



The Feejee Mermaid and Other Essays in Natural and Unnatural History

Jan Bondeson

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In his new collection of essays, Jan Bondeson tells ten fascinating stories of myths and hoaxes, beliefs and Ripley-like facts, concerning the animal kingdom. Throughout he recounts--and in some instances solves--mysteries of the natural world which have puzzled scientists for centuries.

Heavily illustrated with photographs and drawings, the book presents astounding tales from across the rich folklore of animals: a learned pig more admired than Sir Isaac Newton by the English public, an elephant that Lord Byron wanted to employ as his butler, a dancing horse whose skills in mathematics were praised by William Shakespeare, and, of course, the extraordinary creature known as the Feejee Mermaid. This object became the foremost curiosity of London in the 1820s and later in the century toured the United States under the management of P. T. Barnum. Bearing a striking resemblance to a wizened and misshapen monkey with a fishtail, the mermaid was nonetheless proclaimed a genuine specimen by "experts."

Bondeson explores other zoological wonders: toads living for centuries encased in solid stone, little fishes raining down from the sky, and barnacle geese growing from trees until ready to fly. In two of his most fascinating chapters, he uncovers the origins of the basilisk, considered one of the most inexplicable mythical monsters, and of the Vegetable Lamb of Tartary. With the head and body of a rooster and the tail of a snake, the basilisk was said to be able to kill a person with its gaze. Bondeson demonstrates that belief in this fabulous creature resulted from misinterpretations of rare events in natural history. The vegetable lamb, a mainstay of museums in the seventeenth century, was allegedly half plant, half animal: it had the shape of a little lamb, but grew from a stem. After examining two vegetable lambs still in London today, Bondeson offers a new theory to explain this old fallacy.

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