly virtue’ ([1579] 1966: 82)), not in order to reproduce the Cyrus of ancient reality, but to represent him in a way that ‘make[s] many Cyruses’ in the present ([1579] 1966: 24). In this way, the imaginative depiction of heroes and heroic actions, he believed, could lead readers to virtuous emulation.

Sidney set poetry against history, stating that, unlike the poet who is ‘freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit,’ the historian is ‘tied, not to what should be but to what is.’ ([1579] 1966: 24 and 32) That is, where imaginative work can depict heroism achieving greatness and show villainy defeated, a study of the past has to stick to what actually happened, and so must sometimes show malign forces coming out on top. Sidney doesn’t name him, but it is easy to read Niccolo Machiavelli as hovering in the background here. In *The Prince* (1513) Machiavelli offered Lorenzo de Medici, as a guide to future rule, examples from the past to illustrate how earlier leaders had succeeded or failed. Sometimes those successes were far from virtuous. In Chapter XVIII, ‘*How princes should honour their word*’, for example, Machiavelli ([1513] 1961: 99) began by noting that ‘Everyone realizes how praiseworthy it is for a prince to honour his word,’ but went on to state: ‘nonetheless contemporary experience shows that princes who have achieved great things have been those who have given their word lightly, who have known how to trick men with their cunning, and who, in the end, have overcome those abiding by honest principles.’ He concluded by arguing that history shows that appearing to possess integrity is, in the end, more important than actually possessing it: this is hardly a prompt to ‘virtuous action’, and his human subjects are far from heroic, as Sidney would understand that term.

Elizabeth Story Donno (1975: 277) has suggested that Sidney's position on history in *A Defence of Poetry* was a 'tactical device' rather than a reflection of his true opinion. But whether or not he actually held the position he took in that text, his discussion opens up a way of thinking about an aspect of current historical understanding which also challenges the conception of humanity as heroic and transcendent. This is reinforced in Sidney's description of the study of the past where he ([1579] 1966: 30) speaks of the historian as 'laden with old mouse-eaten records'. He places real, historically-situated actions in opposition to imagined feats that transcend time.

Animals are not Sidney's concern, of course: his focus is on the virtuous actions of humans (or more specifically, men). But I want to suggest that his use of the phrase 'mouse-eaten' as well as his representation of history in *A Defence*, offers a productive starting point for thinking about what the inclusion of animals in history can do. The idea of the defeat of human heroism juxtaposed with the image of records being consumed and destroyed by a tiny, apparently insignificant, creature offers a way of thinking about both humanity's limits and history's possibilities. Where I differ from Sidney is in my belief that the image of history as made up of mouse-eaten records might not have negative implications, but might be a route into another kind of 'well-doing'.

### **Bringing in the Animals**

Over the past 30 years animals have entered history in very different ways to Sidney's conception of the mouse's relation to the writing of the past. Rather than only adjectivally present (and so being simply an attribute of the main subject), animals are becoming a focus in themselves. This development has not been a singular or static one. The history of animals has shifted, and continues to shift.

Keith Thomas's 1983 *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* is often cited as a foundational text in the emergence of this new modern interest, and Thomas's engagement with a vast range of materials in addressing the shifts in human relationships with the non-human world has certainly laid an important foundation. But this work can also be read as coming towards the end of a particular tradition, which includes Dix Harwood's *Love for Animals and How It Developed in Great Britain* ([1928] 2002) and E.S. Turner's *All Heaven in a Rage* ([1964] 1992). These works offered histories of ideas about animals, tracing what people thought about them, and how their thought impacted behaviour towards them. In such works, while clearly not adjectivally present – that is, not 'accessory' to the subject (the *OED*'s definition B2 of 'adjective') – animals are still not the true centre of

attention. The active subjects remain the humans who are having the ideas, changing their attitudes and behaviour, while the animals themselves are figured as unchanging – or, if they do change, those changes are understood to be created by humans.

These studies differ from works of natural history in that they do not look specifically at the development or habitat of a natural world ‘out there’ – a place that was visited, observed as if from the outside. Rather, the historical studies by Harwood, Turner and Thomas all focus on animals as creatures in their direct relationships with humans in various (human) contexts: sport, science, labour, consumption. In these works the history that includes animals is crucially social, cultural, and political. Indeed, Nigel Rothfels (2002: 6) has called such works ‘unnatural histories’ to draw out the distinction between studies of animals in their “‘native haunts’” and those that look at animals ‘in such human environments as museums, books, circuses, zoos.’

A subsequent crucial development in the history of animals, following Thomas’s study, was marked by Harriet Ritvo’s 1987 *Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age*, a book that showed the ways in which animals were importantly real (the dogs in the dog shows she studied were actual dogs), but were also used to represent something more abstract. Ritvo linked them to questions of empire, nation, and class. My own *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture* (2000), and Karl Steel’s *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (2011), are just two examples of work that followed this lead, tracing in earlier periods the ways that people understood themselves and their worlds through animals, which were understood as prompts to think with as well as real beings to be baited, hunted, killed. Such recognition challenges previously unexamined assumptions that allowed the human to be figured in isolation from animals; it lays bare the crucial role that non-human beings had, and continue to have in that thing we call, in all its varieties, human culture.

Just as this work began to challenge the ‘splendid isolation’ of the human, so it can no longer be assumed that humans are the only actors in history. This crucial shift in historiography has been outlined succinctly in an autobiographical moment in an essay by historian of horses, Peter Edwards. He notes that while his 1988 book *The Horse Trade of Tudor and Stuart England* dealt ‘with horses as a commodity to be bought, sold, and used solely in the interests of humans,’ his 2007 *Horse and Man in Early Modern England*, influenced by work in Animal Studies, recognised horses as ‘intelligent, sentient creatures, who interacted with their environment and could even change it through the exercise of agency.’ (Edwards 2018: 89) The question of agency, as Philip Howell (2018) has recently shown, is one that raises a variety of important questions for history. Crucially, as a number of recent

historians have shown, assigning agency does not require the need to assume intention on the part of the agent which, in turn, allows animals to be recognised as actors in ways that they were not before. In the works by Thomas, Harwood and Turner, for example, the only agents were the humans. So, where Edwards's early work was written under the influence of Joan Thirsk whose invaluable agricultural histories present animals as objects of trade, the focus of human labour, sources of food (see Thirsk 1984, for example), his more recent studies reflect a shift that is clearly evident in 'Settler Stock?', Sandra Swart's 2014 essay which traces negotiations between Dutch settlers and the Khoisan people at the Cape in the mid-seventeenth century, noting how significant animals were in them. What is important in her study is that the humans who are doing the negotiating remain the active subjects, but the animals are more than objects, and by recognising this, new histories can be written. Indeed, what is clear from 'Settler Stock?' is that taking animals as a focus can also chip away at certain established historical assumptions. In tracing evidence that the Dutch 'were in need of two vital commodities – not only animals but knowledge about how to keep those animals alive,' when they arrived at the Cape, Swart shows how this need 'invert[s] the triumphalist narrative of conquest', locating power with the Khoisan people who possessed the animals and the knowledge to maintain them (Swart 2014: 259 and 258).

### **Taking Animals Seriously**

Swart's essay exemplifies the way that taking animals seriously as presences in the past can change how we understand that past, and the documents used to do that can be the very documents that have been used before. So, Jonathan Saha (2014) has brought what he calls 'the felt encounters' between humans and animals to the centre of his study of colonial Burma to produce a new and more complex understanding of some horribly familiar images. In his study he shows how the imperial dehumanisation of Burmese people is constructed through their closeness to their animals which is illustrated in the early twentieth-century photograph of a Burmese woman breast-feeding an elephant calf. Refusing to take the image at face-value, Saha (2014: 9) recognises it as 'staged and posed,' arguing that it 'is *producing* the practice by moving it from the anecdotal to the evidential.' The photograph is orientalism made real, you might say. But Saha does something else: alongside this imperial will to dehumanise the Burmese, he traces the 'ample evidence of British intimacy with animals in Burma', revealing 'unacknowledged tension' in British attitudes. This is a tension that would be missed if the presence of animals was not taken seriously and is one that has the potential to offer new ways of thinking about the imperial endeavour (Saha 2014, 5 and 11).

Saha presents this new reading by thinking about animals, and thinking about the historical importance of touch in human relationships with those animals. As such, he is emphasising not simply the visual (how things look, with their potential – as Machiavelli knew – to look somewhat different from the truth) but the tactile; he is bringing into his history another way of experiencing of the world. Saha is not alone in making this move: like him, Swart's work also reveals the important relationship that is emerging between sensory studies and the history of animals, and there is good reason for this connection. As the anthropological work brought together in David Howes' *Empire of the Senses* (2005) reminds us, being in the world involves sensory engagement with it, and those sensory engagements are experienced differently and have different meanings in different cultures. Alain Corbin and others have shown that these differences are also historical: Corbin ([1982] 1996) has studied the olfactory world of nineteenth-century France, and Bruce R. Smith (1999), to offer just one more example, has looked at changing soundscapes of early modern England. Such work has opened up new ways for historians of animals to think, not only about the visual presence of animals in the past, but also the olfactory, auditory and tactile, and to contemplate what those animals' own experiences of their worlds were. Swart has reminded us, for example, that, alongside historians' tendency to 'deodorize' the past and so to evacuate the presence of animals in that way, recognising the species specificity of sensory engagement also leads us to consider that there is not only one way of looking at the world. 'Horses and Humans would write very different histories,' she writes (Swart 2010, 245 and 256). We can't know those histories, of course; but contemplating their existence can be productive, and can offer new insights (see Fudge 2017).

In another essay that focuses on touch, Sarah Cockram (2018) has used current studies of the positive physiological and psychological impacts of proximity to animals to think what the inclusion of pets in Italian Renaissance portraits might allow us to understand about the human and animal worlds they represent. In doing this, her work signals another important move in the history of animals over the last few years. In the past decade the relationship between historical and current scientific research has changed. Ethologists (those who study animals in their own environment) have advanced new ways of understanding animal behaviour and culture that open up our understanding of animals' complex social worlds, and this has impacted work by historians by offering a foundation from which to consider animals not as objects of human interest, but as makers of their own worlds. Environmental historian Mahesh Rangarajan (2013: 126), for example, traces the history of the lions of the Gir forest in India through records of their interactions with the forest's human residents, arguing that the

changes in the lions' behaviour over time offer the possibility that these lions and humans have 'a shared past,' that they have learned to live alongside each other, and that 'each and both have interacted and shaped that history, not equally, not as each lion (or herder or cultivator or prince or official) pleases but in time-specific ways rooted in a particular context.' Such a history can only be written when the lions are themselves considered subjects – the focus, but also the agents of change.

Developing out of ethology over the past 40 years, Animal Welfare Science (AWS) has challenged the previously held view 'that domestic animals were completely modified by man [sic] and therefore scarcely biological and not comparable with their wild equivalents.' (Broom 2011: 125) Instead, studies have revealed animals such as cows to have complex social worlds, and to thrive in challenging environments (see, for example, Špinka and Wemelsfelder 2011). As such, where work in ethology has opened up new ways of understanding wild animals' behaviour and so has impacted our understanding of how past encounters with those animals might have been experienced by all parties, so work in AWS has offered a way of reconceptualising some of the mundane historical encounters that took place in the past. Milking, for example, can be read not just as a human process whereby a valuable commodity is produced, with price and marketability a focus. Instead, it becomes an engagement between two parties – one human and the other animal. It can be read as being founded upon mutual understanding as well as relations of dominance and submission that can tell us much about the worlds of all the participants (see Fudge 2018). Recognising animals' agency – their capacity to be changed by, and change their own worlds – means that animals can enter history as co-workers to be negotiated with, not only as objects to be counted, weighed, killed, consumed.

### **The Power of a Hungry Mouse**

So how does all this link to Sir Philip Sidney's relegation of the value of history because of historians' reliance on 'old mouse-eaten records'? Whether they are influenced by developments in anthropology, ethology, AWS, or somewhere else, what all these works in the history of animals show is that being in the world is historical for all species; and that human lives are lived in constant interaction with non-human animals – whether in direct relationships, such as in animal agriculture, or through attempts at avoidance, such as in the Gir Forest. What follows from this is that the histories that attempt to understand and include this are inevitably undermining the idea that the human is the only world-shaping force, and as well as that, they are opening up the possibility just as humans have been shaped by their interactions with

animals throughout the past, so there might be another way of being human in the future. Like Machiavelli, we might look to the past to understand how, and how not, to act in the future. But we might do this with an eye, not to maintaining human power, but to exploring other ways of being, other ways of exercising our agency in a multi-species world.

For Sir Philip Sidney, human endeavours (by which he meant of course, male endeavours) were the only ones worth contemplating. And those human endeavours were utterly separate from animals, except where the animal was trained, ridden, or killed – made object. But his negative description of history, it turns out, might actually offer a possibility that is much more like current work in the history of animals than is initially apparent. If we think in another way about those hungry mice – if we focus on their agency to change their as well as our worlds – we might read them, in fact, as figures of the ‘anti-humanist’ position that is visible in many histories of animals (Saha 2015, 910). In their destruction of human endeavours, Sidney’s mice are not simply undermining the human capacity to *know* the past – to tell its story clearly, cleanly; they are revealing themselves, in fact, to be agents who shape how that past can be understood. Attending to the presence of a mouse - or a cow, a horse, an elephant, a dog, a lion - can reveal the limits of humanity and open up new ways of thinking about the past. The mouse might not be a prompt to virtuous action (with its etymological root in the Latin ‘*vir*’, man), but recognising its presence might, perhaps, allow us to see history in a way that Sidney refused to do. Here, acknowledging the ‘mouse-eaten’ nature of the human record might offer a path to another way forward that could include recognition of the presence of animals, and through that allow for ‘well-doing and not ... well-knowing only’ in a way that Sidney had not foreseen.

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