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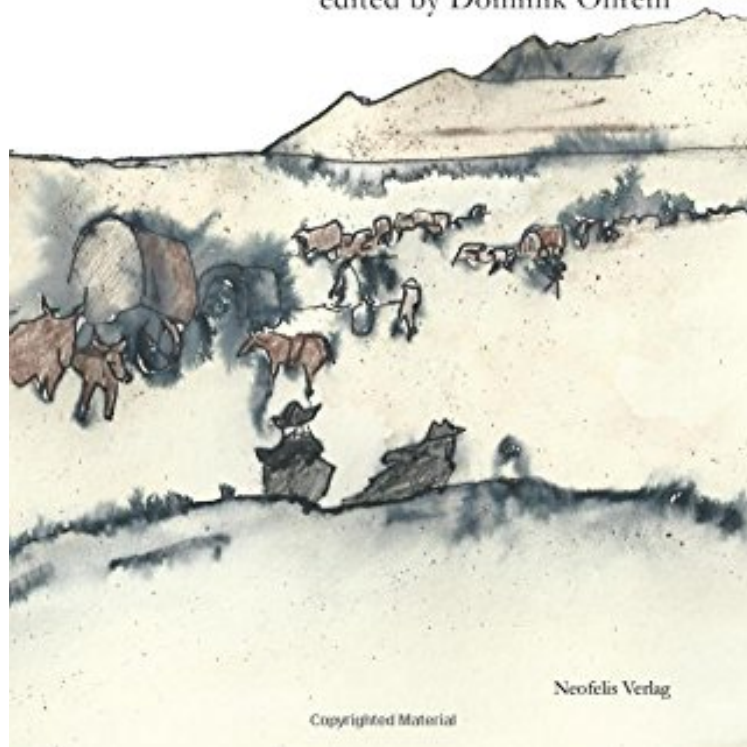
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AMERICAN BEASTS

Perspectives on Animals, Animality
and U.S. Culture, 1776–1920

edited by Dominik Ohrem



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In American history, animals are everywhere. They are a ubiquitous presence in myriad historical, literary, biographical, scientific and other documents and narratives of the American past - a past that, just like the present, was characterized by a multiplicity of relations between humans and other animals, ranging from intimate co-existence to outright violence. While such quintessentially 'American' species as the bison, mustang or grizzly continue to roam the discursive, imaginary and, now to a much lesser degree, the geographical spaces of the nation, the less 'formidable' creatures of civilization have been of even more vital importance to the genesis of modern American society and culture: the many domesticated animals whose labor and bodies sustained and continue to sustain American society; the selection of species that became the focus of American pet culture, particularly in the context of middle-class conceptions of family life and domesticity. And yet, it is precisely their ubiquity in the past and present of American culture which underlines all the more forcefully their at best shadowy presence in traditional strands of American historiography. In contrast, "American Beasts" begins with a 'declaration of interdependence': the idea that any clear-cut separation of human and animal worlds obfuscates, rather than enhances, our understanding of the American (and, for that matter, any other) past. "American Beasts" explores different aspects of human-animal relations and their transformation between the early national period and the end of the Progressive Era in the 1920s: from the rise of pet-keeping in the U.S. and the importance of animal labor in American cities to the role of animals and animality during slavery and westward expansion. Taken together, the contributions in this volume show not only to what extent American history can and must be understood with regard to the multifaceted and often problematic or ambivalent relationalities between humans and animals, but also how a stronger concern with animality allows us to highlight the complex intersections of the history of human-animal relations with American histories of, for instance, race, gender and sexuality. [Subject: Sociology, History, American Studies]