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Takashi Ito, *London Zoo and the Victorians, 1828–1859*

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REFERENCES

Takashi Ito, *London Zoo and the Victorians, 1828–1859* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2014), 204 p, ISBN 978-0-86193-321-1

- 1 At the beginning of Wilkie Collins's *Heart and Science* (1883), the heroine visits the London Zoological Gardens with her fiancé. But the London zoo is not only a romantic site where young middle-class people flirt. If the young maiden enjoys looking at the birds, the mad scientist of the novel, Dr Benjulia, also roams the Zoological Gardens in search of animals to experiment on. Collins's description of the London Zoological Gardens as both symbol of urban leisure and scientific knowledge is significant. Zoos may be seen as places designed for popular entertainment today but these institutions participated in the making of scientific knowledge and its dissemination, as Takashi Ito's *London Zoo and the Victorians, 1828–1859* recalls. Ito's work relates the making of the London Zoo, or London Zoological Gardens, a place initially opened only to subscribers of the Zoological Society of London and their friends and family but which gradually welcomed wider audiences through the nineteenth century. In 1828, the London Zoological Gardens were of course not the first institution to display animals. The Tower Menagerie or Exeter Change, Edward Cross's Menagerie, were popular sites where exotic animals could also be seen. However, the London Zoo, as it later came to be called, gradually competed with big institutions such as the British Museum or the National Gallery.
- 2 As it quickly becomes obvious, Ito's book is not merely a historical portrait of the London Zoo. The book not only deals with the making of the institution but chronicles as well the debates that informed the whole project, examining what lay behind its rationale in the three decades that followed its opening, from issues related to animal

welfare to those of science communication. As Ito contends, understanding the making of the London Zoo means exploring the historiography of popular science and casting away top-down models of science popularisation. For the London Zoo was as much a platform for the making of knowledge as a place where that knowledge was communicated to the public through various activities. The Zoo stimulated, indeed, the visitors' senses. Moreover, visitors were invited to interact with the animals through feeding, for instance, making science appealing and communicable.

- 3 Chapter One recounts the earliest developments of the London Zoological Gardens, starting with the founding of the Zoological Society of London in April 1826 (recognized as a public institution in 1829, when it received its royal charter). The chapter examines the initial layout of the zoo in Regent's Park and its evolution, as more animals were exhibited. It looks at contemporary representations of the zoo and the clichés that were circulated, presenting the zoo animals as happy and comfortable whilst the reality of their stressful living conditions resulted in fact in high number of diseases and deaths. Indeed, many of the reviews of the place as well as illustrations (as in the *Illustrated London News* or *Punch*) represented it as a harmonious and idyllic site respecting animals and banning all kinds of inhuman treatment. Emblematising the development of urban leisure, the London Zoo became therefore a landmark in the cultural life of the Georgians and later Victorians. The naming and anthropomorphisation of many of the inmates of the London Zoo, endowing the displayed creatures with intelligence and emotion, aimed to change the perception of the animals, moving away from earlier forms of popular entertainment, such as the baiting of bears, bulls or badgers which were gradually prohibited in the 1830s. Focusing on George Sharf's *Six Views of the Zoological Gardens* (1835), Ito explains how the artist's most popular lithographs constructed in fact an ideal representation of the zoo's inmates, highlighting interactions between the animals and the spectators and even foregrounding people mixing from different social classes. Ito contrasts Sharf's works with that of other contemporary artists, such as James Hakewill's *Ten Views of the Zoological Gardens* (1831), highlighting the role that such lithographs played in the circulation of an idealised image of the place which contributed to the vision of the London Zoo as a new urban cultural site.
- 4 In Chapter Two, Ito more particularly focuses on one of the zoo's emblematic animals — the giraffe — to explain why some species were more valued than others and how certain animal-collecting networks were activated. The first giraffes were brought to Europe in 1827, creating a popular sensation. In France, Zaraf the giraffe was displayed at the *Muséum national d'histoire naturelle* in Paris. In Britain, however, the specimen given to George IV died in 1829. Ito then shows how the creature, long believed to be mythical, encapsulated tensions, as Britain's scientific institutions could hardly compete with the Paris natural history museum. The search for more giraffe specimens thus became emblematic of Britain's attempt at establishing its scientific reputation in the field of zoology, with renowned scientists such as Richard Owen providing scientific observations of the London Zoo specimens. As a matter of fact, the Zoological Society played a significant part in the quest for scientific supremacy, trying to acquire giraffes and be the first one to exhibit them in Britain, and competing with the Surrey Zoological Gardens then owned by Edward Cross, former proprietor of Exeter Change Menagerie. The four giraffes which arrived at the Zoo in 1836 brought around 4,000 spectators into the zoo, with a yearly attendance of 260,000 (not exceeded until the 1851 Great Exhibition). This story of the quest for sensational exotic animals, such as

giraffes, Ito suggests, challenges the concept of “imperial zoo”, however, by revealing how some animals were actually collected outside imperial networks, problematizing therefore the view of the acquisition of exotic animals as part of an imperial battle for power between Britain and France.

- 5 Moreover, Ito brings home how the London zoo both epitomized scientific knowledge and became mingled with popular tales and fables at a time when popular science publications boomed. The use of pictorial motifs and literary references to describe the giraffe, for instance, a highly feminised creature that was as much graceful as it was fragile, was emblematic: this mingling of “scientific realism and picturesque fantasy” (80) in contemporary popular constructions of the animals is telling. Indeed, in Britain people became more familiarised with such exotic species through reading newspapers and popular periodicals than by actually seeing the animals in the London Zoo. The zoo’s identity as a public institution was in fact not synonymous with public access: if the Zoological Society aimed at benefitting the public, it could do so without enabling public access to its specimens, as Chapter Three highlights, focusing on the years 1828–1847. The question of accessibility gave rise to a heated debate, as a visit to the zoo came to be quickly seen as a form of amusement, poles apart from what the Zoological Society had originally imagined. Chapter Four shows that attendance varied greatly according to new species additions and that it was crucial for the Society to time the arrival of certain species in order to maintain a regular income. If the impact of David Mitchell (who became secretary of the Zoological Society in 1847, added new species and made changes to the admission policy) was decisive, so was the part played by newspapers and the popular press, since stories were made for public consumption, turning the zoo into “a narrative space” (122). In May 1859, for instance, editors and writers of newspapers were granted free admission to the site so as to encourage frequent visits. The dramatization of the zoo’s stories or the sensational depiction of new species were thus designed to increase attendance, the blending of scientific and literary discourses revealing how science and spectacle were now becoming inseparable in Regent’s Park. The last chapter, on what kind of science the London Zoo really developed, promoted and communicated, turns towards the question of acclimatisation and the Zoological Society’s emphasis on breeding. However, as science became highly professionalised towards the end of the nineteenth century, acclimatisation failed to be seen as a disciplinary science, making it more and more difficult for zoologists to use the zoo as a forum for their scientific activities.
- 6 As Ito’s study shows, the example of the London Zoo is a highly significant instance of the issues that must be taken into consideration to understand the making of scientific knowledge and its popularisation. As one of the largest cultural institutions in Britain, the London Zoo showed how the development of zoological science was as much influenced by the discovery and supply of new species as by the public rationale of the proprietors of the London Zoo, as evidenced by the impact that popular accounts of the displayed animals could have on the spectators and on the income generated by admissions. Although we would often like to read more about the visitors’ experience or about the circulation of people, objects and knowledge that, Ito argues, lay outside imperial networks, Ito’s analysis of the management of the institution, its idealisation and the construction of the London Zoo is a fascinating study and will not fail to be of interest to historians of science and cultural historians.

INDEX

Mots-clés: animaux, dix-neuvième siècle, science, Société zoologique de Londres, Zoo de Londres

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