

*A New Zealand Book of Beasts: Animals in our Culture, History and Everyday Life*

By Annie Potts, Philip Armstrong, Deidre Brown.

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Nonhuman animals have undoubtedly played a profound role in the shaping of Aotearoa New Zealand history and culture but it is only recently that these key players have become a focus of scholarly attention. In *A New Zealand Book of Beasts* Annie Potts and Philip Armstrong, Co-Directors of the New Zealand Centre for Human-Animal Studies along with Associate, Deidre Brown, challenge their readers to think about entrenched notions of how we know, value and represent the animals that share our spaces. This is a far reaching study that touches on a range of human-animal encounters, covering a time span from early human occupation to the present. Real life animals, animals as symbols or metaphors as well as those of myth and legend come under the spotlight.

This book is an important contribution to the interdisciplinary field of human-animal studies that seeks to bring nonhuman animals to the foreground and liberate them from traditional human centred approaches. We are made aware that animals in our midst are most commonly seen and treated according to how they stand in relationship to humans and as such are placed in categories such as companion animals, livestock, pests and national icons. *A New Zealand Book of Beasts* successfully navigates difficult ground to lead the reader into an understanding of the diverse ways in which animals are culturally constructed. The authors' acknowledgement of the need to consider the intent and actions of the animals themselves is a challenging task but worth pursuing in the interests of animal welfare as well as a better understanding of ourselves and of human society. The voices of nonhuman animals can be difficult to detect but the authors demonstrate how literature, art, written and oral histories, popular culture and academic research can communicate valuable clues.

What makes this offering particularly significant to international human-animal scholarship in the field and to us as New Zealanders is that it provides a distinct Aotearoan perspective. The authors argue persuasively that New Zealand human and nonhuman animal lives have been and continue to be closely entwined. The Polynesians who became Māori and the Europeans who became Pākehā found and imported animals to these shores that would sustain as well as enrich their lives economically, socially and culturally. Fittingly, as the first human settlers in Aotearoa, the many dimensions of Māori interactions with animals feature throughout the book. Another aspect that is emphasised is the prominent role of agriculture in this country and how this impacts on animals, both domestic and wild.

The book is divided into four sections, each written by one of the three co-authors who look at a different aspect of human engagement with animals. Philip Armstrong's chapters in the first section are devoted to the moa, sheep, dolphin and whale, iconic New Zealand animals chosen to reveal the complex nature of human-animal relationships. The moa, a target of early Māori hunters with its habitat eroded by farming practices has become an emblem of extinction and the source of myths lamenting paradise lost. As native bush gave way to vast grasslands, pastoral farming drew a new wave of human settlers bringing with them from Europe animals on which they based their prosperity. The chapter, 'Sheepishness' looks at sheep, long a metaphor of sacrifice and passivity. Armstrong presents a broader picture of the animal that in time was to far exceed in number the New Zealand human population. By drawing upon the writings of Samuel Butler and H. Guthrie-Smith, he shows that even those whose livelihood depended on the products of the sheep they farmed were prepared to recognise that these animals had the capability to alter landscapes and human culture. Their anthropomorphic accounts of sheep as explorers and builders of travel networks indicate that

the concept of nonhuman agency is far from new. Nonhuman intent and consciousness is carried through to the chapters which relate and analyse the stories of human interactions with dolphins and whales. These are located in the second half of the twentieth century, a period when human emotional connection with animals revealed developing concerns of environmental degradation and the desire to live in closer harmony with nature.

Living closely with certain animals is the focus of attention in Annie Potts' section on companion animals. The similarities and differences between Māori and Pākehā connections with animals, whether symbolic or real, highlight a prevailing theme that human societies' relationships with animals are ultimately 'shaped by and in turn shape the values (and interests) of the cultures within which they occur'(121). This is shown in 'Ngā Mōkai' which explores Māori perspectives on companion animals. Mōkai, a word for certain domestic animals as well as for human slaves, such as captives taken in battle, suggests something of the ambiguous nature of the relationship between pre-European Māori and their animals. For example, kurī whose ancestors accompanied their human folk from their Polynesian homelands figure strongly in Māori mythology in differing guises from faithful companions to man-eating monsters. In actual life kurī were valued as hunters, guards, beloved pets but were also killed for food and for their prized skins.

European cultural preconceptions influenced how Pākehā regarded and treated their domesticated animals. In 'Exotic Frontiers' Potts gives a brief history of pigs, horses and chickens in New Zealand and in doing so reveals often conflicting attitudes of stewardship, dominance and companionship. Agency is allowed these introduced species by showing how they had the power to 'create and modify cultures, landscapes and commerce' (122). Moving into the present day, the final chapter of this section reveals the paradoxes involved in pet keeping. While New Zealand enjoys the highest level per capita of pet ownership in the Western world, our record of animal abuse is disturbingly high. The positive effects of living with companion animals is analysed along with the darker side of animal neglect and cruelty. Somewhat controversially the suggestion is made that this country's strong farming legacy contributes to a trivialising of pet keeping and a valuing of animals solely in terms of their functional role. This could be viewed as a particularly urban sentiment and suggests the need to broaden the framework of discussion on the understanding, regard for and welfare of nonhuman animals.

A rich source of insight into human-animal relationships that has often been overlooked in the past is the representation of nonhuman animals in the visual arts. Well supported by illustrations from a range of media, Deidre Brown's two chapters discuss how animals in art can express a range of ideas about spirituality, indigeneity, colonisation and human aspirations. 'Indigenous Art Animals' looks at the animals of customary Māori art forms. Often defying Western categorization and approaches, the evolving role and depiction of birds, reptiles, fish, taniwha and animal-human hybrids are examined. Brown explains how the arrival of Europeans provided new subjects and ways of representation for Māori artists to develop such as the appearance of nākahi, an Old Testament serpent and taniwha hybrid gifted with protective powers.

Animal representation in contemporary art is the subject of Brown's second chapter. The point is made that animals have largely been overlooked by art commentators and curators, those whose choices determine what work is brought to public attention. There are indications that this is changing with a few recent exhibitions that feature nonhuman animals. These have come about partly as an Aotearoan response to international art developments but also to the growing field of human-animal studies. Acknowledging the significance to New Zealand's culture and identity, Brown analyses a number of artworks that explore themes of hunting and collecting animals. Artists such as Fiona Pardington and Angela Singer who draw upon museum collections of skeletal and taxidermied animals seek to restore identity and dignity to

creatures killed and 'preserved' in the interest of science and to promote reflection on ecological loss and animal treatment. The images discussed in the chapter are often challenging, sometimes confronting but they all seek to give voice to animals in an effort to evoke greater respect for and understanding of their needs.

Rather than provide a formal conclusion for the book the final section, written by Annie Potts, raises two contentious issues of relevance to New Zealanders today. In 'Kiwis Against Possums' Potts questions why some species are deemed worthy of human compassion while others are demonised. The history of the officially sanctioned introduction of the bushtail possum from Australia to New Zealand in the 1850s is traced up to the current 'war' on these so-called 'foreign invaders' who many would argue deserve their fate. This construction of a 'national enemy' has very little to do with the possum himself but much more to do with human anxieties about the destruction of our natural environment and the threat to our agricultural economy. Potts does not provide answers for the dilemma of unwanted animals but challenges her readers to acknowledge human mistakes of the past and to consider a more reasoned approach towards possums and their kind.

The final chapter addresses the subject of eating meat, a topic often avoided perhaps for the passions it enflames. Here Potts notes how attitudes and practices towards consuming animal flesh and other products can create societal tension. Non-meat and non-dairy eaters express feelings of alienation from mainstream New Zealand while those who farm animals contend that they also feel marginalised by some sectors of society. This and other points raised offer more compelling evidence that animals do have the power to impact on our politics and daily lives and this serves to highlight the significance of human-animal studies in today's world.

*A New Zealand Book of Beasts* is a highly informative and engaging read. In questioning 'common-sense' assumptions and in examining various myths about nationhood and what it means to be a New Zealander, a strong foundation is laid for an open and robust debate on the complexities of our relationships with the nonhuman animals that live alongside us and are part of our everyday lives. All readers will be left in no doubt that nonhuman animals should be given their rightful place in further inquiries into the histories and cultures of Aotearoa New Zealand.