

Animal Studies and Exploration History: Amundsen's Sledge Dogs Who Helped Discover the South Pole

NICHOLAS MILLER

History Department, *University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA*

"It is my belief that a significant understanding of the strategy used to discover the South Pole can be obtained through reconstructing the role that the animals performed in this historic feat. By naming, identifying, and relaying the individual accomplishments of the sled dogs, recognition of these beings is rightfully given, and the story is told in its true totality."

Mary R. Tahan

Roald Amundsen's Sled Dogs: The Sledge Dogs Who Helped Discover the South Pole. Mary R. Tahan. Berlin: Springer, 2019. 662 pp. \$44.99 (Berlin: SpringerLink). ISBN 978-3-030-02692-9.

The Return of the South Pole Sled Dogs: With Amundsen's and Mawson's Antarctic Expeditions. Mary R. Tahan. Berlin: Springer, 2021. 492 pp. \$29.99 (Berlin: SpringerLink). ISBN 978-3-030-65113-8.

From the fictitious Captain Ahab's incessant chase of Moby Dick to fur trappers of the North American Rockies and even the wild safaris of Africa, animals have inspired and accelerated human exploration and discovery of the unknown. Like most stories, these narratives are usually far more engaged with human actors, events, and histories. For instance, Elizabeth Leane argues, "While animals frequently feature as companions in narratives of human travel, they often remain in the background, mentioned every so often but rarely well delineated."¹ Sandra Swart suggests, "Perhaps it is the very centrality of animals to human lives that has previously rendered them invisible – at least invisible to scholars' intent on mainstream history or the (aptly labeled) humanities more generally."² One way to approach writing this history that takes nonhuman animals seriously could be straightforward: just capturing the lived experience of particular creatures in the past. For instance, static glimpses of the daily lives of creatures in the past could be combined and run chronologically to create a picture of how quotidian life of a dog or cat changes over time, much as early works on social history on women and the working class did.³

¹ Elizabeth Leane, "Animals," in *The Routledge Research Companion to Travel Writing*, eds. Alasdair Pettinger and Tim Youngs (Routledge, 2020), p. 313. She suggests that a threefold categorization – animals as quest-objects, instruments of travel, and companion – offers one way to organize the field of animals in travel literature.

² Sandra Swart, "'But Where's the Bloody Horse?' Humans, Horses and Historiography," in *Riding High: Horses, Humans and History in South Africa*, pp. 1–17. (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010), p. 1.

³ William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), p. xii.

This stresses the argument that their lives can be discovered and that these lifestyles changed over time.

This brings historians back to the question of agency, which occupies most discussions of oppressed groups by historians at present. “Agency,” in this case, finds a way to account for historical experience, which recognizes simultaneously that history and society are made by individual action and that individual action, however, purposeful, is made by history and society. Nevertheless, while studying cultures that involve nonhuman animals—the cultures of hunter-gatherers, for instance—little notice is taken of the nonhuman animal side, although nonhuman animals may strongly influence people’s lives.⁴ Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert state, “If we concentrate solely on how animals are represented, the impression is that animals are merely passive surfaces on to which human groups inscribe imaginings and orderings of all kinds.”⁵ Without at least a system of mutual understanding, it would be difficult for us, to reword Nagel, to envision what it is like to be a bat.⁶ Jane Goodall explores this mutual understanding through empathy, and, as research is proving, nonhuman animals are capable of reflection, bliss, worry, pain, and more. In her studies of the great apes, she states, “we should not delude ourselves into believing that, so long as there is human suffering, it is morally acceptable to turn a blind eye to nonhuman suffering. Who are we to say that the suffering of a human being is more terrible than the suffering of a nonhuman being, or that it matters more?”⁷ For instance, *In the Shadow of Man*, Goodall explains that in stressful situations, chimpanzees and humans are soothed and comforted by physical contact with another individual,⁸ and that “social grooming is the most peaceful, most relaxing, most friendly form of contact.”⁹ In her works, she ascribes these animals with human-like behaviors and characteristics and explains how each chimpanzee has a unique personality and each has his or her own individual life history. Goodall argues that, “we find that individual chimpanzees can make a difference to the course of chimpanzee history, as is the case with human... [and] the ties between family members are close, affectionate and supportive, and typically endure throughout life.”¹⁰

Despite these insights, typically nonhuman animals are still linked to food, clothing, labor, entertainment, and companionship. On occasion, they are appreciated as unique and fascinating beings. In addition, animal behavior is often interpreted through a lens that emphasizes ‘the struggle for existence’; however, when this “struggle” is contrasted with human activities, ideas of territoriality, hierarchy and cooperation combine into institutions of empire and exploration. For instance, Abel Alves, in his book *The Animals of Spain*, argues that the early modern Spanish

⁴ Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, forward to *Among the Bone Eaters: Encounters with Hyenas in Harar* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), p. ix.

⁵ Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert, *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places*, (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2000), 5.

⁶ Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?,” in *The Philosophical Review* vol. 83, no. 4 (Oct., 1974), p. 438.

⁷ Jane Goodall, “Chimpanzees – Bridging the Gap,” in *The Great Ape Project*, ed. Paola Cavalieri & Peter Singer (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1993), p. 3.

⁸ Jane Goodall, *In the Shadow of Man* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), p. 237.

⁹ Goodall, *Shadow of Man*, p. 240.

¹⁰ Goodall, “Bridging the Gap,” p. 2.

empire was shaped by its animal actors, and these nonhuman animals were valued companions, as well as economic resources. He uses empirical observation and metaphor to explore the idea that humans and animals may be "difference... of degree rather than kind."¹¹ Similarly, Virginia DeJohn Anderson's *Creatures of Empire* also looks at conquest, occupation, and exploration and argues that livestock played a vitally important role in the settling of the New World – a central factor in the cultural clash between colonists and Native Americans as well as a driving force in the expansion west. As Susan Crane voices in *Animal Encounters*, "The animal's trace, even when faint, is revelatory."¹²

When Alfred W. Crosby wrote *The Columbia Exchange* in 1972, he told the story of Columbus's landing in 1492 through the ecological ramifications it had on the New World. Even in Antonello Gerbi's classic *Nature in the New World* and in translations of Columbus's diaries, we find that Columbus constantly compared western hemisphere animals to those in the eastern hemisphere. And while the study of other-than-human animals in world history is a relatively recent phenomenon, there have been a few pioneering efforts since the discipline-defining work of Alfred W. Crosby, William Cronon, and Harriet Ritvo.¹³ Today, guided by the impact of individuals like Erica Fudge and Virginia deJohn Anderson, animal studies and the field of history are expanding in their eagerness to study the agency of nonhuman animals and the relationships that were formed between them and humans. Mark Derr's, *A Dog's History of America*, discusses Spanish *conquistadores* who named and value their horses and dogs—in conquest and exploration. (It is hard to sometimes separate the two.¹⁴) Balboa was a bit of an explorer, and he loved his dog Leoncico (also Leoncillo). Hernando de Soto was accompanied by a Bruto.¹⁵ British explorers in Africa, who preceded occupiers, had some things to say about animals they explored with as well. The aforementioned studies notwithstanding, animals as significant members of historical exploration is still an underdeveloped field with limited scholarship. Documenting the lives of animals for their own sakes has heretofore not been a high priority of archivists or historians.

Mary R. Tahan's books on polar expedition, however, are a welcomed addition to historical exploration scholarship and the animal studies field. In an attempt to dig into the historical ethos of this unique relationship, Tahan's books focus on the interactions and intersectionality between people and nonhuman animals and how this connection spurred humankind forward in its survey of the South Pole. In a unique approach, Tahan's research and materials center on the animals and stresses the underlining responsibly placed on these incredible creatures, sledge dogs. Although other scholars have discussed animals in relation to humans and how humans have used them

¹¹ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 2nd ed. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1889), p. 126.

¹² Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), p. 171.

¹³ Alfred W. Crosby, "The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492" (West Port: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1972); William Cronon, "Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England" (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Harriet Ritvo, "The Animal Estate: The Estate and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age" (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

¹⁴ Whether in exploration or conquest, a "flag" is still placed claiming territory.

¹⁵ Mark Derr, *A Dog's History of America* (New York: North Point Press, 2004), pp. 32, 39.

(there is that in these books as well), Tahan emphasizes these animals as necessary actors in exploring the polar ice caps. These beasts of burden were not “extras” or a byproduct of expansion or conquests. Rather, they were central and vital to the whole endeavor, and the author heavily suggests that it would not have been possible for humanity to reach the South Pole without them. Humans relied on these animals, not the other way around. As a journalist and documentarian by training, the author possesses specialized acumen concerning the subject matter and utilizes firsthand experience and knowledge to explain the influence and importance that these dogs had on this era of human history.¹⁶

Her first book, *Roald Amundsen’s Sled Dogs* is a historical account of each of the 116 dogs who became a part of Amundsen’s famous Norwegian Antarctic Expedition of 1910-12; her second book, *The Return of the South Pole Sled Dogs*, explains what happened to the remaining 39 dogs who returned home from the South Pole, including Amundsen’s lack of concern for the animals after they reached the Pole. Throughout these volumes, Tahan investigates the human explorer’s insight into their animal assistants and what impact these animals left on these humans. According to Martha Few and Zeb Tortorici’s Introduction in *Centering Animals in Latin American History*, the study of animals in history inspires a question: “does the centering of animals—the transforming of nonhuman animals into *central* actors in the historical narrative—provides us with significantly different versions of the past than those historical works that solely present animals as visible and important factors in history?”¹⁷ Tahan tackles this question head on in her examination on “the sledge dogs who helped discovered the South Pole.”

As Mary Tahan can attest to in her research, other-than-human creatures are sentient beings who each have their own unique personalities and traits. Throughout these books, she discusses Amundsen’s attitude’s toward the dogs and his anthropomorphizing of these “four-legged passengers” and describes them as, “gentle,” “kind,” even labeling a pair as “best friends.”¹⁸ In her first book in the series, *Roald Amundsen’s Sled Dogs: The Sledge Dogs Who Helped Discover the South Pole*, Tahan identifies each of the 116 “Eskimohunde... from Greenland” – all of which were crucial and necessary for Amundsen’s expedition to the South Pole – involved with the Norwegian Antarctic Expedition of 1910–1912.¹⁹ First, though, Tahan discusses the (ineffective) use of ponies and stresses the ongoing arguments of the time in considering the utilization of dogs for polar expedition. Dogs were not the preferred mode of arctic exploration in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In 1899, members of the Royal Geological Society, Sir Clements R. Markham (as well as Robert Falcon Scott and Ernest Shackleton) and Fridtjof Nansen—Amundsen’s mentor—were in a heated debate considering “the practice of using dogs... ‘a very cruel system’ citing unnecessary

¹⁶ <http://www.maryrtahan.com/about.php>. As part of her research, Tahan was invited by the Direccion Nacional del Antartico (Instituto Antartico Argentino) to travel to Antarctica, where she performed on-site photography and videography of the Antarctic landscape and historical sites.

¹⁷ Martha Few and Zeb Tortorici, eds., *Centering Animals in Latin American History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 3.

¹⁸ Tahan, *Roald Amundsen’s Sled Dogs*, p. 54, 80-81.

¹⁹ Tahan, *Roald Amundsen’s Sled Dogs*, p. 21.

‘cruelty’ to the animals as they are worked to death, starved, or killed for dog food.”²⁰ Nansen strongly advocated for the pragmatic use of dogs and argued: “overtaxing the dog is better than the ‘cruelty’ of overtaxing a human being; ‘it is terrible, gruesome to kill the dogs,’ he stated, and then added, ‘But at home, we also kill animals.’”²¹ Despite these ethical considerations, Tahan states Amundsen insisted on using dogs for his expedition. Throughout her books, she explores “a *tough love* (treatment)... a strategic utilization of them to further his career” and emphasizes that although he grew certain attachments for the animals, these “‘wild’ beings whom Amundsen saw as living, breathing ‘tools’ ... a means to his end.”²²

Discussing Amundsen’s exploits in his Northwest Passage expedition, Tahan explains how he would employ dog-sledging strategies learned from his time spent with the indigenous people of the Canadian Arctic and applies them for his own usage. Tahan describes these tactics, his emphasis on eating meat, and the adoption of feeding his dogs and his crew the less fortunate canines, a practice essential to their survival and their ability to discover the South Pole.²³ By using animals for food, for labor, and for clothing (i.e., Inuit style animal furs), Tahan evinces how Amundsen’s expedition was able to complete its proposed goal of reaching the South Pole. Through interviews, crewmember diaries, archival footage, reports, written correspondence, and newspapers, Tahan explores the strategies and personal insights of Amundsen and his crew in running canines to achieve their lofty goal. In her description of the members and their wards, each dog had its own personality and likes and dislikes; it was up to the individual team leaders to get the best out of each dog. By adding this aspect of the canines, she gives recognition to the significant role that animals played in this important part of history as well as the indispensable human-animal relationship needed for the Antarctic exploration. For instance, the historic moment, claiming of the South Pole for the King of Norway, was even celebrated, albeit briefly, by the eating of one of the dogs.²⁴ In addition, while several of the sled dogs were killed for their meat during the trek home (and taken from the depots), Amundsen states, “The going was splendid and all were in good spirits... one would almost have thought the dogs knew they were homeward bound.”²⁵ Remarkably, there were no human casualties, a fact that only increased the admiration and laudatory sentiments from the leaders of the time.

Although her main argument is centered around these dogs from Greenland, Tahan also discusses other animals vital to the cause. For instance, what were the dogs to eat during the journey to the South Pole and once on the barren continent? Amundsen required “ten tons of *lodde*

²⁰ Tahan, *Roald Amundsen’s Sled Dogs*, p. 3. Tahan alludes to this on p. 481 in reference to Shackleton’s famous *live donkey vs. dead lion* statement, as well as, on p. 115 in reference to Robert Falcon Scott and his ponies. Amundsen even uses horses as food in one instance (p. 114).

²¹ Tahan, *Roald Amundsen’s Sled Dogs*, p. 3.

²² Tahan, *Roald Amundsen’s Sled Dogs*, p. 45, 80.

²³ Antonello Gerbi discusses natives, colonists, and explorers of the Americas eating dog in his *Nature in the New World: From Christopher Columbus to Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo*, trans. Jeremy Moyle (Pittsburgh: UP of Pittsburgh, 1985), pp. 29, 33, 69, 278, 295, 416.

²⁴ “Thus, we plant thee, beloved flag, at the South Pole, and give to the plain on which it lies the name of King Haakon VII’s Plateau.” Amundsen, Roald, *The South Pole: Complete and Unabridged with Illustrations, Charts, Maps and Appendices*, trans. Arthur G. Chater (Pantianos Classics, 1912), p. 154.

²⁵ Amundsen, *The South Pole*, p. 158.

[a small fish]” for the dog’s food and in one instance, “one horse had been rowed out to the ship, expressly for the dogs, at 4:30 pm, shot while in the rowboat, skinned, chopped, and fed to the dogs at 6:00 pm.”²⁶ Once in, the Antarctic seal becomes an option as well. The author even states that in the beginning of their journey, there were multiple pigs, carrier pigeons, and even a canary on board. Interestingly enough, the author also explores the intersect between the sled dogs and Amundsen’s relationship with his own personal dogs, *Rex* the St. Bernard and two Jack Russell Terriers.

Tahan’s second to last chapter (40) explores the surviving dogs and where their next journeys would take them, a possible build up to her sequel, *The Return of the South Pole Sled Dogs: With Amundsen’s and Mawson’s Antarctic Expeditions*. This complementary book documents the return of the 39 surviving sled dogs of the Norwegian Antarctic Expedition of 1910–1912 from Antarctica, and narrates how the sled dogs were used in Argentina, Norway, Antarctica, and Australia to promote Amundsen’s triumphant expedition to the South Pole while also following some of the dogs as they undertook subsequent expeditions. Like its predecessor, the book is divided into an *Introduction* that is followed by six distinct parts, with each chapter including an abstract.²⁷ The book describes how Amundsen continued to utilize the polar dogs to further push his agenda and to solidify his expedition’s considerable moment in the annals of history.

While *The Return of the South Pole Sled Dogs* portrays some dreary endings (i.e., death or sold) for the dogs, the book also stresses that some of the dogs were employed to assist Douglas Mawson’s Australasian Antarctic Expedition of 1911–1914 with his scientific discoveries. And others were used for Arve Staxrud’s Norwegian Arctic Rescue Mission of 1913, which ended up saving members of the Herbert Schröder-Stranz German Arctic Expedition.²⁸ A few of the dogs even found homes in Norway, like Obersten (“The Colonel”) who was one of Oscar Wisting’s sledge team members who discovered the South Pole and, ultimately, who would go on to live with his fellow South Pole expedition member until his passing in 1920. Regardless, the book emphasizes the lack of compassion once the journey for the Pole was done. Historian Virginia Anderson states, “classifying animals not just in terms of their utility but also their market value added a new dimension to the relationship of dominion. Putting a price on animals symbolized the conversion of creatures into commodities.”²⁹ Tahan investigates this idea thoroughly in her discussion of the 18 dogs and 4 puppies who arrived in Buenos Aires Zoological gardens to act as a marketing brand to help promote Amundsen’s career and the utilization of the dogs for commercial public consumption. For example, she discusses New York-based agent Lee Keedick and his attempts to promote a lecture tour and even brings up the selling of dog skins from the expeditions. Moreover, she brings up Amundsen’s lack of empathy for the sled dogs after all they

²⁶ Tahan, *Roald Amundsen’s Sled Dogs*, 2 & 114 respectively. More information about feeding can be found on p. 99.

²⁷ Tahan, *The Return of the South Pole Sled Dogs*, p. 1.

²⁸ Tahan, *The Return of the South Pole Sled Dogs*, p. 451.

²⁹ Virginia Anderson, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 68.

have done for him and shows how Amundsen's manager, his brother Leon, would rather focus on his personal dog Rex. She argues that,

Amundsen's sledge dogs were, at times as this, looked upon as a collection of artifacts from the expedition. They were sometimes considered as not living beings, but as museum collections—dead or alive—and, once dead, could be represented merely by their dog skins. In contrast, Amundsen's dog Rex at home is a living, breathing companion and protector, described by Leon perhaps to 'humanize' his brother Amundsen to Keedick and to the public.³⁰

According to posthumanist Kari Weil, "for centuries nonhuman animals have been locked in representations authored by humans, representations that, moreover, have justified their use and abuse by humans."³¹ What with this being the case, how does the historian include nonhuman animals as another social actor (alongside social classes, women, the state, the church, etc.) in the histories they write? Mary Tahan tried to explore these ideas throughout her books and show that although Roald Amundsen may have gotten the credit for his discovery of the South Pole, it would not have been possible without his team of dogs. And yet, out of the 116 dogs headed for the South Pole, only 39 survived, and within 2 years upon their return, a meager 11 remained. She states, "After the 116 sled dogs had reached Antarctica, and once the heroic South Pole goal has been accomplished, the dogs seemed less important to Amundsen—they were given away as a valuable symbol of success or gratitude, or placed on public exhibition."³² Regardless, she affirms us of the sacrifices of these animals and their contribution to human exploration and discovery of the unknown.

Marcy Norton proposes that, "History and anthropology might have more to teach us than do the biological sciences about what conditions and frameworks offer the possibility for intersubjective experiences between and among species."³³ In this instance, I think both of Tahan's books strongly support Norton's proposal and encourage more engagement with historical and anthropological materials when discussing nonhuman animals' experiences with peoples' lives. And while I felt the books were lacking in objectivity at some parts, I found the work to be enjoyable and invigorating. She provided a plethora of pictures and details in her study of Amundsen's polar expedition while also revealing Amundsen's concern and, in several instances, his lack of concern for the dogs. As Tahan acknowledges in the *Preface*, these books were intended to feature "the story of the discovery of the South Pole and the pivotal role that the sled dogs played in it."³⁴ Animals in exploration is a promising field, and what is needed now is further development

³⁰ Tahan, *The Return of the South Pole Sled Dogs*, p. 203.

³¹ Kari Weil, "A Report on the Animal Turn," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2010), p. 2.

³² Tahan, *The Return of the South Pole Sled Dogs*, p. 450.

³³ Marcy Norton, "The Chicken or the *Iegue*: Human-Animal Relationships and the Columbian Exchange," *The American Historical Review* 120, no. 1 (February 2015), p. 57.

³⁴ Tahan, *The Return of the South Pole Sled Dogs*, p. vii.

of these ideas and a better appreciation for nonhuman subjects' roles in history. With an expectation that future historians will continue to study other-than-human subjects that have helped shape our history, this field needs to address the nonhuman animal actors in historical narratives, as well as, develop approaches of studies that integrate these subjects as more than just extensions of humans. However, no matter who is directing them, historical narratives combine information from a number of sources, classes, and agents. In recent years, with the postmodern and ontological turn, academics have increasingly argued that the inclusion of other voices such as women, native peoples, immigrants, and individuals of varied social class enhances historical accounts. Tahan's books seek to take this one step further and argue that the inclusions of nonhuman animals as agents will most certainly enrich historical data. The author certainly hits this mark, and these should be recommended books for anyone with an interest in nonhuman animals, exploration, or history.

Notes on contributor:

Nicholas Miller is a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee working with both the History and Anthropology departments. His research combines ethnohistory, animal representation/agency, and folklore studies. He argues that animals are not so different from us, and this should imply that traits such as learning, adaptation, and empathy are enough to establish a foundation in which a historical perspective can form. His email is nrmill12@gmail.com.