

Cattle draft in Europe: historical and cultural perspectives and the need to sustain living expertise

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Summary

Reference to animal traction and cattle draft in particular can be found in unexpected places, with surprising attention to detail, such as in older Irish literature and legal texts. Less surprising, but often even more informative are the sources including 18th and 19th-century agricultural improvers, whose experiments tell us much about animals, people and society.

A group of people in France highly interested in animal traction have a triple objective: highlighting pertinent historical sources, bringing colleagues together to discuss both historical issues and present-day animal handling practices and, last but not least, exploring ways to effectively sustain modern experts in training animals and people and encourage the diffusion of their knowledge.

Historical perspectives

TAWS is concerned with hands-on work and the repercussion of problems in the global village. At times, it is enriching to step back and see our efforts and hopes in a deeper perspective of technological change affecting the welfare of both animals and people. People do what they can with what they have and, we might suppose, animals put up with most of the odd or intelligent ideas we try out on them. What, though, are the motivations to innovate and change from no harness to harness, from one kind to another, from one draft animal to another, from one implement to the next? Each time this happens, we have a tendency to suffer from amnesia, to forget just what pushed people in one direction or another, so it can be instructive – and fun – to look back into our past and search for the bits and pieces of information that will tell us more about how we work with animals.

An Irish legend

There are many examples in oral tradition and written literature across the world of small or even earth-shaking technological changes and these are often portrayed in older sources as a gift from the gods or from our ancestors who come back in dreams or tales to advise us about how to move on, just as a wise mother-in-law might, stirring one's curiosity without being too heavy-handed. We can take an example from older Irish literature to illustrate this – it happens in the tale called *The Wooing of Etain*:

Eochaid is the Irish high king and one day, he sees a stranger approach his home. This man is a king, too – Midir – and he comes from the Other World to challenge Eochaid to a game of chess with intriguing stakes. If Midir wins, he will spend the night with Eochaid's wife. If Eochaid wins, he will name his own conditions. The opponents might seem unequal, since Midir has magical knowledge, but Eochaid wins and sets out a number of tasks he wants Midir and his people to perform. Among these are building a causeway across a bog. Midir's people use oxen for all the work – hauling in the materials and preparing the ground. To Eochaid and his own people's surprise, Midir's folk use something they have never seen before – a withers yoke instead of a head yoke, which the Irishmen hasten to adopt afterwards. This is how Eochaid gets his full name, by the way, Eochaid Airem or Eochaid, the Ploughman. As an aside, we might add that wet archaeology has found examples for both head and withers yokes in the bogs of Ireland and the British Isles more generally.

A nineteenth century innovator

Agricultural improvers, researchers and planners are another fine source of information and many people will be familiar with Brunel, Marshall or Young. Let me introduce you to a Frenchman, feeling a bit far away from the mainstream, but trying hard to follow every line of innovation in his own day – Monsieur Des Colombiers, in the Allier region north of Lyon, in the 1830s and 1840s. He belongs to the Allier Society of Agriculture, whose members pride themselves on testing every piece of new equipment they can get their hands on.

Monsieur Des Colombiers is interested in raising the efficiency of ploughing techniques and reports on his efforts in the 1841 *Annales provencales d'Agriculture et d'Economie rurale*. He has tried the ox collar circulating at the time and finds it unmatched for efficient draft performance. Alas, it is far too expensive for his farmers to adopt and rather too far away from their harnessing habits. He also notes that it is not easy to construct a collar to correctly fit the shoulders of the oxen so that it neither slows their progress nor inflicts injuries on them.

He goes on to compare the performance of his animals under the Bourbonnais or Burgundy yokes and is not satisfied there is any improvement – the animals do not walk better and appear to tire more rapidly. Then he has the frontal yoke tried out and this is it. The oxen can work alone or in pairs with the ploughman, who no longer needs to have his apprentice stand by, and the team can ‘throw up small covering ridges two feet wide at the base which our ox drivers make a matter of personal pride to trace out perfectly straight.’

His efforts are crowned with some success – favourable publicity through the Society spreads the word. On his own lands, his ploughmen use the new system for hoeing and earthing up potatoes and the oxen used to the older yokes refuse them, clearly preferring the frontal yoke. However, the story is not as simple as this. He finds that – in the long run - his farm workers use the system only for second dressing of weeded plants in his vineyards. For other work, they find it too bothersome to adjust the traces frequently and use a large whippetree.

As Paul Starkey might say – is this innovation ‘perfected but rejected’ in Monsieur Des Colombier’s Allier region or elsewhere? Only more research will tell. This brings us to the second point in this first section – getting people together to juxtapose historical inquiry and practical experience.

Publications and colloquia

An informal group of researchers, veterinarians, animal handlers and just interested folk in France want to bring people together on the subject of cattle draft and, most particularly, how humans and animals work and live together. Our first objective is to find and republish (or encourage republication of) quality historical sources. Our second is to hold one or more colloquia on the subject, but this could take the form of local as well as international meetings. The important thing is to get the work moving. Our third objective, however, is definitely the most urgent:

Sustaining present-day experts

All of us know people who handle animals. Some of them are experts in training them and have the further virtue of being patient and skilled enough to actually train people to work well with their animals. A Japanese visitor looking in on this might say that these people are ‘living treasures’, like a Samurai sword-maker, a fine potter, a master of the tea ceremony or a kimono-maker. In France, some arts and trades have their own standard for the finest work, for instance, those accepted into the Compagnons de France or certified in various fields like pastry-making or glass-working. Everywhere, however, the problem is how to adequately structure a skill or trade without creating more work for the people who do it, how to effectively sustain them in their professional activities and how to encourage them to pass on their skills and knowledge to others.

Our group has thought of a European confederation for animal traction handlers, which would involve those skill-holders and their supporters, perhaps somewhat along the lines of and in cooperation with other efforts under way such as FECTU. Such a pool of qualified experts capable of shorter or longer term training could propose two streams of preparation: the first, for people planning to work as advisors in developing countries or in environmental planning / sustainable agriculture and, secondly,

for people aiming at long-term employment in the animal traction sector (leisure, forestry services, therapeutical and vocational services, working animal care, etc).

If you have ideas to share on any of these proposals, please contact: the author or:
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