

# “Accustomed to Female Domination”: Women, Mass Media, and Animal Intimacy in Interwar Britain

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This essay analyzes four visual sources that shed light on the relationship between gender and animal intimacy in interwar Britain. They are all photographs that appeared in print media, and all relate to the production of wildlife films. The first is a montage of six photographs showing a woman’s friendship with the “strange savage beasts” of the London Zoo; the second is an advertisement for a popular remedy; the third shows a director shooting a zoo film; the fourth contains shots from a documentary made in 1938. The essay focuses on three women—Gladys Callow, Mary Field, and Evelyn Spice—all former schoolteachers who became involved in the production of zoo films. By analyzing this series of images, connections between contemporary ideas about gender, animal tameness, and colonial domination are established, reflecting shifts in the depiction of animal intimacy in early twentieth-century Britain.

A montage of six photographs, published in a British magazine in 1923, shows a woman posing alongside “her wild animal friends” at the London Zoo. Gladys Callow, a “Lady Fellow” of the Zoological Society of London, is pictured kiss-feeding a bear, playing with two hippopotamuses,

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feeding a leopard, and stroking a golden eagle and a vulture. "How is it done?," Callow remarked in a rare interview: "I cannot tell you. Ever since I was a child I have loved animals. I do not fear them and they do not seem to fear me. I always make a habit of talking to them, avoiding jerky movements and treating them as one would treat a domestic pet."<sup>1</sup> The images draw a direct association between Callow's gender and the behavior of the "strange savage beasts," implying that her femininity is synonymous with the animals' domestication. Focusing on four visual sources, this essay argues that the mass media in interwar Britain represented intimacy with wild animals as a highly gendered experience. Coinciding with a time of heightened imperialism, as well as growing women's participation in public life, these images linked together key issues in interwar culture, including science, empire, class, and gender (fig. 1).

The photographs of Callow present a depiction of wild animals that is starkly different from that to which the British public was accustomed. Children's books and travel narratives customarily depicted male adventurers stalking and hunting big game in far-flung places, forging a firm association between "exotic" animals and colonial masculinity.<sup>2</sup> Beginning in the turn of the century, some images started emphasizing intimacy over brawn. Particularly with the advent of wildlife photography and film, showcasing intimate proximity to wild animals became central to naturalists' self-fashioning. White men could now star in their own colonial fantasies while also preaching the gospel of conservation.<sup>3</sup> The advertisement shown in figure 2, for instance, also published in 1923, shows the naturalist Cherry Kearton, whose wildlife books and films made him a celebrity. He is shown tenderly holding a chimpanzee named Toto, one of several wild animals that Kearton kept as pets.<sup>4</sup> The advertisement is for Phosferine, a widely marketed tonic that claimed to alleviate "nerve troubles," promising a "vigorous, healthy state." Kearton assured readers that Phosferine helped him with, among other things, "the strength of nerve required to be in close contact with wild animals in their natural surroundings." The advertisement reflected concerns about male mental and physical vigor and implied that the intimate portrait of ape and man was the result of strenuous (manly) activity.<sup>5</sup> This is reinforced by Kearton's clothing—the mandatory khaki uniform of the upper-class colonial adventurer—which stands in contrast to Callow's fashionable urban clothing, including white dresses, heeled shoes, stylish hats, and a large handbag.



**Figure 1.** Gladys Callow pictured alongside several animals at the London Zoo. *The Sketch*, November 14, 1923, 37. Credit: © Illustrated London News / Mary Evans Picture Library.

Kearnton was part of a new breed of interwar naturalist-photographers who emphasized their “friendships” with animals as evidence of their scientific expertise.<sup>6</sup> The photographs of Callow in figure 1 carry a similar message: they speak of a certain confidence, a “strength of nerve.” However, these images differ from depictions of animal friendships with male subjects. They establish an altogether different correlation



**Mr. CHERRY KEARTON, The World-Famous Naturalist and Big Game Hunter,** writes: "Shortly my adventure film "Wild Life Across the World," which my distributors claim to be the most remarkable film of wild animal life ever produced, will be seen in all the leading cinemas in the country, from which the public will appreciate the strength of nerve required to be in close contact with wild animals in their natural surroundings, together with the constant danger of tropical diseases always prevalent in countries where the thermometer is sometimes at 120 degrees in the shade. For many years Phosferine has always formed part of my kit, and I can testify with pleasure as to its nerve-giving and sustaining properties."

# PHOSFERINE

The Greatest of all Tonics

*The Easy Way to Health*

Nerve Troubles—Neuralgia—Neuritis, whatever the form—can be effectively dispelled by taking a few drops of Phosferine night and morning. Phosferine fortifies the system against attack and successfully promotes a vigorous, healthy state.

Liquid & Tablets. The 3/- size contains nearly four times the 1/3 size.

**Figure 2.** Phosferine advertisement featuring Cherry Kearton and Toto, his pet chimpanzee. *Sunday Illustrated*, June 17, 1923, 16. Credit: The British Newspaper Archive.

between Callow's female gender and her ease with the animals. The photographer was J. E. Saunders, a man who admitted that he had a "somewhat cynical attitude to women."<sup>7</sup> On several occasions he displayed the pictures in public, including in lectures to the Royal Photographic Society. Saunders claimed that the animals were often "too friendly," and this meant that "he had to get Miss Callow to manage

them if they were to be photographed at all by him.”<sup>8</sup> Revealingly, he attributed Callow’s “unusual talent” and “uncanny knowledge” to the fact that “many of the animals in the Zoo were accustomed to female domination.”<sup>9</sup> Saunders also resorted to sexual innuendo, for instance, when speaking of a vulture that “sat on her lap” and “pulled her stockings down, very gently and never tearing them in the process.”<sup>10</sup> Journalists, moreover, quipped that the animals were “henpecked.”<sup>11</sup> The montage was printed in *The Sketch*, a widely circulated newspaper that “offered middle-class males a voyeuristic glimpse of flirtatious sexuality.”<sup>12</sup>

Saunders’s photographs of Callow were supposed to illustrate something universal about women’s effect on wild animals. They recreated cultural clichés about gender and nature, emphasizing nurture and caretaking as intrinsically female virtues.<sup>13</sup> These ideas were firmly rooted in Victorian and Edwardian Britain. On the one hand, key concepts in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century science, including evolutionary theory, sexual selection, taxonomy, and the notion of “instinct,” were highly gendered and reinforced beliefs about women’s relationship to the natural world.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, middle-class women, who played a leading role in the animal welfare and conservation movements that took off in Britain and the United States from the mid-nineteenth century, often referenced their gendered status as domestic and moral caretakers to legitimize their activism on behalf of animals and the environment.<sup>15</sup> These campaigns had an imperial dimension too: animal welfare activists in the eighteenth century compared cruelty to animals with slavery, while women in the nineteenth century like Frances Power Cobbe increasingly interwove animal welfare and women’s rights with questions of national identity and imperialism.<sup>16</sup> The belief that women were intrinsically “close” to nature was also linked to contemporary notions of racial hierarchy.<sup>17</sup> Recapitulation theory, based on Ernst Haeckel’s thesis that “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny”—that an individual’s development reflects the evolution of a species—was widely used by contemporary scientists, educators, and imperial officials as a justification for classing nonwhite people, alongside women and children, as underdeveloped, “primitive,” and therefore “closer” to nature.<sup>18</sup> Often they regarded native populations as uncivilized in part because of their supposed failure to subjugate wild animals.<sup>19</sup> Zoo animals, meanwhile, were living symbols of the reach and power of imperial science and its successful domination over nature.

Saunders's photographs of Callow, then, are charged with what Donna Haraway calls the "triple code of gender, science and race."<sup>20</sup> Although she is shown venturing into the animals' enclosures, the metal bars of the cages are never far from sight, a reminder of the creatures' subordination. Callow's power is synonymous with domestication; the actions that she performs—feeding, tending to, loving—played on stereotypical gender roles. Her domesticating power, if softer than that of the rifle, grants her control over the animals. Before the camera, she performs a version of dominant femininity that, in the words of Vron Ware, "symbolized the taming of the savage."<sup>21</sup> This marks a shift in depicting zoo animals not as dangerous and ferocious beasts but rather as domesticated beings. The portrayal of wild animals as tame and domesticated was a key strategy for illustrating domination over nature beginning in the late nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> The period 1900–1960, moreover, witnessed a marked increase in anthropomorphic representations of zoo animals, which contributed to this tamer view.<sup>23</sup> In Callow's case, the animals' domesticity was dependent on the colonial context that enabled them to be captured, transported, and bred in an imperial metropolis like London.

The first image in the photo montage—which shows Callow with an American black bear—raises several questions. Callow and the animal have been cut out, removing them from the zoo's physical space. This literal deletion of the animal's surroundings is a reminder of how modern zoo environments served as theaters in which to perform the boundaries of the wild/tame dichotomy.<sup>24</sup> The watercolor background renders the image somewhat ambiguous, halfway between a photograph and an illustration. There is further ambiguity in Callow's kiss-feeding the bear, which mixes motherly nurture with a hint of sensuality: there is a glimpse here of cross-species romance, a queering of animal-human boundaries.<sup>25</sup> Kiss-feeding, or "pre-mastication," is performed by multiple species, including mammals and insects, to feed their young or potential mates and is thought to be a precursor to human kissing. The behavior was barely understood in the 1920s: it was not until the 1980s with the rise of sociobiology and human ethnology that scientists like Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt began to research kiss-feeding in detail.<sup>26</sup> Photographs of people kiss-feeding animals, meanwhile, became something of a twentieth-century phenomenon.<sup>27</sup>

American black bears reach adulthood at around age five. Since the bear in question was nine years old when the photograph was taken,

the animal is not just anthropomorphized but also infantilized. Callow's kiss-feeding exerts a form of "nurturant dominance," the power exercised by the feeder.<sup>28</sup> Insofar as the bear has been removed from its land of origin, literally and symbolically orphaned, Callow is cast in the role of parent. In this sense, the image also evokes British imperial attitudes toward colonial lands and people, which used images and metaphors that exaggerated the benevolence of the former and the dependence of the latter, often using highly gendered imagery.<sup>29</sup> The bear's infantilization is also a reminder of the childcentric nature of the zoo itself. In the early twentieth century, zoos were increasingly seen as children's spaces, offering a compromise between entertainment and instruction for mostly middle-class urban families.<sup>30</sup> The bear in question, named Winnipeg and originating from Ontario, is better known as the inspiration for A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* (1926).<sup>31</sup>

The images in figure 1 anticipated a short film about Gladys Callow called *Strange Friendships* (1924). Although Callow would later shoot her own zoo films on a Ciné-Kodak, these do not survive.<sup>32</sup> *Strange Friendships* was part of the *Secrets of Nature* series (1919–33), which was directed by Mary Field.<sup>33</sup> In figure 3, a photograph published in a book



**Figure 3.** Mary Field shooting a film in the London Zoo. Mary Field and Percy Smith, *Secrets of Nature* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934), 60. Credit: Author's photo.

about the series, Field is directing a film at the London Zoo, accompanied by an all-male production team. Her directorial gaze is the principal subject of the photo: while the film camera is trained on the caged monkey, the photograph focuses on the tense shared moment between Field and the animal.<sup>34</sup> Her posture and her physical distance from the monkey—which is barely discernible inside the dark cage—could hardly be in starker contrast to Callow's confident, breezy attitude with the animals shown in figure 1. Zoo films were a specialty of Field's. Her success as a director appears at first to conform to cultural stereotypes about women's innate connection with nature: for women like Callow and Field, there was an expectation that their gender endowed them with a kind of folk knowledge about animals. However, Field freely admitted that she was actually "really very frightened of most of the Zoo inmates." Snakes were an exception: "I can help to hold down a boa constrictor without any qualms, and I had no objection when a python . . . suddenly poked its head inside my coat and wound itself securely round my waist to keep warm."<sup>35</sup> *Strange Friendships* was Field's first zoo film, and she remembers that it took "all my courage" to enter Winnie's cage. Eventually she warmed to the bear, recalling that "her touch was exquisitely tender."<sup>36</sup>

The large lamps that loom behind Field were needed to illuminate the zoo's dark cages, but paradoxically they induced a sense of lethargy in the animals. When filming a monkey using these lamps, Field observed that "he swung on to the wire netting and, clinging on with all four paws, proceeded to toast his tummy."<sup>37</sup> Interwar audiences were accustomed to viewing animals as performers, including at the circus and the zoo, and Field built a career on adapting these performances for the cinema.<sup>38</sup> She believed that her own emotional state had an impact on the animals' behavior, remarking that they were "like human actors who respond to the Director's moods and who are efficient when he is efficient and infuriatingly stupid when he is tired or hurried."<sup>39</sup> Field's gendering of the director as male is noteworthy. Far from emphasizing a unique feminine "touch" for animals, Field cultivated a professional image that was based more on her skill in writing scripts and editing footage than on a supposedly instinctive connection with "nature." Speaking to *The Picturegoer* in 1931, moreover, she "confessed" that she chose to have a male voice narrate her films because she "hoped to create a personality beyond herself and the speaker by the combination of a woman's ideas with a man's tongue; a personality with the perfect sex appeal!"<sup>40</sup>

Field focused the latter part of her career on producing children's films. In making this choice and playing on the idea that women knew best how to engage young minds, we might say that she did end up conforming somewhat to contemporary gender norms. Both Callow and Field had been schoolteachers, and the association between children and nature—and the role of women in mediating this relationship—was especially powerful. Nature study, for instance, a pedagogy that introduced children to the sciences by emphasizing direct observation, was promoted in large part by women and was also influenced by recapitulation theory and the notion of a “primitive” child mind.<sup>41</sup>

Another former teacher, Evelyn Spice, filmed *The Birth of the Year* at the London Zoo in 1938, pictures of which appeared in the tabloid *The Bystander*. Spice, originally from Canada, had trained as a journalist and quickly became a leading documentary director.<sup>42</sup> *The Birth of the Year* showed “members of young animals at the Zoo as they awake to the call of spring.” In the images shown in figure 4, animal intimacy is crafted into a cinematic style. The images show close-up shots of an emu, a tiger, two galagos (bush babies), and a bear, all depicted in the earliest stages of life. In the case of the galagoes and the tiger, anonymous human hands provide a sense of scale while also emphasizing the animals' tameness. The bear, clinging to a cup as it drinks, is especially evocative of a human child. The caption explains that it is nicknamed Betsy and was “left by her mother when she was three weeks old.” Field, commenting on the powerful effect that images of young animals could elicit, noted that “many creatures that would otherwise be hopeless film material achieve star value by producing a gawky and engaging baby.”<sup>43</sup> Aside from their entertainment value, baby animals were the perfect cinematic subjects for portraying key principles in animal behavior, including animal instinct and comparative psychology.<sup>44</sup>

*The Birth of the Year* was part of *Animal Kingdom*, a series of films made at the London Zoo that were “designed as popular essays in evolutionary biology” and were supervised by the biologist and popularizer Julian Huxley.<sup>45</sup> As with *The Birth of the Year*, Spice's film *Zoo Babies* (1938) used intimate images of infant animals to tell a story about “the progressive stages in the methods of reproduction and upbringing by which the continuity of the species is maintained.”<sup>46</sup> This closely echoes the language of eugenics, which emphasized the role of mothers in maintaining the “racial stock” of the nation.<sup>47</sup> Spice also directed two additional zoo films for the *Animal Kingdom* series: *Fingers and Thumbs*



**Figure 4.** Shots from Evelyn Spice's film *The Birth of the Year* (1938). *The By-stander*, December 14, 1938, 425. Credit: © Illustrated London News/Mary Evans Picture Library.

(1938) and *Behind the Scenes at the Zoo* (1938). That these films, alongside Field's zoo films, were some of the only animal films directed by women in this period says something about the gendered history of wildlife film: in short, women were often tasked with producing less "scientific" and more "emotional" films. This aspect of the history of wildlife filmmaking is rarely remarked on: although the tendency for wildlife

film and television to build narratives that conform to dominant gender and family norms is well documented, the fact that many of the genre's earliest films were directed by women like Field and Spice has gone largely unnoticed.<sup>48</sup>

The visual sources examined in this essay show how ideas about gender were implicated in the representation of human-animal relationships in interwar Britain. Alongside an emerging colonial masculinity that correlated animal intimacy with scientific knowledge, the London Zoo became a mediating space for a very different kind of animal encounter. Although Callow's, Field's, and Spice's images depict unique engagements with wild animals, they all share the same portrayal of zoos as places for the domination, domestication, and taming of wild animals through women's mothering, infantilizing, and "civilizing" influence. They were the product of an interwar culture steeped in imperialist thinking, including hierarchical notions about race, class, and gender. But beyond reflecting these overlapping assumptions and prejudices, the images illustrate how Callow, Field, and Spice were simultaneously disrupting contemporary ideas about women's roles in society. The evolving mass media of interwar Britain—and especially its emerging cinema industry—was a key professional setting in which these women engaged in new and often unconventional ways of living and working, even while playing off popular stereotypes—in this case, women's nurturing instincts toward animals.<sup>49</sup>

All four sources relate to the production and promotion of interwar wildlife films, which are the precursors to today's nature documentaries. To make sense of the persistent appeal of newborn captive animals in *Tiger King* (2020) or the intimate portrait of human-animal friendship in *My Octopus Teacher* (2020), we need to account for a longer history of animal representations across different media. These four images are a small sample of the wealth of material available for studying the cultural production of mass-media animals in twentieth-century Britain, and its intersection with contemporary issues surrounding gender, imperialism, race, and class.

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## Notes

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