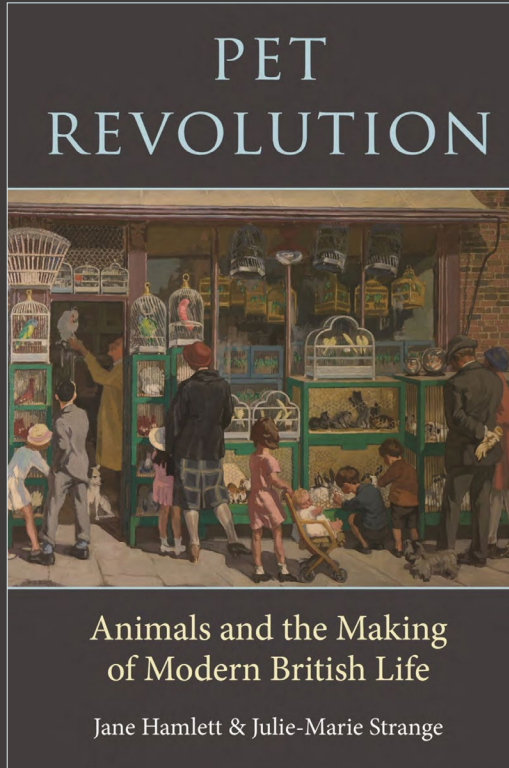


BOOK REVIEW

# A Pet Revolution?

Daniel Breeze



*Review of:*

Jane Hamlett and Julie-Marie Strange, *Pet Revolution: Animals and the Making of Modern British Life*. London: Reaktion Books, 2023. 256 pp., 42 illus. £20 (hb, ebook).

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**J**ane Hamlett's and Julie-Marie Strange's *Pet Revolution* is an impressive introduction to the past two centuries of pet-keeping in Britain. Hamlett and Strange will be recognisable names to Victorianists for their pioneering research in Victorian studies of the home (Hamlett) and death and grief (Strange). Readers of this journal might recognize Strange as a co-author of *The Invention of the Modern Dog: Breed and Blood in Victorian Britain* (2018). This new book is the result of an AHRC-funded project that explored the roles of pets in British family life between 1837 and 1937. An exemplary history of the subject, the book bursts at the seams with primary sources that illustrate how all social classes came to welcome animals into their homes.

In their introduction Hamlett and Strange boldly contend that a pet revolution should be put alongside other revolutions: "Modernity in the Western world was forged through a series of revolutions, from the industrial and agricultural to the political and commercial. We contend that, in Britain at least, there was another revolution — the pet revolution — whereby households across the social spectrum welcomed animals into their domestic lives on an unprecedented scale" (8). Their argument, then, is that revolutions of the nineteenth century, alongside trade facilitated by empire, made possible the widespread adoptions of pets within the British *home*. This focus is made clear in the introduction: "It is, we argue, impossible to understand the history of home and family without bringing animals into our stories" (16).

In Chapter One, "Capture and Taming", Hamlett and Strange discuss the shifting attitudes towards the boundaries of what could be considered a pet. Hamlett and Strange contend that this was influenced by notions of imperialism, gender, and class. For example, while literature for boys was replete with instructions on how to capture and tame wild birds, girls were generally told to be content with the domesticated budgie (30–31). The so-called civilizing mission of empire was brought home in the attempts to civilize wild animals and bring them into the home as pets; this included dormice and squirrels. Pointing towards the recent work by Diana Donald,

*Women against Cruelty* (2019), which presents a women's history of animal protection in Victorian Britain, Hamlett and Strange show the "taming" and "bagging" of animals to be a peculiarly masculine and imperial venture. Successive laws, lobbied for by nascent campaign groups such as the RSPCA, shifted the social acceptability of these practices, which gradually institutionalized the pet-industry. This opening chapter, then, chronicles a reordering of how Britons became acquainted with the animals that would become their companions. What started out as a free-for-all — eccentric gentlemen kept lions in their apartments off Piccadilly (actor Edmund Kean) and wombats in their backyard Menagerie (poet and artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti) — became a legislated and institutionalized landscape of pet-keeping. From curiosity to commodity.

Chapter Two, "Building Trust and Buying Love", explores the changing landscape of animals as pet commodities in terms of their sale and purchase. Hamlett and Strange bring out aspects of class in their analysis of the social history of pet-dealers. There was a clear distinction, they argue, between those walking the street and those traders who had set up shop. However, that boundary was perhaps distorted by the presence of animal traders on the stalls at markets alongside "livestock" traders. Moreover, there is a compelling discussion in this chapter about dog-nappers who, in their quest for ransoms, targeted the newly popular pedigree breeds and their wealthy humans (58–61). Hamlett and Strange argue that the increasing sentimentality of Victorians towards dog companions contributed to the inflation of dog ransoms. Importantly, the early Victorian epidemic of dog-napping led to legislation which reclassified dogs as property in 1845. This encapsulates how the development of emotional attachment between humans and animals in this period developed side-by-side with the commodification and propertied understanding of pets both in law and wider society.

Chapter Three, "Rules Made and Broken", takes us back into the domestic sphere, looking at "pets at home". The discussion about how pets bred disorder into the highly structured Victorian home recalled questions of agency. Hamlett's and Strange's primary sources often

infer a certain Victorian state of mind that quietly enjoyed the upheaval brought by their non-human companions—whether it be Beatrix Potter taking delight in the volatile temperament of her rabbit, Benjamin Bouncer, or Louis Wain’s *Illustrated London News* cartoon “Other People’s Pets”, which features finger-biting parrots, marauding monkeys, and badly-behaved dogs in a comedic and knowing manner (95–96). However, others found less enjoyment from the behaviour of their pets. The Reverend John Wood admonished his Skye terrier, Roughie, for his lack of class-consciousness: “he seemed as glad to see the most repulsive tramp as myself” (98). I was left wondering whether ideas about animal resistance developed by scholars like Susan Nance and Jason Hribal could be applied to pets during this period. Finally, Hamlett and Strange argue that shifting home designs both helped and hindered pet-keepers with suburbia leading to a boon in cats and dogs, and increased flat-living and renting complicating the pet-owner dynamic.

Chapter Four, “We’ve Taken to You”, focuses on how pets were present within memoirs, diaries, and letters concerned with family life. Perhaps the most arresting account in this chapter is that of Ruth Rose, whose wartime diaries show how Paddy, her dog, provided comfort and companionship throughout her difficult marriage to a controlling and abusive husband (137–38). This chapter is illustrated with paintings and photographs, like other chapters, and there is a particularly intriguing portrait photograph here of a young Edwardian Black man holding two dogs “reassuringly”. Hamlett and Strange note the photograph as “one of the rare visual depictions of human-animal relationships in pre-First World War Britain that include someone from a minority ethnic background” (118). This is noteworthy both for what it infers and what it neglects to show. By emphasizing the rarity of visual depictions involving minority ethnic individuals before 1914, Hamlett and Strange hint at the marginalization of groups from our historical records about human-nonhuman interactions in Britain during the earlier periods of their study.

Chapter Five, “In Sickness and in Health”, chronicles the changing medical landscape for pets: from home remedies to the sale of

curing concoctions and manufactured pet food toward the end of the nineteenth century; from vets as professionals focused mainly on horses to the expansion of their vocation to include dogs, cats, and small animals. Albeit brief, there is an interesting discussion about the slow process of women being accepted as vets and not simply being side-lined into assistant caring roles due to essentialist ideas of gender (169). This is interesting because the veterinary profession is now majority female, compared to the medical doctor profession, which remains majority male. Perhaps the shift in veterinary care from mainly agricultural to companion animals over time has shifted the social stereotypes about what a vet looks like—a shift incomparable to any in the medical profession? Their section on cat owners feeling conflicted about having their pets neutered and/or spayed is an interesting study of how those owners understood the relationship between cat sexuality, gender, and behaviour (173–6). While Hamlett and Strange relate the improving affordability of veterinary care for working people, first through charities and then through its proliferation, they also recognize the sad reality that still exists for some people and their animal companions: “the deep pockets of love do not always stretch to the financial costs of health” (178).

In the sixth and final chapter, “In Loving Memory”, Hamlett and Strange discuss the aftermaths of pet-keeping: grief. Gender once again is an important dimension of analysis. Particularly moving is a story from the memoirs of the famous Yorkshire vet James Herriot who euthanized Bob, a fourteen-year-old Labrador cross who had developed incurable cancer, the companion of an elderly and widowed labourer. The bewilderment and trembling lips of the elderly man meant Herriot dispensed with the clichés and took no payment. “Herriot’s recollection of his awkwardness demonstrates”, we are told, “men’s self-consciousness regarding sentiment” (198). Another story recalls an Edwardian family in Limehouse who, in hard times, couldn’t afford to feed their pet rabbits and themselves. The rabbits were summarily eaten, and the father of the family did all he could to hold back his tears (201). Similarly, I know two of my own great grandfathers kept rabbits especially for food, but both eventually

found they couldn't continue the practice after a certain point because of unspoken emotional attachments. These stories illustrate how the incorporation of nonhumans into British homes — interestingly all working-class ones in these examples — destabilized the gender norms of the Victorian patriarchy.

As I have made clear, the excellence of this study lies in Hamlett's and Strange's wide breadth of sources and their clear analysis. This is a first-class cultural history of pet-keeping in Britain from the Victorian period to the mid-twentieth century. The book succeeds in analysing how dimensions of class and gender effected this practice and points to how imperialism not only opened trade routes for exotic animals, but also became an avenue for a certain discourse to seep into home-life within the metropole. The acceptance of nonhuman animals within the Victorian homes of all classes was tied up with the civilizing mission of empire, but it also subverted their sense of order through the misbehaviours of those animals that many learned to love. It is, for the most part, a history of sentiment rather than respect; it's unlikely that many of the pet-keepers whose words fill this book felt moral duties towards the animals they owned in the same way that animal advocates today understand their relationships with companion animals. In fact, this is another theme present: the drift towards a thoroughly commodified and propertied understanding of pets.

However, I am unsure whether Hamlett and Strange fully justify the claim in their introduction that the “book is interested in the shifting parameters of power, intimacy and conceptions of personhood in human–animal relationships” (10). Their pet revolution names a rearrangement of British perceptions of the home, the family, and the emotional status of nonhumans who became part of these institutions. It is this domestic revolution in which a pet revolution came to be, one made possible by its industrial and agricultural antecedents, but perhaps subordinate to them. Unfortunately, though, it is hard to grasp how the revolution which they describe shifted power dynamics in human–animal relationships. As a work firmly grounded in cultural history, discussions of power could have perhaps been

developed further with added references to the rich vein of theoretical work underway in the field of historical animal studies—an engagement with ideas about animal agency, for example.

Ultimately, as Hamlett and Strange acknowledge, pets were not a product of the nineteenth century, or of Britain in particular, but during this period their place, both symbolic and literal, was certainly reformed. The lingering question such a work raises for animal advocates is thus: how do we imagine the sequel?