Reviews

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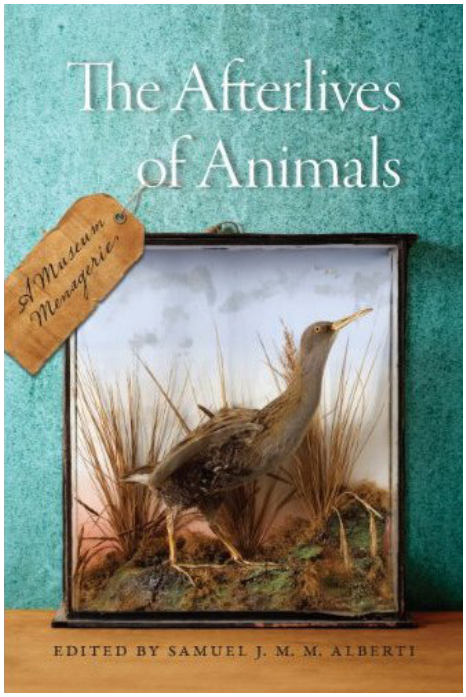
"Narratives for Resurrection"

Samuel J. M. M. Alberti, ed. *The Afterlives of Animals: A Museum Menagerie*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011. 247 pp. $35 (hb), $18.50 (pb).



The bodily resurrection of animals has long been made possible through taxidermy and other preservation techniques, and the presence of such beings in museums is often taken for granted. Specimens are re-animated in lifelike poses for the visual consumption of visitors and are usually displayed in ways that reinforce their liveliness, their idealized ways of being in the wild when they were alive, rather than their death and deadness. Visitors are encouraged to look at displayed animals in order to learn about life, natural history, and how taxonomic systems have helped humans to understand evolution and the connectedness of species. Like the unnamed bird that stands proudly upright within a tiny reconstructed marshland, encased in a table top habitat diorama on the cover of *The Afterlives of Animals: A Museum Menagerie*, humans gaze at animals and specimens stare back, unseeing through glass eyes. The pervasive

illusion of life does not often prompt spectators to contemplate the death of these creatures and how they came to rest in the museum.

However, each specimen — whether under the bright lights of a display or housed deep in museum storage — has a story that encompasses both its life as a living being and its afterlife as a preserved specimen. In this book, editor Samuel J.M.M. Alberti has brought together an intriguing and enlightening collection of essays, penned by authors from a wide variety of disciplines, to capture the stories of some of these more charismatic non-human animals. Through the inclusion of diverse narratives, Alberti demonstrates that natural history specimens are far from the "natural" and "objective" representatives of science they are frequently assumed to be. Instead, preserved animals are unequivocally shown to be important pieces of material culture that, situated within their historical context, can shed important light on human-animal relationships.

In the introduction, Alberti sets the scene for his interest in the "social lives of things" (3), having selected animals whose "fame in life and their iconic status in death defy taxonomy. They are not only specimens, but also personalities; not only data, but also historical documents" (1). Alberti identifies the individuality of animals as the book's overarching theme (8-9) and readers are introduced to these remarkable creatures through twelve chapters that are presented in chronological order. Beginning with Christopher Plumb's story of how two zebra came to be publicly associated with the character of Queen Charlotte and her son from their arrival in Britain in 1762, the book moves to Alberti's more straightforward narrative about the journey of an Asian elephant named Maharajah from a travelling menagerie, to a zoo, and then to his afterlife in the Manchester Museum. The story of a second elephant follows, by the name of Sir Roger, and we learn of his tragic execution and subsequent post-mortem display in Glasgow through Sutcliffe, Rutherford, and Robinson's excellent archival research and emotive storytelling.

Sophie Everest writes another impressively documented story about an unnamed mandrill's study skin at the Manchester Museum, an individual whom she correctly points out as being important through his "valuable typicality" (75). Alberti acknowledges that most chapters in this book focus on individuals who have some notoriety, but given that the majority of museum specimens are unknown and anonymous, Everest's article is an essential contribution to this work. Another

unnamed study skin, this time of a hen harrier — a bird of prey that has been intensively persecuted in the British Isles — comes under investigation by Patchett, Foster, and Lorimer. Their focus, however, is on engaging with the "biogeographies" of the harrier. Once they determine the region in which she was likely hunted and killed, they travel there, specimen carefully in hand, to photographically situate her within the forest. Although I did not end up entirely convinced by their assertion that a biogeography is less anthropocentric than the other biographies in this book, I enjoyed the "salvage ethnography" that resulted from their journey (115).

In her chapter about a gorilla named Alfred who has spent his life and afterlife in Bristol, Paddon discusses how specimens become "mascots." She makes the argument that it is the "imposed anthropomorphic constructions that connect audiences with animals, and museum visitors with animal mascots" (144). This certainly appears to be true for Alfred, who was much-loved by the public (and, remarkably, even wore woolly sweaters during winter at the zoo ... although the two are not necessarily related!). The value of anthropomorphism emerges in other chapters too, evidencing that it can, indeed, be used as a bridge to empathy and understanding. However, Fudge (2002) has pointed out that anthropomorphism can be problematic because it prevents humans from having a full understanding of the agency of other animals, and this would have been an important point to make and elaborate upon.

Rachel Poliquin's chapter on Balto, the lead dog in a sled team who carried diphtheria toxin to a remote Alaskan community during an outbreak in 1925, similarly emphasizes the use of anthropomorphism in the media's construction of him as a hero: Balto deserved to be immortalized through taxidermy because he was more than "just" an animal and yet, simultaneously, he was preserved in a way that no human hero would have been because he was an animal (94). Thankfully, Poliquin recognizes that taxidermy is a "dubious honour" (107), and in his chapter about Chi-Chi, the panda who lived at the London Zoo and now resides at the Natural History Museum, Henry Nicholls also makes the point that the process from death to preserved specimen does not always go smoothly. Although Britain's public appeared happy to bestow immortality upon a giant panda, they were far less supportive of preserving the remains of Guy, a gorilla at the London Zoo, just a few years later (179). Nicholls attributes this to humans being "touchy about the treatment of our close living relatives" and the surge in interest in primatology in the 1970s thanks to Jane Goodall and Dian Fossey (180). Yet, when a young polar bear named Knut died at the Berlin Zoo in 2011, there was an overwhelmingly negative response from the German public to immortalize him as a taxidermy mount. As such, it can be said that there are other

forces at play in this shift in Western culture, and public response is likely to vary widely based on the history and context of individual animals. This type of conflict also emerges in Sabin's chapter on the Thames Whale, who had very limited contact with the public (largely through the media) over the weekend in which she swam up the Thames river to London and subsequently died during a rescue attempt. Despite this very short relationship with the whale, members of the British public insisted that she be given an afterlife in the Natural History Museum, rather than be sent to the landfill after post-mortem analysis, the fate that is reserved for most whales and dolphins who are found dead (192-193).

There are two chapters about (entirely different) whales. Sabin's first person account of the Thames Whale's passage to her afterlife in the museum was an engaging and interesting read and, of course, it is about a whale that lived and died. In contrast, Michelle Henning's chapter is about a whale that has no physical body and whose existence is purely hypothetical. "Neurath's Whale" is named after a man, Otto Neurath, a Viennese museum director who contributed to a magazine article called "Museums of the Future" in 1933. In his argument, Neurath uses an example of a whale display in a natural history museum to discuss what he saw as the current limits of such displays. I appreciated this article because Henning captures Neurath's desire to "make visible a 'network' of human and nonhuman relationships and dependencies, and to overcome the existing splitting of nature from society" (152). Her discussion is entirely relevant to museums today, which still struggle with this challenge.

The transition to reading Garry Marvin's discussion of the unique relationship he identifies between so-called "nature hunters" and the animals they have killed and mounted was a bit jarring after reading so many biographies of individual animals. The perspective of "nature hunters" that he presents is important and valuable in itself. However, I find it problematic that Marvin does not fundamentally question this category of hunter. The chapter's introduction also seems to reinforce the nature-culture dualism; in defining the "cultural lives" of animals as "lives lived in the presence of or with humans" (202), he ignores the cultures of other species and neglects the widespread impact of human culture on wildlife.

It was not until I reached Marvin's article and then the final chapter, when Swinney pushes the themes of the book a little bit further, that I realized that this book is

essentially entirely focused on the immortalization of wild nature. Domesticated animals, specifically farm animals, are entirely excluded from a group of narratives that are apparently worthy of remembrance, and I find that troubling. Ecofeminists have long criticized the masculinity of popular environmental narratives that neglect domesticated animals, who are perceived to "mundane" and "created by man" (Davis, 1995: 193-194). It is true that museums have historically collected wildlife, and so examples of these specimens are far more prevalent. However, domesticated animals do exist in museums. The first cloned sheep, Dolly, is now on display in Edinburgh. I have also seen smaller community museums in England that have preserved prize-winning cock-fighting roosters in their collections, and remarkable horses have often been put on display as well. And, of course, there are the random cats who were likely euthanized as strays and whose bodies then found their way into a museum diorama (complete with taxidermied mice), documenting their place in everyday human life. Anatomical collections like the Hunterian Museum are also full of bits and pieces of sheep, chickens, and other animals who were easy targets for experimentation about basic physiology. Surely, their stories deserve to be told as well.

Overall, I was impressed by the caliber of scholarship in this book and some of the individual articles would make good case studies for discussion in university courses. For instance, I assigned Alberti's article on Maharajah in an upper-division undergraduate seminar, and students greatly enjoyed its vivid detailing of the elephant's journey through life and death, and that he situated these remains within the current context of the Manchester Museum (the class discussion was paired with the short YouTube video mentioned in the chapter, made by the Museum, about Maharajah's story). This book would also appeal to people who are simply curious about the origins of museum collections and the specimens they have within, although not all of the articles are written to be accessible to non-academics.

Other academic volumes about the meanings of preserved animals have recently been published, particularly those in the Animalibus series (including Poliquin's *The Breathless Zoo* and Landes, Lee, and Youngquist's *Gorgeous Beasts*). Yet, Alberti's edited volume is unique in that it is simply what it claims to be: a collection of animal biographies. It is this simplicity that draws readers into the story of each animal, and which will compel them to contemplate more deeply the lives and afterlives of other animals on display the next time they visit a museum or zoo.

Works Cited

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Davis, Karen. "Thinking Like a Chicken: Farm Animals and the Feminine Connection," *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations*. Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan, eds. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. 192-212.