

## CONFERENCE REPORT

*Animals in History And Culture*. Faculty of Humanities, Bath Spa University College. July 3-4, 2000

*Representing Animals*. Center for Twentieth Century Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. April 13-15, 2000

*Thresholds of Identity in Human-Animal Relationships: An Interdisciplinary Colloquium*. Interdisciplinary Humanities Center, University of California, Santa Barbara. March 10-11, 2000

*Millennial Animals: Theorizing and Understanding the Importance of Animals*. Department of English Literature, University of Sheffield. July 29-30, 2000

Between July 1999 and July 2000, four international conferences dedicated to the study of nonhuman animals in culture were held in the United States and Great Britain. This activity signals what many hope will be the beginning of a new interdisciplinary field of animal studies within the humanities. If one does emerge, its outlines and internal tensions are now much clearer than they were two years ago.

The first conference, *Animals in History and Culture*, was held at Bath Spa University College, England, July 3-4, 1999. Organized by Dr. Erica Fudge and Dr. Tracey Hill, the conference addressed the conceptual exchange between humanity and animality from the seventeenth century to the present. Forty-eight papers examined the ways human beings have looked at animals and human relationships to animals. Several speakers detailed historical instances of animal images or taxonomies being used to abet racism, sexism, or classism. By and large historical and British, this, the largest of the conferences, gave exciting evidence of institutional support for animal studies within the humanities.

Two conferences were held in the United States in the spring of 2000. The Center for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, under the directorship of Professor Kathleen Woodward, chose as its theme for the 1999-2000 academic year, *Representing Animals*, around which were organized a lecture series of 7 invited speakers, a panel discussion, a public address by Jane Goodall, and a conference. With all but 7 of the 38 participants coming from the United States, this conference provided an opportunity to assess the direction of animal studies in the United States. As at the Bath Spa conference, many of the papers addressed the reception

and consumption of representations of animals through time as well as the underlying ideological preconceptions about animals that drive cultural representations. Papers at the Milwaukee meeting focused primarily on contemporary culture. For example, one speaker addressed the changing attitudes toward “liveness” in contemporary animal displays; another outlined the economic impetus behind promoting the mouse as the ideal research subject. Several of the papers reflected interest in animals used in zoos and “zoo culture” shared by conference organizer Nigel Rothfels, Assistant Director of the Center.

In the course of the Milwaukee conference, some animal advocates became distressed by the absence of an advocacy perspective, even the treatment of animal suffering and death with chilling detachment. The most dramatic erasure of flesh and blood animals came the day after Jane Goodall spoke to conference attendees as well as hundreds of people from the community, the majority of whom were visibly moved by her unflagging commitment to non-human primates. When the next day a young scholar dismissed Goodall’s work as “anthropomorphic,” many participants heatedly objected. Expecting scholarly discussion similar to that in Women’s Studies or Race-and-Ethnicity Studies, advocates were not prepared for the diverse understandings of animals, many of which recapitulated the production of animals as objects and differed little in spirit from the exploitative representations under analysis. In sum, animal advocates felt that conference papers demonstrated impressive levels of expertise about the ways that animals are processed by culture but that often the animal was tragically absent.

One professional wildlife writer and university professor, Charles Bergman, was sufficiently disturbed by the Milwaukee conference to write an eloquent article to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 23, 2001 issue) calling for the humanities to take animals more seriously. About the conference, Professor Bergman wrote,

Some of the people attending the conference cared about creatures, but for the most part, the participants talked almost exclusively about what representations of animals mean to us. They said virtually nothing about how our representations affect the animals, or the ethical issues involved in representation. The actual animals seemed almost an embarrassment, a disturbance to the symbolic field.

Professor Bergman suggested that academic discourse needs to find a new way of talking about animals that treats them as autonomous living creatures rather than as texts that we produce. He aptly concluded, “we need to care as much for the worlds of being as we do for the worlds of meaning.”