



Mr. Hornaday's War: How a Peculiar Victorian Zookeeper Waged a Lonely Crusade for Wildlife That Changed the World

Stefan Bechtel

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He was complex, quirky, pugnacious, and difficult. He seemed to create enemies wherever he went, even among his friends. A fireplug of a man who stood only five feet eight inches in his stocking feet, he began as a taxidermist and an adventurer who tracked tigers in Borneo with friendly headhunters, lead crocodile-hunting expeditions in the Orinoco, and scouted the last remaining bison in the Montana territories.

William Temple Hornaday (1854–1937) was also a man ahead of his time. He was the most influential conservationist of the nineteenth century, second only to his great friend and ally Theodore Roosevelt. When this one-time big-game collector witnessed the wanton destruction of wildlife prevalent in the Victorian era, he experienced an awakening and devoted the rest of his life to protecting our planet's endangered species. Hornaday founded the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., served for thirty years as director of the renowned Bronx Zoo, and became a fierce defender of wild animals and wild places. He devoted fifty years to fighting gun manufacturers, poachers, scandalously lax game-protection laws, and the vast apathy of the American public. He waged the “Plume Wars” against the feathered-hat industry and is credited with having saved both the Alaskan fur seal and the American bison from outright extinction.

Mr. Hornaday's War restores this major figure to his rightful place as one of the giants of the modern conservation movement. But Stefan Bechtel also explores the grinding contradictions of Hornaday's life. Though he crusaded against the wholesale slaughter of wildlife, he was at one time a trophy hunter, and what happened in 1906 at the Bronx Zoo, when Hornaday displayed an African man in an “ethnographic exhibit,” shows a side of him that is as baffling as it is repellent. This gripping book takes an honest look at a fascinating, enigmatic man who both represented and transcended his era's paradoxical approach to wildlife, and who profoundly changed the course of the conservation movement for generations to come.

Mr. Hornaday's War: How a Peculiar Victorian Zookeeper Waged a Lonely Crusade for Wildlife That Changed the World Details

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Author : Stefan Bechtel

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From Reader Review Mr. Hornaday's War: How a Peculiar Victorian Zookeeper Waged a Lonely Crusade for Wildlife That Changed the World for online ebook

Jackie says

An interesting biography, although it jumped around in time in weird ways. Certainly worth reading if you're interested in the history of American conservation. Other than the chronology, a straightforward retelling of one exceptional man's life.

One flaw that was pretty significant to me, however, was the author's continued usage of outdated and offensive terminology and othering language for the American Indian people that appeared in the book, which startled me every time. To give the benefit of the doubt, I can assume that he's trying to echo contemporary language, but he doesn't do this skilfully at all. To just throw in words like "squaw" and "war-whoops and tomahawks" without setting them off in some way to show that this is not your own choice of language as a historian is not a great authorial choice to make, in my opinion.

Jean says

The late 1800s was an interesting time to have lived. Hornaday's life was well researched, and his travel experiences were fascinating. It's ironic that a man who killed animals to "preserve" them in museum displays became so passionate about protecting endangered species. The politics of the time influenced public opinion a great deal... similar to today.

Alice says

I find it really fascinating and counter-intuitive that a lot of conservationists (especially early on) were big hunters. Seems strange to both work to save animals/habitat and kill them. But, that's reality for Mr. Hornaday and his friends. This book is mostly about Mr. Hornaday's quest to save the American Bison from the verge of extinction - a quest that started by the startling realization that the species was nearly wiped out over the course of only two years in the last 1800's. The only reason this is not a five-star review is because of the way the book jumped around - I'm still not sure about when some things happened in relation to each other.

Madeleine McLaughlin says

Hornaday? Haven't heard that name. But I guarantee that you'll love him if you're a conservationist or sympathetic to the plight of wild creatures. He saved the buffalo from extinction and many, many other pluses for wildlife. Great read.

Allan says

Great book about an unsung hero. I was not familiar with this giant of the Wildlife Conservation Society. It is amazing that the battles he fought to preserve wildlife are even more important in todays challenges of global warming and species extinction.

Danielle T says

Took longer than I should've reading this, but it was interesting, especially compared to the account I read on Carl Akeley earlier this summer- two different approaches to bringing wildlife to the masses, both, coincidentally in New York working with Henry Fairfield Osborn (also, both taxidermists).

A definite read if you're interested in the history of the conservation movement or paradoxical Victorians.

Brittany says

When you start trying to delve into the history of zoos, there's not a whole lot of material for you to read. Much of it is spread in disparate sources, and a lot of it was written in the 1960s or 1970s and hasn't been updated. So the world was practically crying out for this book, a biography of William Hornaday, one of the most biggest figures in zoo history.

The editor of our magazine got an advance copy and said he didn't mind if I read it first! It had a big disclaimer apologizing in advance for all the typos, but I only caught a bare handful, if you don't count the time he said a fur seal's scientific name was *Ursus marinus* which I think we can all agree is a little more egregious than a mere typo.

Anyway, regardless of that travesty, this was a fine book, in the sense of fine jewelry or fine dining. It was very well done, solidly constructed, high-quality and enjoyable. Bechtal made neither the mistake of falling too much in love with his subject nor of standing so far aloof that the text became dry and unreadable. Hornaday was a larger-than-life figure and so his life makes for fascinating reading. He's one of those people you can tell you might not have enjoyed so much if you had to work with him every day (or worse, work *for* him) but from the comfortable remove of history and biography, he's an eminently enjoyable figure.

Hornaday's passion for wildlife lead him to save the American bison, be one of the very first people fighting for wildlife and environmental legislation, found the National Zoo, and then go on to run the Bronx Zoo (which he, like George Schaller, tried and failed, to have rebranded to something more scientific) for years.

His story is all the more enjoyable because he was nowhere near perfectly virtuous. He hunted and killed, even animals he knew to be rare, he was a hypocrite at times, he was an egoist, he saw himself as a holy martyr, he refused to compromise, and he never did see anything wrong with exhibiting an African pygmy in the ape house at the Bronx Zoo. But his tragic flaws make for a fascinating character, a riveting story, priceless history, and some really first-class discussion.

I highly recommend this book. Not only is it informative in the extreme, it's also amazingly engaging and just plain fun to read.

Corinna Bechko says

Really interesting biography of a man I knew very little about despite having spent most of my career working with wildlife and in zoos.

Milli says

American Bison are my favorite animal, so I knew I had to read this book.

Mr. Hornaday's story is full of passion, anger and love. He never gave up the fight, even from his deathbed, and never wavered in his love for his wife. We should have a Mr. Hornaday Day instead of Columbus Day.

It is a truly inspirational story, and also a frightening one. If it weren't for the efforts of Mr. Hornaday, America would be a truly different place. I would recommend this book to everyone, regardless of whether you consider yourself a conservationist or environmentalist. It's humbling and terrifying to know the limitless effects of our destruction, and even more humbling to know that one man saw the signs and demanded change.

Stefan Bechtel jumps around in his timeline quite a bit during the book, which can be a bit distracting when you're trying to keep the events in context. But overall its an enjoyable read and well-researched.

Ashley says

Rec'd on Brain Scoop: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGROuk...>

Kelly Buntin says

William Temple Hornaday (1854-1937) was an influential conservationist for this country. This is a well researched and written account of his life's adventures and then as he matured, his passion for educating the public and protecting the vanishing species that roamed the land that became these United States (as well as the world). A daunting task that Hornaday continued til the very end of his life. I highly recommend this tome to anyone interested in American history and the conservation movement.
