

Dr. LAUDER LINDSAY'S
LEMMINGS

*Mad beasts and misanthropy
in a Victorian asylum*



by RICHARD
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'THE SCORPION
seems deliberately
to commit suicide by
stinging itself fatally.
It does so under the
influence of such
motives as fear or
despair.'

WILLIAM LAUDER
LINDSAY *Mind in
the Lower Animals in
Health and Disease*
2 VOLS. LONDON :
KEGAN PAUL, 1879.

Leaf through the second or subsequent editions of Charles Darwin's *Descent of Man* (1874) and you will find a handful of footnotes citing the work of one William Lauder Lindsay.¹ Read Lindsay's entry in the revised *Dictionary of National Biography*, and you might be forgiven for concluding that the high point of this Scottish physician's career was his *Memoir on the Spermogones and Pycnides of Lichens* (1870).² We beg to differ. In *Mind in the Lower Animals in Health and Disease*, a sprawling two-volume treatise published at the end of his life in 1879, Lindsay found his metier: not vegetable love, but animal madness. He ranged across continents and centuries, pillaging writers from Pliny to Darwin and ushering his readers into a dark, destabilised world of simian



1. See Darwin, Charles: *The Descent Of Man, And Selection In Relation To Sex*. Edited With An Introduction By James Moore And Adrian Desmond. London: Penguin Books, 2004 (Rpt. Of 1879), Pp. 23, 100, 119.
2. Seccombe, Thomas (Rev. DJ Galloway): 'Lindsay, William Lauder (1829-1880), Physician And Botanist', In *Oxford Dictionary Of National Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

neurosis and reptilian psychosis, suicidal scorpions and deranged, Prufrockian lemmings.

Darwin and Lindsay both sought to make *Homo sapiens* part of the natural world, but they came at the question from opposing directions. Darwin saw Lindsay's work as a small and comparatively unimportant thread in his own evolutionary tapestry. But Lindsay argued that the history of human-animal relationships was, like the history of attitudes towards the mad, dominated by superstition, misrepresentation and cruelty. He set out to restore the maligned reputation of the animal kingdom by demonstrating 'the psychological superiority of the lower animals – the dog, horse, elephant, parrot or ape – over the human child, and even the human adult', and showing, in the process, that all creatures – from pea crabs to collies – were smart and sensitive enough to suffer doubt, depression and insanity.

Lindsay was a widely travelled, fairly eminent member of the Scottish medical landscape, his research cited by Darwin and published in some of the leading medical journals of the period, and his life recorded in the *DNB*. He seems to have seen *Mind in the Lower Animals* as part of a serious attempt, both scientific and humanitarian, to sweep aside existing notions of the limits of the mind. But his obituarists concentrated on a different side of his life and work: Lindsay the retailer of sentimental anecdotes, an eccentric anthropomorphist of Swiftian proportions (though lacking Swift's wit and savage indignation). Lindsay's work is part of a long tradition in Western thought, one which sought to explore the boundaries between the divine, the human and the animal, and in doing so to discover what it meant to be free, conscious and responsible. But his sentimental anthropomorphism and his engagement with evolutionary theory marked Lindsay as distinctively Victorian, responding to the hopes and anxieties of the British nineteenth century.

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In *Perceiving Animals*³ the historian Erica Fudge identifies the



3. Fudge, Erica: *Perceiving Animals: Humans And Beasts In Early Modern English Culture*. Illinois: University Of Illinois Press.