

“*Mon premier gorille*” from adventurer Paul Du Chaillu’s colourful 1863 account of his travels in Africa.

EVOLUTION

Beastly surprises

Henry Nicholls relishes the history of the ‘ape man’ who braved the dangers of Gabon — and of Victorian England.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the famed Victorian publisher John Murray released a title that took Britain by storm. It shot to the top of the best-seller list, dividing the scientific elite and raising troubling questions about the origins of humankind. The book was *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa* by Paul Du Chaillu.

Never heard of it? That is perhaps due to our obsession with another of Murray’s titles, *On the Origin of Species*. It took decades for a true appreciation of Charles Darwin’s work to begin to emerge; but *Explorations and Adventures* had a much more immediate and wide-reaching impact. Its enigmatic author became an overnight sensation. Now, journalist Monte Reel goes to the heart of this human drama in *Between Man and Beast*, “the story of a nervy young man who rises, and occasionally falls, in a quest to construct a heroic destiny from scratch”.

The first scientific description of the gorilla was given in 1847 to the Boston Natural History Society, but was only read by a handful of the zoological elite. The tribes sharing a

forest with the animal known locally as *njena* lived in fear of it, believing it lurked in trees, ambushing and choking humans. In 1856, Du Chaillu, the twenty-something son of a French merchant living in West Africa, set out to explore the interior of Gabon — then a cartographic void allegedly rife with cannibals and *njena*. Three years later, Du Chaillu emerged from the malarious jungle with stories aplenty and the stuffed skins of more than 20 western lowland gorillas. After a brief, largely unsuccessful, attempt to exhibit them in New York, he took his haul to London.

Reel’s build-up to this moment is ingenious.



Between Man and Beast: An Unlikely Explorer, the Evolution Debates, and the African Adventure that Took the Victorian World by Storm

MONTE REEL
Doubleday: 2013.
352 pp. \$26.95

Over the course of several tight, deliciously crafted chapters that flit between Du Chaillu in Africa and the pioneering naturalist Richard Owen in London, Reel sets these two outwardly incongruous characters on a collision course. When Du Chaillu turned up in London, his gorillas were the cargo of Owen’s dreams. A sensational exhibition of these dramatically stuffed beasts, he felt, would only support his view (based on differences in brain anatomy) that humans could not be descended from apes. Owen led the young gorilla hunter into the innermost chambers of Britain’s scientific establishment, and the heart of Victorian culture itself.

Reel revels in this wider context. He exposes the underbelly of a still-rampant slave trade, takes in a United States on the brink of the civil war, and conjures up the infamous Oxford meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1860. There, Thomas Huxley clashed with both Owen and Samuel Wilberforce (the bishop of Oxford) over Darwin’s fresh-off-the-press theory. Reel evokes the “soupy fog” of gaslit

London, with its peculiar blend of high society and “smudged underclass” of “ragpickers, costermongers, night-soil men, mud larks, shoeblacks, lamplighters, thimblegriggers”. Whenever Du Chaillu’s compelling drama touches on issues of race and racism, privilege and class, amateurism and professionalism, celebrity and reputation, Reel takes an enriching detour into the details.

With the runaway success of *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa* and packed lectures at London’s elite scientific institutions, Du Chaillu and his gorillas became an instant cultural phenomenon. They inspired a deluge of (mostly favourable) book reviews, plenty of satirical comment, cartoons, a poem, a sell-out tour of a hirsute ‘freak’ described as “the facsimile of the gorilla” and a popular song and dance known as ‘The Gorilla Quadrille’. They piqued the interest of literary lights such as Charles Dickens, who in 1861 wrote two articles about gorillas in the weekly magazine he edited, *All the Year Round*. In time, Du Chaillu became an inspiration for Arthur Conan Doyle’s action-adventure novel *The Lost World*, Jack London’s wilderness stories, Edgar Rice Burroughs’s tales of Tarzan and Merian C. Cooper’s 1933 film *King Kong*.

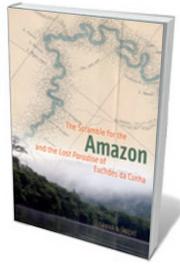
But the sensational colour Du Chaillu used to capture the public imagination began to arouse the suspicion of establishment figures. Perhaps his account was not entirely truthful — or was even completely fabricated. Some wondered whether he might have just bought the skins and skipped the jungle adventure altogether. “He wasn’t just walking the thin line between credibility and bravado; he was dancing on it,” writes Reel. “Every statement of fact in his book was now vulnerable to a contagion of doubt.”

Du Chaillu responded by mounting a second expedition, vowing to collect not only more gorillas but every conceivable snippet of scientific data. Although disastrous, it proved just enough to save his reputation.

Ironically, *Between Man and Beast* itself is not immune from a contagion of doubt. Reel asserts that every scene and quotation “is constructed from historical documents” and “physical descriptions and atmospheric details are rooted in factual evidence”. This is undoubtedly an honest statement, but serious historians will be uncomfortable with Reel’s intense, near-filmic reconstruction of historical events, peppered with detail that is either unverifiable or based solely on Du Chaillu’s own recollections. For everyone else, however, this is what makes the book a supremely entertaining, enlightening and memorable read. ■

Henry Nicholls is a freelance journalist based in London. His most recent book is *The Way of the Panda* (Profile Books, 2010). e-mail: henry@henrynicholls.com

Books in brief



The Scramble for the Amazon and the *Lost Paradise* of Euclides da Cunha

Susanna Hecht UNIV. CHICAGO PRESS 600 pp. \$45 (2013)

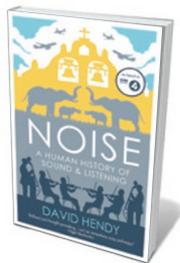
Historian Susanna Hecht charts a brutal nineteenth-century resource grab: the US and European rubber raids in the Amazon. Woven through is the story of great Brazilian environmental writer, geographer and engineer Euclides da Cunha, whose survey expedition down the Amazon River exposed the raids’ grim ecological and human toll. Da Cunha’s account, *Lost Paradise*, masterfully mixes biology, geography and philosophy, but remains unfinished: he died violently. A journey into South America’s heart of darkness.



Turned Out Nice Again: On Living With the Weather

Richard Mabey PROFILE BOOKS 160 pp. £8.99 (2013)

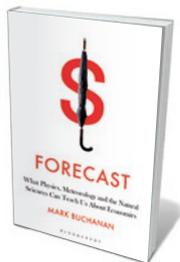
As denizens of an island prone to flooding, gales, drizzle and the occasional halcyon day, Britons obsess about meteorological vagaries. Nature writer Richard Mabey celebrates this preoccupation with the weather that, glue-like, bonds a nation. In a lyrical 90 pages, he takes us from freak events such as the January 1940 ice storm that saw cats “iced to branches”, to retinal detachment during extreme low fronts and the soggy impact of climate change. Mabey’s veerings — from forecaster-shamans to naturalist Gilbert White’s frozen pisspot — are as gloriously mercurial as the British weather.



Noise: A Human History of Sound and Listening

David Hendy PROFILE BOOKS 402 pp. £16.99 (2013)

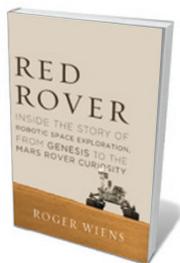
An acoustic history spanning some 100,000 years, this BBC Radio 4 tie-in is a smorgasbord of sound. David Hendy leads us into the ‘voiceprints’ of human prehistory through the music of wind-torn forests, calling animals and stridulating insects that must have inspired our early ancestors. He then tackles the roots of oratory; the aural assault course that was ancient Rome; the specialized ‘smart’ acoustics of churches and mosques; noise anxiety in an urbanizing, militarized world; the rise of recording technology; and the contemporary search for silence in the soundscape.



Forecast: What Physics, Meteorology, and the Natural Sciences Can Teach Us About Economics

Mark Buchanan BLOOMSBURY 272 pp. £18.99 (2013)

Physicist Mark Buchanan rethinks the wobbly phenomenon of international finance. Markets, he argues, do not self-regulate. They are as vulnerable to severe ‘weather events’ as Kansas: prone, like any system, to positive feedbacks in which small variations can lead to sudden change. Buchanan argues for a physics-flavoured disequilibrium approach that would improve forecasts through the creation of models that are fine-tuned to recognized shifts in trade, speculation and other financial activities.



Red Rover: Inside the Story of Robotic Space Exploration, from Genesis to the Mars Rover Curiosity

Roger Wiens BASIC BOOKS 256 pp. \$25.99 (2013)

Space hardware is in boom mode, points out geochemist — and principal investigator for Curiosity’s ChemCam instrument — Roger Wiens. Meshing the blow-by-blow science with memoir, his account begins with childhood rocket modelling and telescope building, moves on to the 2001 Genesis mission and culminates with the financial and technological rollercoaster in the lead-up to Curiosity. A tribute to human ingenuity in NASA’s “faster, better, cheaper” era.