A New Zealand Book of Beasts: Animals in Our Culture, History and Everyday Life, by Annie Potts, Philip Armstrong and Deidre Brown. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2013. 288pp.

Reviewed by Sally Borrell

Perhaps he was going a bit soft, but he felt sorry for the things. It wasn't their fault they were so destructive. It wasn't as if they'd asked to be pests. It was just the luck of the dice that they'd been born possums and he'd been born a farmer.

Laurence Fearnley, *Butler's Ringlet*

Michael King, in his *Penguin History of New Zealand*, comments that an early geographer's description of New Zealand as 'a land without people wait[ing] for a people without land' is, '[if] taken literally … ridiculous… Indeed, if a land without people *could* make a choice, it would most likely opt for *continuing* absence' (23). Today, filling out their arrivals cards, visitors and returning residents to New Zealand might be tempted to include themselves as items to declare. The forms list items ranging from food and animal products to soil, including recent contact with forests or farms. The island location means that it is theoretically possible to defend the endemic and introduced flora and fauna, both so central to New Zealand's sense of identity, from some external threats – hence the strict biosecurity measures. What is missing from the declaration form is of course the self-evident animal arrival that King refers to: humans.

While there is close scrutiny of nonhuman life at the national border, exchanges across human-nonhuman animal borders in Aotearoa New Zealand have received comparatively little cultural analysis. One of many recent outcomes of the authors' shared project 'Kararehe', *A New Zealand Book of Beasts* is the first thorough exploration of the ways in which human-animal relations shape, and are shaped by, culture and intercultural relations in New Zealand. Using different but accessible writing styles, and offering a user-friendly explanation of animal

studies, the authors contribute both to animal studies scholarship and to popular appreciation of this complex and central feature of 'kiwi' life. The discussion spans discourses from pastoralism and sentimentalism to environmentalism and decolonisation. Rather than making cross-cultural comparisons, however, the authors concentrate on the unique local applications of such ideas. Similarly, the language of writing is unapologetically New Zealand English, which is to say (somewhat paradoxically) that Māori terms are common and glosses infrequent. However, the meanings of these terms (if not all nuances) will usually be apparent, so that the effect is to insist upon the unique cultural makeup of Aotearoa without impeding an international reader. For a New Zealand reader, meanwhile, the book offers fascinating insights into what had seemed familiar.

The text is divided into four thematic parts, each written primarily by one author, accompanied by black and white and colour plates including sketches, paintings, postcards, photography, carving, textiles, taxidermy and an album cover. In Part 1, 'Animal Icons', Philip Armstrong examines the figures of moa, sheep, whales and dolphins within New Zealand culture, particularly literature. Building from the relatively common ground of regret over extinction, this first section serves to open up the taken-for-granted assumptions about attitudes to animals that are interrogated throughout the book. Chapter one demonstrates that although kiwi have become New Zealand's dominant animal symbol, moa remain an emblem of extinction, and one that is pivotal in interpretations of Māori history. Chapter two explores how settler farmers-turned-writers Samuel Butler and H. Guthrie Smith countered stereotypes of sheep as passive, instead exploring what would now be termed theories of nonhuman agency. Chapters three and four consider attitudes to dolphins and whales respectively. Armstrong invokes a discourse of sentimentalism to address the role of emotion in human-animal histories, taking the example of the wild dolphin Opo who spent a summer playing with humans at a beach at Opononi in the mid-1950s. He then discusses a range of Māori and Pākehā whale tales, the best known being Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*, which reflect a relatively sudden cultural shift from exploitation to respect.

In Part 2, 'Companion Animals', Annie Potts also addresses utility and respect for animals and shows how these functioned in tandem in traditional Māori-companion animal relations. Both birds and kurī (dogs probably brought from Polynesia) were kept for

companionship and for their skills in mimicry or hunting. The same individual animals might then be killed for a variety of reasons, including for consumption. The next chapter addresses introduced European animals: pigs, horses and chickens. Although they were often considered to breach Māori tapu (sacredness) in ways that native animals were not (for instance when they entered tapu sites), introduced species were readily incorporated by Māori into the use/companionship dynamic. This contrasted with the (urban) European distinction between pet and non-pet, so that in one interesting record, a European found himself unable to eat his host's pig (124). The third chapter of this section examines the contemporary persistence of this distinction. Potts contrasts Yi-Fu Tuan's theory of 'dominance and affection' with the notion of 'companion animals'. She notes the striking reluctance of earthquake evacuees and victims of violence to leave their animals, but reminds the reader that humans still sterilise and train these companions who remain legally 'chattels'. This section of course leads a reader living with nonhuman animals (and Potts notes that two thirds of New Zealand households contain at least one) to reflect upon their own relationships and upon Potts' call for an 'intersubjective' approach: 'This perspective ensures we remember that animals, like us, have "subjective selves"; they are not merely objects for manipulation and use' (156).

In Part 3, which again overlaps historically with the preceding ones, Deidre Brown sharpens the focus of the discussion to visual representations. She explains that customary Māori art relied on oral traditions to 'activate' it, and that figures like hybrid manaia creatures resist interpretation. However, birds and fish were often depicted or worn for talismanic purposes or to enhance the user's mana (a concept encompassing both status and spiritual power). European species, styles and techniques were adapted into Māori art, reflecting the incorporation of introduced animals into the lived relationships discussed in Part 2. The next chapter turns to contemporary artists of various backgrounds working to 'return identity' to collected animals, or to explore Pasifika connections, farming and 'the animal as animal'. Though Brown laments the lack, until recently, of critical attention to a subject long associated with allegory and childhood (as it has been in literature), she demonstrates that this is changing and concludes that perhaps 'the animal' can no longer be restricted to symbolic roles.

Brushtail Possum. Photo Annie Potts.

In Part 4, the most challenging to mainstream New Zealand culture, Potts addresses 'pest' animals and vegetarianism. Chapter 10 highlights the vilification of possums via a 'cute, but' campaign that combats their visual appeal by casting them as invaders. Potts concludes that possums 'are as much the victims of colonisation and exploitation as the native species', and that 'if the spotlight were taken off the possum as the enemy of native New Zealand, it might refocus somewhere less comfortable and convenient' (224). The extent of the rhetoric described in fact makes rabbits seem the most likely alternative; however, chapter 11 demonstrates that a growing body of vegetarian perspectives is resisting the dominant discourse. Despite its marginalisation, Potts shows that this group offers an increasing and increasingly visible, 'embodied' resistance to New Zealand's historical identity as constructed in relation to animals.

In the absence of a conclusion, the reader comes away with a sense of the changing nature of human-animal relations in Aotearoa New Zealand, always diverse, charged and evolving. With each chapter, it becomes clear that the topic could form an entire volume on its own. Indeed, perhaps unsurprisingly given the diversity of the material, some chapters read as almost stand-alone pieces. Naturally, the authors have also had to be selective. One problem which it would have been interesting to see addressed is the plight of the most currently

endangered animals, such as the Māui's dolphin, a species endemic to New Zealand and numbering approximately 55 members after ongoing failure on the part of the government to take adequate conservation measures. Another is the recent explosion of the dairy industry, sometimes called the 'white gold rush' (briefly touched on in Chapter 11), which has led to intensive irrigation of terrain otherwise too dry for cattle, and which is having devastating effects on waterways. However, one book cannot hope to address every aspect of what is more a field than a subject, and this one does not pretend to. Instead, the authors open up the complexity of human-animal relations in this former 'land without people' as a rich area for ongoing analysis of how, inevitably and indelibly, human and nonhuman animals write each other's histories.

Reference list

Fearnley, Laurence. *Butler's Ringlet*. Auckland: Penguin, 2004 .

King, Michael. *The Penguin History of New Zealand.* Auckland: Penguin, 2003.