BOOK REVIEW

La chauve-souris et l'homme.
Pp. 218. Price $38 U.S.

Bats have been the subject of folklore and superstition for centuries. Their nocturnal habits and affinity for eerie places have rendered them a source of mystery, fear, and fascination and have generated an extraordinary number of interactions between humans and these unique flying mammals. In her book La chauve-souris et l'homme, Denise Tupinier traces, in a very singular and idiosyncratic way, various themes surrounding these interactions, and explores the role that bats have played in popular traditions, arts, sciences, and customs, over the centuries and across continents.

The book opens with an account of the first historical documentation of bats and the events leading to the eventual identification of the bat as an organism distinct from birds. Here she notes that bats were first mentioned in the Bible, in which they were considered "impure" and not to be eaten. She also notes that Aristotle gave detailed descriptions of these animals, but it was not until the sixteenth century that zoologists and naturalists became interested in describing and classifying them, although we are reminded that at this point they were considered an intermediate stage between a bird and a mammal. According to Tupinier, it was during the eighteenth century that the puzzling nature of bats was finally elucidated, at which time they became classified in the order Chiroptera, by Blumenbach, in his Handbuch der Naturgeschichte, published in 1779. However, it took until 1850 for the majority of the scientific community to accept this classification scheme.

Equally as interesting as this overview of taxonomic history is Chapter Three, in which she explains the etymology and origins of the word "bat" in different languages. The perception of a "flying mouse" seems to dominate Western European languages and culture, whereas a combination of the terms bird, mouse, and rat is prevalent in Arabic and Asian languages. As she mentions, the association of bats with birds and small rodents (and/or some reference to their nocturnal habits) is present in virtually every language. The chapter also traces the evolution of the scientific nomenclature, from the sixteenth century onward, and the origination of many species' names used today.

In Chapters Four and Five, Tupinier examines the role of bats as technological models (in the design of flying machines) and as therapeutic agents used in ancient medicine and pharmacology. In Chapter Six, she reviews the involvement of bats in historical events throughout Europe and Asia, as well as their exploitation in unconventional military projects, such as "Operation X Ray", which involved unsuccessfully training bats to transport and drop incendiary bombs on Japan, during WWII. Chapter Seven is perhaps one of the most interesting parts of the book. It provides an amusing account (accompanied by many fascinating photographs and illustrations) of how bats have been used as symbols in military insignia, coats of arms, and commercial products, ranging from kerosene lamps to the familiar bat logo on bottles of Bacardi rum.

In the chapters that follow, Tupinier explores the role of bats as subjects of folklore, superstition, and popular traditions, as well as their representation in various forms of art, music, and literature. It has been predominantly in Western culture that humans have regarded bats with fear and hatred and have associated them with witchcraft and evil spirits. In China and Japan, bats are considered a symbol of happiness and longevity, whereas in Zaire they inspire respect and admiration.

An interesting sample of poetry and literature, with bats featured as the primary subject, can be found in Chapter Twelve. In addition, this chapter includes a selection of legends, tales, and fables from around the world. This extensive collection is definitely one of the best features of the book. Bats have also been represented in art, ranging from Mayan sculptures to Western European paintings, and have been depicted extensively on tapestries, Chinese porcelain, jewelry, art nouveau objects, and even postage stamps. Many pictures of these objects and works of art can be found scattered throughout the book, as well as in the corresponding chapters. The book concludes with a chapter discussing the important role of bats as keystone species and the mutual benefits that bats and humans can derive from each other.

Overall, Tupinier's book is a compilation of interesting and entertaining facts, written in a simple and comprehensible way, but it also is presented in a rather idiosyncratic manner. The structure of the book is not apparent, and there is no obvious cohesion among the topics covered. Notwithstanding, it is well written and can be appreciated without a particularly strong command of the French language. Its most redeeming quality is the excellent illustrations and photographs, ranging from seventeenth-century drawings and caricatures, to portraits of different species, works of art, and miscellaneous artifacts and objects featuring bats.

Although this is not a scientific publication, the
variety of information presented, which is centered around ethnography and history, should provide interesting material for public lectures. In addition, biologists can derive some valuable insight about the animals that they have chosen to study.

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