

William H. Magee

THE ANIMAL STORY: A CHALLENGE IN TECHNIQUE

IN ART REALISTIC ANIMALS are as old as the caveman drawing on his stone wall, but in the novel and short story they are as new as the theory of evolution. A direct if minor effect on literature of the controversy over that theory appeared in the sudden creation of animal heroes in the closing quarters of the nineteenth century. Although a consciousness of such an inspiration would probably have shocked some of the first modern writers with four-legged heroes, particularly moralists who made a cause of the prevention of cruelty to animals, Sir Charles G. D. Roberts made the connection. He also described the first consistently realistic animals in literature, thus giving Canada a founding influence in this development in modern literature.

Ancient and mediaeval writers who had used animals in fiction usually had had purposes which discouraged or even prevented realistic characterization. Primitive storytellers used animals as antagonists of human heroes to depict man's struggle for survival against nature. Those animals might possibly have been created as true to life as had those in the cave drawings, but in fact the temptation of making them almost human antagonists, of having them think human thoughts and speak, beguiled the storytellers away from the simple truth of the cave artistry. In contrast, didactic stories called for animal figures that were strictly human except for some single superficial characteristic. For classical writers Aesop's *Fables* provided virtually the archetype for animal heroes. Likewise mediaeval writers used animals to point up human morals for human readers, in allegory as well as in fable. Bestiaries perhaps partook no more of the fantastic than did most mediaeval literature, but the animal characters were easier to pervert than the human ones. Mediaeval romance encouraged fantasy still more, with dreamland dragons and questing beasts. None of these classical or mediaeval literary purposes encouraged the depicting of animals as characters leading independent lives.

Renaissance and neo-classical writers showed much less interest in using animals as characters. For although their object in writing remained essentially didac-

tic, the new spirit of representational art controlled their technique. In their man-oriented world, too, new literary uses for animals were not likely to develop, and even stories in earlier forms touched on the animal characters more lightly. Romances used considerably fewer animals, pastoral heroes and heroines ignored their sheep, and La Fontaine forced a satire of his human contemporaries on animals in the Aesop tradition. Indeed the customary bent towards satire made neo-classical animals still less realistic, for they were required to expose this or that human foible. Perhaps it was unconscious remorse for this falsification, together with increased knowledge of geography, that sent the fanciful beasts migrating to the then much smaller unknown world. Although the temper of the times encouraged such writers as Swift to make such creatures conform to common sense, with the *houyhnhnms* a didactic aim still thwarts realism in the characterization of animals. Before animals could again come into general use in literature, two changes had to occur. First, the nonhuman heroes had to live for their own ends, not just to echo the concerns of human readers. Second, some new techniques had to be found for drawing in words a truly representational character study of animals. Neither their primitive use as daily antagonists of man nor their mediaeval use for allegory or romance appealed to writers in the early nineteenth century, and no new one developed. Only single lesser writers who watched them with objective interest, such as Mrs. Catherine Parr Traill, or who hunted, like Robert Surtees, thought of building simple stories around them.

The widespread use of animals in modern literature dates from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In 1877 Anna Sewell began the vogue with *Black Beauty*, the bestselling horse story which pleaded for more humane treatment of domestic animals. Through her philanthropy, Miss Sewell had hit on a purpose for her story which distinguishes animal characters from man, instead of stressing similarities. The artistic appeal for human readers is genuinely indirect, a good will based perhaps on the misery and cruelty suffered by all living creatures and caused by bad men. For the first time in literary history it was no longer desirable or even artistically sensible to draw manlike animals. Any failure to make the domestic animals credible on the part of Anna Sewell or her followers is the result only of failures in technique.

Pets can beguile readers into tears even more readily than horses can, and so it is that the Canadian contribution to Anna Sewell's type of animal story is even more sentimental than *Black Beauty*. When Margaret Marshall Saunders wrote her famous dog story, *Beautiful Joe* (1894), she won a competition for a companion piece to *Black Beauty*. Again the animal is at the centre of the scene, and

again the author stresses needs peculiar to it rather than common with man. Indeed *Beautiful Joe* seems for chapters at a time to be less a story than a manual in the care of animals. Chapter headings read "Training a Puppy", "Goldfish and Canaries", "A Neglected Stable", "A Talk about Sheep"; but these at least avoid the sentimentality and melodrama of the rest of the book. At first the dog hero is, as he puts it, merely a dumb animal, but he quickly finds a way to communicate the author's message to younger puppies, such as Billy the fox terrier: "I used to tell him that he would kill himself if he could eat all he wanted to." The characterization of Beautiful Joe takes on a clarity of outline through its new, nonhuman perspective, and some continuing credibility results from the marked simplicity of the dog's reflections and its lack of dialogue. Miss Saunder's failure came in the more advanced challenge of devising a credible plot for her dog hero. Confronted with the need to develop a conflict, she borrowed a melodramatic villain and weeping young women from the traditions of nineteenth-century human fiction. The cruel master Jenkins not only demonstrates man's cruelty to animals by disfiguring the hero, he also destroys the initial authenticity of the story when he tries to rob and burn a house which the hero dog is defending. The constant Christian didacticism in the book suggests another literary tradition of the times. As a result, the story which begins from a distinctive and credible nonhuman point of view ends in a medley of long popular conventions of fiction. They sufficed to make *Beautiful Joe* the most popular Canadian best seller to date, as well as to launch Miss Saunders on a career which ran to nearly a dozen domestic animal novels, none of which shows any advances in technique.

Also in 1894, Rudyard Kipling introduced a different widespread use of animals in modern literature with his first *Jungle Book*. It is a pure romance of man living among the beasts of the jungle, with the boy Mowgli as the typical hero of an adventure which differs from the hackneyed only because of the rest of the cast. Sometimes Kipling reverted to the primitive use of animals as antagonists of man, sometimes his characters echo human virtues and vices. The animals would suit Kipling's purpose at least as well if they were characterized realistically. As with Miss Sewell and Miss Saunders, the old hybrid characters no longer were essential to the purpose, and the incredible humanness is merely a difficulty of technique. The chief literary advance in Kipling's animal stories results from the more unified atmosphere provided by his romantic approach. Kipling subdued the attendant artistic dangers of triviality, sentimentality, and melodrama, although his sprawling progeny of Tarzan and other yarns of men living among somewhat nonhuman beasts has carried the art of fiction close to its nadir. Sir Charles G. D.

Roberts objected to the falsified animals of both traditions and started a third and accurate one in *Earth's Enigmas* (1896).

When Roberts turned to the animal world to populate his stories, he tried to look at life from the animals' point of view. To do so, he would choose an animal or animal family going about its daily business of searching for food, the most common concern of such creatures, Roberts felt. Their chief obstacle is the threat of danger or death from the intended victim or from another hungry animal. Consequently the typical character has a serious outlook on life, with no time for fun, no concern for outsiders, and the stories seethe with this solemnity. When the simple wants of two such hungry animals clash, when the one eats the other, or more often the young of the other, the irreconcilable conflict creates an effect of stark tragedy. Roberts usually increased the poignancy of this effect by making the animals either pregnant or starving from trying to feed their young. In "The Young Ravens That Call upon Him" (*Earth's Enigmas*), a starving eagle seizes a newborn lamb to feed the starving eaglets, bringing momentary contentment to the nest but leaving the wandering ewe utterly forlorn. Such a juxtaposition can make the animal story a profound comment on the tragedy of life on earth.

Having focused his animal characters on the central concern of their lives, Roberts went on to draw them as convincingly nonhuman. Anna Sewell and Miss Saunders had chosen a special rather than a central problem of animals in the world, one in which man plays a unique and godlike rather than a similar role. Without any men at all in some of his stories, Roberts was driven back to consider the first principles of animal characterization. His animals do not talk, and their thoughts are single, immediate, and simple. Most of the time their behaviour is habitual or instinctive, as when the male eagle always hunts the Squatook Lakes and his mate hunts the Tuladi in "The Lord of the Air" (from *The Kindred of the Wild*). When the environment changes, as when an Indian trapper regularly leaves food for the male eagle, and later a net under the food, the eagle comes to accept the change as habitual too. After being captured, the bird can think of one quick move to escape, but only pride provides the continuing urge to escape, and an unexpected ferocity makes it succeed. As the story closes, the eagle has returned to its habitual perch over the Squatooks. The dominion of the eagle, and his determination, make the character heroic, but the simplicity of his outlook helps retain the conviction of reality.

At best Roberts developed a powerful new literary form out of the simple stories of such realistic animals. The climax of two stories of starving animals in the same incident lends depth to the view of the world, and the joining at the cli-

max turns their innocent wants into pathetic tragedy. A rare irony deepens the effect still further at the end of "When Twilight Falls on the Stump Lots" (*The Kindred of the Wild*), after a mother cow has fatally gored a bear looking for food for its cubs:

The merry little cubs within the den were beginning to expect her, and getting restless. As the night wore on, and no mother came, they ceased to be merry. By morning they were shivering with hunger and desolate fear. But the doom of the ancient wood was less harsh than its wont, and spared them some days of starving anguish; for about noon a pair of foxes discovered the dead mother, astutely estimated the situation, and then, with the boldness of good appetite, made their way into the unguarded den.

As for the red calf, its fortune was ordinary. Its mother, for all her wounds, was able to nurse and cherish it through the night; and with morning came a searcher from the farm and took it, with the bleeding mother, safely back to the settlement. There it was tended and fattened, and within a few weeks found its way to the cool marble slabs of a city market.

The curtailed lives of both groups in the conflict, dams and offspring alike, add a perspective of the futility of survival that makes this Roberts' most moving story. Perhaps a less conscious irony underlies the treatment of man as just another animal with the same hunger to satisfy. In "Savoury Meats" (*The Kindred of the Wild*) a man shoots a doe to give his invalid father the red food to live, but a wildcat eats the abandoned fawn. In "Wild Motherhood" (*The Kindred of the Wild*), which tells three parallel stories, a man with a meat-hungry wife and son shoots not only a wolf who is trying to feed a pregnant mate who cannot hunt because of missing a paw, but also the moose that the wolf is hunting. In stories like these man is an animal competing with his fellows in satisfying the same wants, and succeeding because he is the most fit.

Other variations on the basic characters and plots proved less rewarding. Stories of men trapping tended to distract Roberts into sentimental studies of tender-hearted human beings. "The Moonlight Trails" (*The Kindred of the Wild*) ends with a boy, who has excitedly been snaring rabbits, repenting at the sight of dead rabbits hanging in the noose. Even more sentimental is the longing of a goose that has been raised on a farm from a wild egg to be off with the migration ("The Homesickness of Kehonka", *The Kindred of the Wild*). The young goose, with his wings clipped, falls easy prey to a red fox, but by then his untameable spirit has no doubt done its intended work on the reader. Once in a while man even enters as a god looking after animals like a puppet master. In "The Watchers of the Camp-Fire" (*The Kindred of the Wild*) the man shoots a hungry panther just

to save a doe which has been attracted to the site by the light of his campfire. In casting around for the necessary variety in the development of his plots, Roberts fell back more and more on the repertoire of human fiction, particularly in his later volumes. Roberts also had an instinctive bent towards romantic justice which clashed with the air of objectivity so important to his best effects. In "The Haunter of the Pine Gloom" (*The Kindred of the Wild*) the animal-loving young boy of "The Moonlight Trails" turns out to hate lynx while loving all other creatures. With romance entered nostalgia, with nostalgia sentimentality. A heightened scene produces a heightened emotion, and so melodrama was pressed into service.

Ultimately Roberts was unable to develop a general repertoire of fresh characters and situations for his new genre. Deliberately giving up the dialogue, the extended descriptions, and the casual plotting of traditional fiction, he found it difficult to fill up his stories without repetition. The juxtaposition of two or even three parallel searches for food, climaxing in tragedy for at least one, eked out the material for several well-rounded stories, but it did not provide a pattern which was repeatedly reusable and fresh. The restriction to simple wants also worked against variety. In effect Roberts seldom wrote well with any other want for his heroes than food. In "The King of the Mamozekel" (*The Kindred of the Wild*), the long biography of a bull moose from birth to adult domination of a herd is tied together only by the dubious psychological dread of bears suggested as unique to this moose. The wintertime longing of a young ox for the dream pastures of the previous June makes "Strayed" (*Earth's Enigmas*) an untypical romance of minimal interest. Roberts developed a new literary form, but then he found no reliable means to give it variety.

"Alike in matter and in method, the animal story, as we have it to-day, may be regarded as a culmination." When Roberts began his essay on "The Animal Story" (in *The Kindred of the Wild*) with these words, he was recording his technical frustration. He was also rejoicing in the sense of his own accomplishment and his new recognition of the significance of the history of animals in literature. He saw that the keys to his discovery were the recent advances in psychology and the biological sciences, declaring that "the animal story at its highest point of development is a psychological romance constructed on a framework of natural science" (*The Kindred of the Wild* [Boston, 1902], p. 24). Consequently he sets his own stories and those of Ernest Thompson Seton against those of Anna Sewell, Marshall Saunders, and Kipling, pointing out their errors in the representation of animals. Although he is rather distressed that Christianity with its "Dispensation of Love" (p. 21) had not stimulated this advance long before, he rejoices ultimately that his

stories appeal to the heart and the spirit of evolutionary man after "the long upward march of being" (p. 29). Perhaps the delight in this "potent emancipation" (p. 29) provided the stimulus for Roberts to produce a score of animal story books despite his conviction that he had reached the culmination of the genre: "There would seem to be no further evolution possible" (p. 28).

The example provided by Roberts in *Earth's Enigmas* stimulated several kinds of animal stories, but neither the naturalists nor the romancers succeeded in discovering any other distinctive patterns in plots. Naturalists and wild-animal lovers like Ernest Thompson Seton and Grey Owl tried using the form to make natural history memorable, but they also made it bizarre. Explaining the choice in the prefatory "Note to the Reader" in *Wild Animals I have Known* (1898), the first of more than a dozen volumes, Seton applies hero worship to the animal world as the most memorable device for informing the reader about a species. In the stories themselves, however, he stresses individual rather than representative aspects of heroism. Lobo the wolf organizes a pack in deliberate opposition to man, and Lobo proves his superiority to man in incident after incident ("Lobo, the King of Currumpaw"). Vixen the fox eludes a watch at both the hen house and the kennel, to bring freshly killed chickens to his captured cub night after night ("The Springfield Fox"). At best these stories create a dramatic tension comparable with Roberts', and Seton can deepen them with a similarly tragic vision: "No wild animal dies of old age. Its life has soon or late a tragic end. It is only a question of how long it can hold out against its foes." ("Raggylug, the Story of a Cottontail Rabbit"). Thus Vixen the fox counters every human attempt to thwart her feeding her cub, but when she concludes that she can never free the cub she kills it, in a particularly moving climax. Most of Seton's stories, however, are too episodic to build up such drama. Without a representative unifying drive like the constant search for food in Roberts' stories (in these stories the animals seldom eat), Seton's animals usually drift from crisis to unrelated crisis. Silverspot the crow learns many separate things in his recounted life ("Silverspot, the Story of a Crow"), and Redruff the partridge sees his young die one by one ("Redruff, the Story of the Don Valley Partridge"), and then each is by chance eaten by an owl. Even less promising are the stories in which Seton turned desperately to conventions of human fiction, which are not only trite but gratuitous in the animal world. Lobo the wonder wolf abandons its fight against man and lets itself be trapped when its mate is caught. Seton was unable to expand the genre of the animal story with any new patterns of plot or characterization.

The many romances of wild animals in our century share the general interest

of Roberts and Seton in animal psychology, but for unity and emotion they rely on trite models of human fiction. Individual incidents can dramatize conflicts peculiar to the animal world, as in Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903), when Buck wins the leadership of the dog team in a fierce fight for survival. For London as well as Seton, however, survival or simple leadership proved insufficient material for a worthy plot. The chosen animal must be a hero, and with heroism enters villainy, moral insight, and active affections. These animals typically move more and more from the simple, single thoughts reminiscent of Roberts' stories the further the author ekes out their lives.

As well as centring animals in fiction, modern writers have sometimes adopted the methods and even the attitudes of the tradition for animals in secondary roles. Then animals can draw off the point of view for observing human characters and situations to an unusual perspective, either serious or amusing. Stories of sports which climax in the killing of an animal, like bullfighting or fox hunting, have gained intense poignancy through a sensing of the beast's plight. John Masefield carries the emotional identity to its ultimate in *Reynard the Fox* (1919) when he forsakes the hunters and pants ahead of the chase with the fox. Among the humorists, authors who deal in the comedy of human manners can gain from the startling perspective of how loving ones look to pets. Tobermory, the infamous talking cat of Saki's story, says only what would sound trite or obvious from a human being. Yet what Tobermory says seems in keeping with the nastiness suggested by a cat's smug face. Other writers have found animals useful in fixing human characterization. The impudent, loud parrot of *Jalna* helped Mazo de la Roche to her most memorable character study, grandmother Adeline, reinforcing the image with repetitive traits. Galsworthy's atmosphere of beautiful old age in "Indian Summer of a Forsyte" draws impressively from the dog Balthasar. The dog shows how admirable Old Jolyson's repose is, and reflects his security. Steinbeck exploited symbolic beauty and security still more in "The Red Pony". Here the elemental dramas of death and birth in the lives of horses catch a romantic vision of life lost by the farmer amid his daily chores and cares. Animals convincingly drawn can lend a tangible reality to everyday associations.

The successful representation of animals in modern fiction, developing rapidly since the beginnings in *Black Beauty*, *Beautiful Joe*, and *The Jungle Books*, has added to literature a huge range of possible characters long ago exploited by sculptors and painters. In the careful inner studies as prompted by zoology and psychology, writers have found the means to a success denied to ancient, mediaeval, and Renaissance writers alike. Animals, who live in nature and even in the house for themselves

and not for man, are credible in fiction only so long as they care about themselves first. The early modern stories, in which animals plead for human kindness or support romances of men raised by beasts, ventured on the new animal hero through special, nontypical applications of this care. From them Roberts developed the wider exploitation of animal heroes for general stories in which conflicts outside the repertoire of human fiction are centred on animals. No matter whether they were emphasizing science or adventure, Roberts and his followers depended for their artistic appeal on the universality of the earthly challenges facing man and animal alike. They ask their readers to feel at one with their heroes in contrast to the myriad enemies to both. They also expose the limits as well as the vastness of the expanded range of characters and topics for fiction. Art and life may be one, but stories of animals living only for themselves must still appeal to readers that are human.



BEOWULF REMEMBERED

Deborah Eibel

In parishes along the northern bays,
 Old men claim shells are maddened: regiments
 Of shells lie breathless on the beach, and talk
 At random of the wilderness of seas.

Their huge lips give a terror to the ear
 Of timid noon. Yet speak they must: those shells
 That make a silent kingdom of the sand
 Are punished by the wind and thrown away.

But most endure; and each of these recites
 Its private version of the history
 Of champions who lived along the bays,
 Of Beowulf, who played with maddened shells.