

Ryder, Richard D. *Beasts of Burden, Tiers of Tyranny.*
The Animals' Voice Magazine.

Beasts of Burden, Tiers of Tyranny

BY RICHARD D. RYDER

For millenia, humankind has regarded nonhuman animals as enemies or rivals to the world's resources and hence they have been subordinated as slaves. Yet there has also been a lurking guilt about our exploitation of them founded, no doubt, upon our realization that they suffer as we do ...



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continued from previous page

In ancient Egypt, laws were passed to protect wildlife and Pythagoras preached vegetarianism based upon a theory of reincarnation, purchasing animals in the market in order to liberate them. Porphyry, Plotinus and Seneca also abstained from eating animal flesh and in Rome, Plutarch based his vegetarian diet upon a duty of kindness to living creatures.

Many of the world's major religions acknowledged the importance of the human/nonhuman relationship and laid down ethical guidelines — Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism are clear examples and also, but more often forgotten, is the Judaism of Isaiah and Rosea.

Using animals for meat and as beasts of burden was almost universal in early civilization, as was the sport of hunting enjoyed

St. Francis in the 13th century. Aquinas, influenced by Aristotle's view that the less rational (e.g., slaves and animals) should serve the interests of the more rational (humans), argued that the only grounds for objecting to cruelty toward nonhuman animals was that it might lead to cruelty to humans.

With the coming of the Renaissance, humankind's treatment of the other animals sharply worsened and for over 300 years in Britain, the baiting of captive bears, bulls, badgers and even horses, became popular sports, excused on the grounds that God had given humans "dominion" over the animals and that such rude sports were conducive of manliness. The cruelties of the medieval kitchen, too, were horrendous. As in certain Asian countries today, there was a tendency to skin, cut up or cook animals alive.



"The day may come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withheld from them but by the hand of tyranny."

— JEREMY BENTHAM, 1748-1832

by the leisured classes which was often associated with the cult of manliness. Indeed, the skills of the chase were sometimes seen as equivalent to those of battle and part of humankind's huge war of conquest against nature. In warlike cultures, such as that of Rome, the torture and slaughter of thousands of elephants, giraffes, lions and smaller creatures, became a popular spectator sport at the coliseum and throughout the Empire.

Early Christianity, far from being entirely blind to the issue of cruelty, produced many saints noted for their closeness to animal life. Indeed, several saints, anticipating the modern Animal Liberation Front, actually rescued wildlife from hunters — St. Anselm, St. Neut, St. Godrie, and St. AvenLine, among them. One, the Hermit of Eskdale, was actually killed by the hunters in retaliation. Vegetarianism was not uncommon in the early church and even the moderate St. Benedict ruled that the members of his order should eat no four-footed creatures.

Christianity's reputation for speciesism took a turn for the worse after the influence of St. Thomas Aquinas eclipsed that of

There had been a few isolated voices of dissent during the Renaissance — Sir Thomas More, Leonardo da Vinci (who, like Pythagoras, would buy animals in the market in order to set them free) and Michel de Montaigne — but there was no *campaign* to protect nonhumans.

By the 17th century, Britain, far from being regarded as it is today, as the pioneering country of reform in the treatment of animals, was widely regarded in Europe as the cruelest.

Perhaps this is the one reason why Britain began to produce individual reformers. In 1635, the Englishman Thomas Wentworth legislated in Ireland to prevent cruelty to horses and sheep. In 1641, the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, on the advice of Nathaniel Ward (a graduate of Cambridge University in England) legislated against cruelty and tyranny toward domesticated animals. Later in the century, a number of writers began voicing their compassion for nonhumans, notably John Locke who thought that "people from their cradle should be tender to all sensible creatures" and the shepherd Thomas Tyron.



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who was probably the first to use the word "rights" in a nonhuman context, in about 1683.

Matters did not, of course, improve overnight. Actually, they stayed much the same throughout the following century. Indeed, the 18th century saw a sudden explosion of indignation on the part of civilized and compassionate opinion which really marks the start of the enlightened modern attitude toward nonhuman life: men of letters such as Richard Steele, Joseph Addison and Alexander Pope led the way by attacking not only barbarous sports and cruel culinary practices but also vivisection (condoned by Descartes in the previous century on the absurd grounds that only the human animal suffers pain); lesser known figures such as John Oswald, John Hildroip and George Nicholson expanded the subject from both the religious and secular points of view. In the final quarter of the century, the topic of animal rights was on the lips of almost everyone who considered themselves

Erskine, succeeded in pushing their Act through parliament, making it illegal to "beat, abuse, or ill-treat" farm animals.

Martin proceeded to bring as many prosecutions as he could under his new Act against drovers and carters he had observed beating horses and cattle in and around the great London market of Smithfield. But Martin, anxious to publicize the principles of humanity rather than to be vindictive toward individuals, would sometimes pay the fines himself.

In 1824, Martin, William Wilberforce, the Reverend Arthur Broome and others founded the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) in order to monitor the markets, slaughterhouses and streets and to publish educational literature. For its first few years the new SPCA teetered on the brink of bankruptcy while persevering with its campaigns to prosecute and educate. In the middle 1830s, it began to take on its aristocratic character. In 1835, the young Princess Victoria became a

"I think the rapidly growing tendency to regard animals as born for nothing except slavery to so-called humanity is absolutely disgusting."

— SIR VICTOR GOLLANCZ, 1893-1967



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educated — from Dr. Samuel Johnson to poets such as William Cowper, William Blake, and Robert Burns. Percy Bysshe Shelley was one of the first to attack cruelty to farm animals and narrowly escaped with his life when angry Welsh shepherds shot at him after he had put out of their misery several diseased or dying sheep.

The theological position was best put by Rev. Dr. Humphry Primatt in 1776: "Pain is pain, whether it be inflicted on man or on beast; and the creature that suffers it, whether man or beast, being sensible of the misery of it while it lasts, suffers evil." And the philosophical, as expounded by Jeremy Bentham in 1789, sounded remarkably similar: "The question is not 'Can they reason?' nor 'Can they talk?' but 'Can they suffer?'"

British attempts to introduce legislation to protect nonhumans began in 1800 but were unsuccessful until 1877 when the redoubtable Richard Martin MP and the equally robust Thomas Lord

patron of the SPCA and then, in 1840, after she had become queen, she granted the prefix "Royal" to the Society's title. Henceforward, the RSPCA went from strength to strength and there is no doubt that its royal and aristocratic connections helped to make animal welfare — once considered the concern of intellectuals and women — an accepted part of staid British society.

It was in 1865 that Henry Bergh, a wealthy American, attended the annual meeting of the RSPCA in England and was inspired to establish a similar organization in New York. Others, such as Caroline Earl White of Philadelphia and Emily Appleton in Boston, were thinking along similar lines, and before the end of the decade both east and west coasts had established a number of humane societies campaigning to protect horses from whips and bearing reins, opposing vivisection and the worst cruelties of the long distance transportation of food animals being taken

continued on next page

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continued from previous page
to the slaughterhouses of the Mid-West.

In Britain, many of the early animal wellfarists such as Martin, Wilberforce and Lord Shaftesbury were equally or better known as reformers of human society — slavery abolitionists, campaigners against poverty and injustice. The same was true in America where Samuel Gidly Howe, educator of the blind and deaf, became a director of the Massachusetts SPCA, and anti-slavery writers such as Lydia Maria Child and Harriet Beecher Stowe became pioneer protectors of abused children in New York and inspired the RSPCA in London to set up a society to do likewise. Noted feminists, too, on both sides of the Atlantic, were swept up in the anti-vivisection movement, and by the end of the century animal welfare had become predominantly female.

and other writers based in Oxford at that time; in America, it was led by writer/philosopher Dr. Tom Regan.

In Britain, the Hunt Saboteurs' campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s made news as young people staged direct protests against otter, fox, hare and stag hunting with hounds. The early 1970s also saw street demonstrations and increasing political agitation against animal experimentation (especially the testing of cosmetics and weapons) and factory farming. In 1972, Ronnie Lee and Cliff Goodman founded the Animal Liberation Front, setting about the liberation of laboratory and farm animals and the destruction of property associated with speciesist exploitation. In America, such tactics appeared toward the end of the decade.

In America, too, the 1980s have been a time of mounting animal rights activity as veteran campaigners such as Christine

*"The animals, you say,
were 'sent'
For man's free use
and nutriment.
Pray, then, inform me,
and be candid,
Why came they aeons
before man did,
To spend long
centuries on earth*



ROBERT FRANK/COURTESY PHOTO

*Awaiting their
Devourer's birth?
Those ill-timed chattels,
sent from Heaven,
Were, sure, the maddest
gift e'er given —
'Sent' for man's use
(can man believe it?)
When there was
no man to receive it!"*

— HENRY S. SALT, 1851-1939

The effects of wars on freedom movements is an intriguing subject. In Britain, feminism stagnated after 1914 and so did animal welfare. In the 20th century, one world war rapidly followed another and their horrors concentrated the minds of the survivors upon the troubles of their own species: the plight of other sentient was ignored. Furthermore, the emphasis upon martial traits had confused some into believing that an exploitative attitude toward nonhumans was a manly virtue and this misplaced machismo continues as a potent source of cruelty and violence to the present day.

It was only in the 1960s that Western societies showed signs of psychological recovery from the world wars and the cold war ethos of the 1950s; the civil rights and women's liberation movements in the United States were followed by a major revival of serious interest in animal rights in Britain from 1969 onward. It was led, to a large extent, by philosophers such as Peter Singer

Stevens, Cleveland Amory, and Shirley McGreal were joined by vigorous newcomers like Henry Spira, Ingrid Newkirk and Alex Pacheco backed by philosophers such as Tom Regan, Charles Magel and Bernard Rollin. Unlike in Britain, pressure was often directed at professions, individual laboratories and exploiting companies rather than at federal government. As a result, however, the American record of achievement has been better than the one in Britain in recent years.

Let us hope that the 1990s will be a golden age in the international crusade against speciesism; the time is ripe for a moral revolution of great significance for the whole planet. ■

Richard D. Ryder studied animal behavior at Cambridge University and is the former Chairman of the Royal SPCA, the world's oldest and largest humane society. Ryder has been an active campaigner for animal rights since the early 1970s.

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