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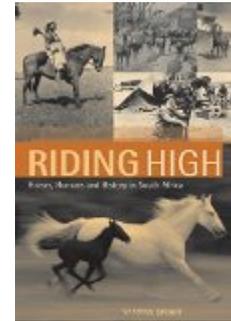
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sandra Swart. *Riding High: Horses, Humans and History in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010. xiv + 344 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86814-514-0.

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Horses and Human History in South Africa

It was only after the end of apartheid that South African intellectuals were free to think about animals.[1] Still, Sandra Swart, the author of *Riding High*, takes some pains to justify the subject of her book. A study of horses, she admits, might readily be seen as “the self-indulgent preserve of the feminine, middle class and white” (p. 8). The ensuing book proves that such a response would constitute presentist narrow-mindedness. Horse history tells a lot about the diverse classes, races, and genders in South Africa’s past. *Riding High* enhances our understandings of central processes and events in South African history because it is specialized, but never narrow or peripheral. To trace the equine thread over hundreds of years, Swart engages with many subspecialties of South African historiography, including environment, technology, warfare, racial science, agriculture, and consumption. In its proficient engagement with such a wide range of topics, the book provides an admirable model. It is also well written. Swart has an eye for the ironic image and the ridiculous moment, has a penchant for quoting Dr. Johnson, and is skilled at wordplay. Nonspecialists who value good history can read this book for a pleasant ride into South Africa’s past.

The motivation behind the book is to correct the invisibility of horses in historical understandings. “Horses mattered” is the foundation of the argument, but it is not a straightforward assertion; “mattering,” even for a beast, is not a function of biophysical character, but determined through negotiation. In my reading, the six central chapters are divided into three sections, with dif-

ferent emphases on the ways horses mattered. Chapters 2 and 3 lay out a basic argument about utility, emphasizing how much horses mattered in the Cape Colony before 1850. We gain a deeper understanding of horses in war, transportation, and racing. Chapters 4 and 5 take a more unexpected approach. Here, we are shown the limitations on the power and significance of horses, even as we consider the surest cases for the importance of horses in South Africa’s past: nineteenth-century Lesotho and the South Africa War. We leave those chapters with the understanding that the history of horses is not dependent on their efficacy for powerful humans. Chapters 6 and 7 continue the story in the twentieth century, when the importance of horses in transportation, agriculture, or war declined. But even as they became less utilitarian, they bore weighty meaning and mattered in new ways.

The book begins with the arrival of Europeans and horses at the Cape in the mid-seventeenth century. Chapter 1 describes the horse as a member of the portmanteau biota aiding the biological expansion of Europe (although many ponies were imported from the Dutch colony in Indonesia, rather than from Europe itself). Because of disease, especially African horse sickness, horses did not thrive. Local conditions selected for a homely, sturdy, small animal that could not compete with draft oxen in agriculture or long-distance transportation. But they were integral to that primary South African institution, the commando. In the story of the horse at the Cape, Swart underlines that ecological imperialism was, like other sorts of imperialism, a matter of power. The

fragile power of the horse in South Africa (it never went feral) gave it a different role from that on the American frontier: “horses did not represent freedom or wildness to the white settlers, instead they represented civilisation ... both symbolically and physically” (p. 36).

Horses also mattered within “civilized” Cape society, as described in the second chapter. Thoroughbred racing became popular during the early decades of British rule and horses mattered financially, politically, and symbolically. Horse breeding was important enough an economic sector to contribute to the downfall of Governor Charles Somerset. But more than being fast, horses could be fashionable, if they had the pedigree. The Cape gentry’s approach to thoroughbred breeding provides a telling window into thinking about inherited difference and, by extension, about human race. Swart works carefully with evidence on the discourse of breeding. She is cautious about making connections with thinking about human races, largely limiting the analogies to those made in the sources. Even so, discussions about horse breeding spoke volumes about understandings of gender and type among all mammals; the interest in pedigree is evocative of eugenics. Ironically, the result of all this attention to breeding was that the general hardiness of Cape horses declined; the well-bred horses were not the well-adapted ones.

The next two chapters turn and complicate the argument by lingering on the limitations of horses as physical beings and cultural symbols. These central chapters are a high point of the book, delivering mature, intellectually honest, and unanticipated (by me at least) analyses. It is uncontroversial to assert the importance of horses among the mounted Basotho, republican commandos, and imperial regiments. But, here, Swart pulls the reader back from assumption; they did not always matter as we might have expected.

Earlier chapters followed African adoption of horses as a minor theme, but chapter 4 takes Lesotho, the only “wholly mounted” African polity, as its subject. This chapter tempers common knowledge in two significant ways: first, the history of the horse in Lesotho counters the exclusive association of the imported biotic portmanteau with imperialist causes. Among the Basotho, the horse also enabled resistance against European imperialist expansion. The second point is on the cultural significance of horses in Lesotho. Basotho ponies were critical to military defense and internal economics. But the notion that the Basotho uniquely define themselves through horse ownership came from outside observers.

The Basotho themselves have consistently testified to the primacy of cattle as esteemed objects. Owning and trading horses allowed them to accumulate more cattle. In following this strategy, they were a lot like their neighbors, with the difference that their mountain environment gave them an edge against equine diseases.

The chapter on the South Africa War is similar in that it reins in conventional wisdom about the ways that horses mattered. It emphasizes the mortality, rather than the power, of horses. This chapter counts the beasts, where they came from, and what happened to them: hundreds of thousands of mounts were marshaled by the British for their army, with a mortality of two-thirds. More than three hundred thousand horses are estimated to have died. Nearly everything about being a warhorse was deadly: the disease environment; the lack of food; poor husbandry; and of course, the shells and bullets. But even as horses died in droves, the public began to see them as individual creatures, thanks in part to the 1877 publication of *Black Beauty*. The extraordinary mortality combined with sentimentality to create a powerful moment and Swart tracks a change in human-horse relations to the war. As casualties, equines could be memorialized along with ordinary soldiers. As effective war machines, they were increasingly doubted. Not least, the huge numbers of imported horses who had not yet died at the end of the war changed the genetic mix of South Africa horses yet again.

Together the first four chapters lay the parameters of how horses mattered before the twentieth century, when commandos were disbanded and engines began to replace animals in transportation and traction. Chapter 6 describes the declining economic value of horses, even as boosters sought state support for horse farming. As horses declined in number and utility, they took on another life in nostalgic Afrikaans literature. With its glory days on the republican frontier and in its threatened circumstance, the twentieth-century horse was easily identified with the Afrikaner ethnicity and poor whites.

But chapter 7, “High Horses: Horses, Class, and Socio-Economic Change in South Africa,” which presents the story of the horse’s reincarnation as an object of conspicuous consumption, is the more interesting and evocative discussion. In the mid-twentieth century, horse imports took another turn, as many wealthy Afrikaner farmers acquired American Saddlehorses. To execute the Saddler’s distinctive gaits, horses and riders underwent expensive training that was displayed in competitively judged shows. Swart draws on Thorsten Veblen

to describe the Saddlehorse as an object of conspicuous consumption. The American horse was a modern, costly, international horse, and not everyone bought in. A localist competitor show breed, the Boerperd, which was purported to have origins in historic South African horses, also emerged in this period. Actually, since South African horses had taken shape through waves of successive imports and creolization, boosters had to make a choice about what kind of horse to reify, so several different “authentically” South African horses emerged, were named, and were managed as breeds. The connection with Afrikaner identity politics was evident in Boerperd standards, shows, names, and finances. Afrikaners made up most aficionados of both the Boerperd and the Saddlehorse, and both breeds were objects of display rather than utility, but the Boerperd offered an egalitarian and nostalgic object of desire for an ethnically self-conscious consumer. By offering a fresh understanding of Afrikaner identity, this chapter is a model for post-apartheid, post-struggle historiography.

In this book, Swart admirably proves her point that the horse is a legitimate historical subject. But what kind of subject? Perhaps they are so easily integrated into existing narratives because they often appear as something closer to technologies than to sentient beings. Swart draws often on William Story’s book *Guns, Race, and Power in Colonial South Africa* (2008) for parallels. Showing how a technology operated in circumstances of human difference is solid social history. Swart is comfortable in that camp, stating in the first introductory chapter that social history provides good tools to account for the material existence of horses as well as humans’ representations of them. But, if a horse seems more like a gun as an object than a person as a historical subject, has history made an animal turn? And what are the advantages of such a turn, even if the post-apartheid, post-struggle moment allows it?

The concluding chapter presents a scintillating essay on the possibilities of this new sort of history, a “horsetory.” I recommend it as required reading for the field of animal studies. Swart admits what has been observed for many other subjects: inserting horses into the narratives that were written without them will not make them subjects of their own lives. Swart deftly contrasts Claude Lévi-Strauss’s pronouncement about thinking *with* animals with Aldo Leopold’s exhortation to think *like* a mountain. How can we think historically

like a horse? Swart outlines some possible methods that would bring us closer, including biographies of individual horses and studies of daily experiences of the collective.

But the deeper answer lies in her discussions of two different considerations for a narrative: sensory experience and agency. Agency is the stuff of old-school social history and Swart cautions us not to set the bar so high that only self-actualizing rational individuals have it. Individual horses exercised it in their everyday, kicking, bucking, and biting lives. They aided or resisted imperialism in cooperation with humans, making “human power (over them and therefore over other humans) possible in the first place” (p. 204). Collectively, they changed the landscape and set off new ecosystems interactions. But then again technology can also have this sort of impact, so as much as this discussion of agency improves social history, it does not take us toward an animal turn.

Swart leans farthest in that direction in her attention to sensory history. Unlike horses and people, technology and mountains, for that matter, do not have sensory experience. It is by tuning into “horse sense,” of time and distance, of a world of rich shadows, smells, and sounds unremarked by humans, rather than celebrating “horse agency” that narratives themselves will transform. But Swart has reservations about how far we could take the writing of “horsetory.” Even if writers take the goal of sensing like a horse, the histories would not come from equine mouths, and anyhow, she wonders, “how useful would a history of horses without humans be?” (p. 217). Rather than “horsetory,” the ambition of this book is to improve history, by helping it look more like the past. Past humans, Swart believes, possessed knowledge about and had sensory empathy with horses. They knew (and stepped back from) their exhibitions of agency and invested them with meanings about their own lives. In that sense, Swart proposes a return rather than an animal turn. Rather than develop a new way of thinking like horses, this book hopes to reconstruct old ones.

Note

[1]. J. M. Coetzee forcefully integrates animals into his commentary on post-apartheid society. J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace: A Novel* (New York: Viking, 1999). For a collection of historical essays on dogs, see Lance Van Sittert and Sandra Scott Swart, *Canis africanis: A Dog History of Southern Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

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