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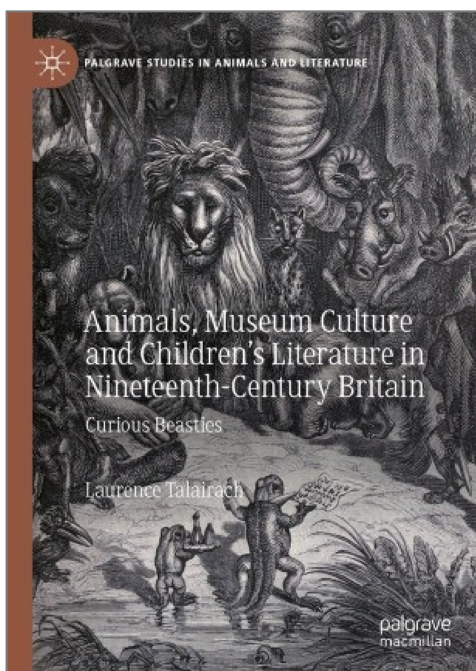
BOOKS

Laurence Talairach, *Animals, Museum Culture and Children's Literature in Nineteenth - Century Britain: Curious Beasties,* London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 309 p.



Discovered and collected, caged and catalogued, taxidermized and preserved, reconstituted from old bones or imagined into existence, nonhuman others feature prominently in Laurence Talairach's *Animals, Museum Culture and Children's Literature in Nineteenth Century Britain* (2021). Exploring the discourses of zoology and palaeontology in relation to children's literature, Talairach shows, through extensive examples, the development and proliferation of animal-centred books for the younger readership, as well as the distinct moral and ethical paths such literary works forged in the context of British imperial expansion. The fascination, or rather the "obsession", with classification, control and possession of knowledge characteristic of the second half of the eighteenth century, lasting well into the late Edwardian period in Britain, was accentuated by the rising presence of newly discovered animals, or "beasties". These "curious beasties" (5) not only astounded the British subjects, but puzzled naturalists and scientists alike through their ambiguous nature. This wondrous appeal also permeated children's literature and led to the creation of oft-moralising tales that frequently incorporated scientific information or veiled commentaries on the politics of the Empire, touching upon the ethics of collecting specimens and even bringing into question man's superiority and hegemony over the animal kingdom.

As Talairach observes, in the second chapter titled "Wild and Exotic 'Beasties' in Early Children's Literature," as more animals were being imported into Britain, menageries gained popularity and "by the last decades of the century, even children were being taken to see the wild beasts of the Royal Menagerie" (25). Consumerism and the newly discovered economic value of caged and/or trained animals meant that exhibitions started competing for costumers, two such enterprises vying for prominence in London in the last decades of the

eighteenth century: the Exeter Change menagerie and the Royal Menagerie of the Tower of London. Rare and exotic animals brought in costumers by "appeal[ing] to the curious" (26) and utilising advertisements meant to enthuse as well as emphasise the global movement of animal collections. Talairach identifies in such advertisements a tendency to tap into "fears of the monstrous" (26), manipulating the animals' description so as to render them outlandish and grotesque. Talairach gives a description of a cassowary from an advertisement in the *Leeds Intelligencer (16 Nov. 1779)* which compares parts of the bird to a multitude of different animals: "it has the Eye of a Lion, Defence of a Porcupine, and the Swiftness of a Courser" (26). The author highlights the public's attraction to interactions with animals, alleged to "converse with any Person" (27), as well as the connection with the "world of the fair" in which natural curiosities, "freaks", as well as differently-bodied humans, were commonly showcased (37). Furthermore, in addition to the increased availability of children's books, toys and games, such spectacles were also deemed to be beneficial for children's education in the second half of the eighteenth century, as evidenced by the advertising of menageries as "suitab[le] for women and children" among the middle and upper classes (28).

The animals did not represent only a means of educating the masses. Their caging and taming were presented as symbols of the superiority of man, of British colonial power as well as of the Empire's hegemony over the world. A thought-provoking distinction between private animal exhibitions, menageries and the animals which represented the "monarch's prestige and power" in The Tower of London, is explored (29). While private menageries presented "beasties" as rare and exotic curiosities, the Menagerie in the Tower of London introduced Guidebooks explaining how the animals were cared for and tamed, and inviting the visitors to "enjoy the thrill of proximity to wild animals and the happy sense of secure superiority produced by their incarceration" (30). Seeing as the guidebooks were aimed at the more refined, "genteel" public, reporting stories which delved into the relationship between the animal and its keeper, encouraged a connection between animal and human while still legitimising the notion of the animal's inferiority.

John Gay's *Fables* from 1727 and 1738 continued this concept of human-animal connection, while also satirising early Georgian society and power relationships. Talairach draws attention to the "blurred line" between human and animal, in terms of appearance and mannerisms. In "The Monkey Who had Seen the World", Gay played upon the proximity between apes and humans, in a gesture deemed by Talairach to have subverted the moralistic use of animals in fables in such a way as to "turn the mirror back on humans" and mock their supposed civilisation and education (36). Talairach goes on to explain that it is through this concept of similitude that eighteenth-century educationalists were able to propose innovations in pedagogical literature, which frequently addressed this issue and also marked the beginning of literature written for a specifically targeted younger audience, through John Newbery's *Little Pretty Pocket Book.*

While the main portion of Talairach's study focuses on this concept of human-animal similarity as well as the idea of "bestiality" and the taming of it, it does so through a variety of different approaches to literary works with different educational stakes for children, as well as for adults. The study continues by raising awareness to the role of women in popularising children's literature, mentioning that many of the books were written by women and mostly aimed at a female audience, while maintaining a stable traditional perspective on the

roles and patterns of conduct of males and females. This aspect relates to the tales of taming and collecting "pets" addressed in the next chapter. In *The Travelling Menagerie* by Charles Camden, Talairach believes that the main character's attitude towards his pets is a product of the Victorian museum culture, predicated on objectifying, commodifying and displaying animals. In his examination of Mary Anne Barker's *Aunt Annie's Story about Jamaica*, Talairach presents a view of the museum and consumerist culture. While the first story focused on the forceful collecting, taming, and training of animals as a means of research, this narrative focuses on the patronising undertones in children's literature. This section of the book engages with Barker's definition of "pet", as "the stupidest little creatures in the world" (118), and with the idea that animals are nothing more than "luxury goods," which, as Talairach observes, is linked with slavery, thus "collapsing the distinction between exotic animals and exotic peoples" (118), and further highlighting the Victorian obsession with possession. According to Talairach, the idea of control, mastery and hegemony which "reflected the British sphere of influence" in England as well as in the colonies was a "fantasy" that also encouraged children to create collections, or mini-menageries, of their own (123).

This aspect is further expounded on in the following chapter, titled "Young Collectors," which explores the amateur naturalist movement of the century, disseminated throughout the Empire, mainly as it was reflected in the pages of *Aunt Judy's Magazine.* More specifically, the "paradox of the museum" rests in the incompatibility between gestures of collecting and preserving (127). Despite this, Talairach argues, numerous women writers believed such incongruities could be overcome as long as children were taught how to treat nature and its resources in a mindful way. The *Aunt Judy's Magazine* phenomenon was a particularly noteworthy milestone by not only the pushing for a right treatment of nature through acts of collecting and preserving, but by fostering women's contributions to science as well. The founder and editor of the magazine, Margaret Gatty, who was a naturalist herself, succeeded in creating a network between all the English colonies in which the public could read about natural history, ask for advice on techniques of collecting and conserving, as well as connect to readers from other parts of the Empire so as to share knowledge, trade and buy specimens for their own collections. Gatty encouraged collection "without involving any wanton destruction of life" (130) as well as by "observing the beauty and order of God's works" (130). Talairach sees this as proof that the moralising values of life further "informed children's literature, especially when aimed at a young (female) audience" (130). Although Gatty could neither travel, nor become a researcher, Talairach explains that "her activities as a naturalist were therefore fully developed through the marine specimens (seaweeds) she collected, those she kept in her aquarium, her drawings, as well as the network of contacts she developed actively with other naturalists" (137). The role of women in shaping the museum culture during the nineteenth century is highlighted in this section, Talairach believing that William Harvey and George Johnston's act of naming two algae species after Gatty was "no coincidence", but a sign of appreciation for Gatty's help in their research. This goes to show, Talairach continues, the prevalent Victorian belief that women naturalists were more likely to be "gatherers" than "namers" (139).

The next two chapters, titled "Nonsense 'Beasties'" and "Prehistoric 'Beasties'," show the effects of the increasingly popular theory of evolution developed by Charles Darwin. Darwinism is portrayed as having affected the advancement of children's

literature in two ways: the creation of "nonsense" creatures and the understanding of "prehistoric" creatures. The former type is explored in terms of the bond between humans and animals, such tales as *The Water-Babies* and *Alice in Wonderland* "bridg[ing] the gap between natural history and the objects representing that knowledge" (195). The "bridge" between human and animal is broken in Alice's story, as she is mistaken for several animals and loses her superiority, just like the Water-Baby rewrites the rules "by which we classify the natural world" (198), turning into a curious "beastie" and thus shattering any hope of taxonomic distinctions. Talairach notices the similarity between the two narratives, both characters transforming into "curiosities", unable to (re)gain control of the situation.

In the next chapter, on "prehistoric" animals, the connection between evolution and extinction becomes more apparent. The rise in popularity of palaeontology and geology, as well as of Darwinism, fuelled the fascination with mythical creatures, which, in turn, aided in both imagining and visualising extinct species. The idea that some creatures, such as unicorns and mermaids might have once existed, but gone extinct or evolved into other animals, permeated children's literature. This opened the door to new opportunities for the writers of children's books, not only to use recent palaeontological finds in their works, but also to write about topics of animal extinction and objectification, criticising both museum culture and the notion of human superiority. E. Nesbit's trilogy, *Five Children and It, The Phoenix and the Carpet* and *The Story of the Amulet,* explored the topic of extinction, a topic of high interest since, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, Victorians had witnessed the demise of several species. The trilogy follows five children going through several adventures, the most "curious" one regarding the discovery of the Psammead, the last animal of its kind, Talairach regarding its appearance, in the shape of five different species, as a nod towards the five children. This further widens the racial gap between the two kingdoms for, as it is argued, "If the Psammead trilogy is thus concerned with the issue of extinction, it also denounces that of the commodification of animals, linking animal extinction and commodification through its stance upon animal displays and, therefore, nineteenth-century museum culture" (261). The children seem to be already trained to exert the consumerist gaze, which instantly turns the natural specimens into purchasable commodities, as when they see "rich tropic shells of the kind you would not buy in the Kentish Town Road under at least fifteen pence a pair" (269).

Laurence Talairach reveals the fascination with which people in nineteenth-century Britain embraced the discovery of new animals, showing the impact this had for the emergence and development of children's literature, at a time when amateur naturalist movements simultaneously advocated the preservation of or care for animals, their objectification and exploitation for their economic worth, as well as the need to educate young minds in the spirit of becoming docile and pliable British subjects.

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