The Modern Battlefront of Natural History and the Emergence of Animal Heroes

*by Gary Genosko**

The popular nature writer and conservationist Ernest Harold Baynes (1868-1925) was instrumental in bringing the issue of the place of animals in war to the attention of nature historians in the United States. In **Animal Heroes of the Great War,**[1] Baynes presented a general overview of the use of animals in the Allied war effort of World War I, describing the service of horses, camels, mules, donkeys, oxen, dogs and pigeons. As a representative of **Harper's** magazine, he travelled through England, France, Belgium, Italy, Egypt and Palestine from the winter of 1919 to the summer of 1920, collecting material for **Animal Heroes** and "Our Animal Allies in the World War," which appeared in **Harper's** in 1921.[2]

Baynes, then, was no ordinary war correspondent. While his place in 'environmental history' remains to be elaborated, I will not attempt a comprehensive treatment of his work in this paper.[3] Rather, I will use his writings on the place of animals in the army to develop a critical perspective on the accounts of the 'heroic acts' which pigeons and dogs performed as members of the Allied forces in WWI and, to a lesser degree, in WWII.[4]

This paper, therefore, is as much a study in the history of ideas as a theoretical investigation of the practice of anthropomorphism. The work of Baynes may be shown to provide a poignant counterpoint to the claim that, as Leesa Fawcett puts it, "anthropomorphism stands as an example of the realization that we are an integral and continuous part of the living world."[5] The animal heroes theme reveals some of the extreme consequences, the dark underside if you will, of this 'realization.'

Burroughs-Roosevelt-Baynes

In the early years of this century, especially those of Theodore Roosevelt's first term as president of the United States (1901-05), the naturalist John Burroughs launched several attacks in the pages of **The Atlantic Monthly**[6] against a kind of nature writing which he called "Sham Natural History." Burroughs maintained that the popularizer of nature adventure stories, Rev. William J. Long and the naturalist and illustrator Ernest Thompson Seton, had published animal stories which were to a large extent fictional rather than true observations of the animal kingdom as based on "natural facts." Burroughs believed that by using the term 'true' to describe and to defend their stories, Long and Seton were misleading their readers: "True as romance, true in their artistic efforts, true in their power to entertain the young reader, they certainly are; but true as natural history they as certainly are not."[7] In essence, Long and Seton were 'charged' with corrupting the minds of the young and it was through this legal metaphor that the influential Burroughs, with the support of Roosevelt, gave rhetorical notice to those who did not recognize anthropomorphism as an 'offense'.

When Roosevelt wrote the "Preface" to Baynes' **Wild Bird Guests** (1915) six years after his second term as president (1905-09), the Baynes-Roosevelt ligature was established in the name of the preservation of bird life: a patriotic, economically sound and acceptable brand of aesthetic interest, in that order.[8] In the "Preface" Roosevelt acknowledged a debt to the "missionary work" of Baynes in establishing some 300 bird sanctuaries in the country. Upon Roosevelt's death in 1919, Baynes published a short eulogy in verse, "Death and Roosevelt,"[9] therein paying homage to the so-called 'Great Conservationist'.

When Baynes' book, **Animal Heroes of the Great War**, appeared posthumously in 1925, Owen Wister, the author of the introduction, did not fail to again place Baynes in the Burroughs-Roosevelt camp. Wister states that Baynes "rose to the first rank in his chosen field; the peer of Burroughs and of Muir--indeed of any among those who observe and interpret the wilderness with imagination and accuracy."[10] He was quick to add that Baynes "was

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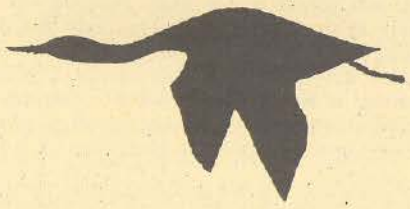
always literal when he spoke or wrote of animals." In fact, for Wister, Baynes had an indefinable quality which enabled him "to write of animals without mawkishness," avoiding the habit of excessive humanization and anthropomorphism.

In the exalted company of Burroughs, the American nature writer John Muir (who was a model of legitimacy in the eyes of Burroughs), and Roosevelt, who had given Baynes a letter of introduction which facilitated his research in Europe and Africa, Baynes had achieved the status of a 'true' nature writer and a patriotic conservationist.[11]



Animal War Heroes

Although Wister was careful to align Baynes with the Burroughs-Roosevelt offensive, the theme of the animal hero which Baynes used owed as much to the focus of Seton as to the patriotic and anti-anthropomorphic mandates of Roosevelt and Burroughs. In **Animal Heroes** (1905), Seton defined a hero as "an individual of unusual gifts and achievements whether it be man or animal ... and it is the histories of such that appeal to the imagination and to the hearts of those who hear them."[12] The adventure story with an animal as its central character is an enduring part of popular culture. Indeed, thirty-three years after Seton, Harper Cory published his version of **Animal Heroes**. Cory's tales of non-human heroes and heroines were based on "wild animals which displayed courage and patience when confronted with circumstances inimical to their freedom or existence."[13]

By adjusting the scope of the definition of the hero, an individual animal could be seen to distinguish itself from others through heroic acts. The notion of an "animal hero" became an interpretive framework with which to render the exploits of outstanding individuals in the context of an adventure story. In the work of Baynes, however, there was no need to create a sense of adventure since the war itself provided the 'plot'. Moreover, he did not have to fabricate animal heroes on the battlefield since he found that many pigeons and dogs had in fact been rewarded for their brave service. Thus, the war records easily lent themselves to the animal heroes theme.

Baynes observed that:

> The French used in all about thirty thousand [pigeons] and the birds that performed distinguished service, or showed unusual gallantry in the line of duty, were rewarded the Croix de Guerre or the Croix Militaire. Diplomas, with the citations were issued and kept at the headquarters of the French Pigeon Service, and because pigeons cannot wear medals on their breasts, special bands with the colors of the decorations were made for their legs...[14]

The British Pigeon Service, established in 1914, and the American Pigeon Service, which did not see action until 1917, did not adopt the vanguardism of the French recompense as such. Although it was not until the Second World War that Britain engaged in such a practice (the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals donated the Dickin Medal for heroic animals) and, in the United States, the taxidermists of the Smithsonian Institution and the Hall of Honor of the American Pigeon Service held a monopoly over the creation of stuffed and mounted pigeon heroes, the famous British birds were not neglected.

The animal enthusiast Jilly Cooper notes that in World War I "pigeons who were wounded in active service were promptly pensioned off"[15] as pets. Baynes relates that a group of soldiers who were rescued from the North Sea as a result of a message delivered by their final bird (which dropped dead from exhaustion upon delivering the call for help), "took the little body, had it carefully mounted, and today there is to be seen in the headquarters of that aero squadron a neat glass case, containing a beautiful pigeon, and beneath it the inscription, 'A Very Gallant Gentleman'."[16]

The mode of characterization which Baynes used in relating the histories of the animals which were eligible for the status of war hero (almost exclusively racing homer pigeons and dogs) was that of the self-sacrificing individual, especially the tragic hero. This way of delivering the service of pigeons and dogs is based on the idea, firmly established and encouraged in the military context, of self-sacrifice in the name of a higher or greater cause. Baynes differs from Seton in his use of the hero theme since in the military context it is strictly the case that pigeons and dogs are rewarded for serving humans rather than for acts which pertain to their conspecifics or to self-preservation.

In his discussion of pigeon heroes, Baynes noted that "the loss of a leg or an eye was quite a commonplace occurrence, and such an injury in itself was not enough to prevent the bird from finishing the task it had been set to do."[17] But it was as a result of coming from 'proud stock' that the American blue check cock Lord Adelaide, a famous tanker bird (a bird released from a tank as a means of communication) "went on, weak and covered with blood," to deliver his message.[18] The heroic bird is given a will to serve and to triumph over adversity and has as its goal the successful completion of a 'mission' or, in the case of Lord Adelaide, a tradition to uphold. The will to serve indicates that it is not merely as a result of instinct or training that a bird completes its task. The status of hero is irreducible to the importance of the message which an animal delivered. For instance, Cooper insists that "people tend to dismiss the pigeon's achievement and to say that they all just followed a natural instinct to get home as fast as possible. But there are courageous pigeons who battle on, and others who dally by the way."[19]

Although there has been a shift from wild to domesticated animals in the animal heroes theme, in both cases an individual (rather than a group or a pair) distinguishes itself. The domesticated animal serves the human agent who has made certain that its natural capacities work toward the cause of the war effort. Animals, therefore, cannot serve in the war effort unless they become absolutely dependent upon their trainers or handlers. For instance, Lieutenant-Colonel E.H. Richardson, Commandant of the British War Dog School at Shoeburyness in Essex, found that many breeds of dogs were unsuitable for the messenger service because, with respect to hounds:

> ... their absorption in their natural work--the temptation to follow the scent of some wild creature that had crossed their path, --was usually so great, that even if it were possible for training to overcome it, the time required was better spent on breeds which had--shall we say --a broader outlook on life.[20]

In fact, the rigour of the dog school was such that "out-and-out slackers, or 'conscientious objectors', were given short shrift and sent to the lethal chamber at Battersea. England expects every dog to do his [sic] duty!"[21]

A general point needs to be considered: the so-called 'natural work' of dogs, insofar as such 'work' concerns other dogs or non-human beings, is prohibited by the trainer unless it can be made operational for the benefit of the troops. In **Animal Reveille**, Richard Dempewolff provides us with a burlesque description of the deployment of a liaison dog named Plaisir:

> ... there was one risque little war dog specialist who played a field all her own. She was a seductive French 'fifth columnist' dog named Plaisir. It was early in the game when Plaisir went into operations, but she did a noble job. Nazi hordes were pounding at the Maginot Line, and their canine corps was much in evidence. Messenger hounds scuttled back and forth across the front continuously. The Frenchmen sniped at them whenever they could, but it was like trying to hit a white jackrabbit zigzagging over the snow. Then a soldier with a fine sense of humour and a keen imagination happened to think of Plaisir, a small liaison dog of dubious ancestry who had reached her 'time' and was out of service temporarily.
>
> That afternoon Plaisir was unleashed and sent out across the front to practice her wiles. Early in the evening the men saw her coming back, trotting saucily along, her bushy tail curled naughtily over her rump. Behind her, trailing a long queue, were a round dozen well-trained German messenger dogs, devotedly following the little Mata Hari into captivity.[22]

There is perhaps no clearer example of sexism in anthropomorphism. Dempewolff achieves a burlesque effect by sexually exploiting the heat of the female dog. His description is then supplemented with a stereotype of French women. This ethnocentric and sexist passage is perfectly compatible with military operationality. In this example, Plaisir's "natural work" was made operational in order to lure the "well-trained German dogs" away from their duties. It is in this sense that the prohibitions concerning "natural work" may be lifted and used to tactical advantage. Yet, Plaisir is also de-professionalised--she will become no hero, no "well-trained" war dog. Her "work" is "pleasure," and this reduction is only an extension of her "dubious ancestry." But still, a hallmark of anthropomorphic description is that sex is pleasure for animals.

Domestication entails the absolute dependence of an animal (in anthropomorphic terms, the willing dependence) on its trainer and the reduction or, in some cases, redirection of sensory subtleties. The successfully engineered war animal can distinguish itself if it exhibits the behavioral patterns that it has been taught. A messenger dog is deemed to be heroic if it suffers and overcomes battle wounds or similar obstacles. If a dog is able to overcome injuries incurred on the battlefield in active service and, in completing its mission, exhaust itself, ultimately expiring at its destination, then it is afforded the status of a tragic hero. For example, Baynes and Cooper describe how Commandant Raynal's "last pigeon, badly mangled, dropped dead as he delivered his message" to Verdun and as a

result was awarded the Legion d'Honneur.[23] Both authors recount the exploits of the messenger dog Von Kluck who died at the feet of the officer awaiting his message.[24] Baynes tells us that the British bred pigeon No. 2709 was given up for lost since a night had passed from the time that it had been dispatched from the front to divisional headquarters some nine miles away, but:

> She was not dead--it was not time to die yet. Somewhere she had lain out in the wet all night, and in the grey of the morning, she staggered into the loft, and died before the officer on duty could read the message she had brought.[25]

The downfall of a tragic animal hero is not the result of a tragic flaw in its personality, as we find in the definition of a tragic human hero. As we have seen, a domesticated animal may be said to be flawed in the military context if its behaviour cannot be made operational for a specific task. The force of the story of the tragic animal hero does not emerge through the use of the term 'tragic', but is established on the basis of two invariable features: i) the messenger completes its mission and; ii) expires at its destination after having overcome an obstacle (shrapnel, predators, weather conditions, etc.). The "rewards" of domestication may be a medal, a posthumous toast, pet or veteran status, a noble death, or a pat on the head.

Toward a Critical Anthropomorphism

War animals are referred to as 'soldiers,' 'veterans,' 'heroes' and 'allies.' The level of anthropomorphism in the military use of animals is extremely high. Primarily, however, it is the process of domestication which brings animals into the human social unit as creatures designed to suit our emotional needs and living conditions which warrants the practice of anthropomorphism.

It takes almost no effort to attribute human qualities to the animals we have domesticated and socialized. It is not surprising that we do so since anthropomorphism is an essential feature of the way we comport ourselves with domesticates. John Livingston remarks in a personal note that "when I am teased for behaving anthropomorphically, my rejoinder is that as a person that is the only way I *can* behave."[26] Anthropomorphic description is appropriate as an insight into the practices which mediate our relations with domesticates and, more generally, as the self-reflective recognition that anthropomorphization is a prevalent if not constitutive feature of human knowledge.[27] In this sense, the absence of anthropomorphism may be seen as an aberration which is indicative of an insensitivity to the status of domesticated animals and our influence over them. An anthropomorphism which is critical must acknowledge its own prejudices.

In the work of Baynes, we do not find a critical, reflective anthropomorphism. Instead, it is a straightforward orientation. I do not mean that it is only anthropocentric, as if this term explained itself. The value judgments which an unreflective anthropomorphism carries give rise to the belief that the failure of some animals to satisfy unrealistic human expectations results from their uncooperative attitudes toward certain human goals, in this case military goals. As we have seen, this belief was a reason to send dogs to the "lethal chamber." It is supremely anthropomorphic to claim that the failure of some dogs to "broaden their horizons" for King and Country is a renegade tendency, a breakdown of loyalty, yet this claim has nothing to contribute to a sensitivity to domesticates.

What is so deceptive about the use of the animal war heroes theme is that it seems to provide evidence of a caring approach to animals, despite the excesses it allowed. It represented a moral triumph of sorts over the conditions of war and a way to legitimize the expenditure of animal charges. It would be inhumane not to award animals if they displayed military virtues. But a large number of animal heroes were tragic heroes, and thus "received" awards posthumously; it is difficult to imagine what a pigeon might make of a diploma bearing its "name."

Anthropomorphism is fraught with racism, sexism, nationalism, militarism, etc.
Anthropomorphism is also selective. The animals capable of performing the human tasks that were necessary for the survival of soldiers but impossible for them to perform proved to be the best candidates. Pigeons and dogs were given a special status over camels and oxen, for instance, and awarded with tokens of their military use-value. While all war animals are chattel of military proprietors, those that function as soldiers and develop affection for their handlers receive the highest "honours" of anthropomorphism; those that merely toil, appear to respond negatively to humans, exhibit little affection and have a limited use-value, receive little.

The animal heroes theme should not be dismissed as a historical curiosity, an affectation of a mid-twentieth century war culture. It has genuine heuristic value since it expresses the ambiguity of anthropomorphism as a means of ennobling animals. This ambiguity--glorification and justification for the injury and death of animals--reveals to us that anthropomorphism has a dark side. It is the task of a critical anthropomorphism to uncover the extent and the depth of the contradictory goals which

guide our relations with domesticates, and to analyze our power to categorize, terrorize and reward animals when they mirror certain aspects of ourselves, including our follies.

Notes

1. Ernest Harold Baynes, **Animal Heroes of the Great War** (New York: Macmillan, 1925).

2. Ernest Harold Baynes, "Our Animal Allies In The World War," **Harper's** 848/22 (Jan., 1921):168-78.

3. While the animal heroes theme did not originate with Baynes, the animal war heroes theme he employed remains influential in popular writing on war animals. In **Animals in War** (1983), Jilly Cooper borrows heavily from Baynes and uses his interpretations of the war records from WWI as models for elaborating the war records of the distinguished animals of WWII.

4. The war record of an animal usually consisted of a short factual report kept by the service in which the animal served. In some cases the record of the decoration of an animal may appear on its certificate of identification. Such records provide only the 'bare facts' and do not tell a story or narrate an episode in the life of an animal. Stories are reconstructed from eyewitness accounts, personal records, memoirs and army lore.

5. Leesa Fawcett, "Anthropomorphism: In The Web of Culture," **Undercurrents** 1/1 (1989):20.

6. John Burroughs, "Real And Sham Natural History," **The Atlantic Monthly** 91 (1903):298-309; idem, "The Literary Treatment of Nature," **The Atlantic Monthly** 94 (1904):38-43; for a general overview of the debates of this period see Ralph H. Lutts, "The Nature Fakers: Conflicting Perspectives of Nature," in **Ecological Consciousness, Essays from the Earthday X Colloquium**, University of Denver, April 21-4. Edited by R.C. Schultz and J.D. Hughes (Washington: University Press of America, 1981), pp. 183-208.

7. Burroughs, "Real and Sham," p. 300.

8. Ernest Harold Baynes, **Wild Bird Guests** (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1915), pp. v-vi.

9. Ernest Harold Baynes, "Death and Roosevelt," **The Independent** 97/3659 (Jan. 25, 1919): 109.

10. Wister in Baynes, **Animal Heroes**, p. xxiv.

11. It is ironic that a few years before his death in 1925, Baynes became embroiled in the vivisection debate, fighting against what Wister called the sham of anti-vivisection; Ernest Harold Baynes, "Vivisection and Modern Miracles," **The Outlook** (July 11, 1923):366-69.

12. Ernest Thompson Seton, **Animal Heroes** (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), p.9.

13. Harper Cory, **Animal Heroes** (London: Duckworth, 1938), p.7.

14. Baynes, **Animal Heroes** , p. 221; for short histories of pigeons in war see Wendell Mithchel Levi, **The Pigeon** (Columbia, S.C.: R.L.Byers Co., 1941) and Robert E. Lubow, **The War Animals** (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1977).

15. Cooper, **Animals in War** , (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1983), p. 79.

16. Baynes, **Animal Heroes**, p. 231.

17. Ibid., p. 216.

18. Ibid., p. 218.

19. Cooper, **Animals in War**, p. 80.

20. Baynes, **Animal Heroes**, p. 163.

21. Ibid., p. 164.

22. Richard Dempewolff, **Animal Reveille** (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1946), p. 125.

23. Baynes, **Animal Heroes**, p. 223; Cooper, op. cit., p. 75.

24. Ibid., pp. 185-86; Ibid., p. 60.

25. Ibid., p. 221; see also, Marion B. Cothren, **Pigeon Heroes** (New York: Coward-McCann Inc., 1944), p. 22.

26. John Livingston, "Rightness or Rights? Dominance, Domestication and the Paradox of Animal Rights," **Border-/lines** 5 (1986): 27, n. 11.

27. John O' Neill, **Five Bodies** (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 47.