

Harriet Ritvo¹

History and Animal Studies

Nonhuman animals other than human can hardly be characterized as novel historical subjects. Their remains have provided valuable evidence for historians of cultures that left little or no written trace. They traditionally have attracted the attention of economic historians, especially those who study times and places heavily dependent on agriculture. In more recent times, important animal-related institutions, from humane societies to zoos, have had their chroniclers. People distinguished in their association with animals, from breeders to hunters to scientists, have had their biographers as, indeed, have some animals distinguished in their own right, such as Jumbo, Greyfriars Bobby, or Seabiscuit. Specific animal-related issues or practices have received focused attention, and historians working in specialized areas continue to make use of such excellent studies as Richard D. French's *Antivivisection and medical science in Victorian society* (1975). Even some much earlier work continues to be useful. Even some much earlier work continues to be useful. For example, E. P. Evans' survey of *The criminal prosecution and capital punishment of animals*, which first appeared in 1906, has been republished twice in the last twenty years; and Gustave

Loisel's expansive *Histoire des ménageries de l'antiquité à nos jours*, which first appeared in 1912, has not yet been superceded.

Nevertheless, the last several decades have seen significant changes in the attitude of historians toward the study of animals. One shift is simply quantitative: Animals (or the relationships between human beings and other animals) have been attracting more frequent and sustained scholarly attention. There are several ways to understand this increase. One is by analogy to a set of earlier expansions in historical perspective. Historians' sense of what was important in the past tends to mirror their sense of what is important in the present. Shifts in social and political understandings normally are reflected, with some time lag, in the topics that scholars select for historical research. Thus, the field of labor history emerged in response to the labor movement of the early twentieth century; the fields of women's history and minority history constitute part of the academic response to the civil rights movement and the women's movement. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, animal-related causes—from saving the whales to abolishing factory farming—gained increasing popular support in North America and Europe. Predictably enough, successful (or even conspicuous) advocacy in the political sphere led to increased interest among historians. As each of these new fields gained acceptance within the wider community of historians, the range of historical subjects considered serious (even legitimate) correspondingly expanded. Animals can be seen as the latest beneficiaries of this increasingly inclusive or democratic trend (sometimes called "history from the bottom up") within the historical profession.

Historical attention to animals also has been encouraged by the vigorous growth of environmental history, another field that developed in tandem with an activist political movement. Environmental history currently is one of the most vital and attractive areas of historical scholarship. In addition to a fresh set of subjects, it offers a fresh set of approaches and a way of understanding history that is inherently synthetic and trans-national. Animals ordinarily have not been among the most prominent concerns of environmental historians, who have tended to focus on the roots of such modern issues as pollution or on large and contested concepts like "wilderness" or "nature." But the relationship of animals to these themes is clear, as is the ineluctable role of animals in considerations of our relation to the nonhuman world. Further, the intellectual appeal of environmental history has drawn some

older fields into its orbit. Thus, agricultural history now can be reconceptualized as a kind of intermediary between environmental history and the history of technology. Environmental history journals and conferences routinely feature research about animal breeding and farming as well as research about hunting, preservation, and endangered species.

As more historians have chosen to work on animal-related topics, such topics increasingly have been integrated into the disciplinary mainstream. This change has been at least as important as the simple quantitative increase. It reflects two convergent tendencies. One is the willingness of historians who work on other topics to acknowledge the historical significance of animals. The other is the inclination of historians who work on animal-related topics to present them as part of the general history of a given time and place rather than isolating them in peripheral, or even antiquarian, sub-fields. Most of the books that paved the way for the current lively interest in animals among historians exemplify this trend: James Turner's *Reckoning with the beast: Animals, pain and humanity in the Victorian mind* (1980); Keith Thomas' *Man and the natural world: A history of the modern sensibility* (1983); Jean Claude Schmitt's *The holy greyhound: Guinefort, healer of children since the thirteenth century* (1983, original French publication, 1979); my own *The animal estate: The English and other creatures in the Victorian Age* (1987); and Kathleen Kete's *The beast in the boudoir: Petkeeping in nineteenth-century Paris* (1994).

Such integration, of course, is not quite consistent with seeing the historical work of the last two decades as part of a multi-disciplinary field of "animal studies." But it is consistent with the uneasiness that historians often feel about fields characterized as "studies" of one kind or another. As with the umbrella category of "cultural studies," such designations seem to foreground shared topical interests and de-emphasize divergent scholarly methods and goals. They sometimes lead to claims that historicist literary or other cultural studies are the same thing as cultural history. Such claims, however, have no bearing on the question of what contribution recent historical scholarship has made to "animal studies." In a general sense, the answer to this question is obvious—or at least the answer is not unique to the study of animals. The study of the past provides a necessary foundation for understanding the present; and historical research provides the essential context for more exclusively interpretive scholarship.

In particular, recent years have seen excellent work by historians on a wide variety of animal-related topics. Much of this work deals with issues that also have attracted the interest of scholars in anthropology, literary and cultural studies, sociology, and other disciplines. One major focus of attention has been the relationship between scientists (whether zoologists, naturalists, or physiologists) and the animals they study. It has been productively explored in, for example, Nicolaas Rupke's collection, *Vivisection in historical perspective* (1987), in Adrian Desmond's imaginative work on the Zoological Society of London, and in Louise Robbins' *Elephant slaves and pampered parrots: Exotic animals in eighteenth-century Paris* (2001). Such studies also have firmly grounded our understanding of past scientific practices in the cultures to which the scientists belonged, rather than seeing such practices primarily as the antecedents of their modern equivalents. Conservation and hunting, still hot topics, have been the subject of general overviews like John MacKenzie's *The empire of nature: Hunting, conservation and British imperialism* (1988) and of monographs like Robert Paddle's *The last Tasmanian tiger: The history and extinction of the thylacine* (2000). The breeding of domesticated animals has been a particularly evocative topic for the same reason that it is fraught with special dangers for scholars: the analogies between humans and their animal companions and livestock are so strong and compelling. Historical works such as Juliet Clutton-Brock's *A natural history of domesticated mammals* (1989) and Nicholas Russell's *Like engend'ring like: Heredity and animal breeding in early modern England* (1986) offer clear, scientifically informed accounts of complex processes and relationships. Historical research on animals has been thriving within the discipline of history; historians' sense of their field has expanded to include such topics. And at the same time that this widened perspective has enriched the discipline of history, it also has made a similar contribution to "animal studies."

* Harriet Ritvo, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Note

¹ Correspondence should be sent to Harriet Ritvo, History Faculty, E51-288, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA 02139. E-Mail: hnritvo@mit.edu