

Garlick, Ben ORCID logoORCID:

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7257-0430> (2019) Garlick B (2019) 'Book Review: The Routledge Companion to Animal-Human History, Hilda Kean, Philip Howell (Eds). Routledge, Abingdon (2018). 560 pages, £140 hardcover'. Journal of Historical Geography, 66. pp. 114-115.

Downloaded from: <https://ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/4107/>

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305748819301653>

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. [Institutional Repository Policy Statement](#)

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorks.ac.uk

**The Routledge Companion to Animal-Human History, Hilda Kean, Philip Howell (Eds).
Routledge, Abingdon (2018). 560 pages, £140 hardcover**

Edited by Hilda Kean and Philip Howell, this new collection presents a diverse assortment of essays championing the study and presence of animals in historical research. The editors' aim, which is certainly achieved, is to provide both an overview of the ontological and epistemological questions central to the field, still in the process of 'opening up' (p.544) as Harriet Ritvo puts it, and to signal some future directions of travel. For historical and more-than-human geographers, this collection will be of great interest, traversing multiple spaces, times, archives and human-animal encounters.

The assembled authors reflect the editors' interdisciplinary ambition. Alongside historians, scholars assemble from across historical geography, literature, art history, science and technology studies, and veterinary science. Each takes a somewhat different approach to the question of the historical animal – as well as issues of agency, method and politics. Split into three sections, attention is given to familiar themes, questions of practice and broader themes of ongoing debate. Whilst, as Ritvo's epilogue notes, the authors don't tend to stray far from 'taxonomic home' (p. 543) in their choice of animals as subject matter – livestock and domestic pets are well represented here – there does remain quite the menagerie on show, as dogs, sheep, cattle, primates, elephants, fruit flies and songbirds, to name a few, jostle for space.

The first part of the collection, 'Animals and the practice of history', traverses three familiar sub-themes within historical scholarship: political history and discourses of nationhood, the history of science and the practices of public history. Beginning the section, Sandra Swart

argues for the need to repopulate histories of nationalism with the ‘animal citizens’ who remain central to ‘the story a nation tells about itself’ (p. 32). Like nations, national ecologies, and even *species* exist as imagined communities. Jan-Erik Steinberger’s discussion neatly follows Swart, framing wildlife conservation as the practicing of ‘cultural memory’. Moreover, as demonstrated with reference to South Africa’s Kruger National Park (founded in 1898) the management of animal lives and landscapes is inseparable from the political ambitions of nation building.

Elsewhere in the section, Abigail Woods and Robert Kirk demonstrate the need to historicise the *scientific* animal, often underacknowledged when compared to livestock or pets. Woods, advocating collaboration between medical and animal historians, traces the construction of animals as experimental objects, vectors of disease, and victims themselves of illness, the agency of other creatures potentially apparent to veterinary practitioners by virtue of their capacity to assist or resist a variety of interventions. For Kirk, animal-human histories of experimentation challenge portrayals of science as ‘an all-too-human activity’ (p. 135) and engender a more critical application of experimentally-produced knowledge *about* animals by historians.

Urging animal-human historians to venture *beyond* the academic, Hilda Kean argues that we might find animals’ roles in the making of the past acknowledged amidst practices of public memorials and museum curation. For Kean, the content of this *Companion* must be taken beyond a narrow audience of scholars, and into conversation with public historians.

Likewise, Liv Thorsen proposes that the artefacts that abound in museum collections can be animated with a sense of their animal histories and the historical relations in which animals

and humans were enmeshed. An item such as a dog fur cap (p. 185) opens onto times and places where relations with a familiar domestic partner were far more utilitarian, raising questions about the meaning of these pasts and the agency of this kind of object to provoke an emotional and ethical response.

Following these opening discussions, 'Problems and Paradigms' considers questions of agency, the challenges of drawing upon literary and artistic sources, and whether or not histories of changing *human* perceptions of animals are the best we can hope for. Philip Howell traces three ways in which agency might be conceived – being ascribed or perceived by people; as something recognisable in instances of 'resistance' or transgression; and as a quality of being rendered capable of action or response amidst assemblages or relationships. Favouring the third route, Howell nevertheless acknowledges the utility of each approach and underlines the need for historians to *define* agency and consider the histories such definitions make possible within their work.

The subsequent chapters by Jennifer McDonnell, J Keri Cronin and Boria Sax each examine the potential of artistic and literary sources for animal-human historians. MacDonnell makes the case that Victorian literature, whether novels such as *The Island of Dr Moreau* – explicitly communicating public concerns around vivisection – 'animal biographies' such as *Black Beauty* – rendering their protagonists as (potentially) more than metonymic, can usefully yield insight for historical enquiry. Likewise, Cronin and Sax emphasise the role of the visual arts and the effects of representational practice. Regarding the RSPCA's response to the 1887 Royal Academy exhibition and the cultural construction of primates respectively, art is shown as shaping public sentiment, provoking an affective response, and for evoking a

sense of how actual animal lives unfolded in context. As Cronin suggests, *art* history might also productively engage with the ‘animal question’ (p. 251).

Though more concerned with human *perceptions* of animals – be it in relation to menageries and zoos, eighteenth century rural British landscapes, as beings with a potential emotional inner life, or as vectors of affect in the inter-war years – the section’s final quartet of chapters by Helen Cowie, Carl Griffin, Ingrid Tauge and Michael Guida suggest the kind of animal histories possible even if we remain agnostic as to how animal experience can be gleaned from the archive. Appreciating, as Guida does, for example, whilst we do not understand *why* birds sing that their song has had a demonstrable impact upon the affective life of the British population reveals much about the emotional involvement of animals in historical circumstances.

The final section of the *Companion* presents five chapters concerned each with a broad theme of interest to animal-human historians, the ontology of the ‘breed’; the role of animals within military histories; practices of hunting; animals as food; and the treatment of animals during the middle ages. Collectively, these chapters emphasise the diverse and contingent histories of their subject matter – whether via Howell’s tracing the multiple, contingent and contradictory relationships between hunter and hunted, or in Karl Steel’s recovering accounts of medieval vegetarianism and compassion for animals that run counter to the clichés of ‘medieval brutality’. Chris Otter’s overview of the history of meat, from the invention of fire to the post-war Great Acceleration, uses the lens of several different animals to denaturalise the idea of ‘meat’ and attend to how animals’ material lives have transformed in the process of their *becoming* food.

A notable contribution to this section lies in Gervase Phillips' argument about the need to appreciate not merely the scale of animal involvement (and suffering) in war – some 1.5 million horses dead, and 1.2 million still serving in the *Wehrmacht* by 1945, as one example – but also the value of appreciating animals active, capable of learning, anticipating, responding to, and being affected by the horrors of conflict. She chapter powerfully argues that historians should deploy the insights of historical and contemporary science in their scholarship to recognise the evident capacities of (some) animals to experience emotion and make choices. 'Such knowledge,' she writes, 'ought to have some effect upon how historians write about animals' (p. 431).

Overall, then, the *Companion* showcases not only animal-human history's immense scope, but also the lively contradictions that abound within it. Howell, in concluding the *Companion*, is deft at navigating such tensions, seeing value in the fact there exists no single animal-human history. He takes as his focus the fact that, where issues of agency, archival methodology, or the means of writing history are concerned, there exists 'remarkably little consensus' (p.522). Some researchers demonstrate the art of richly crafted, empirical description, others see the optics of contemporary theory brought to bear. As Ritvo's epilogue makes clear, the tracing of animal-human history is always a provisional endeavour: 'there is always at least one road not taken' (p. 544). The turns toward posthumanist social theory in much 'more-than-human' scholarship remain, Howell notes, 'off-putting' (p. 526) for many. Even where theory is embraced, there is little consensus as to how, or to what ends, it might be applied. Ritvo worries that we sacrifice 'animals in the flesh' for the sake of 'animals in the abstract' (p. 543) when we too readily embrace modish philosophical approaches. Perhaps here geographers can make a key contribution, attentive

as we often are to the need to *situate* our empirical discussion and application of theory amidst the contingency of place, time and relations.

Essential, for Howell, is the need to appreciate the *specificity* of animal *and* human relationships in space and time, informed by – but not uncritically – the insights of ethology, zoology and biology. The question of the *work* that such a history might do – politically or ethically – also remains unsettled. The chapters across the *Companion* demonstrate varying degrees of willingness to accord agency, take a political stance or pronounce on the ethics of the relations they examine. Whilst some historical researchers might wish to retain a sense of ‘Olympian detachment’ (p. 528) from the matters they discuss. Ultimately, as Howell makes clear, ‘[a]ll research is a political act, whether we like it or not.’ (p. 528). Certainly, the political decision to include animals more explicitly in our historical writing and research is to be celebrated, not only for the intriguing questions this opens up, but for the potential futures towards which such work might lead.

Ben Garlick

York St John University

E-mail address: b.garlick@yorksja.ac.uk