INTRODUCTION

THE HORSE AS CULTURAL ICON: THE REAL AND THE SYMBOLIC HORSE IN THE EARLY MODERN WORLD

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In the modern developed world, the appearance of horses in a peaceful public space (police horses in a town centre, say, or horses with their riders on a hack, stopping for refreshment at a food and drink outlet) typically draws a small crowd. Children approach diffidently to touch and stroke the horses, adults stand back, looking. Horses are unexpected visitors in contemporary everyday life: not quite exotic, but not familiar either. This estrangement between humans and horses has occurred abruptly and relatively recently. From antiquity until the 1930s, horses were fully present in the day-to-day world, a situation that only a small and rapidly dwindling cohort of elderly people can now recall. More than this, horses were not just a part of human life in the past, they were crucial to the development of modern societies and nations. But, despite the importance of horses, cultural studies scholars, literary critics and historians of all kinds have paid very little attention to their lives, roles and meanings. A continuing process of urbanisation since the industrial revolution, a general acceleration of technological change and, in particular, the rapid post-Second World War expansion of motor transport, may account for the virtual obliteration of knowledge of an older horse-powered society among the populace as a whole. It does not explain, however, the scant scholarly attention paid to the significance of horses. Paradoxically, it is, in part, the taken-for-granted centrality of horses to human lives in the past that has rendered them almost invisible to history. Victorian compilers of the calendars of State Papers, for instance, habitually failed to list references to horses in the indexes and not uncommonly omitted them from the edited texts altogether. Similarly, western culture and its languages are so saturated with terms deriving from the routine business of riding, breeding, selling, driving and handling horses that
we fail to notice them.¹ That horses are largely associated with leisure activity in the contemporary developed world has also perhaps diverted modern cultural analysis from attention to the roles and meanings of horses in the past. An unconscious transfer of value from present to past has meant that horse-related history may seem unserious, the product of no more than a hobby-based or idiosyncratic interest. The effects of a wider alienation of the world’s human inhabitants from a natural environment and other species is part of the familiar story of how knowledge of ecological damage is not matched by a substantiating experiential awareness. This broad separation of the human from a natural environment also forms part of the general context to history’s inattention to the formative role horses have played in shaping the world.

Recently, in reaction to growing recognition of what has been called modernity’s species narcissism, a well-received sprinkling of books and articles on the importance of horses to history has appeared. Nevertheless, the range of meanings and functions of horses to early-modern societies and cultures remains under-explored. This book reflects the work of an already-established, international network of scholars that has sprung up to share and further develop knowledge and understanding of early-modern horse cultures. It brings together leading academics and younger scholars of distinction from a number of disciplines, most of whom met at a conference at Roehampton University in June 2009 to celebrate the career of Professor Peter Edwards, to discuss the multi-faceted role of the horse in early-modern society.

The cross-disciplinary essays here display their authors’ diverse approaches to the subject, which, in turn, reflect the potency of the horse as a functional animal and as a cultural icon. Taken together, the essays assert and underline the horse’s immense influence on early modern societies, offering a view of the animal from a number of perspectives, as highlighted by the tripartite division of the volume: Horsemanship and Status; Horse Breeding; Horse-Human Identities. Although the individual essays cover a range of separate (if inter-related) issues, they all share a central concern with the work of recovery and interpretation. Each essay aims to retrieve aspects of the

¹ Similarly, authoritative past and present editions of, for instance, Shakespeare’s King Henry V, a play full of horse talk, or of The Taming of the Shrew, with its sustained series of allusions to horse management manuals, rarely pick up on equine references in interpretative introductions or textual notes.