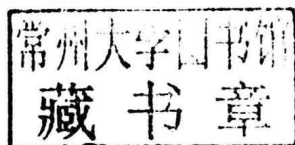


The Afterlives of Animals



EDITED BY SAMUEL J. M. M. ALBERTI

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Introduction

The Dead Ark

One of my favorite natural history exhibits, now sadly extinct, was “Abel’s Ark” at the Hancock Museum in Newcastle upon Tyne (now part of the Great North Museum). Faced with a collection of sporting trophy heads inherited from a local Victorian naturalist, twentieth-century curators built an educational display in which the decapitated mounts poked their heads through the window of a jolly ark (see fig. 1).¹ Few displays demonstrate so effectively in a single glance the changing functions of natural history museums and the radical shifts in the meanings of animals: from life on the savannah to a sportsman’s prize, from hunting mount to specimen to educational object.

Elsewhere in the serried ranks of other natural history museums, there are many animals that similarly refuse to be constrained by their zoological classification. Their 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 They are not only specimens, but also personalities; not only data, but also historical documents. *The Afterlives of Animals* selects some especially interesting examples and traces their individual histories both before and after death: their movement and meanings in life, how they died, and then how they came to be in collections. By assembling a series of such “animal biographies,” we are able to trace the shifting meanings (scientific, cultural, emotional) of singular animals and their remains. The stories that follow take us from fields and rivers through zoos and menageries to museums. From Balto the husky to Chi-



FIG. 1. "Abel's Ark" at the Hancock Museum, 2005. (Great North Museum: Hancock and the Natural History Society of Northumbria/Steve McLean)

Chi the panda, they show us how people relate to animals in life and death. For many people in the modern West, these zoological shows and collections were the principal (or indeed exclusive) site for their encounter with the material animal, and the herd of beasts in these pages includes representatives of some of the most popular exhibits. As Nigel Rothfels has observed: "The perennial stories of whales, elephants, pandas, and other charismatic species, make clear that the stakes in representing animals can be very high. Who controls the representation and to what ends it will be used [is] of profound importance."² It is the premise of this volume that those who have custody of dead as well as living animals play crucial roles in this representation, but that their intended interpretations do not always tally with the meanings afforded to animals by visitors.

It might seem strange to write biographies not of people but of animals, and even stranger to extend these biographies beyond death, to the preserved remains of these animals that might simply be considered "things." But in approaching the singular histories of specific animals, whether as individuals or as objects, we draw on techniques deployed for some time by anthropolo-

gists and others who are interested in the “social lives of things,” as Michelle Henning and other contributors indicate in their essays below.³ Like these scholars of material culture, we approach the following studies through the trajectories of specific items and the relationships they form with people and other objects. As one would when narrating a human biography, we account for key moments in our thing’s life and afterlife. Where did it go, whom did it meet? How has its status changed? What makes it different from other, similar things or individuals? Because of the nature of our subjects, however, we acknowledge that there are periods and spaces in their trajectory that cannot be recovered, that these “biogeographies” (see the essay by Merle Patchett, Kate Foster, and Hayden Lorimer) are often messy and unchartable. Furthermore, in taking animals as our protagonists, we follow a venerable tradition, that of the “it-narrative,” an eccentric subgenre evident from the eighteenth century in which the story was told from the perspective of objects or animals.⁴

Here we are especially interested in the fate of these animals after death: their *afterlives*. Just as animals were mobile, flexible entities with changing meanings as they traveled through sites for living display, so this accrual continues postmortem. We mean “afterlife” not in the spiritual way, clearly, but rather in the same sense as the conservator Richard Jaeschke in his discussion of the fate of archaeological objects: “For the archaeologist, the life of the object is fixed at the moment of its discovery [a notion that could equally be applied to the biological death of an animal for the museum zoologist]. For conservators, however, the situation is not so simple and the life of the object continues.” The last of the stages in the career of objects that Jaeschke proposes, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, is the afterlife: during which “the object is placed in its heavenly home, the museum or archive, to remain for eternity . . . [but] the afterlife seldom proves a heavenly resting place and usually involves the object in more adventures and perils. It does not cease to age and to have a history, but its history of use has become a history of treatment.”⁵ As Geoffrey Swinney reflects in his afterword to this volume, the animals herein have many different kinds of afterlives, in different places and in different media. Afterlives, Swinney shows, are created in the recounting—we ourselves are contributing to this process in this book.

Written by contributors from different disciplines and backgrounds about different species of animals at different times, the accounts that follow nonetheless exhibit some striking parallels. In what remains of this introductory

piece, I draw attention to two broad themes in particular: the journeys they made, whether geographical or physical; and the accompanying shifts in meaning. The biblical title of this introduction, as well as drawing attention to the Hancock Museum's imaginative reuse of mounts, is intended to encapsulate both of these themes: transition (Noah—arguably the first collector—saving and transporting animals), and new meaning (such as the metaphorical use of the ark by modern zoos in conservation mode).⁶

TRANSITIONS

The list of places visited or inhabited by the animals here would be as long as the book itself, including several countries in at least four continents; rivers, fields and Arctic wilderness; a royal menagerie and a royal college; several zoos, workshops, storage facilities, and numerous museums; as well as all the places we have been unable to recover. And thanks to our biographical perspective, tracing the paths of animals in life, preparation, and exhibition (or not), we are able to show the dynamic links between these different spaces for the experience and display of animals. Furthermore, as shown by most essays herein, representations of particular animals then traveled even farther in print, image, film, and online.⁷

Whether in body or not, in moving between these sites, these animals circulated understandings of the natural world. As I argue in my essay on Maharajah, massive beasts were in effect chunks of landscape ripped asunder and transplanted to urban locales.⁸ They and their smaller peers were the embodiment of what the historian of science James Secord dubs “knowledge in transit.” Secord advocates breaking down the purported boundaries between the practice of science (how scientists understand nature) and the popular, “public understanding” of science (how the rest of us understand nature). Instead we should think more holistically about the circulation of knowledge, about the sciences as a series of “communicative actions.”⁹ Scientific knowledge is not disseminated simply by virtue of its truth value, but rather spreads unevenly and contingently. This circulation, I would argue, involves not only concepts but is also (and especially effectively) channeled through things. Are not the animals we write about in this volume *material* knowledge in transit, bringing experiences of nature with them to different sites and audiences?

One transition of particular interest in the essays that follow is between zoos and museums.¹⁰ Although specimens that were extracted from their so-

called “natural” habitat may well be valued more as markers of nature, many of the zoological specimens in natural history collections arrived from the local zoological gardens, as we see in the following biographies of Chi-Chi the panda, Alfred the gorilla, the elephants Maharajah and Sir Roger, and the unnamed mandrill. Acquisition routes then extended farther, to traveling menageries, to the peripatetic whale shows that Henning mentions, and even to circuses. These connections, like those to hunting upon which Garry Marvin reflects, are perhaps associations that museums would rather not emphasize, seeing them as somehow “tainting” the scientific data. But the link to zoos is interesting for our purposes because it allows for the unusual possibility—pet taxidermy notwithstanding—that the same audiences might have experienced particular individual animals in both life and death, and allows us to compare and contrast their meanings.

Even more central to *The Afterlives of Animals* than the connections between zoos and museums is the transition between life and death. The writer and naturalist Henry David Thoreau grumbled:

I hate museums; there is nothing so weighs upon my spirits. They are the catacombs of nature. One green bud of spring, one willow catkins, one faint trill from a migrating sparrow would set the world on its legs again. The life that is in a single green weed is of more worth than all this death. They are dead nature collected by dead men. I know not whether I muse most at the bodies stuffed with cotton and sawdust or those stuffed with bowels and fleshy fibre outside the cases.

Where is the proper herbarium, the true cabinet of shells, and museum of skeletons, but in the meadow where the flower bloomed, by the seaside where the tide cast up the fish, and on the hills and in the valleys where the beast laid down its life and the skeleton of the traveller reposes on the grass? What right have mortals to parade these things on their legs again, with their wires, and, when heaven has decreed that they shall return to dust again, to return them to sawdust? Would you have a dried specimen of a world, or a pickled one?¹¹

This, then, is the tension between museums and zoos, and within museum themselves. In investigated and collecting living nature, museums become mausolea, storehouses of millions upon millions of dead things in drawers

and jars, grim reminders of mortality. They comprise, as Benedict Anderson put it, a necrological census.¹² This is why taxidermy is so interesting, as we see in the essays that follow on Sir Roger, Balto, Alfred, Chi-Chi, and hunting trophies. Whereas skeletal mounts, wet specimens, and study skins such as the mandrill and the hen harrier are clearly dead, taxidermy is intended to give the illusion of life.¹³

And so—in this context at least—death is not the event horizon we might assume it to be. In taxidermy as well as other preservative media, as Richard Sabin shows so vividly in his essay, the biological death of the living beast is the birth of the specimen. The causes of death mentioned in this volume range from “natural” (such as tuberculosis) to violent (especially gunshot). But for those beasts destined to become museum specimens, biological death is only one moment, one narrative hinge of many (admittedly a particularly resonant one) in the life/afterlife of the animal. Contrary to the philosopher who claimed of one object that was once alive, “This parrot is no more! He has ceased to be! This is an *ex-parrot!*” it *was* still a parrot, but in a different phase of its existence.¹⁴ And they continue to have much in common. Materially, they have many of the same properties, even if only a fraction of the living specimen has remained (whether skin only or bones only). In life they are acted upon, circulated, and displayed, and so, too, in death. Taxidermy mounts continue to stare back at us, albeit from glass eyes.¹⁵

And yet they are “remnant models,” surface without substance, no more complete than the skeletal specimen; and those specimens that look back are in a tiny minority—as discussed in essays below on Chi-Chi, the mandrill, the hen harrier, and Maharajah.¹⁶ As Mark Alvey argues: “It is the animal, and yet it is not. . . . A ‘stuffed’ panda in a diorama is more real than a photograph, and yet somehow less real than an example of the same species in the zoo.”¹⁷ The vast majority of specimens are not prepared for display, however: they are rarely looked at, their aspect is strikingly different from the living beast, and their afterlife is almost a secret (as we see in Sophie Everest’s essay).

Whether or not it is lifelike, the end result of the passage from life to death (and the subsequent survival of the remains) involves considerable work—techniques that aid the passage into an afterlife. The death of the animal may or may not have been the result of direct human intervention (see Garry Marvin’s essay), but a sustained afterlife certainly is. The first postmortem act was commonly fragmentation, the separation of flesh, bone, and skin—

detailed accounts of which for Chi-Chi, Sir Roger, and especially the Thames Whale can be found below—some parts kept, some discarded, and often different parts going to different places. Thereafter, a range of techniques were deployed to reconfigure and preserve the remains, to render them stable and legible.¹⁸ Conservators, taxidermists, and curators labored on specimens as whalers labored on their bounteous catch, as Henning shows in her essay: in making a museum object, they “manage the material.” Making animal afterlives is an active process, as Merle Patchett, Kate Foster, and Hayden Lorimer show, and upon which Swinney reflects in his afterword. Not only are animals recomposed (so that they do not *decompose*), but they are also embellished, reconfigured in new and interesting ways.

MEANINGS

Capture, transit, display, work, and embellishment layered many different meanings around the animals detailed in these pages. We know from the thriving animal studies literature that animals can be widely polysemic according to context and mode of engagement; like the essays in the Animal Studies Group’s *Killing Animals*, in *The Afterlives of Animals* we explore how the transition from life to death impacts further upon these diverse meanings.¹⁹ Specifically, when taken together, these essays demonstrate the variance of understandings and experiences between taxa, between modes of preparation, and, most diffusely, between different “ways of looking.”

It will come as no surprise that different kinds of animals mean different things. Zoos and museums are engines of difference, classifying and presenting the entangled mess of the natural world in a comprehensible way (ideally to be consumed in palatable chunks of time). Nature and culture are defined in particular ways in the modern West, and zoological collections are important sites for policing the boundaries between and within them. But the meanings afforded to particular species or genera by formal taxonomy belie the affective connections we make to, say, dogs (as Rachel Poliquin discusses in her essay).²⁰ Furthermore, pragmatic ways of arranging (such as by size) are as evident as scientific classification. The whale and the elephant have much in common.

But in the galleries of natural history museums, the striking visual differences are not between taxa but rather between modes of preparation; not between a lion and a tiger but between the skeleton and skin. The stored study

specimen that Everest considers elicits very different reactions than does the mounted specimen on display in the gallery. Which is why, as Patchett, Foster, and Lorimer reflect, the “deadness” of the remains of the hen harrier is so significant. The most complete animals are to be found submerged in preservative fluid, but these “wet” specimens are often considered insufficiently palatable for display, notable exceptions such as the Natural History Museum’s Darwin Centre notwithstanding.²¹ Furthermore, the appearance and experience of a specimen has a great deal to do with how effective the preservation was. A well-crafted mount in a plush diorama is one thing, but visibly poor stitching and bulbous glass eyes are the stuff of horror movies.

Some taxidermists deliberately eschew lifelike forms. Steve Baker has coined the term “botched taxidermy” for contemporary art that presents animals and/or their remains that seem somehow to have *gone wrong*.²² Such work draws explicit attention to the relationship between human and nonhuman animal, and the impact of the former on the latter. This is especially true of the subtle creations and interventions of Kate Foster (a coauthor, with Patchett and Lorimer, of an essay in this volume) and Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson (discussed in several essays), whose use of museum specimens seeks to engage with the animals on their own terms.²³ All taxidermy is artistic and has an aesthetic appeal, however distinctive: but the intentions and audiences involved in the avowed use of dead animals for fine art involves particular values and quite different afterlives.

Clearly, then, the meanings of animals on display are imbued not only (if at all) by those with custody of them but also by their audience, and therefore vary according to the ways they are looked at. To understand the afterlives of animals, we therefore address here their consumption as well as their production. Henning notes in her essay that in industrialized society our distance from some species objectifies them: watching an animal in captivity, whether in a cage or a case, has been likened to voyeurism.²⁴ On display, they come to represent things beyond their own material bounds. Osteological and other remnants act as maps, synecdochal of the whole organism. And although we have chosen for the most part here to write about individual animals, clearly they are more than singular when we look at them. They are also metonymic for their species, redolent of places far away and times long ago (even if they are not as ancient as visitors assume Maharajah to be, as I mention in my essay).

Nevertheless, the individuality of the animals is the overriding theme of

this volume. Of the varied extrascientific meanings that recur throughout, the most striking is that of the fame of that particular beast. Balto and the Thames Whale were newsworthy, valiant individuals who undertook heroic journeys over ice and upriver (the former successfully, the latter with tragic consequences). They are more than metonyms, postmortem celebrities whose renown stemmed from their activities and/or visibility in life. The queen's zebra and Chi-Chi the panda had media presences that any Hollywood A-lister would envy (even if their meanings were commonly adapted for satirical purposes). On a local level, Maharajah, Sir Roger, and Alfred were "much-loved" mascots and emblems, instilling considerable identification with, and loyalty to, their institutions. The geographer Jamie Lorimer observes how significant this "nonhuman charisma" is to biodiversity conservation initiatives (see also Henry Nicholls's essay), identifying "flagship species"; here we see the connections people make with flagship individuals.²⁵ They have affective, political, and even humorous meanings, and our studies reveal that they continue to be popular after death; their renown continuing to develop postmortem. Whether or not museums capitalize on them, the social histories of key animals in the museum become part of civic consciousness, as any curator unwise enough to seek to remove an iconic exhibit of any kind will attest. Oral traditions run parallel (and sometimes even contrary) to formal museum documentation.

One key indicator of the fame of an animal in life or death is the nickname with which many of the present herd were mantled. This is also a key marker of the rampant anthropomorphism evident in these pages and reflected upon by Swinney.²⁶ "Nonhuman beings" they may be (see Hannah Paddon's essay), but they are instilled with many of our characteristics. Tellingly, this volume demonstrates that animals continue to be anthropomorphized postmortem, that personhood endures (or is afforded anew) beyond biological death, and that even in our retellings we contribute to this ambiguity, slipping between "she," "he," and "it." They hold a mirror up to us as writers (see Michelle Henning's essay); these tales are as much about people as animals.

The mandrill, hen harrier, and trophy mounts, meanwhile, in contrast to the famous beasts with whom they rub shoulders in this volume, are afforded neither human characteristics nor pet names. Selected for their anti-celebrity, they are among millions of anonymous specimens languishing (or not) in storage. Beyond Patchett, Foster, and Lorimer's astute reflections, we do not at-

tempt here to address the massed meanings of drawer upon drawer of stored objects, but we are nevertheless aware of the limits of the single biographical study. To fully understand the many meanings within natural history museums, we must acknowledge not only the singular but also the standard, not quality but also quantity.

PARAMETERS

Even if one were to study only renowned animals with names and posthumous careers, one could fill many more volumes like this. There are any number of further examples of iconic animals whose remains feature in modern museums: Martha, the last of the American passenger pigeons, is now at the Smithsonian; the Natural History Museum at Tring displays the famous interwar racing greyhound Mick the Miller, while Guy the gorilla is in the museum in London; General Custer's horse Comanche found its way postmortem to the University of Kansas Natural History Museum; and Dolly the cloned sheep has taken pride of place in the National Museum of Scotland.²⁷ Some are so famous that their disassociated skin, bones, and hearts are to be found in different institutions, such as Jumbo the elephant (see my essay on Maharajah), and even in different countries, like the racehorse Phar Lap, whose skeleton is in New Zealand (where he was born in 1926), but whose heart and mounted hide are in separate museums in Australia.²⁸ And as Swinney indicates in the afterword to this book, this is to concentrate largely on mammals: occasional invertebrates can also gain celebrity status, and dinosaurs, after all, are perhaps now the most iconic animals in museums.²⁹

These conspicuous absences notwithstanding, the essays here present a herd of animals from across the world, whose afterlives were spent in Europe and North America. Contributors take variously museological, historical, anthropological, curatorial, artistic, and geographical approaches to the stories of these animals. They range from autobiographical to analytical, and anywhere in between (so we make no apologies for the variations in style, from poetic to clinical). For the most part, we are concerned with material beasts; Neurath's whale is an exception to this rule, but Henning is not the only author to consider the conceptual animal (as, for example, the circulation of Chi-Chi images). Most essays address an individual; Marvin's trophy mounts are the exception to this rule, but he is not the only author to discuss the general trajectory of animals on their way to museums (as I seek to do for elephants).