Book Review:

Paper Tiger: A Visual History of the Thylacine

By Carol Freeman. Brill, Leiden & Boston, 2010.

Linda Williams[1]

This book is the latest in the Brill series in Human-Animal Studies, and provides a scholarly yet very readable account of a very great loss, the extinction of the Thylacine, more familiarly known as the "Tasmanian Tiger". That familiar name in itself was but one of many myths and misconceptions about this animal that contributed to the gradual, yet inexorable process of its extinction.

It is largely the visual histories of this process of extinction, however, that Freeman investigates in this study, and she does this with an excellent eye for the semiotic nuances of visual representations of the Thylacine from ignoble early 19th Century images of the animal as sheep-slaughtering "vermin", to apparently more objective early 20th Century photographs such as a photo from the *Australian Museum Magazine* of 1921.[2] In this image 'The Tasmanian Tiger, or wolf' appears to be caught in the act of killing a live chicken, and is supplemented with a caption noting the animal had 'teeth like a wolf' which were 'similarly modified for rending flesh'. The flesh most thylacines were assumed to render was, as the photo suggested, from the bodies of colonial animals such as chickens, and particularly the sheep which were so important to the colonial economy. Yet, in the carefully researched and documented case Freeman amasses, it is clear that there was very little evidence that this indigenous predator attacked sheep or other livestock, and indeed appears to have been a reclusive animal. Further to the European colonisation of Tasmania however, its reclusive nature did little to protect it from being systematically hunted down and eventually eradicated.

Today we understand digital photography to be a highly flexible medium, yet in the early 20th century, photography unlike hand crafted images such as sketches, paintings or engravings, was still regarded as a medium with an indelible claim to veracity, and documentary realism. Yet as Freeman maintains, it is very likely the *Australian Museum Magazine* photo was in fact a reconstructed image taken from a museum tableau with an inert, stuffed thylacine. As such, it was one of the many images or descriptions of the Thylacine that made a steady contribution to the narrative of its extinction that unfolded with gathering momentum from the moment in 1642 when Abel Tasman first recorded seeing the footprints of a large predator on the East coast of Van Dieman's Land.

Clearly, like most of the earlier images of the thylacine, such reconfigured photographs call into question some of the claims to impartial objectivity in 19th and early 20th century science, and constitute some of many primary visual sources which

for Freeman " confirm that the species was persistently *mis*represented in zoological and natural history works until the last moment of its existence."[3]

Freeman does not see such misrepresentations as guileless however, and takes her case further with the recognition of how visual representations can have considerable deliberation and agency in forming social preconceptions of the non-human world:

> These modified photographs show how the extermination of the thylacine was consistently encouraged in zoological works. Together with earlier illustrations, they finally and effectively 'image' the species extinction.[4]

This is a bold claim, but it is one based on a carefully made case drawing on a range of primary visual sources examined in detail, and analysed in relation to other textual material. Freeman then, presents a well-researched and clearly written account of how visual culture has substantial agency in how we feel and think about other creatures, and hence it was perhaps surprising that the final chapter 'Forgetting and Remembering', though it highlights how the thylacine now appears in various places from the Tasmanian coat of arms to advertisements for Tasmanian lager, did not venture into the realm of how contemporary artists have reconfigured visual representations of the thylacine in the context of species extinctions on a global scale. This is a small quibble, however, in response to the very valuable contribution made by this book. It is a powerful account of the politics of representation and their very real consequences, and Carol Freeman's *Paper Tiger. A Visual History of the Thylacine* has what it takes to become a classic text in the study of Human-Animal relations. Moreover, by implication Freeman's study makes a valuable and timely contribution to the question of how we are going to come to terms with our role in the burgeoning global problem of mass species extinctions.

Notes

1. Linda Williams is Associate Professor of Art, Environment and Cultural Studies at RMIT University where she also leads the Art and Sustainability Research Cluster. Along with her work as a widely published art critic, she has published in the field of the history of culture and science, philosophy and critical theory, with a particular focus on human-animal studies.
2. C. Freeman (2010), *Paper Tiger: A Visual History of the Thylacine,* Brill, Leiden & Boston, p. 219, Figure 74.
3. ibid., p 223.
4. ibid.