

# CHRISTMAS BOOKS supplement

## Images of animals

Colin Blakemore

*Animals and Men: Their Relationships as Reflected in Western Art from Prehistory to the Present Day.* By Kenneth Clark. Pp. 240. (Thames and Hudson: London, 1977.) £10.50.

EVERYTHING about this book is full of promise. Its author, Lord Clark, is now a cult object more widely revered than Horus and Hathor, the sacred falcon and cow of ancient Egypt who decorate several of the book's ample pages. The title is provocative and challenging. The book is (literally) weighty and the many, many illustrations are generally of high quality. Most of all, the timing is impeccable. It is surely no accident that this elegant volume appears a few weeks before Christmas in a year of intense public interest in the status of animals and the need for their protection. Not only is there the growing public sentiment for the conservationist movement, but there is also heightened anti-vivisectionist activity in response to the centennial of the British Cruelty to Animals Act. There can be no more convincing sign of the times than the growing power of the 'Ecology' movement, even in France—that bastion of effortless pragmatism, where there has always been more appetite for, than love of, animals.

Despite the richness of its potential and the certainty of its commercial success, the book in actual fact does not fulfil its promise. Lord Clark's text is merely a brief essay, which at times is no more than a list of the plates that follow it. The captions to the illustrations, which enlarge a little on the text, were not even written by Lord Clark but by three assistants. Most disappointing of all is the fact that the book is *not* primarily about the relationship between animals and man: it is largely a catalogue of western works of art that happen to contain images of animals.

Text and plates are arranged around five subjects: "Sacred and Symbolic Animals"; "Animals Observed"; "Beauty and Energy of Animals"; "Animals Beloved"; and "Animals Destroyed". A scholar of Lord Clark's academic stature, vast experience, and skill in communication is expected to bring insight and even humour to these topics. And he does. The balance between admiration, curiosity and love in our relationship with animals is nicely handled. And there are fascinating vignettes—like the fact that Leonardo was

a vegetarian; that Cezanne, Monet and Manet never painted an animal; and that for 700 years all animals in art were symbols for the evangelists.

But the closest that Lord Clark comes to deeper issues is on the very first page, where he asks why the mythical harmony



Francis Barlow's frontispiece to his edition of Aesop's Fables, 1665

of animals and man in the Golden Age never actually came to pass. "The answer lies in that faculty which was once considered man's highest attainment, a gradual realization that the sounds he uttered could be so articulated as to describe experience. He discovered words, he could communicate with other men."

This idea (that language bluntly separates man and beast) recurs from time to time. To the Egyptians, the haughty speechlessness of animals made them worthy of worship. And we are said to play with animals because in doing so "we forget the difference that separates us—the faculty of speech. Children would rather play with a teddy-bear than with a small model human being, and they put long imaginary speeches into the bear's mouth. Thus, the barrier between animals and man is broken down". Quite apart from the fact that Lord Clark does not seem to have heard of dolls, I do not trust the hypothesis that people are truly distinguished from animals by their speech, any more than the suggestion that the relationships between individual human beings rest on language alone.

What of the remarkable communion that can exist between a rider and his horse, between a farmer and his herd,

between people and their pets? And, equally, what is it that makes us wince at the mindless existence of a battery hen or bristle with anger when we see magnificent animals languishing in tiny cages? I believe that our extraordinary empathy with animals springs from the fact that we are animals too. Animals with insight enough to recognise our biological oneness with other beasts.

And yet our animal nature, as well as making us admire and understand the special skills of other species, also drives us to kill and eat a number of them, because that is what we, as animals, are clearly designed to do. Lord Clark certainly touches on this paradox in our attitude to animals. "We love animals, we watch them with delight, we study their habits with ever-increasing curiosity; and we destroy them." But he does not face squarely the question of man as an animal of such cultural sophistication that he can use a representation of another species as an exercise in the exploration of his own deepest emotions.

Even as an animal picture-book, it has some surprising omissions. Where are Henri Rousseau's strange jungle beasts with their haunting eyes; the mysterious animal automata of Maurits Escher; and the folksy farmyard beasts of Marc Chagall? But more important, where are the works of art that explore the real question of man *as* animal? Goya's terrifying masterpiece of *Saturn Devouring his Children*, the Tiepolo *Martyrdom of St John of Bergamo* (what a chance to compare it with the Delacroix or Rubens' *Lion Hunts*); the mythical man-beasts of Michael Ayrton; and the lumps of animal flesh that pass for portraits by Francis Bacon?

Lord Clark explains in a Foreword that this enterprise grew out of a commission for a book on animals in art from the World Wildlife Fund (which will receive a contribution from its sales). "This by itself did not seem to me to constitute a subject," writes Lord Clark, "but on reflection it occurred to me that no-one had ever given much thought to the relationship of animals and men, and that this might be a subject worth exploring." Of that there is no doubt. Let us hope that it will continue to be explored as part of the effort to establish the true nature of man. □

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