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Will Abberley

“The Love of the Chase Is an Inherent Delight in Man”: Hunting and Masculine Emotions in the Victorian Zoologist’s Travel Memoir¹

The Victorian zoologist was sometimes imagined as deeply entangled with nature, sharing basic, primordial feelings with the animals he studied, notably the excitement of hunting. Yet he was also figured as detached from nature, elevated above immediate instincts and sensations to a higher, intellectual plain. These opposing figurations were thrown into sharp relief when expeditionary zoologists narrated their experiences in travel memoirs. Their interspecies encounters were often highly emotional experiences, which seemed (for them, at least) to narrow the boundaries between humans and animals. However, zoologists also frequently tried to downplay or dismiss such affective experiences in order to bolster their credibility as objective observers. I argue that this conflict arose from different configurations of masculinity that framed men as alternately inside and outside of nature.

Zoology was a popular pastime in mid-nineteenth-century Britain that attracted enthusiasts of many social classes and both genders. Nonetheless, authority over zoology as a body of knowledge was generally vested in a small group of educated, middle- to upper-class “men of science” affiliated with institutions such as the Linnean Society of London.² These men were usually able to devote themselves to zoology through inherited wealth, or particular work such as museum curating or capturing specimens for private collectors. Among such men was a still smaller class of expeditionary researchers who visited remote, faraway lands and brought back new knowledge of animal life. Their work was heavily gendered in the Victorian imagination, associated with the masculine traits of courage, determination, and self-possession, as well as physical strength and endurance. The novelist Charles Kingsley wrote that the roving zoologist must be like “the perfect knight-errant of the Middle Ages”: “strong in body,” “brave and enterprising, and withal patient and undaunted” (1855, 39–40).

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2 This term was distinct from “scientists,” which did not enter into frequent use until the late nineteenth century (White 2002).



Figure 1:
An engraving of a
“disappointed and sulky”
chimpanzee by T. W.
Wood. In Charles Darwin,
*The Expression of the
Emotions in Man and
Animals* (London: John
Murray, 1872), 141.

The tensions within this discourse of zoological masculinity remain largely unexplored, though, particularly regarding emotions. Previous research has shown how, in Western culture, women have frequently been linked with nature and animals through their supposed emotionality (Plumwood 1993, 19–21; Lutz 2002, 104–5). The converse image of such primal, emotional femininity was the association of masculinity with

detached, self-controlled rationality (Forth 2008, 30–1). Yet this model was opposed in the Victorian period by what Bradley Deane (2008) calls “primitive masculinity,” which located manliness primarily in bodily strength and instincts. Such masculinity (hinted at in Kingsley’s muscular zoologist) dovetailed with imperialist ideology by framing white men as vigorous conquerors, even as it undermined their supposed intellectual superiority over their “barbarian” antagonists. I argue that while the rationalist model characterized masculinity by restraint of emotions, the primitive one viewed certain emotions (such as the excitement of the hunt) as the essence of masculinity. As a literary scholar, I will illustrate this tension through textual close readings of travel memoirs by two of the most famous expeditionary zoologists of the period: Charles Darwin’s *Journal of Researches* (1845) and Alfred Russel Wallace’s *The Malay Archipelago* (1869).

Since philosophers first defined them in the early nineteenth century, emotions had been imagined as linking humans with animals. Unlike earlier, more ambiguous categories of feeling, “emotions” were strictly separate from human intellect (see Dixon 2003). For zoologists, emotions such as hunting fever might be seen as a resource for understanding the commonalities between humans and other animals. Reflecting on his experiences of hunting in South America, Darwin commented that “the love of the chase is an inherent delight in man—a relic of an instinctive passion” (1845, 505).

Darwin would draw on his experiences with animals to argue that humans shared basic emotions with them in his 1872 book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. Yet masculine science was also imagined as rationally unemotional. In the words of the physicist John Tyndall (after whom the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research is now named), the man of science was characterized by “self-renunciation” and “loyal surrender of himself to Nature and to the facts” (1854, 308).³

This conflict can be seen in Darwin’s memoir, which vacillates between celebrating the ecstasy of hunting, and stressing the zoologist’s detachment from such emotions. Commenting on his experience of men’s instinctive “love of the chase,” Darwin reflects that such feelings constitute “the savage returning to his wild and native habits. I always look back to our boat cruises, and my land journeys, when through unfrequented countries, with a kind of extreme delight, which no scenes of civilization could have created” (1845, 505). However, Darwin hesitates to dwell too long on this ecstasy, listing reasons “of a more reasonable nature” (506) for zoologists to travel the world, such as broadening their knowledge. Similarly, Darwin’s hunting anecdotes often emphasize his self-restraint as he stops short of killing creatures and tests their behaviors instead. Noting the lack of fear and defensive ingenuity among gannets and terns on an Atlantic islet, he writes, “Both are of a tame and stupid disposition, and are so unaccustomed to visitors, that I could have killed any number of them with my geological hammer” (10). Darwin’s use of the subjunctive (“I could have”) highlights his suppression of his violent impulses. While his imagined savage would have indulged his bloodlust, the man of science in him seeks to discover the unseen causes of the birds’ tameness, theorizing that geographic isolation has eroded their defensive instincts. Later, he repeatedly catches and then releases a lizard to test whether it can adapt its habits to evade threats. Darwin’s narrative contains many references to native South Americans’ hunting methods, some of which he adopts for obtaining specimens; but only he, the Western man of science, pursues animals to experiment upon them.

Darwin also distances himself from the primitive emotions involved in hunting by avoiding detailed descriptions of slaughter. He skirts over encounters with individual animals, instead generalizing species-typical behavior. For example, he only briefly

3 On the development of scientific ideals of objectivity, see Daston and Galison (2007).

mentions his hunting of Uruguayan deer to reinforce his argument that such creatures have been conditioned to fear humans on horseback but not on foot. Darwin writes, “If a person crawling close along the ground, slowly advances towards a herd, the deer frequently, out of curiosity, approach to reconnoitre him. I have by this means killed, from one spot, three out of the same herd” (48). He later abstracts to an even higher level when referring to his bird shootings in the Falklands and Galapagos islands. Darwin compares the relative timidity and brazenness of different species, and the differences between his experience hunting them and those of another traveler a century earlier. While his predecessor reported that many birds were easily killed, Darwin finds them more elusive, suggesting that they have “learnt caution” of humans. He concludes that instinctive fear develops gradually over generations, writing: “We may infer from these facts, what havoc the introduction of any new beast of prey must cause in a country, before the instincts of the indigenous inhabitants become adapted to the stranger’s craft or power” (401). Darwin’s choice of words highlights his performance of scientific detachment. His grand theory of species change eclipses the many, individual acts of killing upon which it was built.

A similar narrative strategy of downplaying the emotions involved in hunting is discernible in Wallace’s *Malay Archipelago*. Wallace’s dramatic anecdotes of hunting orang-utans always portray him as unflappably calm in pursuit of his prey. The zoologist’s self-possession is emphasized by the contrasting discomposure of others, such as his young assistant Charley. Recalling one day when Charley came to alert him of an orang-utan nearby, Wallace writes that the boy

rushed in out of breath with running and excitement, and exclaimed, interrupted by gasps, “Get the gun, sir,—be quick,—such a large Mias!”
 “Where is it?” I asked, taking hold of my gun as I spoke . . . Two Dyaks chanced to be in the house at the time, so I called them to accompany me, and started off, telling Charley to bring all the ammunition after me as soon as possible.
 (1869, 72)

Charley’s broken speech is opposed by Wallace’s pointed questioning, quick organization, and forethought. As he pursues the orang-utan through dense vegetation, Wallace’s calmness is again highlighted by the contrasting reaction of Chinese workers who “were shouting their astonishment with open mouth: ‘Ya Ya, Tuan; Orang-utan,

Tuan” (74). After shooting the creature, Wallace instructs his native Dyak servants to cut down the tree that holds the body; “but they were afraid, saying he was not dead, and would come and attack them” (75). Wallace further reinforces the natives’ closeness to animal nature (and hence their emotionality) with the book’s frontispiece illustration, which depicts another scene in which a Dyak wrestles with an attacking orang-utan (fig. 2). Thus, Wallace accentuates his detachment from nature by presenting others around him as contrastingly embedded in animal environments and unable to control their primitive feelings.

In these hunting scenes, Wallace indicates no feelings of sympathy for the orang-utans, and moves the narrative swiftly onto his preparation of their skins and skeletons for display. Such ruthlessness was to be expected in the narrative of a practical zoologist concerned with obtaining specimens. Nevertheless, Wallace’s emotional orientation towards the orang-utans changes dramatically when he kills a mother and decides to nurse its surviving infant. Feeding and playing with the creature over several months, Wallace comes to view the orang-utan in almost human terms. He observes that it sucked his finger before “giv[ing] up in disgust, and set up a scream very like that of a baby in similar circumstances” (66). Wallace’s language shows how his

emotional life becomes entwined with that of the infant as he narrates his efforts to quell its crying. Having made “an artificial mother” out of buffalo skin, which the infant could grip onto, Wallace comments, “I was now in hopes that I had made the little orphan quite happy.” Like an affectionate parent, he finds that, when spoon-feeding the creature, “it was a never-failing amusement to observe the curious changes of



Figure 2.
Titlepage illustration in
Alfred Russel Wallace,
The Malay Archipelago, 2 vols. (London:
Macmillan & Co., 1869),
II, v.



Figure 3.
Frontispiece illustration in Alfred Russel Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1869), I, iv.

countenance by which it would express its approval or dislike of what was given to it” (68). The anthropomorphism becomes increasingly pronounced as Wallace describes the infant’s tantrums not as similar to but “exactly like a baby in a passion” (69). When the young orang-utan sickens and dies, Wallace describes the event as a minor bereavement, writing, “I much regretted the loss of my little pet, which I had at one time looked forward to bringing up

to years of maturity, and taking home to England. For several months it had afforded me daily amusement by its curious ways and the inimitably ludicrous expression of its little countenance” (71, see fig. 3). Despite these statements, however, in the following paragraph, Wallace is again out shooting orang-utans with apparent composure. Living alongside the creature in the domestic interior of the hut enables Wallace to engage in the emotions of love and sympathy, which are wholly suppressed while hunting outside in the forest. This tonal dissonance suggests an uncertainty for Wallace about the role of emotions in his identity as a zoologist. Like the thrill of hunting for Darwin, Wallace’s affection for his pet suggests that emotion has a place in scientific masculinity, helping zoologists to explore possible overlaps between human and animal. Yet Wallace’s authority as an objective “man of science” also depends on his suppressing this emotion and, so, reasserting his distance from nature and the animals it contains.

Darwin and Wallace’s emotionally ambivalent anecdotes of encounters with wild animals magnify the contradictions in Victorian attitudes to masculinity and nature, and Victorian men’s attitudes towards nature. The zoologists vacillated between presenting themselves as highly emotional beings—swept up in predaceous excitement and anthropomorphic sympathy—and, conversely, cool, intellectual observers, detached from the wildlife they studied. This instability was echoed in a clash of literary modes as the authors veered in their writing between the objective facts and abstract theories of science and the subjective experiences of autobiography. Similarly, as wild environ-

ments were liminal spaces without clear demarcations, the zoologist's travel memoir was a liminal genre in which highly charged emotional narrative sat side by side with rarefied theoretical discussion, and opposing visions of the "man of science" collided.

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