

Born To Be Wild

By Audrey C. Foote

THE COVENANT OF THE WILD; Why Animals Chose Domestication. By Stephen Budiansky Morrow. 190 pp. \$18

FOR NINE-TENTHS of recorded history human beings have shown little sympathy for many of their own kind, and virtually none for animals. Ancient philosophers despised beasts for their lack of reason, churches denied them souls, and some later thinkers decided they were literally automatons, unable to feel anything. For centuries almost everyone believed animals were put on earth for man to use and treat as he wished.

Some still do assume that, but in the Age of Enlightenment ideas began to change about animals as well as people, affecting both laws and behavior. Recently there has been a virtual revolution in attitudes toward race, sex, and even species; rising concern about the environment reinforces this surge of humane sentiment towards all living creatures.

Of course, there is now a backlash against the new ethic. While pressure builds for animal rights, individuals are inconvenienced and jobs are jeopardized. Much of the resentment is economic, as furriers and farmers lose jobs or are pressed to costly reforms. Some is societal, among those who like mink coats, veal cutlets, and deer hunting. But the antagonism of some others is primarily theoretical; when as informed and thoughtful as Stephen Budiansky's, it also deserves attention.

This author's vocation as a journalist on scientific subjects enables him to write effectively for a non-specialist audience. But it is his avocation as a sheep farmer

that gives warmth, as well as some heat, to his argument, for he obviously cares for the lambs he raises for slaughter. The Covenant of the Wild is a kind of apologia, a defense of that mundane but still troubling paradox.

Another recent book, *In the Company of Animals*, by British zoologist James Serpell, asserts that livestock farmers increasingly evade rather than wrestle with the moral dilemma, using such distancing devices as detachment, concealment, misrepresentation, and shifting blame on consumers. But for Budiansky the answer to the problem lies in pre-history, in an implicit contract made between early man and the first domesticated animals. (Wild animals, which raise other ethical issues, are peripheral here, as in Serpell's book.)

Scientists now agree that between 1,200 to 5,000 years ago the ancestors of our dogs, then those of sheep, goats, cattle, pigs, fowl, cats, and horses, became domesticated. (Why these and not other species is a fascinating issue discussed here.) This process was helped by the once wild, fierce animals evolving into docile, friendlier, fast-reproducing, and more useful creatures through a curious process of arrested development called "neoteny": The domesticated animal retains the immature appearance and behaviour of the young wild ancestor.

It has long been assumed in folklore and science that it was man, or more likely woman or child, who initiated domestication by bringing home young creatures as pets. But now Budiansky, with some experts on the history of agriculture, argues that it was certain "opportunistic" beasts who took the initiative. They traded all their assets for shelter, food, and

protection — a classic symbiosis. They did well, he claims: "Life with man was a better evolutionary bargain for domesticated animals than life in the wild." And today their free cousins are nearing extinction, while in human custody their species thrive.

But what of the individual animal? Once, such a covenant was not a bad bargain. It still seems a good bet for companion animals: independence renounced for comfort and love. Many human beings have tried the same with less success. Still yearly millions of unlucky dogs and cats are abused, abandoned, and euthanized — rejected, but unequipped to escape back into nature.

As for farm animals, until recently they too might have been willing to give up freedom for the security, if boredom and brevity, of domesticated life. But since the mechanization of agriculture, most farm animals find only deprivation and pain. Budiansky neglects to draw such distinctions between the species and the individual, between then and now. Moreover, even if the animals came to us, like immigrants, does this alter the ethics of the relationship?

Nevertheless, despite the dreams of some animal rights advocates sickened by the suffering, there is no way to cancel our Faustian compact and send defenseless domestic animals back into a shrinking wilderness. Indeed it is too late, or too early, to free man and beast from an ancient commitment that at its rare best brings beauty to us, security to them and joy to us both. But it is certainly time to renegotiate the covenant.

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