

## Book Reviews

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*Imperial Creatures: Humans and Other Animals in Colonial Singapore 1819–1942*. By Timothy P. Barnard. Singapore: NUS Press, 2019. 336 pp.

Animal history has come of age over the last decade or so (Specht 2016). But in the historiography on Southeast Asia, animal history might be said to have already been a well-established sub-field prior to this, particularly through the work of Greg Bankoff (2004; Bankoff and Swart 2007), Peter Boomgaard (2008) and William Clarence-Smith (2004). Timothy Barnard's lively contribution to this field itself builds on a swath of recent studies of Singapore's ecological history, a field that he has played a leading role in fostering (Chee 2011; Barnard 2014; Tan 2015; Barnard 2016; Powell 2016). The broader field of animal history is a dynamic and diverse one, much of it animated by involved, philosophically informed meditations on what the incorporation of animals into history does to the discipline. Where these studies have focussed on colonial contexts, animal histories have sought to navigate the overlapping conceptual frameworks of postcolonialism and post-humanism (Skabelund 2013; Roy 2015). *Imperial Animals* does not dwell on these theoretical debates, and in this sense might be better located in the earlier empirically driven work of historians like Boomgaard, particularly his pathbreaking study of tigers in the Malay world. However, Barnard's engaging animal history of Singapore builds extensively upon this more recent literature, and the themes explored in the book make it something of a bridge between these somewhat disparate clusters of research.

While the book is chronologically driven, there is a sophisticated nested structure to how Barnard has organized his material. Chapters 2 and 3 set the scene and reveal the underlying historical shifts that

the subsequent chapters explore through the themes of cruelty, regulation and consumption. Chapter 2 examines the impact of the advent of British imperialism on Singapore's fauna, demonstrating the deleterious effect that early colonial policies and practices had on local biodiversity. Chapter 3 picks up from this story of the reduction of indigenous species to reveal how the island was repopulated with creatures imported from the wider world. Particularly arresting in this chapter are Barnard's descriptions of the wild animal market, which became renowned for its vibrancy in its time. Together, these two chapters provide the reader with a grounding in the city and reveal the centrality of animals to the making and maintenance of Singapore.

Following from these overarching chapters, the rest of the book draws out more specific themes from roughly the 1850s through the 1940s. Picking up on a theme that has also been explored in other imperial contexts (Shadle 2012; Igra 2019), Barnard traces the shifting concerns over cruelty towards animals in Chapter 4. This analysis shows the particular imperial concern with draft animals, the intersections between perceived cruelty and notions of civilization, and cross-cultural tensions over practices deemed to be cruel. The role of the Society for the Protection of Animals in Singapore is especially well attended to in this chapter. The following chapter focuses on similar cross-cultural tensions through attempts to deal with the threat of rabies, again a developed theme in wider historiography (Palsetia 2001; Sittert 2003; Chan 2015). The efforts to limit the disease exposed rifts in how local dogs and imported, high-status, pedigree dogs were viewed and regulated. The policies developed for culling dogs to manage the risk of disease frequently pitted the state authorities against different sections of the populace, particularly the elites. The final section continues on the theme of managing human health by looking at the regulations on meat production. Changes in the urban management of animal slaughter are traced through to the emergence of a self-consciously modern system for slaughtering and selling meat in the colony—policies that were often clumsily imposed on the communities involved in these activities.

This narrative of regulation, control and cultural clashes over meat production and consumption is, again, an established theme in the wider literature (Poon 2014; Yahaya 2015; Malarney 2018).

Emphasizing the extent to which Barnard's book identifies and focuses on established historiographic themes is not to suggest a lack of originality or innovation. Far from it. The value of *Imperial Animals* lies, in part, in drawing these themes together into a single coherent study rooted in a particular place. As a result, it is an excellent resource for teaching, as undergraduate students are able to explore these wider trans-imperial themes through an empirically grounded single volume. Interestingly—although not discussed by Barnard—newspaper reports, editorials, opinion pieces and debates concerning animals provide the bulk of the source material. I highlight this not as a limitation but as a question: given the prominence of animals within these discussions in the press, what role did animals play in fostering a public sphere in Singapore? An implication of Barnard's study may be that *discussing* animals may also have been an important part of civic life in colonial Singapore.

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