

## Chapter 8



# The World the Horses Made

IT IS UNLIKELY that there are any truly wild horses anywhere in the world today. During the Pleistocene era, right up until ten thousand years ago – when the human experiment in agriculture first began – wild equids proliferated in Asia, the Americas and Africa. In the modern world, however, only seven of these species survive: the African wild ass (*Equus africanus*), Asiatic wild ass (*Equus hemionus*), Kiang (*Equus kiang*), Grevy's zebra (*Equus grevyi*), mountain zebra (*Equus zebra*), plains zebra (*Equus burchellii*) and Przewalski's horse (*Equus ferus przewalskii*).<sup>1</sup> Yet a new one has come into being: the domestic horse (*Equus caballus*). While this recent arrival flourishes, five of the eight surviving species are 'vulnerable', 'endangered' or even 'extinct in the wild'. Przewalski's horse, which was once found in the remoteness of the Altai Mountains in the Dzungarian Basin and Chinese Turkestan, probably no longer exists in its pure state, having been diluted with herds of semi-feral horses. It exists nowhere in the wild; the last was a solitary stallion spotted in the Mongolian Desert in 1969. The immense herds of ostensibly 'wild horses' of the western United States, Australian desert, and South American llanos and pampas are really the feral descendants of sometime domestic stock.<sup>2</sup> The 'wild horse' nomenclature is revealing: 'mustang' is from the Castilian *mesteño*, meaning belonging to 'everyone or nobody'.<sup>3</sup> The worth of such 'wild horses' in the Americas fluctuated from very valuable to utterly valueless, as human needs varied over time. This offers a sharp contrast to the history of horses in southern Africa, where horses have never thrived as a feral population and, equally, were never without considerable worth. In southern Africa, generally speaking, a

horse had an owner: there were no vast 'wild horse' herds able to live freely on their own terms.<sup>4</sup>

Tellingly, even mustangs imported during the South African War (1899–1902) were immediately tamed for military use and later sold to South African farmers. Indeed, in vivid contrast to the herds of the American West, wild horses in southern Africa are anomalous – small, isolated groups which, because of their scarcity, have inspired local myths and followings.<sup>5</sup> For example, in the 1920s there were wild, shaggy horses with 'long, flowing manes and tails' on the islands at the mouth of the Orange River. A traveller noted that to evade capture these horses would plunge into the water and swim to 'refuge in the extensive island labyrinth'.<sup>6</sup> The palaeontologist Robert Broom thought them the descendants of a fossil horse, the long extinct *Equus capensis*, and the young Union of South African hoped they might prove a 'horsesickness-proof horse'.<sup>7</sup>

In a similarly water-logged example, the so-called 'mutant horses' of Bot River in the estuary between Kleinmond and Hermanus on the south-western Cape coast are said to graze on vlei or marsh grass and have hooves the size of plates. This group is believed to have roamed the salty marshland for a century, part of a herd hidden from soldiers during the South African War. Its numbers were reputedly swollen by horses released by farmers following mechanisation in the agricultural sector after the Second World War and added to by other escapees over the years. The tiny herd has engendered a localist folklore of salt-water drinking, webbed-footed horses, seldom seen by humans, as they roam behind the Kogelberg, an area once demarcated as a restricted military area for missile tests.<sup>8</sup>

In another southern African milieu, but in an antithetical environment to the small, damp habitat of the Bot River herd, a very different feral group has endured – in the arid vastness of Namibia. A couple of hundred so-called Namib Desert horses have survived in an area of about 350 square kilometres around Garub, 20 km west of Aus, a barren zone where rainfall is erratic and unpredictable – barely sufficient for succulents and a ragged stubble of Bushman grass growing in the hot sand. They are rumoured to be the descendants of horses that belonged to an eccentric German nobleman, Baron Hansheinrich von Wolf, who built a castle in the desert and died in action in France in 1916. Legend has it that his wife, maddened by grief at hearing the news, released his 300 prized horses into the desert. But they are more likely to be the progeny of horses left by soldiers during the First World War; those of the

## Riding High

South African Expeditionary Force and the retreating German colonial forces, with an admixture from a stud owned by the one-time mayor of Lüderitz.<sup>9</sup> Under Namibia's South African occupation their range fell under the control of a subsidiary of the Anglo American Corporation. The area was off limits to humans as a restricted diamond-mining area. Through the 1970s and 1980s, a mine security officer who developed a fondness for the herd made sure they always had water.<sup>10</sup>

Another ex-mining community, the nearly forgotten village of Kaapsehoop on a buttress of the Mpumalanga escarpment, nurtures its own feral population of about 200 horses. Community legend suggests that their ancestors were miners' horses dating back to the discovery of gold in the late nineteenth century. Locals are fiercely protective of the horses and warn visitors to slow down as the horses loom out of the perennial mist unexpectedly on the little-travelled roads.

Some feral herds exist today only in the imagination and memory. A feral herd was said to have come into existence after the 1852 shipwreck of HMS *Birkenhead* en route to deliver soldiers for the war in the Eastern Cape. At the eastern tip of Walker Bay on the Cape south-west coast, the ship struck an uncharted reef. The *Birkenhead* became famous as the first shipwreck where the 'women-and-children-first' rule was applied. The horses ignored this gendered directive and simply swam ashore. They were said to be the ancestors of a free roving band that roamed the *strandveld* plains east of Gansbaai until late in the twentieth century.

Such small runaway *droster* equine communities (and the occasional lone rogue) were fugitives from human society, while most horses have been captive within the human social order.<sup>11</sup> The 'world the horses made' was built in close conjunction with humans.



This book has talked about the horse as a commodity and as a device used by humans to effect change or to wield or display power. But, as the previous chapters have also shown, in another sense the horse has been the quintessential migrant labourer in southern Africa and moved about as the human economy dictated. In the subcontinent, the human and horse species have become entangled in a range of relationships from slavery, to partnership, to fellow combatant, and to a mutualistic alliance of sorts. They have also moved in

different labour arenas: horses have filled the roles of urban slave and rural serf. Both the strengths and vulnerabilities of horses acted as an historiographic ‘unseen hand’, radically affecting human history, from the outcomes of battles to patterns of human movement, both extending and imposing limits on human activity. This underlines the point that including horses in human history does more than simply complete the story – it changes it.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the preceding chapters have discussed the material difference horses made to human settlement, transport networks and military capacity; social life; and even the human sensory experience. It is clear that horses have changed history. What is much less clear is how best to write that history. Undoubtedly, horses were more than simply depreciable capital goods or data for a statistical series. This leads us to questions of how to write history that engages with animals as subjects. This chapter explores ideas suggested by the previous chapters, particularly Chapter 1, with a particular focus on social history’s long-time concern with agency and with understanding socio-cultural experiences from the perspective of those who actually lived them. Building on this basis, the chapter probes the constraints and possibilities of writing history that takes animals seriously.<sup>13</sup>

### Making horsetory?

Their story might thus be told in ways suggested by the rise of the ‘new social history’, which encouraged studying the past not from the perspective of the elite, but from the viewpoint of such previously neglected groups.<sup>14</sup> Yet including horses in (human) social history exposes important contradictions. As this chapter will show, the history of horses can be to some extent compared to that of oppressed social groups/the subaltern, but at the same time, horses have been the adored animals of the colonising elite and certainly instrumental, if not critical, in the process of colonisation and oppression. Thus, to locate horses at the centre of the narrative, one has had to extend the directions suggested by social history radically while accepting that the parallels are analogous but not interchangeable. In examining ‘the world the horses made’, this chapter draws on the example set by classic studies of ‘worlds’ made by the oppressed – like Genovese’s *World the Slaves Made*; Sobel’s *World They Made Together* or Hill’s *World Turned Upside Down*.<sup>15</sup> As Nash suggested, and as discussed in Chapter 1, some working in environmental history (the usual home of Animal

Studies, or the animal turn<sup>16</sup>) have embraced social history's notion of exploring history from below, while others consciously fuse the approaches to write 'socio-environmental' history.<sup>17</sup>

Horses share similarities with other under-represented groups: marginality from the centres of power and record keeping. As Chapter 1 has argued, social history has long offered ways of discussing the oppressed and the silenced. From this tradition one can learn from the ways in which other under-represented groups received historiographic recognition. Of course, to make the parallel between animal and human oppressed is neither to conflate nor to trivialise the suffering of any subaltern.<sup>18</sup> Simply, one draws on what the new social historians of the 1960s called the worm's-eye view of history, which was liberating to a generation frustrated by the conventional histories of the elites.

Over the next two decades, historians began to focus on women's history, black history, gay history, and the histories of colonised peoples and the working class. An illuminating case study is offered by women's history (which shares many similarities with Animal Studies, because both their stables comprise practitioners from a liberal, middle-class tradition). The first wave of feminist interventions into historiography countered exclusively male narratives with a gynae-centric variant of 'big man' history focused exclusively on the powerful women of the past. This tradition of 'herstory' was progressively succeeded by a second groundswell that studied less-powerful women, first as passive victims of patriarchy (just as the Fabian orthodoxy insisted the working class were just inert victims of *laissez-faire*). Then followed a third wave acknowledgement that even under oppressive patriarchies, ordinary women possessed, albeit in limited circumstances, agency of their own (as Thompson and others did for the working class). The parallels between writing the histories of both groups are striking. Horses and women have much in common historically: both were socially integral but subordinated groups that were not always conveniently tractable. Some characteristics of a horse, especially a display of self-will, were described as particularly female, as in an Afrikaans narrative from the third decade of the twentieth century, which translates to 'it is always very difficult to foresee what a chestnut horse or a woman will do'.<sup>19</sup>

Drawing on the gendered or women's history paradigm, perhaps historians' first step could be simply to demonstrate that animals have a history in the first place. Just as first 'great women' were 'reclaimed', historians claimed the animal equivalents like the famous racehorse Horse Chestnut and military leaders'

## The World the Horses Made

magnificent chargers. Secondly, historians could find the ordinary horses, victims of society's oppression, like the nameless horse owned by Wolraad Woltemade, who was compelled to rescue drowning sailors from a wreck until he drowned himself; or the over 300,000 horses that died in the South African War.<sup>20</sup> Historians could ask whether an animal has a history that can be traced and expressed. Firstly, clearly each animal has an individual history, a history often written on their bodies. The scarred knees of a Cape carthorse, saddle sore scars of a Maluti Mountains pack horse and the steroid-based bone problems of a racehorse all bear testimony to how horses have endured human needs. Their history is reflected in their behaviour too. The cordite-inured police horse, the dead-mouthed school master and the bolting ex-racehorse all reflect their individual past experiences through their reactions to current experience.

Indeed, the focus on narratives and life stories became a significant part of writing women's history, which required the documentation of women's ordinary lives. Social history has uncovered the value of life history research, with many of the most complex and detailed explorations of women's history incorporating extensive life history and personal narratives.<sup>21</sup> Narrative forms are infused with specific notions of causality; they link the individual life and the sense of agency. Thus, one could start to write the biography of a horse called Somerset. In Chapter 5, this horse was alluded to as simply 'Dick King's horse'. Yet Somerset had more varied experiences and a more interesting life than such anthropocentric labels allow. Somerset, a brown (bay or chestnut) gelding (named after Lord Charles) was first owned by an English officer, then bought at great expense by a prospective Voortrekker for his journey into the interior. Somerset experienced the Great Trek and saw active service – he was purportedly even ridden in combat by Boer notable Andries Pretorius. Later, in Port Natal, Somerset was allegedly stolen and sold to the British garrison. The British were then besieged by the Boers near Congella in 1842. Dick King, a member of the Port Natal Volunteers, and an African volunteer, Ndongeni Ka Xoki, volunteered to ride to Grahamstown to obtain relief for the beleaguered troops. King and Ndongeni (who accompanied King for part of the way, but suffered due to a lack of stirrups) alternated between riding Somerset and an unnamed white horse. Somerset won renown as the horse that made this incredible journey of 600 miles or 960 km in ten days, fording over a hundred rivers. In his later years, Ndongeni remembered Somerset as a horse who leapt where other horses could only walk or wade.<sup>22</sup> Ndongeni and King received

## Riding High

farms for their services. Somerset was widely rumoured to have died the day after the epic ride. A counter-narrative has him growing old and fatly happy on King's sugar farm.

Similarly, another way to approach writing history that takes animals seriously could be simple: capturing the lived experience of particular creatures in the past. Static snapshots of the daily lives of horses in the past could be combined and run chronologically to create a picture of how an average day in the life of a horse changed over time, much as the first works on social history on women and the working class did. For example, an everyday picture of horses in the 1730s could be derived from Otto Mentzel, a German expatriate who lived at the Cape, who described such a day as follows:

At six o'clock, or if it rains hard, a little earlier, the ... [horses are brought in with the other animals]. Each kind [of animal] is driven into its own kraal, but the saddle-horses are put in a stable. But unless they are wanted for riding the next morning, they are not on that account given forage at home.<sup>23</sup>

Contrasting snapshots like this with others underscores the twin points that horse's lives can be discovered and that these ways of life changed over time.<sup>24</sup>

But were these lifeways affected by the horses themselves? This brings us back to the key question of agency, which occupies most discussions of oppressed groups by historians. 'Agency' has been the principal element of the third way of writing the history of the oppressed, which accepts that such groups are not passive victims, but acted in their own right, albeit not in circumstances of their own choosing. In other words, as Marx said of humans, they 'make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances.'<sup>25</sup> This notion of agency is now explored in the context of multiple possible ways of writing horses into history.

Previously, agency has not been a salient feature in historical analyses of animals. Robin Law, for example, who wrote a pioneering study of horses in West Africa, was at pains to point out that he himself had no particular enthusiasm for horses *per se* nor treated them as subjects in their own right.<sup>26</sup> Equally, McShane and Tarr sculpt an able biography of the horse, but their focus was not on the horse as an animal possessed of agency; instead, they discuss it as a 'living machine' in an urbanising society. A similar approach is observable in

## The World the Horses Made

Africa, from Fisher's ground-breaking work on horses in the Sudan<sup>27</sup> to Webb's research of the equine role in western Sahara and Senegambia<sup>28</sup> and Legassick's study of horses in the Samorian army.<sup>29</sup>

Efforts to locate agency in human groups are often seen as an act of redress. Equally, an approach to inserting animals into history might take the form of reparation, drawing on the approaches, for example, of feminist historians and historians of slavery, who emphasise what has been termed 'compensatory' history. A fissure lies in the division between researchers working from an academic activist position conducted in a spirit of commitment to praxis and a camp more deliberately non-partisan. The first faction contends that Animal Studies should provide the representative voices for non-human animals in an institutional structure that considers them voiceless. This faction contends that because animals do not speak for themselves and leave no texts, Marx's formula on French peasants in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* is uncannily applicable to animals, who cannot create their own documents, oral or written, or author their own historical accounts: 'They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.'<sup>30</sup>

### The unseen hoof

Another way to address animal agency is to reassess the idea of agency itself. Some have argued that the failure to question agency in the telling of history actually reproduces familiar forms of power.<sup>31</sup> Efforts to reassess the histories of labour, girls, the subaltern, childhood and so on attack prevailing hegemonic notions of agency predicated on the idea of an autonomous individual who follows the imperatives of rational choice, fully aware of how the world works. Instead, some historians search for more subversive tradition, although they still tend to structure narratives around political rebellions in public spaces. Yet 'agency' and public resistance are not synonymous and a search for agency should not be indexed necessarily by the presence of heroic acts of conscious self-determination.

Compellingly, on the issue of agency, historically humans involved with horses *recognised* their horses' efforts as resistance; i.e. there was contemporaneous identification of (animal) agency.<sup>32</sup> For equine insurgency deemed incorrigible there remained capital punishment, as in the case of rogue horses that were executed. On a very obvious level, animal agency might also



## Riding High

be seen as surfacing, at one remove, in the very constraints that humans have had to apply to them. The instruments of control – reins, stables, whips, bits, chains, curbs – tell their own story about the *need* for control. Horses exhibited what James Scott called the ‘weapons of the weak’.<sup>33</sup> Building on Thompson and Bourdieu, Scott argued that the displays of public domination by the elite differ from the camouflaged protest of the weak – for humans, millennial visions, gossip (or horse maiming)<sup>34</sup> and for horses, even less conspicuous acts. Acts of rebellion might be quotidian, like the horse’s flattened ears and bared teeth as the girth of the saddle was done up. As Hobsbawm observed, after all, most subordinate classes are less focused on transforming society than in ‘working the system ... to their minimum disadvantage’.<sup>35</sup> Such everyday insurgency might be reflected in the refusal of the marooned horses to be recaptured and the fawn-coloured male called General who jumped ship, referred to in Chapter 2; the ‘underbred and stubborn’ horses in Chapter 3 who cantered riderless down the road after bucking off their masters; the horses scattered by helicopters who disrupted the funeral referred to in Chapter 4; or Malpert’s ‘kicking and lashing’ in displeasure at a stranger’s attempt to ride him in Chapter 5. Even the restrictive practice of knee haltering could not always curb Cape horses, who often still cantered away ‘nimble’ on ‘three legs’.<sup>36</sup> Such rebellions are found in the throwaway and incidental, as in the half-humorous story jotted down by Lady Anne Barnard, a late eighteenth-century observer of the Cape milieu and a self-confessed ‘coward of Horses standing at their own discretion without a governor’, who nearly suffered the ‘ugly accident of being killd [sic] after her carriage horses bolted and left her with injuries that needed two days in bed for her to recover from.’<sup>37</sup> The illustration below from the South African War elegantly depicts an almost unobserved rebellion: the British officer’s horse in the foreground displays an obediently lowered head and a body controlled in the approved manner. In the background, however, a horse reacts in his own way, defying his rider’s attempts to rein him in.

These small, private protests can be overlooked easily by historians. Like other powerless groups historically, horses were exploited, they laboured, they produced, they followed human orders and they were a force in social change.<sup>38</sup> In the final analysis, it is difficult to refute their agency.

## The World the Horses Made



*An almost unobserved rebellion. Cape Mounted Rifles.*

*Source: From the author's collection*

### Horsepower

To move to another kind of agency, historically the reasons for successful conquest and colonisation have been honed down to three advantages: superior weaponry, inadvertently imported diseases and material technology (animal power, in this case) – ‘guns, germs and steel’, to use Diamond’s phrase – brought in by settlers and their stock.<sup>39</sup> On the various frontiers, new technologies opened up fresh routes to the accumulation of wealth and the acquisition of power. As Storey has shown in southern Africa, environment, technology and politics shaped and co-created each other. What made it different in this case was that the technology in question was sentient.<sup>40</sup>

## Riding High

Ownership of the means of production by the powerful was foreshadowed by ownership of the means of destruction.<sup>41</sup> Simply put: horses were mobile, breathing armaments. Indeed, as the *Union of South Africa Yearbook* baldly phrased it in several editions: the horse ‘played an important part in establishing the supremacy of the white race.’<sup>42</sup>

Yet, horses did not stay in solely elite hands and neither can their effects be understood in declensionist terms alone. Certainly, horses were agents for marking and defending social borders, as Chapters 2 and 3 have shown, but also for shifting them, as Chapters 4 and 7 demonstrate. Neither did horses remain under white control. Race, class, gender and geography played significant roles in horse ownership and use over time. The disparities of power between these categories were (and remain) fundamental to the ways people relate not only to each other, but to the environment, including, of course, to particular animals. Of course, the agro-pastoralism that preceded colonial capitalism was not a prelapsarian state and should not be romanticised: unequal power relations and environmental injustice existed then too. With colonial incursion, racial classification and the new classes it created further limited the ways blacks interacted with the environment and animals, as Chapters 3, 4 and 6 have shown. Although race was not the only salient characteristic of that power – gender, class, ethnicity and geography all played a role.

The power achieved through cooperation across species was more complex than that of germs or guns. It was made up of three parts: it was partly the power over the horse; and chiefly the power over other humans that having a horse gave to its owner. But there was a third dimension to consider: the agency of horses themselves in acknowledging and understanding power that made human power (over them and therefore over other humans) possible in the first place.

Horses were able to be used in human power plays because the horses themselves understood power only too well. For example, horses thrown together in a camp for the first time will quickly sort out a new hierarchy, with demonstrations of dominance, both symbolic (like teeth baring and squealing) and physical (like kicking and biting). One of the key reasons why horses could be domesticated and successfully deployed within human societies was because, in their wild state, they had herd hierarchies that translated to human direction. Their own suite of behaviours thus made them (and a very few other animals) capable of being domesticated. As discussed in Chapter 1, they accepted

## The World the Horses Made

human direction because they understood the idea of a chain of command. The emphasis horses put on hierarchy made them valuable: horse and human were able to function as co-workers, with the driver or rider acting as the proxy dominant horse.

Equally, horses form strong individual bonds, grazing together, grooming each other and standing head to tail for hours to swat the flies off one another. Grooming by humans, necessary to remove dirt and parasites, replicated herd behaviour and encouraged the horse to understand himself as part of a horse-human herd of two. The horse's ability to form individual bonds with other horses and the transferability of this trait to humans were significant. Horses put their trust in herd leaders so, for example, in the cacophony of war a scared horse would listen to his rider.

### Horse sense and human senses

The past is mysteriously silent. Historians have long neglected noise, mainly because of its ephemerality and lack of an archive. The story of sound in human history includes both how aural landscapes change over time and how humans relate differently over time to sounds. Noise is sound with emotions attached to it. Thus, not only sound, but noise is historically contingent, varying over time.<sup>43</sup> Aural landscapes – or soundscapes – are created by configurations of physical ecology (in South Africa, east coast dune forests replete with reflective surfaces, for example, resonate differently from the Karoo or the Highveld). Certainly, even without changes to the vegetation, the rural and urban soundscapes of southern Africa are significantly different because of horses and were characterised by the sounds of hammer on anvil; the jingle of bits; the creak of leather saddlery; the crack of whips; the whinny of horses; and, as a contemporary observed, 'the muffled beat of hoofs, the dull champ on bridles, the ring of a stirrup.'<sup>44</sup> Travellers' nights, sleeping around the fire, were disturbed not only by snoring men, but also snorting horses.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps above all, the absence of the noise of that by which they were replaced – the machine – made the horse era world a different place from either the pre-colonial period or the present. Sometimes the sounds would have been grisly, but familiar at particular periods, e.g. as a combatant reminisced about a particularly vivid visceral memory of 1900: 'the unmistakable thud which a heavy bullet makes on horseflesh.'<sup>46</sup>

## Riding High

Horses changed human history not only on the macro level discussed in the other chapters, but in the small, intimate arena of the sensory and visceral, and, for some, on the personal level of belief. In the shadow of the big stories about horses – conquest and colonisation – exist small slices of personal, intimate history. These are the secret histories of how contact with horses changed the way in which humans experienced the world physically and changed how some thought about the world and their own place in it. The sensory fabric of human life in southern Africa has been shaped by the coexistence of humans and horses since the mid-seventeenth century.<sup>47</sup>

### Hearing (and smelling) horses

Human understanding of sound is historical and cultural, with the ability to interpret noise (and experience it as melodious or jarring) changing over time. As Coates points out, noise is to sound as stench is to smell – something dissonant and unwanted. It is tempting to assume that noise is noisier now. However, in much of the urbanised West this simple linear model of noise pollution growing worse over time is flawed, because while the ascendancy of the engine has meant a noisier world, it is worth remembering that opposition to horses in urban centres (and support for the horseless vehicles) was the perceived need for the reduction of racket.<sup>48</sup>

In South Africa, as horses were replaced by machines in the twentieth century, discussed in Chapter 6, and where horses were increasingly kept out of towns in the mid-century, it was for reasons of economy, disease and waste rather than noise. Southern Africa saw the rise of ‘imperialistic spread of more and larger sounds’ in urban settings as horses replaced feet, carts replaced horses and cars replaced carts.

As recently as 1900 it would not be unusual for a human in some groups – like some men within the so-called Cape ‘Malay’ Muslim community, and a majority of Boer and Basotho men in southern Africa (as Chapters 2, 3 and 4 have shown) – to be able to decipher the equine lexicon.<sup>49</sup> Many humans would have spoken a rudimentary horse–human patois. A local equine vernacular was in evidence by at least the nineteenth century and probably much earlier, e.g. ‘the chirp, psp, used in the United States to urge horses forward, is used to stop them in South Africa.’<sup>50</sup> While some domesticated animals, like dogs, for example, could be taught highly idiosyncratic signals from their human owners,

horses could not. This was because horses typically were used by different riders or drivers concurrently and often had more than one owner in their lifetime. A horse that could not comprehend the signals was of little value. Thus, humans had to teach horses common signals. Equally, humans had to learn horse signals. They would have been able to understand that squeals and grunts indicated excitement; snorts signified interest or possible danger; a soft whicker was meant to reassure a foal or express anticipation of food; and a whinny meant the horse was all alone. Some (mostly male) humans were particularly familiar with the subtle nuances of the idiom – those engaged in the horse industry itself, like grooms, stable boys and jockeys; those who used horses as part of their jobs, like itinerant *smouse* (peddlers); transport riders; or communities that imposed horsemanship as a condition of manhood, like Boers in the eighteenth and Basotho men in the mid-nineteenth century. They were able to understand the non-verbal vernacular, e.g. the v-shaped tightening of the muscles behind the nostrils revealing tension or the curled lips conveying a stallion's interest in a mare in heat. The non-verbal language included a horse swishing a tail, or shaking a head to indicate irritation, or moving its ears to convey its moods.<sup>51</sup> Such humans were able to interpret the flared nostrils of an excited or frightened horse, or the thunderous farting of a startled – or triumphant – horse. The horse in a stable or kraal with an *afdakkie* (small lean-to) would have generated a cosy, familiar flatulence. Our history tends to come deodorised, as Roy Porter has pointed out.<sup>52</sup> But a history of the sensory reminds one that the smell generated by horses was an everyday part of the life of a significant proportion of people.<sup>53</sup>

Unconstricted spaces were also affected. The sensory experience that was altered with the introduction of the horse age in South Africa included the human experience of speed and the meaning of distance. This was, in fact, one of the reasons they were imported. Chapter 2 explored in depth the reasons for horse importation from 1652 onwards, but a central motive was to utilise their capacity for short bursts of speed to intimidate local communities. The ability to travel at less intense but more sustained speeds proved useful too. A horse could cover six miles an hour or well over 30 miles a day if not too heavily loaded.<sup>54</sup> For example, on the eastern frontier, for the Xhosa campaigns, the British army, for example, bought Hantam ponies that were expected to be able to do 230 miles in four days, if pushed to their extreme limit. With the physical elements of increased speed (and, concomitantly, decreased relative distance), human geography itself changed. Distances between places started

## Riding High

to be understood by those with access to horses in the number of days' travel on horseback.

Thus, horse riders or drivers or passengers in horse-drawn conveyances could experience the world in fresh terms of speed and distance. Yet they were undeniably circumscribed by the horses' own vulnerabilities. Just as human sensory experience of the southern African world changed with the arrival of horses, it changed with their passing from centrality. In a world without horses, humans no longer heard or made certain sounds. Human ears no longer heard the heartbeat thud of hooves on ground. Conversely, the very sounds humans make changed with the transition to mechanisation. Humans still make certain sounds, but in a horseless world they have forgotten the reason why they do it: the traditional tuneless whistle through their teeth as they clean their cars was once necessary during grooming to keep out the dust that arose as they brushed the horse down.

This chapter has explored some subaltern histories in the shade of the big story of horses as instruments of conquest. The acquisition of horses also introduced individual people and small groups to new experiences of the world in the intimate, personal realms. Humans were lent speed and a fresh sense of distance by riding or driving horses. In borrowing the power of horses, humans also fell victim to their vulnerabilities, particularly to disease, which imposed a suite of opportunities and limitations on human experience. Moreover, as Chapter 3 discussed, some humans could acquire equine power: physically, through riding or driving them and mentally, through connecting with them spiritually. Through rituals and trances, AmaTola shamans could even become horses.

### Environmental agency

Thus, the history of the relationship between the two species is made up not only of the grand narrative of human development buttressed by the labour of horses, but also by small stories and curious connections.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps the epitome of the grand narrative has been the act of domestication itself, popularly understood as the epitome of human agency over a passive, agentless cipher, as noted in Chapter 1. Generally, 'domestication' has been seen anthropogenically as a process whereby succeeding generations of submissive, tamed animals gradually became absorbed into human societies, were increasingly

exploited and eventually lost all contact with their wild ancestral species.<sup>56</sup> However, an argument could be made that some (albeit perhaps limited) agency was exercised on the part of the animal, that the process may have begun as a symbiosis, in which certain species of animals ‘chose’ to become associated with human societies as a survival strategy at the end of the Ice Age.<sup>57</sup> They challenged the popular Manichean understanding of domestication as either a heroic act of human ‘triumph over nature’ or a tragic act of human ‘domination and debasement of nature.’<sup>58</sup> At the end of the Pleistocene era, rapid climatic changes that disrupted habitats and food supplies favoured animals that were the animal equivalent of ‘weeds’ – opportunistic, adaptive generalists. Crudely put, in the ensuing extinction spasm, evolution favoured some animals with juvenile traits that made them appealing to *Homo sapiens*. The rapidly changing environment created a natural selective pressure that favoured neoteny (the retention of juvenile traits into adulthood). Humans would have selected animals with paedomorphic or neotenic variations because they were more tractable. Those animals who became adult enough to breed, but remained neotenous enough to cower and play and to tolerate human beings and other strange species, contrived to carve a niche for themselves. Humans helped these forever-young animals succeed by feeding, sheltering and even breeding them. Thus, so-called ‘artificial’ selection by humans was arguably ‘natural’, or at least exhibited some animal agency.<sup>59</sup>

Horse domestication took a comparatively lengthy period to develop and probably depended on chance genetic changes that would have predisposed some horses to breed in captivity. Horse domestication could thus, in a sense, have been initiated (at least genotypically) by the horses *themselves*.<sup>60</sup> The most credible hypothesis is that both the human and equine parts of the equation would have evolved together in a mutually dependent relationship. Arguably, the equine species’ nomadism could have lured human societies into a nomadic lifestyle – perhaps the ultimate evidence of agency.

Environmental historians have challenged common assumptions about human agency in other ways too.<sup>61</sup> One way to breach the divide between evolution and history is to think about an organism by placing it firmly in its environment rather than seeing it as a self-contained individual confronting an external world.<sup>62</sup> So another possible way to tell the story is to couch it in terms of the natural history of an invasive species. An ecological reading of history could couch the horse’s history as the invasion of a non-native species and the



impact of this alien, allied in an influential symbiotic relationship to another invader, on local biotic communities.<sup>63</sup> From the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, European nations dominated the earth and, as a result, Europeans and their organisms made an appearance nearly everywhere.<sup>64</sup> Some aliens arrived by predictable accident (like rats jumping ship and emigrating secretly to the mainland), some by slightly less predictable accident or small errors of judgement (like the rabbits on Robben Island) and some by a frankly weird twist of fate.<sup>65</sup>

Others arrived by design. The horses introduced to the Cape from the mid-seventeenth century (and then on the cusp of the twentieth century), as Chapters 2 and 5 explained, were deliberately brought in as part of a bigger plan for an invading sub-set of *Homo sapiens* trying to expand their home ranges. Strictly speaking, there had been an earlier version – the giant prehistoric Cape horse or zebra (*Equus capensis*) discovered by Broom that roamed the *fynbos* (sclerophyllous heath) – wiped out by climate change or by early human predation 12,000–10,000 BP.<sup>66</sup> But this creature's younger cousin, a non-native species, arrived as late as 350 BP. Introduction of a non-native species – like this youthful equine cousin – occurred when 'propagules' arrived in a new area outside their previous geographic range and established a viable population. Strictly speaking, 'colonisation' by a species occurs when a 'founding population' is able to reproduce and 'increase sufficiently to become self-perpetuating'.<sup>67</sup> In southern Africa, this has not happened for horses, outside of the few isolated examples already discussed (and even those had human assistance in droughts). A species is said to be 'naturalised' in its new environment when it successfully establishes a new self-perpetuating population that is incorporated into the resident ecosystem. Without the mutualism of another species (*Homo sapiens*), the horse could not be said to be naturalised. Indeed, this is a narrative of not one (mid-eighteenth century) equine invasion, but rather three (mid-eighteenth century; mid-nineteenth century and early twentieth century; and, finally, a smaller American invasion in the mid-twentieth century), as the earlier chapters argued.

Yet, even so, as the preceding chapters have shown, horses were undeniably both vectors and recipients of environmental forces, which is another way of interpreting 'agency'. As vectors, horses precipitated environmental change: there even appear to be signs of active resource management among some horses.<sup>68</sup>

## The World the Horses Made

There was certainly evidence of indirect impact, particularly at specific flashpoints. For example, immediately after the Anglo-Boer War/South African War, new diseases were introduced and epidemics raged, as explored in Chapter 5. The introduction of the horse thus altered the environment, changing the flora of the new territory. Foreign weeds were noticed in the remount and repatriation camps. The one million tons of fodder – chiefly hay and oats – imported to support the horses needed by the imperial troops inadvertently imported a number of fellow travellers. The seeds of foreign plants survived the digestive process and were excreted in the horses' faeces.<sup>69</sup> The nomenclature of the weeds of war reflected their origin: 'langkakiebos', 'kleinkakiebos' and 'kakiedubbeltjie', 'kakieduwweltjie'<sup>70</sup> – with the 'kakie' referring to the British soldiers. 'Nassella-polgras' arrived from hay imported from Argentina, polluting grass and lowering the carrying capacity of pasturage. Little sweet-toothed Argentine 'sugar ants' (*Linepithema humile*) arrived with the horse fodder and were distributed with fodder for the army's horses. These small, fast, competitive ants, who milk other insects for 'honeydew', spread into the interior and are now are themselves marching on Pretoria.

Of course, horses wrought other kinds of ecological change. Horse tracks can contribute to erosion – unsurprisingly, as the impact force of a galloping hoof is 8.89 kN – six times greater than that of the human foot.<sup>71</sup> Along very localised paths in the veld, galloping changed indigenous flora to more mesic composition – literally, squashing – and thereby reducing the number of invertebrate fauna in the soil.<sup>72</sup> Compared to other ungulates, horses possess a unique evolutionary history that makes them disturb the environment in a very different way. As noted in Chapter 2, distinct from ruminants, horses are cecal digesters and, together with their large body size, this kind of digestion adds extra time-energy constraints.<sup>73</sup> This means that the free-roaming horse is one of the least discriminating grazers, leaving fewer plant species unscathed. Moreover, this kind of diet means that horses have to consume 20–65 per cent more than would a cow. Coupled to this, horses have elongated heads and supple lips, and, unlike cattle, possess upper front incisors. As a result, they can nibble plants more closely to the ground, setting back plant regrowth further.<sup>74</sup> In South Africa, horses were an ecological disaster waiting to happen as soon as their number reached a tipping point or their population became feral.

But this disaster never struck. While certainly harbouring the potential to wreak environmental havoc, the horses of South Africa never did – unlike

## Riding High

the vast herds of the American West and Outback Australia, and even on a very minor scale, Namibia.<sup>75</sup> There was much soil erosion in southern African landscapes, but little of it was attributable directly to horses.<sup>76</sup> This was essentially since they did not become feral because of ecosystem constraints, particularly local diseases, and the consequent high (human) value placed on the horse. Any 'feral' population or escapees were appropriated by humans for use or as trade goods. Basically, a living horse was an owned horse and horses did not roam in large herds. Therefore, as a species, they never inflicted substantial environmental damage: there was never a 'plague of horses'.<sup>77</sup> Where they wrought destruction it was through the actions of their riders and the power lent by horse ownership.

### Plundering and pondering power

This power was coveted. So a new crime came into being: horse theft. For example, James Backhouse, a travelling Quaker, noted that by the mid-nineteenth century horse stealing had become a serious social crime. Such crime was not restricted ethnically and occurred between different groups and crossed national borders.<sup>78</sup> It even produced its own celebrities (like Scotty Smith, who won renown as the 'Robin Hood of horse thieves').<sup>79</sup> The nature of crime changed too: speed could now be an element of a quick getaway. Horses whose riders were victims of robbery were sometimes killed pre-emptively to prevent hot pursuit. In 1807, for example, a band of Bushmen stole 300 head of sheep belonging to a Hantam farmer, murdering the shepherd (a slave) and killing nine horses in order to stall the chase.<sup>80</sup>

This power also affected human ways of imagining, as illustrated by the changing cosmology of the AmaTola Bushmen in Chapter 3 and expressed in changing metaphors of dominance. Horse terminology became integral to metaphors of power, for example, in Basutoland by the late nineteenth century in a place where a mere generation previously horses had been unknown. As discussed in Chapter 4, a son of Moshoeshoe likened the people to a horse that:

must first be trained before it can obey; [t]here are countries where horses and cattle may still be caught in a wild state, this is a country where wild men are still to be caught. You are the trainer who must catch and tame us.<sup>81</sup>

## The World the Horses Made

The state's relationship to the people was couched in equestrian terms, as was the role of masculine identity for specific ethnic groups, discussed in Chapter 6, as in De Wet's famous dictum: 'A Boer without a horse is only half a man.' Thinking 'with' horses, as Levi-Strauss had it, was far more widespread in southern Africa – and simpler – than thinking 'like' them.

### The view from the saddle

This brings one to the final way of approaching writing the history of the horse: from the perspective of the horses themselves. Just as Gutman suggested of Genovese's *World the Slaves Made* (he compared it to an imagined history of steelworkers that began with a 150-page biography of Andrew Carnegie),<sup>82</sup> 'the world the horses made' is still too much a history of their riders. It is still too much the 'world the horses were *made* to make' (by humans) rather than 'the world they made'. Equally, it is perhaps also too much *by* their riders. Simply studying the unrepresented is not the same as seeing through their eyes; social history is not a synonym for 'bottom-up history'.<sup>83</sup> The view from 'below' is not presented; rather, it is the view from 'above' – literally, from those sitting on its back. Thus, one gets a view of (and largely 'from') the elite, not 'of' or 'from' powerless people, nor of the animals themselves.

After all, most individuals in the history of southern Africa neither owned horses nor had access to their use. Asymmetric access to the technologies of power, of which horses were one, buttressed elites. Horsemen had to have some power to even possess horses and once they did, they could seize more power and deploy it more effectively by using horses in a military capacity or in utilising trade networks more lucratively.

Thus, unless one accepts the notion that animals, or at least domestic animals, are themselves marginalised or oppressed groups, using horses as a subject precludes much that is valued by social historians, which is the ability to tell the story of the marginalised and down-trodden. If one really wanted to tell a 'bottom-up' social history story of the (human) marginalised, donkeys would be a better vehicle than horses. In the twentieth century, horse power became increasingly obsolete in commercial agriculture, although it remained significant in small-scale agriculture (albeit entirely secondary to the ox and, in some places, the donkey).<sup>84</sup> Even though in South African urban areas workhorses are no longer widespread, horses are still used for neighbourhood deliveries

## Riding High

and collections and are a key form of transport in Lesotho. Donkeys are low maintenance and low cost, are more resistant to disease, and are able to survive even on drought-shrivelled grasses. Similarly, donkeys were particularly used by women, since horses were the instruments only of the men in some societies, like in gerontocratic Basutoland (which began as an innovative borrowing by a vulnerable group, but helped to improve military capacity, which bolstered the group's power).<sup>85</sup> As Epprecht and others have commented, on account of the donkeys' perceived destructive grazing habits, they were the focus of a punitive campaign by the government in the 1920s and 1930s in Basutoland. The chiefs (at least ostensibly) supported the Basotho women against the state on this issue, preserving donkeys, which became a symbol of this gendered resistance.<sup>86</sup>

In focusing on a different vulnerable group, Nancy Jacobs has carried out an extraordinary class-based analysis of 'the Great Donkey Massacre' of the 1980s in the homeland of Bophuthatswana. From the 1940s the South African Native Affairs Department, followed by the puppet regime in Bophuthatswana, imposed authoritarian conservationist regulations. Only the rich could afford to accumulate cattle for status or commercial production or keep horses, but the poor were able to afford and maintain donkeys. Anti-donkey propensities transcended race and remained entrenched in class: affluent cattle ranchers and officials attacked the widespread agro-pastoralism of commoners, blaming their donkeys for precipitating erosion by first greedily devouring and then trampling the veld. Periodic small-scale donkey culls exploded during a severe drought into the arbitrary and savage slaughter of thousands in the so-called Donkey Massacre of 1983 – a silent massacre, hidden from the official archival record.<sup>87</sup> Soldiers from inside their armoured vehicles shot and killed donkeys. Some people tried to flee with the donkeys or even hide them in their houses: bloodied carcasses piled up, traumatising residents. As a distraught woman mourned in the aftermath of the massacre, '[i]t was like they were people'.<sup>88</sup> Jacobs speculates that the killing was politically driven, designed to remind the commoners of the futility of opposition. It was in effect a demonstration of the power of the state over poor and disenfranchised people. Afterwards, the carnage became politicised – a cause against the Bophuthatswana puppet government and apartheid. A protest song was later written about the slain donkeys haunting the puppet leader and urging listeners to join *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, the armed wing of the African National Congress.<sup>89</sup>

One could also use a focus on donkeys to tell the story of people perhaps

even more liminal than the Thornveld agro-pastoralist – the itinerant sheep-shearing *'karretjie mense'* (donkey-cart people) of the arid Karoo, who represent a rural under-class, 'the poorest of the poor', tracing descent from Khoikhoi and /Xam-speaking San ancestors. Their nomadic *'karretjie'* lifestyle emerged only in the modern era in response to the wool industry's changing needs. With fencing, the farmers' needs for full-time shepherds lessened and labour was required really only in the shearing season, so a floating excess labour force arose. At the end of the nineteenth century the shearers moved on foot, but within a few decades in the early twentieth century they adopted the donkey cart, constructed from defunct horse carriages and, later, car parts.<sup>90</sup> Numbering an estimated 5,000 by 1994, the *'karretjie mense'* received scant poverty relief measures with the coming of democracy; they were technically classified as coloured under apartheid, although as one woman observed: 'We are too poor to be brown. We are the yellow people.'<sup>91</sup>

Poor whites, an indigent group that excited much more public and state attention than the *'karretjie mense'*, were linked to donkeys too. As ownership of the beasts was racialised, there was concern from middle-class reformers and politicians about the reliance of indigent whites on donkey transport. For example, in the first decades of the twentieth century in the Cape the state provided donkey transport for impoverished white school children who lived more than three miles from a school. The Carnegie Commission into the Poor White Problem, however, raised a widespread concern: 'Donkeys are most generally used for this purpose, and many teachers are of the opinion that the intimate association for many hours each day with this type of animal has an adverse influence on the child!'<sup>92</sup>

### From the horse's mouth

Thus, as a lens solely into the history of marginalised humans in southern Africa, horses are not as good a choice as donkeys. However, horses were (and still are) used on small-scale farms and in urban settings, like itinerant coal merchants and cart drivers of the Cape Flats and some urban settlements like Soweto. They were and remain in widespread use in the Lesotho Highlands. Yet even in those cases, horse owners (almost all men) represented an upper strata among the poor. If, however, one were to try to embrace the teachings of social history to write through the perspective of 'the silenced' in a very different way,

## Riding High

one would have to offer an equine history of the world ‘from the horse’s mouth’. Aldo Leopold famously urged us to ‘think like a mountain’, but, as mentioned above, even thinking like another mammalian species has proved challenging to historians.<sup>93</sup>

Horses and humans would write different histories. Both cultural and biological differences between the species would shape very different kinds of stories about their pasts. There are some similarities. Like some southern African human communities, feral equid societies are large and polygamous, and, like many humans, individual horses live in long-term, non-territorial reproductive associations.<sup>94</sup> Just as in most human societies, incest is avoided. In the herd, everyday decisions about where to eat are made by an older mare. Horses, like humans, have few physical defence mechanisms: both use flight, but humans use tools and both groups’ survival strategies centre on the formation of strong social bonds. Social isolation is always highly correlated with extreme stress. Unlike humans, however, horses are not obsessed with territory. Horses do not – in Scott’s term – ‘see like a state’. Moreover, with different obsessions, histories and ecological niches, horses and humans fear different enemies. For example, horses and humans would tell very different stories about the South African War. As a Boer combatant observed, horses that had coolly withstood enemy rifle fire could be stampeded simply by a ‘night-roving porcupine’.<sup>95</sup> The nature of horses ‘cultures’ varied geographically, depending on acquired knowledge of local conditions, e.g. in the wide-open veld of the Free State ‘if a horse [saw] a tree it shie[d] at it’.<sup>96</sup>

The second difference in the history narrated by horses would be the chronological and temporal structuring. The human horological obsession provides no template for how horses structure time. Furthermore, horses’ nasal acuity allows them a broader temporal understanding than humans possess; their ‘nasal vision’ allows them to see not only through space, but also time. Thus, thirdly, our worlds look and feel different and so, concomitantly, would our historiographies. Our biological constraints show us a very different world: horses’ hearing is far more sensitive than that of humans. A horse’s own sense of smell is acute – like hearing, it has evolved as a vital part of its defence system. There is ongoing production and receiving of pheromone signals (small messages produced by skin glands). Horses have an olfactory experience different from that of humans; they can smell emotions and sexuality, allies, enemies, and places. Members of a group are identified by a corporate odour.

## The World the Horses Made

Particular smells – like those of fire and blood – resonate sharply and rapidly, generating understandable alarm in a predator-fearing herbivore species that evolved while roaming highly combustible grasslands.

Historians and other humans tend to dwell in the realm of the visual. Equine sight is very different to that of humans. Their eyes are large in comparison to other mammals, suggesting a reliance on that sense, with the size giving them good night vision. Unlike humans, horses focus by raising and lowering the head rather than altering the shape of the lens. Their eyes are on the side of the head with monocular vision so they can see separate objects with each eye at the same time, permitting wide lateral vision and curtailing only immediate frontal vision. This allows a grazing horse almost panoptic vision, even at night, essential for wary herbivores. Seeing like a horse is well nigh impossible for a human, but many have tried to think like a horse, which was essential in the processes of domesticating and taming them.

An experiment in blurring the genres of *history* and *natural history* with an exploratory ‘horsetory’ of the world is possible. This hippomorphic story would be suffused in the horses’ physical pleasure, memory, intense fear and cyclical seasonality, and strongest traits (as grass-eating prey herbivores with a fatal tendency towards over-eating and over-heating). It might be a story of grass, foals, blood, sex, pain, fear and food – perhaps mainly food. It is an interesting and helpful exercise to write history through the eyes of the horse, forcing the human historian to adopt a new and sympathetically imaginative perspective. But it remains a Rorschach test, revealing more about the historian (and her/his own epoch) than about horses. Similarly, social historians have received analogous critique for ‘ventriloquising’ their subjects, silencing the authentic voice ‘from below’ and allowing only the narrative voice of the historian to be heard.<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, how useful would a history of horses without humans be? As Thompson observed: ‘We cannot have love without lovers, nor deference without squires and labourers.’<sup>98</sup>

Yet historically, humans have put more effort into trying to understand the world from the horse’s point of view than that of any other animal. It was necessary for humans to think like a horse – to a certain extent – in domesticating, training and riding them – dangerous and intimate processes that historically have compelled humans to see the world through horses’ eyes far more than, say, the eyes of a cat or a snake. There have been South African horse trainers who specialised and made it their sole profession, particularly



## Riding High



*In training a horse in western Pondoland in the twentieth century, a small boy, known as the 'inkawu', or 'monkey', was the first to sit on the horse's back.*

*Source: Campbell Collections, University of KwaZulu-Natal, C52-281*

in the twentieth century, as discussed in Chapter 7. But in southern Africa, the bulk of the population has 'trained' (or 'tamed' or 'broken in' or 'brought on') its own horses over time by merely soliciting advice from those who are experienced.

At first this advice was simply given over the fence post or transmitted from homestead to homestead, and later, particularly in the twentieth century, in the popular agricultural press.<sup>99</sup> A vernacular lore, coupled to a more international equine body of knowledge, was arising, fuelled by the mixing of horse cultures precipitated by the war. As discussed in Chapter 5, there is evidence of contemporaneous acceptance of the notion of equine agency among combatants in the South African War. This was in accordance with the contemporary climate, with Darwin arguing for a real continuity between the emotional lives

## The World the Horses Made

of humans and those of animals, with differences being of degree rather than kind.<sup>100</sup>

Like other vulnerable groups, horses were exploited. They laboured, they produced, they followed human orders, they were a force in social change. Perhaps more than any other animals (except dogs), horses were treated as human. Compellingly, on the issue of agency, historically, humans involved with horses *recognised* their horses' efforts as resistance, i.e. there was contemporaneous identification of (animal) agency.<sup>101</sup> For insurgence deemed incorrigible there remained capital punishment, as in the case of the executed rogue horse referred to in Chapter 2. Horses also displayed the 'weapons of the weak'.<sup>102</sup> They disobeyed commands; destroyed equipment; escaped; and resisted by, literally, 'bucking the system' or 'kicking over the traces' (albeit very rarely successfully). Horses were a great cause of untimely (human) death. Not only were they frequently (albeit passively) embroiled in metaphorical downfalls, as discussed in Chapter 3 – like that of Somerset and Branford<sup>103</sup> – but they were commonly the active and direct cause of physical downfalls. In the end, it is difficult to deny their agency.

### Conclusion

This chapter has explored alternative ways to write history that tries to engage with the lives of animals. The social history of the horse–human relationship reveals how its experiences alter in time and space, as does (concomitantly) the social experience of that relationship. This kind of history could run the gamut between models of the labile and contingent versus the innate, or the social versus the biological. Nature and nurture are inescapably important – the two are locked together and both need to be understood in writing social history. Looking at the real breathing animal points the historian back to the material, while not ignoring the symbolic resonance of the horse. Of course, it is not a fundamental rewriting of southern Africa's past, but it changes, however slightly, how historians might write the social history of the South African War, for example. There are real, undeniable differences in the way humans and non-human animals inhabit the world. But perhaps the anthropocentric notion of agency, like its inverse environmental determinism, is too simple to describe what takes place. Hard technological determinists might see a kind of 'agency' even in iron horses and spinning mules, let alone in living, breathing horses

## Riding High

and mules.<sup>104</sup> A different lens perceives the origin of agency in human action, with the horse a vector subject to human actions and desires, and also to many factors beyond human control. In that sense, this book has discussed the world horses were ‘*made to make*’ (by humans) and, to a small but real extent, *made* themselves. It was a very different world from the one they first entered, in which the only equids were quaggas and zebras.

To conclude by returning to one of the herds that escaped human society: the feral horses of the Namib attract thousands of tourists each year and when they faced starvation during droughts in the 1990s, public relief efforts were overwhelming. Why is it that these runaway horses touch a chord in some human societies? They have something that not only fascinates particular humans, but for which we actually envy them: evidence of agency. These horses seemed to have gained the freedom to live according to their own rules and their own social order. The chapters that preceded this have surveyed the horse and its connection to social power, from its pre-history in a horseless pre-colonial state where the equids were wild, to the history of the horse in the two and a half centuries of horse-powered state, to a post-history of the horse as a memory – an icon of nostalgia and identity, discussed in Chapter 7. Something about the horses triggers a human reaction in the modern urbanising world. Wildness is not a trait that horses have usually had in southern Africa. Chapter 2 explored the difference between the identity attached to susceptible equine imports of southern Africa compared to that attached to the feral herds of the Americas. In the latter, the horses were themselves a frontier to be conquered, but in southern Africa they were a tool in the conquest of the frontier and remained vulnerable. So some humans latch onto the very tiny populations of ‘feral horses’ in their little pockets of wilderness in a way that is disproportionate to their number, everyday lived reality and history. This is because such animals are not only biological creatures, nor solely technologies of change, but also totems to which humans can attach their dreams and desires, in ways the previous chapter has explored. With the horses of Bot River, the Namibian Desert, the Kaapsehoop and the Sandveld of Gansbaai, it is a yearning not for the wilderness, but for wildness – and perhaps for agency.