Y

is for

YAK

The yak's tail was its prize, but watch out for its horns. Across southern Asia, flywhisks made from yak tails had been valued possessions since antiquity. Scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries found references to yak tails and royalty in older Sanskrit and Buddhist texts; others studied Aelian's *De Natura Animalium*, a third-century Roman compendium. Aelian described a timid, herbivorous animal in India, with a bushy tail of hair that grew like a tassel. When hunted, the animal "hides its tail in some thicket, faces about, and stands waiting for its pursuers and plucks up its courage, fancying that, since its tail is not visible, it will no longer seem worth pursuing. For it knows that its beauty resides in its tail."

As governor-general of Bengal in the 1770s, Warren Hastings employed a large retinue of servants to brush flies from the air with yaktails. Hastings hoped to breed yaks in Calcutta, and his wish list for George Bogle's diplomatic mission to the Himalayas in 1774 included animals that produced wool for shawls or tails for whisks. The yaks died

"The Yak of Tartary," by George Stubbs. From Samuel Turner, *An Account of an Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama, in Tibet* (London: Bulmer, 1800). Courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard University.

on route, although several cashmere-wool-producing goats returned to Hastings's paddock. A report in *Philosophical Transactions* lauded the beautiful, long-flowing hairs of the "cow-tails." The value of these increased when "mounted on silver handles, for Chrowras, or brushes, to chase away the flies; and no man of consequence in India ever goes out, or sits in form at home, without two Chowrawbadars, or brushers, attending him, with such instruments in their hands." Thomas Pennant's 1781 *History of Quadrupeds* added that the tails were used to ornament the ears of elephants, dyed red to adorn Chinese bonnets, and mentioned frequently in sacred books of the Mongols.

Pennant relied on Bogle's authority to confirm older fables of cow-tails and the more recent Linnaean classification of the "grunting ox." Yaks had long been crossbred with domestic cows in the high plateaus of central Asia, and their milk and cheese were as valued locally as their meat, skins, hair, and tails. Pennant warned that "even when subjugated, they retain their fierce nature." The sight of bright colors might lead them to attack; a wounded yak would pursue assailants and toss them in the air by their horns. Owners cut off the sharp points of the horns "to prevent mischief."

Hastings received a pair of yaks from Bhutan in 1784 from Samuel Turner, his cousin and an East India Company army officer, whom he had sent on a trade mission. Turner's account of this journey introduced the yak of Tartary, or the bushy-tailed bull of Tibet, to a wider audience. When Hastings returned to England in 1785, his collection of animals stayed behind in Alipore, where they formed the core of the governor's menagerie and later Calcutta Zoo's.

Once in England, Hastings faced severe criticism and a lengthy impeachment trial for his methods of rule in Bengal, and he sought consolation by shipping his yaks from Calcutta. Hastings purchased his family's ancestral estate at Daylesford, which he tore down to build a mansion in the "Mughal style." It was filled with Indian objects and surrounded by a large park, with yaks, shawl goats, and exotic plants. His female yak died during the sea voyage, but the bull survived and became something of a celebrity. Hastings commissioned George Stubbs to paint the yak's portrait, along with paintings of Hastings on his Arabian horse.

The image of Hastings's yak from Turner's *Account of an Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet* reproduces Stubbs's painting of the yak in profile, with white tail and tousled hair, in its native habitat in Bhutan. In the background, mountains rise above Punakha

Dzong—"the palace of great happiness"—reflected in a lake. In the foreground, the vegetables under the yak's nose are the Bhutan turnip, which Hastings admired and planted in his English garden.

The tale of Hastings's yak became one of dissent after its arrival in England. Samuel Turner reported that the yak was initially "in a torpid languid state" but adjusted to the climate and "recovered at once both his health and vigor." This bull eventually fathered many calves, but in early days was said to resent its ill treatment during the voyage and harbor a hostility toward horses—and, perhaps, its owners. A knob nailed into the yak's horn rubbed off, but the crooked nail remained stuck in its horn and "happened to gore a valuable coach-horse belonging to Mr. Hastings, which had the range of the same pasture with him, and, lacerating the entrails, occasioned his death. After this, to prevent further accidents, he was kept alone within a secure enclosure."

Hastings's yak may have been fenced in, but Stubbs's image circulated for decades. The anatomist John Hunter commissioned a copy of the yak portrait from Stubbs, which was displayed prominently in his Leicester Square "museum" and later in the Royal College of Surgeons. Access to the Himalayas was limited, so this portrait remained the European model for a yak for the next half-century. In the 1840s, Abbé Huc, a French missionary priest, memorably described Tibetan snow-covered yaks in winter looking "as if they were preserved in sugar candy." According to the German physician Werner Hoffmeister, to ride a yak was to be in fear of a "kick with their hind-feet, turning their heads round perpetually, as if about to gore their riders."

By the mid-nineteenth century, European observers saw yaks more often in menageries or taxidermy exhibits than in the wild (see L IS FOR LION). The zoologist Edward Blyth used his position as curator for the Asiatic Society of Bengal to trade in exotic animals with Indian princes and British collectors. Around 1848, Blyth sold a yak to the Earl of Derby to join a hybrid yak in the menagerie at Knowsley Hall, near Liverpool. When the menagerie was auctioned in 1851, the hybrid yak thrived at Belle Vue Gardens in Manchester, but the purebred yak was bought by a showman and died shortly afterward, cooped up in a caravan. The most famous yaks of midcentury were the dozen shipped by a French diplomat from Shanghai to Paris in 1854. Most of these yaks were exhibited in the acclimatization gardens of the Bois de Boulogne, while a few were sent to the Alps in hopes of adapting them to alpine agriculture.

Stuffed yaks were frequently on display. By the 1850s, taxidermy specimens were exhibited at Edinburgh, Liverpool, and Calcutta and at the British Museum, East India Museum, and Crystal Palace in London. At the Crystal Palace, yaks were the centerpiece of an ethnographic diorama about Tibetans. In these imperial displays, the exoticism of the yak and the empire were brought together under British and European control. In 1855, *Crystal Palace Alphabet: A Guide for Good Children*, included this entry: "Y stands for Yak, whose tails from Thibet / On Turkish high officers' caps are now set."

The domestication of the yak in the British imagination was seemingly complete by 1896, with Hilaire Belloc's *The Bad Child's Book of Beasts*. Its whimsical illustrations and doggerel verses described the yak as a child's friend and pet for centuries in Tibet. In rhyme, children could ride the yak or lead it with a string: "Then tell your papa where the Yak can be got, / And if he is awfully rich / He will buy you the creature—or else he will *not*."

In the Himalayas, however, such juvenilia paled beside the pathetic fate of yaks during the British invasion of Tibet, led by Francis Younghusband in 1903–1904. According to Perceval Landon, these yaks were "one of the dreariest histories of a waste of animal life in military records." The expedition started with 3,500 yaks carrying loads, adding at least 1,000 more yaks while in Tibet; yet fewer than 200 survived by the end of the journey. The expedition did not provide fodder, so the yaks had to forage on their own in the arid climate. The lesson for Landon was "never again to place their reliance upon these burly and delicate beasts."

British mountaineers learned to provide forage and relied on yaks to cross Tibet to Mount Everest in the 1920s and 1930s. Human porters replaced yaks when the climbing shifted from Tibet to Nepal in the 1950s. Western climbers then viewed yaks as a picturesque backdrop or the source of dung for fires or meat for meals. Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, who had been a yak herder in the area as a boy, reached the summit of Everest with Edmund Hillary in 1953.

Yaks still serve as beasts of burden in the Himalayas, carrying goods across the mountains or hauling baggage for thousands of trekkers and climbers to Mount Everest Base Camp. The image of yaks for such visitors oscillates between domestication and disruption. The most popular path up Everest is derisively—and inaccurately—called the "yak route." But if yak tails have lost their luster, their sharp horns tell an-

other tale. When encountering a yak on the trail, it is the humans who must hustle to get out of the way.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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Y is also for . . .

Yabby
Yellow-backed duiker
Yeti
Yorkshire terrier