Below is a dialogue, held over the course of months, between Professor Helen Cowie of the University of York and Nicholas R. Miller. The conversation began with an interview recorded on February 11, 2025, and continued with e-mail exchanges, resulting in what you see below, an edited and amended revision of that initial exchange. It has been refined and made more succinct for the purpose of clarity. The original February 11, 2025 interview has been archived by the Society for the History of Discoveries.

Abel Alves

Helen Cowie Interview

NM = Nicholas Miller

HC = Helen Cowie

NM: All right. Well, I'm Nicholas Miller. I teach history and anthropology at Ball State University and am also Co-Editor of our special issue on animals and exploration. With us today we have Helen Cowie who is a Professor of Early Modern History in the Department of History at the University of York. Her work has a particular focus on the history of animals. Her books include the 2011 *Conquering Nature in Spain and Its Empire, 1750-1850*; the 2014 *Exhibiting Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain*; the 2017 book *Llama*, part of the Reaktion Animal Book series, and was the first book I read of hers; the 2021 book *Victims of Fashion*; and her latest book, which came out this year, 2025, *Animals in World History* from Routledge. I don't know if you want to add anything else or if that's good?

HC: That seems pretty comprehensive! Thank you very much for speaking with me and getting me involved with the project.

NM: We want to say thank you for saying yes and being a part of this.

HC: Brilliant.

NM: I guess we will start with a very basic question. How would you explain historical animal studies to readers who might not be familiar with the field and what it represents?

HC: A very good question. I guess in some ways it is basic, but I always have to reflect a little bit on this because when you are involved in a particular field for a long time you don't necessarily stand back and think through about what you are doing. I suppose, I would say that historical animal studies are about putting animals back into history, right? So, it's thinking about how people have perceived or used or treated animals in the past, and the impact this has had on animal populations and animal bodies. It's also about how other species have shaped human history, whether by ploughing fields, working with them as hunting partners or helping them to colonize new territory. Animals have often featured in

more traditional works of history, but usually in a peripheral role; military histories, for instance, may mention cavalry charges, while economic histories often focus on animal commodities, such as ivory, beaver pelts or beef. Animal histories, however, put the animal at the center of analysis and focus on different aspects of the human-animal relationship, from pet-keeping to working animals. For some animal historians, this can still mean thinking primarily about how humans have perceived and exploited other species. For others, it can mean going further and trying to recover the actions and experiences of animals in the past or thinking about animal agency. So I think you can engage with animal historical studies at different levels.

NM: I like the way you said that: engagement on different levels. I think that is a really hard thing to comprehend sometimes. How much engagement is necessary to be considered historical probably has gone through different phases. In my, case, I didn't initially start as an animal studies scholar, but animals have increasingly become more central to my own work. That's definitely the path I've taken. And that is partially a reflection of the field growing and it becoming something you can do. History of animals is a thing rather than a slightly dodgy, interesting pastime that you're doing on the side of doing history of science or something else. So, I think you can engage with a lot of different levels and I'm actually pretty relaxed about that. I would want lots of people to feel that it's not in any way exclusive, there's not one methodology. If you are interested in animals, you can do animal studies.

HC: I agree, I think all kinds of history would benefit from thinking about animals in some way. But it's fine to approach the topic from different perspectives and give animals different levels of prominence.

NM: Yeah, that's great. Honestly, that kind of leads into my next question. What are your research interests and what started you on that path? Especially, Historical Animal Studies.

HC: That's another really good question. Again, it's something that, to some extent, I've fallen into. I've always been interested in animals in one way or another, but for a long time I didn't see animal history as something I could study - animals, yes, and history, yes, but not the two together. I think my first encounter with a book about animal history was probably in the third year of my undergraduate, when I took a module on the French Revolution. One of the books on the reading list for the course was Louise Robbins' book, *Elephant Slaves and Pampered Parrots* and I remember being intrigued that someone had written about the animals of 18th-century Paris, not just the people.

As a PhD student I studied the history of natural history in 18th-century Spain and its Empire, and started to become increasingly fascinated by the collections of live and dead animals in the Royal Cabinet of Natural History in Madrid, including an elephant from Indonesia and an anteater from Argentina. Later, I developed an interest in collections of living animals, beginning with London Zoo, but moving out from there to look at travelling

menageries, which toured Britain with camels, lions and elephants. Since then, I've done projects on llamas and on the use of animals in fashion.

I'm presenting this like it was a seamless transition, but it really wasn't! The project on menageries, for instance, came into being primarily because I didn't have funding at the end of my PhD for research trips to Spain and South America, so decided to focus on something closer to home. At the time, a lot of nineteenth-century British newspapers had just been digitized and made available via my university, so I was able to use these to gather information on travelling animal shows. I also happened to see a photograph of elephants walking along the high-street around 1850 at an exhibition in the library of my home town, Stamford. I was fascinated that such exotic animals could once have been seen in such a familiar place and really wanted to explore these local-global connections in greater detail. But, like I say, it took me quite a while to mold all of this into a viable research project.

NM: And I think for anyone who has gotten into historical animal studies, it's never really that seamless. It's kind of something you fall into. But once you fall in, you kind of fall in love. And you're just stuck there.

HC: And I think you realize that it's pretty essential to all kinds of history. In fact, I'd challenge anyone to come up with an area of history that doesn't involve animals in one form or another. If you are looking at labor history, that probably includes animals - whether dogs, camels or horses. If you are studying the history of commodities, there's a good chance that many of these will involve animal body parts, from animal dyes like cochineal to furs, feathers, bones and teeth. And if you're thinking about urban history, you would find animals in many different roles, whether as food on the hoof, sources of transport, vectors of disease, sources of entertainment or domestic companions. In Victorian London, for instance, there would have been horses pulling carriages down the street, animals being driven to market for slaughter, rats and stray dogs roaming the alleyways in search of food and maybe even dancing bears, organ grinders' monkeys or elephants in a traveling menagerie. Many people would also have kept a cat to control vermin or had a pig in their backyard for personal consumption. So, when you start looking at these things, actually, animals are kind of everywhere. I think whatever you are studying, asking: "Are there animals here? What role were they playing?" is often fruitful.

NM: I think that the idea that they're not in the foreground is key, and I guess, historical animal studies is like, they are there and that's the scholar's job to bring them out. You see them. Everyone knows they're there, but we're here to represent them.

HC: Absolutely. It's how you find them as well. When you start looking for animals in the archive, you find them everywhere - in court records, newspapers, letters, diaries, photographs and art. Conducting a systematic search for animals in historical records can be difficult, however, as they may not be the main subject of a particular source, and,

consequently, are not mentioned in the catalogue. In my most recent book, for instance, I use Jacopo Bassano's painting of a market in 16th-century Italy to illustrate one of the chapters. This image is packed with animals, living and dead - a cow, a horse, a sheep, several dogs, a basket of chickens, an owl, two turkeys from the New World and even two chained monkeys. The painting's title "Grande Mercato" ("Large Market"), however, gives no indication of this, so only by actually viewing the painting (as I happened to do on a visit to Turin), was I able to understand its value as a source about early modern animals. Not all animals, moreover, leave equally large footprints in the historical record, so coverage of different species is uneven. We have much more material on pets and zoo animals than working animals, laboratory animals or animals consumed for food.

NM: Yeah, I think that is a great summary. Thank you. And to just continue on with these questions. As a scholar of historical animal studies, how do you think the field is and could be represented in conversation specifically with this journal, with exploration and discovery?

HC: I think there are a lot of potential overlaps between exploration and the history of animals. First, there's the obvious role of animals as partners in exploration. Horses, for example, played a crucial role in the exploration and Spanish conquest of Mexico (as Abel Alves describes in this special issue). Camels helped to explore the desert regions of central Australia in the 19th century, while Asian elephants were conscripted for a Belgian expedition to East Africa in 1879. Dogs have also partnered human explorers in many contexts, perhaps most notably in Antarctic exploration in the early-20th century. Amundson, Shackleton, and Scott all took dogs to pull sleds across the Antarctic, while Shackleton and Scott, less successfully, took ponies as well. So, animals were essential in facilitating human exploration, both as beasts of burden and as military allies. In some cases, moreover, they served as vital sustenance for human explorers. Shackleton's men, for instance, consumed penguins and seals on their expedition, while Galapagos tortoises became a staple for seafarers in the Pacific – among them a young Charles Darwin.

Second, another potential connection between animals and exploration would be the role of animal products in spurring the exploration of new lands in the first place. French incursions into Canada in the 17th and 18th centuries, for instance, were motivated by the fur trade, and the desire to secure beaver pelts. A similar fur frontier existed in Russia, pushing ever eastwards into Siberia to secure marten, sable and fox pelts as existing populations were hunted out. In central Africa, meanwhile, ivory served as a prompt for exploration in the 19th century, pushing Omani traders and European colonists deeper into the heart of the continent. Without the lure of profits, it's not certain that exploration would have happened in these regions when it did - at least not on the same scale or at the same pace.

Third, and related to the above, you sometimes see expeditions undertaken for the specific purpose of searching for, studying or maybe collecting a particular animal species – usually one that is especially rare and difficult to locate. In the 1930s, for example, the Italian explorer Attilio Gatti visited the Belgian Congo to study the elusive okapi, conducting the first extended study of the animal, photographing okapis in the wild for the first time and capturing a young male okapi named Toto for export to a European zoo. Around the same time Americans Floyd Tangier Smith and Ruth Harkness travelled to China in search of pandas, in this case with the explicit aim of securing live animals for zoological collections.

Finally, taking a wider environmental history approach, we can study the ecological impacts of introducing non-native species like dogs, cattle or pigs to new regions. How did they interact with native species? How were they perceived by Indigenous peoples? We can also study how explorers' understanding and perception of animals was changed by encounters with novel species, especially strange animals that maybe challenged their preconceptions and systems of classification. How do you describe and classify a manatee, for instance, or a platypus, if you've never seen one before?

So I think there are lots of different ways in which we can connect exploration and the history of animals – though I'm sure I've not covered them all in that brief summary!

NM: I think it would be really hard. Which is great! I think that means there is a lot of potential for overlap here. I like the distinction you draw between domesticated and exotic animals. What is their role in exploration? Is it for knowledge? Are the animals actually doing the exploration? I know some of your books have talked about globe-trotting elephants and things like that. Are these animals actually doing the exploration or are they just part of the exploratory journey? I know that I have shared this with you, but some of my ideas are like where do these ideas of animals in exploration start? Animals in space, are they explorers? Are they all a part of this Age of Discovery?

HC: I guess it depends on how you define exploration. In some senses, certain animals are explorers because they are accompanying humans to new lands or, in certain cases, going ahead of humans and laying the ground for them. In the 16th century, for instance, Spanish sailors would often drop off pairs of pigs onto newly-discovered islands so that they could breed and produce food for any humans who might land there in future. In the 1950s and 60s, meanwhile, the Russians and the Americans sent a range of animals into space – mice, dogs, monkeys and chimpanzees – to test the effects of weightlessness on the human body. The first primate to orbit the earth was thus a chimpanzee named Enos, not a human being.

In other senses, however, these animals were not active explorers because they were not charting their own path but following a path laid out for them by humans. Enos, for instance, didn't consciously choose to go into space and did not control the movement of the spacecraft he was in (though he could decide whether or not to perform the manual

tasks given to him by his human handlers) – he was merely acting as a human surrogate. So he was not an explorer by choice, and his exploration was constrained by human technicians.

In thinking about the roles played by animals in exploration, I'd also probably draw a distinction between working animals, which were often viewed by human explorers as valuable partners, and livestock, which served them primarily as food. British explorer L. Rankin, for example, expressed a lot of respect for the four Asian elephants on the Belgian-sponsored expedition to East Africa in 1879, describing how they "exhibited unfailing judgement, patience and willingness" at all times, and showed real "pluck under their too great labors." Shackleton likewise wrote very affectionately about the horses and dogs on his Nimrod expedition (1907-9), giving them all names and recognizing their individual qualities; one pony, Socks, was described as "very willing to work and always very fiery," while another, Chinaman, was described as "a strong beast, sulky in appearance, but in reality one of the best of the horses."

By contrast Amundsen took several live pigs on his Antarctic expedition primarily for the purpose of providing food for his dogs. Unlike the dogs, the latter were never named and viewed merely as fuel. They were part of the expedition but not seen as active explorers. So, some animals were explicitly credited as explorers, while others were viewed as useful but inanimate assistants to human adventurers – much like ships or sleds.

NM: I would actually like to get back to this idea of animal agency. How do you describe agency and exploration in historical animal studies? Is that key in doing this kind of research? Is finding the agency with these partners?

HC: I think historians of animals would debate this - agency is a tricky issue.

NM: I know it's a big question.

HC: Can we get at it? Do animals have to consciously want to do something for it to be agency? Or does simply having an impact on those around them qualify as agency? In discussing agency, I think we also need to think about the power dynamics between the different actors, as these put limits on the forms that agency can take. Within the context of exploration, animals may not have choice in what they do, but that doesn't mean they can't have an impact on how an expedition goes. It's an important question to ask. What roles have animals played in this? How do they influence things?

I think there are different directions we can go in assessing agency and exploration. On the one hand, reading the written accounts of human explorers, we clearly do see examples of animal partners resisting what they're meant to be doing and maybe fighting against what explorers were trying to achieve. In his expedition notes, for example, Shackleton talks about how some of the horses would deliberately disobey specific orders or act in a certain way to achieve their own ends. As he put it: "Every one of them seemed to possess more

cunning and sense than the ordinary broken-in horses at home, and this cunning, when put into practice to gain an end of their own, was a constant source of petty annoyance to us," One of the ponies, Quan, reportedly took "particular delight [in] being able to bite through his head-rope and attack the bales of fodder stacked behind him; then, when we put a chain on to prevent this, he deliberately rattled it against the side of the hut which kept us awake." Rival polar explorer Roald Amundsen, meanwhile, adjusted his dog sled groups to reflect existing friendships between the dogs and prevent fighting – another example of animals shaping their own working and living conditions.

On the other hand, taking a broader perspective, we can also see ways in which the biology of particular species determines the limits of human exploration, as, for instance, when horses succumb to disease, heat or cold and are unable to operate in certain environments. Three of the four elephants on the 1879 Belgian expedition died from undernourishment and overwork, for instance, contributing to its failure. On the flip side, moreover, we can perhaps see native fauna as exerting agency over human explorers by (in the case of mosquitos) transmitting diseases such as yellow fever or malaria, or (in the case of predators), attacking and killing them. David Livingstone was famously attacked and badly mauled by a lion in 1844 while travelling in Africa. During the Spanish American Wars of independence, meanwhile, a 'ravenous' caiman seized a soldier named Gamarra as he was swimming across a river in Venezuela, dragging him under the water and drowning him. So animals could deter humans from entering particular regions or attack them if they did so.

NM: I really like that you brought up the animals they brought in and the Indigenous fauna. I feel like it is really easy to separate the two. You think about *conquistadores* bringing their dogs as explorers. Some of these dogs are getting paid as much as crossbowmen. They are coming in; it is usually negative. But we also need to think about what is happening to the animals that are already there. They're going to retaliate too. I know it's been described how early settlers in North America would bring their animals and just let them run free and how that damaged all the Indigenous fauna and the people there. There're no fences or anything, so the agency of the animal is just running free and it's actually destructive. It's one way to colonize and everything.

HC: That's really interesting, isn't it? Animals not only accompany human explorers but serve as unwitting agents of colonization by eating Indigenous people's crops and causing various forms of conflict. Virginia DeJohn Anderson has written about this in the context of Virginia and New England. Nancy Cushing likewise describes how pigs assisted colonial occupation in 19th-century New South Wales by straying into wooded areas and gullies which had become refuges for native plants and animals and Indigenous people and driving the latter out. There are also cases where Indigenous people and native fauna were deliberately removed from homelands to make way for introduced (and more profitable) animals such as cattle or sheep. In Tierra del Fuego, for instance, as John Soluri has shown,

Indigenous people like the Aónikenks and Selk'nam were displaced to make room for sheep, along with native guanacos (which competed with the latter for grazing) and feral dogs (which were seen as destructive to livestock). So animals are central to many colonization projects and help to reshape human relationships with the land - often in negative ways.

NM: Speaking of that, I think it's important to highlight these ideas of empire and imperialization within these conversations. Like, how do these animals represent power and prestige? Is there culture and symbolism to certain animals? In historical animal studies they sometimes talk about charismatic animals like the elephant, but how is that representational of a cultural symbol or power?

HC: I think that's significant in a lot of different contexts. Some of these animals would have resonance in particular countries. Obviously, the elephant is significant in India and parts of Southeast Asia already before Europeans get there and would be used in various forms of war and exploration within those continents. So, you have that kind of significance. With elephants I'm more familiar with African exploration in the 19th century. Again, at that point there's a real desire to domesticate (or, technically to tame) African elephants so they can assist with exploration. That's partly because European livestock doesn't do very well in southern Africa, suffering from diseases transmitted by the tsetse fly, but it's also I think partly for the prestige associated with controlling such a large and imposing species. The well-known British feminist and anti-vivisectionist Frances Power Cobbe, for example, advocated taming "the splendid, sagacious, lovable elephant" in Natal, writing that it would be "a fitting inauguration of our great South African dominion if the lordly *Elephas Africanus* were to be rescued from the barbarous extermination which now threatens his race, and attached – a willing servant – to the car of British prosperity." So taming the elephant was partly about saving the species from extinction (as a result of hunting for its ivory), and partly about practical economic gain, by converting the elephant into a laborer. It was also about making the British Empire look strong, prosperous and humane - in contrast to the Indigenous people who, in the words of Cobbe, had "never mastered the noble animal, but only killed it ruthlessly for meat or for its ivory."

This conflation of taming/domestication with imperial control is also something you see in the Americas, where the lack of domesticated native animals was interpreted by European colonists as a sign of the backwardness of Indigenous peoples. In Pre-Columbian Mexico, for instance, there were not many domesticated animals, the most notable being the turkey and the dog (a hairless, chihuahua-like species called the *xoloitzcuintle*, which was sometimes consumed as food). In Peru there were a few more domesticated species, most importantly the llama (used for carrying goods), the alpaca (reared for its wool) and the guinea pig (reared for consumption and sacrifice), but there were no domesticated cattle and no large domesticated animal suitable for riding (like the horse or donkey). This drew criticism from European settlers, who suggested that the relative absence of domesticated

livestock in the Americas indicated that Indigenous people were more primitive than Europeans and further behind on the road to civilization. Of course, we know this isn't true, and simply reflected the comparative availability of species suitable for domestication. Marcy Norton has also suggested that some Indigenous peoples - notably in Amazonia - also had cultural reasons for not domesticating animals as food, but proved quite capable of taming individuals of many species as companions - a process she refers to as familiarization. British explorer Henry Walter Bates, for instance, described how an "old Indian woman" tamed an "intractable" macaw he had acquired in just two days, supposedly by feeding it with her saliva.

NM: I think that is just fascinating. That idea that since animals were tamed and now, we're using them to conquer is such a big deal. Realizing that the Indigenous People just had a different form of taming or however you want to call it. Marcy Norton writes quite extensively on that. I think it's great to highlight these different dichotomies within Indigenous versus colonization and everything. The power struggle really is present.

HC: That's one of the interesting elements to study in exploration, right? The cross-cultural (and cross-species) encounters it facilitates. Often, of course, explorers don't respect Indigenous knowledge - or, indeed, Indigenous fauna, which is sometimes seen as strange or inferior. But some do discover new ways of thinking about the natural world and almost all, whether they acknowledge it or not, rely heavily on the expertise of Indigenous guides and assistants to complete their journeys or to observe and collect native animals. Prussian naturalist Richard Schomburgk, for example, only managed to view a lowland tapir in Guyana after his indigenous guide spotted the animal's tracks in the forest. Naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace likewise relied heavily on his Malay assistant, Ali, who helped him to locate, collect and preserve birds of paradise in New Guinea.

NM: I think exploring these ideas are just as important as exploring the location.

HC: Absolutely.

NM: That's really great. Kind of just continuing on from that, how do you think the perception, understanding, and sensibility towards animals are changing? How does this contribute to the studies of animals and the study of exploration?

HC: That's a really interesting question, isn't it? In terms of how our understanding of and sensibility towards animals are changing, I suppose we've seen big strides over the past century towards better comprehending animal behaviors and recognizing animal abilities. Thanks to the growth of animal behavioral studies, for instance, we now know that chimpanzees can use tools, that gorillas can learn human sign language, that elephants can recognize themselves in the mirror and that sheep can recognize different human faces. We also know that whales and dolphins communicate through a range of clicks and other

sounds which appear to differ from group to group, suggesting the potential existence of animal cultures.

Whether this has translated into improved treatment of other species is much less certain. On the one hand, there have been instances where better knowledge about other species has enabled us to improve their living conditions in captivity, to better protect them from poachers or invasive species or, in some cases, reintroduce animals like wolves and beavers into places where they have gone extinct. In 2015, for instance, a judge in Argentina ruled that an orangutan called Sandra qualified as a 'nonhuman person' on the basis of her species' proven high intelligence and ordered her transfer from Buenos Aires Zoo to an ape sanctuary in Florida. On the other hand, though, we keep on treating other species as disposable commodities - most notably farmed animals, which are subjected to increasingly bad conditions even though we know they are highly sentient beings. So knowledge doesn't always result in improved welfare.

In terms of how all of this might contribute to the study of animal history, I think there are a number of interesting avenues. First, thanks to greater knowledge about animal behavior, we are now better able to interpret the behaviors of animal actors in the past when these are described in contemporary documents or captured in photographs or film. Eric Baratay, for instance, has attempted to reconstruct the journey of a young female giraffe from Sudan to Paris in 1827 from the perspective of the animal by applying modern knowledge about giraffe psychology and physiology to contemporary writings. Second, it's possible that deeper understandings of ecological change might be applied to past settings, or, conversely, that we can use past records about animals to better understand how their numbers/range have expanded or contracted over the centuries. We can also, perhaps even begin to think about how animals have changed their behavior over time in response to human pressures, adapting their behavior or changing their migration routes. It has been suggested, for instance, that older female elephants (matriarchs) have played a really important role in retaining collective memory for the herd, helping to guide them to water in times of drought - a skill that has been seriously threatened by the killing of these animals for their ivory. Again, it's debated how far you can go with this kind of approach, but it's certainly something that we can try to utilize.

NM: That's a great example, and I'm starting to see how historical animal studies connects to exploration, but also to these ideas of science and everything. I think that when you think of history it's usually considered a very, well it is a liberal art, but now you are bringing ethology, now you are bringing biology, and it's like historical animal studies is really connecting the two and really bridging the gap. I think that's key to, how do you continue the conversation with animal studies, with exploration, and with everything else?

HC: Absolutely. It changes the kind of questions you ask and the kind of materials you use. Things like zooarchaeology as well has really enabled us to learn a lot more about when

and how animals were domesticated, how they were used in different societies in ways that perhaps written sources can't always do.

NM: Do you think, since we just said all of this about historical animal studies, do you think you're starting to go back to when you first started your PhD? You're starting to reflect on what you did then and how it's kind of come full circle?

HC: I think so, yes. When I first encountered animals in my PhD I wasn't really thinking about whether or not they had agency, or how they might have experienced the world around them. Returning to some of the same sources again now, I'm able to ask new questions and draw on some of the wonderful work done by other historians. In one case, for example, I wrote about an anteater that was shipped from Buenos Aires to Madrid in 1776. At the time, I focused on human perceptions of the anteater, and its status as a specimen of natural history. Now, I might think more deeply about how the anteater's biology conditioned its behavior in captivity, and, in turn, how this influenced human understandings of the species. Being nocturnal, for example, anteaters in zoological collections were often curled up asleep for most of the day, which led some 19th-century commentators to brand them slow and stupid.

NM: Yeah. I guess I'll just ask one last question. This has all been great and I think you've been really helpful for people who aren't really familiar with historical animal studies. Are there any new projects on the horizon that you want to share with us that kind of tackle these ideas? Historical animal studies or exploration?

HC: I'm working on a range of animal-related projects, some of which focus more explicitly on exploration than others. First, one project I'm currently working on (along with other scholars) is an edited book looking at the history of animals in Latin America. I'm writing a chapter on "observing and measuring," where I hope to explore changing ways of observing, classifying and interpreting Latin American animals from the 16th to the 21st centuries. I'm planning to focus my discussion on three families of animals - manatees, tapirs and hummingbirds - all of which presented specific challenges when it came to finding them, capturing them and classifying them. Amphibious manatees, for instance, were initially classified as "fish" by the Spanish - in part so they could continue to consume their flesh on Catholic fast days.

I'm also working on a book on birds in the 19th century. This is another edited book, which will be published by Bloomsbury as part of a larger, 6-volume series on The Cultural History of Birds. As well as writing the introduction - where I talk about Shackleton's interactions with penguins in the Antarctic - I'm also writing a chapter on the commodification of birds in the Victorian period. In the latter, I again focus on 3 very different birds - the egret, the ostrich and the eider-duck - and show how each was impacted by the growing human demand for their feathers. In the case of egrets, for instance, the killing of the birds for their delicate tail plumes (used to adorn women's hats),

resulted in their near extinction in Florida, Venezuela and elsewhere. By contrast, ostriches were successfully domesticated by farmers in Cape Colony and shorn of its plumes every six months - though there was some debate at the time as to whether this operation was painful. As for eider ducks (whose down was used in pillows and eiderdowns), their feathers were removed from their nests while the female was sitting on her eggs - an operation that was only possible due to the relative tameness of the birds and their willingness to return to their nests after they had been raided by humans. I'm interested in the ethics of using bird products and the discussions their commodification sparked at the time.

Longer term, I'm not 100% sure what I'm going to work on for my next larger scale study, but I'm thinking of returning to my work on travelling menageries and looking again at performing animals - especially lion taming. I'm interested in the dangers of performing with wild animals - and, obviously, the cruelty that this often entailed. But I'm also fascinated by the close relationships some tamers forged with the creatures they worked with and the degree to which this enabled them to recognize the latter as individuals with distinct personalities. Sea lion trainer Captain John Woodward, for instance, claimed that seals varied in intelligence and that some even exhibited a sense of humor – his clown seal, Mrs. Toby, was "full of fun and as lively as a cricket," but there were other seals "that you could never induce to be funny." I want to think about how trainers related to other species and how public attitudes towards performing animals have changed over time.

That's the sort of trajectory of things I definitely will do and might do if I have the time!

NM: That's the key, right? If you have the time.

HC: Quite.

NM: Well, thank you so much for agreeing to talk with us. I think this was really informative and just thank you so much.

HC: You're very welcome, Nick. It's been really good to talk with you.