

Animal Histories of the Civil War

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Review

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Hess, Earl J., ed. *Animal Histories of the Civil War Era*. Louisiana State University Press, 2022. HARDCOVER. \$45.00 ISBN 9780807176917 pp. 288

Anyone interested in the relationship of animals to the Civil War would do well to turn to this collection. Edited by the prolific Civil War historian Earl J. Hess, *Animal Histories of the Civil War Era* displays the work of eleven scholars. Ranging from emerging to emeritus, they bring a variety of backgrounds to the table: Some identify foremost as Civil War historians who have turned in their work to animals, while others come to the Civil War from fields of animal or environmental history. The book is comprised of an introduction and thirteen articles (three of which are provided by Hess) and is divided into six sections that group the studies around overlapping subject matter or time frames. Uniting them is a shared understanding that the study of animals in the context of the Civil War has to date been hardly addressed, and correspondingly that there is a wealth of knowledge to be gained from bringing together the fields of civil war history and animal history, along with adjacent work in animal studies and environmental history more broadly. As Hess explains in the introduction, “there is a gaping hole in the Civil War literature concerning animals and a similar void in the work of animal historians where the Civil War ought to be” (1).

As a means to fill that gap, the articles on hand vary widely in their choice of subject matter, their use of sources, their conceptual apparatus, and their scope. Upon reaching the collection’s last pages, readers will have encountered camels imported in the South for transportation and military purposes; learned of pigs’ multifaceted relationship to wartime economics and politics; considered wildlife in varied forms and contexts; explored the challenges of maintaining a healthy diet in war; and met with animals in contexts that might be considered broadly as entertainment, be it as mascots, performers, or in debates over zoos. Most of all, they will have learned a great deal of horses and dogs, both of which feature prominently in the collection. All rest on considerable bodies of primary source material, some of which is likely

familiar to Civil War historians but has been gleaned carefully for what it says of animals, and linked in turn to central themes, from slavery and emancipation to agriculture and western expansion.

In terms of their broader conceptual apparatus, scope, and contributions to animal historiography, a few stand out as particularly noteworthy. Evading spoilers as best possible, I will highlight three. First, the complexities of pigs and power as discussed in Jason Phillips' "Root Hog or Die: Southern Pigs and Confederate Independence," which underscores "southerners' bid for independence as a web of relationships between people and animals that tested the possibilities of national existence and failed" in part because of the differing place of pigs within the economies of the northern and southern states (136). Second, Joan E. Cashin's characterization of dogs as "charismatic minifauna" as part of an effort in "The Dogs of War: Canine Exploitation in the American Civil War" to unpack the weaponization of canines in a context of dramatically heightened inequities in the relationship between dogs and humans (169-170). Third, Lorien Foote's "'The Dogs Ought to Be Exterminated': Dogs, Slavery, and the Consequences of Emancipation," which uses South Carolina as a case study of the complex ways in which dogs fitted into patterns of power, to the extent that their labour became key to maintaining social control in the South in light of the growing number of men engaged in the war effort, and correspondingly figured in contestations over slavery, emancipation, and white supremacy. Also noteworthy in this regard is Hess's overall contribution, which comprises not only an introduction highlighting key works connecting animals and the Civil War but also three articles on dramatically different subjects, namely artillery horses; wildlife; and the varied implications and understandings of meat and plant-based diets. To continue after decades of scholarship to move this effectively among such new and varied materials and perspectives is something in itself to which one might aspire.

As always, collections such as these end up alluding in their brevity to new directions that they cannot in themselves tackle in detail, and this one is no exception. Articles limited in their engagement with animal-related historiography might push further those dimensions, for example by linking discussion of equines as "engines of war" (45) to Jason Hribal's presentation of animals as members of the working class (see for example Hribal, "Animals, Agency, and Class: Writing the History of Animals from Below," *Human Ecology Review* 14, no. 1, 2007: 101-12) or to Clay McShane and Joel A Tarr's analysis of horses as "living machines" in *The*

Horse in the City: Living Machines in the Nineteenth Century (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007). In similar terms more might be done to define further the subfield that the collection so strongly identifies by situating the place of animals in the Civil War relative to their place in war and conflict more broadly. Gestures to conflicts such as the First World War are an obvious means of comparison and differentiation, but an even more striking opportunity for such work might be found in the changing power dimensions and conflicts that unfolded in central and western North America during the nineteenth century among indigenous peoples and within the context of the nation's westward expansion, throughout which animals figured prominently. Here one might visit works ranging from Pekka Hämäläinen's *The Comanche Empire* (Yale University Press, 2009) to Andrew C. Isenberg's *The Destruction of the Bison* (Cambridge University Press, 2000) or even the "world-altering avalanche" (193-94) of biota that Alfred Crosby describes so effectively in *Ecological Imperialism: the Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge University Press, 1986) to further underscore the centrality of animals to the conflicts that shaped the nation and to highlight the place, and in some cases the influence, of the Civil War within them.

Of the many areas for future research to which this work alludes, one that would be worth a book in itself concerns the relationship of the Civil War to changing ethical perceptions of animals. To what extent did the brutal treatment and experiences of animals during the Civil War, as witnessed by soldiers and civilians alike, influence the development of the animal protection movement and animal ethics in the United States is a question raised by more than one of the contributors (see for example 7-8; 185; 243-44). In my mind, the answer to that question may rest not so much in the rapid spread identified here of SPCAs and humane societies across the nation in the years immediately following the war, but in the evolution of the sport-based wildlife conservation movement and in greater attention to animal health and medical technology that came in the postwar development of the veterinary sciences, both of which present pragmatic links to warfare and its impacts in forms including the maintenance of marksmanship and military skills, the curtailment of commercial and subsistence hunting practices, the protection of habitat, and investment in the health and thus the effectiveness of animals employed in military contexts as weapons and for purposes of transportation and labour.

In raising that and other questions, perhaps the greatest tension that underpins many articles in this collection, and that might be further unpacked in future studies, concerns the ways

in which the Civil War magnified the many paradoxes already heightened by the rapid development of modernity in all of its urban, industrial, scientific, and technological complexity. Most notable in this regard, they demonstrate, are the ways in which the war, be it with regard to horses, dogs, pigs, or other species, highlighted animal agency and intensified the emotional bonds between humans and animals while simultaneously reducing them even further to machines, essentially to war technologies and materials. At its most extreme, that reduction enabled in yet another ironic twist the exploitation of animal sentience, intelligence, and affection felt by humans toward them as a strategy of war, such that both the killing and the employment of animals in warfare became a means through which both sides sowed sorrow, pain and fear among their opponents.

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