An important recent development in research on animals (and not merely in an historical context) has been the attempt to view the relationship between man and all other creatures from the perspective of the animals themselves. The authors of this book place themselves firmly in the ranks of those who promote the notion of the ‘animal turn’, setting out their intentions from the outset. Then, at the end of the book, they survey the collective texts of the various contributors and rather tentatively declare that the study ‘hints at the outline of a more species-centric history’ than one with a traditional anthropocentric stance. A distinct but related theme of the book focuses on the ‘invention’ of equine breeds in south-east Asia and South Africa, taking account of both the iconic value of the horses and the interplay of human and environmental factors on their development. Although an initial glance at the table of contents to the volume suggests a set of disparate essays, the chapters together comprehensively cover the key issues. Moreover, the region highlighted in the texts—Indonesia, the Philippines and South Africa—does have a degree of coherence in terms of the movement and interbreeding of stock.

The first question a reviewer has to ask of this book is whether the authors are being unduly modest or over-optimistic in their claim that they are writing a new kind of history of animals. Judged by their own criteria, namely, the impact that the introduction of horses had on existing ecosystems; the degree to which they adapted to new environments; the ways in which they interacted with and changed indigenous and colonial human cultures; and the exercise of equine agency, they have undoubtedly succeeded. These topics receive considerable coverage throughout the book. Bankoff, for instance, provides an interesting account of the effect that the introduction of horses into the Philippines had on colonial and native societies, as well as on the horses themselves. The Philippine horse, the result of interbreeding between stock from places as diverse as Indonesia, northern Europe, Spain and the Americas and later from China and Japan, had emerged as a distinct breed by 1700. Perversely, these horses adapted to their new environment by reducing their size and stubbornly resisting human attempts to breed in extra height. The experience of the Philippine horse reflects a more general feature, namely the tripartite, often
difficult, relationship between the participants: the colonial authorities, the native horse keepers and the horses themselves. The same triangular contest occurred between Henry VIII’s government, seeking to increase by legislative means the size of native ponies grazing on commons and wastes in early sixteenth century England; local farmers, who rounded up the horses (and the buyers who valued and bought them); and the horses themselves, which adapted to the environment in their own way. Dr. Cassidy has charted the same conflicting interests in the breeding of horses in modern Kyrgyzstan.

Advocates of the new animal-centred approach promote the concept of agency, arguing that their subjects possess self-awareness and have the potential to influence and even change their surroundings. Although recently brought to the fore, it is not a new idea since one can discern a tradition of theriophilic writing, based on a belief in animals’ capacity to reason, that goes back to Classical philosophers such as Porphyry. Most of the instances of equine agency recorded in this book, however, present it in a negative sense, that is, horses unwittingly affecting their environment by their presence. On the Indonesian island of Sumbawa, for instance, the growth of horse breeding and trading from at least the sixteenth century onwards, led to dramatic changes in the landscape, notably the expansion of pasture ground at the expense of woodland. Conversely, Swart, in her discussion of the introduction of horses into South Africa, emphasizes the impact that the animals had on the psyche of human society. In Lesotho horsemanship defines its people, a legacy of the growing military and commercial value of the native Basotho horse during the course of the nineteenth century. Afrikaaners raised the Boerperd, a utilitarian horse, to a similar iconic level, utilising it as a racial symbol to set against the frivolous thoroughbred of the British ruling class. The genetic fortunes of the Basotho horse enable Swart further to explore the relationship between human racial and equine breed identification. Late twentieth century attempts to re-establish the ‘purity’ of the breed prompt her to consider the concept of ‘race’, whether human or equine, and the extent to which it is invented and capable of modification.

The problem with animal-centred research is that we humans lack evidence of the real experiences and feelings of creatures with no direct means of communicating with us. Thus, while the contributors of this book carefully consider the environmental, social, cultural, economic and political impact of horses on the societies in which they operated, the weight of material here is anthropocentric: man taking the initiative. The editors