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Still Life/Nature Morte

Carol Freeman, *Paper Tiger: A Visual History of the Thylacine*. Human-Animal Studies series. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010. xiv + 287pp. €90, \$128 pb.

In 1936, the last captive thylacine or Tasmanian tiger died in Beaumaris Zoo, its species dramatically depleted since the European settlement of Australia. There has been no conclusive proof of the species' survival in the wild and it is now considered extinct. However, even during their existence, thylacines were the stuff of legend, and their disappearance ended neither the tales of sightings nor the scientific and popular fascination with the species. From 1999 to 2005, the Australian Museum even undertook an ambitious project to clone the species from preserved specimens, but this was abandoned due to the degradation of the "ancient DNA" that scientists had to work with. On an historical level too, understandings of the species are hampered by incompleteness and distortion of records. Zoologist Eric Guiler has highlighted the scapegoating of the thylacine as a sheep-killer and the unreliability of records made during successive bounties (1985, 1998). More recently, Robert Paddle (2000) and David Owen (2003) have provided further attempts to sift fact from fiction in order to shed light on the history of thylacines. Carol Freeman's *Paper Tiger* explores another dimension of the story of this lost species, showing how visual representations of thylacines reflected, contributed to and perhaps exacerbated the discourses surrounding their extinction.

The first chapters explore sketches, woodcuts and lithographs produced during the nineteenth century, along with the texts that accompanied them in zoological and natural history publications. Freeman shows how myths, scapegoating, Tasmanian bounties, and artistic license shaped these representations of thylacines, even after live ones appeared in European zoos. Comparing British and continental "imagetexts," she argues that less sympathetic British depictions of the thylacine were more influenced by and had more influence on colonial Australian perspectives. An interesting relationship between images also surfaces: a taxidermy museum specimen or a zoo sketch in an influential publication could become the source for multiple adaptations. The 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s also saw the rise of a powerful association between the thylacine and European wolves, which Freeman sees as significant in the quick uptake of bounty hunting. Images from this period often feature gothic European wilderness, and texts emphasize sheep-killing. Freeman also finds more positive "naturalistic" illustrations

from this time, but notes that these were not readily available to Australian readers, who had far greater access to sensational newspaper illustrations.

With the possible exception of these latter images, the material so far leaves one feeling thankful that photographs of thylacines also exist as a point of reference. However, the next two chapters demonstrate that photography was mediated, too, although its messages could still conflict with existing convictions about the species. Pictures from a Washington zoo are described as lending dignity to thylacines, whereas London examples show confined animals and accompanying texts suggesting that they deserved such treatment. However, Freeman comments that there is little evidence for this in the pictures, creating a “slippage between image and text” (186). Later, zoo settings were edited out and replaced with painted landscapes or erased altogether. In one striking case, Freeman finds evidence that a thylacine photographed stealing a chicken was in fact a taxidermy mount. This therefore “constitutes a refusal to allow photography to change earlier perceptions” (218).

The book’s final chapter brings the story of the thylacine’s depiction into the present, discussing various logos and emblems. Freeman observes that while such images maintain awareness of the species, they obscure its fate by using it signify other things. She concludes that in the history of the thylacine, “The relation between images and extinction has a complex, circular effect where pictures reflected, reinforced, shaped and encouraged destructive attitudes and actions” (242). She calls for skepticism and analysis of representations of animals in general: “Responsible representation ... should not be an unreasonable expectation” (246).

On finishing this book, the reader comes away with a sense of valuable insight into a complex and tragic history that is generally presented with admirable thoroughness. One area that might perhaps have been explored is indigenous responses to commercial thylacine imagery, something David Owen discusses in his book, but Aboriginal perspectives are largely outside the range of *Paper Tiger’s* inquiry. Another area where there is scope for expansion is in the chapters on photography. These could have included the interesting film footage made in various zoos, which offers additional evidence of the ways in which thylacines were regarded and treated in captivity. However, while these points might have added further dimensions to the discussion, their absence certainly does not detract from a fascinating text enriched by many images. Eighty illustrations punctuate the text, including twenty-one color plates. Highlights include contrasting lupine and “naturalistic” versions of a pose borrowed from Joseph Wolf; one shows a shadowy, windswept animal that would not look out of

place on the cover of a gothic novel, while the other is a lifelike engraving of thylacines in an inviting, realistic setting. The photographic images are also striking, as zoo settings appear as particularly miserable, or disappear entirely to leave the animals looking like mounted specimens, apparently motionless in the absence of space in which to move. The sheer variety of images makes them appear to represent multiple different species, and this in itself illustrates the range of different perspectives on the thylacine.

Overall, Freeman's take on this remarkable subject is detailed and convincing, with a good balance between close readings and discussion of their implications. Her clear, accessible style makes the book a pleasure to read. In sum, *Paper Tiger* makes a valuable contribution to the understanding not only of thylacines and their extinction, but also of the impact of human constructions of other species and the ethical implications of this for animal representation.

Works Cited

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