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Ruth Harrison and Other Animals

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There was an excellent conference in the Zoology Department earlier this year on the subject of two pioneering books published about fifty years ago and the two heroic women who wrote them. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) is the better-known book, in print ever since its first appearance. Ruth Harrison's *exposé* of factory farming, *Animal Machines* (1964), did not reappear in a second edition until the occasion of this Oxford conference, although she had persisted as an eloquent and effective agitator on her subject until her death in the year 2000. In fact the closing speaker at the conference told a story neatly illustrating this persistence: some farming representative expressed his relief at finding that the tenacious Ruth Harrison was apparently no longer present at a meeting, but he was quickly corrected from behind a filing cabinet (it was a small room): "I'm still here." To which our speaker added, "And indeed she is."

I must say that I inwardly disputed that addition, at least in its most immediate application. We were generously fed during the conference (for which, sincere thanks), but there was no indication of the food's provenance – that is, of how the land or the animals implicated in it had been treated. It was blithely Carson/Harrison-free fare. Nor did the organisers wish to take up the suggestion (no doubt they had very good academic and other reasons) that the conference might sponsor a statement of some sort, urging the University's catering committees to do their best to act upon the teachings of the two women. These may seem very parochial points, but I think they're rather the reverse of that. We can't leave laws and codes of practice, or for that matter books, to do our ethics for us. Harrison herself said as much. Immediately after listing six specific bans which she wished to see enacted, she concedes that "Legislation alone will not provide the animals with an adequate charter."[1] And I would suggest (or it wouldn't have been worth mentioning these cavils) that the conference's collective portrait of this woman, and likewise the accounts given by several of the same distinguished academics in the new edition of her book, have underestimated her radicalism.

For instance, one of the prefaces to the new *Animal Machines* ascribes Ruth Harrison's effectiveness as a reformer largely to her "informed engagement with the real-life problems of animal use."[2] It's true that her book is altogether practical and empirical. There is no ethical run-up. It begins "I am going to discuss a new type of farming …" and soon we are at the scene itself: "Let me tell you about a visit to one of the more extreme units where veal calves were reared." And the book ends "I can only set down the facts as I see them and rely upon my reader to form his own conclusions." The Oxford conference very naturally followed this same line – pragmatic, science-led (or leading). But just before that ending to *Animal Machines*, there is a glance at something much more fundamental than animal welfare as normally understood: "We need", Harrison says, "to reassess our basic attitude towards the animals which are bred solely for human benefit." This is no modest or partial proposal; "We" means all humans, and "animals" as defined here leaves out only the absolutely feral.

I shall return to this aspect of Ruth Harrison's thought a little later. It happens that there was a different sort of Oxford symposium, just a few years after *Animal Machines* was published, which set out to present both the "real-life problems" and the necessary mental reassessment in a comprehensive statement. It took the form of a book called *Animals, Men and Morals*, edited by three post-graduate philosophers. Several of their fellow-writers for the book were likewise University people; accordingly some of its chapters are academic studies of one kind or another, though written with uncustomary fervour and impatience. Others lay out the facts for factory farming, for fur and cosmetics, and for experiments on animals. Although it made no great splash at the time (1971), this book proved to be the founding text of the modern animal rights movement, in both its philosophical and its political forms. A Warneford psychologist called Richard Ryder wrote the chapter on vivisection; in fact he seems to have been largely responsible for prompting and facilitating the book as a whole. Since Dr Ryder will be speaking in Oxford next month (on 7th November at Mansfield College), it's topical to say a little more about his part in the book.

Ryder himself had done research work with animals (I politely use that richly euphemistic "with"). Like Ruth Harrison, therefore, he knew the things of which he came to write. What he first wrote was a pamphlet titled *Speciesism*, which he published and distributed round Oxford in 1970 – some readers may remember it. Ryder coined its title-word on the analogy of 'racism' and 'sexism', in order to show at a lexical glance that the moral revolution of the 1960s, unfinished as it obviously was, had

still another ancient orthodoxy to start to undo. By placing the subject of animal welfare in that political context, the new word also freed it from its conventional associations with the minor good works of well-off old ladies (ie. courageous women who meant to get something right done, as fortunately many still do). When another Oxford post-graduate, Peter Singer, reviewed *Animals, Men and Morals* for the *New York Review of Books*, and when he went on to write *Animal Liberation* (1975), he used 'speciesism' as his key word for just those reasons and despite its awkwardness ("the word is not an attractive one, but I can think of no better term"[3]). Defining as it does the essential wrong, it remains a complete work of animal ethics and a rule-book in ten letters.

Singer's review spoke of *Animal, Men and Morals* as "a manifesto for an Animal Liberation movement".[4] In the event, it was his own book which became that manifesto, and it has been so ever since. But it was the earlier book which had established the proper way to look at this subject: not just as a miscellany of improvised cruelties, calling on the services of kindly people to press for remedies, but as an enormous and systematic wrong requiring a fundamental change of mind. As the book's 'Postscript' says – so much in the spirit of that time, as well as of that project – "we want to change the world."[5]

Richard Ryder's chapter of the book, surveying the law and practice of animal research, was a good deal longer than any of the others (he afterwards made a book of it, called *Victims of Science*). It gives many examples of contemporary experiments, illustrative of what animals might be asked to endure: rats in their 'Wright Auto-Smoker', dogs having their legs crushed in the notorious 'Blalock Press' (ah, those evocative trade-names!), pregnant baboons in car-crash simulations, and so on. A few of the examples are from Oxford's laboratories. It's a disgusting read, and it all sits in the baleful shade of the chapter's epigraph, taken from the works of one of experimental psychology's leading practitioners, Harry Harlow: "most experiments are not worth doing and the data obtained are not worth publishing".[6]

It is often asked of those who oppose vivisection why they don't bother about the far greater numbers of animals killed for food. The simple answer of course is that they do. As *Animals, Men and Morals* insisted, it's all one subject, though some may specialize within it. But there's a more unpleasant answer too. Factory farming, as Ruth Harrison showed in 1964, is itself a product of scientific research: "every batch of animals reaching market is a sequel to another experiment or part of an

experiment." The laboratory exemplifies speciesism in an especially stark and modern way, but it also promotes and pioneers it.

A popular account of animal research published in 1963 makes this last point very clearly. *The Science of Animal Behaviour* was written for the Pelican imprint by P.L.Broadhurst, a professor at Birmingham. He was presumably aiming the book at the lay-person and the aspiring young scientist, and it is patently and reasonably intended as an advertisement for his profession. There is not much in it about animals as they can be observed in nature. The laboratory is Broadhurst's preferred setting, partly because that was his own place of work (rats and the misleadingly fun-sounding "shuttle box" were his customary tools), but mainly because animals in themselves do not quite constitute a subject: "there is essentially only one basic scientific interest in the study of animal behaviour and that is to learn more about man himself."[7] Accordingly a high point of his presentation is the contemporary research of that same Professor Harlow into maternal deprivation as it affected baby rhesus monkeys. "Mothers are important, it is generally agreed", muses our author, himself a family man. "But just how important …?" Harlow's work with his artificial mothers, calibrated as to their lovelessness and delinquency, seemed to provide some answers. For instance, as Broadhurst reports, these forlorn babies "preferred a soft cloth model even when it did not provide milk to a hard one which did!" Not just the vulgar exclamation mark, but the cover of the book, picturing a monkey in the throes of this pathetic decision, show that the experiment, which should bring tears to the eyes of any person of ordinary sensibility, is thought to instance the discipline of animal research at its best.

I'm sure that Professor Broadhurst was a genial enough man, though of Harlow one can be rather less certain. Both had wives who helped them in their research, if that's relevant. As Richard Ryder says in his book *Victims of Science* (1975), "My intention is in no way to defame scientists, but to question their conventions."[8] And the convention in which Broadhurst was working is very clear: it is the old master/slave convention. And not just at work, where "the lowly rodent and his laboratory master" live out that relationship. Those two are the template for a much larger project, because the "exploitation in the service of man of the behavioural resources of animals has hardly begun." In the editorial foreword to *The Science of Animal Behaviour*, this "service of man" is frankly and enthusiastically called "slave labour".

It seemed natural to Broadhurst and his editor to cast the scientist as the designer of our future relations with animals. So while Ruth Harrison was proposing those checks on the industrialisation of farming, Broadhurst was telling his Pelican audience that the present role of animals in food production would soon "seem pitifully small" (a most interesting choice of adverb). To some extent, as the Oxford conference demonstrated, science has begun to provide its own corrective in the new academic discipline of Animal Welfare, where indeed Oxford has taken a leading part. But I believe that Broadhurst himself would have welcomed that, as keeping the story within the laboratory and its allotropes. Besides, science has not been brought to a pause in this matter. New ways of exploiting animals for food, indeed new animals, are being thought up and made real for new forms of slavery.

No, urgently needed as particular corrections are, it is only by man's "re-appraisal of his position in relation to the creatures with which he shares the environment" that these and all the other wrongs catalogued in *Animals, Men and Morals* can be understood and undone, and new ones prevented. That quotation is from Ruth Harrison's own chapter in the book. It is of course the chapter about factory farming, but it is also the first chapter, and it acts as an introduction to what follows. Her first sentence accordingly takes a fully re-proportioning view of our standing in the natural world: "It is a sobering thought that animals could do without man yet man would find it impossible to do without animals." This is a radical fact: if you read "could" as a past tense, you have the whole tragic history of human/animal relations before you.

1 *Animal Machines*, CAB International, 2013, p.202. Later quotations from Harrison's text are from pp. 35, 203, 202, and 38.

2 David Fraser, in *Animal Machines*, p.19. The "still here" story is told in this same piece, p.17.

3 *Animal Liberation*, Pimlico, 1995, p.6

4 *New York Review of Books*, vol.20, no.5, April 5, 1973

5 *Animals, Men and Morals*, ed. Stanley and Roslind Godlovitch and John Harris, Gollancz, 1971, p.232. Later quotations are from p.11.

6 Referenced in the text to *Journal of Comparative and Physiological Psychology*, 1962

7 T*he Science of Animal Behaviour,* Penguin Books, 1963, p.12. Later quotations are from pp.74, 73, 100, 135, and 132.

8 National Anti-Vivisection Society, 1983, p.xv