

SUGGESTIONS AND DEBATES

“The World the Horses Made”: A South African Case Study of Writing Animals into Social History*

S A N D R A S W A R T

History Department, Stellenbosch University

E-mail: SSS@sun.ac.za

SUMMARY: This paper explores new ways to write history that engages with the lives of animals. It offers a sample card of how social history can be enriched by focusing on history from an animal perspective – and equally, how the tools provided by social history reveals the historicity of animals. The case study is drawn from South African history and the focus is on horses. The paper firstly proposes that horses changed human history not only on the macro-level, but in the small, intimate arena of the bodily, following Febvre’s call for a sensory history. Secondly, this paper explores social history’s long-time concern with agency and with understanding socio-cultural experiences from the perspective of those who actually lived them – in this case, from an equine perspective. Thirdly, the paper asks how social history that takes animals seriously might be written and might offer a fresh dimension to our understanding, with examples from the most analysed event in southern African historiography, the South African War (1899–1902).

One of the first European settlers in southern Africa was a horse. This creature was the sole survivor of a shipwreck on the Cape of Storms. Wearing the decaying remnants of a rope halter, he was occasionally glimpsed by the sailors that arrived with the first wave of white settlement but had become so wild he could not be caught.¹ He was the only “wild” horse to exist in the Cape.

* Thanks are due to many academic friends, with particular appreciation to Dan Wylie and William Storey for commenting closely on this article.

1. H.C.V. Leibbrandt, *Précis of the Cape Archives: Letters Despatched 1652–62*, I (Cape Town, 1898), p. 31. A number of versions of the VOC journals have been published: H.B. Thom, *Journal of Jan van Riebeeck* (Cape Town, 1952), of course not solely Van Riebeeck’s memoir as sometimes dictated, sometimes authored by unknowns; H.C.V. Leibbrandt, *Précis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope* (Cape Town, 1891).

Although species of the genus *equus*, like the zebra, were indigenous to Africa, the horse was introduced into the continent as part of the processes inherent to global ecological imperialism. Horses were the first domestic stock imported by the settlers and the early modern colonial state was based, at least in part, on the power of the horse in the realm of agriculture, the military and communications.² It is widely accepted that horses played a significant role in human history (and, though less remarked, that humans played a pivotal role in horses' history). As Crosby noted of other settler societies, human settlers came not to the colonized world as individual immigrants but "as part of a grunting, lowing, neighing, crowing, chirping, snarling, buzzing, self-replicating and world-altering avalanche".³

Just as they had done in Europe, Asia and North Africa, these equine colonizers not only provided power and transportation but also altered their new biophysical and social environments in various ways.⁴ In their three and a half centuries in southern Africa, horses left deep socio-political and economic tracks, replaced with mechanization only after lively debate, while remaining significant in subsistence agriculture, low-cost transport of goods in some urban settings, and transport in, for example, the Lesotho highlands, and in the military and policing sectors. Throughout, racehorses remained a popular way for people to correlate inversely their hopes and their wages every payday.

It is thus easy to talk about horses as a commodity, or as a device used by humans to effect change, to wield or display power. But, in another sense, the horse has been the quintessential migrant labourer in southern Africa, and moved about as the human economy dictated. In the sub-continent, the human and horse species have become entangled in a range of relationships: from slavery, to partnership, to fellow combatant, to a mutualistic alliance of sorts, and moved in different labour arenas: horses filled the role of urban slave and rural serf. Yet, at the same time horses were the tools of the elite, often pampered, and a key instrument in the process of conquest. Social history can tease out such contradictions. So, this article wishes simply to offer a sample card of how social history can be enriched by focusing on history from an animal perspective – and equally, how the tools provided by social history reveals the historicity of animals.

2. For the introduction of horses at the Cape, see Sandra Swart, "Riding High: Horses, Power and Settler Society, c.1654–1840", *Kronos*, 29 (2003), Environmental History, Special Issue, pp. 47–63; Greg Bankoff and Sandra Swart, *Breeds of Empire: The "Invention" of the Horse in the Philippines and Southern Africa, 1500–1950* (Copenhagen, 2007). For developments in the twentieth century, see Sandra Swart, "High Horses: Horses, Class and Socio-Economic Change in South Africa", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 34 (2008), pp. 193–213.

3. Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 194.

4. For an ovine comparison, or the "ungulate irruption", see Elinor Melville, *A Plague of Sheep: Environmental Consequences of the Conquest of Mexico* (Cambridge, 1994).

To locate horses at the centre of the historical narrative, this paper suggests extending radically directions suggested by social history. The rise of the “New Social History” encouraged studying the past not from the perspective of the elite but from the viewpoint of previously neglected groups.⁵ In examining the “world the horses made”, this paper draws on the example set by classic studies of “worlds” made by the oppressed, like Genovese’s *World the Slaves Made*, Sobel’s *World They Made Together*, or Hill’s *World Turned Upside Down*.⁶ As Nash suggested, environmental history (the usual home of animal studies or the “animal turn”)⁷ has embraced social history’s notion of exploring history “from below”, except that here the exploited element would be the biota and the land itself.⁸ Both schools seek not only examples of oppression but also agency, exercised by the ecological and social communities.

Thus, this paper has three foci: firstly, it proposes that horses changed human history not only on an obvious macro-level, but in the small, intimate arena of the visceral, heeding, in a modest way, Febvre’s call for a sensory history.⁹ Secondly, this paper explores social history’s long-time concern with agency and with understanding socio-cultural experiences from the perspective of those who actually lived them, from an equine perspective. Thirdly, the paper asks how social history that takes animals seriously might be written, with examples from the South African War (1899–1902).

HEARING (AND SMELLING) HORSES

The past is oddly quiet. Historians have long neglected noise, mainly because of its ephemerality and lack of an archive. The story of sound in human history includes both how aural landscapes change over time and

5. For a broader discussion see Sandra Swart, “‘But Where’s the Bloody Horse?’: Textuality and Corporeality in the ‘Animal Turn’”, *Journal of Literary Studies*, 23 (2007), pp. 271–292.

6. Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974); Mechel Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton, NJ, 1987); Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth, 1972), pp. 303–310, a time when ideas about animals were turned upside down with the rest of the world.

7. For discussion see Harriet Ritvo, “Animal Planet”, *Environmental History*, 9 (2004), pp. 204–220; Erica Fudge, “A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals”, in Nigel Rothfels (ed.), *Representing Animals* (Bloomington, IN, 2002), pp. 3–18.

8. Roderick Nash, “American Environmental History: A New Teaching Frontier”, *Pacific History Review*, 41 (1972), pp. 362–372, 363.

9. L. Febvre, “Smells, Tastes, and Sounds”, in *idem*, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1982). For up-to-date discussion, see Mark M. Smith, “Producing Sense, Consuming Sense, Making Sense: Perils and Prospects for Sensory History”, *Journal of Social History*, 40 (2007), pp. 841–858; Richard Cullen Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca, NY, 2003).

how humans relate differently over time to sounds. Noise is sound with emotions attached to it. Thus not only sound but noise is historically contingent, varying over time.¹⁰ Aural landscapes – or soundscapes – are created by configurations of physical ecology (in South Africa, east coast dune forests replete with reflective surfaces, for example, resonate differently to the Karoo or the high veld).

Certainly, even without changes to the vegetation, discussed later in this paper, the rural and urban soundscapes of southern Africa were significantly different because of horses. The sounds of hammer on anvil, the jingle of bits, the creak of leather saddlery, the crack of whips, the thudding of hooves and the whinny of horses and (perhaps most of all, the absence of that with which they were replaced – the motor car) made the horse-era world a different place to either the pre-colonial period or the present. Sometimes the sounds would have been grisly but familiar at particular periods: for example, as a combatant reminisced about a particularly vivid visceral memory of 1900: “the unmistakable thud which a heavy bullet makes on horseflesh”.¹¹

Human understanding of sound is historical, with the ability to interpret noise (and experience it as melodious or jarring) changing over time. As Coates points out, noise is to sound as stench is to smell – something dissonant and unwanted. It is tempting to assume that noise is noisier now. However, in much of the urbanized west this simple linear model of noise pollution growing worse over time is flawed, because while the ascendancy of the engine has meant a noisier world, it is worth remembering that the source of opposition to horses in urban centres and support for the horseless vehicles was the perceived need for a reduction of the racket.¹² However, when in South Africa horses were increasingly kept out of towns in the mid-twentieth century, it was for reasons of disease and waste, rather than noise. Southern Africa saw the “imperialistic spread of more and larger sounds” as horses replaced feet and cars replaced horses.¹³

As recently as 1900, it would not be unusual for a human in some groups, like white English, or Afrikaans-speaking, or some Sotho men, to be able to decipher the equine lexicon. A local equine vernacular was in evidence by at least the nineteenth century and probably much earlier: for

10. For a sparkling recent analysis, see Peter Coates, “The Strange Stillness of the Past: Toward an Environmental History of Sound and Noise”, *Environmental History*, 10 (2005), pp. 636–665.

11. H.F. Prevost Battersby, *In the Web of a War* (London, 1900), pp. 75, 217.

12. Clay McShane and Joel Tarr. *The Horse in the City: Living Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, MD, 2007).

13. To quote Schafer on a broader point, R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT, 1994), p. 3.

example, “the chirp, psp, used in the United States to urge horses forward, is used to stop them in South Africa”.¹⁴ Many humans would have spoken rudimentary horse-human *patois*. They would have been able to understand that squeals and grunts indicated excitement; snorts signified interest or possible danger; a soft whicker was meant to reassure a foal or to express anticipation of food and a whinny meant the horse was all alone.

Some (largely male) humans were particularly familiar with the subtle nuances of the idiom – those engaged in the horse industry itself like grooms, stable boys, jockeys, those who used horses as part of their jobs like itinerant *smouse* (peddlers), transport riders, or communities that imposed horsemanship as a condition of manhood, like Boers from the eighteenth and Sotho men from the mid-nineteenth century. They were also able to understand the non-verbal vernacular, for example, the v-shaped tightening of the muscles behind the nostrils revealing of tension or the curled lips conveying a stallion’s interest in a mare in heat. These humans were able to interpret the flared nostrils of an excited or frightened horse, or the thunderous farting of a startled – or triumphant – horse. The horse in a stable or kraal with an *afdakkie* (lean-to) would have generated a cosy, familiar flatulence. Our history tends to be presented deodorized, as Roy Porter has pointed out.¹⁵ But a history of the bodily and corporal reminds one that the smell generated by horses was an everyday part of the life of a significant proportion of people.¹⁶

UNSEEN HAND OR HOOF?

Unconstricted spaces were also affected. The human sensory experience that was altered with the introduction of the horse age in South Africa, included the human experience of speed and the meaning of distance. This was, in fact, one of the reasons that they were imported from 1652 onwards, but a central motive was to utilize their capacity for short bursts of speed to impress local communities. The ability to travel at less intense but more sustained speeds proved useful too. A horse could cover well over thirty miles a day if not heavily loaded. With the physical elements of increased speed and, concomitantly, decreased relative distance – human geography itself changed. Distances between places started to be measured in number of days travel on horseback.

14. H. Carrington Bolton, “The Language Used in Talking to Domestic Animals”, *American Anthropologist*, 10:4 (1897), pp. 97–113.

15. Roy Porter in foreword to Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odour and the French Social Imagination* (London, 1994).

16. Again there was a dark side to the aural and aromatic experience: during the South African war, for example, people became familiar with the “foul whirr of flies where beasts have been slaughtered, the bitter odour from dead horse and mule”; Battersby, *In the Web of a War*, p. 130.

The extent and manner of travel were circumscribed by disease. Animal afflictions contributed towards dictating human settlement patterns, land use, trade and military capacity (for example, Bushmen soon learnt when the equine forces were weakened by sickness and reduced defensive or offensive capacity).^{17,18} Right from the beginning of the human movement from the coast to the interior, travellers faced an invisible danger more formidable than human or animals and tried to ward it off with remedies that were little more than talismans. They were advised, for example, to carry a bottle of the opium-based laudanum and administer it at once should their horse become sick (30 drops in a tumbler of water).¹⁹ This was because horses faced a barrage of dangerous afflictions.

Southern Africa presents a range of topographies and environments, from temperate to tropical climates, and thus offers a diverse pathogenic and parasitic menu: glanders or *droes* disease; farcy, strangles, or *nieuw ziekte*, *snotziekte*; lampas, *bota* or *papje*, biliary or gall-sickness, roll-sickness or, simply, worms.²⁰ But the real scourges were sleeping sickness and horse-sickness: the former lay in wait to the north and the latter inflicted devastating losses on the herds. They were both vector-born diseases. Particularly in the low veld and on the east coast in Zululand, trypanosomiasis or, colloquially sleeping sickness or nagana, was spread by tsetse flies.²¹ The result was muscle wastage, loss of energy, fever, anaemia, oedematous swelling, and neurological problems and possibly death (the species that infected horses did not infect humans, although they were affected by their own strain). Similarly, African horse-sickness did not affect humans: it is a seasonal midge-born viral disease of horses, donkeys

17. Nigel Penn, *The Forgotten Frontier* (Athens, OH [etc.], 2005), p. 124.

18. Livestock disease has attracted more interest from historians than other animal aspects: for a robust sample, see Karen Brown, "From Ubombo to Mkhuzi: Disease, Colonial Science, and the Control of Nagana (Livestock Trypanosomiasis) in Zululand, South Africa, c.1894–1953", *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 63 (2008), pp. 285–322; D. Gilfoyle, "Veterinary Immunology as Colonial Science: Method and Quantification in the Investigation of Horsesickness in South Africa, c.1905–1945", *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 61 (2005), pp. 26–65; W. Beinart, "Transhumance, Animal Disease and Environment in the Cape, South Africa", *South African Historical Journal*, 58 (2007), pp. 17–41; S.J.E. Vandenbergh, "The Story of a Disease: A Social History of African Horsesickness, c.1850–1920" (M.A. thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 2009).

19. *General Directory and Guide Book to the Cape of Good Hope and its Dependencies* (Cape Town, 1869), p. 142.

20. Overlaying this "natural" state are the parasites imported in successive waves by sheep-herding Khoikhoi, Bantu migrants with cattle, goats, dogs, chickens, and later Europeans with horses, donkeys, and pigs. No one knows exactly who brought the rat – but its remains have been found in archaeological digs dating back to 700 AD; B.L. Penzhorn and R.C. Kreck, "Veterinary Parasitology in South Africa", *Veterinary Parasitology*, 71 (1997), pp. 69–76.

21. The main tsetse-transmitted trypanosomes of *Equidae* are *T. brucei*, *T. congolense* and *T. vivax*.

and mules, and zebras, in decreasing order of susceptibility.²² Most animals became infected in the period from sunset to sunrise, when the culicoides midges were most active.²³

Over time horse owners came to use a mixture of local knowledge of disease management from pastoralist *Khoikhoi*, extrapolating from how they moved cattle as, of course, equine-specific disease had no local tradition of healing (and the first European settlers were not horse experts). Indeed, local knowledge came to be an amalgam.²⁴ Travellers noticed how the *Khoikhoi* would relocate their cattle if they manifested illness.²⁵ The first frosts of May provided the signal for the return of the horses.²⁶ By local observation, it became clear that horses grazing on higher lands stayed horse-sickness-free, so horse owners moved their stock strategically to higher elevation. Mountain ranges were often Crown Lands reserved in former days as sanctuaries for horses when “distemper was abroad”, infuriating farmers who coveted them for other livestock.²⁷

From the seventeenth century, and gathering demographic impetus from the eighteenth century, the new settlers established themselves in places where their horses could survive. The desire to reach horse-sickness-free zones determined range of settlement. In the early decades of the nineteenth century’s northward movement of people, legal boundaries were crossed in order to reach safe horse country. For example, the degree of immunity in the high Hantam lured potential horse-breeders.²⁸ The disease made depredations every year, but since the first crippling outbreak in 1719 (which killed 1,700 horses), roughly every 20 years the disease became epidemic: 1780, 1801, 1819, 1839, 1854, 1870, and 1891.²⁹

22. For a good discussion of the effects of these two diseases in particular, see K. Brown, “Frontiers of Disease: Human Desire and Environmental Realities in the Rearing of Horses in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century South Africa”, *African Historical Review*, 40 (2008), pp. 30–57.

23. The disease was endemic, and periodically became epidemic, and the really overwhelming epizootics spread intermittently from the disease’s endemic base in the eastern low veld.

24. As Beinart and McGregor acknowledge it “is a weakness of past writings that indigenous and scientific, African and settler ideas are often considered separately”; W. Beinart and J. McGregor (eds), *Social History and African Environments* (Oxford, [etc.], 2003), p. 3.

25. A. Sparrman, *A Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope, Towards the Antarctic Polar Circle, and Around the World, but Chiefly into the Country of the Hottentots and Caffres, from the Year 1772 to 1776*, [1785], (Cape Town, 1975–1977), pp. 216–217, 238.

26. William Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa, 1822–1824*, II (London, repr. 1953), p. 172.

27. KAB CO 4015, 657, Report from Field Cornet A. Van Zyl, 29 November 1842.

28. Livestock were relocated in crises to avoid other infectious diseases like lung sickness in the mid-nineteenth century; Christian B. Andreas, “The Spread and Impact of the Lungsickness Epizootic of 1853–57 in the Cape Colony and the Xhosa Chiefdoms”, *South African Historical Journal*, 53 (2005), pp. 50–72.

29. “The Horse-Sickness of South Africa”, *Veterinary Journal*, 7 (August 1878), p. 101. For a good discussion, see Vandenbergh, “The Story of a Disease”.

Mortality was very high: the greatest proportional losses occurred in 1854, with 65,000 horses and mules out of 169,583 lost, which meant a loss of £525,000 to the colony.³⁰ In 1870, a further 70,000 died,³¹ and in 1891–1893, 100,000 horses died, almost 20 per cent of the total stock.³²

Thus both the strengths and vulnerabilities of horses acted as an historiographic “unseen hand”, radically affecting patterns of human settlement. This underlines the point that including horses in human history does more than simply complete the story – it changes it.³³ Cataloguing the material difference horses made to human settlement patterns, transport networks, and military capacity (usually the twin topics that do receive attention from historians, so not discussed here),³⁴ social life, and even the human sensory experience, makes it clear that horses changed history; what is much less clear is how best to write that history. Clearly, horses were more than simply depreciable capital goods or data for a statistical series. This leads us to questions of how to write history that takes animals seriously.

WRITING THE HISTORY

Horses shared similarities with other under-represented groups: marginality from both the centres of power and record-keeping. Social history has long offered ways of discussing the oppressed and the silenced. Here one can learn from the ways in which other under-represented groups received historiographic recognition. Learning from other turns and sub-disciplines allows one to leapfrog historiographic cul-de-sacs and adapt the most promising methodologies. (Of course, to make the human–animal parallel is neither to conflate nor to trivialize the suffering of any sub-altern.)³⁵ One possibility is offered by the shift towards what the new social historians of the 1960s called the “worm’s-eye” view of history, which was liberating to a generation frustrated by the conventional histories of the elites.

30. The numbers soon climbed. Remarkably, the census of 1865 recorded 226,610 horses in the Colony; see also T. Bayley, *Notes on the Horsesickness at the Cape of Good Hope, in 1854–55* (Cape Town, 1856), p. 41.

31. *The Argus Annual and South African Gazetteer 1889* (Johannesburg, [etc.], 1889), p. 221.

32. J. Schreuder, “The Cape Horse” (Ph.D., Cornell University, 1915), p. 47.

33. A point Helen Bradford made about the fallacy of just “adding women” to history. See H. Bradford, “Women, Gender and Colonialism: Rethinking the History of the British Cape Colony and Its Frontier Zones, c. 1806–70”, *Journal of African History*, 37 (1996), pp. 351–370.

34. Robin Law, *The Horse in West African History: the Role of the Horse in the Societies of Pre-Colonial West Africa* (Oxford, 1980); M. Legassick, “Firearms, Horses and Samorian Army Organisation 1870–1898”, *Journal of African History*, 7 (1966), pp. 95–115.

35. See Philip Armstrong, “The Postcolonial Animal”, *Society and Animals*, 10 (2002), pp. 413–419.

Over the next twenty years historians began to focus on women's history, black history, gay history, the histories of colonized peoples and working-class histories. An illuminating case study is offered by women's history (which shares many similarities with "animal studies", as both contain practitioners in their stables from a liberal, middle-class tradition). The first wave of feminist interventions into historiography, which countered exclusively male narratives with a gynae-centric variant of "big-man" history, focused only on the powerful women of the past. This tradition of "herstory" was progressively succeeded by a second groundswell which focused on less powerful women, first as passive victims of patriarchy (just as the Fabian orthodoxy insisted the working class were just inert victims of *laissez faire*), then with the third-wave acknowledgement that, even under oppressive patriarchies, ordinary women possessed, albeit in limited circumstances, agency of their own (as Thompson and others did for the working class).

The parallels between writing the histories of both groups are striking. Horses and women have much in common historically: both were socially integral but subordinated groups that were not always conveniently tractable. Some characteristics of a horse, especially a display of self-will, were described as particularly female, as in an Afrikaans narrative from the early twentieth century, which noted: "it is always very difficult to foresee what a chestnut horse or a woman will do".³⁶

Drawing on the gendered or women's history paradigm, perhaps historians' first step could be simply to demonstrate that animals have a history at all. Just as the first "great women" were reclaimed by historians, historians claimed the animal equivalents like the racehorse *Horse Chestnut* and military leaders' chargers. Secondly, historians could find the ordinary horses, victims of society's oppression, like the nameless horse owned by Wolraad Woltemade who was compelled to rescue drowning sailors from a wreck until he drowned himself or the over 300,000 horses that died in the South African War.³⁷ Historians could ask whether an animal had a history that can be traced and expressed?

Firstly, clearly each animal has an individual history, a history often written on their bodies. The scarred knees of a Cape carthorse, saddle sore scars of a Maluti Mountains pack horse, the steroid-based bone problems of a racehorse all bear testimony to how horses endured human needs. Their history is reflected in their behaviour too. The cordite-injured police horse, the dead-mouthed schoolmaster, the bolting ex-racehorse all reflect their individual past experiences through their reactions to current experience.

36. "[A] is dit altyd baie moeilik om vooruit te sien wat 'n vosperd of 'n vrou sal doen"; Johann Buhr, "Manne te Perd", *Die Huisgenoot*, 16 October 1936, p. 22.

37. Royal Commissions of Inquiry, Military Preparation for South African War 1903: Cd. 1792, p. 97.

The second and third waves required documentation of women's ordinary lived experience which marked the turn to social history and life histories. One way around that is the focus on narratives and life stories.

Narrative forms are infused with specific notions of causality, they link the individual life and the sense of agency. Social history has uncovered the value of life-history research, with many of the most complex and detailed explorations of women's history incorporating extensive life history and personal narratives.³⁸ Similarly, the one way to approach writing history which takes animals seriously could be simple: just capturing the lived experience of particular creatures in the past. For example, static snapshots of the daily lives of horses in the past could be combined and run chronologically to create a picture of how an average day in the life of a horse changed over time, much as the first works on social history on women and the working class did.³⁹ This underscores the point that horse's lives can be discovered and that these lifestyles changed over time.

This would bring historians back to the question of agency, which occupies most discussions of oppressed groups by historians at present.⁴⁰ "Agency" has been the principal element of the third way of writing the history of the oppressed – finding a way to account for historical experience which recognizes simultaneously that history and society are made by individual action and that individual action, however purposeful, is made by history and society. This notion of agency is now explored in the context of multiple possible ways of writing horses into history. Efforts to locate agency in human groups are often seen as an act of redress. Equally, an approach to inserting animals into history might take the form of reparation, drawing on the approaches, for example, of feminist historians and historians of slavery, who emphasize what has been termed "compensatory" history.

A fissure lies in the division between researchers working from an academic activist position conducted in a spirit of commitment to praxis

38. Belinda Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng: Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900–1983* (Portsmouth, 1991) and Shula Marks, *Not Either an Experimental Doll* (Bloomington, IN, 1987) are especially significant exemplars of this approach and, similarly, for the life story of a male from an oppressed group, see Charles van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894–1985* (Cape Town, 1996).

39. For example, a picture of horses in the 1730s could be derived from Otto Mentzel, a German expatriate who lived at the Cape, who described: "At six o'clock, or if it rains hard, a little earlier, the [...] [horses are brought in with the other animals]. Each kind [of animal] is driven into its own kraal, but the saddle-horses are put in a stable. But unless they are wanted for riding the next morning, they are not on that account given forage at home"; Nigel Worden, *The Chains that Bind Us: A History of Slavery at the Cape* (Cape Town, 1996), pp. 50–51 (quotation from: Otto Mentzel, *Description of the Cape* (London, 1785)).

40. In other words they, as Marx said of humans, they "make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances"; Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, (1852) D. De Leon (trans.) (Chicago, IL, 1919).

and the non-partisan camp. This is part of a wider fissure in “green social sciences”: there is an ontological schism over the *raison d’être*. The first faction contends that animal studies should provide the representative voices for non-human animals in an institutional structure that considers them voiceless. This faction contends that, as animals do not speak for themselves and leave no texts, Marx’s formula regarding French peasants in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* is uncannily applicable to animals, who cannot create their own documents, oral or written, or author their own historical accounts: “They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.”⁴¹

One way of addressing animal agency is to reassess the idea of agency itself. Indeed, some have argued that the failure to question agency in the telling of history actually reproduces familiar forms of power.⁴² Efforts to reassess the histories of labour, girls’, the subaltern, childhood, and so on attack prevailing hegemonic notions of agency predicated on the idea of an autonomous individual, following the imperatives of rational choice, and aware of how the world works. Instead they searched for more subversive tradition although they still tend to structure narratives around political rebellions in public spaces. Yet “agency” and resistance are not synonymous and a search for agency should not be indexed by the presence of heroic acts of conscious self-determination.

Compellingly, on the issue of agency, historically humans involved with horses *recognized* their horses’ efforts as resistance: that is, there was contemporaneous identification of (animal) agency. For equine insurgence deemed incorrigible there remained capital punishment, as in the case of rogue horses executed. On a very obvious level, animal agency might also be seen as surfacing, at one remove, in the very constraints that humans have had to apply to them. The instruments of control – reins, stables, whips, bits, chains, curbs – tell their own story about the *need* for control. Horses exhibited what James Scott called the “weapons of the weak”.⁴³ Building on Thompson and Bourdieu, Scott argued that the displays of public domination by the elite differ from the camouflaged protest of the weak – for humans, millennial visions, gossip, (or horse maiming)⁴⁴

41. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York, 1963), p. 15.

42. Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, CA, 2002).

43. James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT, 1985).

44. Horses had a symbolic meaning that allowed people to exercise their “weapons of the weak” upon them. After horses gained a structured military use from the second half of the seventeenth century, there were several attacks on horses; two horses were killed in July 1672, for example, by *Khoikhoi*. It is not certain whether these attacks were motivated by the intent of obliterating horse stock or whether a horse acted as a proxy of white settlement, being perhaps one of its most visible and vulnerable manifestations. Horse maiming was sometimes undoubtedly a form of social rebellion in others contexts, as in Europe, for example. See Roger Yates, Chris Powell, and Piers Beirne, “Horse Maiming in the English Countryside: Moral Panic,

and for horses, even less conspicuous acts. Acts of rebellion might be quotidian, like the horse's flattening of ears and baring of teeth as the girth of the saddle was done up.

These small, private protests can easily be overlooked by historians. Yet, horses disobeyed commands, destroyed equipment, escaped; they resisted by, literally, "bucking the system", or "kicking against the traces" (albeit very rarely successfully). Horses were a great cause of untimely (human) death. Not only were horses frequently (albeit passively) embroiled in metaphorical downfalls – like that of Somerset and Branford⁴⁵ – they were commonly the active and direct cause of physical downfalls. Like other powerless groups historically, horses were exploited, they laboured, they produced, they followed human orders: they were a force in social change.⁴⁶ In the final analysis, it is hard to deny their agency.

THE VIEW FROM THE SADDLE

This brings one to the final way of approaching the writing of the history of the horse: from the perspective of the horses themselves. Just as Gutman suggested of Genovese's *World The Slaves Made* (he compared it to an imagined history of steelworkers which would begin with a 150-page biography of Andrew Carnegie),⁴⁷ the "world the horses made" is still too much a history of their riders. It is still too much the "world the horses were *made* to make" (by humans) rather than the "world they made". Equally, it is perhaps also too much *by* their riders. (Simply studying the unrepresented is not the same as seeing through their eyes; social history is not a synonym for "bottom-up history".)⁴⁸ The view from "below" is not presented, rather it is the view from "above" – literally, from those

Human Deviance, and the Social Construction of Victimhood", *Society & Animals*, 9 (2001), pp. 1–23; G. Elder, J. Wolch, and J. Emel, "Race, Place, and the Bounds of Humanity", *Society & Animals*, 6 (1998), pp. 183–202.

45. Governor of the Cape Lord Charles Somerset and his equine-induced career stumble is further discussed by Sandra Swart, "Riding High: Horses, Power and Settler Society". William Branford, a Cape Colonial Veterinary Surgeon, was struck from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons in 1880, after a mortifying court case over a lottery for a racehorse he owned; Beinart, *Rise of Conservation*, p. 141.

46. A horse's independence has even filtered into the human idiom in "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink". Indeed, recently, a judge of the South African Supreme Court of Appeals ruled against a tourist claiming damages after a fall, blaming the horse's owners; the court ruled simply that the owners could not be responsible for the horse's actions as "horses will be horses"; "Judge Finds a Horse Cannot Be Anything but a Horse", *Sunday Times*, 3 September 2006.

47. Herbert Gutman, in I. Berlin (ed.) *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class* (New York, 1987), p. 50.

48. For lively discussion see Jason Hribal, "Animals, Agency, and Class: Writing the History of Animals from Below", *Human Ecology Forum*, 14 (2007), pp. 101–112.

sitting on the horse's back. Thus, one gets a view of (and largely "from") the elite, not "of" or "from" powerless people nor the animals themselves.

After all, most individuals in the history of southern Africa neither owned horses, nor even had access to their use. Asymmetric access to the technologies of power, of which horses were one, buttressed elites. Horsemen had to have some power to even possess horses and, once they did, they could seize more power and deploy it more effectively by using horses, in a military capacity or in utilizing trade networks more lucratively.

Thus, unless one accepts the notion that animals, or at least domestic animals, are themselves marginalized or oppressed groups, using horses as a subject precludes much that is valued by social historians, which is telling the story of the marginalized and downtrodden. If one really wanted to tell a "bottom-up" social history story of the (human) marginalized, donkeys would be the better vehicle than horses. In the twentieth century, horse power became increasingly obsolete in commercial agriculture, although it remained significant in small-scale agriculture (albeit entirely secondary to the ox and, in some places, the donkey).⁴⁹

Donkeys were low-maintenance and low-cost; they were more resistant to diseases and could survive on even drought-shrivelled grasses. Similarly, donkeys were particularly used by women, since horses were the instruments only of the men in some societies, as in gerontocratic Basutoland (which started as an innovative borrowing by a vulnerable group but helped improve military capacity which bolstered the group's power). As Epprecht and others have commented, on account of the donkeys' perceived destructive grazing habits, they were the focus of a punitive campaign by the government in the 1920s and 1930s in Basutoland/Lesotho. The chiefs (at least ostensibly) supported the Basotho women against the state on this issue, preserving donkeys, which became a symbol of this gendered resistance.⁵⁰

49. Even though in South African urban areas, work horses are no longer widespread, horses are still used for neighbourhood deliveries and collections (like coal and scrap respectively), for example in Soweto, Thaba Nchu, and the Cape Flats. In a recent study it was estimated that in the more liminal rural areas of South Africa, 40–80 per cent of families engaged in smallholder farming use animal power for transport and/or crop growing, usually oxen; T.E. Simalenga and A.B.D. Joubert, *Developing Agriculture with Animal Traction* (Pretoria, 1997). In Lesotho, horses are still a key form of transport. Just after Union, whites owned 563,000 out of 719,000 horses, but this increased briefly to a highpoint of 767,000 in 1922, then steadily declined to 480,000 in 1926, 404,000 in 1937, 347,000 in 1947 and just 303,000 by 1950. Black ownership, which (given the racialized nature of South Africa's agricultural sector, was usually for small-scale production and for transport needs) stayed more or less constant (205,000 horses in 1926; 170,000 a decade later, 190,000 ten years after that, and 223,000 by mid-century mark). These figures are compiled from *Handbook of Agricultural Statistics* (Pretoria, 1904–1950).

50. Marc Epprecht, "This Matter of Women is Getting Very Bad": *Gender, Development and Politics in Colonial Lesotho, 1870–1965* (Pietermaritzburg, 2000), 48, 124.

In focusing on a different vulnerable group, Nancy Jacobs has carried out an extraordinary class-based analysis of “the great donkey massacre” of the 1980s in the homeland of Bophuthatswana. From the 1940s, the South African Native Affairs Department, followed by the puppet regime in Bophuthatswana, imposed authoritarian conservationist regulations. Only the rich could afford to accumulate cattle for status or commercial production or keep horses, but the poor were able to afford and maintain donkeys. Anti-donkey propensities transcended race and remained entrenched in class: affluent cattle ranchers and officials attacked the widespread agro-pastoralism of commoners, blaming their donkeys for precipitating erosion by first greedily devouring and then trampling the veld. Periodic small-scale donkey culls exploded, during a severe drought, into the arbitrary and savage slaughter of thousands in the so-called “donkey massacre” of 1983 – a silent massacre, hidden from the official archival record.⁵¹

Soldiers shot donkeys from inside their armoured vehicles. Some people tried to flee with the donkeys or even hide them in their houses: bloodied carcasses piled up, traumatizing residents. As a woman mourned afterwards: “It was like they were people”.⁵² Jacobs speculates that the killing was politically driven, designed to remind the commoners of the futility of opposition. It was in effect a demonstration of the power of the state over poor and disenfranchised people. Afterwards, the carnage became politicized, a cause against the Bophuthatswana puppet government and apartheid. A protest song was later written about the slain donkeys themselves haunting the puppet leader and urging listeners to join Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the ANC.⁵³

One could also use a focus on donkeys to tell the story of people perhaps even more liminal than the Thornveld agro-pastoralist, the itinerant sheep-shearing *karretjie mense* (donkey-cart people) of the arid Karoo, who represent a rural underclass, “the poorest of the poor”, tracing descent from Khoikhoi- and Xam-speaking San ancestors. Their nomadic *karretjie* lifestyle emerged only in the modern era in response to the wool industry’s changing needs. With fencing, the farmers’ needs for full-time shepherds lessened and their labour was required really only in the shearing season, so a floating excess labour force arose. At the end of the nineteenth century the shearers moved away on foot but within a few decades in the early twentieth century they adopted the donkey cars, constructed from defunct horse carriages and, later,

51. Nancy J. Jacobs, *Environment, Power and Injustice: A South African History* (Cambridge [etc.], 2003), p. 201.

52. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 203.

53. Today, Jacobs notes, in Kuruman a strong pro-donkey populism still lingers, redolent of moral significance to poor people, Christianity, the environment and democracy.

motor parts.⁵⁴ Numbering an estimated 5,000 by 1994, the *karretjie mense* received scant poverty relief measures with the coming of democracy; they were technically classified as coloured under apartheid, although as one woman observed: “We are too poor to be brown. We are the yellow people.”⁵⁵

Poor whites, an indigent group that excited much more public and state attention than the *karretjie mense*, were linked to donkeys also. As ownership of the beasts was racialized, there was concern from middle-class reformers and politicians about the reliance of indigent whites on donkey transport. For example, in the first decades of the twentieth century in the Cape, the state provided donkey transport for impoverished white school children who lived more than three miles from a school. The Carnegie Commission into the Poor White Problem, however, raised a widespread concern that: “Donkeys are most generally used for this purpose, and many teachers are of the opinion that the intimate association for many hours each day with this type of animal has an adverse influence on the child!”⁵⁶

FROM THE HORSE’S MOUTH

Thus, as a lens into the history of marginalized humans in southern Africa, horses are not as good a choice as donkeys. Although, they were (and still are) used on small-scale farms, in urban settings by itinerant coal merchants and the cart-drivers of the Cape Flats, in some urban settlements like Soweto, and are in widespread use in the highlands of Lesotho, even in these cases horse-owners (almost all men) represent an upper strata amongst the poor.

If, however, one were to try to embrace the teachings of social history to write through the perspective of “the silenced” in a very different way, one would have to offer an equine history of the world “from the horse’s mouth”. Aldo Leopold famously urged us to “think like a mountain”, but even thinking like another mammalian species has proved challenging to historians.⁵⁷ Yet historically, humans have put more effort into trying to

54. Their name came into use only in the twentieth century; Michael de Jongh, “No Fixed Abode: The Poorest of the Poor and Elusive Identities in Rural South Africa”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 28 (2002), pp. 441–460, 448.

55. “*Ons is te arm om bruin mense te wees. Ons is die geel mense*”; *ibid.*, p. 442. For identity politics and recent self-identification as San, see *ibid.*, p. 459. See also Michael de Jongh and Riana Steyn, “Itinerancy as a Way of Life: The Nomadic Sheep-Sheerers of the South African Karoo”, *Development Southern Africa*, 1470–3637, 11 (1994), pp. 217–228; and C.J. Van Vuuren, “Horses, Carts and Taxis: Transportation and Marginalisation in Three South African Communities”, *South African Journal of Cultural History*, 13 (1999), pp. 90–103.

56. E.G. Malherbe, *Education and the Poor White, Report of the Carnegie Commission*, III, (Stellenbosch, 1932), p. 241.

57. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford, 1966), p. 140.

understand the world from the horse's point of view than that of any other animal. As noted above, it was necessary for humans to think like a horse – to a certain extent – in domesticating them, training them, riding them – dangerous and intimate processes that compelled humans historically to see the world through horses' eyes far more than, say, the eyes of a cat or a snake.⁵⁸

Horses and humans would write very different histories. Both cultural and biological differences between the species would shape very different kinds of stories about the pasts. There are some similarities. Like some southern African human communities, feral equid societies are large and polygamous, and, like many humans, individual horses live in long-term, non-territorial reproductive associations.⁵⁹ Just as in most human societies, incest is avoided. In the herd, everyday decisions about where to eat are made by an older mare. Horses, like humans, have few physical defence mechanisms: both humans and horses use flight, but humans use tools and both groups' survival strategies centre on formation of strong social bonds. Social isolation is always highly correlated with extreme stress.

Unlike humans, however, horses are not obsessed with territory. Horses do not – in Scott's term – "see like a state". Moreover, with different obsessions, histories, and ecological niches, horses and humans fear different enemies. For example, horses and humans would tell very different stories about the South African War. As a Boer combatant observed, horses that had coolly withstood enemy rifle fire could be stampeded simply by a "night-roving porcupine".⁶⁰ The nature of horses' "cultures" varied geographically, depending on acquired knowledge of local conditions: for example, "In the Free State if a horse [saw] a tree it shie[d] at it."⁶¹

The second difference in the history narrated by horses would be the chronological and temporal structuring. The human horological obsession provides no template for how horses structure time. Furthermore, horses' nasal acuity allows them a broader temporal understanding than humans possess: their "nasal vision" allows them to see not only through space but also time. Thus, thirdly, our worlds look and feel different, and so, concomitantly, would our historiographies.

58. There have been South African horse-trainers who specialized and made it their sole profession, particularly in the twentieth century. But in southern Africa, the bulk of the population has trained – or "broken in" – its own horses over time by merely soliciting advice from the experienced, first simply over the fence post and later, particularly in the twentieth century, in the popular agricultural press. For an example of a professional, see TAD 34B/1922, R. v. Charles Orton; Leonard Flemming, "The Romance of a New South African Farm", *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 21:82 (1922), pp. 115–128.

59. J. Berger, *Wild Horses of the Great Basin: Social Competition and Population Size* (Chicago, IL, 1986).

60. Deney Reitz, *Commando: A Boer Journal of the Boer War* (Johannesburg, 1990).

61. Flemming, "Romance of a New South African Farm".

Our biological constraints show us a very different world: horses' hearing is far more sensitive than that of humans. A horse's sense of smell is acute – like hearing, it has evolved as a vital part of the defence system. There is the ongoing production and receiving of pheromone signals: smell messages produced by skin glands. Horses have an olfactory experience different from that of humans: they can smell emotions and sexuality, smell allies, enemies, and places. Members of a group are identified by a corporate odour. Particular smells – like those of fire and blood – resonate sharply and rapidly, generating understandable alarm in a predator-fearing herbivore species that evolved roaming highly combustible grasslands.

Historians and other humans tend to dwell in the realm of the visual. Equine sight is very different to human sight. Their eyes are large in comparison to other mammals, suggesting a reliance on that sense, and the size giving them good night vision. Unlike humans, horses focus by raising and lowering the head rather than altering the shape of the lens. Their eyes are on the side of the head with monocular vision so they can see separate objects with each eye at the same time, permitting wide lateral vision and curtailing only immediate frontal vision. This allows a grazing horse almost panoptic vision even at night, essential for a wary herbivore. Seeing like a horse was almost impossible for a human, but many tried to think like a horse, which was essential in the processes of domesticating and taming them.

An experiment in blurring the genres of *history* and *natural history* with an exploratory “horsetory” of the world is possible. It would be suffused in the horses' physical pleasure, memory, intense fear, and cyclical seasonality, their strongest traits as grass-eating prey herbivores, their fatal tendency towards over-eating and over-heating. It might be a story of grass, foals, blood, sex, pain, fear, food – perhaps mainly food. It is an interesting and helpful exercise to write history through the eyes of the horse, forcing one to adopt a new and sympathetically imaginative perspective. But it remains a Rorschach test, revealing more about me and my epoch than that of horses.

Similarly, social historians have received analogous critique for “ventriloquizing” their subjects, silencing the authentic voice “from below”, allowing only the narrative voice of the historian to be heard.⁶² Furthermore, how useful would a history of horses without humans be? As Thompson observed: “We cannot have love without lovers, nor deference without squires and labourers.”⁶³

62. G. Minkley and C. Rassool, “Orality, Memory, and Social History in South Africa”, in S. Nuttall and C. Coetzee (eds), *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1998), p. 98.

63. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (London, 1963, 1966), p. 9.

WAR HORSES

Perhaps the most analysed event in southern African historiography is the South African War, waged by the British to establish their hegemony in South Africa and by the Boers/Afrikaners to defend theirs. This is widely regarded as proportionally the most devastating waste of horseflesh in military history up until that time, and the slaughter was described by one officer as a “holocaust”.⁶⁴ Thus, it is used here as a vehicle to explore some of the trajectories outlined above – arguing that even a heavily analysed historical phenomenon can gain fresh insights from taking animals seriously.⁶⁵ Thus: firstly, simply including horses as living creatures not machines, secondly, deferring to the imperatives of a horse’s biology; thirdly, searching for evidence of their agency or even simply contemporaneous perceptions (by humans who coexisted with them) of equine agency.

Looking at the “real animal” (in this case, for example, the several hundred thousand horses imported by the British) requires an understanding of the historiography of the visceral. It redirects the attention of the historian back onto the body (a focus that has been distracted from the visceral by the “textual” and “linguistic turns”).⁶⁶ For example, it can be shown that horses’ systems impacted directly on British military advances in the early stages of the war. Horses’ breathing and eating systems merge, making it impossible for them to vomit.⁶⁷ Simple indigestion can thus mean death. Also, horses are stoic: as prey animals they hide pain due to the evolution of their survival instincts so as not to appear as the weak animal in the herd, which would draw a predator’s watchful eye. Thus, for the horses of the imperial forces, the eating of unusual fodder, drinking too much water after hard work, a spell out in very hot or very cold weather, unfamiliar pathogens and alien plants could all mean death. This led to a rate of wastage for the war of 25 per cent per month; that is, each horse had to be replaced once every four months.

64. Frederick Smith, *A Veterinary History of the War in South Africa, 1899–1902* (London, 1919), p. 226. After qualifying as a veterinary surgeon, Frederick Smith (1857–1929) joined the British Army in 1876, seeing service in India. From 1886 he was attached to the Army Veterinary School, Aldershot, transferring five years later to the Remount Department. He came to South Africa as a regular AVD officer in November 1899 and remained until 1905, serving as Principal Veterinary Officer after the war. After his return to England he was, in 1907, appointed Director General of the Army Veterinary Service, retiring in 1910, after which he dedicated himself to writing.

65. For an extended discussion, see Sandra Swart “The Last of the Old Campaigners”: Horses in the South African War, c.1899–1902, *Society & Animals*, forthcoming.

66. Translated, Lucien Febvre, “Sensibility and History: How to Reconstitute the Emotional Life of the Past”, in P. Burke (ed.), *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Febvre* (London, 1973), pp. 12–26.

67. For a good discussion see J. Edward Chamberlin, *Horse: How the Horse Has Shaped Civilizations* (New York, 2006), p. 17.



Figure 1. The corpses of horses slaughtered in battle.

Reproduced by kind permission of the War Museum of the Boer Republics, Bloemfontein.

Horses thus had to be acquired on a global level with much variation in suitability for the veld.⁶⁸ Equally, London's bureaucrats had little idea of the sheer complexity and diversity of "horse cultures" and "horsemanship". Horses imported from Argentina, for example, suffered because of "culture" rather than "nature": the horses would live semi-wild in little herds of riding horses. Each man-made herd always had one "bell mare" whom the others were trained to follow.⁶⁹ When separated for remount

68. In the first fifteen months of war, England and Ireland supplied 87,000 horses but the supply was insufficient, so a further 109,878 horses from the United States, 14,621 from Canada, 26,544 from South America, 64,157 from Austro-Hungary, 8,000 from New Zealand, 23,028 from Australia and 5,611 from India were imported; NAB, CSO, 1652, 1900/5324, Arrival of SS "Norfolk" from Buenos Ayres with horses under offer to military authorities, 1900; Harold Sessions, *Two Years with Remount Commissions*, pp. 8–9 (London, 1903); Smith *A Veterinary History of the War*, pp. 230–231; VAB (Free State Archives), Cd.882, Report on Horse Purchase In Austro-Hungary, 1902. Some estimates have it that 40,000 Australian horses were also imported into South Africa for the war; R.L. Wallace, *The Australians at the Boer War* (Canberra, 1976), p. 39; TAB (National Archives Repository, formerly Transvaal Archives Repository), MGP, 62, 577/01, Re – Prices for Australian Horses, 1901.

69. A horse was trained to follow the bell mare by having his head tied to hers for several days; Sessions, *Two Years with Remount Commissions*, pp. 99–101.

work in South Africa, he would panic for the loss of leadership of the “bell mare” and simply “pine for days or weeks” for his companions – a phenomenon unforeseen by the Remount Department.⁷⁰

The war helped both accelerate and highlight a time of changing association between human and horse. There was an obvious pecuniary incentive to treat horses well: the average imperial mounted soldier in South Africa went through seven remounts during the course of the war. On the British side, the peculiarly Victorian emphasis on “sentimentality” was increasingly visible in the relationship, especially following the 1877 publication of Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty: The Autobiography of a Horse*. Sewell’s novel had chronicled the rise and fall of a thoroughbred gelding, *Black Beauty*, from the pastoral pre-lapsarian bliss of his foalhood on a landed estate to his final misery as a cab horse working the streets of London. The novel mobilized the language of slavery to invoke calls for compassionate management, and Sewell’s effective use of anthropomorphism (advanced by the novel’s first-“person” narration by the eponymous *Black Beauty*) permeated popular consciousness.⁷¹

It arguably also helped to propagate the idea of seeing and talking about the horse as a “person”. Leaders had iconic horses that became wartime celebrities in their own right: General De Wet’s famous grey *Fleur* and General De la Rey’s “famous little white-faced pony”, *Starlight*; General Malan’s *Very Nice*, and General Smuts’s *Charlie*.⁷² Lord Roberts’s Arabian *Vonolel*, who had carried him in campaigns in India, Afghanistan, and Burma, actually won service medals from Queen Victoria.⁷³ Moreover, the war had seen a greatly increased discourse on caring for horses, which included references to the horses’ own agency and individuality.

Horses mattered as individuals in a way that other animals did not. Certainly, one of the seminal war narratives from the Boer side was originally entitled “Of Horses and Men”, which reflects that the position of the horse was not only pivotal but contemporaneously *understood* to be pivotal. Diaries, letters, and memoirs offer suggestive descriptions of the horse–human bond and new ways of articulating it. An affinity, and even a tentative analogy, was observed between common combatant and horse. Smith likened the English horses to “the townbred soldier”, both were “newly arrived” foreigners, “ignorant of the country”. On the Boer side,

70. *Ibid.*

71. See Peter Stoneley, “Sentimental Emasculations: Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Black Beauty”, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 54 (1999), pp. 53–72.

72. Reitz, *Commando*, p. 137. De Wet prayed to god to spare his *Fleur*, struck down by a foreign “English disease” and then, when prayer failed, buried him on his farm.

73. After the war, some British officers returning home tried to place their war horses on state stud farms to ensure a happy retirement for their old comrades; TAB LTG 53, 68/5 31 March 1903.



Figure 2. A Boer combatant and his emaciated horse.

Reproduced by kind permission of the War Museum of the Boer Republics, Bloemfontein.

Reitz observed as the war wore on that the Boers presented “long columns of shaggy men on shaggy horses”. On the other hand, he noted, the officers at General Smuts’s headquarters, in friendly derision, referred to the staff officer equivalents as *kripvreter*s (stall-fed horses who did not have to scavenge their food from the veld like ordinary horses).

There is evidence of a clear belief in equine agency. Reitz, for example, describes his horse, who was baptized *Malpert* (crazy horse) by the police at the government laager. *Malpert* was “possessed of the devil”. His methods of work evasion relied heavily on “kicking and lashing” until he left men somewhere “between cursing and laughing”. But Reitz maintained that *Malpert* came to respect only his brother and himself, as Reitz had once clung to him during one of his bucking paroxysms until *Malpert* was “bested”, and his brother had once doctored *Malpert*’s ulcerated back and he “showed his gratitude by obeying him”.⁷⁴ Thus, a measure of conscious agency was granted to the equine fellow combatants. Some Boers even granted their horses almost mystical powers, feeling that their horses could even warn them of danger ahead.⁷⁵

When conditions permitted, the corpses of horses were treated as bodies rather than meat.⁷⁶ Tellingly, one war correspondent noted that

74. Reitz, *Commando*, pp. 16, 144.

75. Standertonner (pseudonym), “Hendrik Prinsloo”, *Die Huisgenoot*, 4 December 1936.

76. Both preceding quotes Reitz, *Commando*, pp. 155 and 159.

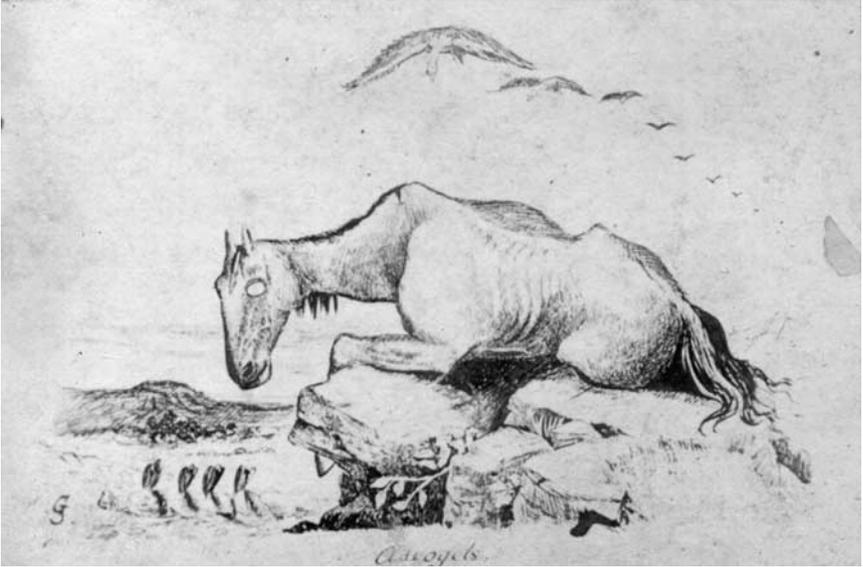


Figure 3. A caricature of vultures flying over horses.
 Reproduced by kind permission of the Campbell Collection, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

soldiers would try to prevent the vultures from feeding on fallen horses.⁷⁷ In a particularly revealing reflection, a British combatant described how his horse, *Peter*, had “learnt most of the philosophy that soldiering teaches; learnt to like ration biscuit, and to lick his lips when he was thirsty”. He continued that the

[...] horse with which one has lived happily for long hours, day after day, on lone and dreary marches, is bound up, unawares, with all the dreaming sympathies which such days breed. He is an unaccounted confidant; his spirit and courage have lifted the flight of reflections, and in the rhythm of his paces our vague thoughts have trod. One learns from the parting how close has been the comradeship, and feels, too, [...] a sharp reproof for [having kept] in a place of danger one innocent of all share in the quarrel from which came his end.⁷⁸

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored alternative ways to write history that tries to engage with the lives of animals. The social history of the horse–human relationship reveals how its experiences alter in time (and space) and

77. A.G. Hales, *Campaign Pictures of the War in South Africa (1899–1900): Letters from the Front* (London, 1901).

78. Battersby, *In the Web of a War*, pp. 217–218, 218.

concomitantly so does the social experience of that relationship. This kind of history could run the gamut between models of the labile and contingent versus the innate, or the social versus the biological. Nature and nurture are inescapably important – the two are locked together, and both need to be understood in writing social history. Looking at the real breathing animal points the historian back on to the material, while not ignoring the symbolic resonance of the horse. Of course, it is not a fundamental rewriting of southern Africa's past, but it changes, however slightly, how historians might write the social history of the South African War, for example.

In the shadow of the big stories about horses – war, conquest and colonization – exist small slices of personal, intimate history. These are the secret histories of how contact with horses changed how humans experienced the world physically and changed how some thought about the world and their own place in it. The sensory fabric of human life in southern Africa has been shaped by the coexistence of humans and horses since the mid-seventeenth century.

It is a useful exercise in historical empathy to write a hippocentric history. Of course, there are real undeniable differences in the way humans and non-human animals inhabit the world. But perhaps the anthropocentric notion of agency, like its inverse environmental determinism, is too simple to describe what takes place. The world the horses were “made to make” (by humans) was very different from the one they first entered, in which the only equids were quaggas and zebras, and they played a small but real part in effecting that change.