

“An Alligator Got Betty”: Dangerous Animals as Historical Agents

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ABSTRACT

In 1932 four year old Betty Doherty was taken from the grasp of her older brother by a fourteen foot crocodile in Far North Queensland. Through an examination of historical sources as well as the work of psychologists, cognitive scientists, and zoologists, this paper explores the role ascribed to the crocodile as well as other ‘dangerous’ animals that have bit, stung or consumed settlers across Australia, and asks whether and how they might ‘act’ or be given voices within our reading and understanding of the past. Animal historians have begun to ask questions about historical agency through analyses of domesticated or working animals, and interactions between people and wild mammals. Insects, fish, and reptiles, however, remain anonymous and non-specific, disappearing back beneath the waves or into the dark holes from which they emerged, and yet they were often agents of great change in the human lives they encountered. This paper asks whether historical agency and intent can be found in these less sympathetic and less ‘knowable’ creatures, and examines how historians might conceive of watery predators or venomous creatures that disappeared from sight or perhaps were never seen at all.

Keywords: animals; agency; punishment; predators; venom; Australia

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Four days into the new year of 1932, five young Doherty children walked down to the Seymour River, in northern Queensland, to gather mangos from the tree that grew at the riverbank. Their mother, Lucy, stayed in the house some 400 feet from the river, using the time to tidy up in the tranquillity of the morning. But the shouts and screams of her children soon punctured her quiet undertaking and, rushing to the door, she saw two of them, Lucy 8 and Nellie 6, running toward the house waving their arms about wildly. Instinctively, she grabbed the razor and ‘Condys Crystals’, the family’s first aid for snake bite, and ran toward the girls. Getting no sense from them, she sent them to find their father and frantically ran down to the river where she found her eldest son, John 12, holding two year old Mickie. “What’s wrong?” implored Lucy.

He replied “An alligator got Betty”. I [Lucy] said “Got Betty”. He replied “Yes a big one too Mummy”. I said “Oh where”. He replied “Just there Mummy” pointing to a spot about 9 feet from the water. I said “Jacky are you sure you saw the alligator” He replied “Yes Mummy, I had Betty by the hands, and he pulled her away from me, I nearly Fell Mummy, I could not hold her. He only caught hold of her by one foot, and threw her over his back into the water, he turned very quickly, and dived into the water after her, and I did not see Betty or the alligator come up again.”¹

All that remained of the frightful event were a couple of claw marks about two feet from the water’s edge and some bark knocked off a tree. Lucy’s husband arrived minutes later, joined shortly after by men from the nearby quarry, and members of the Halifax police. The desperate search for the four year old began, but realising that all hope of saving Betty were lost, the search soon turned to “catching the monster.” Traps were set and parties of men in outboard motor boats scoured the river, its banks and water holes. Twelve days later a fourteen foot ‘alligator’² was caught and ‘killed under Police supervision’ and the contents of its stomach examined. Two small bones were found but were declared ‘not human’ by the Chief Medical Officer.³ Betty’s body was never found.

The gruesome death of Betty Doherty was a traumatic event for her siblings and created a devastating sadness in her parents.⁴ The event entered into local mythology and was remembered with horror in the small community around Halifax long after the media lost interest in the story. Yet, beyond these immediate connections, the tragic story of little Betty was soon seen as one among many such fatal encounters with north Queensland’s saltwater crocodiles. Indeed within days the case was being added to lists of other saurian deaths.⁵ By February papers around the country were giving one line to Betty, as one among ‘many crocodile horrors.’⁶

But, for the historian, the event and the ways that it comes to us through media, court and police records reveals much more than the simple horror of the tragedy, speaking to us particularly about the interrelationships that had developed - some one hundred and fifty years after European settlement - with this one of many species of dangerous creatures in Australia. The story allows us to see beyond responses to Betty’s death, and the heroism of her brother John (who was later awarded a medal of bravery for his attempt to hold onto his sister against the strength of the crocodile), enabling us to explore how the crocodile was seen to have participated

in the event. Unlike many of the fatal encounters with crocodiles, as with other deadly animals in Australia which disappear out of sight and back into the ‘other’ world they inhabit or indeed which are never seen at all, the reptile that took Betty maintained its part in the narrative long after the event itself. Its role in the story did not end at the moment of the attack, like a terrible natural accident, a biotic element in a catastrophic misfortune, but continued through the days that followed. The crocodile became an active participant in the narrative, not only changing irrevocably the lives of the Doherty family but becoming imbued with a moral and legal responsibility for the child’s death.

This article seeks to explore the role ascribed to animals like the Seymore River crocodile and other dangerous creatures that have bit, stung or consumed settlers across Australia. Snakes, spiders, crocodiles, sharks, jellyfish, and other creatures which pierce the skin, tear at the flesh or inject venom play a distinctive part in the history of Australia. Australians have needed to find ways to live alongside them both before and since European arrival, and have found numerous ways to express their relationship with these creatures through policy, science and culture.⁷ But is there a deeper role for these creatures in our understanding of the past? By looking at the way their actions have been reported, recorded, and conceived, Australia’s particular range of dangerous creatures open up a new way of thinking about animals as historical actors. My aim is not to resolve the problem of agency in historical animals, but to use creatures like the Seymore River crocodile, as well as venomous snakes and other unseen ‘killers’, to explore a variety of ways that historians might conceive of non-human historical ‘actors’ in Australian as well as other contexts.

Animal studies has become a vibrant field of enquiry across numerous disciplines. Historians have been increasingly keen to examine the way non-humans have contributed to and participated in social, cultural, environmental and imperial histories. These have focused on human-animal relationships, the metaphorical use of animals, and exploring the notion of animal agency. Much of this work has concentrated on domestic and working animals whose lives were more entwined with and recorded by people of all ranks, times, and places.⁸ For scholars interested in dangerous wild animals, the focus has been on large charismatic carnivores, such as tigers and bears, and to a lesser extent crocodiles, that were celebrated in representations of colonial exploits, and became symbols of European dominance over the environment.⁹

Arachnids, reptiles, fish and other marine creatures, on the other hand have not generally elicited these kinds of responses, but rather are spoken of with fear, revulsion, or annoyance, not cultural or historical importance. And yet, they are often agents of great change in the human lives with which they intersect. This article interrogates not only the responses of Europeans to these animals in Australia but also considers how Australia’s particular range of and relationship to these creatures can contribute something distinctive to the growing field of animal histories more generally. The article asks whether historical agency and intent – either perceived or ‘actual’ - can be found in these less sympathetic and less ‘knowable’ creatures, and how this might contribute to our understanding of the past.

The ‘Guilty’ Crocodile

After it had lurched out of the water and grabbed Betty, the Seymore River crocodile may very well have consumed the child immediately, although that would have depended on its level of hunger, the presence of other crocodiles, and if the attack was motivated by the need for food or

territorial defence. Crocodiles motivated by the latter may not always consume their catch but it is a misconception that crocodiles store their prey. They might eat part of it and guard the rest until later. Sometimes a current will pick up part of the remains and they get wedged under rocks or river debris leading to the idea of storage, though there is no evidence that this is what crocodiles do. However, given Betty's size and the fact that no remains were found, it is likely that she was fully consumed.¹⁰

The Seymore River crocodile then reappears in the historical record some five days after the incident when he was seen by a member of the search party, who claims to have spotted a fourteen foot crocodile on the riverbank, among the mangroves, close to where the children had been playing. We cannot be sure if this was the 'actual' saurian that took Betty as the behaviour of a crocodile after an attack can vary:

Dominant animals that reside in an area tend to stay in that area, whereas subordinate crocodiles may in fact take all or part of their catch elsewhere first. This may be done to avoid encountering other crocodiles who might steal their catch. The 14ft crocodile at the scene of the attack 5 days later may well have been the one responsible if that was its territory, or it may have been the crocodile that the real culprit was trying to avoid.¹¹

His size and presence at the attack site is therefore not sufficient to determine if this was indeed the crocodile that captured Betty. But, it was enough for the residents of Halifax, who assumed that this was the same creature that had taken the child. Snares were laid and a week later the child's father found a live crocodile caught in one of the traps. The crocodile was shot.

Whether or not the captured crocodile was the 'actual' individual responsible for Betty's death, it was held as such by the inhabitants of Halifax. Even when the bones inside the stomach were determined not to have been human, the crocodile was put on display as the 'monster' responsible for taking the child. In a region where saltwater crocodile numbers were still, in the early 1930s, quite high, before unregulated hunting decimated their numbers from 1945-1971, seeing a crocodile would not have been unusual. Even so, £7 was collected for the family when 'large crowds from all parts of the district took the opportunity to view the monster'¹² suggesting that this was no ordinary crocodile, but one that had distinguished itself from its fellow crocodilians. Fitting within a long history of fear and fascination with man-eating animals, this reptile drew the awe and outrage of the people of the district, as a creature that had murderously upturned the anthropocentric order of nature. It appealed to the morbid enthral of predation in the same way that the continual production in the present day of 'animal attack' films and television programmes reproduce the theme of vengeful nature and the ancient allure of stories like that of the Leviathan.¹³

Figure 1

What the capture and display of the Seymore River crocodile also did was to show the pervasiveness of the idea of individual agency in the 'offending' reptile. Local men were not interested in catching *any* crocodile, but were instead focussed on the apprehension of *the* crocodile that had killed Betty. Reports about the search noted the abundance of saurians in the river, one explaining that their numbers had, in fact, been recently multiplying with indigenous Australians no longer living along the river and consuming their eggs.¹⁴ So there was no shortage of crocodiles in the Seymore River that could have satisfied a generalised vigilantism.

But what the residents of Halifax were after was a targeted punishment of the particular animal involved. From the start, the media had characterised the crocodile as ‘savagely aggressive’¹⁵ and unrepentant, revisiting the scene of attack ‘evidently ... looking for more prey’. An encounter with the alleged crocodile five days after the attack, that was described in numerous newspaper reports, depicted him as displaying a brazen defiance:

Disturbed by the searcher, who was unarmed, it turned back to the water. After swimming about 10ft. it turned its triangular nose towards the onlooker, and remained on the surface for a few minutes.¹⁶

With the frequent use of the term ‘monster’ referring not only to the creature’s size, but also its deviance, these depictions criminalised the crocodile as a child murderer that had behaved ‘monstrously’. Like all other crimes, the killing of Betty Doherty demanded police intervention and called for retributive justice:

... Constables Still, Fredrichson, and Schnitzerling from Halifax, went to the spot, about 100 yards south of the scene of the tragedy. The monster, which was still alive, was shot and dragged on a motor lorry to Halifax... the police are certain that the crocodile caught is the one which dragged the child from her brother's arms.¹⁷

The crocodile was not perceived to have been behaving on instinct, as a natural predator within its natural environment, but as a malicious actor that had ‘dragged’ the child from life and a much loved brother.

Despite knowledge of the potential harmfulness of crocodiles, recent research has shown that people tend to ‘hold animals responsible for their harmful dispositions – particularly when they are directed at human beings.’¹⁸ Historically, there has long been a criminalisation of animal behaviour in these circumstances, clearly articulated in the notorious animal trials of medieval and early modern Europe in which animals ranging from dogs and pigs, to vermin and insects, were brought before both criminal and ecclesiastical courts accused of theft, murder or of participating in acts of bestiality. The courts were serious proceedings that earnestly followed the rules and conventions of any other court, and most often resulted in the public execution of the ‘offending’ animal.¹⁹ These trials aimed to restore moral order when an animal had broken the laws governing heaven and earth. In more recent history, Amy Louise Wood shows how the mock trial and very real execution of circus elephants in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century America, at least three dozen of which were carried out between 1880 and 1920, continued this tradition within the very different moral, legal and cultural context of the modern United States. Wood argues that the public execution of elephants that had ‘become dangerous’ or had killed their owners or handlers were both commercial spectacles as well as rituals that articulated popular fears, impulses, and values attached to crime and punishment. ‘In particular,’ she suggests, ‘they dramatized public conflicts that were erupting in response to the state’s attempts to suppress popular impulses for vengeance by sanitizing criminal executions and removing them from public view.’²⁰

The Seymour River crocodile was not subject to criminal prosecution, even in the form of a mock trial, but the performance of justice was nonetheless still being satisfied. It had ceased to be legally or morally acceptable to witness the public execution of Europeans in Queensland by the mid-nineteenth century, and of Aborigines by the end of the century²¹ and Queensland was

the first state to abolish capital punishment completely in 1922. However, the spectacle of justice could still be carried out on animals, over whom the strictures of the law did not apply in the same way. The agonising death of Betty Doherty demanded a response and the involvement of the police allowed for an outlet in a state that had long worried that the ‘vendetta of Italy’ or ‘lynch law, so prevalent in the USA’ would become common ‘especially in North Queensland’ if an appropriate judicial response was not forthcoming.²² So, rather than being shot by Betty’s father, who had found the crocodile in the snare, or one of the hunters, the crocodile was turned over to the police, and dealt with as a matter of public order or ersatz criminal judgement. This reflected the difficulty people often have in accepting terrible accidents and tragic misfortune without reason or explanation, and this is often sought through the ascription of criminal responsibility²³

The problem this raises though is whether this ascription of criminal responsibility demands an acknowledgement of malice or intent, and for the animal historian, if this allows us to think differently about the agency and historical ‘involvement’ of animals like the Seymore River crocodile. Before we think further about this question however, there is another factor we need to consider. The other side of criminal responsibility is the desire to punish. Normative theories of punishment generally attribute three motivations to punishment: deterrence, incapacitation, and retribution. As deterrence is an unlikely outcome in the punishment of animals (the punishment of the Seymore River crocodile was not intended and would not have deterred other crocodiles from similar attacks), incapacitation and retribution are the primary purpose of the capital punishment of animals. Recent work by psychologists Geoffrey Goodwin and Adam Benorado has shown that in addition to preventing an animal from harming further people after an attack, as is often noted when aggressive dogs are ‘euthanised,’ retribution is a strong motivation in the killing of dangerous animals.²⁴ The researchers demonstrated that incapacitation was rarely the motivation in the case of wild predator attacks. In their study of responses to shark attacks, they showed that people were less interested in killing an equally dangerous, yet ‘innocent,’ shark of the same species, than they were of killing the ‘actual “guilty” animal’. ‘From an incapacitacionist perspective, if two animals are equally dangerous to humans, it should not matter whether one of them has previously attacked and killed a human, or not.’²⁵ Eliminating the presence of any member of a species deemed and demonstrated to be dangerous aims to remove further threat after an attack. Focus on identifying the animal ‘guilty’ of killing a human speaks more to ‘making amends’ and the quest for some kind of ‘justice’.

While under ordinary circumstances animals like sharks and crocodiles are not generally thought to have the moral capacity to distinguish between right and wrong actions, meaning they do not meet the cognitive standards of *mens rea* (the ‘guilty mind’ that provides for criminal intent), Goodwin and Benorado point to various psychological research papers that show that people tend to attribute human moral traits to animals following moral events (when perceived harm or good have occurred).²⁶ In these cases ‘agency’, which ‘involves such capacities as self-control, morality, memory, and planning’ is attributed to the animals concerned.²⁷ So, when an animal like a shark or crocodile attacks a person, people tend to attribute human-like moral qualities to those animals when they might ordinarily not. This becomes even stronger when the ‘victim’ of the animal attack is more sympathetic, like a child.²⁸

So, our exploration of historical agency is initially lead here by the family, friends, and community members of Betty Doherty. From John’s first shocked explanation of the event, the

crocodile was a central character in the story. ‘*He* pulled her ... caught hold of her ... threw her’. The immediate focus on identifying the ‘actual’ crocodile involved in the ‘attack’ speaks to the agency ascribed to the reptile by the community itself – a response that recurs in most similar ‘unprovoked’ attacks. Yet analysing agency historically through the perceived ‘guilt’ or moral responsibility ascribed to a dangerous animal does not necessarily bring us closer to understanding the historical behaviour or participation of the animal itself. Rather, it addresses the way that humans conceptualise the role of non-humans as particularly sovereign and aware when they are involved in a fatal encounter such as this. By seeking an explanation for this kind of tragedy, intent and moral involvement – agency – is attributed to the creature. This is not an inexplicable death of someone caused by a collapsing rockface, or freak wave, or lightning, or choking, or drowning. In none of these is the water, food, electrical force, or landscape the focus of retributive action or destroyed. It plays a role and, as we shall examine in the pages to come, is a crucial element in determining what *happens*.²⁹ However, these inanimate ‘actants’ are conceived of very differently from the crocodile which, I would argue, has become an agent through the particular way it is perceived to have participated in the event with intent and deliberation. The assumed ‘guilt’ of the crocodile, its deviance and monstrosity, speak to its perceived role and consequently, its active role in the historical narrative.

Animals with Agency

Animal historians have grappled with the idea of agency when exploring ways to think about non-humans in history.³⁰ The importance of agency arises when historians seek to move beyond a consideration of animals in history as mere objects that have appeared with, been acted upon, used, or been embellishments for human actors. The cognisant existence of animals has long been explored and recognised by scholars and activists in other fields, with historians only beginning to make serious inroads in recent years into the consideration of animal lives within and as a driving force in history. However, what constitutes animal agency remains relatively open. Does historical agency require the ability to respond rationally to and affect the world in which one lives? Does it require a level of cognitive and emotional engagement and directedness that goes beyond simple instinctive responses? Does it require premeditation on the part of the animal? Must they speak? Historians vary in their answers to these questions with many outside the field of animal history simply denying the possibility of agency,³¹ and claiming that animals lack the intentionality that is essential to historical actors. But, for those historians who do accept a role for animals beyond that of object or automation or ‘gap-filler,’ the notion of agency allows for an historical exploration of animal lives in and of themselves, or alongside and in relation to human lives.³²

In tackling the question of agency, most historians have analysed the considerable source material that has been built around the often long-standing relationships people in the past have had with domesticated - whether working, farming, or companion - animals. In doing so, plucky cats, brave horses, clever dogs, stubborn cows, or abused donkeys, have shown themselves experiencing and affecting the worlds in which they lived.³³ Jason Hribal, for instance, suggests a ‘history from below’ approach to historical animal lives that echoes the pioneering social history of E.P. Thompson, and claims that the ability of working animals to labour and produce, resist and fight, withhold their labour, make demands about their conditions, and partake in non-verbal negotiation with humans, demonstrates how ‘animals were themselves a force in social change.’³⁴ Approaches like this provoke fundamental questions more generally about historical

voices and challenge historians to think creatively about how to retrieve hidden or forgotten lives, both human and non-human, from the past. Indeed, as David Gary Shaw argues, in the introductory article to the *History and Theory* special issue on ‘Does History Need Animals?’:

Possessing agency brings to the fore the very purpose and point of history. For some, to deny agency seems almost to deny historical significance. Indeed, one reason for expanding history’s subjects to include the whole of human society was to demonstrate that agency could exist where political power was small.³⁵

Animal historians stretch the boundaries of agency beyond voiceless humans to non-human actors, asking the same questions once asked about the historical lives of women or indigenous peoples or slaves. Even though domesticated animals have lived their lives alongside humans voicelessly, they have made things happen, and they have made a difference, not simply because they could be ‘put to good use’ but because they could affect change through their actions. Training a dog or horse, or even a dairy cow, to fulfil the tasks a person wants it to carry out, requires not only repetition, coercion, or reward, but a thorough understanding of the character or characteristics of the individual animal. Some animals are more stubborn than others, some respond better to one person than another, some prefer carrots, while another will do anything for apples. Once trained, the animal then co-operates with the human, and acts independently within the relationship and the assigned task. For example, a messenger dog ‘has to know what it has to do, and to think out how to do it’ in the absence of its trainer.³⁶ Within the human world that it inhabits, the dog plays a role, like any other actor. It may participate differently in the story to which it belongs, but the self-directed action of the dog contributes to events and the path along which they unfold. For some, this ability to ‘make things happen’ is qualification enough for the attribution of agency, whether we can see intentionality or not.³⁷

But thinking about agency with a working or companion dog, or a mule, or even a hunting falcon if we are to push beyond the mammalian world, is perhaps a simpler task because the enduring relationships of domestication permit a ‘knowing’ and understanding that can build over time. It is much easier to find intent in the action of an animal whose characteristics one has come to know. It is also easier to see lives lived and experienced, and the effects on people and environments brought about by those lives when they occur alongside our own. Less detectable are the lived experiences and impressions made by wild animals. Even so, the binary of ‘wild’ and ‘domesticated’ animals in terms of their relationship with humans is perhaps a false one when we consider the connections and dependency many wild animals have with people through the human destruction or maintenance of their habitats or food sources, or the incursions made into their territory. A good illustrative example here is work on wild lions in Gujarat, in Western India, that have adapted to the ‘multiple layers of association’ they have with the humans who share their landscape. Responding to changes in human populations, livestock, and hunting, the lions have altered their hunting, social, and territorial activities in a manner that might more accurately be described as intergenerational memory than mere adaptive behaviour.³⁸ In addition to these kinds of entanglements, sustained relationships between humans and wild animals are far from impossible. Connections may form between people and animals from the world of wild foxes, birds, or dingoes for example, allowing people in the past, as well as historians, to attribute recognisable ‘personality’ traits and levels of agency to these animals even when seen across the divide of ‘the wild’.

By contrast, insects, arachnids, fish and other sea creatures are much more difficult to observe and interact with.³⁹ They have been discussed en masse as legions of disease-carrying mosquitoes, as populations of urban pests requiring sanitary and policy reform, or as shadowy menaces that interfere with otherwise idyllic surroundings. As categories and even as individuals they have tended to be dealt with as anonymous and non-specific, disappearing back between the tangled mangroves or beneath the waves, receding back into the dark holes from which they emerged. Yet as agents of change, with an ability to ‘make things happen,’ they are no less impressive than wild mammals or birds, or even perhaps, some domesticated animals. Both John McNeill and Timothy Mitchell have shown very successfully that the enormous capacity of mosquitoes, and indeed of microbes, to impact human lives and communities and to respond to and resist changes and attempts to control them, imbues them with ‘agency.’ But, as clearly as these scholars demonstrate the active role of mosquitoes in history, these insects remain anonymous and act collectively as a species, rather than as individuals.⁴⁰ Harmful or fatal encounters between one animal and one person however, such as occurred between Betty and the crocodile, forces a consideration of singular creatures, individual animals that are perceived as ‘especially’ aggressive, particularly ‘guilty, or notably present. We may see these creatures as having been imbued with a moral agency by humans, or they may, alternatively or concurrently, be thought of as possessing agency in a relational sense, as in the model broadly conceptualised in Actor Network Theory (ANT). ANT holds that all “things” that *have an effect* are actors – or *actants* – and that these are no more likely to be human than non-human. Rather, importance is given to the role played by the *actant* within a network of, and in relation to, others *actants* in effecting an action or outcome.⁴¹ With a similar focus on relationality, Donna Harroway has argued that species *act* in relation to one another, so that, ‘all the actors become who they are in the *dance of relating*, not from scratch, not ex nihilo, but full of the patterns of their sometimes-joined, sometimes-separate heritages both before and lateral to this encounter.’⁴²

The relational agency of wild animals, however, must be read differently from the type described and increasingly understood between people and domesticated animals, which is deliberate and builds over time. Unlike domestic animals, wild animals tend to be considered relating to humans or other animals, or to be imbued with agency only at the level of species or local population. They are considered as individuals only in as much as they are ‘components of larger ecological wholes’ with ethologists interested in ‘individual animals’ roles in larger ecosystems⁴³ rather than the behavioural specificity of individuals. Dangerous wild animals, however, allow us to extend our thinking because their actions tend to be judged differently. Because the action of an individual creature is so momentous in the human realm, it moves beyond the generic and nonspecific, and becomes *visible* as an individual actor.

Deadly Agency

In discussing the particular type of agency that the destructive power of individual dangerous wild animals can reveal in intrinsically less knowable creatures like crocodiles, Brett Walker has approached the problem through the analytical frame of intimacy. Using the well-known example of philosopher Val Plumwood’s near fatal encounter with a saltwater crocodile in Kakadu National Park in Australia’s Northern Territory in 1986, in which she was taken twice into the ‘whirling terror’ of the ‘death roll’,⁴⁴ Walker declares that Plumwood ‘would have been surprised to learn that her reptilian pursuer was not an agent.’⁴⁵ Rather, ‘she was no longer the

sole agent in this pending violent encounter in her biography because the crocodile had become an agent as well.⁴⁶ The crocodile's agency was defined by its ability to change the trajectory of Plumwood's life from the moment it began to stalk her. The interplay of both characters in the event, through her initial sense of unease, of being watched, followed by the crocodile's violent blows against her 'flimsy' canoe, to their underwater struggle, and its 'angry' growls at her resistance, is a story with two equally engaged actors.⁴⁷ Plumwood saw, in her encounter with the crocodile, that she, as the human subject in the event, did not hold an elevated position. Her story did not transcend that of the crocodile's. Rather, she reflected that

As my own narrative and the larger story were ripped apart, I glimpsed a shockingly indifferent world in which I had no more significance than any other edible being. The thought, "This can't be happening to me, I'm a human being. I am more than just food!" was one component of my terminal incredulity. It was a shocking reduction, from a complex human being to a mere piece of meat.⁴⁸

With this description, Plumwood reveals how the 'exceptionalism' of humans and their unique claim to history is fundamentally undermined in the process of being reduced to merely another prey species.

When a person is digested by another animal, the cultural construction of a human separateness from nature is exposed. 'Being eaten,' Walker tells us, '...is to confront our shared animal nature with other organisms, to surrender being human, a crafter of culture and artifice, and to regress into animal 'barbarism''.⁴⁹ During a struggle like that of Plumwood and the crocodile, both participants are drawn into each other's worlds, and each other's bodies, in a profoundly intimate manner. The grisly intimacy of a person being eaten by another creature, I would argue then, allows us to observe important ways that people conceive of themselves and their relationship to nature, and exposes the fragility of a human-centric reading of history. But can we push the intimacy and agency revealed through predation to other fatal and life-threatening human-animal encounters?

Additionally, the intimacy and particular horror of being taken into the body of an animal through predation, ripping apart any centring of humans in such an encounter, corresponds strongly with the intimacy and horror of having something equally deadly and animal inserted within the human body. The injection of venom, a noxious animal fluid, travelling into the blood and tissue of a person, similarly blurs the corporal boundaries of human and animal, such that the significant differences in human fatalities by predators and venomous animals are often ignored. Instead, in the popular imagination at least, deaths and injuries by 'deadly' wild animals of both categories are frequently brought together. In both, human lives are changed or ended by the puncturing of skin and the merging of animal and human.

There is no doubt that in terms of their ability to 'make things happen' venomous animals, like snakes, spiders, and even jellyfish, contribute to and even 'act' within human stories. The power of their venom, that can infiltrate the body of a person within minutes, rapidly alters biographical trajectories through death, scarring, or disability. The mother of seven year old Matilda Dean, who was bitten by snake in her home in Bundalaguah in western Victoria in 1873, would, like Val Plumwood, have been surprised to hear that the reptile that killed her daughter was not an 'agent' in the family's biography. Each of the participants in the drama that unfolded in the Dean's home that December day – the mother, the daughters, the snake - is recorded in the

coronor's report,⁵⁰ each interacting with the others, occupying space in the Dean's front room, and within the narrative. Elizabeth Dean explained how her daughter had

...put her hand down a hole in the side of a window to pick up a comb which had been lost, but she could not reach it & took her hand out again – she said “oh Mother something pricked me on the finger.” Her sister put her hand down the same hole after & said that a nail must have scratched [Matilda] ... about a minute after I saw the head of the snake in the same hole after her hand came out. Afterwards I saw the snake crawl further out of the hole, we endeavoured to kill it but were not able to do so.⁵¹

Although Elizabeth could not describe the snake in any detail, a tiger snake was later seen making its way from the house into the garden, and once killed, the distance between its fangs was measured against the marks on Matilda's body, satisfying all that ‘there was little doubt’ that this was the snake that had bitten the child.⁵² Clearly, in ways comparable to those we have observed in the case of Betty Doherty, it was important that the ‘actual’ snake that had been hiding in the hole Matilda reached into, was found. The identity of the ‘guilty’ snake was sought and tested against the evidence of the child's body.

We can see in this case then, as in others, that victims of snakebites, and their families, often sought to identify and wreak revenge in the killing of the ‘offending’ reptile. This played itself out in different ways, but was driven by the same moral reckoning. In a story tragically similar to Matilda Dean's, Mary Jane Eady, a one year old, had been left for a matter of minutes in a room with her older sisters in April 1867. Her mother had gone momentarily into the bedroom when she heard the child call out.

I came out and saw her under the table on the floor. I observed the back of the right hand was bleeding, her sister 6 yrs old said she had been bitten by her sister Maggie who is nearly three years old when I looked at the hand I saw it was it was not the bite of a child... There is a hole under the table in the wooden floor close to which she was when I took her up...

...She got quite cold in the face & hands and died in less than an hour from the receipt of the scratch on her hand, a few months ago a snake was killed quite close to the door. I cannot account for the child's death unless a bite of a snake caused it.⁵³

So, this time, no animal was seen at the scene of the ‘attack’ and numerous searches made under the floor and around the hole revealed nothing. It was not until a week later that ‘some one passing into the dairy, a small building adjoining the room, discovered the gentleman they were in search of helping himself to some butter.’⁵⁴ The identity of the ‘offending’ animal was this time not sought or determined through any corporal connection, as in the cases of Betty Doherty or Matilda Dean, but simply through its proximity to the location of the event and the reptile's further ‘deviant’ act of butter theft. In Mary Jane's story the presence and involvement of the snake was assumed but never actually observed, yet the ‘responsible’ actor was pursued nonetheless, not as a generalizable snake but as the very one that had bitten the child – *the* snake.

In many cases though, the ‘guilty’ animal is unknown, never seen, and never found. There is often speculation about animal involvement in cases of mysterious sudden death or when a person disappears from a body of water known to be inhabited by predators. But if a ‘culprit’ is

unseen, sometimes even by its 'victim', and its identity remains uncertain, how are we to think about it historically? Are we then just left with the death or absence of a person and the legal and emotional consequences this creates, there being no tangible creature to act as 'perpetrator' of all that 'happens' in response? How must the historian think about an 'actor' who is not only voiceless, but is also faceless and formless?

This is a problem that confronts the historian in many cases of both fatal and non-fatal assumed animal 'attacks' which, as in the following example, are catalysts to enduring change. Twenty-two year old Henry Hogarth went to bed in the room he shared with his brother John around ten o'clock on a Friday night in February, 1883. While he slept something crept onto his bed and bit him, causing him to wake up and call out. By the time John had lit the lamp there was nothing to see except for 'three puncture wounds on the right hip and a mark above.' The brothers neither saw nor heard anything but came to the conclusion that it must have been a snake – optimistically a 'non-poisonous' one.⁵⁵ They applied a mixture of salt, egg white and gunpowder but Henry soon deteriorated and fell into unconsciousness. He was rushed to Bendigo Hospital but never regained consciousness and died twelve hours after he had been woken by the sting.⁵⁶ All that remained of the snake itself, like in the case of Mary Jane Eady, was the punctured skin and the venom it had transferred into Henry's body, working its way through his blood and into the tissue, shutting down his nerves and paralysing his muscles. The snake may have been illusive but it maintained a presence throughout Henry's body and final hours. As in so many other cases, where hands went down holes in pursuit of a rabbit, where bare feet walked through long grass, when boots that had been left out overnight were pulled on in the early morning, or where outside toilet seats had lain undisturbed, the silent, unseen presence of an animal came into contact with a person and injected itself into the human story. Feeling threatened, cornered, scared, or startled, these animals responded to the person who had suddenly entered into their world by using their defensive sting or bite. The historian, like the person who is bitten or stung, knows that something catastrophic has occurred but can only speculate as to what has caused it. The voiceless creature is doubly silenced, excluded from the historical record except through suggestion.

And yet, even this can show us the historical role of illusive animals. Being hidden or unseen, as various historians have shown for other shrouded historical actors, can indeed be troubling for historians. Often they are guilty of seeking the 'ideal-typical historical or social actor' defined by rational imperatives, their meaningful impact on the social, political or economic structures in which they participate, or those who partake in or drive activities that see change over time. As rich historiography that has emerged over the past few decades has clearly shown, however, actors who have not left sources which preserve their own words or experiences, or who do not conform to post-Enlightenment western notions of rational intent, are just as valid as historical subjects and actors as those who have and do. We may look, for example, to Mary Jo Maynes's historical discussion of girls. Maynes points out that the lack of source materials emanating from children in the past, their lack of power, their marginality, supposed 'irrationality', and their invisibility, has tended to exclude them from prevailing notions of historical agency. This problem is not exclusive to children, but Maynes argues that the absence of girls in written sources is a reflection of the 'agendas and perspectives of the record-keepers' not the presence or absence of the girls themselves. The girls have not ceased to 'act' within their own lives and spheres, and the lives and spheres of the people around them. In fact, not attracting attention to themselves, quietly inhabiting their space, and being 'seen and not heard,' were qualities

emphasised and encouraged in childhood. Attention, of which written records were often a consequence, was generally drawn only toward those girls who transgressed the standards of ‘privacy and respectability.’⁵⁷ So, the ‘normal’ presence of children, and especially girls, in the past might be measured more by their absence, while those who we do see were the children who secured a place in the historical record by transgressing the ‘normal’ practices of obscurity – the girl who ‘was trouble, or [was] in trouble.’⁵⁸ While points of comparison between historical girls and illusive venomous snakes may seem jarring, we might draw some tentative intellectual parallels in how both may be considered historically. As with Maynes’s girls, the ‘normal’ behaviour of venomous snakes, spiders, and even sharks and crocodiles, is not to be seen, to be outside of the gaze of people, hidden from the potential danger of the human world. The lives and experiences of the vast majority of these animals do not come into contact with the human experience, they occupy their own space and time independent of or in spite of human activity. They remain hidden and silent and at a distance. It is usually only those wild animals which have violated the ‘normal’ detachment of human and non-human that are preserved in the historical record.

We do not have historical stories to analyse about the snakes that lived quietly beneath the Dean or Eady households summer after summer, feeding on the mice and other scavengers that, too, had sought food and shelter in and under the obligingly build houses. Similarly, we never get to learn about the sharks, as Jennifer Adams Martin so cogently points out, that ‘don’t attack’.⁵⁹ A recent survey of ‘ocean-users’ (swimmers, snorkelers, divers, surfers, etc), from areas of the Western Australian coastline where five fatal shark attacks occurred over ten months in 2013, indicates that most encounters with the three most ‘dangerous’ species of sharks in that part of the Indian Ocean were peaceful. Of over 500 respondents to the survey, sixty one percent (355) had encountered at least one of these sharks in the water with no incident during that year.⁶⁰ So, the ‘normal’ behaviour of sharks, like the other ‘dangerous’ species that have caused human fatalities, is to live quietly, unobserved, or unobtrusively, alongside humans. It is in this state that these animals are generally conceived of as simply another part of the natural world, there for the gratification, wonder, or exploitation of humans. They are passive and acted upon but are not generally considered as actors. It is only when these creatures divert from this prescribed ‘normality’ and respond violently or defensively toward human presence that they enter the historical record as ‘actors’. They are just *sharks*, a biological class and genus, generally only specified by species and size⁶¹ until they ‘attack’ and kill a person. Then, they are perceived as ‘angry’ or ‘aggressive’ and more ‘clearly a danger’ than other members of their species.⁶² *The Seymore River crocodile*, if it had not responded to either its hunger or territorial dispute by snatching Betty Doherty from the grasp of her brother, would have lived out its life, seeking food or a mate, defending or defining territory within the social networks of the river’s crocodilians.⁶³ Its ferocious transgression of the imagined boundary between human and non-human worlds launched it into the realm of human history, enabling us to observe it as an agent in the narrative that unfolded over those steamy two weeks in January 1932. But, whether it was ascribed with criminal or moral responsibility for the girl’s death, or had mindlessly responded to instinctive compulsions, it certainly brought about significant change in the human world in that part of early twentieth-century Queensland, and for this reason alone, I would argue that it must be considered a historical actor or agent. In considering nature’s historical agency, Richard Foltz has argued a similar point, stating that

...it is history's "unintended consequences" that have been the primary sources for historical change, so the question of willed versus unwilled actions may be of diminished importance, especially if we expand our sense of what defines "consequences"...whether or not humans have characteristics which absolutely distinguish them from other species should not be the determining factor in whether we accord something an active role in history. Our arbitrary valuing does not alter reality...⁶⁴

The intellectual puzzle of whether historians can consider the millions of other creatures that have lived quietly and unobtrusively alongside people in Australia as contributors to the continent's pre and post European settlement history, needs further reflection and greater reliance on the work of scholars beyond the discipline of history. Historians can work through the written records describing the dreadful moments, agonising hours, and heart-breaking days and weeks, that surround the fatal encounter between a person and a venomous or alpha predatory animal. But, if we are to challenge our thinking about historical voices to include elusive wild animals whose lifecycles never intersect with any great note with the lives of humans, we will need to stretch the scope and collaborative work of our discipline to include more natural and biological sciences.

For, it is the natural and biological sciences that tend to lead the discussion about how to deal with continuing cases of injurious and fatal encounters between humans and wild animals. However, by exploring different ways of conceptualising the agency of dangerous animals through these events, these animals can be revealed as individual actors rather than simply members of a species fulfilling an ecological function. This is not to follow the moralising rhetoric of 'guilt' and 'culpability' that singling out 'responsible' animals, such as the Seymore River crocodile, implies. But the case of Betty Doherty alerts us to the fact that people tend to perceive distinct characteristics in creatures that create change in this way. From this perceived, and perhaps, anthropomorphised position, we can bring unseen, unknowable, charismatic and uncharismatic wild creatures into the increasingly well-developed literature on animal agency and begin to analyse them within the same frameworks as more knowable and domesticated animals. We can start to see them as individual animals, rather than as simply a single part of an invariant species whole.

¹ Inquest of Death of Betty Doherty, QSA JUS/N941/32/150

² While there are no alligators in Australia, the word was frequently used into the twentieth century to describe Australian Saltwater crocodiles both in natural history classifications as well as in lay nomenclature.

³ Ibid.

⁴ A 1988 newspaper article that recalled the incident reported that "This traumatic experience reportedly affected John Patrick Doherty. He never married, and died at an early age." 'Saturday Magazine'. *The Canberra Times*, July 9, 1988, p. 17.

⁵ *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin*, January 6, 1932, p. 7

⁶ 'Snapping Crocs.' *Northern Standard* (Darwin), February 19, 1932, p. 1.

⁷ I discuss in much greater depth the place of dangerous animals in Australian history and culture in my forthcoming chapter 'The Monster's Mouth...: Dangerous Animals and the European Settlement of Australia', in Sarah Crockram and Andrew Wells (eds), *Interspecies Interactions: Animals and Humans between the Middle Ages and Modernity*, (London: Routledge, 2016)

⁸ See for example: Kathleen Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth Century Paris*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Erica Fudge, 'Milking Other Men's Beasts,' *History and Theory, Theme Issue*, 52 (2013), 13-28; and, Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age*, (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987).

⁹ See for example: John M. Mackenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation, and British Imperialism*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); and, Jon T. Coleman, *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ This information on the Seymore River crocodile's likely behavior in the case of Betty Doherty is courtesy of the generosity of leading saltwater crocodile expert, Adam Britton of the Research Institute for the Environment and Livelihoods at Charles Darwin University, Darwin. Correspondence 11 January 2015

¹¹ Adam Britton email correspondence 11 January 2015

¹² 'Crocodile Snared.', *Queensland Times*, 18 January 1932, p. 7

¹³ Chris Wilbert, 'What is Doing the Killing? Animal Attacks, Man-Eaters, and Shifting Boundaries and Flows of Human-Animal Relations,' *Killing Animals: The Animal Studies Group*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 30-49, p.40.

¹⁴ 'Taken By Crocodile.', *The Central Queensland Herald*, 7 January 1932, p. 31

¹⁵ 'Crocodile Snared.', *Cairns Post*, 18 January 1932, p. 4

¹⁶ 'Huge Alligator at Scene of Tragedy. Search for Child Continues.' *Queensland Times*, 9 January 1932, p.10

¹⁷ 'Crocodile Shot', *Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser*, 18 January 1932, p. 5,

¹⁸ Jared Piazza, Justin F. Landy, Geoffrey P. Goodwin, 'Cruel Nature: Harmfulness as an Important, Overlooked, Dimension in Judgments of Moral Standing,' *Cognition*, 131 (2014), 108-124, p.122.

¹⁹ Peter Dinzelsbacher, 'Animal Trials: A Multi-disciplinary Approach,' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 32:3, (2002), 405-421, p.406. See also, Edward Payson Evans, *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals*, (London: William Heinemann, 1906)

²⁰ Amy Louise Wood, “Killing the Elephant”: Murderous Beasts and the Thrill of Retribution, 1885-1930,’ *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 11:3, (2012) 405-444, p. 410-11

²¹ John McGuire, 'Judicial Violence and the 'Civilizing Process': Race and the Transition from Public to Private Executions in Colonial Australia', *Australian Historical Studies*, 29: 111, (1998), 187-209.

²² 'Capital Punishment Abolition.', *The Brisbane Courier* , 13 July 1922, p. 12; and, Ross Noel Barber, 'The Labor Party and the Abolition of Capital Punishment in Queensland, 1899-1922,' *Queensland Heritage*, 1:9, 3-12, p.10

²³ Jesse Elvin, 'Responsibility, 'Bad Luck', and Delinquent Animals: Law as a Means of Explaining Tragedy,' *The Journal of Criminal Law*, 73:6 (2009), 530-558, pp.549-553.

²⁴ Geoffrey P. Goodwin and Adam Benforado, 'Judging the Goring Ox: Retribution Directed Toward Animals,' *Cognitive Science*, (Sept 2014), 1-28

²⁵ Ibid. p.20

²⁶ Ibid. p.22

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. p.20

²⁹ David Gary Shaw, “Horses and Actor-Networks: Manufacturing Travel in Later Medieval England”, in Susan Nance (ed.), *The Historical Animal* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 133-47, p.133

³⁰ The 2013 Theme Issue, 'Does History Need Animals?' of *History and Theory* being a notable example of the growing interest in animal history and the idea of animal agency. *History and Theory, Theme Issue*, 52 (2013)

³¹ This statement is generated by anecdotal information gathered through discussions with colleagues in animal studies as well as from other fields.

³² Hilda Kean, 'Challenges for Historians Writing Animal-Human History: What Is Really Enough?' *Anthrozoos*, 25 Supplement (2012), S57-S72, p.S58

³³ See for example: Jason Hribal, 'Animals, Agency, and Class: Writing the History of Animals from Below,' *Human Ecological Review*, 14:1 (2007), 101-112, p.101; Kean, 'Challenges for Historians,' p.S60 and S66; Fudge, 'Milking Other Men's Beasts'; Chris Pearson, 'Dogs, History, and Agency,' *History and Theory, Theme Issue*, 52 (2013), 128-145.

³⁴ Hribal, 'Animals, Agency, and Class,' p.102.

³⁵ David Gary Shaw, 'A Way with Animals,' *History and Theory, Theme Issue*, 52 (2013), 1-12, p.7-8.

³⁶ Chris Pearson, 'Dogs, History, and Agency,' *History and Theory, Theme Issue*, 52 (2013), 128-145, p.141.

³⁷ Shaw, 'A Way with Animals,' p. 8

³⁸ Mahesh Rangarajan, 'Animals with Rich Histories: The Case of the Lions of Gir Forest, Gujarat, India,' *History and Theory, Theme Issue*, 52, (December 2013), 109-127, p.127

³⁹ Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*, p.15

⁴⁰ Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) and John R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

⁴¹ David Gary Shaw, 'The Torturer's Horse: Agency and Animlas in History', *History and Theory, Theme Issue*, 52, (December 2013), 146-167, p. 159

⁴² Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p.25

⁴³ Anna L. Peterson, *Being Animal: Beasts and Boundaries in Nature Ethics*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p.79

⁴⁴ Val Plumwood, 'Being Prey,' *Terra Nova*, 1:3 (1996) , 32-44, p. 36

⁴⁵ Brett Walker, 'Animals and the Intimacy of History,' *History and Theory, Theme Issue*, 52, (December 2013), 45-67. P.50

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.49

⁴⁷ Plumwood, 'Being Prey,' pp. 35-37

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 43

⁴⁹ Walker, 'Animals and the Intimacy of History,' p.54

⁵⁰ Queensland and Victoria's coroners' reports provide an incredibly rich and intimate view of the people involved in the ordinary and extraordinary days and hours before and after fatal encounters with Australia's native animals. I will discuss these at greater length in a future publication.

⁵¹ Coroner's Inquest of Matilda Dean, December 31, 1873, Bundalaguah, Victoria. Public Record Office Victoria, VPRS 24/P/0 Unit 302 Item 1873/395

⁵² 'Case of Snake Bite', *Gippsland Times*, 3 February 1874, p. 4

⁵³ Coroner's Inquest of Mary Jane Eady, April 21, 1867, Barwon Heads, Victoria. Public Record Office Victoria, VPRS 24/P/0 Unit 199 Item 1867/112

⁵⁴ 'The News of the Day.', *The Age*, 27 April, 1867, p. 5

⁵⁵ Coroner's Inquest of Henry Hogarth, February 26, 1883, Sandhurst, Victoria, Public Records Office of Victoria, VPRS 24/P/0 Unit 439 Item 1883/261

⁵⁶ 'Accidents and Offences.', *Illustrated Australian News*, 21 March 1883, p. 38

⁵⁷ Mary Jo Maynes, 'Age as a Category of Historical Analysis: History, Agency, and Narratives of Childhood,' *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 1:1 (2008), 114-124, p.117

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Jennifer Adams Martin, 'When Sharks (Don't) Attack: Wild Animal Agency in Historical Narratives,' *Environmental History*, 16:3 (2011), 451-455.

⁶⁰ Leah Gibbs and Andrew Warren, 'Killing Sharks: Cultures and Politics of Encounter and the Sea,' *Australian Geographer*, 45:2 (2014), 101-107, p. 104

⁶¹ See of example one of many news reports about sharks in the vicinity of humans: Heather McNeill, 'Popular Perth beaches closed after 3.5 metre shark sighting,' *WA Today*, November 12 2015, <http://www.watoday.com.au/wa-news/popular-perth-beaches-closed-after-35-metre-shark-sighting-20151112-gkxbsc.html> (accessed March 15, 2016)

⁶² For example:

Rebecca Trigger, Graeme Powell and Stephanie Dalzell, 'WA shark attack: Search to catch and kill shark after fatal attack on teen Jay Muscat at Cheynes Beach', *ABC News*, 30 December 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-12-30/outpouring-of-grief-for-wa-teen-killed-by-shark/5992160> (accessed March 15, 2016)

⁶³ See Grahame Webb and Charlie Manolis, *Australian Crocodiles: A Natural History*, (Chatswood, N.S.W: Reed, 2000)

⁶⁴ Richard C. Foltz, 'Does Nature Have Historical Agency? World History, Environmental History, and How Historians Can Help Save the Planet,' *The History Teacher*, 37:1 (2003), 9-28, p.23

Figures

Figure 1 – Seymore River crocodile on the police motor lorry that carried it to Halifax.

Constable George Schnitzerling stands at the crocodile's head and Constable Jens Fredericksen stands at the tail, January 17, 1932. [Image courtesy of the Queensland Police Museum]