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The lion's historian: Africa's animal past



**AUTHOR:**

Sandra Swart

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**REVIEWER:**

Dan Wylie<sup>1</sup>

**AFFILIATION:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Literary Studies in English, Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa

**EMAIL:**

d.wylie@ru.ac.za

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# Animals are our history

Sandra Swart, Professor of History at Stellenbosch University, has been steadily building a reputation as the 'animals' historian', pre-eminently in her previous book, *Riding High: Horses, Humans and History in South Africa* (Wits University Press; 2010). In *Riding High* she showed how the horse was absolutely key to the conduct of colonisation, centuries of warfare, the symbolisation of power, and entertainment. In *The Lion's Historian*, Swart examines the intricate effects of several other animal presences, wild and domestic, feral and alien, largely absent from conventional historiography.

With vivacious boldness, Swart goes further than merely chronicling human use of or contact with animals, or 'giving a voice to the voiceless'. Broadly, she argues, human-animal interactions are not marginal to history as we anthropocentric writers conceive of it, but actively constitutive of it. Other animals have frequently co-evolved with human societies, co-operatively learning from as well as conflicting with them, injecting their own languages, habits and agency. In this, Swart joins a burgeoning stream of thought, largely aimed at de-centring self-satisfied human prominence in global environmental narratives. This stance emphasises web-like and co-operative networks and multispecies symbioses, as opposed to Chain-of-Being or bowdlerised Darwinian hierarchies of conflictual dominance, and attributes forms of consciousness and even agency to non-human entities as diverse as fungi and wolves. Whilst – as Swart acknowledges – a writer of history is ineluctably locked into 'the prison-house of [human] language', a radically different, more imaginative and inclusive mode of environmental history cries out to be written.

To this end, Swart offers eight illuminating case studies in African humans' interactions with other animals. She expands her South African emphasis further north, notably in the first chapter on lions, since East African herder-lion relations are a particularly well-documented and ongoing issue. Here, as elsewhere, Swart is concerned to exhume non-Western, non-industrialised perspectives, from Maasai to San, which evince a gamut of possible relationships radically different from the monetised horror show of 'canned' lion hunting.

In the South African context, animal/human ('humanimal', in some formulations) history is inevitably bound up with the impact and development of European incursion and colonisation. The book's second chapter accordingly examines the articulations of animals and power in Jan van Riebeeck's 17th-century Cape settlement. Relations between Dutch and Khoikhoen transhumance herders centred almost exclusively on negotiations over the procurement of meat, spawning conflict over grazing for their respective cattle and sheep. There was predation by wild animals, from porcupines to lions, to cope with too – a prelude to their rapid extirpation, with incalculable environmental ramifications. The point: early Cape history makes no sense at all without the animal element.

In the third chapter, Swart reassesses the role of the horse in indigenous resistance to white imperial incursion. Horses were only one animal species crucial to the interlocked "politics of species and race." Cattle – and the pasturage they required – of course were the constant *casus belli* of the century-long war on the Eastern Cape frontier; in turn, animals were the primary sufferers in human conflict. Swart then examines in detail the pernicious effects of the 1913 *Land Act*, as refracted through the writing of Sol Plaatje. Plaatje might seem an unlikely activist against animal cruelty – a persistent issue, in fact, that intersects complexly with using animal epithets to hurt others, especially the powerful denigrating the allegedly 'lesser races'. Such rhetorics resurface repeatedly, not only in South Africa, while attitudes of kindness or otherwise towards animals can remain iconic of racial divisions. (Swart cites Jacob Zuma's infamous statement in 2012 regarding white people's affection for dogs.)

Dogs are also the focus of a chapter on the evolution, training and societal impact of police dogs as an increasingly feared weapon of apartheid control. At a different scale altogether, but with strangely congruent dimensions, Swart explores the race-identity politics behind Eugene Marais' celebrated book *The Soul of the White Ant*. Ideological blinkeredness aside, she acknowledges, Marais did stimulate enhanced empathy with both ants and baboons through his poetic insights into their almost-human societies – a goal close to Swart's own project.

As environmental historian William Beinart has explored, colonisation included the increasing application of Western science. Swart examines one scientific by-way – the efforts to somehow reproduce or resurrect the quagga, which the early colonists had sportively shot to extinction. Shades of reconstituting, via frozen DNA, the woolly mammoth, of course. Whether hapless or hubristic, such enterprise (Swart calls it 'zombie zoology', a term she wistfully complains somehow has not caught on) has particular importance and poignancy in our present era of multiple extinctions.

Finally, Swart unpacks one of South Africa's most newsworthy and emotive animal issues: the interface of humans and baboons in the Cape Peninsula. In many ways this nexus encapsulates centuries of our humanimal histories, the troubled interdependencies of 'civilisation' and 'wilderness', of the fears and condemnations that comprise the definition of 'humanity' itself. Here she summarises key aims: to "push back into deep history, drawing on cognate disciplines like palaeontology, palaeoecology, archaeology and the study of rock art"; to question "static and stagnant representations of human-animal relations"; and to take "vernacular knowledge, oral tradition and traditional ecological knowledge seriously." Swart accordingly concludes that such deep histories reveal that human-animal relations have always been malleable; hence, we need not be trapped in our present ecological predicament. To comprehend the history is to hope.

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*The Lion's Historian* is both thoroughly researched and passionately engaged, its lively style an implicit protest against the starchy blandness of much professional historiography. It is further leavened with personal anecdotes, punning subtitles (Swart is frequently laugh-out-loud funny), resonant phrases, and a scattering of photographs. None of this

diminishes the book's seriousness or persuasiveness. While multispecies studies in the environmental humanities flourish (including among Swart's own postgraduate students), much vital work beckons. With characteristic theatricality, Swart closes this scintillating book with a non-human utterance, a baboon word (meaning, roughly, 'Alert: human!'): *Wahoo!*

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