

[Howard-Smith on Russell, 'Greyhound Nation: A Coevolutionary History of England, 1200-1900'](#)

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Edmund Russell. *Greyhound Nation: A Coevolutionary History of England, 1200-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 214 pp. \$94.99 (cloth), [ISBN 978-0-521-76209-0](#); \$24.99 (paper),

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As wolves were the first animals to be domesticated (and potentially coevolvers with humanity to begin with), dogs are all too frequently cut out of environmental history. Edmund Russell remedies this state of affairs in *Greyhound Nation*, which, as its subtitle states, offers the reader a coevolutionary history of England's greyhounds and people from the centuries following the Norman conquest to the start of the twentieth century. Coevolutionary history, previously outlined by Russell in his 2014 article in the *American Historical Review*, means studying "reciprocal impacts in human and non-human populations" (p. 192). This methodological approach breaches disciplinary divides and marries history with natural science and evolutionary biology. Evolution and history are, Russell argues, "two facets of the same coin" (p. ix).

The last few years have seen the publication of other monographs challenging our assumptions about animals and their roles and development within British history. Michael Worboys, Julie Marie-Strange, and Neil Pemberton investigate nineteenth-century dog breeding and attitudes to "breed" in *The Invention of the Modern Dog: Breed and Blood in Victorian Britain* (2018). In *City of Beasts: How Animals Shaped Georgian London* (2019), Thomas Almeroth-Williams explores how approaching urban history from the perspective of animals can challenge our assumptions. *Greyhound Nation* is likewise unapologetically experimental and provocative in its approach to reconciling evolution and history. The introduction offers a two-page primer on evolutionary terminology and concepts for the uninitiated reader (or perhaps a skeptical one). Such an explainer is certainly necessary, given that Russell consistently employs this framework throughout *Greyhound Nation*, discussing human-greyhound history/evolution in terms of *traits*, job-habitat *niches*, and *memes*. As a result, *Greyhound Nation* does not engage specifically with the questions of animal agency that preoccupy other histories of nonhuman animals but instead identifies the ways in which greyhounds created opportunities (e.g., for humans to create complex hunting rituals) and exacted prices (by requiring food and water for their labor). Any history of nonhuman animals is necessarily written through an anthropomorphic lens, and as Russell's chosen epigraph (a quotation from the Victorian dog writer Hugh Dalziel) states, "whoever would write the history of dogs must write the history of man." However, Russell keeps his eye on dogs as subjects with their own historical and biological realities rather than simply as convenient symbols for human concerns, even as greyhounds were implicitly linked to social status.

Greyhounds are the perfect subject for Russell's study, as they come with an extended recorded history in which they were treated both legally and generally as being distinct from other dogs, reflected in the codified sports based on their abilities with arcane mechanisms, and even a terminology all of their own. (Russell notes the implication that *Julius Caesar's* dogs of war are greyhounds as only they were "slipped" as opposed to "cast off.") Russell is also emphatic about the perils of treating breeds as static entities, something he perceives other historians as reticent to do. Instead, he emphasizes the degree to which interbreeding greyhounds with other varieties of dogs was not only accepted but actively celebrated until the nineteenth century. Popular histories of dog breeds have a vested interest in presenting Fluffy and Fido as members of entrenched groups, although most recent scholars of animal-human studies do not doubt that animals, like humans, have their own historical specificity. One way to counteract the impulse to pigeonhole living dog breeds, Russell suggests, is to approach histories of animals in human societies as a branch of labor history, focusing on the changing occupations of different populations of animals over time.

Accordingly, *Greyhound Nation's* co-subjects are "greyhounds" rather than "the greyhound." The book traces the various ways humans and greyhounds have affected each other, with a focus on breeding practices, care, and the evolution and popularization of greyhound sport, and perhaps just as importantly the dissemination of knowledge about all of these things. Russell's scope includes the first references to the "greihund" in medieval Latin treatises to the continued popularity of track racing (and of retired racing greyhounds as pets) in the twenty-first century. In doing so, he draws on a range of sources over the course of several centuries, from hunting manuals and stud books to poetry and the nineteenth-century *Kennel Gazette*. Few major historical shifts evade the orbit of greyhound-human coevolution.

Russell divides English human-greyhound coevolutionary history into two main periods: a "patrician" era in which greyhounds coevolved with the aristocracy and those who worked for them, and the "modern" period (named after the so-called modern greyhound) following the 1831 Game Act, which repealed medieval restrictions on the keeping of greyhounds and other hunting dogs and effectively democratized greyhound ownership. Between the two is a transitional era (1776-1831) which saw the foundation and success of elite coursing clubs. *Greyhound Nation's* six chapters follow this periodization. The two chapters covering the transitional period are split to explore the impact of the greyhound-human relationship in the (co)evolution of people and the greyhound respectively. The three chapters on the "modern" greyhound also consider greyhounds' role in the modernization of human society separately from the coevolution of coursing and show greyhounds. This final divide between the two main populations of greyhounds means Russell has to skirt around the question of whether Victorian show breeding influenced attitudes towards the "pure" breeding of working animals in the coursing chapter before discussing such a possibility in the next.

This final chapter, on the breeding of the show greyhound, is, understandably, the one least specific to these animals, and perhaps for that reason the incisive reframing of canine behavior and activity that characterizes the rest of Russell's book is seemingly less evenly applied here. Russell claims that Victorian dog shows "ignored behavior and prized appearance," arguing that all the behaviors displayed by hunting and coursing dogs was "replaced by one behavior—staying still" (p. 180). Yet success at shows was predicated on remaining calm while chained or caged, and a dog who demonstrated this trait was surely far more likely to be chosen for matings. However, this is atypical of a study which revels in granular detail: the 1,099,511,627,776 possible trait combinations of

medieval greyhounds; the popular understanding of the relative merits of smooth- versus rough-coated dogs; the levels of standard deviation in the sizes of show dogs and coursing dogs.

Greyhound Nation is obviously valuable for anyone interested in interactions between human and nonhuman animals within human societies. In his introduction, Russell observes that “any breed would make a good case study” for this sort of endeavor (p. 1). In the epilogue, he presents a guide to this sort of undertaking, suggesting questions it is necessary to ask of the animals we find before us. In finding answers to them, we might appreciate how evolutionary and historical forces are one and the same. Such questions should be posed not only by historians of the environment, of labor, or of human-animal relations, but also by those of us who spend time with these animals in our daily lives. In *When Species Meet* (2008), Donna Haraway writes that “knowing and living with dogs means inheriting all of the conditions of their possibility.”[1] In *Greyhound Nation*, Russell has given his readers a new tool kit for approaching and understanding the impact of dogs (and other domesticated animals) and humans in each other’s intertwined histories.

Note

[1]. Donna Jeanne Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 98.

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