Jonathan Saha’s extensively researched and analytically ambitious new book, *Colonizing Animals: Interspecies Empire in Myanmar*, begins by highlighting historiographic sequestering of two major fields: critical animal studies and postcolonial studies. Animal studies has posed a significant challenge to conventional histories by highlighting the anthropocentrism in the social sciences and the humanities. Postcolonial studies, on the other hand, has centered the colonial process as a defining feature of modernity and critiqued the eurocentrism of existing big picture narratives. Both fields have critiqued the historical archive as a site of power, urged scholars to expand the cast of actors that populate conventional narratives, and appealed for a sharper, more expanded understanding of historical agency and contingency. And yet, as Saha points out, by and large, both fields have functioned in isolation, and even occasional wariness, of each other. *Colonizing Animals* thoughtfully brings these disciplines in conversation, sketches a careful critique of existing historiography, and offers novel conceptual and methodological frameworks for writing historical accounts that center animals without decentering the marginalized human subject.

The main argument of the book can be summarized quite succinctly: modern empires and capitalism are both thoroughly an “interspecies affair” (p. 1). *Colonizing Animals* plays on twin implications of its title: animals were part of interspecies relations that enabled colonization at the same time particular lifeworlds became colonized. Postcolonial scholars have pointed out the racial logics underpinning conceptions of animality and centrality of animals to the workings of imperial biopower.[1] However, the material implications of these logics have been less thoroughly explored. In highlighting the commodification of interspecies relations, *Colonizing Animals* provides a roadmap to move past theoretical and methodological fragmentation of animal history as a field. The book fleshes out the mechanics through which interspecies relations sustained colonial and capital transformation in Myanmar. In doing so, *Colonizing Animals* attempts to “denaturalize” both capitalism and colonialism and makes critical historiographical interventions in the fields of colonial and imperial history, environment studies, histories of capitalism, and scholarly work on nationalism.

The core of the book stretches from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century and is organized thematically in six chapters, each centering on a different aspect of changing interspecies relations, and an introduction and conclusion that chart the historiographic import of the book. The first two chapters offer a theoretical
framework to understand the place of working animals; the focus here is on two animals—elephants and oxen—that became central to colonial projects in the twentieth century. Elephants were critical to the colonial timber industry in Myanmar, and there was a significant expansion in the scale of elephant capture during the nineteenth century. However, the mobilization of elephant power in the working process required consistent care, skill, and experiential knowledge of their attendants, *Oozies*, recruited largely from the Karen groups in northern Myanmar. In southern Myanmar, a different interspecies relation emerged at the cusp of agrarian transformation. Within a short period, Irrawaddy delta went from a mangrove-forested backwater region to becoming the world's largest rice-producing region—a transformation largely driven by conceptual and material alteration of, and collaboration between, peasant and bovine labor.

Animal studies scholars have argued that working animals should be conceptualized as laborers and key actors in capitalist accumulation. [2] In *When Species Meet* (2008), Donna Harraway has notably drawn attention to qualities of animals as sentient actors and conceptualized their commodity status as “lively capital.” *Colonizing Animals* argues that from the nineteenth century onward, animals were rendered into a particular form of capital, which, drawing from both Harraway and Karl Marx, Saha defines as “lively constant capital that demands interspecies relationships and labour to produce surplus value” (p. 34). Saha terms this “undead capital.” By recognizing working animals as “undead capital” rather than identifying them as “laboring” bodies or “lively capital,” Saha helps resolve key points of difference between post-humanist and postcolonial scholarship. While the post-human turn has rightly questioned the overrepresentation of the human animal as an agent of historical change, postcolonial historians, including Saha, contend that this critique has resulted in attention away from marginalized humans. Recognizing animal labor as coerced and unfree has also led to superficial comparison with human unfreedom, particularly slavery, which has irked historians of colonialism across geographies. Undead capital brings attention to interspecies relations labor that makes the production of surplus value possible, thus, making it possible to trace specific histories that shaped social arrangements critical to economic activity.

Working animals were rendered into capital. One of the central contributions of the book is that it draws historical attention to this process. Chapter 2 closely attends to species-specific histories that transformed elephants and oxen into economic and “vital” resources. Chapter 3 moves to wider implications of this rendering. Saha focuses on two sets of case studies: one centers on colonial policies aimed at eradicating “dangerous animals” and the other looks at practices surrounding licensed killing of “useful or charismatic species” (p. 85). Together they demonstrate how colonial practice regulating maintenance of some animal life led to the commodification of the very act of killing.

Crocodiles were particularly targeted in southern Myanmar, because they were seen as threatening to human life and more so because they threatened bovines critical to expansion of wet-rice cultivation. Bounties or rewards were issued both by central authorities and informally by lower-level bureaucrats. Saha argues that this attempt to secure animal capital, in the form of cattle, led to the commodification of crocodile, snake, and sometimes leopard carcasses. The colonial legal archive throws up wide-ranging evidence of how this changed local relations with “dangerous animals”—breeding crocodiles to kill and sell carcasses, reusing the same skin multiple times to extract bounties, and expanding gun licensing to enable crocodile slaughter. The colonial archive helps Saha highlight how colonial policies, often ineffective and ambiguous, nevertheless transformed interspecies relations.
Affective encounters with animals, through the act of looking, touching, smelling, or hearing, are central to defining what is human. The category of the human, Saha contends, is “mediated through imperial discourse” (p. 108). In chapter 4, Saha intently focuses on British representations of tactile interactions, both Burmese and their own, with a variety of animals across a range of sources—memoirs, natural histories, scientific texts, travel writing, and government reports—and shows how animals become materially and figuratively entangled in the production of imperial difference between the colonizers and the colonized. Rather than seeing the production of difference as an idea that emerged in Europe and was diffused through the empire, Colonizing Animals asserts that “ideas about animals might have been the result of imperialism” (p. 16). Chapter 5 continues to build this argument by moving beyond colonial texts and attending to interspecies relations in Burmese-language sources.

Changing conceptions of animality systematically informed national imaginaries and were central to the formation of a distinct Burmese modernity. Saha analyzes the writings of Burmese nationalists for symbolic and material traces of Burmese understandings of changing interspecies relations. “Town Gossip by Town Mouse,” a column published in The Sun, a nationalist newspaper founded in 1911, frequently included editorials on working animals relevant to the nationalist imaginations of an independent economy. Saha closely reads two such articles and shows how their focus on developing sympathy toward animals was mediated through calls to preserve Buddhist religious teachings and was simultaneously based on “othering” of Indian herders and slaughterhouse workers’ relations with animals. Furthermore, Saha highlights how Burmese nationalists, such as the well-known journalist and poet Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, mobilized scientific primatological knowledge toward a critique of colonial modernity. This “anti-colonial primatology” questioned fundamental colonial ideas of civilizational progress; distinguished between wild and tame; and infused evolutionary scientific ideas within idioms of Buddhist Jataka stories, Burmese folklore, dynastic chronicles, poetry, and European Marxist thought (p. 143). At the same time, they also highlight contradictions within anti-colonial thought as Hmaing’s writings retooled racial knowledge toward an exclusionary politics of nation.

The final chapter, “Revolting Creatures,” carries forward one of Saha’s central threads: the exploration of how colonial sovereignty shaped everyday practices involving interspecies relations. Here, environmental historians will find Saha’s treatment of the Hsaya Rebellion of late 1930—the greatest threat to colonial rule since the uprising of 1857—instructive. Attention to “beasts of rebellion” Saha argues, does not radically alter existing historiographic accounts but does expand the narration of key events (p. 162). In illuminating the role that the longer history of cattle theft, and cattle’s centrality to Burmese nationalism, played in instigating violence, Saha demonstrates how political action resulted from peasant grievances that emerged from existing ecologies made vulnerable.

While each chapter engages with a different lens, and a distinct genealogy and theorists, Saha’s accessible account of existing historiography across environmental studies, colonial history, and the history of capitalism makes Colonizing Animals an excellent introduction to any historian interested in thinking with interspecies relations. Moreover, Saha leverages his earlier work within legal history and makes a persuasive case for writing from the ambiguities of the colonial archive, making ample use of a variety of sources, including legal case histories adjudicating interspecies conflict, records of animal contestations involving colonial firms, and criminal records of colonial counterinsurgency efforts. Additionally, Saha’s emphasis on Burmese-language sources is a welcome and much-needed intervention as animal
historians, particularly those working on the British Empire, have rarely ventured outside imperial texts and English-language sources.

Finally, among the many strengths of *Colonizing Animals* is its attention to the role of place in formulating conceptual or methodological frameworks. Saha demonstrates the importance of theorizing from imperial settings, inviting scholars to move beyond “superficiality of the field’s engagement with colonial contexts” (p. 130). The choice to juxtapose a variety of case studies next to each other is a significant one. This allows Saha to highlight disparities that emerge when we consider interspecies relations from distinctive vantage points, for example, from the domestic intimacy of British officers cohabitating with their canine pets (chapter 4) vis-à-vis beginning, as Saha shows in the earlier chapters, from interspecies lifeworlds that inhabit the timber yard and the rice field. One takes us toward a cultural history of how imperialism is made familiar and stable for the colonizers, while the other takes us to a processual understanding of animal capital and to working interspecies relations whose transformation was critical to imperial and capital power.

At a time when the ongoing ecological crisis has turned many environmentally attuned scholars into chroniclers of the present, *Colonizing Animals* asks us to turn toward the past and value animals not in and of themselves. For Saha reminds us, “the animal is a synecdoche for the environments that they emerge from and are reproduced within. To include animals in our histories is to value the ecologies that make possible their continued existence in the world.... It is a radical position that needs to be attuned by a critique of commoditization of life and marginalization of humans” (pp. 196-97). In looking backward, *Colonizing Animals* shuns ahistorical narratives of contemporary conservation and ethical discourses surrounding animals, in favor of a messy, muddled world teeming with interspecies vulnerabilities.

Notes

