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## ROMANTICISM AND ANIMAL RIGHTS

In England in the second half of the eighteenth century an unprecedented amount of writing urged kindness to animals. This theme was carried in many genres, from sermons to encyclopedias, from scientific works to literature for children, and in the poetry of Cowper, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Clare, and others. *Romanticism and Animal Rights* discusses the arguments writers used, and the particular meanings of these arguments in a social and economic context so different from the present. After introductory chapters, the material is divided according to specific practices that particularly influenced feeling or aroused protest: pet keeping, hunting, baiting, working animals, eating them, and the various harms inflicted on wild birds. The book shows how extensively English Romantic writing took up issues of what we now call animal rights. In this respect it joins the growing number of studies that seek precedents or affinities in English Romanticism for our own ecological concerns.

DAVID PERKINS is Marquand Professor, Emeritus, at Harvard University. He is the author or editor of nine books including *The Quest for Permanence*, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Sincerity*, *English Romantic Writers*, *A History of Modern Poetry*, and *Is Literary History Possible?*

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DAVID PERKINS

*Harvard University*



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*For Morle, Midget, Musch, Lite, Silkey,  
Poldi, Tommy, Tonio, Pronto, and Louie*

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## *Preface*

Fellow feeling for animals, compassion, kindness, friendship, and affection are expressed in every time and place and culture, in primordial artifacts, Egyptian tombs, Homer's description of the old dog Argos, as much as in Henry Moore's 1980 drawings of sheep. Perhaps no argument for kindness to animals was ever made that had not already been made long before. In England, however, in the latter part of the eighteenth century, there was a change, a gradual, eventually enormous increase in the frequency of such expressions. Kindness to animals was urged and represented in sermons, treatises, pamphlets, journals, manuals of animal care, encyclopedias, scientific writings, novels, literature for children, and poems. There were also, of course, writings on the other side, defenses of traditional practices, such as bullbaiting, but they were far less numerous than the literature I foreground. To what extent all this writing registered or helped bring about a general change of mind, and to what extent it contributed to developments in the actual treatment of animals, are questions that cannot be answered with much certainty. I pursue them briefly in a moment, but the literature itself, the discourse, is my primary subject.

There was a close connection between the cultural world we call Romanticism, with its ideals of sympathy, sentiment, and nature, and the tender attitudes expressed in writing about animals. But these ideals might also be said to characterize what we call the Enlightenment, as might the practical, reforming benevolence that was strongly evident in this discourse, and the nexus I focus on might be called Enlightened as well as Romantic. The other half of my title, "animal rights," is hardly more precise, for the phrase has become a catch-all for any protest against cruelty to animals. A headline in today's newspaper reports "British Researchers on Animal Rights Death List." Whether or not the terrorists who made this list believe that animals have rights is unknown, for even if they were motivated only by pity and rage, they would still be called "animal rights activists." Accordingly,

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I adopt the phrase “animal rights” as a shorthand term for kindly attitudes to animals and pleas for reform in the treatment of them.

The place of focus is Great Britain, and given this already large terrain, there is no attempt to expand further into colonies and possessions overseas, or into the United States, although this would permit some interesting comparisons. The period of time to which the book attends is 1750 to 1830 with occasional excursions into earlier or later moments. Within this period, the amount of writing that concerns or touches significantly on animals approaches the numerical sublime. I do not in the least attempt to survey all this, but notice only the portion that is relevant to animal rights, an amount of writing that is still unmanageably much.<sup>1</sup> After preliminary chapters of a more general kind, the material is divided according to specific practices that particularly influenced feeling or aroused protest: pet keeping, hunting, baiting, working animals, eating them, and the various harms inflicted on wild birds. To represent the spread of Romantic attitudes on these topics, many authors are cited, but to me the individual case is more interesting and in some ways more revealing than an array of quotations from different sources. For this among other reasons, I have included in most chapters longer readings of single authors or texts. These are contextual readings in the sense that the texts are viewed amid other discourses on their subject and close readings in the sense that the texts are considered in detail. Robert Burns, William Cowper, Christopher Smart, Thomas Day, Sarah Trimmer, John Aikin, Letitia Barbauld, William Wordsworth, John Clare, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Lamb, and many others could be described as animal lovers, even as immoderate ones. What, then, motivated their attitude? What did they deplore, what hope for in human relations with animals? Cumulatively, the book shows, I hope, how extensively English Romantic writing took up issues of animal rights. In this respect it joins the growing number of studies that seek precedents or affinities in English Romanticism for our own ecological concerns.

Reading these descriptions of animal suffering at the hands of humans, these protests against it, I interpret them more or less literally. In other words, I emphasize that the concern was for animals, for their woes, more than it was, in most of the texts I cite, for the socially subordinated humans that animals might represent figuratively. Writings about animals in the eighteenth century spread nets of figuration to allude also and variously to children, women, servants, the lower classes, slaves, colonized peoples, and other races. Such tropes were age old. When such figurative meanings are not obvious in the texts, they can be interpretively supplied. Persons who are especially interested in one or another of these groups naturally develop



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such readings. Thus G. J. Barker-Benfield, discussing women authors of the eighteenth century, argues that when they wrote about animals, they were referring to their own situation: the contribution of sentimental fiction to “revolutionary attitudes toward animals was a kind of surrogate feminism.”<sup>2</sup> Carol J. Adams argues that “animals’ oppression and women’s oppression are [and were] linked together.”<sup>3</sup> Moira Ferguson thinks that in the texts by women that she discusses, the situations of women, colonialized peoples, the working class, and the poor were all linked together and represented in discourse about animals.<sup>4</sup> Similarly allegorical readings easily suggest themselves with reference to other social groups. I pursue such readings myself on occasion. But to all such reading there is the objection that it crowds the stage and divides the spotlight. Whatever social group animals and their treatment are said to figure becomes the real center of concern, displacing the animals. If this is not a further exploitation of animals, it at least diverts attention from their suffering. Most of the authors I quote took up this suffering as a humanitarian cause in its own right.

Though this study deals with writings that are now more or less two hundred years old, the feelings and arguments they express are still with us, still sometimes controversial and even, in some cases, hotly and freshly so. The arguments deployed pro and con were much the same as they are now. The main exception was a once persuasive argument from religion that is now much less current. But in applying this material to the present day, the reader should keep in mind that the same or closely similar arguments may have dissimilar meanings in a social, cultural, and economic context of utterance that has changed enormously.

Given that my subject matter, though historical, is still controversial, the reader may wish to know where I am on questions of animal rights, from what standpoint the book is written. My purpose in this paragraph is only to confide, not at all to argue, which would require vastly more pages. I do not believe that creatures, including human ones, have natural rights. In an earlier part of my life I worked on a small farm and I have kept pets for years. Thus I know from experience as well as from books that emotions directed to animals may be very intense and are likely to be in conflict with each other. However great the affection we have for our animals, we still generally intend to eat, work, cage, or at least dominate them, and even hunters are likely to say that they feel a tug of the heart toward their victims. Romantic authors generally assumed that the best thing for animals was to be far from humans, living their wild lives without interference. This Romantic opinion seems correct, though as a wish it is Utopian. I do not share the further Romantic belief that nature (or God) suffuses the natural

lives of animals with happiness, but at least in the wild they can follow their instincts freely, as they cannot in zoos, pens, cages, and houses. Moreover, even if human relations with animals involved no harms or hindrances to them, we would still, I think, confront perplexing moral questions, at least in situations such as pet keeping and farming, where we live with animals. A relationship cannot be morally healthy that is utterly unequal, the one dominant, the other helpless and vulnerable. And however much we interact with animals, we have at best only a limited understanding of them. Just as they, I presume, can relate to us only as though we were somewhat peculiar cats, dogs, horses, cows, or parrots, we inevitably humanize them. We have no other basis than ourselves for interpreting their behavior and emotion, no basis, certainly, that serves immediately in daily life. Projective self-deception takes place in all human relationships, but when it becomes obvious and extreme, we are entitled to view it ironically. As a pet keeper with moral qualms, I am inconsistent, like most of the authors in this book, and I compromise principles with practicalities. But I strongly favor kindness to animals, much more than exists at present, and, in short, can confess of myself what Byron says of Don Juan:

He had a kind of inclination, or  
 Weakness, for what most people deem mere vermin,  
 Live animals: an old maid of threescore  
 For cats and birds more penchant ne'er displayed,  
 Although he was not old, nor even a maid.<sup>5</sup>

I come now to the historical significance and consequences, if any, of this discourse. My purpose is only to remind, briefly, of difficulties in addressing such questions. Because so much more writing than in the past urged kindness to animals, it seems reasonable to suppose there was a changed climate of opinion in the later eighteenth century. The writers, in other words, were not speaking only for themselves but for many other persons who were subject to similar influences and harbored similar sentiments. And certainly many social, economic, and cultural developments underlie this literature, enabling and evoking it, and the literature itself was, of course, an additional factor in disseminating concern for animals. The impression that there was a changing climate of opinion is supported by the gradual waning or suppression in this period of cock-throwing, bullbaiting, and similar sports of the common people. Eventually bills to prevent various abuses of animals were brought in Parliament and in 1822 the first was passed. Thus the writings I take up can be said to testify and contribute to sentiments that gradually had practical results.

But if there was a climate of opinion, it is not easy to say where it pervaded or who were its social bearers. So far as I have been able to discover in the secondary literature, there were not pronounced differences by region.<sup>6</sup> Modern conceptions of class seem not to apply very well to eighteenth-century England.<sup>7</sup> But contemporaries recognized, of course, a “middling sort,” and if we locate this sort within families having incomes between £100 and £1,000 a year, they would make up between 15 and 25 percent of the population around 1800.<sup>8</sup> This group would include many lawyers, doctors, clergy, farmers, merchants, shopkeepers, craftsmen, and the like, and it was from such families that most writers emerged. Several, however, belonged to the gentry, such as Shelley and Byron, and some, such as Robert Burns and John Clare, were from lower positions on the social scale. Of course one might argue that in becoming writers their social identification altered; they would be perceived, compared, and talked about with other writers. Beyond the writers themselves, animal sympathizers would probably be found more among the genteel or respectable middling sort than among the low and poor and more in towns than the countryside. But Methodists were preaching kindness to animals, and villagers kept pets as much as anyone else. A further difficulty is that concern for animals varied according to the usual inconsistency of human nature and also according to interests. A person might deplore one thing and see nothing wrong with another that, to different minds, seemed just as cruel. Wordsworth wrote movingly against hunting but was an enthusiastic angler, for which Shelley attacked him.<sup>9</sup> Fox hunters denounced bullbaiting and horse racers drovers. All this writing was done with quills plucked from live geese.

Moreover, it is hard to disentangle the impact of literature and of sentiment from other causes that were also in operation. The practical reforms that can be cited might have come about anyway. Cock-throwing and bullbaiting attracted crowds, and these were often rowdy. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries such amusements of the people had been attacked by Puritans as occasions of drinking, gambling, swearing, and idleness. Methodists, evangelicals, and others continued this criticism in the eighteenth century. For such reasons and also because they were imbued with ideals of refinement, genteel persons in towns generally avoided such scenes by 1800. Moreover, as the towns grew larger, the magistrates were more concerned and challenged to maintain public order. Industrial production, though still relatively localized in 1800, required that expensive factories and machines not stand idle. The need for a sober, disciplined, and reliable workforce furnished another objection to bullbaitings and the like. Thus benevolent sentiment about animals could be co-opted, so to

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speak, and we could describe it *à la* Foucault as part of a disciplinary effort directed against the lower orders. Indeed, exactly this was said about it in Parliament. A typical expression of the magistrates may be quoted from the Norwich Court of the Mayoralty, which in 1759 ordered that constables patrol the streets to enforce a ban on Shrovetide cock-throwing, “in just abhorrence of the cruel practice . . . and to prevent such disorders as usually arise therefrom.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly the magistrates of Stamford affirmed in 1788 their intention to suppress the annual, November 13 bull-running in their town, “a custom of such unparalleled cruelty to an innocent animal, and in all respects a Disgrace to Religion, Law, and Nature.”<sup>11</sup> Reading such statements, it is hard to know whether sentiments of humanity or concern for law and order were the primary motivation, and it is certainly possible that the former were put forward to ornament the latter. Historians usually explain such reforms as took place in the treatment of animals as the joint working of many factors, of which a changing attitude to animals was one.<sup>12</sup>

Neither is it clear that there was, on the whole, more kindness shown to animals in 1830 than in 1750, though there was more lip-service about it. Though bullbaiting and cock-throwing were on the wane, horse racing and cockfighting flourished, as horse racing does to the present. For these amusements were patronized by the gentry, which had the political strength to protect them, as of course they did hunting, which gathered more support than ever in the period I discuss. Fox hunting especially increased then. “There were 69 packs of hounds in Britain in 1812 and 91 in 1825.”<sup>13</sup> As for the conditions and treatment of work and farm animals, and of those driven to markets and slaughtered, there was probably mitigation in some respects and greater harshness in others. The description given by Lewis Gompertz of these matters in 1829 does not suggest that amelioration had taken place.<sup>14</sup> Roy Porter was probably thinking of coach horses, among other things, when he suggested that “society’s victims wrung fresh pity and guilt because they were being more savagely exploited than before.”<sup>15</sup> In 1830 wild birds were still netted in vast numbers to be eaten or to become parlor pets in cages. If the perspective is extended to the present day, there is still no clear vista of improvement. I would not know how to weigh the sufferings of contemporary hens in batteries and hogs in hog cities against those of their ancestors in 1800, except that now vastly more animals are involved. Modern scientific breeding for the production of eggs, milk, and meat has produced monsters – chickens, for example, with breasts so large that the animal falls over if it tries to stand. Abuses of animals are less visible to most people than they were in 1800, but they are known and tolerated,

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and the fact does not argue a radical increase in human sympathy with animals. What alleviations time has brought to animals seem mostly the results of a changing economy and technology.<sup>16</sup> Railways and motor cars ended the woes of coach horses. There were no anesthetics in the eighteenth century, so vivisection was carried on without it. Before refrigeration, only live meat could be fresh, and cattle, sheep, and geese were driven from far to the London markets. That the abusive exploitation of animals now has a political and polemic opposition is a legacy to us of the writings I discuss.

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