

Historical Precedence

For the Prevention of Cruelty

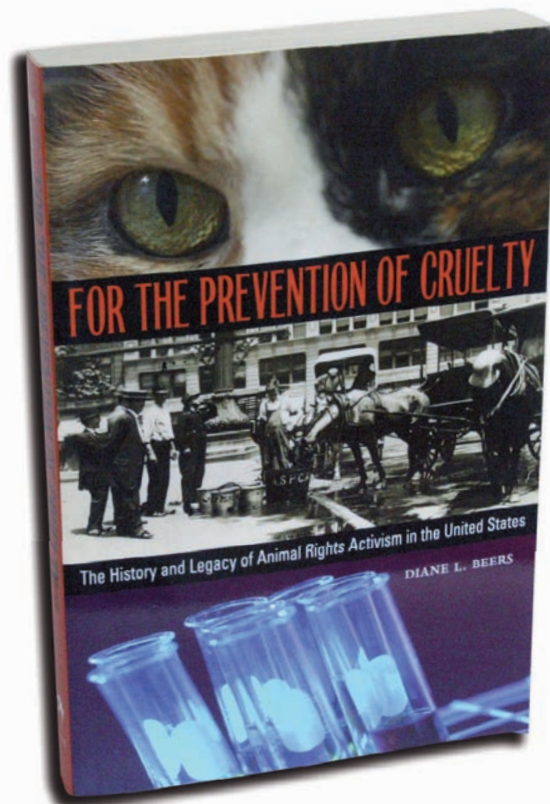
The History and Legacy of Animal Rights Activism in the United States

By Diane L. Beers

Swallow Press

2006 • 368 pages • \$19.95

Review by Mark Hawthorne



THERE HAS LIKELY NEVER BEEN A TIME when the words “animal-rights activism” have elicited a stronger reaction from both sides of the stockyard fence. But do we ever stop to consider how this movement began? Who were the first proponents? What were their early successes—and failures? Moreover, what can we learn from the past to gain victories for animals today?

For thoughtful insights into these issues and more, treat yourself to Diane Beers’ *For the Prevention of Cruelty: The History and Legacy of Animal Rights Activism in the United States*. Beers, a professor of history at Holyoke Community College in Massachusetts, has done what a writer within the animal-rights movement probably could not: given us a narrative that is at once a straightforward, authoritative account of the origins of animal-rights activism and a compelling critique of the movement’s triumphs and missteps from 1866 to 1975.

Animal activism, it turns out, is nearly as old as the word “vegetarian.” Both sprang from England in the middle of the 19th century—one as a way to better define a culinary choice,

and the other to defend those caught in the crosshairs of humanity’s hunger for scientific advancement, reliable transportation, momentary amusement and animal flesh. Exploring long-forgotten files in dusty broom closets in pursuit of history, Beers unearths a remarkable story. Some of her discoveries are no surprise, such that the founders of animal activism were mostly women. Yet others are downright revelatory. Who knew, for example, that activists convinced the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus to stop using animal acts for five years?

The author introduces us to many compassionate individuals who helped forge the early movement—people like Ella Wilcox Wheeler, Anna Harris Smith and Henry Bergh, whom Beers describes as “the dynamo of American animal advocacy.” But it is Caroline Earle White who leaps from the pages as the most inspiring and vocal activist of the 19th century. A passionate crusader, White helped create the Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1867 and later founded the Anti-Vivisection Society of America.

The ideological struggle between reform and abolition for animals was palpable as activists in the 20th century battled groups formed to promote animal exploitation, confronted the tragic confluence of shelters and medical labs, and organized against factory farming. Animal activism has now matured, from what detractors once regarded as “a fringe cause dominated by hysterical, primarily female sentimentalists” into a growing concern of millions of ethically minded Americans.

If *For the Prevention of Cruelty* were simply a history of animal-rights activism, it would be an indispensable work, both for its social commentary and as a chronicle of humane action. But the author takes the subject a step beyond, inviting readers to consider the impact of factions within the movement coming together with environmentalism to form a powerful, united coalition for animals and the planet. We have the work of early activists to thank for what we’re able to accomplish today, and we have Diane Beers to thank for a skillfully written account that brings to life their efforts on behalf of the voiceless. **VN**

Repeating History

It's been said that those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it. In these cases, it's a good thing.

Workhorses

Multiple strategies—including **boycotts, leafleting and legislation**—forced transport companies to introduce humane standards for horses hauling freight and passengers in the late 1800s. A major coup for activists, this victory altered consumer behavior, put cruelty in the public discourse and encouraged reform in other areas of animal exploitation.

Feathered Hats

An example of effective alliances, the **feathered-hat boycott** of the 19th century brought animal activists together with humanitarians, conservationists, environmentalists, bird watchers and women's groups to end an industry that annually killed millions of wild birds. Proposed by Caroline Earle White, the campaign not only halted the production of feathered hats, it resulted in numerous state and federal laws protecting birds.

Animal Acts

Inspired by two anti-circus-themed novels by Jack London, the Massachusetts SPCA joined with the American Humane Education Society to target “the Big Top.” They formed the Jack London Club, which asked members to **oppose trained-animal acts** by distributing anti-cruelty literature at circuses, sending letters to editors and circus managers and hissing or leaving during animal performances. In 1925, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus eventually conceded to public pressure and ceased using animals. Though the hiatus lasted only five years, it demonstrated the effectiveness of creative direct action.

Mark Hawthorne is the author of *Striking at the Roots: A Practical Guide to Animal Activism (O Books)*, which will be published next year.



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