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Picturing Animals in Britain 1750-1850

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D. DONALD. *Picturing Animals in Britain 1750-1850*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 2007. ix + 377 pp. 277 pls. \$65.00; £40.00. ISBN 9780300126792.

We are proverbially admonished not to judge a book by its cover, but the cover of Diana Donald's *Painting Animals in Britain* says a lot about what is inside. Like the rest of this overview of the representation of animals in the visual culture of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain it is physically magnificent. Inside, the pages are large and the paper is glossy; the numerous illustrations are reproduced with precise detail and (often) in stunning color. Of the images that receive such lavish treatment, most were expensive products when they were created—for example, oil painting or plates designed for connoisseurs of natural history—but not all; the book includes some striking color images of mass-produced cartoons and prints. And this diversity of intended audience is one of Donald's main points. She has drawn her black-and-white illustrations from the widest possible range of available visual media, from the cheapest ephemera to paintings acknowledged as masterpieces in their own time and (sometimes) afterwards.

Beautiful as it is, *Picturing Animals in Britain 1750-1850* is no mere coffee table book. Donald has judiciously selected the illustrations to support her assertion that, during the period she discusses, animals were a ubiquitous feature of British culture, and, further, that their visual representation reflected the “fractured consciousness” (vii) that informed human attitudes toward and treatment of them. Her demonstration begins on the cover, which features a detail from one of Edwin Landseer's paintings of Isaac Van Amburgh, an American wild animal tamer who thrilled London theater audiences with his control of big cats. (Queen Victoria commissioned one of the paintings; the Duke of Wellington the other.) The cover image focuses on the recumbent Van Amburgh, resting

his head on the flank of a lion and his hand on the head of a tiger who snarls but does not bite. A leopard gazes up at him with doglike adoration—or perhaps with longing at the lamb who snuggles (in affection or terror?) against his chest. The whole tableau occurs behind bars, and the entire painting also includes the admiring audience that has gathered safely on the other side of them. The painting is obviously about human control of other animals, and, probably, about British control of the African and Asian homelands of Van Amburgh's cats. But Landseer does not present the exercise of power as simple; in the understanding of the human and non-human actors in the scene, as well as in that of the observer, it is mixed with acquiescence, admiration, and affection. Further, although the scene recalls popular "happy family" displays, in which diminutive natural enemies (for example, cats and mice) calmly coexisted, Van Amburgh appears to share some of the lamb's uncertainty about the intentions of the felines.

Instead of offering a chronological survey, Donald divides her study into four thematic sections, each of which consists of two chapters. The first section focuses on natural history illustration, with special attention to the visual representation of the struggle for existence, and to the relationship between theology and natural history. The second section deals with attempts to understand animal consciousness, most elaborately that of dogs, the domesticated animals whose lives were most closely intertwined with those of people. The third section considers human domination of both wild and domesticated animals, and the fourth considers elite hunting culture (mostly, but not entirely, foxhunting culture) and its critics.

Donald's anchors her discussion of each topic in close analyses of a few images, which are often familiar and (therefore?) predictable or ineluctable. For example, her

Prologue features Joseph Wright's "An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump" and William Hogarth's "Four Stages of Cruelty"; her chapter about the mental lives of dogs focuses on Landseer's canine portraits; and George Stubbs figures prominently in her account of the experience of British horses. Her discussions of these images (as well as of images less well known) illuminatingly ground close readings in historical context, drawing on literature, religion, science, and popular culture of its time. The very diversity of these sources often highlights the tension between conflicting attitudes toward animals that is the book's main theme. Thus, although her chapter on horses begins with Stubbs' handsome portrait of "Whistlejacket," along with other representations of elite horses, Donald quickly reminds the reader that most British horses endured much harsher existences. Indeed, as Anna Sewell showed in Black Beauty, even horses who seemed destined for a relatively pampered life might finish on the streets and at the knackers'. This thread becomes increasingly pronounced in the course of the chapter. Donald concludes it with an extended consideration of the role played by depictions of cruelty in the humane movement, which became increasingly popular and influential in the course of the nineteenth century.

The role of animals in modern British history has received a fair amount of scholarly attention in recent decades, and the general outlines of Donald's account will not surprise anyone who is familiar with this body of work. But her insightful attention to contemporary imagery valuably enhances received understandings. Historians may wonder about her decision to focus on the century that began in 1750. Donald might agree that this periodization seems arbitrary since, despite her title, her discussion ranges freely both earlier and later. More problematic is her occasional tendency to treat the

period as a homogeneous unit, rather than acknowledging that human relations with other animals changed from decade to decade, along with theological convictions, scientific understandings, and most other aspects of the culture that shaped the lives of both her human and her non-human subjects.

This is not to say that Donald is unaware of changing attitudes, or of their uneasy relationship to attitudes that persist. The tension between admiration, sympathy, and compassion on the one hand, and exploitation, cruelty, and domination on the other, unifies her entire discussion. As she notes intermittently, although consideration for animals increased in Britain throughout the period she discusses, and has continued to increase subsequently, this trend has by no means resulted in the elimination of animal suffering at the hands of humans. Although she begins her final chapter with an optimistic reference to the near-present—the 2005 ban on hunting—which she uncharacteristically suggests was an inevitable result of “change not only in attitudes to animals, but also in notions of the proper role of the state in defining and preventing cruelty towards them” (273), she concludes with a more sobering and realistic assessment of “the strangely divided consciousness of human beings in their attitudes to animals” (305).