

## HENRY S. SALT, SOCIALIST ANIMAL RIGHTS ACTIVIST

An Introduction to Salt's *A Lover of Animals*

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Henry S. Salt (1851-1939) remains largely unknown today, despite his central role in social and humanitarian movements throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Salt is briefly mentioned in passing when discussing the history of animal rights activism, but serious consideration of his philosophical position has not been conducted. General interpretations of Salt often recognize that he was a socialist, and animal rights are seen as an additional interest of his. Likewise, animal rights advocates view him as an animal rights activist who happened to be a socialist. But for Salt, these positions were not separable. A philosophical understanding of materialism provided the foundation for Salt's commitment to a wide range of humanitarian causes.

Salt's intellectual revolution and commitment to political radicalism developed after he had completed his schooling at Eaton and Cambridge. By the age of 24, Salt was an assistant master at Eaton (Hendrick, 1977, pp. 12-13). As a teacher, he became critical of the educational system, as sports took precedence over challenging the minds of youth. During the 1870s and 1880s, Salt became keenly aware of social issues and developed friendships with many radical social reformers, such as William Morris, J. L. Joynes, Eleanor Marx, George Bernard Shaw, Edward Carpenter, Sidney Olivier, Prince Kropotkin, and Graham Wallas (and later in life Count Tolstoy, Gandhi, Clarence Darrow, Ernest Crosby, and Ouida). Through these social relationships and Salt's personal studies, he became an active socialist, writing for *Justice*, the journal published by the Social Democratic Federation. During these same years, Salt became acquainted with vegetarianism and simplicity (Thoreau), quickly recognizing their importance in relation to social reforms. To pursue his humanitarian commitments full-time as well as his pursuit of living more simply, Salt took leave of Eaton to study and reside in the countryside. His cottage became a crossroad for radicals organizing, studying, and writing.

During this period of time, Salt was an active contributor to *Justice*. With great clarity, he wrote articles that advocated land reform, questioned the rights of landlords, criticized the treatment of the poor population and social policy within London, addressed the economic vulnerability of workers and the constant threat of starvation confronting this population, and raised questions in regard to the causes

of crime. Throughout these articles, Salt maintained a critique of capitalism, stating that the source of wealth for the upper class was the systematic impoverishment of the lower class by appropriating the surplus product of the laboring class. Salt identified the impoverishment and hunger of the working class as a direct result of the enrichment of the capitalist class. Food reform and social reform became central concerns for Salt, as he developed a deeper understanding of the social conditions related to these issues. In 1886, Salt wrote an essay for the *To-day* journal declaring socialism and vegetarianism not in opposition. He raised the question, "If those who live selfishly on the labour of others are rightly denounced as 'blood-suckers,' do not those who pamper a depraved appetite at the expense of much animal suffering deserve a somewhat similar appellation?" (as cited in Hendrick, 1977, p. 52). Salt continued by raising questions with regard to the health consequences and wastefulness of meat consumption. Like socialism, vegetarianism moves toward the same goal of a more humane world. With great precision, Salt pointed out that a vegetarian society would not solve the existing social problems but that it was a necessary consideration for a socialist movement that made a plea for a humane society.

Salt's commitment to socialism and vegetarianism, along with other like-minded individuals, led to the formation of the Humanitarian League in 1891. For the next 28 years, Salt and his comrades fought to end cruelty throughout society, through a systematic critique of the social system and social protest against cruelty. Through the pages of two journals, *Humanity* (1895-1919) and *The Humane Review* (1900-1910), the Humanitarian League fed the flames of resistance against animal cruelty and human suffering. The Humanitarian League worked to expose the inhumane practices in society while offering potential alternatives and solutions to those social ills. The Humanitarian League fought for laws to prevent cruelty to animals and to protect wild animals; engaged in struggles to end vivisection, the use of animals for fashion (fur and feather trade), and the killing of animals for sport; and encouraged a vegetarian diet to end the suffering of animals slaughtered for food. At the same time, the league sought reforms in slaughterhouses and cattle ships through a campaign to nationalize these industries, with hopes of ending them with larger changes in society. It also fought for criminal law changes, encouraging education and better sanitary conditions for inmates and an end to the practice of flogging and torture (Salt, 1921). On international grounds, the league called for changes in the treatment of people in colonies of European nations. In fact, commitment to this international humanitarian position led to Salt's (as well as others') resignation from the Fabian Society when a vote to condemn imperialism, at the time of the Boer War, failed to pass (McBriar, 1962, p. 124).

In 1892, Salt's *Animals' Rights* gained much attention when he argued that animals should be exempt from any unnecessary suffering (Salt, 1980). Salt makes reference to Bentham's utilitarianism within the argument, but his understanding of this issue goes much deeper. Salt rejected the dichotomization between nature and society as well as between humans and nonhuman animals. He pointed out the hypocrisy of scientists who "in theory renounced the old-fashioned idea of a universe created for mankind," yet used a position of moral right, ignoring the close relationship that exists between humans and nonhuman animals, to justify the torture of animals (Salt, 1921, p. 14). Again and again, Salt confronted individuals holding onto positions originating out of natural theology. Even his former employer, Dr. P. H. Carpenter, confronted Salt about his vegetarianism by stating, "Don't you think that animals were *sent* [to] us as food?" (Salt, 1921, p. 63). After the publication of *Animals' Rights*, Monsignor John S. Vaughan (one of many) claimed "beasts exist for the use and benefit of man" (Salt, 1921, p. 126). Following

the knowledge of evolutionary science, Salt articulated the scientific basis for kinship of all sentient life; however, he stated that many scientists, refusing to accept this position, retreated into a fallacy in the realm of ethics, similar to the theologians of the day, accepting the dichotomy between living creatures.

Central to Salt's natural history writings is a materialist conception of nature. Like other socialists and materialists of his day, most notably Karl Marx, Salt was heavily influenced by the ancient materialists Epicurus and Lucretius. He translated excerpts of Lucretius' great poem *De rerum natura* into English in a small volume titled *Treasures of Lucretius* (Salt, 1912). Salt followed Epicurus and Lucretius in arguing

that the universe is ruled by wholly natural laws, and that mankind is free to work out its own destiny, undisturbed by any supernal guidance. With the same object of liberating us from the fear of the grave, he [Lucretius] insists with deep earnestness that the soul dies with the body, and that the after-life, concerning which men so afflict themselves in anticipation, is but a fable and a dream. (Salt, 1912, p. 10)

Like many others, most notably Montaigne in the *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (1580), Salt was deeply moved by Lucretius' sympathetic treatment of animals, translating the following from Lucretius (II: 352-366) under the title "A Cow Mourning for Her Calf":

Oft at some consecrated altar-side,  
Where fragrant incense burns, a calf lies slain,  
And from his breast breathes out the warm life-tide:  
But the lone mother, o'er the grassy land  
Far ranging, sees his cloven hoof-prints plain,  
And leaves with roving eyes no spot unscanned  
For her lost young, and fills with lowings wild  
The shady wood; then tireless turns again  
To the bare stall, sore stricken for her child.  
Naught can the dewy grass, or tender leaf,  
Or brimming river-bank, once fondly known,  
Avail to banish that o'er-mastering grief;  
Nor by the sight of other calves, upgrown  
In the fair fields, is her sad heart beguiled:  
So deeply yearns she for her one, her own. (Salt, 1912, pp. 26-27)

Through this materialist philosophy, Salt transcended the dichotomy of society and nature. He was able to develop an understanding of natural history and evolution. At the same time, Salt's socialist position allowed for a systematic analysis of the operations of society and how it interacted with the environment. There was in his unified materialist perspective no basis for conflict between social struggle and the struggle for a more humane world, encompassing all of natural existence.

Indeed, Salt's materialist understanding of the natural and social world provided him with a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between humans, animals, and the natural world. He transcended the existing dichotomies by declaring:

Humanity and science between them have exploded the time-honoured idea of hard-and-fast line between white man and black man, rich man and poor man, educated man and uneducated man, good man and bad man: equally impossible to maintain, in the light of newer knowledge, is the idea that there is any difference in kind, and not in degree only, between human and non-human intelligence. The

emancipation of men from cruelty and injustice will bring with it in due course the emancipation of animals also. The two reforms are inseparably connected, and neither can be fully realized alone. (Salt, 1921, pp. 121-122)

The Humanitarian League was devoted to a “systematic protest against the numerous barbarisms of the age—the cruelties inflicted by men on men, and the still more atrocious ill-treatment of the lower animals” (Salt, 1921, p. 123). The league recognized that their positions would not be popular with the general public and that they would be considered “faddist,” yet they felt that through praxis and persistence they would be part of the ongoing changes in history. Indeed, in line with his broad socialist-humanitarian vision, Salt (1921) ends his autobiography, *Seventy Years Among Savages*, by stating:

Humanitarians, then, must expect little, but claim much; must know that they will see no present fruits of their labours, but that their labours are nevertheless of far-reaching importance. Let those who have been horrified by the spectacle of an atrocious war resolve to support the peace movement more strongly than ever; but let them also support the still wider and deeper humanitarian movement of which pacifism is but a part, inasmuch as all humane causes, though seemingly separate, are ultimately and essentially one. (p. 246)

Salt's argument in support of vegetarianism influenced Gandhi during his residency in London. Gandhi, a vegetarian due to his vow to obey Hindu dietary laws, relished the day when Indians would all be meat eaters. But this position changed once he purchased Salt's (1886) *A Plea for Vegetarianism*. Gandhi pointed out that from the date of reading Salt's book, he became a vegetarian by his own choice and made it his mission “to spread it henceforward” (Gandhi, 1930, p. 83).

In addition to Salt's relentless devotion to humanitarian issues, he remained an active literary critic and naturalist throughout his life. He produced numerous books and studies on some of his favorite authors, including Shelley, Thoreau, De Quincey, and Jefferies. Salt edited numerous volumes of poetry, political work, translations, and a historical collection of radical songs (and poems) that outlined the “revolutionary ideal” (Hendrick, 1977). Given Salt's admiration for Thoreau's natural studies, Salt's natural history work reflects a rich understanding of natural conditions as well as the interaction between society and nature, given the capitalist mode of production. In *On Cambrian and Cumberian Hills: Pilgrimages to Snowdon and Scawfell*, Salt (1908/1922b) challenges the destructive forces despoiling the land:

The pretence that there is something selfish and anti-democratic in the desire to save our mountain scenery from destruction is absurd; on the contrary, it is entirely owing to its devotion to the fetish of “property” that the public has so long allowed these places to be exploited for private gain, and has stood by in utter apathy and indifference while a handful of speculators and traders have benefited at the expense of the community. (p. 120)

Salt (1908/1922b) continues his argument by denouncing the mining industries that destroy the mountains and poison the lakes, streams, and air with chemicals. Likewise, Salt's (1928) book, *Our Vanishing Wildflowers*, raises the issue of how polluted rivers and land threatened wildflowers and animal life. In *The Call of the Wildflowers*, Salt (1922a) charged that private property prevents other people from being able to enjoy the gift of nature by instituting class privilege in time and money

and by limiting access to the land. Salt encouraged a form of trespassing that leaves the land free from harm and avoids possible persecution from landholders (Salt, 1922a, pp. 113-120). Salt helped form a conservation movement to save the English countryside from exploitation due to the pursuit of profit and from general disregard. When discussing wildflowers, Salt, as a materialist, had to confront natural theology because natural theologians held that God sent the flowers for human pleasure and lessons. Salt contends that these positions prevent an understanding of the naturalness of flowers and our complex, interactive relationship to nature (p. 12).

A reflection of the sincerity of Salt's philosophical position is evident in the statement read at Salt's funeral. Bertram Lloyd read the following address that Salt had prepared for his own burial service. Salt declared,

I shall die, as I have lived, a rationalist, socialist, pacifist, and humanitarian, I must make my meaning clear. I wholly disbelieve in the present established religion; but I have a very firm religious faith of my own—a Creed of Kinship, I call it—a belief that in years yet to come there will be a recognition of the brotherhood between man and man, nation and nation, human and sub-human, which will transform a state of semi-savagery, as we have it, into one of civilization, when there will be no such barbarity as warfare, or the robbery of the poor by the rich, or the ill-usage of the lower animals by mankind. (as cited in Hendrick, 1977, pp. 1-2)

For Salt, the relationship between cruelty to other humans and cruelty to animals could not be separated. He recognized the historical and systematic conditions that perpetuated these conditions. Salt maintained a realist position, understanding how difficult it is to change the operations of institutions and people's actions, yet he recognized it is only through human actions that these conditions can change.

Salt was notable for the sophistication of his insights with regard to the relationship between nature and society. He systematically understood how the pursuit of profit resulted in the destruction of the environment. His commitment to humanitarian issues, both social and animal, remains unparalleled by social movements today. Whereas *Animals' Rights* (Salt, 1980) remains his most well-known book on the same subject, his one-act play (one of the two plays he wrote), "A Lover of Animals" (Salt, 1895, pp. 52-63), reprinted here, presents a dynamic story with regard to various perceptions and positions with regard to animal rights. Salt's biographer, George Hendrick, has contended that Salt may have modeled the character of Grace Goodhart in part after Eleanor Marx, who Salt felt was a splendid individual, "strong both in brain and in heart" (Salt, 1921, p. 81; see also Hendrick, 1977). In this play, Salt is able to expose the contradictions that we find when addressing animal rights. As with any situation, Salt hoped that we, as human actors, could transcend the current social issues through active struggles for a more humane world.

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