

15. Animal Rights and Welfare

‘Surely it cannot be denied that to inflict any kind of needless pain, for money or for personal gratification, is an act unworthy of a reasonable being. Everyone knows that many persons are compelled to use, and some to destroy, animals for food, but there need be no real cruelty. All unnecessary suffering can and ought to be avoided, whether animals be used for our pleasure or are designed for our food. There is something mean and cowardly in giving distress to a dumb creature that has little or no power of resistance. Such cruelty deserves no sympathy, but the strongest condemnation... the exercise of kindness towards brute creatures will help us to curb all unkindly feelings towards our fellow men. Cruelty to animals betrays an unmanly disposition, a little mind and a cold heart; but kindness, even to the lowest insects, is one of the characteristics of a manly spirit, of a great mind, and of a warm Christian heart.’¹

Rev. C. Stuart Perry, Anglican vicar of St Judes Church, Carlton, Melbourne (1868-87).

Hand in hand with dietary reform were the beginnings of the animal welfare movement in Australia. While vegetarianism and animal rights were never greatly publicly supported or accepted policies in the period, animal welfare was, and there were a number of organisations formed by vegetarians or which had vegetarians as active members. Like the Vegetarian Society (and most other reform movements), the first animal rights/welfare activities took place in Melbourne. The earliest known organisation to lobby on behalf of animals was the Humane Society that was formed around 1854 (not to be confused with the Royal Humane Society of 1874).

Animals in colonial Victoria were far more in evidence than now. Horses were the main means of transport and filled Melbourne’s streets. The ill-treatment of horses - in particular those used

¹ Perry, C. Stuart, *Man's duty towards the lower animals : an address delivered in aid of the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals*, in St. Jude's Church, Carlton on Sunday, May 10, 1874

commercially in cabs and in general haulage - caused constant distress to the compassionate citizens of Melbourne.

“What can be more melancholy than the sight of the long row of horses in the night cabs? Most of them broken down with age, or crippled by injuries and ill-usage, often marked with scars or bruises, lamed and screwed, brought out under cover of the dark, and worked by men who hire the use of them at so much an hour.”²

Horses were not the only animals to be openly abused. Animals driven into town for slaughter (often in very poor condition) or held for auction or sale in crowded pens - or even actually being slaughtered - were a common sight. Abattoirs were often within cities and most butchers slaughtered animals at the back of their suburban commercial premises, even though regulations in Melbourne from the 1860s forbade it. In Sydney, abattoirs were all over the city until centralised on the Homebush site in 1916. Until then it was not uncommon for pedestrians walking in a city to come across blood running freely down the pavement from a nearby back-street abattoir.

In an effort to enforce a legal solution to the cruelty, a group of like-minded members of the Society for Public Morality called a public meeting in December 1870, with the intention of forming a new organisation with animal welfare as its core aim. Thus, in 1871, The Victorian Society for the Protection of Animals (VSPA) was born. The organisation later changed its name to The Royal Society for the Protection of Animals in line with its British counterpart.



2 Perry, C. Stuart, Man's duty towards the lower animals : an address delivered in aid of the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, in St. Jude's Church, Carlton on Sunday, May 10, 1874

One of the bills printed by the Society and posted at police stations throughout Victoria. Image courtesy of the RSPCA Victoria.

Florence Hayward (1858-1939), the South Australian vegetarian and animal rights activist who wrote poetry and children's stories under the pseudonym 'Firenze', responded in an essay marking the VSPCA's inception:

“A Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals! I read the announcement with astonishment. There is then such a Society in our midst? Is there any work for them to do amongst us? They call for Essays, which they wish to publish! What, can there be a difference of opinion on the subject? Need there be a Society to prevent it? Need anyone write against it? Think a little.

Think of the over-driven, over-burdened beasts you see in the streets every day. Remember the accounts which the newspapers occasionally give of the cattle driven to the city for market, left unfed, unsheltered, unwatered in our sweltering summer heats for days together. Do not forget that stage driver who made a horse with a broken leg go fifteen miles over a bush road, dragged on by the other horses while he lashed and cursed the helpless beast. Recall, too the particulars of that drinking bout in the kitchen of a country inn, when a party of men and WOMEN roasted a cat alive for fun, while they sat drinking away the hours of a rainy holiday.

These things are of recent occurrence, and they happened in or near Melbourne. Do not ask, then, if there is work to be done - if there is need of the united efforts of a Society to make these things impossible amongst us, since not for mercy's why, then, for terror's sake - terror at the swift, sure, vigorous execution of the law, which now it is no man's business to enforce.”³

The VSPA succeeded in gaining widespread support including that of the leader of the Victorian Parliament, the Hon. Sir Henry Wrixon (President from 1901-1913), and Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin, (Vice President from 1901-1913, President from 1913-1918). Other influential figures on the management committee were several prominent businessmen and Rabbi Abrahams, representing the Jewish population of Melbourne, as well as Thomas Adamson, Consul for the United States.

³ Firenze (Florence Hayward), *The Present Duty : an essay*, Collingwood, Vic., Griffith & Spaven, 1873

Victoria's animal welfare laws contained within them the first anti-vivisection legislation in the world. Campaigns against vivisection were never an unpopular cause among the general public, let alone from vegetarian and animal welfare advocates. The VSPCA opposed it, as did Melbourne Spiritualists and the Theosophists. The Theosophists in particular actively supported - or indeed started - anti-vivisection organisations and were also keen members of the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection (BUAV) founded in 1896 of which, by the 1920s, there were six active branches working in different Australian states, most of which are still active today in some form.

The Melbourne publisher and bookshop owner, E. W. Cole, printed anti-vivisection pamphlets and kept a supply of related material available at his bookshop. The Fabian socialist reformer (and some-time vegetarian), Henry Hyde Champion, often raised the issue in his newspaper, *The Champion*. During the 1890s, he frequently brought the practice of animal experimentation to the public's attention in his editorials.

In 1896 and 1897, he reported details of experimentation on live animals. One of the experiments witnessed by a number of eminent scientists involved making Tiger snakes bite live dogs to see the effect of their poison. In Champion's view, the doctors "killed a dog by revolting and cruel means while several leading medical men looked on."⁴ By highlighting experiments such as this he tried to bring about the prosecution of the people responsible under Victoria's animal welfare laws. Unfortunately, he met with little success.

RSPCA branches were also formed in other Australian states between the 1870s and 1890s. In Queensland interestingly, the branch there for 70 odd years dropped the word 'Animals' from its title, as it also sought to prevent cruelty to children. It was thus the first organisation to actively seek to protect children in Australia, and mirrored the activities in Britain. For there, those responsible for creating the RSPCA also founded the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (SPCC). This disproves the old adage, that those who care for animals are blind to human suffering.

Numerous other animal welfare organisations sprang up throughout Australia in the early 20th century. There was a Wildlife Preservation Society founded in 1909, which sought to preserve Australian native flora and fauna. Its founder was David Stead who was probably the single most important individual in developing the Australian fishing industry, and who perhaps believed fish were neither wildlife nor native. There was an Animals' Protection Society formed to alleviate the

⁴ Dogs and Frogs : on the altar of vivisection, *The Champion*, February 29, 1896, p.69

suffering of animals in the meat industry and the Australian branch of the World League for Protection of Animals. There were also separate groups for individual species, such as the Gould League for Birds and Cat Protection Leagues, as well as societies created purely to promote more humane slaughter.

By the early 1980s there were over 70 animal rights and welfare organisations in operation,⁵ the leading 22 of which speaking with one voice under the auspices of the Australian Federation of Animal Societies, which was formed in 1980. The RSPCA, which by this time was an established force throughout Australia, with its many inspectors, members and volunteers did not join this organisation. The reason for this, in part, at least, was due to the fact that over the years a number of people actively involved in animal industries had joined and, in some States, lead the organisation. It can only be assumed that they had joined in order to prevent it from becoming a strong voice against the exploitation and cruelty on farms and to keep it focused on companion animal issues within the cities – wherein they had no vested commercial interest. Nevertheless, the RSPCA and its many volunteers and members still managed to do some good work. The greatest hindrance to the RSPCA in its work has been that it is restricted in its abilities to prosecute those responsible for animal cruelty. Although the RSPCA employs Inspectors to investigate and prosecute animal abusers it can only do this within the current legislative framework. As Australia's laws allow entrenched animal cruelty against 'production animals', the RSPCA Inspectors cannot prosecute those who farm in a cruel manner. Thus if a farmer once beats their dog, they could be prosecuted, but if they imprison and torture hundreds of pigs in tiny stalls for all of their miserable short lives, they are innocent of any crime. Until public opinion forces governments to change laws, the RSPCA, beyond their role of public education of consumers, is essentially powerless to act.

In recent years the organisation has taken on board many of the demands of animal rights organisations and has mobilised against the worst excesses of factory farming, battery cages, intensive piggeries and the trade in live animals to the Middle East. The adoption by the RSPCA of the principles of five freedoms, first introduced in the UK in 1965, has gone some way to give a framework for the ethical treatment of 'production animals'.

1. Freedom from Hunger and Thirst

By ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.

⁵ Animal Liberation, 1981 directory of Australian animal welfare-rights organizations, Sydney, 1981

2. Freedom from Discomfort

By providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.

3. Freedom from Pain, Injury or Disease

By prevention by rapid diagnosis and treatment.

4. Freedom to Express Normal Behaviour

By providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind.

5. Freedom from Fear and Distress

By ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.

Since the publication of Peter Singer's seminal work *Animal Liberation* (1975), there has been an extraordinary growth in the philosophical and moral support for animal rights and consequently veganism and vegetarianism. In December 1976, Animal Liberation was founded in Sydney with branches following in Melbourne in 1978, Brisbane in 1979 and Canberra in 1980. The founder of the first Australian Animal Liberation group, Christine Townend was directly inspired by the work – as the name of the group indicates.

While the later Animal Liberationist non-violent direct action stance, as developed by Patty Mark and others in the early 1990s, took its inspiration from more obvious political liberation struggles, its theoretical basis can also be traced back to Singer's arguments.

All previous animal welfare organisations, such as the RSPCA, have sought reform, rather than abolition, of the meat industry. In many respects they succeeded in their early years and brought about improvements in the transportation (at least within Australia) and slaughter of animals. Yet as animals lives became grimmer, as intensive and factory farming practices became widespread from the 1950s onwards, they signally failed to adapt to and challenge this new threat. Animal organisations that do not have as a first principle that animals are not food are by their own contradictions destined to fail. As Christine Townend stated:

“one did not defend the rights of babies, and then partake of a meal of fine roasted orphan”⁶

⁶ Townend, Christine, *A voice for the animals*, Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst NSW, 1981, p.5

Indeed it is only relatively recently that we no longer can view the incongruous sight of an RSPCA fundraising sausage sizzle stall.

Animal welfare organisations in the past have failed to address or stop what goes against the very essence of animal rights philosophy - the forced breeding, captivation, torture and deprivation of life which are inherent in meat production. It has only been the animal rights, vegetarian and vegan Societies which have rightly maintained that there can be no real end to animal suffering while billions of fellow creatures are slaughtered for food.