

## Book Reviews

THOROUGHBRED NATION: *Making America at the Racetrack*. By Natalie A. Zacek. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2024). xiii, 352 pp. List of figures, introduction, acknowledgments, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth \$39.95, ISBN 9780807182826).

I grew up in Lexington, Kentucky, a community with a tradition of racing fast horses dating back more than two centuries. Lexington is surrounded by Thoroughbred horse farms, with lush green fields divided into spacious paddocks by neat white fences. West of the city is world-famous Keeneland racetrack, and to the north lies the Kentucky Horse Park, which receives more than a million visitors each year. Visual evidence of Lexington's culture of the horse is evident not only in commercial architecture that mimics horse barns but in the widespread use of equine-themed place names for streets, subdivisions, and even shopping centers that commemorate famous horses, jockeys, and horse farms.

Although not included in her study, Lexington would be an example of the type of community that is the focus of Natalie A. Zacek's new book, communities in which the sport of Thoroughbred racing was initially developed by local gentry and served to enhance the image and prestige of the city. Through most of the nineteenth century, racing was the dominant spectator sport in the American nation. Just as cities in the modern world build arenas to showcase team sports such as baseball and football and achieve recognition for the quality of their sport, during the nineteenth century communities hosted racetracks intended to attract the most celebrated horses and upper-class patrons and thus present the most favorable image of that community.

According to Zacek, American tracks during the colonial and antebellum period were as much social spaces as they were venues

for sport. The social and economic elites of a community organized jockey clubs whose members embraced Thoroughbred racing as a means to affirm their own importance and that of their community. The track was a theater, in which participants were actors in a form of social drama and members of a community with a long tradition of respectability and elegant leisure. Those who attended only for the purpose of gambling were viewed with disfavor.

During the post-Civil War era, the sport experienced a profound transformation in nearly all aspects, the focus shifting from south to north, becoming increasingly democratic and commercialized—and national rather than local in scope. Profit became the driving force in the postwar expansion of the industry. Whereas overt gambling was formerly banned from tracks, wagering on races now became the most important revenue stream. The elites whose purpose in hosting race meetings had been as much about showcasing their wealth and prestige as it was about providing sport were replaced by professional managers who operated the track as a business.

The author takes readers on a fascinating journey to six different states – Virginia, South Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana, New York, and Kentucky - to visit some prominent tracks of the late colonial period through the nineteenth century. Her assessment is of particular value because it demonstrates that the culture associated with Thoroughbred racing was not uniform across the country but exhibited significant differences across regions and through time, reflecting the broader society in which it was embedded.

A few examples are illustrative. The Tidewater region of Virginia and South Carolina was the racing center of colonial America. After the Revolutionary War, Virginia lost population and influence because of westward migration. Unable to maintain their former prestige, Virginia's turf aristocracy chose instead to embrace historic traditions and past glories for validation. In contrast, the track at Charleston, South Carolina became successful and highly influential during the antebellum period by promoting a Race Week that integrated racing sport with activities such as concerts, balls and theater performances for a glamorous social season that attracted many wealthy and prominent visitors from outside the region. Kentucky's Churchill Downs, established at Louisville in 1875, became one of the nations' most successful tracks by encouraging visitors of all classes and stations to participate fully and by

embracing many forms of gambling. At the same time, the Downs promoted itself using the most appealing stereotypes associated with the “Old South” before the Civil War, even though Kentucky had never been part of the “Old South.” Derby visitors who sipped mint juleps and sang the Derby anthem, “My Old Kentucky Home,” could indulge in nostalgia for the “good old days” of a place and time that never really existed.

Well-researched and insightful, Zacek’s *Thoroughbred Nation* should be a welcome addition to the bookshelf of anyone with an interest in equestrian history, the historical nuances of American culture, or in good history generally.

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**EMPIRE OF BRUTALITY: *Enslaved People and Animals in the British Atlantic World.*** By Christopher Michael Blakley. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2023. 256 pp. Hardcover \$45.00, ISBN 9780807178867)

Enslaved people given the same names as cows, African captives paid for with cowries, fugitive women escaping on horseback. In *Empire of Brutality*, Chris Blakley sets out to integrate these and more stories into a history of slavery and resistance in the British Atlantic world. In five thematic chapters, they draw on an impressive array of primary sources to showcase the variety of scenarios in which the lives of enslaved people intersected with animals in the long eighteenth century.

In the first chapter on the transatlantic slave trade in West Africa, Blakley discusses human interactions with and usage of different kinds of animals. Cowries as a currency to pay for enslaved captives feature most prominently. Imported from distant places such as the Maldives and the Indian subcontinent, cowries gave the slave trade yet another global dimension. Chapter two situates the enslaved as producers of knowledge about the natural world and the animals that inhabited it, but also as objects of inquiry and experimentation. Linking the history of slavery with the history of science, it highlights the specific role that slave traders and slaveholders carved out for themselves. They presented themselves as