

Animalia: Animals in the Archives. Helen McClung Exhibit Area, Archives of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario. December 2018 (ongoing). Curated by Jay Young.

JENNIFER GRANT

Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections

York University Libraries, Toronto, Ontario

The Archives of Ontario takes a thematic approach with its newest exhibition, *Animalia: Animals in the Archives*, which highlights the role of animals in Ontario history as documented in archival records. Located in the Archives of Ontario's Helen McClung Exhibit Area and available as an online exhibit,¹ *Animalia* employs an engaging concept for the Instagram age and capitalizes on the broad appeal of animals to a general audience as a way to highlight the variety and scope of the Archives' government and private records. This review will focus exclusively on the physical exhibition.

The curators of *Animalia* have grouped the exhibit by animal species and divided it into five main areas devoted to fish, bears, horses, dogs, and birds. Large-scale panels printed with explanatory text combined with a wide range of images from Archives of Ontario records dominate the exhibition gallery. Each species has its own section, which includes at least one child-friendly, hands-on activity and a display case featuring artifacts and objects, mainly provided by an Archives of Ontario exhibit partner (display cases are provided by Black Creek Pioneer Village, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, and the Royal

1 Archives of Ontario, "Animalia: Animals in the Archives," Ontario Ministry of Government and Consumer Services, accessed 18 January 2018, <http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/en/explore/online/animalia/index.aspx>.



FIGURE 1 Installation view, *Birds, Animalia: Animals in the Archives*. Source: Photograph © Government of Ontario, 2018.

Ontario Museum). For example, in the birds section, a display case curated by the Royal Ontario Museum features samples from the museum's Paul Hahn passenger pigeon collection. In the dogs section, an interactive game invites visitors to guess the most popular dog breed of 1965. Audiovisual elements include a TV montage of archival footage of animals, a video display entitled "Teaching with Bears from the Six Nations of the Grand River" (not operational during my visit but available through the online exhibit), and intermittent audio of animal sounds from an overhead speaker.

This approach to exhibition design, with its emphasis on stimulating the senses (mercifully excepting smell and taste) and its non-linear, anachronic presentation, means that the user experience is more like a visit to a museum than to a traditional archives exhibition. What first appears as a somewhat overwhelming

amount of stimuli in fact allows visitors to engage with whatever materials attract them and to work their way through each section in a variety of ways without losing a narrative thread. Explanatory text is succinct and clear, providing basic contextual information for the imagery, and full citations for archival sources are included. The choice to include thematically related artifacts in the display shows a curatorial understanding of the appeal of three-dimensional objects to a general audience and maintains the exhibition's Ontario-based historical focus.

Nevertheless, *Animalia* relies on traditional archival records for most of its content, using a mixture of photographs, illustrations, posters, textual records, and artwork pulled from the fonds of Ontario government ministries and agencies, the province's art collection, and donated private records. The exhibition's explanatory text provides some context for these records, highlighting the many ways that government and individuals have interacted with animals: as members of the family; as sources of entertainment, food, and transportation; and as natural resources requiring management by the government. The use of government records in particular reminds the audience about the vital role played by animals in the economic development of the province, emphasizing their effects on industry, the environment, tourism, and transportation instead of simply focusing on animals as human companions or objects of affection. The fish section of the exhibition – with its display case featuring records about the Ontario Atlantic salmon as well as a touchable model of the rather nightmarish destroyer of sea trout, the sea lamprey – provides the most evidence of this impact.

Items selected for inclusion in the exhibition predictably skew toward the graphic, with the most visually arresting images of each species reproduced on a large scale. In this way, *Animalia* avoids the dullness of many archival exhibits by minimizing text in favour of a selection of high-impact images and graphics and leaving aside concerns for provenance-based groupings of materials and reliance on heavily detailed textual descriptions. This approach allows visitors of all ages and with varying levels of interest to engage to some extent with the subject matter. However, efforts to foreground the labour of archivists can still be observed. This is most obvious in the text that accompanies a large photograph of a dog standing in the middle of a street, which briefly explains the use of archival metadata in the management of the record and in the creation of the exhibition. A bonus display at the end of the exhibition cleverly highlights the use of animals – or rather, animal-based products – as record carriers and in the toolkits of archival conservators.



FIGURE 2 *Installation view, Dogs, Animalia: Animals in the Archives. Source: Photograph © Government of Ontario, 2018.*

The curators of *Animalia* clearly designed the exhibition to be inclusive in both its form and the broad appeal of its animal-themed content. This is an unsurprising choice for a government archives with a mandate to serve the public. The explanatory text throughout the exhibition is available in English and French, and an audio prompt encourages visitors to visit an accessible version of the exhibition on the Archives of Ontario website, which includes links to video and photographs used in the exhibition and made available on YouTube and Flickr. The interactive aspects of the exhibition include a children's colouring station with table and chairs, a scavenger hunt, and items that visitors are encouraged to touch. All of these curatorial choices speak to a desire to appeal to a broad audience, accommodating visits by school groups, Archives of Ontario researchers, and the public.

When archival institutions go to the often-considerable effort of creating exhibitions, it is worth considering the reasons why. Undoubtedly, they may do so simply to draw attention to and promote the use of archival records, to highlight new or important acquisitions, or to commemorate special events or anniversaries. Exhibitions can be a tool to champion the work of institutions to manage and preserve those records of value to user communities and can serve as a means of institutional self-advocacy. In creating exhibitions for government archives, curators must also consider content selection in light of how those records reflect the role, impact, and responsibilities of government in community and culture, past and present. In *Animalia*, the subject matter is determinedly uncontroversial, apolitical, and broadly appealing, foregrounding positive or at least neutral aspects of the Province of Ontario's socio-economic and cultural influence. Unlike previous on-site exhibitions at the Archives of Ontario, which highlighted anniversaries of historical events,² acquisitions,³ and format-based collections,⁴ *Animalia* is unmoored from concerns about timeliness and from the influence of traditional users of archives such as genealogists and historians, who may prefer to engage with more serious subject matter and in a more text-heavy presentation format. Whether this is a permanent curatorial shift in focus for the Archives of Ontario or simply a refreshing experiment is unclear. However, *Animalia*'s light-hearted subject matter and presentation methods may reflect the curators' awareness of the Royal Ontario Museum's success in engaging younger visitors and school groups with its permanent exhibitions and related programming. *Animalia* itself serves as a worthy example of how other archives with a similar public-focused mandate might highlight their archival records to maximum effect.

From the perspective of the archives professional, it is hard not to wish for more information about the sources of the records used in this exhibition and a more critical interpretive tone pertaining to the Government of Ontario's successes and failures as stewards of the animal-related natural resources highlighted in this exhibition. Yet one must admire the careful balance struck by the

2 Archives of Ontario, *Perceptions of 1812: Identity, Diversity* (gallery exhibit, Toronto, ON, 9 November 2012 – 7 July 2014).

3 Archives of Ontario, *Gifted: Donations from the Ontario Society of Artists* (gallery exhibit, Archives of Ontario, Toronto, ON, 26 April 2012 – 12 October 2012).

4 Archives of Ontario, *Ontario: On the Map* (gallery exhibit, Archives of Ontario, Toronto, ON, 22 October 2009 – 3 February 2010).

exhibition's curators. The skill involved in creating an exhibition that satisfies the supervising government ministry's overarching goals to promote the archives and its holdings while also selecting records that are both engaging and educational for diverse visitors should not be underestimated. Indeed, the openness of *Animalia*'s unifying theme and its cultivation of a wide potential audience with appealing content and inclusive presentation methods are the main successes of the exhibition. By choosing to create a themed exhibition with general appeal, the curators of *Animalia* have also ensured that their exhibition does not have a built-in expiry date, and this extended lifespan perhaps justifies the expense of a physical exhibition (instead of an economically sensible online-only version). In a new era of provincial austerity and populist decision-making in Ontario, this may prove to be a wise decision.



FIGURE 3

Boy in Scottish dress [portrait with dog], [ca. 1900]. George Irwin fonds, C 119-1-0-0-30, 10014086. Courtesy of Archives of Ontario.