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[Review] David Wilson, *The Welfare of Performing Animals: A Historical Perspective*. Berlin: Springer, 2015

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Abstract

This book makes a valuable contribution to animal studies. It investigates the social and political processes concerned with the welfare of performing animals in Britain from the nineteenth century into the twentieth century. Although this area requires specialised inquiry, as David Wilson points out, animal performance is usually generalised about within pro-animal scholarship. Drawing on highly detailed research, this book provides a comprehensive account of the individuals and organisations that campaigned against animal performance and its cruelties and, in turn, those who campaigned for its continuation. It presents the human stories behind the movement against animal performance; descriptions of the actual performances and individual animal performers are outside the scope of this book. While the vested interests of the entertainment industry resisted efforts to ban or even restrict domesticated and exotic animal training and performance, the anti-animal performance campaign attracted a number of notable figures. But Wilson shows that the status of animal performance was fraught from the outset, and that this is not a straightforward narrative in which the pro-animal lobby gradually gained momentum over time to challenge and override the business interests profiting from animal performance. He demonstrates that this is a more complicated history, one in which contradictory moral values on both sides come to the fore; this provides a particularly engaging dimension to the book.

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I expected this book to have the attention to detail on the page that its extensive research deserves, but inconsistencies in the referencing style detract somewhat from the presentation of the findings and use of primary sources. Nonetheless, it contains important new research that enlarges understanding of human-animal relations through its depiction of the ongoing resistance to animal acts. The methodological approach is one that I have encountered elsewhere in the

discipline of history, in which numerous examples are grouped together under broad themes even though these are drawn from different countries, historical eras and venues, as well as diverse species – from dogs to elephants. Collapsed together, these examples seem similar rather than hugely variable cultural contexts. A short history of animal performance in the Roman era precedes the main chapters, which are structured around events leading up to the 1925 legislation passed by the British parliament, and Wilson's commentary makes good use of the records of the parliamentary select committee of inquiry that preceded the bill. Insights about the reasons why it was difficult to obtain the proof required for regulation emerge from Wilson's documentation of the human effort to prevent cruelty towards other species, and the 1925 arguments about prohibition versus regulation through licensing and inspection remain relevant today (189–191).

One thread in this book that I found particularly significant is how Wilson's examples reveal the prominence of women in these campaigns, from when novelist Sarah Scott wrote, in 1762, about the injustice of wild animal exhibition (23). Women were prominent in the movement against animal performance and by the 1920s a large number of official women's organisations publicly supported the proposed legislation (68). There is a clear crossover with other socio-political campaigns, such as suffragette Christabel Pankhurst's involvement (31). These examples present strong precedents for what is usually considered a post 1970s political orientation. Similarly, the involvement of major writers and anti-slavery activists in animal welfare causes suggests that these values belong within a spectrum of concerns about injustice. As well, Wilson outlines how the accusation that foreigners, and especially Germans, were to blame for cruelty to animals in performance in Britain follows World War 1, so that even anti animal performance values were susceptible to the political prejudices of the time (91-95).

If ideas of suffering were initially more prominent than perceptions of deliberate cruelty, this had changed by the 1920s. Yet the problems of providing the select committee with clear evidence beyond hearsay threatened the bill's passage (50). In addition, there was a subsidiary human-centric concern about the attention garnered by the issue, given that it was claimed there were 15 societies preventing animal cruelty, and only one concerned with cruelty to children (69). There was a belief that animal use for functional purposes was acceptable but not for entertainment (62). Even the leadership of the parliamentary support for the anti cruelty legislation was morally compromised and open to question since its leaders were keen

supporters of hunting yet were against animal performance (61). Historical explanations of this type assist with an appreciation of how inconsistencies exist within the processes by which social values are adjusted and changed.

The book's research is organised thematically so that, for example, the dangers and cruelties of transportation are grouped together covering over a hundred years and all species (133).

Interestingly, the accumulated research seems to emphasise dog acts and music hall performance. The book leaves aside the issue of what audiences encountered and why so few audience members complained which meant animal performance acquired large audiences and thrived economically and continued to greatly expand as a business throughout the modernist era. By maintaining its purpose of explaining social opposition, however, the book provides a clear trajectory of the early public criticism and how campaigning becomes foundational to the 1925 UK legislation and its aftermath. The last chapter describes the impact of Edmund MacMichael and the Performing Animals' Defence League, particularly on circus, and this account confirms that one highly committed individual can achieve much on behalf of animals providing a heartening example for activists. In this way, this history of those working against animal performance vindicates the important effort of countless activists on behalf of animal welfare.