

ANOTHER RHINOCEROS MYSTERY

As is reasonably widely known among aficionados, as the SS "Orchis" arrived at London Docks on the evening of 7th December 1872, a Sumatran Rhinoceros (of the Hairy-eared form, if you recognise it) among its cargo gave birth to an apparently healthy calf. When it's borne in mind that it's known the animal(s) belonged to a reasonably prominent dealer/importer named Rice, it's perhaps rather surprising that, as things have stood ever since, it isn't known what became of either of them.

As I say, this much is fairly common knowledge.

The life and work of a zoological historian is fascinating, highly fulfilling - and awash with (mainly pleasant) surprises. This came home to me, most forcibly, this last March (2006), when I located a "Letter-To-The-Editor" that had appeared in the now long-defunct magazine *Land and Water* (which by all accounts was a good one) dated 14th December 1872. It was penned by a prominent personality whose name is well known to you - Frank Buckland (Francis Trevelyan Buckland). As is, again, well-known he had a peculiar propensity for eating most unlikely things - such as Rhinoceros flesh (which he said resembled very tough beef) and chops from an exhumed Z.S.L. Leopard which had been dead for some time - but rather surprisingly his multivorous activities did not contribute to his death, in 1883.

His letter is far too lengthy to appear here in its entirety, but it's devoted to the Rhinoceros birth and contains much hitherto unreleased/unknown information.

It appears - and this, for a start, is revealed for the first time - that at the beginning of the 73 days voyage from Singapore, a pair of Sumatran Rhinoceroses had been placed in separate cages on the deck but "the frightful waves smashed the cage of the male, and he died on the voyage." Quite likely, but perhaps more likely, I cannot help feeling, he had to be shot as he rampaged about the deck...

Frank Buckland went on to explain that these animals had been caught in Malacca (later, Malaya) in "pitfalls" and it appears that "out of six or seven Rhinoceroses so caught, the average is only one uninjured and fit to send to Europe." - which, of course, was an appalling state of affairs. When he went to see mother and baby they had been installed at No.1 King's Place, Commercial Road, London and - this is interesting - were the property of Messrs. C.W. Rice, A.H. Jamrach and C. Hagenbeck. The calf was described as having a "ridiculous-looking innocent hairless face, not unlike that of a newly-born Mouse; it carries its ears folded backwards like a Hare, and its body is covered with black hair; while it has a little horn as big as a shilling on its nose. It had a narrow squeak for its life." This was because, shortly after birth, it squeezed between the bars and was found wandering on deck, getting wet and cold, under the winter sky.

Mr. Bartlett (now that name rings a bell, somewhere) was approached for advice, and on his suggestion it was wrapped up in blankets and removed to Mr. Rice's house, where the latter's wife tended it before a roaring fire before the mother arrived in her travelling crate. It's interesting, and could be highly significant, that Bartlett specified that under no circumstances should Cow's milk be offered - which causes one to wonder whether he knew, even then, that this milk is

far too "feeble" and generally lacking in nutriment to be of much use to a great many other species.

The mother was obviously steady enough to be milked "like a Cow", and the youngster took it from a bottle, but he became so lively that Mrs. Rice was unable to hold him, so he was reunited with his mother and the two installed in a warm and dark corner of the Rice establishment, where Junior was given "a box to himself and a feather bed to sleep on". The box in this context must have been a loose-box, as one Jack, who was described as Rice's head keeper, slept in it with him to ensure he was "warm and comfortable".

The female - which was described as "a great beast about 10 feet long and about four feet six inches high" (although I wouldn't have thought she'd have been as long as that; if she were she must have resembled the result of some unspeakable *amore* between a Rhinoceros and a Dachshund) - had hitherto been very tractable, "but now she is getting a little savage, even though she has a nice warm Horse-rug tied over her, and has the best of food." The calf was strong and active, walking about by itself in and out of the box and lying by the mother after feeding from her.

Frank Buckland again: "I have tasted the milk of the Rhinoceros. It is excellent. I suppose I am about the only man who has tasted Rhinoceros milk and eaten the steak of a young Hippopotamus in London." He went on to say he'd be "very sorry" if these two interesting and valuable animals were allowed to cross the Atlantic, and trusted sincerely that the Council of the Z.S.L. would see fit to purchase them - but obviously this was not destined to come about.

By sheer luck, rather than my skill or otherwise as a researcher, I've also come upon another account of the birth in a copy of *The Field*, of approximately the same date; it isn't signed, so we can but assume it was penned by a staff journalist. Thus we learn:

"Whatever may be said of the birth of a young Hippopotamus in the Zoological Society's Gardens" - this would have been the animal to become the famous Guy Fawkes, born 5th November 1872 - "the event has since been eclipsed by the birth, in the London docks, of a young Rhinoceros (*R. sumatrensis*)" - yes, it really gave the scientific name! - "the same species as the animal which lately died in the Gardens." (Again, this would have been the very short-lived female which arrived as a £600 purchase of Jamrach on 21st August 1872, and died exactly a calendar month later.) Almost unnecessarily it was pointed out that as the birth was both unexpected and unprepared for, plus its adverse circumstances and conditions on board ship, it was quite astonishing that the calf should be doing so well. The event took place in the Victoria Docks, by the way. "Jack" informed the writer that the youngster suckled no fewer than seven times during the night before his visit.

Whoever-he-was described how he was led down some steps into a dark stable where, by the light of a bull's-eye lantern, he could see the far end had been partitioned off with sacking in order to exclude light. In this compartment the female was lying down, but the calf, seemingly attracted by the light, walked confidently towards these disturbers of its peace and so gave them an excellent view of himself - "In appearance it reminds one of the young Hippopotamus, but has a longer head and apparently stands higher on its legs... From its feeding so well we have little doubt that it will live and grow, and it is hoped Fellows of the Zoological Society and their friends may be saved a journey to the Far East, by inspecting the new arrival in their own Gardens if it can possibly be secured for them."

As I say, previously only the barest bones of this matter seem to have been recorded for posterity, but now these two accounts have together contrived to clothe the skeletal material with a reasonable amount of new and interesting tissue. Let's cast about it a bit...

For a start, both writers were struck by how sturdy and healthy the calf was - doing well in fact and clearly, to use a trendy term, having "bonded" with its mother, so in theory at least its future was "set fair". However, one noted authority, none other than Richard J. Reynolds of Atlanta, Georgia, specifically states elsewhere that it lived only a fortnight - but without revealing any details and/or source.

Apart from this, it seems strange that after this fairly detailed account of their installation in a decidedly grim part of the East End, not another word appears to have been uttered or penned about either animal: I first read about the unlikely birth close on half a century ago, and although I've made reasonably thorough efforts to discover more about their fate(s), have been utterly and completely unsuccessful. Note that both scribes hoped the animals would be purchased for Regent's Park, but they obviously weren't, while Frank Buckland hinted very clearly they were United States bound - almost as though he had inside information on the issue. Certainly, though, there seems to be no date or destination given for their or the female's departure from Rice's care, or in fact how long the latter was with him. The obvious move at this juncture is to check on whether any examples of this spectacular species arrived in the States around this period, so it's time to consult Dr. Reynolds' carefully researched and chronicled records of Rhinoceroses in trans-Atlantic collections.

In fact there were two - both in circuses - in the 1870s. The Adam Forepaugh show boasted of a "monster two-horned hairy Rhinoceros as large as an Elephant" in 1874, and which was killed when its beast waggon fell through a bridge while on tour the following year, while in 1873 "John Robinson's World Exposition" exhibited a "double-horned, three ton, black Sumatran Rhinoceros, cost \$13,000". This, apparently, was still with the show as relatively late as 1880. Either of these could have been the Rice/"Orchis" animal, but unfortunately no dates of arrival or acquisition are given.

My own feelings - a hunch if you like - is that she did not reach the States. I feel it's far more likely, especially given the recent birth, that she succumbed *en route*, either to metritis - a common malady caused by the unnoticed retention of a piece of placenta - or eclampsia or post parturition septicaemia, any of which would "fit". Consequently it's more than likely her mortal remains were cast into the mid-Atlantic.

As I say, it's no more than an educated guess - but it would take a great deal of disproving.

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