

Introduction

In 1894, a journalist published an article in *The Standard* advocating the establishment of a kangaroo farm in England. Over the course of several pages he enumerated the multiple benefits to be gained from acclimatising this antipodean marsupial, whose hide produced ‘excellent leather’ for making boots and gloves, whose thighs ‘taste much like those of the reindeer’, and whose tail made ‘a rich and most delicious soup’. Despite understandable fears to the contrary, the journalist insisted that kangaroos would do well in similar terrain to sheep and were ‘sufficiently hardy animals to withstand even the trying variability of our English winters’. He also claimed that they would require comparatively little looking after, ‘[a]ccommodation in the shape of open shedding’ providing ‘sufficient shelter to keep the animals in health’ and a seasonal supply of ‘hay and other food’ meeting their dietary needs. Although its proponent’s primary concern was profitability, the scheme was potentially timely, as kangaroo numbers were rapidly decreasing in Australia due to overhunting and competition with sheep.¹ Writing just five years earlier, another journalist had reported: ‘Large quantities of kangaroos are killed for the sake of the skin, which has become fashionable as a material for the making of boots, shoes and other articles, and unless this indiscriminate slaughter is stopped the kangaroo will soon have shared the fate of the dodo.’²

The article on kangaroo farming elicited an extensive, if mixed, response. One reader, a glove manufacturer, disputed the idea that kangaroo hide might be used in his business ‘to supplement the rather short supply of buck- and doe-skin’, his own earlier experiments having proven that it was the wrong texture – too ‘close, hard and thick’ – and ‘very awkward in shape’. A second respondent, A.A.H., challenged the belief that the kangaroo could survive the British winter, since it might ‘stand cold to a certain extent, but not wet’. He remarked, furthermore,

¹ ‘Kangaroo Farming in England’, *The Standard*, 11 January 1894.

² ‘Extinction of the Kangaroo’, *Northampton Mercury*, 7 September 1889.

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that '[d]uring a residence of nearly two years in Australia, I never once saw kangaroo meat placed on the table', although it was true that 'the tail makes very fair soup'.³ A third writer, James Troubridge Critchell, reacting to A.A.H.'s letter, surmised that the Australians' disdain for kangaroo meat was not proof of its inedibility, but rather of the 'most limited and unenterprising character' of Australian cuisine, which consisted of a 'never-varying' diet of 'beef and mutton, washed down with copious libations of tea'.⁴ A fourth, proud Victoria native S. H. Palmer, rallied in turn to defend the cuisine of his homeland, insisting, 'If ever Mr Critchell visits Victoria he will find that "Australian wines", "salads" and "market gardens" are far from being "curiosities" or "conspicuous by their absence"'.⁵ Drawing things back to the matter at hand, a fifth respondent, G. A. Haig, suggested: 'Before we start farming kangaroos in England, would it not be advisable for some of the Australian meat companies to bring home some kangaroo meat, refrigerated, and let us see how we like it?'⁶ A sixth, R. A. Swayne, recollected fondly that 'I once bought a tin of kangaroo tails' meat many years ago, when tinned meats were first introduced, and found it excellent, equal to a good game pie'.⁷

In the event, the proposed kangaroo farm never materialised and the prospect of domesticating the species faded from public debate. Individual kangaroos did make it to Britain in the nineteenth century, proving that the animals could survive the rigours of an intemperate climate; one man from Beaumaris in north Wales owned a 'pretty small bush kangaroo, from Tasmania, tame and healthy', which had 'spent two winters in an open garden'.⁸ Large-scale kangaroo farming, however, did not take off in Britain – or, indeed, Australia – and kangaroo meat remained an occasional curiosity rather than a regular element of the British diet. In 1897, when a consignment of kangaroo tails was delivered to Leadenhall Market in London, '[t]he public discovered that the tail of a kangaroo made into soup was a very succulent dish, rich and highly nutritious, and like *Oliver Twist*, they asked for more, but the stock of 500 caudal appendages was soon exhausted'.⁹

³ 'Kangaroo Farming in England', *The Standard*, 13 January 1894.

⁴ 'Kangaroo Farming', *The Standard*, 17 January 1894. Critchell was a reporter for the *Pastoral Review* and later co-authored *A History of the Frozen Meat Trade* (London: Constable, 1912) with Joseph Raymond.

⁵ 'Kangaroo Farming in England', *The Standard*, 20 January 1894.

⁶ 'Kangaroo Farming', *The Standard*, 17 January 1894.

⁷ 'Kangaroo Farming in England', *The Standard*, 20 January 1894.

⁸ 'Country House', *The Bazaar, the Exchange and Mart and Journal of the Household*, 28 August 1872, p. 158.

⁹ 'Kangaroo Tails', *The Standard*, 15 September 1898.

Despite its failure, Britain's brief flirtation with the idea of kangaroo farming was a significant episode that encapsulates a much wider pattern of engagement with animal commodities in the Victorian era. First, it highlights the desire for new luxuries, either for the table or the dressing room – or, in this case, both – and the degree to which changing tastes shaped emerging fashions. Second, it illustrates the ecological effects of these fashions, which often resulted in the over-exploitation of animal species to meet the growing market demand. Third, it demonstrates one of the most frequently proposed solutions to this ecological problem: the domestication and/or relocation of coveted animals as a way of either halting or managing the slaughter. Fourth, the responses generated by the kangaroo farming proposal reveal the role of new technologies – canning, refrigeration, steamship transportation – in driving demand for new commodities, and the ways in which professional knowledge, individual experience and imperial/colonial pride could shape discussions over where, how, and indeed whether, certain species should be exploited. The great kangaroo debate of 1894 thus represents in microcosm some of the broader questions manufacturers, farmers and conservationists would have to tackle as they extracted the varied products of the animal world.

A year after the kangaroo farm hit the headlines, another bizarre animal project gripped the nation's attention. In this instance, the scheme in question was a proposed cat farm, which was reportedly about to be established in the Netherlands. According to an article in the *Sun*, the farm would consist of several hundred cats, all black, and would breed and raise the animals solely 'for the sake of their skins'. Where the original felines would come from was not stated. Perhaps they would be pedigree specimens, donated by their owners; more likely, they would be feral cats, rounded up on the streets.

Like the kangaroo farm, the 'projected cat farm' generated a significant amount of comment, in this case most of it negative. Unlike kangaroos, cats were, by the late nineteenth century, popular household pets and not routinely subject to slaughter for their fur.¹⁰ Cared for by loving owners, photographed in touching pictures (Figure 0.1) and even, on occasion,

¹⁰ Earlier in the century the status of the cat had been less assured. In 1854, a 'ruffianly-looking fellow named Richard Calvert' was brought before magistrates in Clerkenwell charged with 'skinning cats while they were alive'. The pelts were reportedly sold to manufacturers and used as 'linings of gentlemen's winter clothing'. 'Clerkenwell', *The Morning Chronicle*, 28 February 1854.

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Figure 0.1 ‘A Tête-à-Tête’, *The Animals’ Friend*, 1911, p. 36.

rescued by the fire brigade (Figure 0.2), cats were common animal companions in the Victorian era and often formed a close bond with their human carers. The idea that they might be reduced to the status of cattle and reared solely for their skins thus shocked cat lovers across Britain, prompting vocal protests against the concept. How could beloved pets be treated in this way? How could anyone justify the ‘barbarity of such [a] projected industry’?¹¹

Among the gasps of horror, one more nuanced critique of the proposed cat farm appeared in a somewhat unexpected place: the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals’ (RSPCA’s) monthly magazine, *The Animal World*. In a surprisingly measured response to the *Sun*’s original report, the author reflected on the complex ethics surrounding cat farming and conceded that, while ‘[w]e are cat lovers, and we would rather the company should not succeed’, if ‘the cats are destroyed humanely, we fail to see the illegality of the practice, in law or in morals’. Meditating on whether it was inherently wrong to raise cats for their skins, the writer concluded that it was not, or at least no more so than farming sheep in Australia ‘solely for the purpose of the market volume of their fat’, killing Alaskan seals ‘for the purpose of producing skins for jackets’ or creating ‘ostrich farms ... in Africa ... only for the

¹¹ ‘A Projected Cat Farm’, *The Animal World*, March 1895, p. 38.



Figure 0.2 ‘Humane Rescue of a Cat by Fireman Cave’, *The Animal World*, June 1893, p. 92.

market of ostrich feathers’. Considering, similarly, whether it was intrinsically worse to kill animals for clothing than for food, he suggested that using the skins of creatures originally killed for their meat might be more acceptable, although in the specific case of cats, the reverse appeared to be true, since behind the ‘outcry against the new company’ may have been a fear ‘that the bodies of the cats would be used for food, without certainty of detection’. Whether cat meat entered the food chain or not, the acceptability of the cat farm ultimately came down to two issues, both directly connected to the cats’ well-being: ‘the happiness of the animals

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when they arrive here [at the cat farm] and the method by which their lives will be terminated'. On the second issue, the author dismissed the concern that cats might be skinned alive; since '[t]he glint or gloss of fur is not lost if the skin be removed from the body after death but before the carcase becomes cold, and as the mutilation of an animal endowed with means of defence like a cat is easier after death than during life, surely such dreaded evil has no foundation'. On the first issue, however, he was less certain, for '[i]t is doubtful whether cats can be reared in communities without deterioration of health, or the spread of disease, or the transmission of infirmities'. Moreover, 'a cat without human affection is a wild animal, which without wild life must be unhappy'. On these grounds, and not on the grounds of killing cats per se, the writer ultimately opposed the proposed cat farm, suggesting that no cat would be happy there while alive.¹²

The reflections inspired by the Dutch cat farm – like those elicited by kangaroo farming – touched on some of the key moral questions surrounding any animal-based commodity. Was it ethical to rear animals simply in order to kill them for their flesh or coats? Was the method of killing the key determinant of this, or was it the treatment of the animals while they were alive that mattered most? If the latter, were there some species that could not, and should not, be kept in captivity, because their natures and habits militated against their happiness in this state? And did it make a difference whether the species in question was long-domesticated, essentially wild or, in the case of the cat, hovering somewhere between the two categories? These were questions that nineteenth-century commentators repeatedly grappled with, and which remain highly pertinent in the modern world. As we shall see, they would surface again and again in relation to different animal commodities, as manufacturers, humanitarians and conservationists pondered the morality of shooting elephants, clubbing seals, farming civets and keeping parrots as pets.

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Animal products were used extensively in nineteenth-century Britain. A middle- or upper-class Victorian woman might wear a dress made of fine alpaca wool, drape herself in a sealskin jacket, strap herself into a whalebone corset, brush her hair with a tortoiseshell comb and sport the feathers or sometimes the entire bodies of wild birds in her hat or on her earrings. She might entertain her friends and family by playing a piano

¹² Ibid.

with ivory keys, own a parrot or monkey as a living fashion accessory and, at the dinner table, feast on Argentine beef, New Zealand lamb, or, if she were feeling more adventurous, kangaroo tail. She might chew these delicacies with dentures made from the teeth of a hippopotamus. The use and consumption of such luxuries attested to her place in high society and her attention to the latest sartorial and culinary fashions. They also had momentous and often dire environmental implications for the animal sources of these products, which perished in their thousands to satisfy the latest trends and caprices of the ‘civilised’ world.

Victims of Fashion examines the role of animal-based commodities in Britain in the period c.1800–1914. Focusing on six animal products employed for fashionable living – birds’ feathers, sealskin, ivory, alpaca wool, perfumes (civet, musk, ambergris and bear’s grease) and exotic pets – the book highlights the pervasive nature of animal-based consumables in the Victorian and Edwardian eras and traces their rise and fall in popularity in response to changing tastes, availability and ethical concerns. *Victims of Fashion* considers how animal commodities were sourced and processed, how they were marketed and how they were consumed. It also assesses the humanitarian and ecological issues raised by the consumption of exotic luxuries and the moral dilemmas these posed for consumers.

Animal commodities were not, of course, a novelty in the nineteenth century. Animal products had been used extensively in pre-industrial societies and some were traded over long distances. Beaver pelts were procured in North America and sent to Europe to make felt hats.¹³ Pearls were sourced from the East and West Indies to adorn the bodies of European elites.¹⁴ Silk was transported from China to Europe across Central Asia, while sable fur reached Western Europe from Russia.¹⁵ What was new in the Victorian era, however, was the range and volume of products in circulation. Faster transportation in the form of railways and steamships brought large quantities of feathers, wool and fur over long distances, while imperial penetration opened up once remote regions to commercial exploitation. Shorter journey times and new preservation techniques also allowed perishable goods to traverse continents and oceans for the first time, bringing New Zealand lamb and Argentine

¹³ Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian* (New York and London: Norton, 1999), pp. 173–209.

¹⁴ Molly Warsh, *American Baroque: Pearls and the Nature of Empire, 1492–1700* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

¹⁵ Susan Whitfield, *Life along the Silk Road* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Janet Martin, *Treasure of the Land of Darkness: The Fur Trade and Its Significance for Medieval Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

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beef to British consumers – initially as live cargo, later as dried, salted, tinned, frozen or chilled flesh.¹⁶ This had implications, too, for the trade in live animals, which entered Britain in increasing numbers for sale as menagerie inmates or exotic pets.

Animal luxuries also became more widely accessible in the nineteenth century, giving rise to increased demand. In the early modern period, exotic animal commodities were confined to a privileged elite, their use sometimes regulated by sumptuary laws or limited, in practice, by high prices. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, however, new manufacturing processes made goods cheaper, while more and more people had the disposable income necessary to spend on non-essential items.¹⁷ Products that had once been the preserve of the nobility came increasingly within reach of the expanding middle classes, eager to keep up with the latest fashions. Even servants and artisans could afford to own feather bonnets or parrots, sometimes procured second-hand. The nineteenth century thus saw a greater range of animal goods being traded in greater numbers and over longer distances than ever before to satisfy the whims of a much wider spectrum of consumers.

Victims of Fashion examines this new influx of animal commodities and considers its social and ecological impact. The book centres on four key themes. First, I explore how each animal product was sourced and processed. I chart the commodity chains that brought elephants' tusks and egrets' feathers from Africa and South America to Europe and I unpick the global networks that facilitated them. Sealskin, for example, was procured by Aleut hunters on the Pribilof Islands off the coast of Alaska, shipped to San Francisco and forwarded to London for processing and sale. Alpaca wool was collected by Peruvian shepherds, passed to British merchants in the city of Arequipa and shipped to Liverpool, where much of it was bought by Bradford industrialist Titus Salt. The finished products were then re-exported to the rest of the world. The successful procurement and manufacture of luxury animal products required the knowledge and expertise of a wide range of people and operated, in many cases, on a truly global level. I explore how this expertise was generated and how it was transmitted between different cultures and nations. I trace animal commodities from the sierra to the salon, the jungle to the dressing table.

¹⁶ Jack Goody, 'Industrial Food' in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (eds), *Food and Culture: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 338–56; Rebecca J. Woods, 'From Colonial Animal to Imperial Edible: Building an Empire of Sheep in New Zealand, ca.1880–1900', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 35:1 (2015), pp. 117–36.

¹⁷ Peter N. Stearns, *The Industrial Turn in World History* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 88.

Closely related to the sourcing of exotic commodities was the manner in which they were marketed. The nineteenth century witnessed important innovations in the way in which goods were bought and sold, as well as new opportunities for advertising. Cheaper manufacturing and increased choice brought what had once been elite products to a wider range of middle- and even working-class consumers, while the advent of mass media, monthly fashion magazines, catalogues and, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the department store forged a new niche for the female consumer, whose changing tastes in hats, coats and accessories shaped demand for a plethora of animal commodities.¹⁸ From the 1870s, moreover, seasonal fashion and a desire for novelty exerted a growing influence on the demand for different animal items, often taking precedence over utility and quality. As one commentator remarked in 1912 in relation to the sealskin industry, ‘people do not pay for what is best; they pay for what fashion demands. If the fashion should demand baby seals, they would have to be taken.’¹⁹ Situating animal commodities within this broader economic context, *Fashion Victims* considers the appeal and affordability of furs, feathers and fragrances and examines how they were advertised to the purchasing public. I explore, in particular, whether publicity for animal products suppressed, emphasised or fabricated their exotic origin, and how this reflected broader concerns about authenticity and adulteration.

A third element of the book focuses on attempts to appropriate, acclimatise and ‘improve’ useful animals by domesticating them, selectively breeding them or introducing them to new territories. Agriculturalists, for example, attempted to naturalise the alpaca on British soil, first in Scotland and Ireland, later in Australia, with the aim of both increasing wool production and gaining direct control over this valuable commodity. There were similar schemes in South Africa and the Belgian Congo to domesticate the ostrich and the African elephant respectively, and, as we have seen, even plans to acclimatise the kangaroo in Britain to farm it for its meat. Historians have become increasingly interested in the field of ‘economic botany’, charting efforts

¹⁸ On the rise of the fashion magazine, see Margaret Beetham and Kay Boardman (eds), *Victorian Women’s Magazines: An Anthology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 10–20. On the advent of the department store, see Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women and the Making of London’s West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 142–77.

¹⁹ ‘Hearings Before the Committee of Expenditures in the Department of Commerce and Labour House of Representatives on House Resolution No. 73, To Investigate the Fur-Seal Industry of Alaska’, 8, 18 and 20 June 1912, p. 1011, cited in William T. Hornaday, *Scrapbook Collection on the History of Wild Life Protection and Extermination*, Vol. 5, Wildlife Conservation Society Archives Collection, 1007-04-05-000-a.

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to cultivate valuable commodities such as rubber, quinine and tea in different parts of the British Empire.²⁰ Animal acclimatisation has received less attention – in part, no doubt, because it was less successful – but it was promoted repeatedly as a means of improvement and even a form of conservation. Drawing on archival records, scientific treatises and articles in the contemporary press, I situate animal acclimatisation within a wider programme of biopiracy and livestock improvement, which sought to appropriate commercially valuable species and ‘improve’ them through careful husbandry.²¹

The consumption of animal products entailed a significant degree of suffering and pain for the animals used to manufacture them and ultimately threatened the existence of some species. This raised important moral and economic questions, and these form the final strand of this book. First, there were issues of sustainability. Overhunting, particularly the indiscriminate killing of females and young animals, drastically reduced the numbers of certain species and raised the spectre of their extinction. The Pacific fur seal, already exterminated in the southern hemisphere, was believed to be in danger in Alaska by the 1880s due to unregulated ‘pelagic’ sealing (catching seals in the sea rather than on land). Many bird species and the alpaca’s wild relative the vicuña were also pushed to the verge of extinction. So devastating was the trade in ivory to African elephant populations that an article in *The Review of Reviews* in 1899 asked ‘Is the elephant following the dodo?’²² These severe environmental issues led to efforts to control the trade in over-exploited species by creating reservations, imposing a close season on hunting and setting quotas for the number of animals that could be killed. *Victims of Fashion* examines the genesis and enforcement of these regulations and emphasises the importance of international collaboration in ensuring their effectiveness. It also points to the complications

²⁰ Important studies of ‘economic botany’ include Lucille Brockway, *Science and Colonial Expansion: The Role of the British Royal Botanic Gardens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002 [1979]); Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Richard Drayton, *Nature’s Government: Science, Imperial Britain and the ‘Improvement’ of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Emma Spary, *Utopia’s Garden: French Natural History from Old Regime to Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bio-Prospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

²¹ On breeding and animal improvement, see ‘Sex and the Single Animal’ in Harriet Ritvo, *Noble Cows and Hybrid Zebras: Essays on Animals and History* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), pp. 13–28; Rebecca J. Woods, *The Herds Shot around the World: Native Breeds and the British Empire, 1800–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

²² ‘Is the Elephant Following the Dodo?’, *The Review of Reviews*, September 1899, p. 287.