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Éric Baratay, *Bêtes des tranchées: Des vécus oubliés*. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2013. 256 pp. Figures, notes, and bibliography. 22.00€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-371-07436-2.

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With the World War One centenary ensuring that bookshop shelves currently groan under the weight of books dedicated to the conflict, it is hard for the historian to carve out their own niche. Yet Éric Baratay achieves this with *Bête des tranchées*, his timely history of the millions of animals that found themselves part of the conflict. For although a handful of historians have explored aspects of this history,<sup>[1]</sup> Baratay has provided an extensive overview of how armies mobilized horses, dogs, pigeons and other animals to wage war. In the process, he uncovers the extent of the animals' labour, suffering, and meaning.

As one of the leading proponents of animal history in France, having published on zoos, working animals, bullfights, and animals in religion and politics, Baratay is well-placed to uncover the animals' unwitting contribution to the war effort. His claims and methodology, however, will raise some eyebrows. In contrast to cultural histories of animals that explore human attitudes towards animals to uncover class, gender and other identities,<sup>[2]</sup> Baratay attempts to write the history of actual animals. In *Le point de vue animal*, he argued that historians can use ethology and studies on animal psychology to read primary sources differently in order to write history from the animals' perspective, thereby uncovering their worlds, comprised as they were of "flesh and blood, sensations and emotions."<sup>[3]</sup>

For Baratay, this approach is part of a much needed de-centring of history that would strip it of its anthropocentrism and focus attention on the historical contribution and experience of animals, as well as the suffering that humans have inflicted on them. He attempts this approach in *Bête des tranchées*, drawing on soldiers' memoirs and diaries as his main primary-source base and using contemporary ethological studies to consider how animals experienced the trenches. But the promise of a radical rewriting of the Western Front (Baratay's main geographical focus) is not fulfilled. If it is possible to write history from the animals' perspective, Baratay falls short here. Instead, he offers a vivid account of the physical contribution and suffering of the militarized animals and human responses to them, peppered with speculation deprived from ethology on how animals experienced the war, including, for instance, the pain experienced by requisitioned horses separated from their owners in 1914 or the stress of carrier pigeons forced to work with unknown handlers. This is not so much history from the animals' point of view, as history written with animals in mind as living and physical creatures.

Although Baratay's methodology has its limits, *Bêtes des tranchées* is still an important book as it offers a counterpoint to cultural histories of animals that treat them merely as objects of human representation and thus provides an original account of World War One. The conflict's animal history is marked by diversity. Firstly, numerous types of animals were sucked into the conflict. Some, such as horses and dogs, were domestic; others were wild, such as blackbirds and squirrels. All shared the front lines with human soldiers, with rats, lice and fleas living in the closest proximity to humans. Secondly, the animals played a diverse range of roles, from pulling artillery and supplies (horses, mules, donkeys and dogs), carrying messages (dogs and pigeons), locating the wounded (dogs) and standing guard (dogs). Some

became markers of human status (officers' horses), some became mascots (numerous species, including goats) and pets (principally cats and dogs). Baratay traces the journeys undertaken by these countless animals, from their initial mobilization to their exit from the conflict as corpses, injured beasts, or livestock and pets to be re-integrated into civilian life. Along the way he describes in vivid detail their training, work, and suffering, alongside the varying degrees of care they received from army veterinary services. The animals' utility to the war effort depended on various factors, including their pre-war life (some horses entered the conflict as already worn-out farm horses, some stray dogs responded badly to training), the rations they received, their vulnerability to disease, and their training: better-trained Austrian and German dogs became more effective first aid dogs than British and French ones.

Two of the most interesting chapters concern non-domesticated animals. Chapter ten outlines how wild animals adapted to the wartorn environment, suggesting, if not providing conclusive proof, that they changed their behaviour in line with the conditions ushered in by the conflict. Chapter twelve, meanwhile, describes how rats, mice, lice, flies and fleas thrived in the corpse-and rubbish-strewn Western Front with its abundant, sweaty, and unwashed human population. The latter tolerated lice better than fleas and came to accept, to an extent, the omnipresent rat, which ate their food and crawled over their faces at night. Living in such close proximity with these animals led some soldiers to see themselves as becoming animal.

Baratay's narrative also teases out the diverse human attitudes towards, and treatment of, animals. Some soldiers felt compassion towards animals, whether it showing tenderness towards a cherished pet, sharing their rations with stray dogs or tending a wounded horse. Encouraged by animal protection societies, some even risked their lives to put a wounded or distressed animal out of its misery. Others inflicted violence on animals, including the group of retreating French soldiers who set fire to their pigeons rather than see them fall into German hands and the officer who pulled feathers off a pigeon to send to his wife. Whilst some forms of violence were rooted in wartime condition, others spilt over from civilian life, such as cutting donkey's nostrils to stop them braying or hitting horses to make them go faster. According to Baratay, animals did not simply accept such mistreatments, but resisted them: dogs bit their handlers; horses kicked soldiers walking behind them; and some dogs and horses refused to perform their duties. Although Baratay's use of the term "resistance" is problematic, he succeeds in showing the variety of animal responses to the harsh conditions in which they found themselves.

Despite some problematic claims, *Bêtes des tranchées* is an important and original contribution to the historiography of the First World War. It is also an essential corrective to the images of animals in the First World War that circulate in the public sphere that present the animals as "brave" four-legged soldiers, loyal servants or amusing mascots and pets. Baratay highlights that this history is marked by violence, suffering and death, as well the affective ties that developed between some soldiers and their animals.

## NOTES

[1] See, for example, Damien Baldin, ed., *La guerre des animaux, 1914-1918* (Peronne: Historial de la Grande Guerre, 2007); Chris Pearson, 'Dogs, agency and history,' *History and Theory* 52:4 (2013): 128-145; John Singleton, 'Britain's military use of horses, 1914-1918,' *Past and Present* 139:1 (1993): 178-203.

[2] Kathleen Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1994).

[3] Éric Baratay, *Le point de vue animal: Une autre version de l'histoire* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2012), p. 12.

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