



Biography

Bringing the issue of animal welfare to the public: A biography of Ruth Harrison (1920–2000)

Keywords: Animal welfare; Animal machines; Farm animals; Biography; Ruth Harrison

Most people who are involved in animal welfare are aware of [Ruth Harrison's](#) seminal book 'Animal Machines', published in 1964. As a consequence of this book, Ruth raised the lid on 'factory farming' in the UK (and much of the rest of the world) and became a credible influence on various animal welfare committees, animal protection societies, and government working groups because of the extensive work she did with them. However, her background may be less known. In this second biographical article, written on behalf of the International Society for Applied Ethology (ISAE), an attempt is made to give an insight into Ruth Harrison's history.

Ruth (b. 1920) was one of three children born in Kensington, London to Stephen and Clare Winsten. Her parents had a creative streak: Stephen was a writer who wrote a biography on his close friend George Bernard Shaw, and Clare was a painter and sculptor who illustrated Shaw's 'My Dear Dorothea'. Her paintings are still on display in the Womens' Art Collection, New Hall, University of Cambridge in the UK. Both parents were fans of Henry Salt, who wrote about vegetarianism and animal rights in the late 19th century. They were also vegetarian, as was Ruth.

Ruth's young adult years gave no indication of the path that she was to eventually follow. In 1939, she became an English major at London University (Bedford College), although part of her university career was spent in Cambridge, when her college was evacuated there during the war. In Cambridge Ruth joined a Quaker group (Society of Friends), like her parents who were also Quakers. She appreciated the Quaker faith because it was not tied to any dogma, but appealed strongly to conscience.

After a year at university, Ruth left to participate in the war effort, by working for the Friends' ambulance unit. Although she possessed no formal qualifications, Ruth worked as a nurse throughout the rest of the war in London hospitals at Whitechapel and Hackney. Following the war, Ruth moved to Germany to assist people displaced by the war and those living in bombed-out areas.

On return to the UK after the war, Ruth enrolled at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA), receiving informal voice production lessons from George Bernard Shaw. Ruth was an able student, and was commended for her production of the play: 'An Inspector Calls' by J.B. Priestley. Upon graduating from RADA with a Diploma in Dramatic Arts, Ruth worked for an architectural firm named Harrison and Seel. In 1954, she married the company's senior partner Dex Harrison. Together, they had a son Jonathan (b. 1955) and daughter Jane (b. 1956).

In 1961, Ruth's life irrevocably changed when the animal rights group 'Crusade Against All Cruelty to Animals' slipped her a small leaflet about the plight of animals raised for food such as veal calves, broilers, and laying hens under her door (photo 2). The images and information shocked Ruth and, despite being a vegetarian, she reasoned that, although she did not eat them, she still had a responsibility towards animals. She decided that if she did not do something about it, nothing would be done. Thus began her quest to investigate 'factory farming' practices in the UK, to find out herself if what the leaflet described was true.

This eventually led to the publication of her book 'Animal Machines, The New Factory Farming Industry' in 1964. She researched the material for her book thoroughly, by visiting different farm systems, which she would discuss in her book (both the good ones and bad ones). This was very characteristic of the way Ruth worked. In her later animal welfare work, she would also adopt this method of visiting farms to make sure she acquired facts and (scientific) evidence to underline her statements.

Unlike Ruth, Dex, her husband, was more interested in conservation and environmental issues. However, he became very supportive of Ruth's work after visiting a laying hen farm and veal farm with her. He accompanied her on many of her subsequent investigations and he took some of the photos published in 'Animal Machines'.



When Ruth completed the manuscript for 'Animal Machines' she send it to [Rachel Carson](#) with a request to write the foreword. Rachel had published a book in 1962 about the ecological

risks of the indiscriminate use of chemicals in agriculture ('Silent Spring'). Rachel was stunned by what she read and agreed to write the foreword. After publication, the book was serialised in a London newspaper and this helped to give it a great deal of publicity. It was translated in several languages.

'Animal Machines' alerted the public and government to the fact that many in the industry regarded farm animals merely as production objects. It also described the continuous effort to obtain ever-greater production at whatever cost to the animals. The book revealed farm practices such as castration, tail-docking, beak-trimming, de-horning, adding antibiotics to feed, battery cages for laying hens and veal calf crates to the general public, who were largely ignorant of such routines.

The public reaction to Ruth's book was so intense that the British government ordered an investigation chaired by Professor F.W.R. Brambell (The Brambell Committee). Ruth became a member and she was grateful for the fact that the committee included experts on animals (e.g. the Cambridge ethologist W.H. Thorpe). The presence of such professionals meant that the investigation would be conducted from the perspective of the animal and not from the perspective of those profiting from the use of animals. The Brambell committee published its report in 1965 outlining basic ethical and biological principles for animal husbandry. The Committee's report vindicated Ruth's own findings, set a course for reforms and identified the scientific study of animal behaviour as a critical component of evaluating (farm) animal welfare. This also laid the groundwork for the development of a new field of science, the science of animal welfare.

In 1966, the Minister of Agriculture appointed an independent committee, the Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (that later became the Farm Animal Welfare Council, FAWC), to provide advice on animal welfare matters. Ruth became a member thanks to her considerable knowledge of animal husbandry and she served on it until she was 70. All these activities led to the drafting of a new law on farm animal welfare (The Agriculture (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act) that was passed in 1968.

After the publication of her book Ruth became very active in animal welfare work. She founded the Farm Animal Care Trust (FACT) in 1967. This charity has been one of the most important charities funding small conferences and farm animal welfare research projects (e.g. on the pig-family pen system, alternatives to veal crates, gas stunning of animals and group farrowing of pigs). She visited many systems on behalf of FACT, such as chick hatcheries, fox and mink farms, alternative hen housing systems and a mobile poultry-slaughtering system, some of these system were located abroad. Overall, between 1964 and 1998, Ruth travelled to many places in the course of her work, visiting farms and research institutions in Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland and 13 other countries in Europe, Australia, the U.S., India, and Canada.

Ruth preferred to work on her own rather than to be employed by any one organisation. She worked out of the living room of the comfortable South Kensington home she and Dex shared. Ruth felt that being unattached in this way gave her more freedom to explore, investigate and advocate wherever the need might take her. However, she frequently consulted for animal protection organisations and over the years she became a director or council member for many groups. These included the Conservation Society, the Soil Association, the Animal Defence Society, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) and the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA), for which she was a board director in the 1980s. Ruth also had dealings with Compassion in World Farming and the Farm Animal Welfare Network (FAWN).

(a)

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- ✘ Refuse to buy forced white veal and broiler chickens and tell the shopkeeper why. Cut-price chickens can only be obtained by broiler methods.
- ✘ Do all you can to avoid buying battery eggs. Ask for FREE RANGE eggs or buy DANISH. Tell the shopkeeper you prefer British eggs but will not buy while they are produced by battery methods.
- ✘ Write to your Member of Parliament, House of Commons, London, S.W.1, protesting against the broiler and battery systems and ask him to take action on the matter. There are attempts to give the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Secretary of State for Scotland power to make regulations concerning intensive methods of food production, i.e. the broiler calf and chicken industries, but this would allow the system to continue even if in modified form.
- ✘ We want an amendment to the PROTECTION OF ANIMALS ACT, 1911, to make these systems illegal. We appeal to you in the name of sanity to write to your M.P. asking him to support us in this.
- ✘ Ask your M.P. to agitate at once for all "broiler" chickens, forced white veal and battery eggs to be marked as such so that you, the public, can make the choice you are entitled as free individuals to make when buying your food.
- ✘ Write to the national and local papers about it and keep writing. Talk about it in your local societies and church organisations and when you go shopping.
- ✘ Join our national campaign against these evils as announced in THE DAILY MIRROR of December 8, 1960.

Remember . . . "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing" —Burke.

Issued by
CRUSADE AGAINST ALL CRUELTY TO ANIMALS
 3, Woodfield Way, Bounds Green Rd., London, N.11.
 in co-operation with
CAPTIVE ANIMALS' PROTECTION SOCIETY

Further copies of this leaflet can be obtained from the above address free of charge but DONATIONS to the campaign will be gratefully received. Cheques and postal orders should be made payable to HUMANE FARMING CAMPAIGN and crossed "K Co."

**Cheap food? ~~YES!~~
 BUT IS IT GOOD FOOD?**



"Farmer & Stockbreeder" photograph.

"BROILER" CALVES — in prison for life!

The Dutch method of rearing calves for veal has recently been introduced into this country and is being developed despite public protest.

What it is

Calves are reared in unnatural conditions, their movements deliberately restricted either in small pens or separate stalls and sometimes by tethering, in many cases deprived of light except at feeding times and even then given only artificial light, and fed on an unnatural diet including drugs. These methods are used to force quick growth and white meat. After lives of complete imprisonment the calves are slaughtered at the age of 12 weeks to give YOU CHEAP VEAL.

A growing evil

Similar intensified unnatural methods are now being extended to other animals. It is easy to see that unless public opinion calls a halt to this false progress NOW the day is very near when all our farm animals will be kept in factories tier upon tier.

We have proof of this in the frightening growth of the broiler chicken industry in this country. In 1960 the British public in their ignorance bought one hundred million broiler chickens. The industry confidently anticipates that the same public will purchase one hundred and thirty-five million chickens in 1961.

(b)

HOW BROILER CHICKENS ARE REARED . . .

"The Observer" of March 8, 1959 described it thus: "The ill-fated chicks, 5,000 or 10,000 under one roof, are given about a square foot of saw-dust to scratch around on; they have to be heavily drugged to keep them alive, and de-beaked to prevent them tearing one another to pieces in sheer boredom. In the latest houses they never see the light of day, and going into some broiler plants is rather like entering a tunnel in a sandstorm."
 Yet these chickens — and the veal calves imprisoned in their pens — are LIVING creatures with a natural instinct for freedom and the open air.

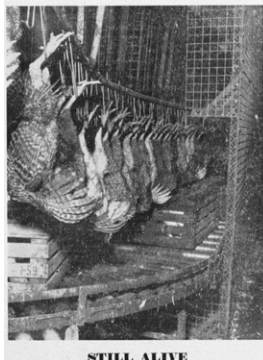
WHAT ABOUT EGGS ?

Do you know that an increasing number of our eggs are produced by the BATTERY SYSTEM? Battery hens are imprisoned all their lives in small wire cages just large enough to hold them.
 Not for them the healthy NATURAL habit of scratching for food; not for them the NATURAL joy of preening in the sun or the pleasure of a dusty earth bath; not for them the NATURAL community life with their kind. For them just the tiny wire cage, the boredom of inactivity and the constant laying of eggs until such time as they do not lay enough or fall sick and are then put to death.
 Do you think we have the right to use living creatures in this way?
 We in Britain — the so-called animal-loving country — allow this method to go on increasingly. Yet, Denmark, world-famed for its dairy produce, has already prohibited battery eggs by law.
 Do you think that eggs produced in this way from hens living completely unnaturally can be as good for you as those from hens on free range?
 Do you think the eggs you buy are as good as they used to be?

**WHAT THEY SAY
 about these unnatural
 methods of food production**

DAILY MAIL Editorial July 16, 1960; referring to "broiler" calves.
 "The real indictment of the "broiler" system is that it is so unnatural that it outrages ordinary human feelings. That agriculture should be mechanised is inevitable. But there is a moral gulf between mechanising a plough and mechanising an animal. Once we start on that road we interfere with the life-cycle and, cock a snook at Mother Nature."
 "Mammon" in THE OBSERVER November 13, 1960: "... we the animal-loving British public will have to make up our minds how much we care about: the forcing of birds with artificial light and mechanical feeding."

By courtesy of "The People"
 An English Broiler Plant. Birds carried head downwards on a moving rail, it takes 15 minutes to reach the man doing the killing. Photograph taken in 1959.



STILL ALIVE

A Vet. in FARMER & STOCKBREEDER, September 13, 1960:
 "The addition of growth stimulants . . . in the form of antibiotics or arsenicals is very widely practised. There is little evidence to show that the persistent feeding of antibiotics . . . is beneficial. Antibiotics are, without doubt, the most widely mis-used drugs available to the industry."
 If you do not care about the plight of the animals and if you are still not convinced that we should stop the production of food by broiler methods then perhaps the following comments will convince you.

TASTELESS MEAT

Adrian Monck-Mason, expert poultry adviser who suggests it would be better to work with Nature and not against her writes in FARMER & STOCKBREEDER, September 13, 1960: "It may be that one day the effects of the medicaments we use will become such as to oblige the biologist to pronounce our drug-drenched chicken carcasses to be unfit for human consumption."

C. W. Scott in THE DAILY TELEGRAPH, August 15, 1960: "The taste of farm produce has deteriorated since natural methods ceased to be the rule."

"DECENT BLOTTING PAPER TASTES BETTER THAN BROILERS," says James Winer, Hampshire farmer, (Daily Telegraph, December 9, 1960), who has retained his sanity amid the scramble for quick money and runs his farm the natural way.

Dr. Samuel R. Day, an Anglican clergyman, in a letter to THE CHURCH TIMES, December 2, 1960, writes: "... One of the main reasons — although subordinate to the religious ones — why I personally will not eat broiler chicken is that I value wholesome food, and am more than a little suspicious of food produced by such chemical means."

Laurence Easterbrook, well-known farmer and writer, in his article, "Stop This Wretched Trade," writes: "We should begin to educate the public in the value of good food to their well-being. But first we must learn. Official circles are completely ignorant on this subject because practically no scientific research has been applied to it. If the Ministry of Agriculture, which controls agricultural research, has become too hidebound to undertake the job, there are others who will, and scientists, young and independent in mind, can be found to do it."

"It must be done. For I believe we are advancing into great danger. History teaches that no nation can debase the living world around it and survive; for we are part of it, and in debasing it we invite self-destruction."

**The only hope for the future rests with YOU, the individual!
 Take action with us NOW! See overleaf.**



By courtesy of "The People"
 The slaughterman cutting the neck of a live bird. Photograph taken in 1959.

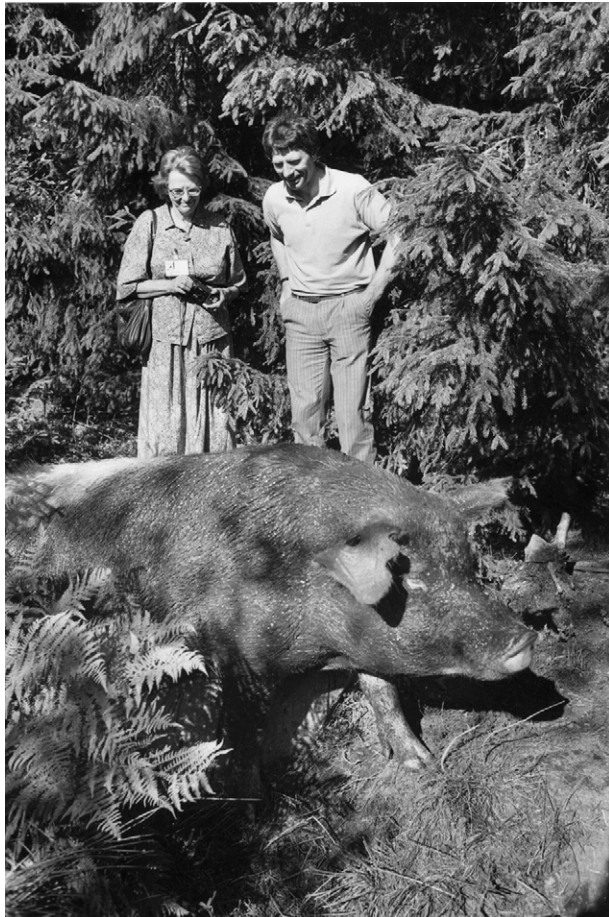


Internationally, Ruth's book and her work in the Brambell Committee and FAWC resulted in animal welfare issues being taken up by several European parliaments. Ruth was very active for WSPA in the Council of Europe with the work leading to the European Convention on the Protection of Animals Kept for Farming Purposes (1976). This provided recommendations on the housing of poultry, pigs, cattle, sheep, goats and fur animals. Specific issues that Ruth investigated were stunning and slaughter, hen housing, broiler production, force-feeding of ducks and geese and the housing of turkeys and pigs.

In the Council of Europe, the country delegates had the utmost respect for her, as she always took care to be well briefed, both technically and politically. As she did for her book, she prepared herself thoroughly for discussions, by visiting systems, visiting researchers and discussing their work, and obtaining data on the economics of the industry. Therefore her arguments were always clear, logical, and based on scientific evidence. Although she was a non-confrontational person, sometimes some of the more extreme elements of the intensive farming lobby provoked her, but she always kept her cool.

It was also characteristic of her thoroughness that she did not hesitate to experiment on herself if she needed to make up her mind about an issue, e.g. she tried gas stunning (CO_2 , with 2% oxygen), but once tried, she was strongly opposed to it and fought against it. Ruth invested a lot of her own time into her work, which gave her the advantage over professionals with wider-ranging responsibilities.

People who have worked closely with Ruth describe her as a positive, calm person who was devoted to animal welfare. Ruth's concern for the way that farm animals were raised came, not, she said, from a love of animals, but from a deep sense of justice and what she called 'fair play'. She was not sentimental about animals, but based her advocacy for them on what science could tell us about their natures and needs and on what ethics demanded of us once we had that knowledge. She believed that if people used animals for food or anything else, they had an obligation to provide them with a decent life, free of pain and fear and one that allowed them to perform their natural behaviours.



Ruth was a stimulating person who knew how to present questions in a way that caused people to think and often re-think their position or views. But she was also compassionate and interested in the person she dealt with. Her professionalism inspired confidence in her objectivity so that both policymakers and scientists took her seriously. Ruth was a touchstone for many people involved in animal welfare work. Scientists, students, policymakers, legislators, advocates and journalists asked her to review research proposals or manuscripts for journals, or for advice on how a particular welfare issue could be approached.

During her years of active engagement for animal welfare, Ruth saw many successes to which she contributed, such as The Agriculture (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act in the UK (1968), the abolition of rearing veal calves in crates, and from the mid 1980s the rise of alternative, free-range systems, particularly for pigs and poultry. But she also saw the continuing intensification of agriculture due to economic powers of the industry and the ignorance of the public. She was disappointed that many issues that were discussed in her book were still issues of concern in the 1990s. As she wrote in her book: ‘Most people, especially in towns, tend to be ignorant of the processes by which food reaches their table, or if not ignorant, they find it more comfortable to forget’. Ruth received an OBE in 1986 for her services to animal welfare.

Ruth regretted that she had not found the time to write another book as a sequel to *Animal Machines*. After her death she left behind 81 boxes of books, papers, and documents that detailed her work. Ruth Harrison died from cancer in 2000, just a few days short of her 80th birthday.

Acknowledgements

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