Philip Armstrong

Beyond the Great Rupture

Arthur MacGregor, *Animal Encounters. Human and Animal Interaction in Britain from the Norman Conquest to World War One*. London: Reaktion Books, 2012. 552 pp. $ 60.00 hc.

Arthur MacGregor's *Animal Encounters* is a substantial book, in more than one sense. Physically speaking it's a formidable volume: a hardback of 552 pages, quarto sized, with 66 color and 95 black and white illustrations. Even more impressive, though, is the weight, depth, and breadth of MacGregor's scholarship. *Animal Encounters* covers an entire millennium, yet manages to bring exceptional detail to a great diversity of topics within the chosen geo-cultural parameters.

Having declared my overall admiration, I want to state an initial criticism before discussing the volume in depth: the title is misleading. The phrase "animal encounter" suggests (to me) a kind of engagement that is spontaneous, potentially surprising, open-ended and multi-directional — as does, to some extent, the word "interaction" (which appears in the subtitle). Yet those categories of encounter most likely to produce mutuality, wonder, or unpredictability — the kinds of interaction most capable of destabilizing relations of domination between humans and other animals — are explicitly excluded from this study: interspecies companionship, non-predatory engagement with wild nature, experiences with exotic animals, imaginative representations of human-animal relations. Eschewing these topics, MacGregor's book concentrates instead on the various traditions, practices and systems by which the British population has made use of nonhuman animals over a thousand years. Indeed, the author declares at the outset that his focus is upon "the material culture of animal exploitation" (7). Of course any work of scholarship operates within certain parameters and makes certain exclusions, so I should reiterate that my criticism here is aimed at the inaccuracy of the book's title, not the scope of its content. (Having said that, I believe there's one especially unfortunate exclusion in the above list, to which I'll return in due course.)

Those domains of human-animal relation on which this book does concentrate are vast in scope and massively significant. Yet MacGregor marshals his material with virtuoso clarity. The structure that organizes the book as a whole is repeated within each chapter: a general overview followed by sections devoted to particular practices or

species, each of which traces developments over the course of the millennium. Readers seeking a reference work to delve into for information on particular topics will discover an abundance of quite self-contained historical essays, while those who follow the discussion from start to finish will be rewarded with a comprehensive and colorful general history woven from a great many interconnecting strands of detail. Such is the diversity of material that even a reader familiar with some aspects of this history is bound to encounter new things. Among the surprises that awaited me, for example, were the British beaver, the tradition of fishing with cormorants, the wild white cattle of Chillingham Park, and the cultural complexities of swan-keeping.

Each chapter deals with one of the main categories of human exploitation of animals (with the significant but understandable exception of marine animals). Chapter One covers use of "The Ubiquitous Horse" for transport, communications, warfare, sport and leisure; Chapter Two hunting and falconry; Chapter Three other kinds of animal-focused "sport" including pigeon-racing, wildfowling, fishing, and the baiting of bulls, bears, badgers, and other species. Chapter Four, "The Living Larder," deals with the provision of foodstuffs via the keeping of poultry, pigeons, swans, pond-fish, rabbits, and bees. And Chapter Five, "Animals on the Farm," first outlines historical patterns occurring across the agricultural sector — changes in composition of livestock populations, developments in ploughing and transport, the emergence of selective breeding or "improvement" — and then provides species-specific accounts of cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, horses, donkeys, and mules.

MacGregor's introduction straightforwardly declares his historiographical approach. "Others have delved in greater depth into the moral and philosophical dimensions of human involvement with the animal world: from this point it will be rather the physical dimensions — the material culture — of these relationships that occupy us and which form the primary concern of this study" (19). Elsewhere a statement like this might seem like an alibi for a failure in self-reflexivity, or a willed blindness to the ideological or epistemological assumptions and shortcomings of one's scholarly approach, but not here. Throughout the book, without recourse to theoretical jargon, MacGregor remains sensitive to the continuities and differences between the past and the present, as well as to the continuities and differences amongst and between humans and other animals. The appeal of his approach resides largely in a kind of humility in the face of the material: rather than processing his sources through a heavy theoretical machine, MacGregor allows them to speak for themselves as much as possible. He quotes at length, choosing colorful and apposite extracts that evoke historical realities with a

vividness that no summary narrative or interpretive discourse could achieve. A similar function is performed by the sumptuous images. There are quite a number of these but the text is not over-burdened with them. This is not a pictorial history, and the writing indisputably — and deservedly — occupies the foreground.

Of course, from a human-animal studies perspective, the critical question is whether or not a work attends to the interests of nonhuman animals themselves, rather than simply using them as data for the anthropo-solipsistic reinscription of human concerns. MacGregor confronts this issue in his preface: "Many of the encounters described below were bloody and their end predictably violent. No moral standpoint is taken here — not out of lack of conviction because it would be inappropriate and counter-productive in such an investigation" (8). While in a way this is reasonable and accurate — the book is not a work of advocacy — MacGregor does actually take a certain kind of ethical approach. His discussion insistently registers, with understated but cumulative force, the gaps and silences in the record that mark the ways in which animals bore the cost, most often with great suffering and in huge numbers, of the human practices described.

In dealing with traditions that were designedly cruel, such as bear-baiting, MacGregor doesn't need to add anything: he lets the practitioners speak for themselves, as in Robert Laneham's sadistic account of a bear-baiting arranged for Queen Elizabeth in 1575 (208). Such quotations allow the reader to confront not only the extreme suffering involved, but also the radical historical disjunction in attitudes whereby the early modern viewer's pleasure in the spectacle was proportionate to the intensity of the animal's mutilation and distress.

Mostly, though MacGregor is dealing with situations in which the suffering or death of animals is considered simply irrelevant to the interests of the humans making use of them: as a result no contemporary record of the animals' experience exists. Yet in these cases, too, MacGregor recognizes the interests of the animals and the price they pay for human benefit. For example, on the arrival of stock animals from the countryside into the towns, he writes: "Whatever their destiny, few animals entering the towns profited from the experience. Cattle and sheep met their end in the shambles and slaughterhouses whose reputation for squalor and inhumanity was legendary" (17). On the endless and varied labors of horses throughout the period under discussion: "Retirement was indeed a concept unfamiliar in the horse world, most working animals being driven until they dropped and buried where they died, generally after being relieved of their hide for use in covering carriages, weaving into traces or plaiting into whiplashes for chastising the next generation of drudges" (23). On the high rate of

human injury and death in medieval tourneys, jousts and tournaments: "No one bothered to comment on what happened to the horses, but casualties must certainly have been common and severe" (75). On the widespread practice of gelding lambs by hand: "Leonard Mascall's [1620] observation that 'by cutting and gelding of them by unskilfull persons, many doe perish and die thereon' must cloak a legion of painful deaths over the centuries" (457). And one last example: discussing the nineteenth-century tradition of livestock painting, MacGregor notes that painter James Ward frequently "found his subjects (having already reached the peak of their condition) were destined for imminent slaughter, requiring him to work all night by candlelight before they were dispatched the following morning" (433). *Animal Encounters*, then, works hard to make its history of human-animal relations as three-dimensional as possible, by determinedly acknowledging that this history didn't just happen to its human participants.

Another way in which scholars can recognize the lives and deaths of actual animals is by examining the roles played by nonhuman species in the shaping of so-called human history. Thus MacGregor discusses the use of horses in warfare throughout the period under discussion, and gives a fascinating account of the role of the pigeon post in World War One. Sometimes he inserts human-animal relations unexpectedly into great historical turning-points, as when he remarks that one of the aims of the Magna Carta was "to redress in favour of the barons the tendency of the monarchy to designate increasing tracts of *forestae regis*" (103) – that is, to wrest from the sovereign's control a greater proportion of the symbolically and materially rich forested hunting-grounds. In regard to the larger story of class hierarchy, that great theme of British history, MacGregor extensively documents the role of various modes of hunting and stock-keeping in the elaboration, display, control, and enforcement of social rank and privilege.

The various elements discussed above make *Animal Encounters* a highly satisfying and generous work of scholarship. But what about the book overall? At the more general level, what argument about human-animal relations does MacGregor provide?

If one were to emphasize the (very brief) framing comments (the first couple of pages of the introduction followed by the few pages of the epilogue), where MacGregor places his history of eleventh- to early twentieth-century Britain in the context of contemporary life, one could gain the impression this volume confirms John Berger's famous and influential argument about human-animal relations under modernity:

namely, that today's post-industrial and urban-centred societies are pathologically isolated from "the animal world" (and from 'nature' generally), in sharp contrast to the lives of "our" ancestors (that is, the ancestors of people of European descent) (Berger 1-2). "Until the very threshold of our own era," writes MacGregor in this mode, "which for present purposes is taken to date from the increasingly mechanized carnage of World War One, the lives of the human and animal populations in Britain as elsewhere were interlinked to an extent that today seems scarcely imaginable." Today, by contrast, "[o]ur largely urbanized society … may form a media-inspired and highly impressionistic view of the animal world, but for the majority it is a world now remote and disconnected from daily life" (11). This grand historical narrative — I will call it the "Great Rupture" theory of human-animal relations — undoubtedly contains important elements of truth, but it also cries out for qualification, and in some ways for contradiction. For example, human-animal studies must take seriously the power and variety of relationships between urbanized, modern, post-industrial humans and their animal companions. MacGregor, as I mentioned near the start of this review, rules out consideration of "domestic pets" (18-19). Unfortunately this exclusion provides unwarranted reinforcement of the Great Rupture theory. In Berger's version pets are the urban, consumerist substitute for authentic (that is, rural) quotidian human-animal interaction. My hunch is that, had MacGregor investigated the changing role of companionate relationships with animals across his chosen historical span, his findings would have significantly complicated this dichotomous paradigm. *Animal Encounters* offers only tantalizing hints of this possibility, for example by quoting, in regard to seventeenth-century hunting dogs, Gervase Markham's observation that the beagle "may be carried in a man's glove, and [is] bred in many countries for delight only" (118).

There are two other necessary qualifications to the Great Rupture theory, however, for which MacGregor's book — despite its apparent subscription to the theory in the preface and epilogue — provides abundant evidence. First, in Berger's overly cut-and-dried version, human-animal relations outside of modernity are implausibly utopian — as embodied by his approving comment that a peasant is both "fond of his pig and … glad to salt away its pork" (Berger 5). MacGregor offers a far more realistic and variegated view of non-modern human-animal relationships, including detailed accounts of precisely the kinds of venal, cruel, callous, instrumentalist, and objectifying attitudes that Berger tends to characterize as unique to modernity.

The second way MacGregor corrects the Great Rupture theory — and this constitutes, I think, his book's most important and persuasive general contribution — is by showing

that many aspects of animal exploitation we characterize as "industrial" were actually present far earlier than the Great Rupture narrative allows — that is, before the Industrial Revolution, and in some cases well before the seventeenth century. Thus, for example, MacGregor describes the transport — albeit on foot (or hoof) — of cattle, sheep, and poultry in their collective thousands from their pastures to very distant endpoints: "their progress to market involved epic journeys in herds of perhaps some hundreds along the green drove roads that formed an alternative communications network proliferating over hundreds of miles of countryside" (17). Meanwhile the carrier and pack-horse system "facilitated a remarkable degree of progress [in the nationwide expansion of industry and trade] even before the development of long-distance carrying by means of wheeled transport on the well-made turnpike roads that underpinned the industrial expansion of the eighteenth century" (52-3). Industrialized technology, then, in the forms of the railway and telegraph, may have intensified and expanded these human-animal networks of transport and communication, but it did not inaugurate them.

Similarly, many of the commercial roles we think of as peculiar to later capitalism — those of entrepreneurs, brokers and agents — were proliferating in British agriculture well before industrial capitalism. "From the early medieval period a whole raft of professional entrepreneurs emerged who took it upon themselves to source these supplies [of livestock] and to oversee their sale in the market place," writes MacGregor, adding that "[w]ool merchants … must be considered amongst the earliest commodity brokers" (17). Somewhat later, "the early 1500s" brought "the emergence of a new class of butcher-grazier" who deployed "extensive flocks undergoing fattening at the hands of increasingly prosperous yeoman farmers, before final delivery for slaughter" (415). In the century that followed, these wealthy graziers and members of the new yeoman class were able to take over the leases of pasturelands and stock seized as a result of enclosures and the dissolution of the monasteries (417).

MacGregor also shows that various other features of agricultural commerce we might consider peculiarly modern were already present in medieval agriculture. Selective breeding, for example of horses, took place from the twelfth century in the monastic estates, "the most progressive and orderly establishments of their day" (24). Regulation, control and transport of wild populations (usually deer) were undertaken as early as the thirteenth century, and on a large scale by the time of the Tudors (112). Transnational trade networks existed from the very beginning of MacGregor's period: "the monasteries — and especially the Cistercians, first established in England in 1128

— play[ed] a major role in promoting wool-growing and in forging links with Continental markets" (461). MacGregor even identifies the operation, again long before industrialization, of some strikingly "intensivist" modes of farming, such as the cramming of calves to produce white veal (454), or the recorded expectation that a medieval shepherd could geld 100 lambs in three hours and shear 90 sheep in a day (457-8).

In addition, when MacGregor's narrative does deal with the beginnings of industrialization proper, it demonstrates how pre-industrial practices interwove with, laid the groundwork for, or continued alongside the new mechanized technologies — thus, once again, providing a history more continuous and multifaceted than the "just-so story" of the Great Rupture. "The coming of the railways," MacGregor writes, "by no means rendered [horse-drawn] carts and wagons redundant on the roads but it changed immeasurably the way they operated…. [T]he numbers of horses employed by the railway companies to gather in freight to the terminuses and to distribute it at the other end of its journey greatly exceeded those rendered redundant by the steam engine" (61). Elsewhere he tells us that "the advent of developing mechanization" created "a whole new range of duties" for horses: "Many of the machines that ultimately would be powered by steam were originally driven by treadmills — the very word has come to signify unremitting toil — and the fact that horsepower is even today the unit by which mechanical output is measured tells us all we need to know about the former universality of the pony in powering virtually every device that could not be more efficiently driven by wind or water" (73).

In all these ways, then, MacGregor's account fragments the received narrative of a Great Rupture between modern humans and animals — a rupture that is industrial, capitalist, technological, and monolithic — into a whole series of developments, some occurring as far back as the medieval period, that made it increasingly easy, convenient and profitable for (European) human beings to separate themselves from animals and thereby exploit them as a resource and *en masse*. Anyone committed to understanding that complex history, and perhaps challenging its legacy, will find Animal Encounters a rich, accessible and authoritative book.

Work Cited

Berger, John. "Why Look at Animals?" *About Looking*. New York: Random House, 1980. 1-26.