



Animal Labor and Colonial Warfare by James L. Hevia.

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This remarkable study had its origins in one simple question: how did the British Indian Army manage to kill some sixty thousand of its own camels during the short course of the Second Afghan War (1878–80)? But that question led historian James Hevia¹ (Univ. of Chicago) to write a far more extensive study connecting animals, imperialism, the environment, warfare, and science in the late Victorian period. In so doing, he has combined an administrative history of British Indian Army logistics from the late nineteenth century to the First World War with discussions of the camel in its social, economic, and ecological environment, the development of veterinary science, and the emergence of a regulatory “biopower regime” (183) in the Punjab in the 1890s. His particular attention to disease-bearing species offers a startling new perspective on British colonialism in India. His “multiagent approach” (293) will appeal to and instruct students of war and the human-animal bond.

Hevia has conducted extensive primary-source research in the UK’s National Archives and India Office Records, private and parliamentary papers, and official reports of administrative departments in British India, as well as canvassing the relevant secondary literature. His mastery of pertinent medical and scientific literature is evident in, for example, his discussion of contemporary debates about the distribution, transmission, and treatment of the parasitic *trypanosomes* that infected the blood of camels, equids, and bovines across Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

With a nod to James Scott,² the author charts the imperial hubris of technocrats with grandiose schemes to master so-called “wastelands,” in this case canal-building projects in the Punjab, thereby reducing camel grazing lands, expanding the range of disease-bearing insects, and undercutting the way of life of local pastoralists. All this mirrored the deleterious effects of such contemporary colonial projects as the reengineering of the Nile River and the transformation of the Mekong Delta in French Indochina.³

The book’s prologue sketches the historical context of warfare and logistics in “Saharasia,” the “ecological continuum of arid tracts stretching across North Africa, through the Middle East, and well into India” (16). Touching briefly on Alexander the Great, the Ottomans, and—most importantly in terms of precedents for the British—the Mughals, the author establishes the role, and sufferings, of camels employed as draft animals “necessary and critical to the Indian Army’s war-making capability” (26).

Chapter 1, “Slayers of Camels,” chronicles the blundering maladministration that left the rotting carcasses of tens of thousands of cruelly abused camels strewn along the lines of advance to

1. His previous work includes *The Imperial Security State: British Colonial Knowledge and Empire-Building in Asia* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2012).

2. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1998).

3. See Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts* (Berkeley: U Cal Pr, 2002), and David Biggs, *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* (Seattle: U Wash Pr, 2010).

Kabul and Kandahar during the war of 1878–80. Neither veterinary nor transport officers had the authority to alleviate the plight of poorly-acclimated, overburdened, underfed, and improperly handled camels.

Chapters 2–5 concern the environmental niche occupied by the camel in the Punjab and the initial administrative responses to recent logistical catastrophes. These included measures that aimed to but did not quite reform the system of chaotic impressment of camels in wartime. (Camel “wastage” was again shockingly high in the 1895 Chitral expedition and the suppression of revolts on the Northwest Frontier in 1897–98.) There was, however a “partial rehabilitation” of the much-maligned camel itself, as the British came to better understand its virtues and showed a willingness to learn camel lore from their Indian sarwans (handlers).⁴ Yet a continued preference for equids led colonial officials to establish a none-too-successful mule breeding industry in the subcontinent (see chapter 3, “Jackasses for India”).

The second half of the book focuses on the policy of “constructive imperialism” associated with Joseph Chamberlain, Secretary of State for the Colonies (1893–1903). This involved a more interventionist colonial state governance, with large-scale infrastructure projects, including irrigation, sanitation, railway, and harbor facilities. To further the strategic interests of the Raj and counter the perceived threat of a Russian invasion via Afghanistan, the Punjab was redeveloped as, effectively, a militarized border zone, with a settled population that could, in wartime, meet the British Indian Army’s pressing need for draft animals and skilled handlers. The result was a

combination of census, registration, biological management of populations, fitness evaluations, and knowledge production through scientific experimentation [that] penetrated ever more deeply into militarized animal life in India; the ways in which it did so among humans governed by state apparatuses we have come to understand as biopower regimes Such a regime certainly affected the pack animals of the Punjab: we might consider animal census, registration, and branding to be essential disciplinary techniques, while breeding programs and the medicalization of pack animal life served as regulatory and generative controls that produced and transformed animal populations. (183–84)

To underpin this biopower regime, the British created a permanent transport system for the Indian Army. Intriguingly, its organization owed much to Mughal precedents: “the British would even adopt the Mughal term *Silladar* to refer to its reserve cavalry and camel corps units” (168). The environmental hazards facing an army whose logistics relied on animal labor included the blood-borne parasite *trypanosoma evansi*, known to the sarwans as Surra. Veterinary surgeons like Griffith Evans (who identified the pathogen) and John Henry Steel made great strides in understanding the disease and in developing treatments, but never eradicated the threat. Indeed, the canal projects extended the breeding grounds of the insect-vectors of the parasite (and other diseases, such as malaria). This had disastrous consequences for local communities. Yet, Hevia explains in his final chapters, it did give the British Indian Army the logistical capabilities to conduct World War I campaigns along the Northwest Frontier and outside India, in places like Gallipoli, Mesopotamia, and Palestine. The book closes with a look at the legacies of colonial policies in modern Pakistan, particularly the militarization of the Punjab, the canal system, the treatment of Surra, and the continued social and economic importance of the camel.

4. See Maj. Arthur Leonard’s practical but sympathetic text, *The Camel: Its Uses and Management* (London: Longmans, 1894).

The book invites constructive debates. In both his preface and postscript, Hevia asks, vis-à-vis the Animals in War Memorial in Hyde Park, London, whether “claims that animals marched ‘alongside’ British and Allied soldiers in conflicts that aimed to preserve freedom [can be reconciled] with the recognition that animals had no choice in the matter” (289). But is there not a similar contradiction in the memorialization of human conscripts as well?

The last two chapters (on Indian Army logistics in the First World War and the impact of colonialism on modern Pakistan) hint at possibilities for future research rather than reaching firm conclusions. Large subjects like Victorian society’s growing concern for animal welfare, evident in the founding of the Royal Society for the Protection of Animals and laws punishing cruelty to animals with fines or imprisonment, seem to underlie the passing mention of anti-vivisectionists’ concerns over experiments on live animals during investigations of Surra. The needless suffering and loss of hundreds of thousands of equids during the Second South African War (1899–1902) caused public outrage and, by the First World War, the military was paying lip service to the principle of minimizing animal suffering. One wonders whether concerns over the suffering of camels in the British Indian Army’s colonial campaign played a meaningful part in reform of the Indian Army transport system.

This wide-ranging, thought-provoking, and convincing study is a most salutary reminder of the indispensable role animals played on campaign, even in an age of industrialization. (Hevia notes that the Pakistani army still uses pack mules to supply remote outposts in terrain where helicopters cannot land and air drops are difficult.) But his readers will learn about far more than the grim logistical realities of colonial campaigns, thanks to his well-informed treatment of the nature of late nineteenth-century imperialism, parasitic blood infections, ecology, links between empirical science and local lore, and the significance of non-human agents in history.