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Foreword Review HISTORY

The Zoo: The Wild and Wonderful Tale of the Founding of London Zoo: 1826-1851

Isobel Charman
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This is a vivid, panoramic account of the first great public zoo.

Isobel Charman's *The Zoo* is an imaginatively written history of the world's first zoo, opened in London in 1828, conveyed through the perspectives of seven historical figures.

Included among these seven perspectives are Sir Stamford Raffles, who initiated the collection of species for the proposed institution; architect Decimus Burton, responsible for the unique design of animal holdings, like the high-doored giraffe house; Devereux Fuller, the London Zoo's head keeper in the 1830s; Charles Spooner, a veterinary surgeon; Charles Darwin, a corresponding member; and the aged Earl of Derby, president of the Zoological Society of London.

Through these dramatically different points of view—mined from journals and staff records, museum catalogs and architectural plans—Charman offers a panoramic account of the first great public zoo and the turbulent era in which it came into being. Added to this is a cavalcade of exotic species like kangaroos, emus, leopards, a black bear named Toby and Obaysch the hippopotamus—the first ever seen by British citizens. The stories of these creatures' often difficult transport from their native lands, as well as their acclimation to London weather and treatment by well-meaning though often inexperienced keepers, lends a special pathos to this adventure in natural science.

The Zoo is distinguished by the author's vivid portrayal of the times, as well as her boldness in inhabiting the viewpoints of these driven men. When, for example, Darwin visited the new zoo and came upon the rhinoceros enclosure, "he was greeted by the remarkable sight of the rhinoceros running at great speed around its yard." Even for a great thinker who had already seen so much of the world, Darwin "laughed out loud when he saw it, rushing to the bars" and, standing with other spectators, was "treated to the spectacle of the huge, inelegant beast galloping from one end of the enclosure to the other."

The Zoo is an intriguing account of a colorful story immersed in Dickensian times.

LEE POLEVOI (March/April 2017)

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