

London Zoo and the Victorians, 1828-1859

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The London Zoological Society was founded in 1826 by Sir Stamford Raffles and Sir Humphrey Davy, emerging at a time when interest in collecting and displaying human and nonhuman fragments of the natural world was intensifying. The growth of European empires and increasing efficiency of global translocation and communication allowed more and more of the exotic 'out there' of the world to find its way to Britain's domestic spaces. As an emblem of the exotic 'out there', a giraffe arrived in London to be displayed at the London Zoo in 1836. It was of the greatest interest, luring throngs of spectators to Regent's Park's beastly place, and there they perceived it in a number of complex and often seemingly contradictory ways. Not only was the animal an obvious icon of the imperial, it was imagined according to both scientific realisms and picturesque fantasies (chapter two).

The story of this animal's acquisition and display at the nation's founding zoological garden highlights many of the major contributions of this work to a number of interrelated historiographies. The book illuminates an unprecedentedly detailed picture of this globally-significant captive space. Significantly, it revises the importance of an explicitly imperial influence in and on zoos (the 'imperial trope'), and problematizes how the Society and its publics understood the specimens on display in the 'ark in the park'. These are important contributions to scholarship. Far from being thrust into the unquestioning minds of visitors, zoological knowledge was co-created by a number of agents at the Zoo, crafted from an astonishing array of socio-cultural influences (pp. 13–14). As a place characterised not by rigidity but by fluidity, Takashi Ito shows that London Zoo was, during its formative years, a space of segregation and integration, unity and heterogeneity (p. 165).

Divided into five substantive and largely chronologically configured chapters, and bookended by explanatory and intellectually astute introductions and conclusions, Ito's richly illustrated study examines the initial years of London's principal zoological garden through a number of revealing analytical lenses. At the core of this work is the contention that the Zoo was a contested space, rarely stable in its significances, and characterised by division and transgression among the human and non-human denizens of its urban jungle. The monograph also deals with three important and parallel matters – how the Zoo was idealised by those running it, how it was managed on the ground, and how it was received by its visitors. These three histories represent distinct ways of understanding the Zoo as an historic space, yet they are entwined in fascinating

ways. This review will firstly unpack the significances of each chapter, before offering some broader insights about the value of the work as a whole.

The introduction sets the stage for the work's substantive chapters, laying important groundwork in the process. Of particular note is the author's scepticism of the uncritical application of ideas and methods from social and cultural history (p. 3) to historic spaces. Although there is little elaboration here, I would suggest that Ito is in fact referring to previous interpretations of the semiotics of enclosure space (the significance of the downward gaze, for example).⁽¹⁾ Ito is right to be critical of these approaches, though it is a pity that he does not offer more on the problems these approaches pose to our understandings of captive spaces in the past.

Chapter one, 'The site of animal spectacle', examines the Zoo as a space of animal display in terms of the agents, ideas and locales that acted together to make its development possible at all. In examining the importance attached (just as it was within other zoological societies of the period) to the ways in which London Zoo was decisively unlike the 'vulgar' animal attractions of previous years, the chapter details the ways in which the Zoo was conceived of as a respectable space, far removed from the fatuous requirements of popular amusement (p. 27). Here education and recreation were to interact in ways which were often apparently contradictory. Conflicts over the configuration of animal enclosures, and complaints about the smell and noise emanating from the Zoo (although fading by 1831) reveal a range of differing ideas about what the Zoo ought to be. Some prioritised beauty over practicality, while others applauded the cleanliness of the zoo in the face of fear-infested criticisms of the diseases lurking within the gathering miasma of animal stench (pp. 31–3).

The Society's establishment of a museum in Burton Street, Piccadilly, shows an initial commitment to the promotion of scientific study (by 1828 the museum contained an astounding 600 mammals, 4000 birds, 1000 reptiles and fish, and 30000 insects ⁽²⁾). At the same time an ongoing tension between zoologists and breeders (for the zoo had a dual ideal of promoting zoology and acclimitisation) revealed an instability in the conception of the Zoo as a space of experimentation. Further, although the chapter provides an engaging analysis of the emergence of London Zoo, its contention that it 'promoted a harmonious image of human-animal interactions' (p. 46) is simplistic. At other zoos during the period predators were presented to visitors as constrained denizens of an antagonistic animal world. I suspect the story of the animal world depicted within the boundaries of London Zoo is much more complicated and contingent than Ito allows.

Chapter two, 'Collecting and displaying', examines the figure of the giraffe as a lens through which to understand the significance of the 'imperial trope' at the zoo during the period. Acquired from Egypt in 1836 (Egypt was not part of the British Empire at the time) through an array of parties, the giraffe was positioned in a hierarchy of animal life in which the exotic and extraordinary were highly esteemed. It was not necessarily an icon of the imperial. Instead it was an object of jealousy, of scientific interrogation, and of intensely personal fantasies. As a way into the revision of the 'imperial trope', this chapter makes much headway.

Chapter three, 'The question of access', is strong. Much existing literature assumes a bourgeois visitor demographic at zoos in the mid-19th century (though some zoos, like Bristol, were open to all, at least for much of the time, from the off). Ito reveals a more complex social picture. The question of who ought to be permitted access to cultural institutions emerged and intensified during the period, with London Zoo proving to be particularly influential. Questions surrounding Sunday opening and democratic access to the animal collection were at the forefront of the Society's consideration for much of this period, though Ito shows that there were significant spatial and class transgressions (pp. 90–100). The wanderings of one William Taylor are particularly illuminating. Ito reconstructs the paths trodden by Taylor on one particular day out in London in 1837. The British Museum and the Zoo were two of the places he visited on what appears to have been a leisurely stroll among the sights of the city. That Taylor was a footman and therefore not formally permitted entry to the Zoo (which was, at the time, a place *ideally* strictly reserved for subscribers and their guests) is important. Ito surmises that Taylor acquired his ticket from his wealthy female employer in the

West End. Ito convincingly shows that the Zoo was a place occupied by a diversity of human animals, and the social interactions unfolding therein were fluid rather than rigid and predictable, a place of recreation for a far more diverse demographic than the Society originally intended (p. 88). This created a social space in which visitors were looking at each other as much as at the animals on display (p. 106).

Chapter four, 'Between science and commerce', focuses on the ways in which the Society communicated with its public during the financial crisis it faced during the 1840s. During the period, the familiar tension between education and entertainment, between science and spectacle, reared its head in potent ways, and the Society was presented with a choice concerning the developmental path they wished to follow. The closure of the Society's museum (which had moved from Piccadilly to Leicester Square) in 1842, and the emergence of orchestral performances in the manner of Surrey Zoological Gardens are examples of a reconfiguration of priorities (pp. 109–10). Commercial pressures encouraged an increasingly multi-sensory spectacle to emerge in the form of feeding and riding (p. 127) (though both of these interactions were perhaps more complex than Ito allows), and the adoption of a 'boom and bust' cycle of extraordinary 'star' beasts that Ritvo originally pointed to in her *Animal Estate*.⁽³⁾ Obaysch, supposedly the first hippopotamus to be displayed in Europe since the Roman Empire's animal games when he arrived in 1850, was the first in a line of exotic novelties used to compel people to visit the gardens to catch a lingering glimpse of the strange (pp. 121–2). Ito persuasively argues that in an increasingly commercial world, the ideals of science had to be bent to the whims of entertainment.

The final substantive chapter, 'Illusory empire', brings the reader to the end of the story of the Zoo before the 1859 publication of Charles Darwin's epoch-defining *On the Origin of Species*. It considers how the failure of one of the Society's initial lofty ideals – acclimatisation, or the domestication and cultivation of exotic species – born out of the Kingston Farm in 1829, can help the historian understand the imperial place of the Zoo. Focussing on activities surrounding the acquisition and acclimatisation of Himalayan game birds, Ito argues that the effort struggled to get off the ground as a distinct scientific discipline in its own right. Through this analysis, he illustrates that the collaborations between the East India Company and the Zoo were hardly ordered, rarely moving beyond the spontaneous activities of individual agents. This was clearly not an example of a seamless symbiosis of science and empire often promoted in related studies, and further questions the applicability of the imperial trope to the London Zoo's international and domestic activities (pp. 160–1).

All of this makes for a major contribution to existing historiography on zoos in both the depth and detail it divulges on London Zoo's origins, its earliest patrons and publics, and its animal collection. It joins existing works, such as Blunt's *The Ark in the Park*, Akerberg's *Knowledge and Pleasure*, and Robert W. Jones' 'The sight of creatures strange to our clime', and builds on the attention London Zoo receives in Harriet Ritvo's seminal *The Animal Estate*, among other related studies.⁽⁴⁾ However, the depth of Ito's research into London Zoo's formative years is a novel and significant addition to our understanding of historical captive spaces and the ways in which they interacted with the wider world.

Further, Ito states that his research contributes to three key historiographies – cultural politics, public science, and animal history. The ways in which it convincingly does so, however, varies. Its engagement with animal history, for instance, could do with more depth and cutting edge. Its contention that people in the past related to nonhuman animals in complex, inconsistent and almost infinitely variant ways (p. 7) is commendable (and an insight which certainly sets the agenda for future examinations of the chaos of human perceptions of past captive creatures, at least). However, some of the key supporting pillars of animal studies, and by extension, animal history, are conspicuous in their absence. Reference to the human-animal borderlands, or a much deeper examination of the physicality of the nonhuman animal influence in this historic space would have enriched this work significantly as a contribution to animal history as an emerging sub-discipline. Instead, the historical 'agency' of animals is rather too quickly glossed over. Indeed, Ito argues that 'it cannot be said that zoo animals recovered their agency in the zoo' (p. 14). To dismiss animal influence in this way seems overly simplistic. Escapes, attacks, the development of reciprocal relationships, and the power of social science approaches such as systems and actor-network theories to illuminate

significant moments of animal influence in captive spaces needs further attention if we are to understand the capacity of animals to act in captive spaces. Further, key works concerning the animal presence in history and culture, including John Berger's legendary *About Looking*, and many of Erica Fudge's insights (see her *Animal* and 'A left-handed blow', for instance) are absent from the bibliography, and these might have put a bit more meat on the bones.⁽⁵⁾ Work on celebrity beasts, not least Nina J. Root's 'Victorian England's hippomania' are also not referenced in relation to the hippopotamus Obaysch in chapter four, while relatively recent Ph.D. theses of considerable value, including Jeffrey N. Hyson's 'Urban Jungles', and Narisara Murray's 'Lives of the Zoo: Charismatic Animals in the Social Worlds of the Zoological Society of London, 1850–1897' cannot be found.⁽⁶⁾ Nevertheless, the bibliography is extensive and well laid out, the author having read widely and consulted an impressive array of primary sources during his research. The work significantly nuances our understandings of Victorian science, in particular its networked and imperial conception. The footnotes are detailed throughout the book, providing clear direction to wider historiographies, crucial clarifications and elaborations.

Of special significance is Ito's engagement with what has been termed the 'imperial trope' of interpretation. Traditionally, 19th-century captive spaces have been seen as microcosms of the British Empire, emerging from the imperial moment and communicating strongly imperialistic messages to their visiting public. This work reconsiders the geographical influences on the Zoo, and the ways in which the Zoo and the public were receptors of an explicitly imperial message during these important formative years. Ito is accurate in his contention that the prevalence of imperialism in late 19th-century culture has too easily been applied in a rather reductionist manner to earlier periods (p. 54) and his revision of its significance in the Zoo's foundational years is convincing and a key contribution to the study of both zoos and imperial cultures. As his analysis of the acquisition of the giraffe in 1836 reveals, 'adhering solely to the concept of the imperial zoo fails to take into account the subtleties of the animal collecting networks as well as the geopolitical contexts within which they developed' (p. 71). That the case of the giraffe reveals a number of influences and ideas beyond the imperial is a critical insight and, in fact, it raises the question of whether the imperial trope has been applied far too liberally to the period of 'high imperialism' itself.

The Zoo as a questionably imperial zoo ought to make an appearance in the continuing debate between scholars influenced by the ideas of Bernard Porter and John M. MacKenzie.⁽⁷⁾ Ito himself poses pertinent allied questions for scholars to tackle. Should the human collection of animals always be called imperial or imperialistic? The answer, I would suggest, might be that imperialism comes in many guises, just as human power over the rest of the natural world manifests according to a variety of motives. What was the opposite concept of imperial zoo, and was there any such zoo? Are all zoos essentially 'imperial'? How do we label the present activities of modern zoos? If empire was the only category governing the zoo, Ito posits, it would have perished along with the British Empire (pp. 160–1). These are critical insights and questions for a historiography that has, perhaps, reached the point where it needs to move beyond the often exclusively imperial interpretative model to consider the sheer complexities underlying the 19th-, 20th-, and 21st-century zoological garden.

Ito's approach is methodologically impressive. His scepticism of the social and cultural approaches to the historical worlds of the zoo are commendable, as these provide only partial insights without empirical evidence to back up this way of understanding such a complex hybrid space. The impressive array of sources used, including diaries, official minutes, guidebooks, and personal papers mean that an understanding of the Zoo's earliest years can be extracted and reconstructed beyond those histories enshrined within official documentation like guidebooks and annual reports. Such documentation always tends to tell stories intended for the public domain. Instead, Ito's synthesis of materials uncovers a rich past of astonishing heterogeneity, and this ought to provide the benchmark for future deep analyses of particular animalscapes.

Despite these contributions, there are some problems here which need to be addressed. At times, the writing is awkward, which impacts on the readability of the piece; while textual errors sprinkled throughout (for example, pp. 2, 42, 54, 83, 88) disrupt the flow of the work. As well, its structure does not necessarily

provide a sense of logical development as the study develops. Furthermore, there are ways in which this work might have been developed in really interesting ways. There are minimal comparisons with other early zoos in Britain (except for the Surrey Zoological Gardens and London's Exeter Exchange on the Strand). The period under scrutiny here was one during which numerous zoos sprang up. Some survived (Bristol Zoo, for instance, which opened in 1836) while others failed (Liverpool had a number of failed zoos during the period). While space pressures are entirely understandable, comparisons with other zoos might have shed some light on the reasons underlying the failure of so many zoos where those like London eventually flourished.

Ito's examination of the early years of London Zoo, and the interactions between humans and nonhumans is a valuable contribution to scholarship, especially concerning captive spaces, Victorian science and the presence of the imperial. It sets the agenda for future studies. This book should be required reading for scholars and students.

Notes

1. Some have argued for an unconscious projection of human superiority through, for instance, the structure of animal cages and the placing of some animals in pits 'beneath' human spectators. The 'downward gaze' was symbolic of a fundamental human domination of nonhuman beings. See, for instance, Kay Anderson, 'Culture and nature at the Adelaide Zoo: at the frontiers of "Human" Geography' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, 20:3 (1995), p. 278; Eric Baratay and Elisabeth Hardouin-Fugier, *Zoo: A History of Zoological Gardens in the West*, trans. by Oliver Welsh (London, 2002), pp. 137–41; Bob Mullan and Garry Marvin, *Zoo Culture Zoo Culture* (Urbana, 1999) pp. 31–2.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Adrian J. Desmond, '[The making of institutional zoology in London, 1822-1836](#) [2]', *History of Science*, 23 (1985), 133–85.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), p. 217.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Sofia Akerberg, *Knowledge and Pleasure at Regent's Park: the Gardens of the Zoological Society of London during the Nineteenth Century* (Umea, 2001); Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier, *Zoo*; Wilfrid Blunt, *The Ark in the Park: The Zoo in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1976); Robert W. Jones, 'The sight of creatures strange to our clime: London Zoo and the consumption of the exotic', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 2,1 (1997), 1–26. Ritvo, *Animal Estate*.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. John Berger, 'Why look at animals?' in John Berger, *About Looking* (London, 1980), pp. 1–26; Erica Fudge, 'A left-handed blow', in *Representing Animals*, ed. by Nigel Rothfels (Bloomington, IN, 2002), pp. 3–18; Erica Fudge, *Animal* (London, 2002).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Jeffrey Nugent Hyson, 'Urban Jungles: Zoos and American Society' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Cornell University, 1999); Narisara Murray, 'Lives of the Zoo: Charismatic Animals in the Social Worlds of the Zoological Society of London, 1850-1897' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 2004).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford, 2004); John M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880–1960* (Manchester, 1984); *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, ed. John M. MacKenzie (Manchester, 1986).[Back to \(7\)](#)

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/95098>

[2]

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