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Review Article

Fred Stenson, *The Great Karoo*

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Sandra Swart, *Riding High: Horses, Humans and History in South Africa*

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Fred Morton, *When Rustling Became an Art: Pilane's Kgatla and the Transvaal Frontier 1820–1902*

David Philip, Cape Town, 2009

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The death of the animal in South African history

Never before in human history have so many animals been subjected to horrific slaughter, unconscionable abuse, and unthinkable living conditions. These conditions have a unique history that requires both material and philosophical analysis, and it is a history that needs to be attended to in its *specificity* so that we might learn better how to transform it.¹

Thus Matthew Calarco in his contribution to Paola Cavalieri's collection, *The Death of the Animal* (2009). Running through the conversations comprising this book is a thread of dissent at the Socratic, rationalistic approach taken by analytic philosophy to the question of rights for animals. J.M. Coetzee's character Elizabeth Costello utters sentiments similar to Calarco's in Coetzee's parallel collection, *The Lives of Animals* (1999)²; and in response, philosopher Cora Diamond also proposes a (re)turn to the experience of the visceral:

The awareness we each have of being a living body, "alive to the world," carries with it exposure to the bodily sense of vulnerability to death, sheer animal vulnerability, the vulnerability we share with them. This vulnerability is capable of panicking us. To be

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1. M. Calarco, "Toward an Agnostic Animal Ethics", p 83, in P. Cavalieri, *The Death of the Animal: A Dialogue* (Columbia University Press, New York, 2009), pp 73–84
 2. J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (Secker & Warburg, New York, 1999)

able to acknowledge it at all, let alone as shared, is wounding; but acknowledging it as shared with other animals, in the presence of what we do to them, is capable not only of panicking one, but also of isolating one³

Coetzee himself translated analytic philosophising about the presence and meaning of the death of animals into bodily, personalised, emotive terms in his novel of a characteristically bleak South African landscape, *Disgrace* (1999).⁴ Almost always, apparently, it paradoxically requires the imaginative empathy of the novelist to ground the fate of sentient beings, humans and animals alike, in the phenomenological experiences of actual worlds. Here, for example, Canadian novelist Fred Stenson, in his novel of the South African War, *The Great Karoo*, evokes the death of the animal in terms which almost smoke off the page:

The mounted regiments were on the downwind side, because the regiments of foot did not find horse smell as homey as horse soldiers did

The other animals in this human town were pets and mascots: rock dassies, springbok captured in infancy; a baboon on a chain; ostriches, who could fight out of any hobble but were addicted to oats. These were sometimes coerced to race

On the other side of the railway tracks, farther down the prevailing wind, was the true animal town. Paddocks of cattle, sheep, goats, and bullocks; mules and free-pool horses. Between the paddocks, garbage carts rolled to the refuse pits, where vultures walked, fussy and unhurried, like shoppers in a market

Near the dump was the African camp: shelters built of garbage that were homes to the men who did the work of Irene and those who needed rest between convoys. For food, the Africans cooked heads, hooves, and offal cast out by the butchers

Directly beside the railway tracks, meat-fragrant smoke rose from the ovens behind the giant mess tents. Butcher's tent. Knackers' yard. Biltong smokers converting trek ox into dried meat.⁵

Fred Stenson is a substantial Canadian writer, with several prizes accruing to various of his fifteen books. *The Great Karoo* is his eighth novel, a densely-researched account of the involvement of Canadian mounted units in the 1899–1902 South African War. The novel follows the mixed fortunes of Frank Adams, one of a bunch of youthful, over-zealous plains-Canadian cowboys, from their arrival in Cape Town harbour, together with such of their personal mounts that had survived the appalling sea journey, through the trek north to Kimberley and the capture of Pretoria, to the final muddled pursuits of De Wet and De la Rey. Some unnerving skirmishes aside, the unit is frequently behind the action; much of the war is spent in gruelling journeys overland and in prolonged boredom. The unit is at odds with itself, with the Britishers sporadically put in charge, and with the strategies pursued by Kitchener and other generals; the Canadian comrades team up, squabble, fight elusive Boers, desert, rejoin. Some die. Adams discovers that falling for a Boer woman is a bad idea. He crosses paths with various historical personages: his closest companion, Ovide Smith, whose burial site in the Free State Stenson found; John McCrae, later famous for writing the World War One poem “In Flanders Fields”; Colonel ‘Mike’ Rimington, under whose Scouts the Canadian Mounted units ultimately worked.

3 Cited by C Wolfe, “Humanist and Posthumanist Antispeciesism”, p 51, in Cavalieri, *The Death of the Animal*, pp 45–58

4 J M Coetzee, *Disgrace* (Secker & Warburg, New York, 1999)

5 Stenson, *The Great Karoo*, pp 209–210

The Canadian contingents have been less well served by historians than the Australian ones, which were made notorious largely by the film *Breaker Morant*. Lord Pakenham's go-to history, *The Boer War* (1982),⁶ mentions the Canadian mounties only a few times in passing. Stenson has done a sterling and intricate job of following (I assume accurately) the units' complex routes back and forth across the South African countryside, also evoking at length the conversations, gestures, and ethical dilemmas of its wide range of characters. Too wide, perhaps, and too detailed: I kept feeling the narrative pace would have been well served by losing 100 pages of very well-written but ultimately redundant conversations. While a certain thinness of landscape description reveals Stenson's perhaps understandable lack of familiarity with the nubby textures of South African environments (hadedas aren't exactly black), Stenson knows horses, and it is around the horses, more than anything in a war they regard mostly as "a mangle they had been turned through, for no good reason" (p 123), that the characters' lives revolve. It is through the suffering and losses of the horses, "sacrificed for nothing" (p 123), the treasured original Canadian steeds, the ragged and often hopelessly unsuitable remounts, that the harsh futilities of warfare emerge most starkly and movingly, though Stenson's prose is admirably restrained, as hard-jawed and undemonstrative as his bereaved characters. On the march to Johannesburg in July 1900,

The oxen were clapped out too Every day, a few would stop Unable to lie down in their yokes, they would stand still, and no amount of abuse from the drivers could move them If the whipping went too far, the cowboys among the Rifles would force it to stop – for, like any cow, an ox can put its brain to sleep In that state, you can beat it to death and achieve nothing

Several times a day, a man would drag his horse off the line and shoot it Pete Bolton shot his early to get it out of the way Eddy had been forced to give up his giant horse to a gun crew and was given a small Argentine who was no match for his weight When the Argentine pony fell twice in an hour, Pete shot it as well ⁷

Quite apart from fictionalising with considerable persuasiveness the grim and confusing daily grind of the war, and uncovering the history of units almost lost from memory, Stenson has thus also embarked on exhuming one brief but important segment of the history of the animals on which the progress and shape of South African history has profoundly depended.

Companionship with, and compassion for, horses in the South African War was hardly confined to Canadian cowboys and scouts: British Tommies loved their horses, and Banjo Paterson poetically lamented the fate of Australian mounts. And here is the Boer general, Viljoen, expatiating on his pony "Blesman":

He remained my faithful friend long after he had got me out of [trouble]; he was shot, poor little chap, the day when they made me prisoner Poor Blesman, to you I owe my life! Blesman was plainly in league against all that was British; from the first he displayed Anglophobia of a most acute character He has served me in good stead, and now lies buried, faithful little heart, in a Lydenburg ditch ⁸

6 T Pakenham, *The Boer War* (Futura, London, 1982)

7 Stenson, *The Great Karoo*, p 205

8 Swart, *Riding High*, p 127

This is just one such citation in Sandra Swart's chapter on horses in the South African War in her excellent study of horses in South African history, *Riding High*. In this chapter, rather than try merely to enumerate the horses drafted (and lost) for what utilitarian purpose in the war, she has focused on the emotional histories of the horse-human entanglement. This is part and parcel of the book's wider project, not only to talk about "the horse as a commodity and as a device used by humans to effect change or to wield and display power" (p 196), but to recover something of history from the horse's point of view ("horsetory", as she characteristically quips), the agency of horses, the view from the saddle, the history of horse sounds and smells. This is not only to turn history in the direction of what novelists usually do – recreate the sensuality of an 1850s Cape Town street in which the smell of horses was as pervasive as petrol and diesel is today, for example, or write the "biography of a horse called Somerset" (p 199), who had a far more varied, interesting and potentially illuminating life than the mere appellation "Dick King's horse" would allow. Swart also wants to extend already well-developed models of "social history from below" from human oppressed groups to animals: "Horses share similarities with other under-represented groups: marginality from the centres of power and record keeping" (p 198). Their silencing is not unlike that of women, as in a 1930s Afrikaans quip that "it is always very difficult to foresee what a chestnut horse or a woman will do" (p 198).

Swart, a professor of History at Stellenbosch University, has gone a long way towards telling this subaltern story, and showing that the horse was "certainly instrumental, if not critical, in the process of colonisation and oppression" (p 197). Swart begins at the beginning: "one of the first European settlers in southern Africa was a horse" (p 18) – a mid seventeenth-century shipwreck survivor. Shortly thereafter established at the Cape, Jan van Riebeeck struggled to get the VOC to send him any horses at all. It was hard to get them there alive, and as hard to keep them alive afterwards: "terrifying diseases" (p 23), of which there was no local knowledge, decimated the imports; horses were like "hothouse flowers", expensive to maintain and, until the development of adequate veterinary sciences and skills, desperately vulnerable. This would remain the case well into the twentieth century. As Swart points out, "Animal afflictions contributed to shaping human settlement patterns, land use, trade and military capacity" (p 22). But in time, success there was: by 1744 the colonists had 5 749 horses, imported from various parts of the world and subjected to the first local cross-breeding efforts (including with zebras), an enterprise that would become ever more refined. Many of these horses were being used for transport, helping structure the very nature and course of roads: another book needs to be written on the transport horse-companies that plied the country for more than two centuries.

Swart moves on to nineteenth-century breeding programmes and the obsession with "blood", paralleling similar concerns for purity of lineage amongst the country's human races. Each of Swart's subtitles in this chapter is a play on language – bad blood, blue blood, fresh blood, blood weeds – as a "clash of horse cultures" (p 51) saw the intertwined developments of veterinary science, social differentiation enhanced by what horses you might own or breed, and "horsing about" for entertainment as opposed to utility. The story of horse-racing, such a lucrative industry today, also needs a book to extend what Swart elects to leave out.

Of the various breeds emerging from this riot of experimentation were those allegedly best adapted to South African conditions – the Cape horse, the Boerperd – of which the most famous is certainly the Basotho pony. A simple graph demonstrates the parallel growth of Moshoeshoe’s adherents and subjects and of horse ownership in the nascent Basutholand. The role of the horse in embodying a national consciousness is fascinating, though more complex than the tourist mantras that Lesotho is now a “nation of horsemen”. Horses, saddles and guns nevertheless came to play significant roles alongside cattle in Moshoeshoe’s modified *mafisa* system by which he attracted and rewarded adherents; the phrase *bohkina pere* – to knee-halter a horse – came to describe also the selection of certain non-permanent chiefs. As that phrase indicates, the “Basotho pony” was no less creolised a creation than the heterogeneous languages and peoples Lesotho eventually embraced.

Swart’s sensitivity to language is just one pleasure of her multi-faceted book, and her chapter on the emotional responses to horses during the South African War richly incorporates memoir and poetry. While hundreds of thousands of horses died in that war, 131 000 were still on state books at the end of it. Thousands were sick and were destroyed; the rest, a shambolic mix of remounts, of breeds imported from all over the world and thus totally transforming the country’s gene pool, were sold off to farmers – their fate being the subject of the next chapter. The first half of the twentieth century saw a radical shift in the role of horses, rendered increasingly if unevenly obsolete by mechanisation, but simultaneously “mobilised as potent symbols in a growing class-based, gendered identity configuration, evident in the growing Afrikaans press, in popular novels and in everyday discourse” (p 170). Again, Swart here has opened windows on a world of imaginative representation which has direct bearing on political movements and on the practical treatment of animals, and which will reward being extended by further research.

The crisis in horse over-population of the first half of the century was merely exacerbated by the exigencies of the Second World War; new communities, uses and discourses had to emerge, and Swart devotes a chapter to just one facet of this period of “seismic” readjustment: the case of the imported American Saddlebred, or Saddler, and its conflictual relationship with supporters of a more home-grown breed, the so-called Boerperd, whose “celebration of nativism from the early 1970s was a particular intra-ethnic, class-based reaction to the elite dynamics displayed by the Saddle-horse movement” (p 193). This line of enquiry culminates in Swart interviewing AWB leader Eugene Terre’blanche in prison, his relationship with the horse being legendary and iconic (he absolutely did *not* fall off his horse, he told her; TV made that up).

The ways in which Swart is thus able to demonstrate the intimate intertwining of human and animal stories and histories, uses, abuses and symbolisations, is exemplary, innovative, and deeply exciting. To point out that *Riding High* is patchy – which is to say, chooses to focus on key moments and issues rather than attempt comprehensiveness – is only to say that there is much more work crying out to be done: Swart includes only brief commentary on allegedly “wild” horses, on racing today, on the use of horses in the Natal wars or amongst the Xhosa. Horses remain important in many interstitial situations throughout the country: witness Fanie Jason’s recently-exhibited photos of horses in working-class Cape Town suburbia (Woodward). Yet the range of historical possibilities broached by *Riding High* is

terrific, and it is to be hoped that the methods are swiftly applied to studies of other species in South Africa's heavily animal-populated landscapes, both domestic and wild.

There is one species that might be regarded as even more important to symbolic and ethnic consciousness, even more densely present in our sundry artistic representations and our economic systems – that is, of course, the cow. Cattle have had a longer history in southern Africa than the horse, have long been recognised as integral to most if not all indigenous societies' symbolic systems and economies, and have rightfully been accorded more attention by anthropologists and environmental historians. (One can never look at an Nguni cow in the same way again after reading Marguerite Poland's study of Zulu hide-pattern culture, *The Abundant Herds* (2003),⁹ for example.) Yet we still lack, I believe, a study of the cow in South African cultures of the stature and nature of Swart's study of horses (or, for that matter, of her study of the Africanis dog).

If cattle have for centuries been central to ritually- and politically-sanctioned forms of exchange and power, they have also been at the centre of illegitimate exchanges – rustling. Historians and other writers are gradually getting to grips with the realisation that criminality, however defined, is not only a blight of the present (as every newspaper will imply), but has always been an integral part of how society and its very legal structures have evolved.

Fred Morton, a professor of history recently retired from universities in Iowa and Botswana, unpacks in delirious detail the machinations suffusing politics, land ownership, and cattle in one smallish area, that between the Pilanesberg in the north-western Transvaal and the Botswana border, and over one relatively short span of time of eighty years, 1820–1902. In *When Rustling Became an Art*, his charmingly-titled study of the succession of Kgatla chiefs (primarily Pilane [ruled 1825–1848], Kgamanyane [1848–1875], and Linchwe [1875–1920]), Morton retrieves another all-but-lost sector of South African history from the shadows:

[The Kgatla] achievement has been overlooked as attention has been given to large, resilient kingdoms on the edges of the trans-Vaal – the BaSotho, Bapedi and AmaSwati, BaNgwato and Ba Kwena. But these states had geography on their side, and were not obliged to move. Mountains and sandveld gave them their power to withstand invaders, whereas the Kgatla lived in open range with grass coveted by all and with only a few hills for defence. Without the luxury of natural barriers to fend off outsiders, the Kgatla built their fortunes by studying the forces contending for power in their midst (before and after the discovery of diamonds and gold), accumulating knowledge and new skills, and imagining a future in which the Kgatla could prosper.¹⁰

Sandra Swart calls Morton's study an "amiable" book; while *Rustling* is nowhere near as witty, even funny, as is *Riding High*, it is highly readable, despite the intricacy of the politics of mobility it has to navigate. The two books do overlap and complement each other: though the political economy of cattle rustling is Morton's central concern, the horse is there, too, as economic resource, as the primary vehicle of the invading Boers, as acquired symbol of chieftainship, as gift or bribe. To cite

9 M Poland, *The Abundant Herds* (Fernwood Press, Vlaeberg, 2003)

10 Morton, *Rustling*, p xxviii

just one example: the following was related of the BaKwena chief Sebele at the battle of Mochudi in 1875:

Sebele apparently was chilled and frightened by the horror of the scene because he slipped from his saddle. The BaKwena retreated. While in his fright Sebele's saddle girth broke and the saddle fell on the ground. He struggled to cling to the horse's mane. When he finally gripped it he bowed on his horse's back (Its name was "Bronc") and made away on it, the horse galloping at high speed¹¹ (Cited in Morton 116)

That horses and cattle could be integrated in a single economic system is evidenced by this letter, sent from Linchwe to Louw du Plessis of the Dorslanders:

I have the honour to thank you for all the trouble you took with regards to Mr Krieling's horse. Referring to the report that I would help Khama, I have to inform you that it is a blatant lie. I already have my hands full with Secheli and have no desire to be attacked from both sides. I will have the bull that is still with you fetched at a later stage.¹²

The letter gives us just a whiff of the complexity of the politics Morton deftly unpacks. From the aftermath of disturbances Morton still lumps under that unwieldy and tenacious non-concept, the "mfecane", through the early Boer incursions and carving out of farms to be bought and sold without consulting the people who already lived there, the discoveries of diamonds and gold, the insertions of missionaries and white traders, endlessly fluid conflicts with every neighbouring group, the establishment of the first Boer Republic and the first British invasion, the establishment of the Bechuanaland Protectorate and of Rhodesia, and finally the manufacture of the 1899 South African War – through all of this and the attendant radical changes in economic labour-wage-and-tax dynamics, the Kgatla survived, and even prospered, on a canny mix of force, movement, negotiation, propaganda, compromise, and deceit. Morton wants to make the Kgatla out to be better than the rest: even their rustling was judicious, never motivated by greed (he only partly tongue-in-cheek tabulates the "Kgatla Rules of Rustling" [p xviii], which are admirably pragmatic in a Machiavellian kind of way). A case of special pleading, perhaps, but Morton is far from uncritical of his subjects: when Kgamanyane, having been flogged in public by Paul Kruger at his farm Saulspoor, decided to shift his people and cattle temporarily to Bechuanaland, he was no divinely-inspired "Moses", Morton writes. Yet something sticks of the "general rule ... that those who flee oppression deserve to be admired less than those who stay, resist and deal with the consequences. The Africans who remained in South Africa developed the organisations, ideas and methods that posed the truly heroic challenges to white minority rule" (pp 90–91). In Morton's portrayal, the Kgatla stayed the course (to use a horsing metaphor) with exemplary cunning, if not unmitigated success, until, in the early twentieth century, *kgosi* Linchwe ran out of friends, and had to settle for being granted Saulspoor, so long a bone of contention, in 1922. In short, they modernised themselves as swiftly as anyone else in the region.

I cannot here even begin to convey the intricacies of the story, which Morton, as far as any outsider can, relates from the Kgatla point of view, using the Kgatla terms for invaders, strangers, and concepts. Suffice it to state that the Kgatla were

11 Cited in Morton, *Rustling*, p 116

12 Cited in Morton, *Rustling*, p 124

throughout the period a real force to be reckoned with, in the face of finally insurmountable odds. In 1852, when Boers visited the Kgatla capital, they encountered a settlement more sophisticated and ordered than the ones they lived in themselves. Much of the time, the Kgatla leaders were more than a match for their neighbours, black or white: in fact, until the early twentieth century, there simply was no comprehensive rule in the region, whatever the Boers or the British might have asserted legalistically. During the 1899–1902 war, where Morton’s story intersects those of both Stenson and Swart, Linchwe’s Kgatla sided with and were armed with Martini-Henry rifles by the British, and rewarded themselves by capturing cattle from abandoned Boer homesteads – some of them Boers with whom they had negotiated friendlier deals not long before. This is just one circumstance in which Morton’s analysis shows how divisions between “black” and “white” communities and their ambitions were highly unstable and porous.

The nexus of land control, the capacity and opportunity to grow crops, and the wealth of cattle remained foundational. Even in the 1930s, the Kgatla retained some 30 000 cattle and Isang Pilane, elder and advisor to the then very young *kgosi*, could identify almost all of them “by their markings as well as their brands, the progeny of those beasts, and who owned which cattle or who borrowed which cattle from whom” (p xxiii). And like his predecessors Isang, though “as mean and ruthless as they come” (p xxiii), was entirely modern: he had “more than a westernised appearance, church-going habits and easy manner at his disposal – he knew English and Afrikaans, knew Roman-Dutch law, and he understood the white men’s institutions better than most whites knew themselves” (p xxiii). Now he travelled by limo, not horse.

But he still rustled cattle. The art of rustling remained fundamental to the people’s security, and some cattle had changed hands, stolen or sold, many times: following Sandra Swart’s suggestion about the horse Somerset, I enjoin someone to write the biography of one Kgatla bull, say, which can quite plausibly be envisioned migrating in its lifetime through almost every major power bloc in the region, revealing even more of the system than Morton does. For if there is one thing missing from Morton’s still essentially human-political account, it is, oddly enough, the actual *art* of rustling: just *how* the individual raiders got in, controlled the cattle, escaped, retained and distributed the booty – is never quite captured. Perhaps the historical material – like that for so many conspiracies – simply does not exist: to recreate the ground-level textures and moment-to-moment dynamics we await, apparently, the intervention of another novelist.

And there is that other still-missing dimension: the terrors and pleasures experienced by the cattle themselves. The fright of being rustled in the nineteenth century was arguably much less than that experienced by the millions slaughtered every year today for human food – what Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello controversially calls a “holocaust” – and generally less fatal. In any event, the actual cow’s bellow is still a voice that has not found its proper South African advocate – at least not one of the stature of Swiss writer Beat Sterchi’s devastating novel, *The Cow* (1988).¹³ Such an advocate of course now has to operate in a very different environmental situation, philosophical atmosphere, and rights-orientated culture, as Tony Yengeni and friends discovered when proposing to ritually slaughter a bull in their suburban yard. One

13 B Sterchi, *The Cow*, trans M Hamburger (Faber, London, 1988)

might expand here on these lines from Francis Carey Slater's empathetic, Xhosa-derived poem, "Lament for a Dead Cow":

No more will her slow shadow
Comfort the sunburnt veld, and her sweet lowing
Delight the hills in the evening¹⁴

The emotionality of human-animal relations is real but still marginalised. A "history" like Morton's, however nuanced and well-expressed, remains largely beholden to the assumption that behaviours can and ought to be explained as politically, philosophically or economically rational. The philosopher in J.M. Coetzee would not have it otherwise:

Regarding rights for non-human animals, enshrined in law, as a way of making the world a better place, let me simply put the question: if one actually wishes to bring about such rights, which is likely to be the more efficacious way of arguing for them: in the manner of the academic philosopher or the manner of the parliamentary politician, that is to say, mixing true reasoning with verbal trickery, selective deployment of evidence, appeals to emotion, ad hominem attacks, and the denigration and browbeating of opponents?¹⁵

Point taken – but Coetzee the novelist might say: Unhappily, neither people nor animals behave rationally much of the time. So let the novelist also have a go at restoring the non-human animal to its proper place in South African history.

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14 See M Chapman, ed, *The Paperbook of South African English Poetry* (Ad Donker, Parklands), p 73

15 J M Coetzee, "On Appetite, the Right to Life, and Rational Ethics", in Cavalieri, *The Death of the Animal*, pp 119–121