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## [Review] Robert Cribb, Helen Gilbert and Helen Tiffen, *Wild Man from Borneo: A Cultural History of the Orangutan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014

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**Abstract**

Wild Man from Borneo is a studious and wide-ranging cultural history of the orangutan and an indispensable resource for anyone working on this species or great apes in general. Orangutan stories and encounters have always captivated, from the tales of the Dayak and Batak peoples from Borneo and Indonesia, to the first rumours of early European travellers, and later observations and dissections. The orangutan's uncanny similarity to humans, both in form and behaviour, made it central to a nineteenth-century debate about the uniqueness of humanity, in a time when few had been seen and Europeans were unsure just what sort of creature it was. Even after knowledge of the species became more settled, orangutans have remained central to explorations of the human/animal border and the place of homo sapiens among the great apes. Yet today, as development-driven deforestation has crippled an already declining population, orangutans are in danger of extinction in the wild. This book serves as a perhaps already forlorn act of remembrance, recounting and affirming the significance and charm of the fabled 'red ape'.

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*Wild Man from Borneo* is a studious and wide-ranging cultural history of the orangutan and an indispensable resource for anyone working on this species or great apes in general. Orangutan stories and encounters have always captivated, from the tales of the Dayak and Batak peoples from Borneo and Indonesia, to the first rumours of early European travellers, and later observations and dissections. The orangutan's uncanny similarity to humans, both in form and behaviour, made it central to a nineteenth-century debate about the uniqueness of humanity, in a time when few had been seen and Europeans were unsure just what sort of creature it was. Even after knowledge of the species became more settled, orangutans have remained central to explorations of the human/animal border and the place of *homo sapiens* among the great apes. Yet today, as development-driven deforestation has crippled an already declining population, orangutans are in danger of extinction in the wild. This book serves as a perhaps already forlorn act of remembrance, recounting and affirming the significance and charm of the fabled 'red ape'.

The early chapters outline the European discovery of the orangutan and the ensuing debates about its status – and ours. The Malay term 'Orang Outang' – translated as 'forest dweller' – overlapped with existing ideas about *homo sylvestris*, wild men, feral children, and 'primitives', amid a general confusion over its geographical origin and its difference from other similar creatures from Africa and elsewhere. The book recounts the first scientific attempts to describe the species by the likes of Tulp, Bontius, Linnaeus, Tyson, Buffon, Cuvier, and Lamarck, through to Darwin and Wallace – a convoluted story of how 'a great ape found only in the jungles of Borneo acquired a generic name, *Pongo*, referring to great apes of Africa, and a specific epithet, *pygmaeus*, alluding to Tyson's insistence that the African pygmies known to the

ancient Greeks were apes, not humans' (26). The authors trace two lines of argument concerning the orangutan's similarity to or difference from human beings: one, more definable, based on comparative anatomy and physiology, and the other, more ambivalent, around behaviour and intelligence. Biological knowledge developed and was transformed as increasing imperial trade brought first cadavers to dissect and then, increasingly, live orangutans to observe. As shown particularly in the 1776 'orangutan war' between Vosmaer and Camper, these difficultly procured specimens had great display and scientific value in an ongoing battle over human nature and the dangers of human animality, which also tied in to political discourses of race and class. Orangutans' disconcerting similarity in body and mind was an uncanny provocation to the imagination and played a part in later fiction, drama, display and entertainment, and scientific and ethical debates.

Subsequent chapters turn to the increasing exhibition of orangutans in Europe and America, from taxidermied specimens and Charles Willson Peale's museum displays, to Barnum's travelling circuses and the first zoo exhibits such as 'Jack' at the Jardin des Plantes and 'Jenny' from the London Zoo (who was visited with great curiosity by Darwin). A tension between scientific interests and those of public entertainment was often evident in these theatrical displays, as they provocatively staged the link or border between human and ape, though only by concealing the animal's original habitat and the violent circumstances of its capture: 'By the time the first American zoos opened in the 1870s, orangutans had been exhibited as freaks, tramps, children, brutes, marvels, monsters, ancestors, missing links, and clowns, but only occasionally in their zoological context as primates removed from their natural habitat to feed a human appetite for entertainment' (79-81). In the stories of Kipling, Burroughs and others, Borneo was presented as a dangerous tropical colony and site of exotic adventure. While few orangutans reached Europe in the eighteenth century, by the mid-nineteenth, over a hundred were being traded a year, most often infants whose mothers were killed so they could be taken.

Chapters on literature and drama further explore the use of orangutan figures to reflect on the human condition. The commentator, who lectures humans on their 'civilised' failings, has been one popular trope, particularly in the genteel figure of Sir Oran Hauton in Peacock's *Melincourt*, that drew in particular on Rousseau and Lord Monboddo's arguments for the (near) humanity and perfectability of orangutans. Numerous other satirical critiques are put in the mouths of these wise animals, from Boulle's *La planète des singes* (the source material for the

Planet of the Apes films) in which the superiority of humans over apes is reversed, up to contemporary ecologically themed novels in which the orangutan guide or teacher reflects on human treatment of the environment in general, as well as its own species, from the didacticism of Dale Smith's *What the Orangutan Told Alice* to the postmodernism of Luis Fernando Verissimo's *Borges and the Eternal Orangutans*. Other pre- and post-Darwinian dramas of animality by the likes of Verne, Crusoe and Defoe have likewise sought to juxtapose human and animal and expose human flaws, exploring the opposition of reason and instinct, civilisation and savagery. And orangutan performances on stage and screen, whether as trickster or servant, freak or animal, from humans imitating apes to trained orangutan acts, have explored ideas of mimicry and imitation and opened on to the question of the performativity of species.

A chapter on zoos situates orangutan exhibits within the changing cultures of zoological display and the growing emphasis on education, naturalism, immersion and conservation in the twentieth century. Yet spectacle remained, particularly in the crowd-pleasing primate tea parties of Hagenbeck's Hamburg Tierpark and William Hornaday's Bronx Zoo that served as entertainments and demonstrations of their intelligence and humanity, and in the repeated breakouts of Fu Manchu, Ken Allen and other orangutan escape artists. The discussion of Hagenbeck and Hornaday reveals zoo directors' and keepers' often unrecognised difference of approach from psychology and behaviourism, reflected in their attentiveness to animals' intelligence and individual personality, that justified gentle forms of training as educational, healthy, and as productive and satisfying work for the animals – all the better to display them with, of course. Orangutans were regularly portrayed as 'natural actors' – not just mimics, but performing emotions and concepts – and used as recognisable zoo 'characters', such as ambassadors individually known to the public, as well as in more naturalistic modes. Yet such trained performances, as elsewhere – in the circus, and Berosini's Las Vegas orangutan act that took as its very subject and source of comedy the question of how (or how not) to train performing orangutans, and became the subject of a legal challenge to its hidden violence – often displayed an ambivalence as to the source of the cleverness (in animal or trainer), and evoked important questions of animal responsiveness, conscious participation, and humour. Are animals here victims or co-performers?

The overall context of the book is that of the orangutan's pending extinction: it frames the introductory and concluding remarks, and is an undercurrent of much of the discussion, with the

proliferation of cultural representations and incorporations often compared sorrowfully to their decline in the wild. A chapter specifically on the question of conservation explains orangutan evolution, their slow reproduction and vulnerable habitat, precolonial interactions, and the major restriction of their range and habitat since the 1970s due to legal and illegal trade, national development, and deforestation from logging and oil palm cultivation. Like many other animals, in the nineteenth century an awareness of their declining numbers only increased the desire to find and kill or capture them before they disappeared, including on the part of zoos. The often slow, difficult, and inconsistent development of laws for the protection of animals and nature in colonial and postcolonial contexts is also recounted, including the various ways in which orangutans and their habitat often slipped through the cracks, as well as attempts to preserve them through captive breeding and rehabilitation.

The final chapter includes a summary of research on the shared evolutionary origins of humans and great apes – suggesting the common inheritance more of ‘social flexibility’ than ‘biological imperatives’ (239) – and suggests that the ‘companionability that we still feel with orangutans may not be just a projection of human values on a nonhuman creature but rather a surviving trace of this ancient bond’ (241). (Which seems a strange and unnecessary denial of coequality; whatever their evolutionary origins, our companionability with orangutans (as with other animals) arises sufficiently from our shared life with them, not through projection but rather through intersubjectivity in the here and now.) The re-emergence of observational and experimental research on orangutan intelligence and emotion, from Köhler and Yerkes to the long-term field studies of Galdikas who catalogued culturally variable tool use by wild orangutans, revealed complex abilities that have only increased calls to respect their welfare and rights.

The book is as much a cultural history of the *idea* of the ‘orangutan’ (and *Western* ideas in particular) as it is about knowledge of, and interactions with, the species itself. As it makes clear, it was in Europe for a long time an imprecise term that referred to a number of ‘ape’ characteristics and regions (30) – for example, Tyson’s famous ‘ourang outang’ dissection is clearly of a chimpanzee – as well as to other mythical ideas, and thus it is difficult today to detect just to what any particular historical use of the term might refer. Moreover, often stories about ‘ourang outans’ – such as Poe’s ‘Murders in the Rue Morgue’, or when horror films ‘subsumed the various great ape species into a composite cinematic vehicle by which to probe human fears

and desires' (173) – have more to do with notions about animality than with orangutans themselves. Unfortunately, at times (though not always (197)) this confusion or generality seems to detract from the sense of the unique and distinctive significance of the orangutan among other species; the orangutan itself is often not the main character in this cultural history but rather apes in general, not only historically but particularly when the final chapter covers in general terms the twentieth-century discourse on the rights of animals and particularly of great apes.

Through a collection of interesting examples, and interspersed with fascinating images, this book tells a meaningful story, particularly about the various ways in which 'orangutans have been flashpoints on the shifting front lines of a vast cultural battle over the nature of humanity' (57). As the authors put it, in these debates over humanlike orangutan behaviour, 'At stake was the human soul' (56). And as they make clear at a number of points, given the enormous challenges to survival faced by the species today, at stake also is the very future existence of the orangutan. Perhaps this focus on cultural representations and projections, contrasted meekly to the ecopolitics of extinction, is just an artifact of the genre. But also at stake in all this – and a question that remains to be addressed – is the orangutan soul. Let us shift the front lines to a different battle, one over the nature of orangutanity, that might help the war over 'humanity' disarm. Let us shift the focus from 'orangutan encounters with human culture' (249) to various human cultures' encounters with orangutan cultures. Let us move beyond cultural history to intercultural understanding and exchange. Let us get to know them better, their character and potential, their multiple lifeways and new subjectivities that are a product of their 'cultural history' – both their historical immersion in human culture, and their own cultural capabilities for adaptation and invention. Let us ask not only about this species' continued existence in the face of extinction, but also, if and as it remains, *who orangutans will be* in their plurality and singularity – forest-living rehabilitants, zoo wards learning to tie knots or paint or play on iPads, and someone else entirely?