



Martha Few, Zeb Tortorici, eds. *Centering Animals in Latin American History*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013. 408 pp. \$94.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-5383-6; \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-5397-3.

Reviewed by Emily Wakild (Boise State University)

Published on H-Environment (January, 2014)

Commissioned by Dolly Jørgensen

A Fresh Bestiary: Writing Animals into Latin American History

After his 1913 trip through the Brazilian Amazon, former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt lamented the lack of life histories of the animals he encountered. He found frustrating the dearth of reliable basic observations of the daily behaviors and habits of wild animals, from jaguars and pumas to ducks and caimans.[1] Roosevelt was concerned primarily with natural histories but a vast array of Latin American animals largely slipped by historians unacknowledged for the next one hundred years. Martha Few and Zeb Tortorici's new volume, *Centering Animals in Latin American History*, goes far in stretching our imaginations beyond description and opening avenues for new inquiry into how and where animals belong as central components of histories of human societies.

This thoughtful edited collection considers a menagerie of animals—dogs, cows, oxen, monkeys, fur seals, birds, locusts, pathogens—and collectively makes a case for the varied perspectives gained by “centering animals.” In the introduction, the editors begin with an inquisition case involving bestiality between a young man and a turkey. This opening immediately alerts the reader to the volume's fresh integration of gender and sexuality studies with approaches to historicizing (non-human) animals themselves.[2] Few and Tortorici then lay out a tension found in the volume between authors seeking to denaturalize the boundary between human and animal and those chronicling the exploitation or destruction of a particular animal group in space and time. Several additional themes shape the ten wide-ranging contributions, including attention to “debates over animal rights, changing moral attitudes toward human dominion over nature and the animal world, the relations of animality to humanity and divinity, and competing local ecological knowledge” (p. 5). The aim of the volume is not so much to consider the cultural representation of animals, or ideas of them, but to examine

their real and actual place in and among human communities, although clearly these intertwine. This often includes extending the consideration of animals toward their possible agency, a theme that recurs throughout the volume. The editors situate the volume within the interdisciplinary field of animal studies and within the fields of Latin American history and environmental history. Geographically, contributions reflect traditional historiographical concentrations in Latin American history as they are centered largely on New Spain or Mexico (three essays) with the Caribbean nicely represented (including essays on Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, and Cuba) as well as Peru, Brazil, Guatemala, and Chile.

The book is organized into three roughly equal, loosely thematic sections that progress chronologically. The first section, “Animals, Cultures, and Colonialism,” includes contributions that consider the symbolic and actual role of animals in key processes of colonization. León García Garagarza explores the implications of an accusation made in 1558 by a native religious leader that Spaniards were converting people into cattle, thus no one should eat the meat of the beasts. The author expands this accusation to examine a larger cosmivision that sought to explain the tremendous social and ecological transformations unfolding as European domesticated animals began to roam the land. The result is a nice discussion of a rapidly changing physical and cultural world in the Valley of Mexico. Few's contribution makes a compelling case for including insects in animal history. Colonial Guatemala faced “plagues” of locusts that devoured agricultural plantings and resulted in coordinated state-directed extermination campaigns. Few contextualizes these campaigns in terms of their significance for those who lived through the episodes, shifting values about agriculture and social order, and also the rise of a new kind of professional expertise and power. Locusts provide a vivid window into the complicated re-

making of relationships among social groups, productive lands, and other species. Tortorici's contribution returns to more familiar domesticated animals but in a fantastical way. Using an inquisition case, the author reconstructs a canine wedding ceremony, including a real priest who performed a ceremony between two costumed dogs. This case is situated within scattered reports of animal baptisms and weddings to bring "into focus a very thin but persistent parameter from which we can get a better sense of human-animal interactions" (p. 97). For anyone who has recently visited a modern pet store full of costumes and accoutrements, this essay magnifies such longstanding changes in human sensibilities toward domestic animals.

The second section, "Animals and Medicine, Science and Public Health," groups three essays that address the slippery boundaries between humans, animals, and microbes over the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Here animals have been both objects of extermination and tools toward discovery in various contexts. Adam Warren points out the wealth of attention indigenous and colonial botany has received from historians of science but the dearth of attention to zoology. He then considers the work of surgeon and medical guide author, Martín Delgar, as a means of cataloguing Andean indigenous healing treatments that used animals. Warren juxtaposes this with modern Kallaway practices to understand the varied influences on the Spanish author. Heather McCrea fruitfully explores how the construction of Mexico's Yucatán peninsula as a particularly wild and dangerous landscape infested with pests gave way to a site of public health prevention discourse. In the political context of the Caste War and then revolutionary state government, warfare and epidemic illness "are conceptualized as part of a dynamic and constantly evolving landscape, a terrain where animals, insects, and humans consistently interfere with, irritate and at times challenge state authority" (p. 151). Neel Ahuja takes us to the topic of imported rhesus macaque monkeys in neocolonial Puerto Rico in the twentieth century, which were imported to the island to breed bodies for pharmaceutical engineering. Ahuja considers the monkeys' contradictory status as aligned with modern technology but also their behavior as invasive and wild. He suggests a wide array of issues this raises, including the challenges of biomedical research and security to the moral issues of turning monkeys into scientific commodities.

The contributions in part 3, "The Meanings and Politics of Postcolonial Animals," delve carefully into the complex political and economic meanings of animals, including hunting, commodification, protection, and sym-

bolism. Reinaldo Funes Monzote considers the changing use of oxen on sugar plantations in Cuba, which led to the development of a protection society for animals. Animals here are intertwined with the history of famous plants—sugarcane but also tobacco and coffee—but the development of a protection society occurred comparatively quite early. John Soluri considers fur seals on the Patagonian littoral as a new space for animal history (marine and terrestrial) that challenged human hunters over time. The commodification of the seals was shaped by shifting relations in the global economy, and the essay raises both methodological and specific questions about fitting this liminal animal into mental frameworks that will elucidate its history. Regina Duarte examines the rise of scientific nationalism in Brazil in contrast to similar trends in the United States and Europe through the exploitation and then expanding protection for birds facing staggering rates of annihilation. Duarte's examination of changing liberal morality to incorporate cruelty to birds and the fascinating roles played by immigrant scientists illuminates an interesting transnational story. Lauren Derby's contribution rounds out the volume with a stimulating discussion of goat celebrations as an allegory related to the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo (1930-61). She asks why the goat became the symbol for the dictator by those who despised him, and her expansive and compelling answers involve explorations of such countryside animals as creole pigs and patio goats, sexual metaphors, gossip, and class inversion. Deciphering the encrypted but prevalent metaphors suggests the many uses of animal satire as political protest. The late eminent anthropologist Neil Whitehead closes the volume with a brief epilogue that reminds us of the challenges of breaching the ecological human-animal divide. He situates the volume within several additional strands of thought, including animal rights, calls for protection and conservation, biointegrity and political freedoms, ethnographic "multinaturalism," and other provocative suggestions.

As a whole, this volume serves as a bridge across several growing fields of inquiry. It is accessible but still sophisticated and intriguing for scholars of modern and colonial Latin America, historians of science and of medicine, environmental historians, and scholars in the growing multidisciplinary field of animal studies. Latin Americanists will be interested in new avenues of not just animal history but also provocative ideas about sexuality, spirituality, and commodification. There is perhaps less here for traditional environmental historians of other regions, although the standout translations of Duarte and Funes Monzote make available in English a representative sample from these two exceptional and prolific envi-

ronmental historians who are well regarded within Latin America. This alone is worth reading the book. Essays by several of the authors (Few, Soluri, and Derby) are small samples of much larger and eagerly anticipated works in progress centered on animals.

There were a few choices in the volume that struck me as surprising historiographically. I wondered why the volume centered its theoretical focus on Erika Fudge, a literary specialist of early modern English animals. Fudge wrote a brief preface to the volume and nearly all the contributions reference her essay, "A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals."^[3] This continuity is admirable and likely due to strong guidance by the editors, but it also seems a little off the general thrust of the contributions. Fudge appeared a curious choice for a volume on Latin America. If an Anglophone connection was desirable, I wondered why not Harriet Ritvo, an environmental historian? Or why not be completely radical and interdisciplinary and try the philosopher Peter Singer or Temple Grandin, the animal science professor? I appreciated the bridge to current animal studies but given nearly half the contributions were in the colonial era, I fully expected more sustained engagement with classic works that addressed animals and disease, including Alfred Crosby's *The Columbian Exchange* (1972); Elinor Melville's *A Plague of Sheep* (1994); and perhaps even some of the earliest works of environmental history to consider animals at all, Enrique Florescano's *Ensayos sobre la historia de las epidemias en México* (1980) and Carl Sauer's *The Early Spanish Main* (1966). These classics are not fully neglected but there is little explanation given to why animals have been latent entering aca-

dem scholarship especially of the modern era or how the contours of absence differ from other regions of the world. These might be more typical environmental history routes and perhaps it is a testament to creativity and expansiveness of the editors to instead pursue alternative and interdisciplinary connections. As a result, readers will ably make these associations using their own expertise. In sum, this is a notable volume for how it bridges colonial and postcolonial histories, expansively defines animal history, and packs in so much variety into so brief of a text. This will be most useful in graduate seminars and some ambitious and narrow undergraduate courses.

If he came back from the grave, Roosevelt himself might be intrigued to see that we now know much about canine weddings, animal-based medicines, and goat politics, but we still lack basic natural histories of charismatic wild animals and their behavior. Let us hope this volume spurs more research into all of the above.

Notes

[1]. Theodore Roosevelt, *Through the Brazilian Wilderness* (1914, repr.; Radford: Wilder Publications 2008), 47.

[2]. For clarity and readability, the term "animal" in the remainder of the review will be utilized to refer only to nonhuman animals.

[3]. Erica Fudge, "A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals," in *Representing Animals*, ed. Nigel Rothfels (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2002), 3-18.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Emily Wakild. Review of Few, Martha; Tortorici, Zeb, eds., *Centering Animals in Latin American History*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. January, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39949>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.