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The London Zoo and the Victorians 1828–1859

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Creature Concerns

London Zoo and the Victorians 1828-1859, by Takashi Ito, Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2014, xii+204 pages, illustrated, £50/\$90 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-86193-321-1

The Zoological Society of London was established in 1826 and its menagerie in Regents Park opened two years later. Even before the animals were available for public inspection, it attracted anticipatory press attention, which only increased in subsequent years and decades. The reasons for this media focus are not hard to find. The zoo occupied a conspicuous location in the metropolis, and its collection appealingly combined the traditional and the novel. The display of exotic animals had a long history in Britain as elsewhere, and early visitors to Regent's Park could also have admired many similar creatures individually exhibited at fairs or in the yards of tavern, or grouped in traveling or stationary menageries. London's oldest such collection, the royal menagerie at the Tower of London, dated from the thirteenth century. All these venues implicitly defined captive animals as spectacle or as entertainment. As the name of the organization indicated, what was new about the presentation of the animals in Regent's Park was the foregrounding of an element of natural history or zoology. (That is, it was new in Britain; several foreign institutions, including the Jardin des Plantes in Paris and Schönbrunn Zoo in Vienna, had already moved in this direction.) Indeed, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, the recently returned founding governor of Singapore and the most energetic advocate for the foundation of the society, invoked patriotism as well as science as he canvassed potential supporters; and the Prospectus for the society that was circulated in 1825 noted that "the metropolis of the British Empire" was almost the only

such place in Europe that lacked a scientific institution where “the nature, properties, and habits” of exotic wild animals could be studied.

Unsurprisingly, the young Zoological Society agreed with contemporary journalists about the noteworthiness of its activities. It supplemented their efforts with its own plentiful documentation with publications ranging from scientific journals to guides for visitors to (ultimately) official histories. In addition it kept elaborate organizational records along with detailed accounts of the many factors involved in the maintenance of a live animal collection—acquisitions, deaccessions, and losses; the supply of goods and services; and overall expenditures and receipts. These rich archival resources, along with accounts in newspapers and magazines and the reports of local and foreign visitors, have made the Zoological Society of London a magnet for historians. The nineteenth-century zoo has been the subject of both popular overviews such as Wilfrid Blunt’s *The Ark in the Park* (1976) and scholarly studies such as Sofia Åkerberg’s *Knowledge and Pleasure at Regent’s Park* (2001). It has frequently figured in the work of historians interested in broader topics in social and cultural history and the history of science, and it inevitably looms large in general surveys of the zoo as an institution—for example, *Zoo: A History of Zoological Gardens in the West* by Eric Baratay and Elisabeth Hardouin-Fugier (2004). The confluence of several historical trends--interest in popular culture, in the interaction between elite scientists and amateurs of various kinds, and in the roles of non-human members of predominantly human societies--has meant that other zoos have also received a lot of attention lately. Recent studies include Catherine de Courcy, *Dublin Zoo* (2010); Andrew Flack, “Histories of Human-Animal Relationships at the Bristol Zoological Gardens c. 1836-c.2000” (unpublished dissertation 2013), Ian Miller, *The*

Nature of the Beasts: Empire and Exhibition at the Tokyo Imperial Zoo (2013), and Noah Cincinnati, “Arks for Empires: American Zoos, Imperialism, and the Struggle for International Wildlife Protection, 1889-1936” (unpublished dissertation 2012).

Takashi Ito’s special contribution to this proliferating literature is to examine the Zoological Society as an institution among other contemporary scientific and cultural institutions. His intensive examination of the records that document its first decades (his narrative sometimes strays a little beyond 1859, the terminal date in the subtitle) allows him to provide a detailed picture of the zoo’s operational challenges. These began before it opened its gates. The first requirement for a menagerie—antecedent to the purchase of animals—is a place to put them. Even after the Zoological Society had received preliminary administrative permission to build in the newly created Regent’s Park, there were difficulties posed by the Treasury, the residents of the neighboring desirable residences, and the architect John Nash. Ito tracks the negotiations that led to the resolution of these difficulties, and explains their impact on the zoo’s layout and buildings. He explains how, in the 1830s, the Zoological Society struggled to resist repeated pressure from religious groups opposed to entertainment, as well as work, on the Sabbath—an issue that became entangled with internal debates about the access of the general public to the zoo itself. In the 1840s and 1850s, the increasing popularity of the zoo led the parish of St. Marylebone repeatedly to challenge its exemption from the parochial rates as a scientific institution. Ito supplements these discussions with a series of helpful tables, which show, for example, zoo attendance, staff salaries, and the numbers of animals on display.

Ito's emphasis on such administrative issues produces a concomitant de-emphasis on the inhabitants of the zoo. The Zoological Society described in *London Zoo and the Victorians* is a distinctively human organization, populated most conspicuously by its Council, its Fellows, and its visitors. Its most persuasively articulated external relationships are with a variety of political institutions, from parish to Parliament. The only animals to receive detailed attention are the Sudanese giraffes who pleased crowds in the 1830s, an early result of the recognition that healthy attendance required a steady supply of charismatic novelties. The discussion of their accession, and of their representation in words and pictures is very interesting (and nicely illustrated), but it does not provide an adequate basis for generalizations about the diverse animals displayed over several decades. Other indications of his relative lack of interest in animals are scattered through the book. For example, he misleadingly characterizes the zebu (the domesticated cattle of South Asia and East Africa) as "a humped species of bovine animal" (122). More surprisingly, he claims that "zebus were mated with asses" (140) at the suburban farm that the Zoological Society maintained for a few early years, to accommodate Fellows who wanted to exoticize their livestock. The conjunction he refers to presumably involved a zebra, but this slip seems more significant than just a typographical error.

Ito's sense of his relation to the proliferating scholarship about the history of zoos is somewhat odd. He claims that his account revises the previous understandings that nineteenth-century zoos were about empire and class, but his claims depend on a reductive version of both the scholarship and the topics. He asserts that since the zoo attracted people from a range of social backgrounds, class was not an important factor,

although juxtaposition is as likely to heighten class sensibility as to dull it. He suggests that the Regent's Park zoo reflected imperialism only in the exhibition of animals collected within the British Empire, not acknowledging that the display of similar animals from territories claimed by rival empires, or even not yet claimed, could have similar force. This tendency to draw overly strict boundaries also leads him to distinguish too firmly, for example, between zoos and menageries and between "legitimate and recreational science." (107) His characterization of his own contribution is also puzzling. The introduction identifies three major themes that will structure the book: cultural politics, public science, and animal history. These themes are indeed repeatedly invoked, mostly in passages of abstract reflection. But the real impact of his work is in a very different and more limited area. Ito's careful research has provided valuable insight into the operation and management of a major nineteenth-century collection of living animals. Of course, the Victorian period also provided a few behind-the-scenes accounts, such as the longtime superintendent Abraham Dee Bartlett's *Wild Animals in Captivity: Being an Account of the Habits, Food, Management, and Treatment of the Beasts and Birds at the 'Zoo' with Reminiscences and Anecdotes*. But Ito looks behind different scenes and with different eyes.

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