

“More of a Liability than an Asset”: Victorian Women’s Advocacy for Other Animals

Diana Donald, *Women against Cruelty: Protection of Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Manchester University Press, 2020. 296 pp.

Although the nonhuman animal rights movement in the West is frequently framed by activists and remembered by historians as gender-neutral, Donaldson’s (2020) *Women against Cruelty* (which examines meeting notes and campaigning documents reaching back to the movement’s founding in the early 19th century) demonstrates just the opposite. Women’s affinity for anti-speciesist activism within the context of a prevailing sexism which pitted all female pursuits as lesser-than would prove a difficult hurdle to surmount with regard to social movement resonance. This is not to reify or reduce women’s contributions. *Women against Cruelty* catalogs a diversity of feminine and feminist approaches to advancing the interests of nonhuman animals: some religious, some scientific, and some intersectional. Many women favored educational outreach, while others relied on rational debate, shocking images, direct intervention, and legal resistance.

Donaldson showed that women’s efforts in some ways discredited the movement through feminine associations, but, in other ways, women also buoyed it with their consistent and energetic support. Women, it is clear, existed as the movement’s foundation, providing critical insight, labor, donations, and tactical innovations. As Donaldson uncovers, women consistently made up the majority of various organizations’ memberships as well. However, the strict gender norms of Victorian Britain ensured that their desire to participate in the *public* affairs of anti-speciesism would be difficult to reconcile with their expected domestic role as caretakers (and their supposed natural affinity to other animals, a connection that many women saw as a strength but many men saw as a reason to discredit them). The Royal Society for the Protection of Animals (RSPCA), for instance, routinely confined women’s participation and restricted their leadership in campaigning.

To an extent, the tension between feminine and masculine social spheres actually reflected a tension between religiosity and the changing mores of the Industrial Revolution. Activism of the 18th and early 19th centuries was imbued with Biblical doctrine, but adherence to this approach would diverge under the growing influence of capitalism. Women, responsible as they were for upholding society’s morals, became agents of a romanticized Christian vision of equality and compassion, while men, privileged with the duty to

advance society through industry and politics, became immediate opponents given the importance of speciesism (and other forms of domination) to this agenda. Thus, on one level, women and girls policed speciesist cruelty, but, on another, they also came to police the unchecked power of men who increasingly pushed the boundaries of social order through conquest, colonialism, and science. The treatment of nonhuman animals, in other words, came to symbolize the uncomfortable and monumental transition into modernity.

Darwin, in particular, is highlighted for challenging the popular understanding of nature (and, by extension, relations between humans and other animals as well as between women and men). Women, who continued to adhere to religious claimsmaking (like Anglo-Irish anti-vivisectionist Frances Power Cobbe) found themselves at odds not only with the capitalist ethic, but also, more broadly, with rigid social stratification, hegemonic rationality, and masculinized notions of progress. Masculinized countermovement claimsmaking levied by scientists, politicians, and other societal leaders utilized Victorian gender norms to dismiss women's advocacy. "Excessive fondness for other species even smacked of misanthropy or frustrated sexual passions," Donaldson interprets, "It was allegedly indulged at the expense of humans (relatives, friends or servants) to whom such ladies had a real moral obligation" (p. 23). Sadly, while some women resisted this sexism (particularly those in the United States), others understood that it was a strategic necessity to police themselves and other women. As Donaldson points out, even the fearless and headstrong Cobbe regularly urged her colleagues to refrain from "hysterics" when advocating (p. 258). This sexism often intersected with ageism as well, as opponents would frame activists as bored, isolated, and frivolous old ladies. Donaldson summarizes: "In these circumstances, strong and overt female support for animal protection measures in the nineteenth century could be more of a liability than an asset, and 'sentiment' needed to be emphatically disclaimed by activists of both sexes" (p. 25).

Given these gender politics, it is strange that Donaldson herself fails to engage a larger feminist narrative by bringing in, to any substantial degree, Victorian feminism beyond that which happened to overlap with anti-speciesism activism, even failing to politicize her own language. (Donaldson regularly makes use of the terms "mankind" and "man" to refer to humans in general, which is now generally discouraged in academic writing.) Otherwise, Donaldson's content analysis of leading publications from the RSPCA, Bands of Mercy, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and several influential female-authored monographs such as Lind-af-Hageby and Schartau's *The Shambles of Science* and Sewell's *Black Beauty*, provides invaluable insight into a deeply complex and largely forgotten arm of anti-speciesist activism. Although women's early

contributions to nonhuman animal advocacy have already been documented by other historians such as Davis (2015), Kean (1995), Leneman (1997), and Unti (2002), Donaldson's work offers a more focused, detailed examination of Victorian gender politics as they manifest in debates over the status of non-human animals. Readers may be left somewhat disheartened that women's association with nonhuman animal rights activism seemed to regularly disadvantage the movement, but the persistence of the anti-speciesist activism into the 21st century and the considerable advancements in nonhuman animal rights since the 19th century are a testament to the role that women's dogged determination has played in sustaining a movement so vulnerable given its fundamental opposition to the capitalist agenda.

References

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