

HARRIET RITVO

*THE PLATYPUS
AND THE
MERMAID
and Other Figments
of the
Classifying Imagination*



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OF THE
CLASSIFYING
IMAGINATION

Harriet Ritvo

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*The Platypus
and the
Mermaid*

*For Fran and in memory of
Arthur, Nana, and Herb*

Considered as an Author, Herr Teufelsdröckh has one
scarcely pardonable fault, doubtless his worst:
an almost total want of arrangement.

THOMAS CARLYLE, *Sartor Resartus*



Original caption:

ZOOLOGY.

Railway Porter (to Old Lady travelling with a Menagerie of Pets).

“STATION MASTER SAY, MUM, AS CATS IS ‘DOGS,’ AND RABBITS IS ‘DOGS,’
AND SO’S PARROTS; BUT THIS ERE ‘TORTIS’ IS A INSECT, SO THERE AIN’T
NO CHARGE FOR IT!”

Introduction



A *Punch* cartoon of 1869 featured a railway porter astonishing a prospective traveler with the news that “cats is ‘dogs,’ and rabbits is ‘dogs,’ and so’s parrots; but this ere ‘tortis’ is a insect.” For Victorian readers, as for their successors, the joke depended on identification with the hapless recipient of this disinformation, with whom they shared the smug certainty that parrots were not, in fact, dogs, nor turtles insects. Their confidence rested, ultimately, on the assertions of a group of experts who claimed the natural world as their intellectual province. But if zoological analysis incontrovertibly demonstrated that turtles and insects belonged in different categories—that the skeletons and circulatory systems of the Testudinae firmly allied them with other Reptilia, such as snakes and lizards, rather than with Insecta, such as wasps and roaches, which were not even vertebrates—the story did not end there. Possibly the railway regulations recalled the earlier vernacular sense of *reptile*, which, more directly reflecting its Latin parent, referred generally to creeping or crawling animals. And the quotation marks that surrounded several of the important categorical terms in the caption suggested that the speaker was aware of the theoretical weakness of his position, as well as its practical invulnerability. But whatever its antecedents and its ironies, this alternative classification did not depend on any of them for its persuasiveness. After all, even the most self-consciously enlightened rail customers—the experts themselves—had to adopt, at least temporarily, the taxonomic perspective embedded in the schedule of rail freight charges, if they wished to transport their subjects and specimens.

The dichotomy on which this cartoon depended was just the tip of the iceberg. Railway bureaucracies were not the only British interest groups to

develop systems of classification that reflected their particular needs and experience. Among many others, butchers and artists, farmers and showmen all deployed distinctive taxonomies in their work, although they seldom bothered to articulate them theoretically. Scientific systematizing was similarly polymorphic. By the mid-Victorian period, zoological and botanical classification had relinquished the cutting-edge status that they had held through much of the eighteenth century, but they continued to provoke controversy. Although specialists agreed among themselves that, in general, their classification was superior to any alternatives, there was much on which they differed, ranging from large theoretical issues to the proper location and naming of individual species.

Indeed, the claims of experts—whether they called themselves naturalists, comparative anatomists, or zoologists—that systematic classification represented their appropriation and mastery of the animal kingdom were thus liable to be contradicted from without as well as undermined from within. But if the experts resisted granting recognition to competing claimants of the zoological territory they had staked out, they tacitly acknowledged the objections of various laymen in many ways. They even quietly incorporated vernacular categories into their classificatory schemes, especially with regard to mammals, the creatures most important to people and most like them. This consistently inconsistent practice illuminates both the nature of scientific enterprise during the period and the relation of science to the larger culture. In particular, the determination to ignore or deny genuine sources of influence may have further implications, for this struthious habit has continued to characterize both the scientific community and what is now referred to as the educated general public, with consequences for the design of curricula and the funding of research, among other things.

As anthropologists have repeatedly pointed out, the classification of animals, like that of any group of significant objects, is apt to tell as much about the classifiers as about the classified. In a large and complex society, such as that of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, animals performed many different functions and stood (or flew or swam) in relation to many different groups of people. Each of the ways that people imagined, discussed, and treated animals inevitably implied some taxonomic structure.* And the categorization of animals reflected the rankings of people both figuratively and literally, as analogy and as continuation. That is,

*I assume that people are animals too, but I will nevertheless use the conventional “humans and animals” formula, since it more closely reflects the views of my subjects.

depending on the circumstances, people represented themselves as being like animals, or as actually being animals. For example, worries about the concupiscence of human females structured the theory and practice of animal breeding, and the emergence of racially based nationalism conditioned discussions of species, variety, and breed in animals. More generally, the drawing of boundaries that lay at the heart of any taxonomy resonated strongly with widespread concerns about the stability of established social categories in the face of constant pressure at home and abroad. The relationships between alternative systems were similarly various: sometimes they seemed completely independent of each other, even within the mind or practice of a single person; sometimes assumptions or preoccupations overlapped; sometimes open disagreement or hostility emerged, reflecting fissures in the social fabric or contested cultural territory.

The organization of this book, like its title, attempts to represent the range of these taxonomic practices and also to situate the technical classification of animals in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain within a larger context. The structure is topical, rather than chronological. The chapters become, to put it one way, increasingly vernacular in their focus. The book begins with a consideration of explicitly zoological classification, then proceeds to the taxonomies expressed by its associated nomenclature, by ideas about hybridity and cross-breeding, by the display and interpretation of monstrosities and monsters, and finally by the hunting and eating of animals. Much of the exposition is based on reading widely varied sources as if they constituted a single many-stranded discourse—a Babel with no dominant voice, or a marketplace of ideas and information in which consumers exercised free and even willful choice. To an inevitably limited extent, I have tried to reconstruct the experience of those who were exposed to this voluminous stream of material at first hand, unprotected by either the clarifications or the distortions of hindsight.

As this method has offered fresh perspectives, it has also, as is always the case, required corresponding deemphases. For example, while it foregrounds historical actors and relationships that have often been neglected, it can also conflate groups of participants and blur the social location of individual contributors. Understanding British naturalists and their institutions as constituents of a distinctive national culture means neglecting their significant international dimension, as well as the extent to which parallel developments occurred in other metropolitan western cultures. And stressing the often unacknowledged persistence over time of many taxonomic notions has meant that some celebrated advances, particularly those relating

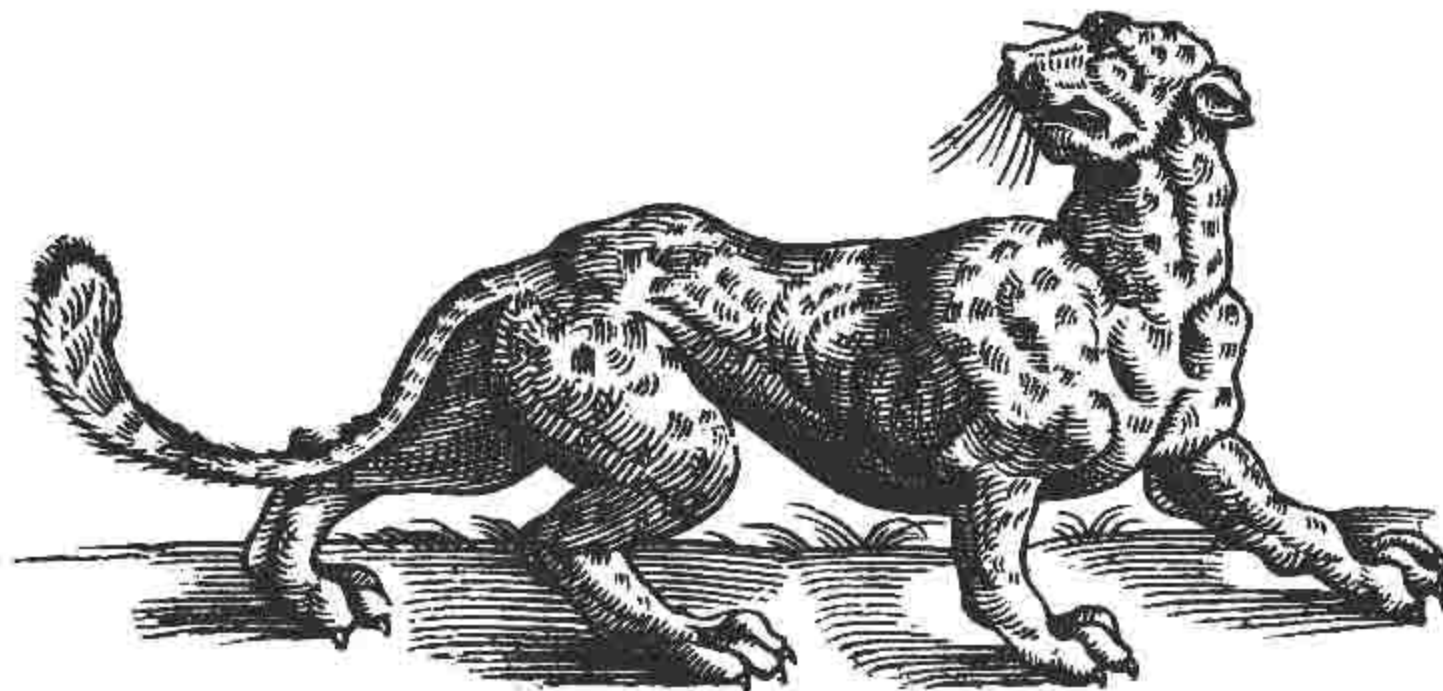
to evolutionary theory, have faded into the background. Fortunately, in recent years, all these areas have been the subjects of distinguished scholarly investigation, from which I have benefitted greatly in my complementary attempt to evoke the elaborate polyphony that formed their context.

Contents



Introduction	xi
1. The Point of Order	1
2. Flesh Made Word	51
3. Barring the Cross	85
4. Out of Bounds	131
5. Matters of Taste	188
Notes	215
Acknowledgments	273
Illustration Credits	275
Index	277

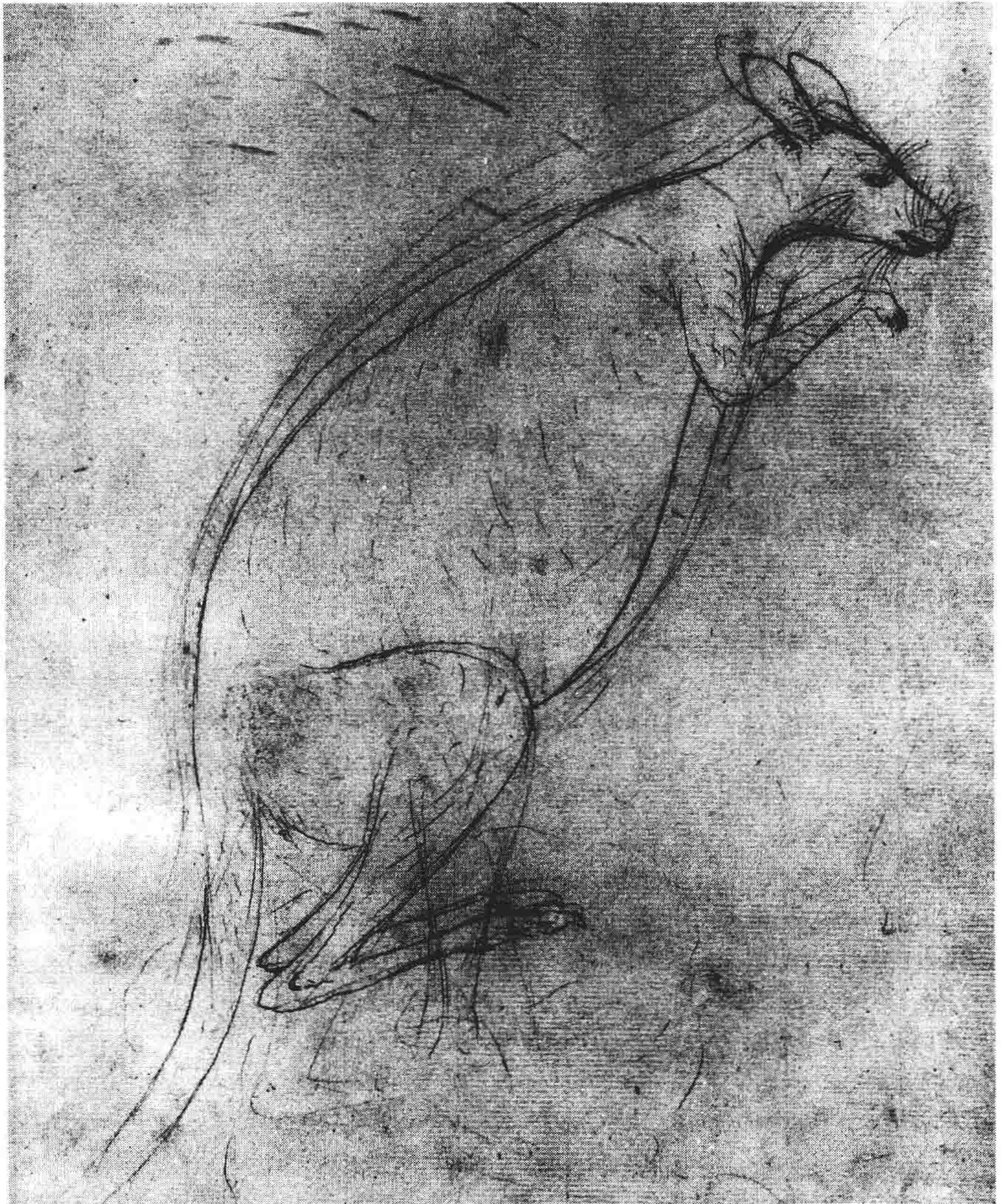
The Point of Order



ONE FAIR WINDY DAY in late June of 1770, as the *Endeavour* lay grounded off the northeastern coast of Australia, those of the crew not engaged in repairing the vessel observed an intriguing animal. In the words of Joseph Banks, no ordinary ship's naturalist but one of the richest men in Britain, it was "as large as a grey hound, of a mouse colour and very swift." James Cook, the ship's captain, added that it had "a long tail which it carried like a grey hound, in short I should have taken it for a wild dog, but for its walking or running in which it jumped like a Hare or a deer."¹ Over the next weeks they caught occasional glimpses of the unknown creature, which continued to surprise them—most strikingly when they realized that "instead of going upon all fours this animal went only upon two legs, making vast bounds."² Finally, in mid-July, Banks happily recorded that the *Endeavour's* second lieutenant had shot a specimen of "the animal that had so long been the subject of our speculations" and that on close investigation it proved to bear "not the least resemblance" to any animal he had ever seen. The shortness of its forelimbs and the length of its hindlimbs appeared especially remarkable. But if the creature was thus difficult to place within the animal kingdom—its oddities strained the resources of the English language as well as those of scientific taxonomy, so that Banks had to borrow the term *kangaroo* from a local dialect—from a more functional perspective it was easier to pigeonhole. Banks and Cook concurred in proclaiming the otherwise unclassifiable new discovery "excellent food."³

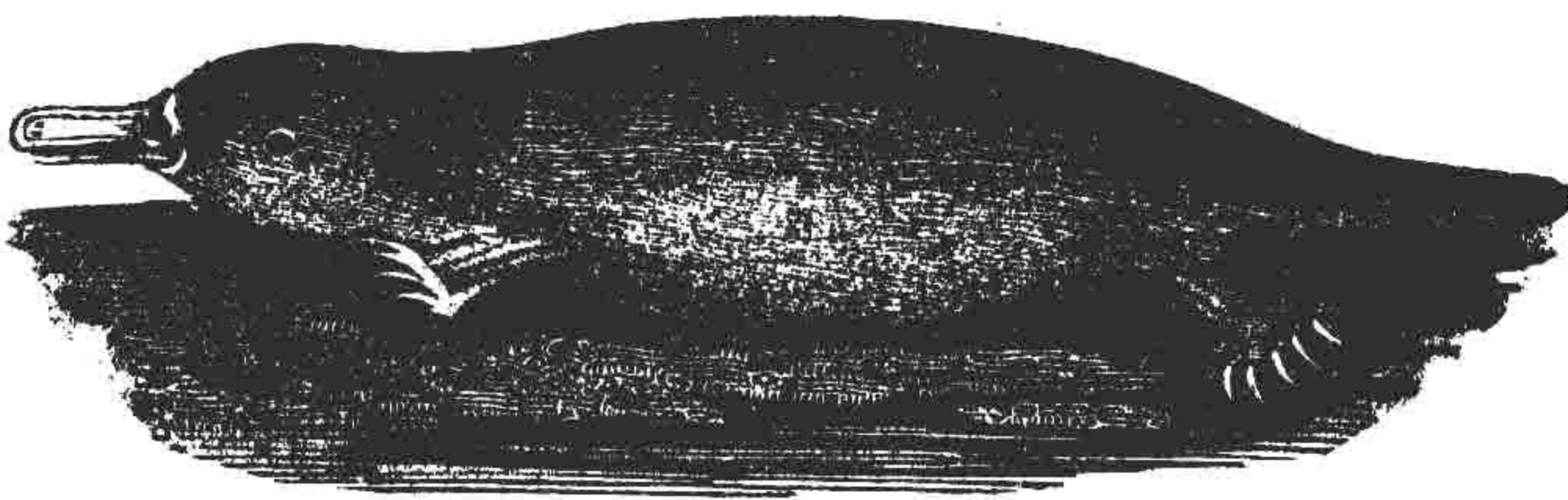
The kangaroo skins and bones that the explorers brought back to London soon initiated what was to be a sustained and committed relationship between these unusual animals and Britons with zoological inclinations, a

group by no means limited to serious naturalists. Thus in 1790 Alexander Weir, the proprietor of a natural history museum in Edinburgh, enticed potential subscribers by announcing his acquisition of "that extraordinary Quadruped called THE CUNQUROO . . . being the first that ever was brought to Britain."⁴ The breadth of the kangaroo's appeal became particularly noticeable when living specimens began to arrive. George Stubbs painted a portrait of what was somewhat ambiguously called "Captain



One of the surprising kangaroos, with special attention to locomotion.

Cook's Kangaroo," and George III installed a few in his menagerie.⁵ The immigrants adapted enthusiastically to their new homeland. By the end of the eighteenth century they had become sufficiently identified with Great Britain that an agent of the Florentine government automatically turned in that direction when seeking a "*Macropus giganteus*" for the Grand Duke.⁶ In 1804, on the strength of the longevity and fecundity of the royal kangaroos, William Bingley pronounced them "in a great degree naturalized in England," which was likely to "render this most elegant animal a permanent acquisition to our country."⁷ Kangaroos were a staple of Victorian public menageries and private parks; by mid-century the Regent's Park Zoo in London regularly offered surplus stock for sale and the Earl of Derby had bred five different kangaroo species at Knowsley Park.⁸ By 1878, as William Henry Flower announced in his presidential address to the Zoology and Botany Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, it had become "difficult . . . to imagine a world without kangaroos."⁹



A cryptic early platypus.

The emergence of the still more enigmatic platypus into British consciousness cannot be dated so precisely. In an account of New South Wales published in 1802, David Collins mentioned that he had observed "an amphibious animal, of the mole species," five years previously, but the first specimens did not arrive in Britain until a year or two after this sighting, when they quickly attracted the attention of puzzled naturalists.¹⁰ In his popular handbook *A General History of Quadrupeds*, Thomas Bewick described the platypus that he had examined at a meeting of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle upon Tyne as "an animal *sui generis*; it appears to possess a three fold nature, that of a fish, a bird, and a quadruped, and is related to nothing that we have hitherto seen"; while the more learned George Shaw of the British Museum, who published the first scientific description of the platypus in 1799, judged it "of all the Mammalia yet known . . . the most extraordinary in its conformation; exhibiting the perfect resemblance of the beak of a Duck engrafted on the head of a

quadruped.”¹¹ Indeed, so astonishing did his first encounter with platypus remains seem to Shaw that he found it “impossible not to entertain some doubts as to the genuine nature of the animal, and to surmise that there might have been practised some arts of deception in its structure.” Ultimately, his suspicions were laid to rest by the arrival of additional specimens identical to their predecessor in the most troublesome respects, but the scissor marks he left on the original specimen, where he thought that an unscrupulous taxidermist might have attached the beak, bore lasting witness to his initial skepticism.¹²

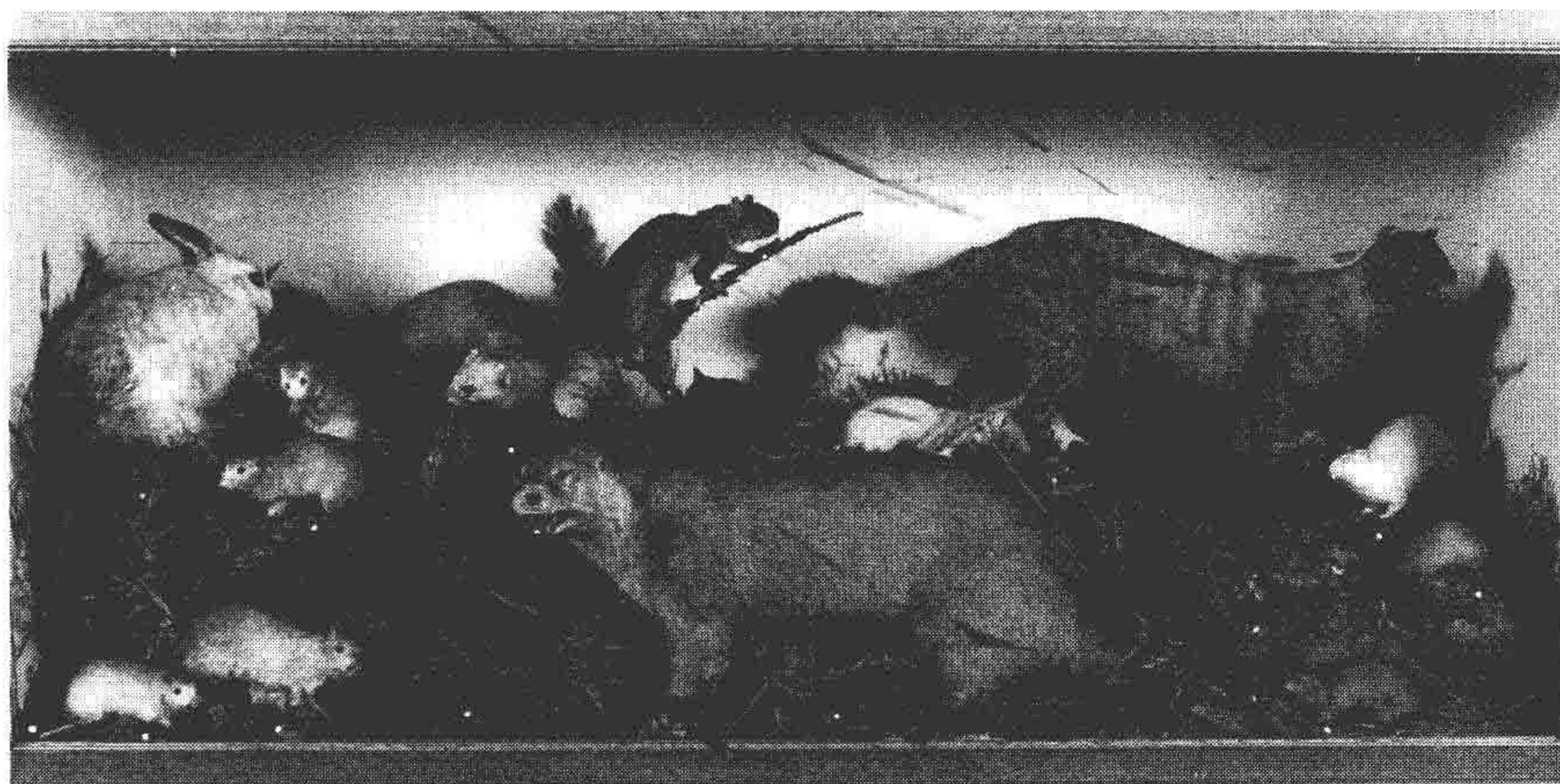
The taxonomic debates sparked by these puzzling animals continued for decades in scientific circles; as the president of the Royal Physical Society noted in 1831, “no animal has ever excited the curiosity of naturalists more than the platypus.”¹³ Late Victorian donors were still sending platypuses to the Oxford University Museum in bunches: five in 1893, seven in 1894.¹⁴ Nonspecialists were also fascinated by the platypus’s anomalous nature. This wider audience did not offer any alternative mode of classification, either implicit or explicit, even an anthropocentric one based on utility. Perhaps this was because the platypus was much smaller than the kangaroo, as well as more difficult to catch and to maintain in captivity; perhaps because the European animal it suggested to its discoverers was the lowly mole rather than the fleet and handsome greyhound. Indeed, so unprepossessing was the platypus in its native streams that one of its most affectionate early chroniclers—a naturalist who recorded with genuine sorrow the deaths of some young animals he had cared for—characterized its appearance as “sordid and far from attractive . . . resembling rather a lump of dirty weeds than any production of the animal kingdom.”¹⁵ Further, one of its most unsettling anatomical features, the cloaca, “which serves both for the functions of reproduction and for the ordinary evacuations,” was, in the words of a naturalist concerned with public sensitivities, “highly curious, but not well adapted for popular details.”¹⁶

The appeal of the platypus to the general public, as to naturalists, seemed rather to depend on its weirdness than on any more positive charm or utility. As Charles Darwin wrote of a successful platypus-hunting expedition in New South Wales, “I consider it a great feat to be in at the death of so wonderful an animal.”¹⁷ Its stuffed remains and its image figured in non-specialist contexts much more frequently than did those of any other exotic animal of similarly insignificant size and aspect. At times it could represent the odd preoccupations of scientists, as in a satiric *Punch* depiction of “The Meeting of the Zoological Society,” where, formally labeled as “*Ornithorhynchus*,” it occupied the foreground of the table around which the learned

gentlemen gathered.¹⁸ More often, however, the hard-to-place creature appeared firmly, if somewhat paradoxically, integrated into the familiar domestic scene. In 1851 the Natural History and Antiquarian Society of Penzance figuratively placed a platypus among the overwhelmingly local fauna on display in its museum; and fifteen years later some members of the Acclimatisation Society of Great Britain more literally included the platypus among the foreign species that might profitably be naturalized at home.¹⁹

The Mammalian Other

Fascinating though the Australian animals indisputably were, their physical endowments might not have been sufficient by themselves to attract the persistent attention of a wide range of audiences. After all, the kangaroo and the platypus appeared on the British scene after several centuries of vigorous global exploration, one recurrent result of which had been the discovery of such previously unsuspected animals as the armadillo and the sloth. Many of these novelties had been transported home for display, dead or alive, along with other creatures, such as the Indian nilgai or blue bull, that had been for centuries only bookish rumors.²⁰ No matter how curious or spectacular, however, most of these creatures, like the giraffes and hippopotami that followed them in the nineteenth century, were in effect nine-days'-wonders, enjoying a brief rush of celebrity and then dwindling into routine menagerie and museum displays and conventional encyclope-



A Victorian platypus, naturalized among creatures of British woods and fields.