

Book Reviews

The Welfare of Performing Animals: A Historical Perspective

DAH Wilson (2015). Published by Springer, Heidelberg, Germany. 296 pages Hardback (ISBN 978-3662458334). Price £126.00.

This is a fascinating book, even though it has very little to say about the welfare of performing animals. What it does present is a comprehensive history of human attitudes and actions in relation to the welfare of performing animals from Roman times to the present day. As such, it reveals a great deal about human behaviour; attitudes that evolve, attitudes that never change and the motivations that lie behind what we say, write and do.

It begins with the Romans who were “notorious for the slaughter of people and animals (lions, elephants) on a massive scale” in the cause of entertainment — the original Roman Holiday. These massively popular, state-sponsored pursuits were presented as exercises in social engineering — “bread and circuses” — designed to promote among the plebians a useful state of aggression towards those perceived by the state to be victims. Thereafter, from the medieval period to the present day, the role of performing animals in popular entertainment has largely involved training them to perform tricks and other unnatural acts to command: dancing bears and monkeys, ‘clever’ dogs and horses, ‘tamed’ lions and tigers. These were peddled individually around the country by itinerant entertainers or latterly organised into travelling theatre acts and circuses. Wilson’s book is almost entirely concerned with animals trained to perform and survive, where cruelty, or at least the public perception of cruelty, is not the primary purpose. The history of attitudes to killing animals for sport (hunting and shooting) and the deliberate exercise of cruelty in pursuits such as cock-fighting, bull- and bear-baiting, are presented only for the purpose of comparison.

The record of animal performances is comprehensive and, I must concede, on occasions, rather impressive. For example, one act recorded in 1789 involved a table-top performance of “12-14 small birds in soldierly ranks, uniformed and... with miniature muskets under their left wings. They marched backwards and forwards in formation, when a deserter was produced and another grasped a lighted match to fire a cannon at him, whereupon he played dead.” Prior to the eighteenth century, (Wilson writes) “the concept of cruelty was not recognised”. Thereafter, voices began to be raised in opposition on ethical and practical grounds that we would acknowledge today: taking animals from the wild, compelling them to perform unnatural acts, inadequate conditions of housing and transport, training methods that involved fear and pain. One of the most effective leaders of the opposition was the *Spectator* magazine, which condemned a wide range of acts on wide-ranging grounds. The flea circus was described as “based on the struggles of a wretched little creature to escape from pain”.

This displays, to my mind, a very modern notion of the extent of sentience within the animal kingdom. In regard to an act in which a tiger was sent up in a balloon, then parachuted to earth, the *Spectator* wrote “the public mind is depraved.... it is in the better training of people that these idle cruelties are to be cured”. On the other hand, they wrote of a performing dogs’ act: “instead of these animals manifesting only a dread of the lash by their servile obedience (they) display a lively docility and aptitude..... implying delight and eagerness to please their master and precluding all idea of suffering and coercion (1841). I think that all this is very sensible”.

Objection to the exploitation of performing animals remained a minority pursuit until the end of the First World War, when it grew into a popular movement. There were many drivers for this. One was the increasing sound and impact of women’s voices. Another surprisingly effective one was the publication of Jack London’s final book *Michael, Brother of Jerry*, which tells of a dog that is abducted into the circus where he witnesses a variety of cruelties associated with training animals for public purposes. Jack London’s fame as a writer of dog novels was such that his plea (not very well supported by evidence) took off in a big way. In 1925, the Jack London Club, established to oppose performing animal acts, claimed a membership of 750,000!

The emotional impact of the Great War, in particular the suffering of horses, was a further major contributor to the increase in public concern for animal welfare. It was however further fuelled by some flagrant racism. Cruelty to animals was commonly described as something practised by foreigners in general and Germans in particular. The British, of course, were splendid. To quote Bensusan (1913) “the majority of foreigners, purchasers of animal troupes, are idle, vicious and cruel. Although we hunt foxes, hares and rats and shoot pigeons from traps we are perhaps the best-hearted nation on earth — ready to kill anything but reluctant to torture anything”. When these words from are viewed in context it becomes clear that he was immune to irony.

The UK Parliament lumbered into action. A Performing Animals (Prohibition) Bill was introduced in 1921 and finally passed into law as the Performing Animals (Regulation) Act in 1925. The description of the conflict between the abolitionists and the performers is comprehensive, instructive and, as a potpourri of sense and nonsense, has clear parallels with attitudes to today’s animal welfare issues: hunting and badgers being cases in point. Our lot condemns their lot. Their lot condemn our lot and nobody asks the animals. Unsurprisingly, when it emerged, the Act proved to be a damp squib, amounting to little more than the words of its opening clause “No person shall exhibit or train any performing animal unless he is registered in accordance with this Act”. Licensing was conditional on inspection but here is little evidence to suggest that the Act *per se* has had

any significant impact on the welfare of performing animals. Moreover, continuing debate in and out of parliament over the last ninety years has achieved precisely nothing. A Private Members' Bill (The Wild Animals in Circuses Bill) was introduced to the UK Parliament in 2014 but was prorogued at the end of the last parliamentary session and will make no further progress.

The record of human attitudes and actions, in the circus and the theatre, in parliament and the press, takes up about 80% of this book. Wilson is a diligent and honest historian. The record is comprehensive and at all times he dutifully records all sides of the argument. Readers looking for a champion for their particular cause will not find it here. The 20% that relates directly to animal welfare appears in the chapter entitled 'Means and ends', which considers the acquisition, confinement, movement and training of animals for the entertainment industry. Here again, this section deals mostly with human attitudes to these practices, and mostly with the actions of humans whose perceptions and prejudices in matters of animal welfare have been expressed in the absence of any attempt to consult the animals. The application of science to the training of performing animals and our understanding of their welfare is given very little space. He describes the work of Keller and Marian Breland, former pupils of BF Skinner, who sought to apply his (outdated) principles to the training of performing animals. He also gives proper recognition to the work of Marthe Kiley-Worthington, who the RSPCA sponsored to carry out a scientific study of the welfare of animals in circuses, but did not publish her report (although the work was later published by Marthe in her book *Animals in Circuses and Zoos: Chirons World?* (available at http://the-shg.org/Kiley_Worthington/).

This could be viewed as a disappointing book because it appears to have no happy ending. For this, of course, the author is not to blame. It has been meticulously researched and it is very well written. It is also thought-provoking. One phrase that ran constantly through my mind while reading this book was UFAW's mission statement "Science in the service of Animal Welfare": the need not just to practise animal welfare science but to breathe through the wind and fire of rhetoric our still small voice of reason. My other constant thought was, in fact, resolved in the closing lines of the Wilson's book. "Animals were now worthy of respect, as well as being sources of curiosity: their activities and behaviour in the natural environment became more fascinating than in the artificial one". Amen to that. The power of public opinion exceeds that of the legislators. One cannot however escape the irony that our respect for animals in the wild has been largely nourished through a diet of moving pictures of animals in the wild observed from the comfort of our own sofas.

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Zookeeping: An Introduction to the Science and Technology

Edited by MD Irwin, JB Stoner and AM Cobaugh (2013). Published by The University of Chicago Press, 1427 E 60th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60637, USA. 816 pages Hardback (ISBN 978-0-226-92531-8). Price £66.50.

The difficulty in constructing a book along these lines is the diversity and depth of subjects that need to be covered in order to provide a strong reference guide for a modern zookeeper. In addition, there is a large amount of cultural and legislative difference when the role of a zookeeper is considered on a global level. With a few notable exceptions this book has a strong Americano-centric feel. While this is not an issue in many respects, it does leave some gaps within the knowledge base, particularly in terms of legislative processes. It is unrealistic to expect a book like this to cover the range of legislative processes even just across major countries; however, a caveat to the reader on checking legislative concerns within their own region would be useful. This is particularly important (but not exclusively so) when talking in terms of veterinary interventions. There are assumptions made about European keepers and European situations which do demonstrate a lack of understanding of the European (or for that matter Australian or Asian) Zoo Community. In particular, there is little mention of the charitable status of many European zoos, and an assumption that a 'good zoo' equates with a large zoo with multiple staff. There are very many small zoos that are able to take on the mantle of a good zoo.

Although strongly Americano-centric, there is an impressive list of contributing authors, representing much of the western knowledge of the role of a zookeeper. For many junior or new keepers (or zoo enthusiasts) who would benefit from this book, a short biography for each author would have been beneficial and given a clearer understanding of the reason why they were appropriate to author those chapters. However, the range of contributing authors has allowed the production of a work of clear value to the zookeeping world.

The title of the book describes "an introduction to the science and technology of zookeeping", and as already stated it is difficult to cover the range of relevant subjects in any depth. However, I was somewhat disappointed in the omissions of some elements from the book, particularly in terms of new innovations in technology, and the lack of a future direction for a 21st century zookeeper.

This book is divided into ten sections, devised to provide detail within defined 'chunks' allowing the reader to dip into a subject as necessary. The chapters are diverse, ranging from information on applying to zoos and aquaria, to legislation in various regions. The second chapter of the book is a welcome surprise, focusing on the process leading up to employment as a zookeeper. This is very much unrecognised information for those looking at a career in zookeeping. Part two of the book moves into more familiar territory with the 'Evolution of zoos',