
Book Review

Laura Hobgood-Oster, *A Dog's History of the World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 196 pp., \$29.95, ISBN: 978-1-481-30019-3.

The underlying thesis of Laura Hobgood-Oster's *A Dog's History of the World: Canines and the Domestication of Humans* is that humans have come to have the characteristics we now associate with our species because of our relationships with other animals, and further, that the human-canine relationship is a unique case for which we have abundant evidence of this co-creative process. 'Humans are essentially connected to other species; they cannot live without intimate companionship with others. It makes humans human. Dogs reveal this wonderful reality more deeply than any other species,' she argues (p. 129). What is unique in Hobgood-Oster's approach to the massive literature on the human-canine relationship is to imagine it with an eye towards the agency that dogs have likely had in this process, a sensitivity to the religious depths that seem often to characterize the bond, a balanced approach that lifts up both the ways the dog-human relationship has been mutually enhancing, and the darker ways in which dogs have been transformed into tools of empire or are victims of human whim and indifference. Hobgood-Oster overviews the full sweep of current knowledge about the history of the human-canine relationship over the last 30,000 years on every continent. In doing so, she surveys diverse chapters in human-dog relationships, putting in historical perspective the massive increase in companion animals (pets) that has been a prominent feature in modern Western societies and beyond since the rise of the middle class.

Perhaps the greatest value of the book is that while ceaselessly putting before the reader the striking differences that have characterized human-canine interactions in particular contexts, she also identifies common threads that help us set contemporary human-dog relationships in the *longue durée* of human history. 'Amazingly', she argues, 'dogs have always been there, walking right next to humans, sitting under their tables, curling up next to them at night to sleep, helping humans fight for food and struggle for survival, posing the question of what it means to be a human, and what it means to be dog' (p. 127). In the areas of companionship, religion, medicine, and war Hobgood-Oster shows that aspects of the human-dog relationship sometimes popularly portrayed as distinctly modern or even contemporary have ancient roots. She notes,

In the twenty-first century, dogs are being incorporated into religious ideas and practices, but that also is one of the markers of the earliest human-dog interaction. Increasingly dogs are front and center in reports from the battlefield, but they were already there when the pharaohs waged their wars over four millennia ago (p. 127).

It is with this historical illumination that Hobgood-Oster invites us to confront our relationship with dogs in the aftermath of the still-trenchant Enlightenment thinking,

epitomized by Rene Descartes, that has led dogs to be categorized ‘as property—as “things” rather than as sentient, living beings’ (p. 133).

In the first chapter, ‘Strangers No More: Partners in the Hunt and Herd’, Hobgood-Oster provides a broad overview of what we know about the creation of the domesticated dog based on evidence as diverse as ancient footprints and mitochondrial DNA studies. We learn that dogs are unarguably the first domesticated animal (p. 6); that archaeological evidence for the relationship is strong starting 15,000 years ago, but that other evidence for domestication is nearly twice as ancient (p. 7); and that there may be multiple instances of dog domestication in different times and places (pp. 9-10). We learn that it is probable that dogs took an active role in their domestication by choosing to stay close to human communities for a range of benefits such as feeding off human waste. In this logic, it was extant similarities between humans and wolves—both are highly social mammals and opportunistic feeders who moved from place to place in search of food—that ultimately allowed humans to insert themselves into wolf-pack hierarchies, ‘basically becoming the alpha wolf in the new pack and taking over that position in the dominance hierarchy’ (p. 15). Rather than something done to passive wolves by deliberate human intervention, domestication names the process by which ‘humans and dogs formed a unique and powerful bond. And, eventually as a result, in every part of the world inhabited by humans, there are dogs’ (p. 32).

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 deal respectively with the roles dogs have played in human religiosity, in practices of healing and saving, and in war and empire. In the view of this reviewer, Chapter 2, ‘Journey to the Afterlife: Best Friends Forever’, shows most directly the religious dimension of the human–dog bond by surveying the millennia-old practice of commemorating and ritualizing the death of dogs. Surveying nineteenth-century European exempla (pp. 36-39), prehistoric dog burials and ancient references to dogs as gate-keepers and guardians to another world (pp. 49-56), including the stunning fact that one Egyptian catacomb holds more than eight million mummified dogs (p. 52), and contemporary examples such as the six hundred pet cemeteries in the US today (pp. 56-58), Hobgood-Oster convincingly argues that mourning the loss of dogs is as old as human relationships with them.

Chapter 3, ‘Healing and Saving: Life Is Better with Dogs’, provides evidence that dogs have not only had their deaths marked by humans, but that humans have long turned to dogs for their medicinal benefits. From contemporary work that has revealed that dogs can smell cancer on the breath of patients ‘earlier than any other cancer screening available, even the most advanced technological approaches’ (p. 60), to healing rituals involving puppies in Hittite culture from 1800 to 1100 BCE (p. 64), Hobgood-Oster shows that ‘dogs have been priceless companions for humans in pain as long as they have traveled together’ (p. 77).

In Chapter 4, ‘Canines and Conquest: Invasion, Empire, and Dogs of War’, we are taken on a fascinating and often disturbing tour of examples of how militaries have employed dogs, from the use of a Navy SEAL-trained Belgian Malinois to capture Osama bin Laden (p. 79) to the military use of dogs in ancient Rome, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, and Greece (pp. 81-85). Here the story of the human–dog relationship becomes a darker one: on the one hand, dogs often were treated as more or less expendable, and on the other, they were trained to brutalize the human enemies of their masters. Evidence now suggests that canine combatants suffer from wartime service in much the same way humans have, and canine post-traumatic stress disorder is now a recognized diagnosis (p. 93). Even so, at the end of the Vietnam War, service dogs

were left behind because they were classified as military equipment (p. 92). During the colonial period dogs were bred to help control native peoples. In the United States, dogs were imported and bred to help not only with colonization but especially to track escaped slaves. It is these historical uses of dogs in the US that made civil-rights era images of police with K-9s attacking nonviolent protestors so powerfully disturbing.

The penultimate and fifth chapter, 'Dogs of Design: The Frankenstein Syndrome in a Changing World', surveys the intensification of dog breeding since the later Middle Ages and the tremendous suffering this has produced for dogs. Hobgood-Oster shows how pure breeds were invented and regulated and how many of these breeds, such as the well-known bulldog, are genetic disasters because of the way factors like 'cuteness' trumped health considerations in breeding. She further shows how the phenomenon of puppy mills—essentially factory farms for the production of puppies—has turned favored breeds of dogs into commodities that are bought and sold by the millions (p. 118), and how questionable bans on pit bulls lead more than one million pit bulls to be killed in the United States every year (p. 121).

In her closing chapter, 'The Dog-human Bond: Domesticating Each Other', Hobgood-Oster pulls these diverse examples of the canine-human relationship together to argue for the common thread that unites them all: humans and dogs are companion species that have helped bring each other into existence—and continue to do so:

Dogs assisted in the hunt and the herd, served as healers, accompanied humans in the journey to the afterlife, served as tools of war and empire, provided deep companionship and, unintentionally, helped to decimate many other species. But they were also avatars of divinities and actors in a variety of myths and legends. They were central players in religious stories and practices (p. 129).

It is in this final chapter that Hobgood-Oster makes one of her most compelling contributions to the study of religion, an argument that we would do well to look at: the phenomenon of dog rescue as itself religious activity. The significance and depth of the human-dog bond is frequently denied in contemporary society, in which animals, dogs included, are legal property. 'In response to this denial of the significance of dogs, among other animals, and of their perilous situation in human society, some people choose to spend their time and energy engaged in rescue efforts', argues Hobgood-Oster (p. 133). With approximately two million dogs surrendered to shelters annually and 60 percent of them euthanized in the United States, there is plenty of rescue work to do (p. 134). Hobgood-Oster shows that this rescue work 'fits easily with the definition of religion as committing life to what matters the most—in this case, what matters to many of those involved in rescue is the human-dog bond. Rescuers fly across continents, stay awake night after night, put dogs before family and friends, and more' (p. 136). For those who have deeply loved dogs and seen their transformative power, the religious language that Hobgood-Oster shows rescuers often use to describe their work may be relatively easy to accept at face value, but for those who would find such strong expression of concern for animals strange, Hobgood-Oster's text will perform the great service of making the strange familiar. After reading her book, it is impossible to look at dogs, or humans, in quite the same way.

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