

Book Reviews

Punching Above Their Weight: The British Veterinary Association 1882-2010

E Boden (2013). Published by Winchester University Press, Winchester, Hants SO22 4NR, UK. 372 pages Paperback (ISBN 978-1906113087). Price £32.50 (£27.50 to BVA members).

In March 2014, a front page story of *The Times* newspaper reported on the British Veterinary Association (BVA)'s call for an end to animal slaughter without pre-stunning. The issue became a topic of national debate, has attracted over 75,000 signatures to a BVA-initiated government e-petition and represented a redoubling of effort on an animal welfare policy area first discussed by the BVA in 1893, at the Association's 11th Annual Congress. From 302 members then to over 14,000 members now, the BVA is the representative voice of the British veterinary profession, but how did this come to be? In *Punching Above Their Weight*, Edward Boden, former editor of the BVA's weekly journal, the *Veterinary Record*, sets out to chart the Association's history from its inception in 1882 to the early twenty-first century.

Boden's account begins in late Victorian times when the development of a countrywide railway service had allowed an existing network of local veterinary associations to begin co-ordinating their activities. In 1882, inspired by the united approach of the British Medical Association, the first national veterinary congress was held in London, where the formation of a National Veterinary Association was proposed to become a connecting link between the local associations.

The subsequent establishment and activities of an Association which came to be concerned with clinical, socio-political and professional veterinary matters is described in strict chronological order, with Boden drawing on a rich archive of congress proceedings, meeting minutes and veterinary reports. From the establishment of an early non-statutory register of members, following receipt of a Royal Charter for the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) in 1844, further key developments are documented over 15 chapters, including legal protection of the title 'veterinary surgeon', establishment of a professional scientific journal (the *Veterinary Record*), activities during two World Wars, feminisation of the profession, a rise in corporate ownership of practices and recurring periods of robust negotiations with political forces much larger than their own (accounting for the title). All such topics are likely to be of particular interest to veterinary surgeons and those with an interest in the veterinary profession, including veterinary nurses whose professional origins are referred to, though not in detail.

The book is also interwoven with material for those with broader interests in animal welfare and the veterinary profession's continually evolving role in its advancement. Referencing Abigail Woods' contribution to the *Proceedings of the First International Conference on*

Veterinary and Animal Ethics (ICVAE) (Wathes *et al* 2013), Boden reports the early view that treating animals ethically meant placing them under veterinary care, protected from lay interventions. He outlines how, at the National Veterinary Association's meeting in 1883, a representative of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), having spoken on 'The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals', was met with accusations from veterinary surgeons that the RSPCA was bringing unnecessary prosecutions for procedures such as tail-docking of horses. A motion that "this meeting condemns the indiscriminate and unnecessary docking of horses' [tails]" was withdrawn and amended to "in the opinion of this meeting, the operation of docking horses as a means of averting danger to man is not cruel when shown to be necessary". Interspersing a carefully referenced factual narrative with occasional personal observation, Boden suggests that this gave insight into a prevailing veterinary belief that questions of animal ethics were matters for the profession, not laymen, to decide. This was not the only occasion when opinion between the veterinary profession and an animal welfare charity differed, and a section dedicated to 'Vets and the animal charities' outlines some others. At a 1947 Council meeting, the National Veterinary Medical Association (the NVMA changed its name to BVA in 1952), sought to remedy 'suspicion and distrust' amongst some veterinary surgeons towards the charities' activities. The Association expressed its view that "animal welfare societies were doing work which the profession had to support" and "if close liaison existed between the societies and the Association... much good could accrue."

The first reference to the veterinary profession's role as "guardians of the health and welfare of the nation's animal population", and the BVA's role in its furtherance, appears early on, in the preface. This is followed soon after by a report from the 1893 national meeting on "The inspection of animals intended for food, prior to and after death, with the most humane methods of slaughter", where "bleeding without stunning, as practiced under Mosaic law, was said to be 'cruel'". A year later, "Pain: its indications and significance in the domesticated animals" was examined at the Association's Annual General Meeting. A three-page account of the death of William Hunting, past Association president and founder of the *Veterinary Record*, refers to Hunting's research finding that treating tendon damage in horses by 'firing' with hot irons showed no benefit. The account reveals the author's evident admiration for Hunting, whose journal he later came to edit.

Despite the Association's obvious interest and concern for animal welfare and ethical treatment, Boden describes their absence from the NVMA's 1922 objects as an 'important omission', particularly in light of his assessment that the BVA "has ethical treatment of animals as an ongoing organisational involvement". The BVA's 'growing concern' for animal welfare was said to be evidenced by the

Association's lobbying for a Protection of Animals (Anaesthetics) Act 1954, which extended the number of species and surgical procedures for which anaesthesia was compulsory. In welcoming the Bill, the parliamentary secretary of the day stated that a request to extend animal protection in this way was what the Government had come to expect from the profession.

Boden returns to the BVA's involvement with another emergent animal welfare issue a decade later. With increasing intensification of animal agriculture in the post-war period, there had been widespread adoption of preventive medicine as well as an increased demand for veterinary surgeons to perform mutilations, such as piglet castration and cow dehorning. The welfare implications of new husbandry systems and practices had sparked public concern following the publication of Ruth Harrison's *Animal Machines* in 1964 and the BVA submitted extensive evidence to the ensuing enquiry of the Brambell Committee. Boden lays out the Association's views in a section 'Welfare implications of intensification', stating that the Association felt that "most of the commonly accepted practices of intensive husbandry could be carried out without cruelty and without detriment to the welfare of the animals concerned, provided that — an important proviso — they were operated with care and concern for the stock". Similar conclusions responding to criticism of large livestock units presaged veterinary arguments rehearsed again nearly 50 years later in the contemporary debate surrounding large-scale dairy farms. The BVA's response to the Brambell enquiry recommended that total darkness and close confinement in veal production were "undesirable and unnecessary", that birds should be effectively stunned before slaughter and stated that close confinement in battery cages was 'deplored'.

Later references and commitments to animal welfare include a 1979 assertion by BVA president, Don Haxby, that animal welfare is an area in which the veterinary profession had to lead, *Veterinary Record* reports that "the interests of animal patients [are] the profession's prime concern" and a quote from the companion animal session of a 2000 veterinary strategy meeting whose veterinary chairman hoped "that vets would not lose sight of animal welfare" as the companion animal veterinary sector continued to develop. Edward Boden set himself the clear aim of detailing the history of the British Veterinary Association and through an apparently meticulous examination of relevant archives appears to have done so with a faithful and methodical adherence to primary sources. Those, from later years, who shared direct experiences of veterinary life with Boden could comment more reliably on the accuracy of his account, but, for myself as a veterinary surgeon — and one who has served on committees of the BVA — *Punching Above Their Weight* achieves its aim, giving a fascinating insight into the Association's origins, and into the origins of several issues which continue to exercise veterinary and animal welfare professionals today. The book describes the BVA's transition from pragmatic beginnings to a science-

based, politically influential body, responding to changes in its external environment and representing its members with tenacity when necessary. Huge societal shifts, such as the decline in the numbers of horses requiring veterinary treatment following the introduction of motor traction, and the profession's ability to provide renewed societal benefits, provide reassurance that the veterinary profession will continue to adapt and contribute to contemporary issues, such as the sustainability of livestock production in a world of climate change and progressing ethical perspectives on society's responsibilities towards animals.

For those specifically interested in the history of veterinary ethics in Britain, Abigail Woods' contribution to the *Proceedings of the ICVAE* (Wathes *et al* 2013) gives a brief but more focused introductory account. Some of the observed value-based differences in approach to animal welfare between the veterinary profession and other animal welfare-focused groups are given attention in David Fraser's *Understanding Animal Welfare* (Fraser 2008). For those with a broad interest in veterinary matters, the recurring prominence afforded to the safeguarding of animal health and welfare throughout Edward Boden's thoroughly researched book is reassuring. *Punching Above Their Weight* can be recommended for giving a valuable historical perspective on the BVA's evolution, leading to the current high profile campaign on welfare at slaughter, while paving the way for forward-looking accounts. As veterinary surgeon and former BVA Ethics and Welfare Group chairman James Yeates notes in one such account: "our historical development can only describe what responsibilities we have had; it cannot prescribe what our responsibilities should be in the future" (Yeates 2013).

References

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The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights

SF Eisenman (2013). Published by Reaktion Books, 33 Great Sutton Street, London EC1V 0DX, UK. 309 pages (ISBN 978 1 78023 195 2). Price £18.00.

In *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights*, art historian Stephen Eisenman provides an original and challenging account of the history of animal rights in Western culture, mostly since the mid-1700s, as evidenced by the art and literature of the European and English-speaking countries.