

REVIEW ARTICLES

MAN, ANIMALS AND NATURE

Man and the natural world. Changing attitudes in England, 1500–1800. By Keith Thomas. London: Allen Lane, 1983. Pp. 426. £14.95. ISBN 0 7139 1227 8.

Reckoning with the best. Animals, pain and humanity in the Victorian mind. By James Turner. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 1981. Pp. xii + 190. £7.50. ISBN 0 8018 2399 4.

Perhaps our earliest true insight into the human mind lies in the Lascaux cave paintings, paintings of animals. Yet the key importance of creatures in man's life, and of man's changing relations with the natural world, has been oddly neglected by historians. Even some of the more visible, mainstream economic aspects (e.g. the value of the horse to pre-mechanized economies) await modern research; while such studies as have appeared remain little read. It is odd how little use historians have made of Clarence Glacken's monumental *Traces on the Rhodian shore* (Berkeley, 1967), which surveys, with massive erudition, changing interpretations of the environment, both physical and animate, from Greek times down to the end of the eighteenth century; and many have perhaps been mistakenly put off by the title of Dix Harwood's unduly neglected *The love of animals and how it developed in England* (New York, 1928), and thus have missed a valuable pioneering study.

It is therefore doubly gratifying that two major studies in this area have recently appeared, which fortuitously complement each other almost perfectly. Keith Thomas's *Man and the natural world* is the grander undertaking, a masterly synthesis integrating the staggering range of reference to primary materials which we have come to expect from the author, surveying what the English thought about plants, animals and landscape from the end of the middle ages up to the dawn of the nineteenth century. James Turner then takes up the story more or less where Thomas left off, focusing down more narrowly, yet with impressive penetration and panache, on the chequered fortunes of animal protection movements in Victorian Britain and America. Both authors have been thinking along similar lines (the embryo of Turner's book lies in the concluding remarks of Thomas's, while Turner's opening chapter reads like a brilliant blurb for Thomas's book); yet there are enough differences in scholarly techniques and assumptions for some contrasts to be instructive.

The capital strength of Thomas's approach is that he never loses sight of the plurality of responses to nature in that world we have lost where man was intimately and constantly involved with livestock and the land (every household an ark), both as immediate environment and as sources of livelihood. Creatures were crucial to man not just for labour-power, food, pleasure and comfort, but also for the more

general business of self-definition and understanding, seeing his *own* place in the scheme of things by recognizing the ways he was like and unlike the brutes ('the paragon of animals'...). With relations so intimate, it is not surprising that the traditional mind needed to stress the *boundaries* between man and animals (Thomas might indeed have dwelt longer on the ways in which folk beliefs are haunted by the dissolution and transgression of those boundaries (Bottom turned ass), by the power of the beasts, and by man's need to propitiate them). But within that framework, Thomas recognizes just what a diversity of attitudes flourished, ones often seemingly paradoxical or contradictory of each other. At all times, plenty of voices can be found, finding nature-in-the-raw horrid, and preferring culture to nature, fielden to forest; yet there is always a counter-voice loving the grandeur of nature untamed, and praise for the monks of old for planting rather than felling trees. Similarly, Thomas shows how across the centuries man expressed in word and action his superiority to the beasts. England was traditionally 'hell for horses' ('leading a dog's life' is a revealing metaphor). Schoolboy cruelty to cats and toads went unrebuked by fathers who loved their bloodsports. Snakes, insects and vermin were there to be abominated, and roast beef to be devoured. Yet all this can be matched by dogged affection for creatures. Countryfolk time out of mind called their cattle 'Button' and 'Lovely', and decked their oxen with nosegays. Women had always nicknamed God's creatures, and gentlemen doted on hounds and horses. Love of animals is not just a triumph of the march of civilization, and the highly pet-conscious Georgians were not the first who felt close to creatures, even if we particularly call to mind Hogarth's pug, William Blake's 'Fly', Gilbert White's tortoise Timothy, Jeremy Bentham's 'beautiful pig', or even the two pet leeches kept by Thomas Erskine. After all, throughout the middle ages saints were famed for befriending dumb animals, and crude assumptions about the evolution of humanitarian attitudes towards animals dissolve, insists Thomas, in the face of statements such as: 'men should have ruth of beasts and birds and not harm them without cause... and therefore they that for cruelty and vanity... torment birds or fowl more than is speedful to man's living, they sin full grievously'. This remark – so 'modern' – dates from around 1410; and we must remember of course that we moderns still permit bloodsports, and few feel qualms about what Byron dubbed the 'solitary vice', angling.

Yet the thrust of Thomas's work lies in laying bare certain secular shifts in attitudes. In Shakespeare's day, educated opinion, drawing on the authority of classical philosophy, the Bible, and Christian theology, saw man as unique, the strutting epitome of the Tudor world-picture. Homo sapiens was justly lord of creation, for he alone possessed reason, speech and, above all, a soul. The beasts of the field were there for him to use, eat and enjoy. Moreover, man had been specifically licensed and commanded by Scripture to subdue the physical environment, to cultivate the wilderness and turn it into that smiling tillage which renaissance aesthetics found so pleasing. This 'breathtaking anthropocentrism' took a multitude of forms (for instance, fables, like Aesop's, saw animals as little people, walking moral tales for human edification). But Thomas's point is that in Tudor times anthropocentrism was hardly questioned, less still challenged either by the common man or by intellectuals.

But that is precisely what did happen from the mid-seventeenth century onwards. It ceased to be self-evidently true to educated opinion, peering through microscopes or telescopes, that all nature was there for human use. It ceased to be self-evident

that man was different in kind from and superior to the beasts. Quite the reverse. For man's right to lordship came to be questioned by a trickle of humanitarianism, which became a flood in the Enlightenment, deploring man's ferocious treatment of God's creatures, and urging kindness instead. Empathy towards animals grew and agitation to protect creatures gathered pace, expressed for example in Hogarth's print sequence, *The four stages of cruelty*. Similarly, it ceased to be obvious that nature cultivated was preferable to nature wild. 'The wildness pleases', judged the third earl of Shaftesbury. 'Natural' landscape gardening, creating man-made wildernesses, pioneered by 'Capability' Brown, itself gave way to delight in nature *tout nu*, untouched by human hand, leading on to 'back-to-nature' Romanticism proper and, adds Thomas, if one were writing whig history, to 'conservationism', the National Trust and animal liberation. Once to be feared, mastered and used, nature had come to be worshipped.

One of the great delights of Thomas's beavering scholarship lies in his attention to the minutiae of developments, the fine-textured manifestations and modulations of these general drifts. One such thread for example appears in his account of changing dietary preferences. As love of nature grew, so eating certain creatures ceased to be acceptable. Elizabethan cuisine had found singing birds baked in a pie a delicacy. But when in the nineteenth century Mountstuart Elphinstone saw Italians tucking into platefuls of robins, he was revolted ('What! Robins! I could as soon eat a child', he exclaimed, unconsciously echoing Swift's modest proposal). Indeed even vegetarianism emerged on the radical fringes. In the seventeenth century the Behemist (and proto-feminist) Thomas Tryon led the field. A vegetable diet was then championed on medical grounds in the early Georgian period by Dr George Cheyne (like Tryon, Thomas might have noted, a religious enthusiast); and by the turn of the nineteenth century it had become associated with atheism or pantheism as advocated by Joseph Ritson and, of course, Shelley.

Why did such broad shifts occur? As Thomas recognizes, material change was important. As urbanization and industrialization progressed, being hard-bitten about animals ceased – for some – to be essential. Urban intellectuals and the genteel, personally uninvolved with animals for their livelihood and shielded from the realities of what was from James Watt's day known as 'horsepower', could afford the luxury of fulminating against the cruel sports of both aristocrats and vulgar, and waxed nostalgic about the countryside which they did not inhabit. Radical thought patterns played a big part too. Heterodox Christians were to the fore in challenging anthropocentricity and dethroning man. The Calvinist Augustus Toplady was sure, and John Wesley thought it probable, that animals had souls just like humans. The Enlightenment valued sympathy, spreading a generalized humanitarianism towards a whole gallery of underdogs and victims, as Turner stresses, animals taking their place alongside slaves, orphans, women and other unfortunates. Moreover, Enlightenment philosophy queried the uniqueness of human reason, and stimulated the biological evolutionism of Erasmus Darwin, who – to use Charles Lyell's phrase – 'went the whole orang', accepted man's genetic ancestry amongst the animals, and also depicted the 'loves of the plants'. Thomas indeed suggests that science played a key role in undermining anthropocentrism. After Linnaeus, animals and plants were no longer classified by their human uses and associations, but according to independent taxonomies. By dispelling vulgar errors, science put man's place in nature on a more objective footing.

It is here, in Thomas's explanations of change, that one's doubts appear. Thomas's

technique is to plot change through the device of building up series of mosaics, made up of thousands of snippets of evidence drawn largely from society's opinion-makers. The evidence is abundant. But he rarely scrutinizes the credentials of his opinion-makers, rarely asks how far they represent common views or essentially speak for themselves. And he rarely cross-questions any piece of evidence at length, reading between the lines, or investigates the entire outlook of an individual, or surveys an event or a controversy (e.g. poaching) from all sides. Nor does he, in the body of the text, evaluate the interpretations of other scholars. The result is that many critical issues could have done with further chewing over. How widespread were shifts in attitudes to animals by 1800? Was it just amongst a fringe or the elite? What was the significance of these changes? Did shifts in feelings result in shifts in action? Did more than a handful give up meat, or abandon hunting? And if *attitudes* changed extensively, but actions did not, what does this say about rhetoric and ideology? Thomas finds the concept of ideology glib and lacking in explanatory power. The shifts in attitudes, he argues, could not have been ideological rationalizations, for they did not actually endorse 'the direction in which English society was moving'. Yet it would curiously underestimate the powers of ideology to expect that it should always crudely mirror material interests. Rather than mirroring, ideology often masks; ideologies remain in business precisely because of their ability to mystify, or to provide compensations – having your cake and eating it or rather, here, loving Daisy yet carving your roast beef. Surely the growth of sentiment paralleled and masked increasingly intense real exploitation of animals in the years of early industrialization. And in any case surely the shift from commanding creatures to petting them was not the end of exploitation but merely a new mode of manipulation (rather as the contemporary move from chaining and beating the mad to giving them 'psychiatric care' was arguably only a different turn of the screw). As that great Victorian nature lover Henry Salt put it, 'there is no more miserable being than a lap-dog, and the lap dog is the sign and symbol of that spurious humanity which is the final outcome of petting'. Our admiration for the plenitude of Thomas's panorama is thus mingled with a certain disappointment that the bumper crop of material has not been flailed rather more.

The role Thomas allots to science is one such instance of taking things too much at face value. Thomas suggests that science was an important agent of de-anthropomorphization in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, producing a 'more detached, more objective' view of man and nature. Perhaps; yet it is a very moot point whether science really was an independent variable, or indeed 'detached'. Many historians of science would nowadays argue that the Baconian attitudes towards nature endorsed by the Royal Society formed a sophisticated ideology explicitly and implicitly aimed at subordinating the animal kingdom and the elements more completely to the fulfilment of human (i.e. Western male capitalist) interests than ever before, creating a more subtle, yet more potent mode of anthropocentrism. These arguments – advanced for instance by Caroline Merchant's *The death of nature* (Berkeley, 1979) and Brian Easlea's *Science and sexual oppression* (London, 1981) – are not decisive, yet they at least deserve consideration.

One of the great virtues of James Turner's continuation of Thomas's story is that he is highly alert to the ways attitudes articulate the interests and aspirations of social groupings. The views he scrutinizes are those of Victorian campaigners against cruelty to animals, in particular early opposition to bloodsports and then the anti-vivisection movement. As Turner notes, these outlooks never automatically

commanded the silent majority. They were initially the views of zealots, such as the Jewish, vegetarian, eccentric inventor, Lewis Gompertz, leading spirit behind the early Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (founded 1824); Anna Kingsford (who boasted 'I do not love men and women'); the feminist Frances Power Cobbe; or George Angell in America. The task of these lobbies was one of persuasion.

Turner poses the crucial question: why was it, if (as he and Thomas accept) best opinion was now coming round to the side of the animals, that bloodsports were not in the event made criminal and vivisection not banned? His microstudy of ginger group politics gives very plausible answers. On the one hand, the SPCA settled down to becoming royal and respectable. Radicals like Gompertz were swept off the stage, and the Society came to represent safe establishmentarian philanthropy, the lower animals deserving attention rather like the lower orders. Not surprisingly then the RSPCA campaigned against cruel hackney-cab drivers, but (just like the Society for the Suppression of Vice) had no intention of suppressing the sports of the propertied and polite.

Anti-vivisectionism went the other way. It was captured by rabid doctrinaires who committed the movement not just to the assault upon animal experimentation but to damning the whole thrust of scientific medicine ('arrogant, secretive, merciless'). Modern medicine, they argued, could not work. Pasteur and his followers were barking up the wrong tree with the germ theory of disease (moral and physical cleanliness was the road to health). But then out of vivisection and the germ theory came the triumph of Pasteur's rabies vaccine and, most convincingly, diphtheria antitoxin, speedily saving tens of thousands of infant lives. The anti-vivisectionists denounced them as frauds, but society drew its own conclusions, and anti-vivisection was exploded as crankiness.

Between them Thomas and Turner offer an invaluable survey of changing attitudes towards nature. Thomas uses the anatomical approach, presenting a wonderfully meticulous atlas of the skeleton and tissues. Turner probes like the physiologist (one almost says, a vivisector), offering a vision of ideas and ideologies in action, functioning normally and pathologically in the social metabolism. Together they offer a fascinating insight into one of the great conundrums of the modern world: the irresistibly rising tide of liberal and radical thought, yet its simultaneous ineffectiveness.

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