

*Horses in Society: A Story of Animal Breeding and Marketing Culture, 1800-1920.* By Margaret E. Derry. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. xvii + 302 p., ill., notes, app., index. ISBN 978-0-8020-9112-3 \$63)

Darcy Ingram

Volume 31, Number 1-2, 2008

Natural Science in the New World: The Descriptive Enterprise

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/019761ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/019761ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (print)

1918-7750 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Ingram, D. (2008). Review of [*Horses in Society: A Story of Animal Breeding and Marketing Culture, 1800-1920.* By Margaret E. Derry. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. xvii + 302 p., ill., notes, app., index. ISBN 978-0-8020-9112-3 \$63)]. *Scientia Canadensis*, 31(1-2), 169–172. <https://doi.org/10.7202/019761ar>

with the question of “surplus alienation,” domination, and essentialism, and even advocating a *necessary* articulation with other political movements, these more recent theorists, at least in Biro’s presentation, still don’t provide a truly assertive (post-postmodernist?) response to the problem of alienation.

One yearns, finally, for Biro himself to take a stand. If he enters briefly into the territory of current political/environmental struggles, these short explorations are far outweighed by more abstract theoretical discussion. How *would* we move towards – or engage in – a political *praxis* which accepts that we, as human beings, *must* use nature to survive, but are not obligated to engage in the domination of nature or people in order to do so? How, concretely, would such a politics engage global warming, the socioeconomic side of natural disasters, the environmental justice movement, and military environmental destruction?

That Biro doesn’t assertively attempt to respond *in terms of actual political practice* to these questions speaks to far more than his style of presentation. It speaks, as well, to the current situation in which the roots of solidarity have been afflicted by a globalizing blight, and the Left, though not dead, now grows only rhizomatically or perhaps lies in seed-hibernation, waiting for another Spring.

D. SCOTT CAMPBELL  
York University

***Horses in Society: A Story of Animal Breeding and Marketing Culture, 1800-1920.* By Margaret E. Derry.** (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. xvii + 302 p., ill., notes, app., index. ISBN 978-0-8020-9112-3 \$63)

*Horses in Society* represents a thorough effort on the part of Margaret E. Derry to outline the evolution of the horse during a period of massive transformation. Linking the interconnected equine worlds of Canada, Britain, and United States, Derry successfully demonstrates the centrality of the horse in nineteenth and early twentieth-century society. Or perhaps more accurately, *horses*. For key to Derry’s study is her assertion that the changing social and technological contexts weighed heavily on horses, their roles, and ultimately on their very composition – as Derry puts it, the book explores “the alterations people thought were needed to make the horse fit better with the developing technology, and what practices breeders suggested as strategies to accomplish those changes” (p.xvi). As

such, *Horses in Society* centers to a considerable degree on how changing human demands in areas including agriculture, industry and transportation led to the development of various types of horses better fitted to these demands. In turn, it links the changing world of horses to issues including developments in science, medicine, and genetics, the growth and influence of the state, and the demands of modern warfare. In doing so, Derry thus explores a tremendous range of subjects, giving the work an appeal much broader than its focus on horses might suggest.

Derry is well positioned to write this history. An adjunct professor of History at the University of Guelph, an associated scholar with the University of Toronto's Institute for the History of Science and Technology, and a cattle breeder herself, she has covered similar terrain in two previous books: *Bred For Perfection: Shorthorn Cattle, Collies and Arabian Horses Since 1800* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), and *Ontario's Cattle Kingdom: Purebred Breeders and their World, 1870-1920* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). Not surprisingly, *Horses in Society* builds on this foundation. Divided into four parts, the book introduces the reader first to the world of horse breeding, in which Derry explores strategies and markets that led to the creation of light, heavy, and farm horses. Next is a discussion of the horse in its nineteenth and early twentieth-century military contexts, followed by an analysis of state activity in the development and regulation of the horse market and breeding industry, and finally by a description of changing cultural attitudes and practices regarding horses. British, Canadian, and American government documents comprise the bulk of primary source materials, and are amply supplemented by numerous agricultural and breeders' journals, and to a lesser extent by what Derry points to as a large but ultimately less useful body of horse-related books and articles from the period.

A number of issues are worth highlighting in which *Horses in Society* addresses significant gaps. First, the general context. The disappearance of the horse from all but recreational uses after 1920, Derry confirms, has obscured the degree to which these animals were until recently a part of daily life. What is more, Derry argues that the disappearance of horses was not a gradual process – social and technological changes in fact made horses more important during the nineteenth century, for everything from agricultural and industrial labour to the transportation of people and materials, the latter most notably in conjunction with the century's growing rail networks. As Derry shows, however, there was an irony in this. For it was the same process of industrialization to which these labouring animals contributed so heavily, she observes, that eventually made them redundant. Second, in exploring what she describes at one

point as the growth of “a sophisticated industry designed to market biological commodities” (p.xv), Derry challenges popular misconceptions regarding the longstanding existence of many horse ‘types’ or breeds. In fact, as Derry shows, the categories by which we understand horses today are in fact relatively new: ‘light’ and ‘heavy’ types of horses in particular were products of changing social and technological demands (the demand for horses that could meet increasingly specialized labour conditions) as well as evolving knowledge in areas of breeding and genetics.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, Derry observes in all of their complexity the limits as well as the reach of the epistemological and regulatory processes that shaped the evolution of horses during this period. As noted above, breeding had a lot to do with the evolution of science, particularly where growing knowledge of genetics, evolution, and the “plasticity of species” (p.23) challenged notions of heredity and race constancy. In turn, the science of breeding remained interconnected with various cultural attitudes and practices, all of which ensured the endurance of multiple, competing, and at times contradictory strategies. Indeed, it would be simplistic to view the evolution of the horse during the nineteenth century as a ‘controlled’ process. If breeders did not agree on strategies that would best meet the demands of a growing international market for horses, the demands of the market were equally unclear – a fact Derry amply demonstrates in her treatment of breeding and purchasing strategies related to military horses or ‘remounts.’ Nor did government regulatory efforts promise to control the evolution of an animal that was now so crucial. Interest in eradicating hereditary diseases, for example, was shared widely, and underpinned state interventions in horse breeding towards the end of the century. But together state interests, combined with those of veterinary professionals, a specialized breeding industry, and a market that differed dramatically between peace and wartime contexts made the evolution of the horse far less rational than one might assume. Complicating this further was the fact that many farmers themselves wanted neither a light nor a heavy horse, but rather a “general-purpose, agricultural horse” or “chunk” (p.79), and saw attempts by the state and private interests to regulate breeding as elitist.

As such, *Horses in Society* is a valuable contribution that will interest historians of science and technology, military historians, and anyone interested in the history of animals, economics or the nineteenth century in general. While those unfamiliar with the history of horse breeding and changing theories of reproduction may find its treatment of such subjects at times confusing, the book is generally accessible. By the same token, those familiar with work on animals by historians such as Keith Thomas

or Harriet Ritvo may find Derry's relatively limited treatment of 'cultural' issues related to art, aesthetics, and ethics in Part Four to be the weakest section of the book. That said, it is arguably to Derry's credit that *Horses in Society* devotes less attention to this avenue in favour of other, less frequently traveled lines of inquiry. Indeed, on this note it might be argued that the book's title is misleading. For if 'Horses and Society' is too broad a description, 'A Story of Animal Breeding and Marketing Culture' sells this study short. What Derry has produced, I think, is a history of the horse's encounter with modernity, and in particular with the physical or biological transformations that this encounter engendered. In this sense, it complements well the historiography that addresses this period of change.

DARCY INGRAM  
*Université Laval*

***Science, Technology, and Society: An Encyclopedia.* Edited by Sal Restivo.** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 728 p., index. ISBN 0-19-514193-8 \$150).

Since the advent of the Internet many of us have likely seen layers of dust accumulate on encyclopaedia sets that probably still adorn our bookshelves. The superb availability of information in our electronically-mediated world, coupled with increasing specialisation within many disciplines, has influenced how scholars access, search, store, and use information. As many of us know, this situation also creates problems with information management and raises important questions about how information can stimulate new insights and theories. How does one assess the quality of information available online and across such a varied set of venues? How do we make sense of dispersed and sometimes contradictory scholarly work without the benefit of context? In recognition of these challenges, several prominent publishers of scholarly books have revived the beast known as an encyclopaedia. Sal Restivo's *Science, Technology and Society: An Encyclopedia* is a prime illustration of how judicious and inspired editorial direction can be valuable by providing context to assist readers in navigating complex and often contentious topics like abortion, acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), genetic engineering, sex and the body, and women and minorities in the scientific community.

Restivo has collected a set of essays from an internationally recognised group of scholars to reveal the range of science, technology and society