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Animals in Irish Society: Interspecies Oppression and Vegan Liberation in Britain's First Colony by Corey Lee Wren

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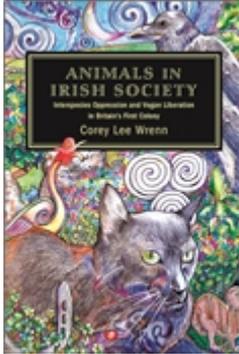
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BOOK REVIEW

Animals in Irish Society: Interspecies Oppression and Vegan Liberation in Britain's First Colony, by Corey Lee Wren, Albany, NY: SUNY, 2021, 268pp., ISBN 9781438484341.



Did you know that the 1916 Irish Proclamation of Independence was signed in a vegetarian restaurant on Henry Street operated by first president of *Cumann na mBan*, Jennie Wyse Power, or that Dublin in 2019 was voted on TripAdvisor as top of a global list for vegan-friendly restaurants? Would you believe that more people were reported to have shown up to watch Belfast sports hero Jack McClelland, one of the world's first vegan celebrities, swim across Galway Bay in 1963 than to greet President Kennedy just a few weeks earlier? Did you know that Ireland is, per capita, the fifth largest producer of food in the world, or that it was not until the 2009 Lisbon Treaty that the European Union officially recognised the sentience of other animals? These are among the myriad of facts and characters that await you in Corey Lee Wren's book *Animals in Irish Society*. However, this book is much more than a compendium of facts and characters, providing a challenging read that draws from Marxist, vegan, and feminist methodologies to examine the history of human-animal relations in Ireland. The author argues that the need for a vegan theory of Ireland is paramount, noting the relative invisibility of "Nonhuman Animals" (the term used throughout the book) to be problematic given their considerable importance in determining the human condition. Wren posits that Irish vegan studies are poised for increasing relevance as the climate crisis threatens the legitimacy and longevity of animal agriculture, particularly since Ireland is a top producer of greenhouse gas emissions in the European Union.

Corey Lee Wren is a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Kent and author of several books, including *A Rational Approach to Animal Rights: Extensions in Abolitionist Theory* (Palgrave Macmillan 2016) and *Piecemeal Protest: Animal Rights in the Age of Nonprofits* (University of Michigan Press 2019). Her latest book *Animals in Irish Society* (SUNY 2021) is marketed by her publisher as the first exploration of vegan Irish epistemology. Using alliteration, the book is promoted as one that can be

traced “along its history of animism, agrarianism, ascendancy, adaptation, and activism.”

Sociology primarily seeks to qualify and quantify the influence of institutions, systems, and relationships on the making and maintenance of human society. Despite the countless ways in which Nonhuman Animals factor into these processes, Wrenn argues that, until recently, the field of sociology has largely overlooked the relationships between humans and other animals. The sociological subfield of animals and society only developed at the end of the twentieth century with scholars exploring the material and symbolic roles that animals play in development (or regression) of human societies, along with the possibilities of animal liberation rights. In an Irish context, this book supplements recent historical work such as Julianna Adelman’s *Civilised by Beasts* (Manchester University Press 2020), which tells the story of nineteenth-century Dublin through human-animal relationships.

The immediate impact of this book on the reviewer was the framing of Wrenn’s arguments in relation to Marxist, vegan, and feminist debate. Although eco-feminism is around since at least the 1970s, vegan feminism or vegan sociology is brand new. Similarly, the field of Animal Studies has existed for some time with publications by seminal authors such as Jacques Derrida and Cary Wolfe. However, the recent turn in Sociology that can be called “critical animal studies” recognises not only the intersection between species and sex and gender but also intersections with race and ethnicity, similar to the early work of Donna Haraway. More importantly in the context of this book, given the sub-title “Interspecies Oppression and Vegan Liberation in Britain’s First Colony,” is the role of colonialism. Karl Marx argues that our economic mode of production will dictate our culture, our beliefs and our behaviours, and how it influences the structure of society. Vegan feminism requires one to explicitly recognise that there is almost a gendered relationship there, where you have animals and marginalised groups becoming feminised, lesser than, and lower in the hierarchy. More important when talking about colonialism is the notion of civilisation, because the term by which the Irish were always referred to was barbarians, the outsiders who were over there, the heathens who needed to be civilised. With colonialism comes this concept of the human; this notion of what it means to be human is suddenly to be civilised, to be above animals, which Wrenn argues is really code for being White, British, and Male. So women, people of colour, and Irish subjects have always been feminised, Otherized, and animalised, and vegan feminism tries to recognise those intersections.

Anyone who has read George Lakoff’s book *Don’t Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (Chelsea Green Publishing 2004), understands how the framing used in any argument is extremely powerful in shaping public perception. The English language uses borrowed French words such as pork, beef, veal, mutton and venison to disguise their animal origin; whereas in the Irish language they are clearly labelled as *muicfheoil* (pigmeat), *mairtfheoil* (bovine meat), *laofheoil* (calfmeat),

caoirfheoil (sheepmeat), and *fiafheoil* (deermeat). Where this reviewer, a meat-eating and milk-drinking omnivore, might use terms such as roast meat, wool, or dairy, the Marxist vegan feminist would describe them as the charred flesh of Nonhuman Animals, the “painful plucking of hair from sheeps” (p. 81), or the “breastmilk” of Nonhuman Animals. Where this reviewer might say that a cow was brought to the bull, or a mare was covered – a Marxist vegan feminist would frame it as female Nonhuman Animals “facing repeated forced impregnations and separations from her own calves” (p. 167). This framing forces us to see what is obfuscated in plain sight by euphemistic language and perhaps colonialist brainwashing.

There is evidence of extensive research within this book, which covers a vast period from the island’s early settlers to the modern day. The book is presented in five chapters followed by Conclusions. Chapter 1 “Celticism, Christianity, and Animism in Gaelic Ireland” includes the animism of our early peoples evident in Irish mythology with characters such as Cú Chulainn (The Hound of Chulainn), or King Labraid Loingseach (who had horses’ ears). It notes that the early Irish settlers unusually had developed lactose tolerance and includes the latest archaeological findings, which have re-estimated the amount of meat eaten by our ancestors and the earlier dating of organised dairying in places such as the Céide Fields in North Mayo. Evidence from Gerald of Wales of hippophagia – eating horsemeat – and an unusual kingship ritual concerning a mare is noted. The taboo of eating dog flesh is covered, and linked inadvertently to Cú Chulainn’s demise.

Chapter 2 “Human and Nonhuman Relationships under British Colonization” correctly notes that it was not until the 1500s and particularly following the monarchy’s split with the Catholic church that British renewed their interest in subduing the Irish. Wrenn argues that the majority of the human population experienced impoverishment well into the twentieth century as a result of this troubled incorporation into Britain’s orbit, but points out that the fate of Nonhuman Animals, meanwhile, would prove even more heinous. With the coming of colonialism, Ireland was basically turned into an external feedlot to feed the British Colonial system. This is when you start to see the intersection of extreme human oppression with extreme animal oppression because animals are being killed and in more extreme ways. Wrenn notes that:

Whereas precolonial Irish culture was more likely to conceptualize humans and other animals as connected and kindred in the positive sense, colonial Ireland was imbued with the decidedly *negative* notion that colonized humans and nonhumans were both animals in their shared exclusion, lesser social worth, and consumability (p. 46).

Chapter 3 “Activism for Other Animals in Ireland, Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries” introduces the reader to Irish contributions to the anti-cruelty movement and to lesser known or forgotten individuals such as Antrim-born William H. Drummond, author of *The Rights of Animals, and Man’s Obligation to Treat Them with Humanity* (1838). It also covers more well-known characters such as Irish

politician Richard Martin or “Humanity Dick” who succeeded in passing the 1822 *Cruel Treatment of Cattle Act* in the United Kingdom, and was also partially responsible for the formation of the first Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). It proceeds to outline the history of vegetarianism in Ireland, noting that nineteenth-century vegetarianism had a much greater appeal to common laborers, primarily due to its affordability and the tendency for food reformers to provide free meals. Belfast vegetarians worked among slum dwellers to improve their nutritional knowledge and cookery skills. Other famous Irish vegetarians and activists such as George Bernard Shaw are discussed. However, Wrenn argues that Shaw’s biographers downplayed this aspect of his career, as “for nonvegan historians, Shaw’s anti-speciesist commitments may have appeared an inconsequential personality quirk” (p. 89). She shines the light on many interesting individuals such as Irish-born Frances Power Cobbe who founded the National Anti-vivisection Society (NAVS).

One of the surprising findings of my own 2009 doctoral research on the history of Dublin restaurants was the proliferation of vegetarian restaurants; such as the Sunshine Vegetarian Dining Rooms on Grafton Street in 1891, the College Vegetarian Restaurant – one of Leonard McCaughey’s vegetarian chain which included an outlet in Belfast – or the previously mentioned Jennie Wyse Power’s Irish Farm Produce Company on Henry Street. This book expands on the various vegetarian societies throughout Ireland and introduced me to The Irish Village, a vegetarian soapmaking enterprise of Brown’s Soapworks in Donaghmore, County Tyrone, which opened as a visitor’s attraction and at one point maintained a staff of two hundred vegetarians. It should be noted that all the vegetarian societies in Ireland closely collaborated with those in England.

Chapter 4 titled “Modern Activism for Other Animals in Ireland” does not survey the entirety of non-human oppression in Ireland, but it has highlighted some important acts of violence and protest that are integral to Irish species politics, such as sulky “racing” and the live export of animals. It elaborates on the animalisation and Otherization of Irish emigrants in New York City for keeping pigs or their role in swill milk dairies, or of Irish Travellers for their association with the treatment of horses in sulky racing. It also discusses the media campaigns of the radical grassroots group Go Vegan World in the twenty-first century, as well as the paramilitary tactics of the Animal Liberation Front. It argues that Ireland’s story of activism might be conceived as a dual narrative of both oppression *and* resistance.

Chapter 5 “Nonhuman Animal Welfare and Irish Food Sovereignty” argues that due to the deeply agricultural nature of the country, the nation’s food system is the largest contributor to nonhuman exploitation. It explores the role meat and dairy would play with the rise of the new state in the lives of its new citizens and their goal for economic independence. The production of Nonhuman Animal products as commodities and their consumption would become integral to the new Irish national identity. Wrenn acknowledges that historically Ireland was a cattle-based society, but

notes that our ancestors were eating much more vegetarian based diets (including a diversity of foraged wild food) because animal products were expensive. They were not vegan, since *bán biadh* or “whitemeats” (milk, butter, curds, bonnyclabber etc.) were a fundamental part of the early Irish diet. However, it could be argued that during Lenten times and other fast days within the church calendar that the Irish diet was effectively vegan. The book concludes that the vital role Nonhuman Animals play in Ireland is unappreciated. It marks three general theses in support of Irish Nonhuman Animal studies: Nonhuman Animals are materially and ideologically key to the functioning and development of Irish society; the experiences of Nonhuman Animals are entangled with that of Irish persons living both at home and abroad; the vibrancy of Irish vegan protest has been documented as deeply influential to the advancement of Nonhuman Animal rights on the world stage.

This is a fascinating book, which challenges the status quo with its Marxist vegan feminist framing. It is extremely well researched and broad in its scope. The alliteration of “animism, agrarianism, ascendancy, adaptation, and activism” promised by the publisher is delivered. It is full of interesting nuggets and facts, but also of challenging political ideology. I loved the description of vegans as “the butter witches of the modern day, an untrusted feminine force interfering with the livelihood of ‘farmers’” (p. 189). Wrenn argues that we are lucky in Ireland not to have any large not-for-profit organisations working for Animal Rights, as they tend to do deals with industry to secure funding for their own activities and therefore it is in their interests to keep the status quo. This is a phenomenon that has also featured in recent documentary films such as *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* (Netflix 2014) and *Seaspiracy* (Netflix 2021). This book is not perfect. One minor omission is the role of the Crane (*Grus grus*) in early Irish society, as the third most common pet after a dog and cat. Perhaps its extinction ca. 1580-1600 explains this oversight. Despite this minor quibble, I recommend this book to be widely read by omnivores and vegans alike. To tackle the climate emergency, we need to reduce greenhouse gasses and to do so, we all need to reduce our current exploitation of Nonhuman Animals, if not completely, at least to the more reasonable levels of our ancestors.

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