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Tom Griffiths

The Beast of the Forest

“Puzzling are the ways of wild animals,” wrote James Stevenson-Hamilton. And even more puzzling, surely, are the ways of humans, especially in their encounters, real or imagined, with threatening nature. This account of a recent European walk draws deeply on Jane Carruthers’ brilliant and elegant scholarship on how people negotiate the wild.

Last year I walked with my grown-up children in the footsteps of the Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson who, in 1878, travelled with a donkey in the French mountains of the Velay, the Gévaudan, and the Cévennes. Stevenson, fondly known as RLS, wrote his second book about that twelve-day journey, called *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* (1879), and it became his first celebrated literary achievement. In our rucksacks we carried his book and read a chapter each day, in step with our guide.

Our walk began near Le Puy on the Velay plateau, an extensive volcanic upland of gentle *puys*, wooded hills that form undulating chains of cones and domes amidst grazing cattle and fields of wheat. Soon you cross the young Loire River, and then suddenly plunge off the southern edge of the plateau into a rougher region, the Gévaudan. It feels wild, harsh, and forbidding, and seems steeped in melancholy.

On the morning we were to walk into the forests of the Gévaudan, our host in the medieval town of Pradelles handed me the local newspaper with a photo and headline that declared *Le loup est arrivé!* (The wolf is here!) It announced evidence that the wolf, which had verged on local extinction since the 1930s and then returned to France via the Italian Alps in the 1990s, was now back in the Gévaudan, one of its most notorious former realms. Our host was stirring us by eagerly brandishing this news, for he knew we had a tent and were, like Stevenson, determined to camp. As the owner of a *chambres d’hôtes*, it was not in his interest to encourage anyone to pitch a tent. *Le loup* has always had its human uses.

That morning a cold north wind was confirming our arrival in a new, harsher region. We were entering the territory of *la bête du Gévaudan*, a wolf or wolves that terrorised

the populace in the mid-eighteenth century, killing about one hundred people between 1764 and 1767, mostly children and young women tending sheep and cattle.

“The beast” did not just attack, it devoured. It lunged for the neck, gored and mauled victims, and wrenched heads from bodies. Twenty thousand peasants from one hundred parishes were drafted to comb the countryside and run it to ground in February 1765, and they failed. It teased and eluded a succession of royal hunters and kept on killing. La bête became a national sensation, securing the attention of the King and attracting commentaries from Voltaire, Immanuel Kant, Frederick the Great of Prussia, and the English writer Horace Walpole.

Stevenson carried a revolver perhaps as much out of wariness of wolves as of bandits, for if wolves survived anywhere in Europe in the late nineteenth century, he reasoned, it would be here: “For this,” he wrote “was the land of the ever-memorable BEAST, the Napoleon Bonaparte of wolves . . . he ate women and children and ‘shepherdesses celebrated for their beauty’; he pursued armed horsemen . . .” Stevenson rather hoped he might meet a descendant of the creature, for he was after an adventure. He even began to consider the beast as an ally. Following an encounter with a pair of girls near Fouzilhic who giggled and teased him (one stuck out her tongue), refusing him directions and bidding him to follow the cows, Stevenson exploded in his journal: “The Beast of Gévaudan ate about a hundred children of this district; I began to think of him with sympathy.”

But Stevenson also observed that the terror it had inspired remained active even a hundred years later, for he encountered a man who would not venture out of his door at night, even though Stevenson was lost and begged him for assistance on the road. The man stubbornly repeated the local logic: “It is night . . . I will not cross the door.” Stevenson—the nomadic representative of worldly modernity—seemed to stare impatiently over the cottage threshold into a rural past of superstition and fear. He reflected that “if all the wolves had been as this wolf, they would have changed the history of man.”

But what if all the wolves *had* been as this wolf? Almost all the histories and stories of la bête du Gévaudan rely on the belief that this was a singular wolf. It was extraordinarily large; it was deviantly fierce; it had a corrupted lust for blood; it was a werewolf. It was an unknown species; it was a hybrid; it was a hyena; it was a savage survival from the prehistoric world. Its eyes had a satanic glow; it leaped gorges in a single bound; it was

supernatural; it was an instrument of divine retribution. It was bred with malice; it was trained with purpose; it was manipulated by a psychotic human; it was a man in a wolf skin. All of these theories have been generated across the centuries, and most of them made their appearance within months of the first attacks.

But what if the attacks were simply an intense but normal outbreak of predation by wolves moving through the district? The key question then becomes: Why did this particular outbreak become a national sensation and whose interests did such a legend serve? This is the argument of a convincing new history of *Monsters of the Gévaudan* (2011) by the American scholar Jay M. Smith, whose work contributes to an exciting tradition of European micro-history in which historians like Carlo Ginzburg, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Alain Corbin make a single life or village or event historically luminous.

Before pursuing this line of reasoning, though, we have to ask ourselves whether we are able to accept that normal wolves attack, lunge, gore, and decapitate. This is an important question for a walker with a tent at dusk in the Gévaudan. Was the rough, untutored peasant who irked Stevenson by not venturing beyond his threshold at night a superstitious coward, as Stevenson thought, or was he actually a rational man steeped in remembered local experience?

Fatal wolf attacks were reasonably common in eighteenth-century France. Historian Jean-Marc Moriceau has documented about three thousand fatal wolf attacks in France from the late sixteenth century to the early nineteenth century, and he estimates that the true number may have been three times that. Intense and gruesome outbreaks of killing similar to that in the Gévaudan had occurred before: Moriceau estimates that in mid-eighteenth-century France there was an average of one hundred fatal wolf attacks each year.

It was illegal for peasant tenants to possess firearms. The women and children of the remote, wild, and sparsely populated Gévaudan had only their batons with which to defend themselves and their herds and flocks. They were vulnerable, but had little choice but to play their roles in the desperate family economy. They were out there on the edge of the forests protecting one of their few assets—the stock they owned or controlled—while their husbands and fathers worked in the fields, gathered wood, or walked the

roads looking for work. Sheep and cattle were precious resources: they fertilised the fields, provided milk, cheese, and cloth, and shared living quarters with the people, keeping them warm in the harsh winters of the Massif Central. These peasant families were exploited by their feudal-style landlords and benefitted least from the small grain harvests of an agriculturally marginal district. In the late spring and summer, when the fall harvest was still some months away, the migration of stock to the mountain pastures took their carers into more remote country. The women and children would have been isolated, scared, and undernourished. They were hungry—and so were the wolves.

As we walked the melancholy forest paths of the Gévaudan and contemplated our evening camp, we discussed la bête and what might be real and what might be imagined. If wolf predation was so much a part of remote rural life, then why did the attacks of the Gévaudan become a national sensation? The first attacks in the summer of 1764, however shocking, were probably accepted locally as a natural hazard. But they continued, and several factors then worked towards presenting the killings as the work of one extraordinary beast. Local superstitions about werewolves, witches, and demons were probably the least of the exacerbations. More influential, argues Smith, were the opinions and purposes of urban, educated elites: scientists, journalists, noblemen, the Bishop, and the King. Scientists were beginning to take a strong interest in natural exotica, in analysing hybrid species, and in separating real from imagined monsters. Journalists were creating a national audience for sensational stories, and printed newspapers were winning a new and broader audience. The beast went viral because of a new kind of media. And the Seven Years War had finished just the year before its appearance, leaving empty newspaper columns looking for local tales of blood and battle. Returned French veterans of that war, having tasted humiliating defeat abroad, were desperate to redeem their honour at home, and eagerly led hunting parties for an enemy they might hope to vanquish (and whose singular and legendary qualities they were keen to exaggerate).

The Bishop and the King also saw an opportunity to manipulate their pawns. The Bishop of Mende, the cathedral city of the region, called for public prayers and issued an official circular—“a masterpiece of provocation,” says Smith—invoking the beast as the wrath of God and blaming “this extraordinary *scourge*” on the spiritual waywardness of the people themselves. “A ferocious beast, unknown in our latitudes, appears all of a sudden as if miraculously, without anyone knowing from whence it came . . . it is because you have offended GOD . . . !” And King Louis XV, suffering political difficulties, saw

an opportunity to foster both fear and loyalty with his personal interest in the peasants' sufferings and his offer of a reward for the killing of "the beast." Identifying and vilifying an enemy and waging a phoney war have long been the strategies of politicians in domestic trouble.

Thus there was a *mentalité* in the 1760s where, as Smith puts it, "many could accept, and even expect, the presence of a monster." A single beast had to be found and killed; a single, extraordinary beast had to be presented to the King. But the creature proved strangely elusive, especially for the royal hunters, and so its legend grew. And when a wolf was trophied, stuffed, embalmed and taken to the royal court in Versailles, it was disappointingly normal in size . . . and soon the killings in the Gévaudan continued. It was now that the very elites who had whipped up the sense of crisis began to feel some embarrassment at inciting popular belief in a monster, and thus they began to attribute the legend to rural superstition. Meanwhile, the beleaguered peasants of the Gévaudan continued to shelter anxiously behind their portals at night.

What is intriguing about the legend of la bête is the way it emanates from a moment in Western history when we are on the brink of modernity. The *ancien régime* is tottering, the French Revolution is brewing, and the birth of the modern world is imminent. It is exactly this kind of knowing hindsight that has shaped the legend of the beast. In post-revolutionary France, the beast of the Gévaudan came to represent the traditional, rural, superstitious world from which rational modernity freed itself. The beast was the creation of ignorant peasants and credulous women, explained nineteenth and twentieth-century urban males. It was part of the world we had to leave behind to become who we are, a world where such a monster might be believed to exist. It was thus both fantastical and necessary. It was a childhood nightmare, a *rite de passage* from which adult consciousness emerged. In this way, the singularity of the beast and its legendary qualities were strengthened in storytelling even by rational moderns, and the real historical context further suppressed. There is an archaeology of forgetfulness at the heart of modernity.

That threshold over which Stevenson gazed—that defended doorway in Fouzilhac beyond which the local farmer would not step—was not, after all, a clear boundary be-

tween archaic and modern, between superstition and reason. To our post-modern sensibilities, the traditional world looks more rational than we thought and our own times more superstitious. The rural farmer at that door was unkind but rational, and the urban traveller who confronted him was dreamy and lost. In Australia in the 1980s, intelligent citizens disdained the testimony of Aboriginal people and refused to accept that a dingo could take a baby from a tent in a national park. They preferred to believe that Azaria, the name of the baby, meant “Sacrifice in the Wilderness” and that spray paint and milk under a car dashboard was infant blood. They found a monster in a Seventh Day Adventist woman who refused to cry for the television cameras. Monsters, like Stevenson’s Mr Hyde, often erupt uncontrollably from inside ourselves, and are projections of our anxieties whipped up by opinion-makers, politicians, bishops, and radio shock-jocks.

Contemporary champions of the wolf are among the latest to fuel the legend of the beast of the Gévaudan, arguing that a normal wolf could not have killed like that. Gérard Ménatory, promoter of a wolf park in the region and keen to rehabilitate the reputation of the wolf, argues from his knowledge of wolves today that the beast of the 1760s was a hyena, probably trained by a human. Another wolf advocate favours the theory of a wolf-dog hybrid also led by a sinister trainer, and another in 2004 identified the beast as a “hemicyon,” a species of dog-bear thought to have become extinct over five million years ago, but one individual of which remarkably survived until the eighteenth century in the remote Gévaudan.

A few weeks after our walk, in October 2012, the newspapers *Midi-Libre* and *La Lozère Nouvelle* reported from the town of Pont-de-Montvert the first convincing evidence that the wolf had returned, finally, to the slopes of Mont Lozère. Some footprints had been photographed, several attacks of stock had been reported, and a blurred night-time silhouette of the creature was published. It was pronounced a *scourge*—that word again! People also argued that the wolf does not just threaten lives, it threatens livelihoods, for the economy and heritage of the Cevennes depends on a history of transhumance pastoralism, on a humanised landscape and not on wild nature. But is there not a place for wild species in our lives, ask the naturalists of the Lozère?

In July, in a little village in the Velay, a horse was killed and found partly devoured. Its head and neck were especially attacked, its eyes and ears eaten. “I grew up with horses but I’ve never seen anything so horrible,” confessed a villager to *Paris-Match*. Locals

wondered: “What kind of beast could attack with such savagery? What are the thickening forests of the mountains hiding?” Last year the local mayor saw a big cat with a long tawny tail. Some think it is a puma from South America, never before seen on the European continent.

I think it is a curious and disabling dimension of our humanity that we are often simply unable to accept the power of nature. We constantly underestimate nature, and think we can control, tame, and master it, whether it be wolf or dingo, and when it takes us unawares we strive to find an extraordinary explanation rather than an ordinary one. And rather than be humble and respectful in the face of wild nature, we look to implicate humanity or circumstance in a singular explanation.

It is the same with the wild beast of the Australian forests—fire—which regularly roars out of the bush and consumes people. Our research focuses on “the beast,” on fire itself—on its physical attributes, the way it moves and consumes, and its effect on victims—but less often on the social, ecological, and historical context of its making. Rather than accepting its certain return as part of the ecological cycle of the forest, we look instead to blame an errant human—a distracted leader, a negligent power company, a sinister arsonist—for its exceptional appearance. Thus we are unprepared when, inevitably, the beast returns.

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