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'Strange and Wonderful': Encountering the Elephant in Britain, 1675-1830

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Abstract: This paper follows in the footsteps of the three live elephants that came to Britain in 1675, 1683 and 1720, before charting the changing cultural taxonomy of the elephant from the second half of the eighteenth century. The shifting understandings of what constituted an elephant's anatomy and character are significant to interpreting divergent and overlapping taxonomies in the long eighteenth century. In a period when different classification systems were rigorously debated, this paper proposes an understanding of the elephant that is not essentialist but rather understands 'species' as cultural, historically made and transformed.

Keywords: elephant, anatomy, menagerie, museum, zoological garden, natural history, Allan Moulin, William Stukeley, Patrick Blair

> 'There is scarcely any animal in the Creation that has at different times taken up so much the attention of mankind as the Elephant.'[1]

So the naturalist and clergyman Revd William Bingley began his account of the elephant in *Animal Biography* (1803).[2] Cultural historians of the eighteenth-century Anglophone world have not, however, given much evidence of their agreement with Bingley.[3] That the elephant has a rich cultural history is apparent in the biography, *Elephant* (2008),[4] and the work of a number of nineteenth-century scholars.[5] The recent turn in eighteenth-century studies towards object biographies or 'It-Narratives',[6] together with the work of scholars who consider animals as material culture, would seem to point the way to an eighteenth-century pachyderm prosopography. This paper is an attempt to write such a narrative and to cast attention onto the elephant as an animal with a cultural history of interest to scholars of eighteenth-century Britain.

The tract that was printed to broadcast the arrival of an elephant at Whitefriars, London, in July 1675 was not exaggerating when it claimed that 'few persons amongst us, but such as travelled the Eastern World, ever saw one of them'.[7] For the majority of the inhabitants of seventeenth-century Britain the elephant was a mythological beast encountered only on the painted signposts of taverns, 5 guinea gold pieces and in the pages of Pliny,

Konrad von Gesner and travel writers such as Robert Knox.[8] But during the eighteenth century the elephant could be seen as a living spectacle, as a cadaver and as a specimen. In particular, the reception of the first living elephants in Britain since 1623[9] – in 1675, 1683 and 1720 – will be interrogated through an analysis of the tracts, letters, natural histories, anatomies and broadsheets that their arrival generated. Later I will look at the changing cultural portrayal of the elephant in the second half of the eighteenth century, demonstrating how naturalists and anatomists conceived of the elephant as a different sort of animal from those earlier elephants. Encounters with animals are always mediated historically and culturally – looking back from a contemporary vista, the elephant seems as though it should be a familiar sight. But the eighteenth-century elephant is different altogether.

I shall consider different 'ways of knowing'[10] the elephant as concurrent antiquarianism and anatomical enquiry interacted to produce a beast that was elusive, mythological and evaded easy classification. Spectators, anatomists and exhibitors were challenged with making new spaces and roles for 'nature' (the elephant) in 'culture'. Anatomies indicate attempts to separate an empirical natural knowledge from a cultural understanding of the elephant, but we shall see how in a period of rationalised natural philosophy and enlightenment the elephant proved to be persistently 'strange and wonderful'. The elephants that are the subjects of this paper are Asian elephants, brought on East India Company ships from India and the East Indies. When the Swedish botanist and naturalist Carl von Linné (Linnaeus) gave his binominal classification for the elephant, *Elephas maximus* (1758), he considered the African and Asian elephants to belong to a single species. It was not until 1797 that the German naturalist and anatomist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach assigned the African elephant a separate binominal; *Loxodonta africana*. The operations of the East India Company, the long history of elephant domestication and trade in Asia, and the more tractable nature (and compact dimensions) of the Asian elephant made it a more suitable animal for transportation than the African elephant.

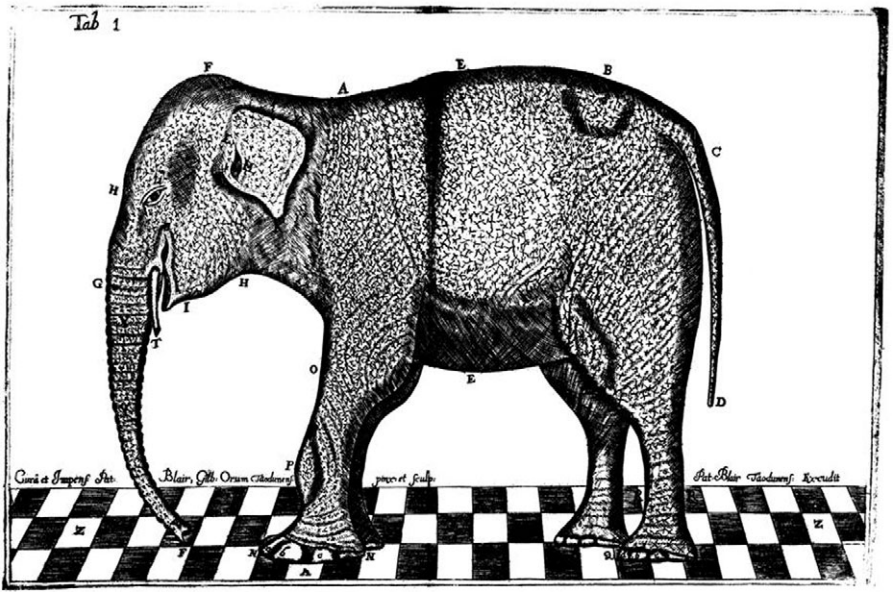
After arriving at Whitefriars, London, on 3 July 1675, a young male elephant billed to the public as 'strange and wonderful' was taken to Garraway's Coffee House and exhibited to a large and eager crowd for an entrance fee of 3 shillings. This elephant was scarcely tractable and, according to his keepers, would 'punch either man or beast that anger'd him, and came within his reach with his trunk'.[11] While on exhibition in Dublin, the booth in which this elephant was stabled caught fire in the early hours of 17 July 1681. The elephant was burned alive. Such a large crowd gathered around the charred remains of the elephant and its booth that armed guards were employed by the deceased pachyderm's proprietor, Mr Wilkins, to protect his property, after the crowd 'endeavoured to procure some parts of the Elephant, few of them having seen him living by reason of the great rates upon the sight of him'.[12] Confronted with a noxious and rotting carcass, Wilkins sent for the

butchers, but the Irish physician Allan Moulin proffered his services and was 'delirious' to instruct himself in the 'structure of the elephant'. That night in a temporary wooden shed in Dublin city centre Moulin undertook the first British dissection of an elephant, boiling bones and cutting into parboiled organs by candlelight.

In 1683, after a tour of Europe, another elephant arrived in Britain. This young female elephant was exhibited for some time at Edinburgh before she made her way to Dundee. After collapsing of fatigue on the road to Dundee in 1706, the elephant drowned when a ditch that had been dug to support her weight was filled with water during torrential rain. The bloated carcass attracted the attention of the locals, who stole away with the elephant's forefoot – a body part that had to be recovered by force.[13] The Dundee surgeon and apothecary Patrick Blair performed a dissection, and his subsequent anatomical account brought him into the network of correspondence of the Royal Society and Sir Hans Sloane.

The third elephant to arrive in the early period covered by this pachyderm prosopography was reported in *Mist's Journal* on 2 July 1720 as arriving in West Smithfield, London. A mere four months later *Mist's Journal* informed its readers that 'Hans Sloane, that curious inspector of the Works of Nature, is now dissecting the young elephant that was lately shown at West Smithfield.' The elephant was dissected on the lawn of Sloane's London residence and was reported by his colleagues William Stukeley and Dr Douglas as having 'Dy'd, as we may reasonably suppose for want of a suitable and proportionate method of food, and from the ignorance of the keepers, who expos'd it to cold and moisture'. A fever had also been exacerbated by a broken tusk and 'the great quantities of ale the spectators continually gave it'.[14]

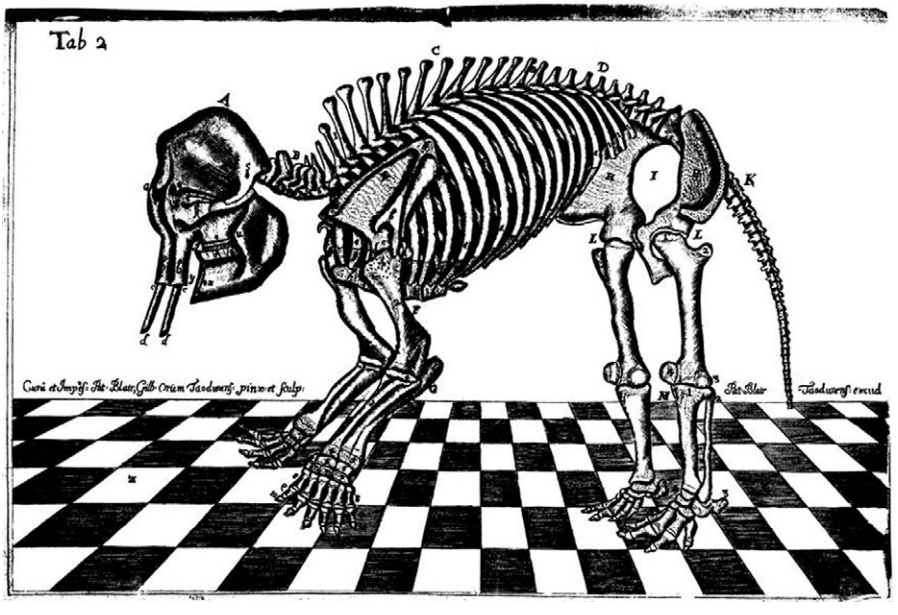
Intestinal purges and the failed medical intervention of a farrier can only have hastened the death of the elephant, on 4 October 1720. The audience for these three exotic spectacles in life included, in theory, anybody who could pay an entrance fee, but this would change radically upon the death of the elephant. In death the ownership of the bodies of the first two elephants was rigidly asserted, and those body parts removed from the carcasses were recovered through legal coercion and retained by armed guards. The physical act of dissection created distinct new objects – bones, preserved skins and organs – and these specimens moved through private spaces. Moulin kept elephant tissues and organs from the Dublin elephant to examine at his leisure after they had been 'preserv'd' and utilised in the production of his anatomical account. Moulin must have been keenly aware of the intellectual and financial value of his preparations, since he took great pains to satisfy the Royal Society that all salvageable material had been preserved. Sloane and Dr Douglas, dissecting their elephant forty years later, also removed specific anatomical parts for further examination and collection. Stukeley informs us that Sloane stretched out the plexus of the arteries that ran along the exterior of the brain onto paper for this purpose, and that Dr Douglas took home 'those organs pertaining to generation in a female'.[15]



1. '*Tabula I Represents the Stuff'd Skin of the Elephant, as it now stands in our Hall*', from P. Blair, *Osteographica elephantina* (1713) © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved (7420.cc.14)

It is possible to write object biographies for these elephants after their deaths and dissection because Patrick Blair meticulously records both the process by which he prepared his specimen skeleton and skin, and the manner in which Moulin mounted his. In his 118-page *Osteographica elephantina* Blair delivered four large copper plates depicting (in order) the skin, mounted skeleton, soft tissue and other osteological observations.

The stuffed skin (Fig. 1) of the elephant stood in the Hall of the Royal Society and by a self-congratulatory Blair was deemed to be 'done to a good purpose', 'lively' and a 'most curious ornament'.[16] The skeleton (Fig. 2) remained in Dundee in a repository and was mounted to make best advantage of its aesthetic and didactic appeal – areas in which Blair faulted Moulin's earlier attempt at mounting. Moulin's method of mounting placed the skull too far forward and encased significant osteological features behind ironwork. Blair, however, ran iron rods through the spinal cord and wired the skull and foot bones so that 'none were visible to the beholder'.[17] Missing cartilage and ribs were forged from beaten and wetted leather to render the representation more aesthetic. This triumph of representative illusion was transformed into a working model through ingenious wiring of the jaw so that a pin could be pulled, causing the jawbone to open and close, thus impressing on the spectator its sheer weight. A mounted skeleton had thus become an



2. '*Tabula II Represents the Sceleton of the Elephant, as it was mounted by my direction, and now stands in the Repository of Rarities*', from P. Blair, *Osteographica elephantina* (1713) © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved (7420.cc.14)

articulate, animated display. In life the elephant had been a spectacle observed in the street and in its wooden booth. In death it became a conversational device to elicit wonder and speculation through demonstration, housed inside the Dundee Repository of Rarities, close to the site of its demise. Such use of its body parts assisted in the concomitant negotiation of the elephant both as mythical and as a natural animal cleaved (unsuccessfully) from its cultural baggage. But even as modern anatomical descriptions were created, the elephant's anatomisers were reluctant to reject all previous accounts of the animal. Observation and antiquarianism were often made to go hand in hand as anatomists claimed to discern the mythological qualities of the elephant evinced in its anatomy.

The use of antiquarianism to underscore anatomical observations persisted from the 1680s into the 1720s, when Stukeley wrote his anatomy (in 1723). Pliny's tale of a learned elephant that was taught to read and write the Greek alphabet was proverbial in this period and was invoked by Stukeley to convey the structure of the elephant brain, which he found 'so fine and perfect, that we need not wonder this creature, according to history, should be the wisest of all beasts, and even embu'd with human passions'.[18] Credulity

was accompanied by both doubt and wonder – the prodigious intellectual qualities of the elephant may have been debatable, but they were at least plausible. In this period it was possible to think about the sagacious and chaste elephant because there was a cultural and intellectual space for these 'framings' of the elephant. Spectators and dissectors of elephants were receptive and sympathetic to such constructions and co-opted in their production. Certainly the antiquarian nature of these allusions and citations cannot be ignored, and such mythological sentiments were indeed weakened even by the 1720s, but the mythical envisioning of the elephant still strongly persisted. In John Johnston's *Description of the Nature of Four-Footed Beasts* (1678)[19] the illustrated plates of the elephant were positioned adjacent to those of different unicorns, another mythical beast reconstructed from fables and a plethora of narwhal, rhinoceros and antelope horns. A century later a natural history of the unicorn would have seemed a contemptible endeavour, yet Tennant's *Natural History of the Elephant* (1771) persisted tenaciously in presenting the elephant as a wonderful beast with prodigious talents.[20] The empirical discourse of anatomy did not preclude the term 'elephantine' embracing a variety of the marvellous and mythic.

This persistence of vision is concisely demonstrated by the controversy that surrounded thought on the nature and mechanics of elephant reproduction and sex. In 1675 the 'strange and wonderful elephant' was a beast that took 'venereal compliments' infrequently, in a private place, with the female on her back and the male 'covering her'. Patrick Blair however thought such sexual habits to be abominable and an inversion of nature's proper order; besides, the elephant was far too unwieldy for the missionary position. Forty years later, Dr Douglas and William Stukeley were still envisaging a female elephant lying on her back on a bed of herbs, emitting a peculiar cry.[21] It was patently anatomically impossible any other way. So tenacious was this ambiguity surrounding the mechanics of elephant coitus that in 1803 a French engraving of the two elephants in the Jardin des Plantes, Hans and Marguerite, chose to portray Marguerite on her bed of herbs with Hans on top – a conception of elephant reproduction that had originally appeared in the works of Pliny and Aristotle.

If a degree of ambiguity surrounded the intimate matters of elephant coitus, by the late eighteenth century other areas of the elephant's character had been more closely scrutinised. When those elephants that arrived in 1675, 1683 and 1720 came to Britain, they arrived, as we have seen, carrying the weight of cultural baggage. Of particular note was knowledge about the relationship between elephants and rulers. In September 1763 a young male elephant arrived from Bengal and was presented by a Captain Brook Samson to George III. The exact proportions of the extraordinary animal were circulated in periodicals such as the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and the *St James's Chronicle* informed London society that 'the elephant lately made a present to the King, is ordered to be kept where the Queen's Zebra is kept'.[22] The Queen's zebra had occupied the menagerie at Buckingham House Gate since early

1762 and had already become a popular attraction and satirical icon as 'The Queen's Ass'. The elephant too would acquire a political meaning. The elephant attracted the satirical moniker 'Elephantus Magnus', and in *A Letter from the Elephant to the People of England* was a rhetorical device for a knowing commentary on despotism, autocracy and the maltreatment of the Scots. Writing of the 'wonderful humility and submission' that would arise from his appointment to a government post, our authorial elephant mocks the problems and political tensions of the Georgian state from his accommodation in the stables of Buckingham House.[23] Despite its sticky political symbolism, the elephant was a resident of the Queen's Menagerie until he died in 1776 and was dispatched to the anatomist William Hunter (1718-1783).[24] When the youngest of the Queen's elephants died, it was dissected by his brother John Hunter: the afterlife of Elephantus Magnus extended to his display in the Leverian Museum in Leicester Square, opposite Hunter's residence and anatomy school.

The cultural framing of Queen Charlotte's elephant as a political pachyderm can be contextualised against broader ideas about the elephant and the monarchy. The elephant letter of 1764 was pre-dated by an elephant letter that was written in 1675 to accompany the arrival of the 'strange and wonderful' elephant at Whitefriars that year. Written by the elephant in the first person, this tract can be read as substituting the monarch for the elephant and as defining the proper relationship between the 'elephant' and *his* 'keepers'. The elephants announced to the citizens gathered at Bartholomew Fair:

> our natures are both alike, for when we are mad; we are hard to be tam'd, there is nothing that will govern us but an Iron Hook thrust into my pole; and an Iron Hook thrust into thy nostrils; yet thou seest at other times how tame and gentle we are. And truly Brother, take it from me, that I never find myself at better ease than when I am obedient to my keepers.[25]

Printed in 1675, this tract is characterised by many of the tensions of the Restoration settlement, including the (re-)negotiation of the relationship between monarch, parliament and citizen. This elephant's speech evokes memories of the regicide and wars of the 1640s and 1650s and the willingness of the 'keepers' to tame the beast with an 'iron hook'. The elephant as an orator and discriminating beast originated with Pliny's tales of elephant competence in Greek.[26] It is therefore unsurprising that satirists sought to couch their political critiques in the mouths of elephants. The witty, literate elephant appeared later in the work of the poet and dramatist John Gay. In *The Elephant and Bookseller* (1726)[27] the elephant passes a droll commentary on the conceits of mankind and the drunken bookseller's verbatim recollection of antiquarian elephant anecdotes (Fig. 3).

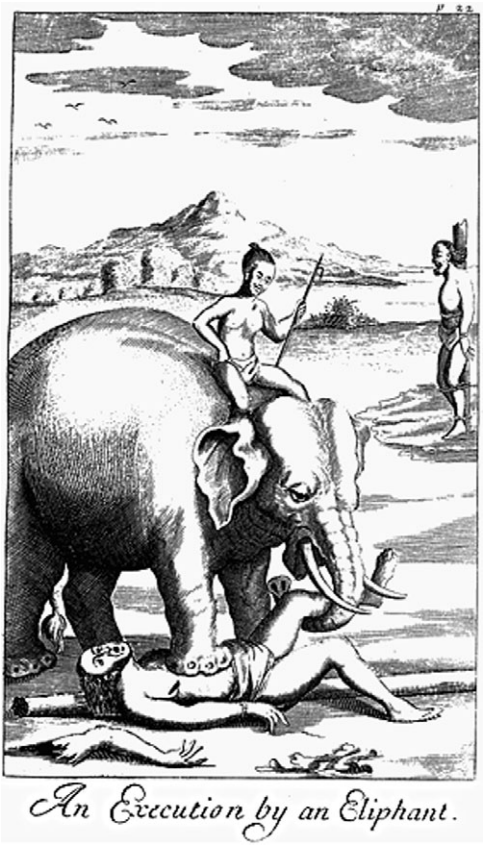
Tracts and natural histories strongly emphasised the relationship between kingship and the elephant. The tracts of both 1675 and 1683 that heralded the arrival of elephants in Britain claimed that the elephant could 'discern

3. Engraving from *Fables by the Late John Gay* (1792) © Bodleian Library, University of Oxford (280 n.358)

betwixt Kings and common persons, for they adore and bend upon them, pointing to their crowns'. Deference to royalty was also invoked in the retelling of Classical and travellers' tales of 'Oriental' kings who enlisted elephants in administering their will. The elephant as an instrument of authoritarian punishment is the subject of a vivid woodcut (Fig. 4) in Robert Knox's *An Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon* (1681).[28]

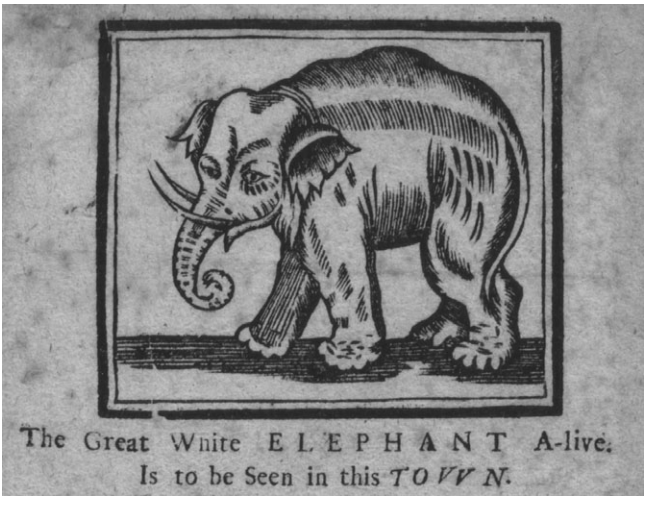
The elephant was, however, also an animal framed as possessing 'a divine instinct of Law and Equity' – a quality manifested in accounts of the refusal of King Bochus's thirty elephants to trample on thirty men unjustly condemned to death. The elephant could be a deferential subject but also a potential dissident. In public spectacles in Britain the deference of the elephant to the monarch was performed for spectators through elephant tricks. A white elephant touring British towns in the first decade of the 1700s was trained to take off his hat to the company and

> makes reverence on his knees. His master then asking where he loves Queen Ann, then he points with his Trunk to his Heart, and he must do for her, he Sounds for her on the Trumpet; but for the Grand Turk he will do nothing but make a dreadful Noise shaking his Head.[29]



4. Engraving of 'An Execution by an Eliphant', from R. Knox, *An Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon* (London, 1681)

This same loyal subject (Fig. 5) would also take ten passengers on his back, two on his head, and two on his ears. Similarly the young elephant that came to London in 1720 was reported in *Mist's Journal* as both 'bending her knees to the ground to drink his majesty's [George I] health' and as 'paying her compliments to company at their entrance'.[30] The amusement and appeal behind articulate and Royalist elephants was directly linked to the circulation of print material that supported these assertions. Whether elephants were truly competent in Greek or loyal to the crown was perhaps of less interest than the literary or political resonance of the reported accomplishment. The presence of a young female elephant from Cross's Menagerie on the stage in the melodrama *Siamoraindianaboo, Princess of Siam, or, The Royal Elephant* at the Royal Coburg Theatre in London in 1830 enraptured audiences with a theatrical representation of the elephant as a loyal royal subject.[31] In a period



5. 'The Great White Elephant' (printed between 1702 and 1714), © Bodleian Library, University of Oxford (John Johnson Collection, Animals on Show 1/57)

of three weeks the elephant had been trained to 'move with a measured pace to musical cadences' and 'taught to distinguish one actor from another, so as to place the crown, with true poetic justice, on the head of the lawful king'.[32] In the same year the rival Adelphi Theatre also boasted a performing elephant, who in a dramatic scene (Fig. 6) would assist in 'the escape of the Prince and his adherents from prison, by kneeling upon her hind legs, and thus forming an inclined plane, upon which her friends might safely reach the ground'.[33]

The tricks that elephants performed included, as we have seen, various forms of deference to the audience or monarch (such as saluting and bowing), carrying buckets, blowing trumpets and waving flags, as well as counting the number of people in an audience, picking their pockets for watches and handkerchiefs, drinking bottles of beer and picking coins off the floor. All these were designed principally to amuse spectators, but they also demonstrated to differing degrees the physical and mental properties of the elephant. While the elephant might crush the unfortunate victims of an Eastern despotic monarch in eighteenth-century literature, in public performances the elephant was a more gentle soul. Close physical contact with elephants, and indeed other animals, emerged as an appealing menagerie practice. A letter from a 'deaf and dumb' Irish schoolboy called William Brennan in 1819 relates an eyewitness perspective of a menagerie visit. Here affective relations including stroking and feeding are conducted alongside ambiguous attitudes towards spectator violence:

6. 'Scene Exhibited at the Adelphi Theatre', from J. Rennie, *The Menageries: Quadrupeds Described and Drawn from Living Subjects,* vol. I (London: Charles Knight, 1831)

> We went to Mr Polito's House, and gave our twelve pennies for admittance. We saw a camel eating straw; he wanted cakes. The buffalo was standing, looking through wooden rails. I saw a panther marching on the floor of his cage; his mouth was yawning; he was grinning at a lady; she was beating him with a stick [...] A man was beating a monkey with a stick [...] I saw a man speaking to the elephant who was bending his legs; his trunk took up cakes; he was eating them. [...] A man was playing with a kangaroo; D__ gave kangaroo small cakes; he was eating them; he wanted cakes in his cage.[34]

Close tactile engagement with exotic animals is a clear feature of the menagerie encounter in the late eighteenth century. Print advertisements and other promotional materials suggest that the opportunity to touch or ride an animal such as a zebra, llama or elephant was a crowd-pleaser. Advertisements attempted to convey the suitability of particular animals for

7. Brass promotional token for 'Pidcock's Exhibition', produced around 1795-7. Tokens functioned as an authorised supplement to scarce minted crown specie and to promote businesses. The elephant featured on the verso of the token was heralded in print advertisements as 'the most stupendous male elephant', who would perform a variety of tricks and allow children to ride upon his back. © Personal collection of Christopher Plumb. Photographer: Stephen Devine, Manchester Museum (2008)

closer encounters, especially for women and children. Not only was the accommodation clean and pleasantly fragrant, but the animals were amiable too, a male zebra being 'so gentle that ladies and children may stroke him with safety'[35] and able to 'suffer a child six years old, to sit quietly on its back, without showing the least sign of displeasure'.[36] At Pidcock's Menagerie on the Strand (Fig. 7) a 'most stupendous male elephant' would give children elephant rides in an apartment that had been constructed for that purpose. This elephant would also perform tricks with buckets, coins and handkerchiefs that involved audience participation.[37]

To ride an exotic beast from foreign climes was an important experience and sensation of British eighteenth-century modernity. The capture and transportation of an animal like the elephant involved extensive colonial and mercantile networks, and the display of a live elephant on London's Strand rendered visible these power relations. To stroke, feed and watch the elephant was to encounter in an embodied sense Empire. The elephant permeated the material culture of childhood in other ways, particularly in natural histories printed for the young. *Tales of the Academy* (1820) presented snippets of popular natural histories familiar with adult audiences, like those of Buffon or Goldsmith, in the form of child-friendly dialogues.[38] Here schoolboys adopt the roles of animals and their menagerie showman, parroting the authority and truisms of naturalists, including Monsieur Buffon:

> Fifth Youth:
> 'I am an elephant'
>
> Showman:
> 'Then you unite, as an eminent naturalist has observed, the most exalted qualities in the three animals, who, next to the elephant, make the nearest approaches to human intelligence; the beaver, the dog, and the ape. Pray favour us with your observations upon a race of creatures, so vast, and deservedly celebrated.'
>
> [...]
>
> Elephant:
> 'The eyes of the elephant, though small, are lively and brilliant; and distinguished from those of all other animals by an expression of sentiment, and an almost rational management of all their actions. He turns them slowly and with mildness towards his master, and when he speaks, regards him with a look of friendship, and attention.'[39]

This appropriation of Buffon into the dialogue of a schoolboy play focuses particularly on spectatorship, or rather, the encounter with the elephant mediated through *his* eye. Buffon had deemed the eye of the elephant as the measure of elephant sentiment (which he called 'pathetic') because it revealed an inner mental order and consistent flow of feelings, unlike, as he saw it, the dog;

> When he [the elephant's master] speaks, the animal regards him with an eye of friendship and attention, and his penetrating aspect is conspicuous when he wants to anticipate the inclination of his governor. He seems to reflect, to deliberate, to think, and never determines till he has several times examined, without passion nor precipitation, the signs which he ought to obey. The dog, whose eyes are very expressive, is too prompt and vivacious to allow us to distinguish with ease the successive shades of his sensations. But, as the elephant is naturally grave and moderate, we read in his eyes, whose movements are slow, the order and succession of his internal affections.[40]

The public exhibition of elephants brought spectators into close contact with elephants, and the tricks that these animals performed were often interpreted as confirmation of a sagacious and sentient mind. But increasingly at the end of the eighteenth century the elephant began to be conceived in a different manner: its eye held to be indicative of a rational and sensitive creature. Nigel Rothfels has shown how the 'piggish' swine eyes of the elephant in the seventeenth century articulated a swinish and bestial imperfection (*E.horribilis*).[41] Yet by the end of the nineteenth century the eye of the elephant, or *E.dolens*, as Rothfels terms this cultural category of elephant, was seen as communicating the capacity of the elephant to suffer sorrow and pain, especially that at the hands of Victorian trophy hunters and other colonial agents. The capacity of the elephant to suffer was tragically evinced in

the shooting of Chunee the male elephant at the Exeter Change Menagerie in 1826. Celebrated for his amicable nature and tractability, Chunee became uncontrollable during his annual 'musth', a period of sexual excitability, which in 1826 was exacerbated by a broken tusk and fever. After causing the death of a keeper Chunee was shot by armed soldiers, with over 150 musket balls fired before he died. The pathos of the horrific scene was widely reproduced in newspapers and engravings.[42]

Rothfels's eighteenth-century elephant is *E.sentiens*; the elephant is gentle, thoughtful and feeling. I agree with Rothfels's attractive and compelling elephant cultural taxonomies and want this paper to resonate alongside his work. However, Rothfels, in his readings of eighteenth-century elephants, does not consider the contexts of anatomy or menagerie spectatorship that I address here. It was these features of elephant encounters and not purely printed natural histories that created the embodiment of the elephant as *E.sentiens*.

E.sentiens was also culturally configured though another organ, the ear. The response of the elephant to music was tested in a special concert given to the elephants Hans and Marguerite at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris in 1798, acquired by Napoleon's troops as war trophies from the Dutch. The elephants were treated to a concert performed by fourteen musicians from the Conservatoire and were reported to have been stirred with emotion and with amorous romantic feelings, and to have reflected deeply in response to the Revolutionary anthem '*Ah! ça ira!*'. Responding to the pitch of the music, these elephants became the epitome or embodiment of Revolutionary *sensibilité*. Charmed by operatic arias and Revolutionary zeal, the elephants, apparently, began to copulate and were, to observers, freed from their chains of slavery by the rhythms of the music, recalling the freedom of their native climes.[43]

For contemporary observers the elephant was an animal apart from the other dumb brutes. Yet it is equally true to assert that there were considerable disparities in credulity and in the assent with which readers perceived the prodigious qualities of the elephant that were presented to them in natural histories. Bingley's *Animal Biography* (1803) persisted in narrating elephant truisms that had been discarded by other authorities earlier in the eighteenth century. We have seen how early anatomists argued over the purpose of the elephant's wrinkled skin or whether elephants were actually afraid of mice. In both cases Bingley's elephant biography informed readers that elephants crushed flies between the wrinkles in their skin, and that they slept with their trunks to the ground lest mice crawl into their proboscis and stifle them. Similarly the Classical and humanist tales of elephants writing and reading Greek were offered as evidence of elephant sagacity. Certainly many natural histories had discarded these explanations of elephant behaviour and physiology, but in his detailed description of the anatomy of the elephant trunk with accounts of its prehensile dexterity Bingley did not render his biography conspicuously antiquarian. Far from it: Bingley claimed that the

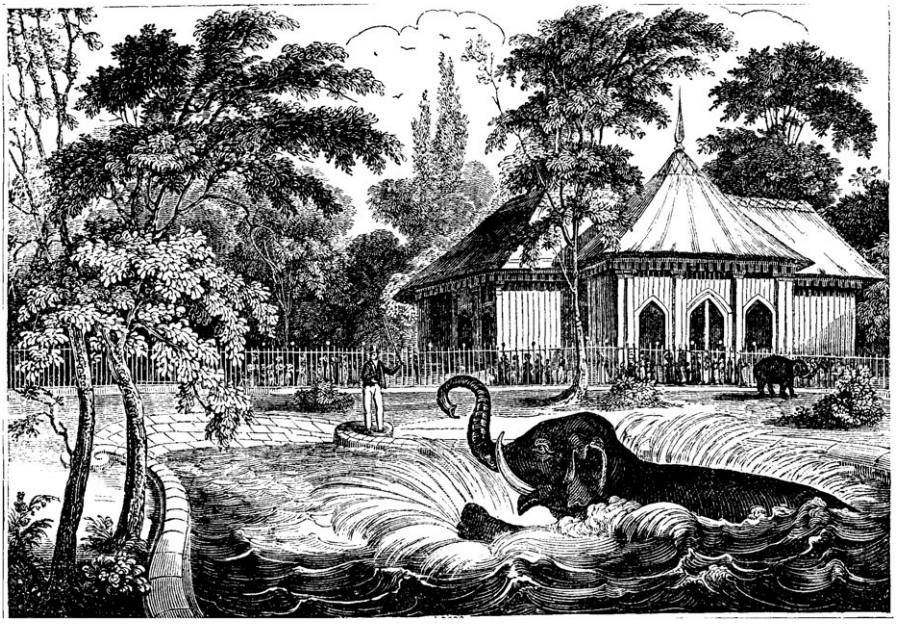
contents of his elephant biography, however incredible, had been validated by respectable and observing men, 'who, with both the powers and abilities of enquiring into them, seem to have entertained no doubts whatever of their validity'.[44]

Bingley's readers – of whom there were many (*Animal Biography* ran to a seventh edition in 1829, reprinted as *Animal Biography; or, Popular Zoology*) – were then presented with the challenge of constructing an animal from the legacies of a mythological beast and new anatomical explanations of elephant physiology and behaviour. It is clear, however, that many readers and spectators did not perceive these two stances as incompatible polar opposites. In some instances anatomical accounts and experimentation validated earlier wonderful and strange elephant occurrences, or lent themselves to the reinterpretation of these antiquarian stories. In 1831 James Rennie (1787-1867), a naturalist and professor of zoology at King's College, London, made an assessment of the 'Utility of Menageries' and considered that spectators had, in actuality, formed few 'adequate notions' of the elephant in existing menageries:

> We cannot, indeed, upon a stage, see the animal bound about as in a state of nature – roll with delight in the mud to produce a crust upon the body which should be impervious to its tormentors the flies – collect water in its trunk, to sprit over its parched skin – and browse upon the tall branches of trees which it reaches with its proboscis. We shall not see these peculiarities of its native condition, til we have a proper receptacle for the elephant in our national menagerie, the Zoological Gardens. Without imputing blame to those who exhibit the elephant in this country, there is great cruelty in shutting up in a miserable cage a creature who has such delight in liberty, and who is so obedient without being restrained.[45]

Elephants on the Regency stage might serve to correct some misconceptions, but the great cruelty inflicted on *E.sentiens* in captivity was not corrected until, so Rennie argued, the new London Zoological Gardens (opened in 1828) constructed appropriate accommodation, following the model of the Jardin des Plantes; here the elephants enjoyed 'a life of much happiness' in a large enclosure with a pool. Rennie's criticisms were apposite since, as he wrote, a new enclosure was in construction at the London Zoological Gardens (Fig. 8). In August 1832 *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction* featured a description and engraving of the new 'luxurious accommodation', detailing the rustic stable, iron fenced enclosure, within which are:

> A few lime-trees, the lower branches of which are thinned by the Elephant repeatedly twisting off their foliage with his trunk, as adroitly as a gardener would gather fruit. His main luxury is, however, in his bath, which is a large pool or tank of water, of depth nearly equal to his height. In hot weather he enjoys his ablutions here with great gusto, exhibiting the liveliest tokens of satisfaction and delight. [...] His keeper had at first some difficulty in inducing him to enter the pond, but he now willingly takes to the water, and thereby



8. The two elephants in their new accommodations at the London Zoological Gardens, consisting of a rustic pavilion, lime tree planted paddock and a pool, from *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction* (4 August 1832)

> exhibits himself in a point of view in which we have not hitherto been accustomed to view an elephant in this country.[46]

This changing exhibitionary context for the elephant clearly reflects much wider changes in the practices of natural history and zoology in early nineteenth-century Britain, but it also reflects a significant point in the cultural biography of the elephant. As a sapient and sentient animal, the elephant was increasingly understood as ill suited to menageries, where it suffered cruelly, like Chunee at the Exeter Change. Instead, and perhaps of equal significance to spectators and zoology, the new zoological garden presented a new and diverting elephant spectacle, allowing the exhibition of behaviours of natural historical veracity.

The cultural biography of the elephant also gestures towards broader conclusions about the nature of natural historical practices and knowledge in eighteenth-century Britain. We have seen how the co-constitution of knowledge production and display worked to create a cultural understanding of the elephant as sapient and sentient. Spectatorship is intimately linked to knowing about the elephant, whether in the form of menagerie encounters or

with a scalpel in hand. An emphasis on the biographical life of the elephant reveals the different publics for the elephant and the cultural species of elephant that these audiences produced knowledge about.

The elephant of the early 1800s, with his satisfied and approving sounds, attentive listening and gentle brilliant eyes, was not the elephant of the late seventeenth century. Although still wondrous, elephant sapience was in natural histories no longer constructed consistently through the authority of Classical authority or Renaissance humanists. Instead, the focus for authoritative knowledge about the elephant turned towards the body of the elephant, the external and internal organs, in mustering support for a wondrous beast. This was a cultural transformation facilitated by the spectatorship of living elephants in Britain and by anatomical scrutiny. In the late seventeenth century the elephant became increasingly known as an anatomical entity, but anatomical accounts of the elephant were always informed by a sense of antiquarianism and a desire to render physical the prodigious qualities of the elephant. Natural histories and anatomies wrestled with the challenge of constructing a tangible animal from a mythological beast. In the process of producing such knowledge about the elephant, practitioners of anatomy did not, as we have seen, produce a less wondrous elephant by the early nineteenth century. Elephant anatomies were an attempt to separate empirical natural knowledge from an antiquarian or Classical understanding of this animal. Yet these anatomical accounts worked to make physical or to anatomise those marvellous qualities and behaviours that made the elephant appealing to antiquaries, exhibitors and spectators. Instead, for many spectators the elephant, with musical ears and feeling eyes, persisted to embody the cultural resonances or meanings with which it had been previously imbued. The place of the elephant in eighteenth-century British culture disrupts or challenges conceptions of the Enlightenment as an anti-marvellous discourse. The elephant continued to be a strange and wonderfully multifarious animal and, in being so, reminds us of the contingency and historicity of any cultural encounter with animals.

NOTES

1. W. Bingley, *Animal Biography; or, Authentic Anecdotes of the Lives, Manners, and Economy of the Animal Creation, Arranged to the System of Linnaeus,* vol.1 (London: Phillips, 1803), p.118.

2. Revd William Bingley (1774-1823) was a naturalist and Church of England clergyman. He was a popular authority on botany, zoology and Welsh topography. Much of his printed material ran to multiple editions, with a number of works, such as *Animal Biography,* translated into other European languages. Bingley's interest in biography extended from animals to encompass eminent statesmen, travellers and Roman characters. (See the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.*)

3. The elephant as an animal with a eighteenth-century cultural history in France is, however, the subject of Louise Robbins's excellent *Pampered Parrots and Elephant Slaves: Exotic Animals in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

4. D. Wylie, *Elephant* (London: Reaktion, 2008). For another cultural history of the elephant in the twentieth century, see Nigel Rothfels, 'Why Look at Elephants?', *Worldviews* 9:2 (2005), p.166-83. The elephants in the menagerie of Charles III of Spain are also the subject of a

biography: Carlos Gómez-Centurión, 'Treasures Fit for a King: Charles III of Spain's Indian Elephants', *Journal of the History of Collections* 22 (2010), p.29-44. The story of a young elephant in early nineteenth-century Venice is told in Liv Emma Thorsen, 'A Fatal Visit to Venice: The Transformation of an Indian Elephant', in Tora Holmberg (ed.), *Investigating Human/Animal Relations in Science, Culture and Work* (Uppsala: Universitetstryckeriet Uppsala, 2009), p.85-96.

5. Sujit Sivasundaram, 'Trading Knowledge: The East India Company's Elephants in India and Britain', *The Historical Journal* 48:1 (2005), p.27-63; Robert Jones, '"The Sight of Creatures Strange to Our Clime": London Zoo and the Consumption of the Exotic', *The Journal of Victorian Culture* 1:2 (1997), p.1-26; Nigel Rothfels, 'Killing Elephants: Pathos and Prestige in the Nineteenth Century', in D. Morse and M. Danahay (eds), *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Culture and Literature* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), p.53-63.

6. See, for example, M. Blackwell (ed.), *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2007).

7. *A True and Perfect Description of the Strange and Wonderful Elephant Sent from the East Indies* (London: Sumpter, 1675).

8. For the purposes of ease of expression and clarity in this paper I use 'Britain' to describe England, Scotland and Ireland throughout the period 1675-1820. Of course, the political entity of 'Britain' (England and Scotland) did not exist until the Acts of Union (1707), and the inclusion of Ireland in the Act of Union (1800/1801) saw the creation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Wales did not exist as a separate kingdom or legal entity in the eighteenth century. England and Wales had shared a monarch since 1284, with legal annexation formalised in the Laws in Wales Acts (1535-42). In 1746 any legal ambiguities were clarified with an act explicitly stating that all future laws applying to England would also apply by default to Wales. 'England' included Wales for all administrative and legal purposes.

9. In 1623 James I had been presented with a live elephant as diplomatic tribute from the king of Spain, Phillip II. This was the first elephant to be seen in Britain since that sent by Louis IX of France to Henry III in 1255. The first three elephants that are the subject of the early part of this paper are then some of the earliest live elephants to be on display.

10. For more on 'ways of knowing' and natural history see J. Pickstone, *Ways of Knowing: A New History of Science, Technology and Medicine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

11. A. Moulin (or Mullen), *An Anatomical Account of the Elephant Accidentally Burnt in Dublin* (London: Sam Smith, 1682), p.35.

12. Moulin, *An Anatomical Account*, p.4.

13. P. Blair, *Osteographica elephantina; or, A Full and Exact Account of the Bones of an Elephant which Died near Dundee* (London, 1713), p.18.

14. W. Stukeley, 'An Essay Towards the Anatomy of the Elephant, from one Dissected at Fort St George Oct. 1715 and another at London Oct.1720', in W. Stukeley, *Of the Spleen, its Description and History* (London, 1723), p.18.

15. W. Stukeley, 'An Essay Towards the Anatomy of the Elephant', p.16.

16. P. Blair, *Osteographica elephantina*, p.104.

17. P. Blair, *Osteographica elephantina*, p.104.

18. W. Stukeley, 'An Essay Towards the Anatomy of the Elephant', p.16.

19. Written in Latin by John Johnston (1603-1675) and translated into English in 1678; J. Johnston, *A Description of the Nature of Four-Footed Beasts* (London, 1678).

20. T. Tennant, *The Natural History of the Elephant* (London, 1771), BL, Rare Books and Manuscripts, shelfmark B.565 (2).

21. W. Stukeley, 'An Essay Towards the Anatomy of the Elephant'.

22. *St James's Chronicle* (27 September-1 October 1763).

23. *A Letter from the Elephant to the People of England* (London: Sumpter, 1764).

24. See *St James's Chronicle* (25 July 1776) and *London Evening Post* (25 July 1776).

25. *The Elephant's Speech to the Citizens and Countrymen of England* (London, 1675), p.6.

26. For an excellent account of the reception of Pliny's literate elephant in Renaissance Europe see Brian Cummings, 'Pliny's Literate Elephant and the Idea of Animal Language in Renaissance Thought', in E. Fudge, *Renaissance Beasts: Of Animals, Humans, and Other Wonderful Creatures* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p.164-85.

27. Gay's work was regularly reprinted. See, for example, J. Gay, *Fables by the Late John Gay* (London: Rivington and Longman, 1792). *The Elephant and the Bookseller* is Fable X, and in this 1792 edition is found on p.28-31.

28. R, Knox, *A Historical Relation of the Islands of* Ceylon (London: Chiswell, 1681).
29. 'The Great White Elephant. Alive. Is to be Seen in this Town', single sheet folio, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford (John Johnson Collection, 1702-14).
30. *Mist's Journal* (1720), Lysons Collection, British Library, London (microfilm: 20452).
31. J. Booth, *A Century of Theatrical History, 1816-1916* (London: Stead, 1917).
32. J. Rennie, *The Menageries: Quadrupeds Described and Drawn from Living Subjects,* vol. I (London: Charles Knight, 1831), p.17.
33. Rennie, *The Menageries*, p.15.
34. William Brennan, cited in C. Orpen, *Anecdotes of the Deaf and Dumb* (London: Timms, 1836), p.432.
35. *Woodfall's Register* (2 April 1791).
36. J. Church, *Church's Cabinet of Quadrupeds* (London: Darton & Harvey, 1805), p.672.
37. There are a number of printed sources related to elephants at Pidcock's Menagerie. See, for example, G. Pidcock, 'Now Exhibiting, in an Apartment at the Great Room over Exeter-Change, in the Strand, a Most Stupendous Male Elephant', single sheet folio, British Library, London (microfilm 4215).
38. *Tales of the Academy* (London: Cowie & Co., 1820).
39. *Tales of the Academy*, p.79.
40. G. Buffon and W. Smellie [trans.], *Natural History, General and Particular* (London: Straham & Cadell), p.48.
41. Nigel Rothfels, 'The Eyes of Elephants: Changing Perceptions', *Tidsskrift for Kulturforskning* 7:3 (2008), p.39-50.
42. Chunee is the subject of considerable scholarship. The most detailed biography is in J. Bondeson, *The Feejee Mermaid and Other Essays in Natural and Unnatural History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).
43. Walter Putnam, 'Captive Audiences: A Concert for the Elephants in the Jardin des Plantes', *The Drama Review* 51:1 (2007), p.154-60.
44. Bingley, *Animal Biography*, p.158.
45. Rennie, *The Menageries*, p.21.
46. *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction* [London] (4 August 1832).

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