

Louise Hill Curth. *The Care of Brute Beasts: A Social and Cultural Study of Veterinary Medicine in Early Modern England*.

History of Science and Medicine Library 14. Leiden: Brill, 2010. xi + 177 pp. index. illus. tbls. bibl. \$117. ISBN: 978-90-04-17995-0.

With this slender volume, Louise Hill Curth sets out to establish early modern veterinary medicine as a legitimate area of scholarly inquiry and to lay the foundation for future research. Despite being occasionally superficial and repetitive, *The Care of Brute Beasts* merits attention from any scholar of animals in early modern Europe. Its focus on the practical care of ordinary livestock, horses, and pets offers a fresh approach to thinking about the ways humans encountered other species in early modern Europe.

Surveying the treatment of animals, in sickness and in health, from the late Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, the book is broad in scope and thematic in approach. The first two chapters address, respectively, the status of animals and ideas of health in early modern England by dashing through a well-known body of scholarship. Although the material is not original, these chapters are studded with insights into the role of animals in early modern society. Curth rightly emphasizes the economic importance of animals to their owners and points out that similar models of medical care were used for humans and for other species. More problematic is the narrow focus on Galen and astrology at the expense of other developments in medicine. In the third chapter's provocative discussion of various sorts of caregivers, Curth gives special attention to those who lay outside the medical establishment, such as women and farriers. The fourth and least satisfactory chapter attempts an overview of veterinary writings, with an interesting discussion of almanacs and a disappointingly incomplete account of the works of Gervase Markham. The fifth and sixth chapters address various sorts of treatments to preserve good health and treat illness. While they contain some fascinating bits of information, these chapters are padded with material presented earlier in the text. The epilogue examines the relationship between the devastating cattle plagues and the founding of the Royal Veterinary College in the eighteenth century. Like the book as a whole, it is a mixture of insights based on original research and unhelpful generalizations.

In her introduction, Curth explains that she chose to sacrifice depth for breadth in the interest of opening up as many avenues as possible for future research. This unevenly written book does not seem to be intended for a scholarly audience, though. The reader is repeatedly informed, for example, that definitions of health and illness have changed over time, and is treated to elementary explanations of the theory of the humors and of the importance of the printing press. Too often, sentences beginning "Unfortunately" conclude that there is insufficient evidence of the practice of veterinary medicine to fuel deeper research; meanwhile, scholarship that fruitfully draws upon a wider range of texts about animals is largely absent from the bibliography. Granted, much of that work lies outside Curth's field, medical history, but a more interdisciplinary approach would have enriched this book.

Curth's focus on practical necessities and material practices represents this book's greatest contribution to the nebulous field of early modern animal studies. It provides an important empirical corrective to the deconstructive approach that finds existential angst in the supposed breakdown between human and animal identities. As telegraphed by its title, *The Care of Brute Beasts* also demonstrates that attentive treatment could be combined with a sense of superiority over the animal kingdom. This complicates the widespread implicit assumption that current attitudes toward the humane treatment of animals are the result of a civilizing process beginning with early modern cruelty. More research along the lines suggested by Curth would be a useful complement to existing work on the scientific approach to the animal kingdom in early modern Europe, much of which focuses on exotic creatures rather than the less glamorous but more common

livestock that roam the pages of this book. Future publications showcasing Curth's own more specialized research would be a welcome follow-up to this thought-provoking but sometimes shallow book.

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