

Animal City: The Domestication of America

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Late June 2020 was an extraordinary time to be reading *Animal City*. COVID-19, a zoonotic disease, had already killed around 130,000 people in the United States, with urban areas suffering the highest death rates. In New York City alone, 30,000 people had died. As scientists and the media attempted to pin down an animal source and intermediate host, America's slaughterhouses and meat-packing plants were emerging as infection hotspots. Meanwhile, anti-racism protesters were taking to the streets of more than 2,000 US towns and cities following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

Robichaud could scarcely have imagined a year like 2020 when he was writing this insightful study of nineteenth-century urban life. But *Animal City* is all the more powerful in the wake of events which expose myriad failings of government, regulation, public health, policing and justice; the far-reaching effects of social inequality; and alarming global developments in human–animal relations.

The author takes us back to a period (c.1850 – 1906) which, he argues, laid the foundations for the world that most Americans now live in, a world in which millions of animals support a way of life out of sight and mind. Within half a century, health and animal welfare reformers restricted the interactions that Americans had with animals to those which they deemed palatable, and they began by targeting urban-dwellers. This process would involve countless failings, missed opportunities, corruption and above all 'pervasive unintended consequences' which, Robichaud convincingly argues, Americans continue to live out (p.88).

This book joins a new generation of historical studies of human–animal interactions in the United States, building on William Cronon's ground-breaking *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991). 2014 brought Catherine McNeur's *Taming Manhattan*; 2016 Frederick Brown's study of Seattle, *The City Is More Than Human*; and 2019 Joshua Specht's *Red Meat Republic*, to name just a few.⁽¹⁾ Robichaud's particular interests in urban animal nuisance, regulation, and welfare have long been at the forefront of both British and North American animal histories, and the nineteenth century has received considerable attention. Nevertheless, Robichaud delivers something fresh and substantial which should satisfy a wide range of readers, both academic and general.

The book's central argument is that human health and animal welfare reform went hand in hand with growing alienation from the animals that put food on urban plates. Three of its seven chapters focus on San

Francisco's evolving relationship with livestock. The subtitle, 'The domestication of America', might raise expectations that the book covers multiple cities across the country. In fact, Robichaud concentrates on San Francisco and New York City, while making concise but valuable points about several other cities including Boston, Chicago, New Orleans, and Cincinnati, as well as London, Paris, and Berlin. In a study which already covers extensive physical and thematic ground, I found this approach effective, supported as it is by the author's care to avoid generalisation. Moreover, while New York's animal history has received prior attention—Robichaud offers many new insights, not least into the city's swill dairies in chapter one—San Francisco was crying out for an in-depth survey, which the author skilfully delivers.

Chapter two examines San Francisco's gradual shift, between 1850 and 1870, from a 'complaint-based' reactive system of slaughterhouse regulation to new laws which prejudged these businesses, along with hog ranches, as nuisances (p.72). Robichaud demonstrates that this 20-year "war on butchers", which culminated in the creation of a suburban slaughterhouse district, Butchertown, brought about an early form of zoning. In the 1850s, cattle droves continued to cause offence and havoc in the streets as the authorities struggled to enforce new slaughterhouse licensing and zoning laws. Facing crippling complaints and fines, shifting boundaries and other uncertainties, some butchers appeared as keen to find a permanent solution as their opponents. In the 1860s, a cluster of intensive slaughterhouses and hog ranches sprang up along Mission Creek, attracting the attention of the city's new Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), Board of Health, and police. The resulting clean-up campaign, utilising tougher laws and enforcement, just as new railroad lines were being constructed, proved pivotal. After a bitter last stand in 1870, the butchers gave in and moved to the new Butchertown in the tidelands, 'out of sight and smell of downtown residents' (p.81).

The unintended consequences of this victory for progress are exposed, to devastating effect, in the next chapter, 'Blood in the Water', for me the book's most significant contribution. San Francisco's reformers not only wanted to put distance between people and livestock, they sought to alleviate nuisances by exploiting the natural environment in and around Islais Creek. Their grand ambitions quickly unravelled, not least because the tides proved insufficient to wash away the huge quantities of blood and offal that the new stilted slaughterhouses were discharging. Watercress, shrimp, migratory birds and milch cows now marinated in putrid water, with tragic implications for the low-earning men and women who lived off them. To make matters worse, Butchertown's slatted floors laid the foundations for a future health crisis: San Francisco's post-earthquake rat infestation and subsequent outbreak of plague.

A more immediate consequence of the public health laws which created Butchertown was the rise of hog ranches attached to, or worse still, beneath kill floors. An 1888 ordinance banned the latter, while further rules demanded that offal fed to hogs must be boiled beforehand. But regulating how firms operated proved even more difficult than controlling where they did so. Health inspectors began to have more success in the 1890s but Robichaud suggests that by reducing the amount of offal fed to pigs, reformers may have unwittingly fuelled an explosion in the city's rat population. Robichaud's attentiveness to such regulatory, agricultural, and ecological connections lies at the heart of what makes *Animal City* such an interesting study. The 1906 earthquake sent Butchertown's stilted slaughterhouses crashing into the bay and, while some were rebuilt, the site entered a state of terminal decline. Robichaud sums up Butchertown's bloody history as one of 'wilful invisibility, neglect, and denial—or worse, out-right desecration. In many ways it was a sacrificial landscape' (p.126).

Chapter four explores the evolution of animal protection societies, particularly San Francisco's SPCA. In doing so, Robichaud explores the motivations of those who sought to civilise America's cities. He gives considerable credit to these reformers for their good intentions and deeds, but demonstrates that their creation of 'invisible landscapes of animal suffering and death' was 'unintentionally counterproductive' (p.138). The removal of animals and slaughterhouses from San Francisco in the interests of public health soon placed geographical and logistical constraints on the SFSPCA's ability to enforce animal protection laws. The SFSPCA's powers fizzled out before they reached the outskirts of the city, and Butchertown. No one knew this better than Captain Henry Burns, the Society's special agent in the 1870s. Burns would

eventually lose his job, ostensibly because his valiant efforts to police the treatment of animals—as they were unloaded from railroad cars and steamships, and driven to Butchertown—were financially unsustainable.

In a sprawling and increasingly segmented system of farming, transporting, and killing animals, individual responsibility and wanton cruelty were too hard to prove and fines almost impossible to extract. It was far simpler to tackle someone mistreating a horse downtown, and this is precisely what the Society opted to do. But efforts to protect equids hit poor workers hardest. While drivers employed by firms usually got away with a warning, Italian vegetable peddlers received hefty fines for working injured horses and mules. The Society brought thousands of prosecutions between 1878 and 1919 but virtually none were against corporations. In the meantime, ‘Out of sight, the abuse of livestock faded from public consciousness’ (p.157).

Robichaud tenaciously exposes the social tensions underlying urban animal regulation in this period. He is commendably and consistently sympathetic to the ‘low-hanging fruit’—the small-scale dairymen, the poorly paid drovers and slaughtermen, the tradesmen employing a single horse, the ragpickers, and others—who repeatedly lost out as a result of health and animal welfare regulations, while the big players evaded enforcement or paid their way out of trouble (p.120). He acknowledges that the 20-year “war on butchers” made life for them frustrating, ‘unpredictable and itinerant’ (p.60); and describes the difficulty and danger of slaughterhouse work. Throughout, the book is impressively alert to the connections between human–animal relations and social inequality. Somewhat disappointingly, however, it very rarely names individual workers or presents their specific actions or words. This may reflect a scarcity of evidence—as Robichaud briefly indicates on a couple of occasions—but perhaps it also stems from a desire to focus on reformers and their agents, all of whom the author brings to life very effectively.

Chapter five takes us back to New York for an original examination of canine labour, specifically dog-powered mills and the pulling of ragpickers’ carts. In the former, reformers perceived unnecessary cruelty, in the latter social degradation. These animals ‘did not fit the emerging ideals of dogs as companions, friends, and pets’ (p.177). The city’s ASPCA (American SPCA) duly went on the offensive and, by 1880, the number of ragpickers’ dogs had fallen sharply. Machine dogs may have been rarer in the city but, as a fascinating legal case involving a cider mill and an animal named Bounce illustrates, they could be even more contentious. In the end, the ‘humane ideal of pet ownership’ won out, but once again there were human casualties (p.195).

The final two chapters turn to animal entertainments. The first focuses on the volatile relationship between ASPCA founder Henry Bergh and the showman P.T. Barnum in the 1860s–80s. Robichaud opens with the stomach-churning spectacle of a boat filled with live bears, bison and other animals being deliberately cast over Niagara Falls in 1827. By contrast, in 1886, as a circus horse was about to walk a tightrope over the Falls, the ASPCA stepped in and shut the event down. Animal entertainment had been ‘cleansed of visible suffering and death’ but, as Robichaud reveals, this process was riddled with controversy, contradiction and deception (p.198). Blatant animal suffering, which risked stirring up harmful human thoughts and feelings, faded from public view but persisted in the shadows, unchecked and excused. Chapter seven examines the development of Woodward’s zoological gardens in San Francisco over roughly the same period. Robichaud reveals how the attraction increasingly monitored and regulated its human visitors, as well as its captive beasts, ‘to create a placid experience’ (p.240). But behind the scenes, the author argues, Woodward’s was not so different from the city’s slaughterhouses and hog ranches. They all relied on animals suffering in far-removed, invisible spaces to supply agreeable goods to civilised city-dwellers.

Animals may be at the heart of Robichaud’s examination of regulatory, environmental, and cultural change, but along the way their physicality and behaviour can fade into the background. I found the book most compelling when the author coaxed these animal actors back into the light, for instance when New York’s feedlot cows were refusing to eat their swill; when we meet Butchertown’s snarling yet selectively companionable dogs; and when he acknowledges the canine intelligence which ragpickers relied on. Throughout, Robichaud meticulously and evocatively describes weather, tides, and habitat, particularly in

chapter three, a truly immersive survey of Butchertown's horrifying environmental impact.

The horse—arguably the most influential quadruped living in nineteenth-century American cities—receives surprisingly little attention in Robichaud's analysis. This is perhaps because horses were not zoned out of San Francisco or New York, the process which the book is most interested in. The author clearly explains, albeit briefly, that moving livestock out of cities encouraged a rise in horse traffic, that horses transported myriad goods through the streets of San Francisco, and rebuilt the city after the 1906 earthquake. But the book stops short of discussing equine intelligence, behaviour, or interactions with people in detail. This would, I think, have helped to flesh out why horses continued to be deemed essential and acceptable presences downtown while cattle and pigs were not. While Clay McShane and Joel Tarr have offered valuable insights into nineteenth-century American urban horse work, as has Ann Norton Greene, these studies leave plenty more to be said.⁽²⁾ This seems something of a missed opportunity in what is an otherwise generous study.

Robichaud avoids forcing lessons from history on his readers but offers plenty of food for thought in the midst of a pandemic, environmental crisis, and escalating tensions, both domestic and diplomatic. I was struck, for instance, by the observation that fear of Chinese immigrants spreading infectious diseases was a major impetus for San Francisco establishing its Board of Health in 1865. Three years later, a representative in California's State Assembly hastily dropped his proposal to extend protection to "Chinamen and Indians" under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (p.132). Much has changed but human and non-human animal lives remain intertwined.

Thoroughly researched, convincingly argued and engagingly written, *Animal City* offers a great deal to researchers, students, and general readers interested in urban, environmental, or social history. Perhaps most importantly, it encourages us to confront the various forms of human and non-human animal suffering which we continue to force out of sight and mind, with all the unintended consequences that this might entail.

Notes

1. W. Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991); C. McNeur's *Taming Manhattan: Environmental Battles in the Antebellum City* (Cambridge, Mass., 2014); F. L. Brown, *The City Is More Than Human: An Animal History of Seattle* (Seattle and London, 2016); J. Specht, *Red Meat Republic: A Hoof-to-Table History of How Beef Changed America* (Princeton, 2019).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. C. McShane and J. A. Tarr, *The Horse in the City: Living Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, 2007); A. Norton Greene, *Horses at Work: Harnessing Power in Industrial America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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