

HORSES AS MEAT-EATING KILLERS?

Have we misunderstood the true nature of equines? A new book probes a "hidden history" of horses that reveals their ability to eat meat. Neil Clarkson reports.

The large bay stallion presented a terrifying sight, trotting down the road with the body of a dead child hanging from its jaws.

Journalist William Knighton had been traveling by horse and buggy through the streets of Lucknow, India, wondering why locals had deserted them.

The stallion spied Knighton and his companion in the buggy. The horse immediately threw the toddler on the road and set off after his new prey.



Knighton knew what fate had in store, he recounted in his book, "The Private Life of an Eastern King", about his time in the service of Nasir al-Din Haidar, the maharaja who ruled Oudh from 1827 to 1837. The Englishman described how they had earlier come across the horribly disfigured corpse of a native woman on the road.

"The body was bruised and lacerated in all directions, the scanty drapery torn from the form; the face had been crushed as if by teeth into a shapeless mass," Knighton reported.

The victim's long matted hair, which fell in bundles over the road, was clotted with blood. They proceeded, finding houses

closed. A palpable sense of terror hung over the silenced city. Further down the road they found a second victim - a youth similarly mangled and destroyed. The pair then noticed one of the king's troopers atop a nearby house, who warned of the stallion that would become known as the Man-eater of Lucknow.

Suddenly, the soldier shouted, "Look out! He has turned in our direction. Flee for your lives."

Knighton and his companion did just that, as the stallion tossed aside the dead child and set off in pursuit.

"I rapidly turned the buggy round, though my horse was almost unmanageable with terror. Then we went flying back down the road at a mad gallop, heading towards an enclosure with iron gates we had passed a short time before.

As we ran for our lives, we could hear the iron-shod hooves of the man-eater in hot pursuit."

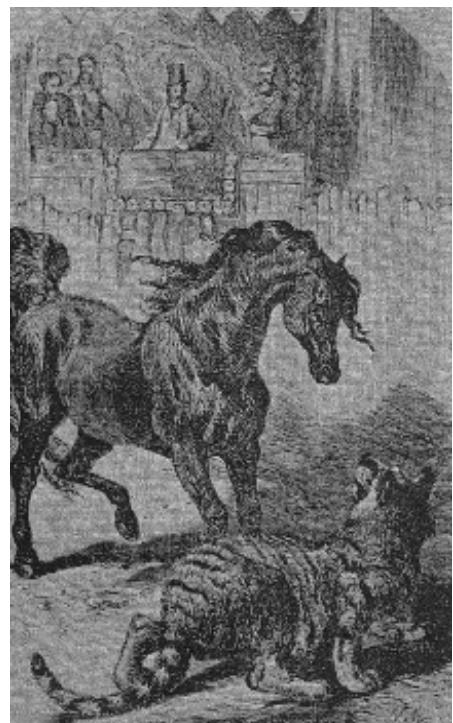
The second they passed through the gates, Knighton's friend sprang from the buggy and slammed the gate shut.

"Just as the fall of the bolt secured our safety, the man-eater dashed up. His head was covered with blood, his jaws steaming with recent slaughter, his cheeks horrid with coagulated guts that had most probably spurted from his victims.

"There he stood, with cocked ears, distended nostrils and glaring eye-balls, looking savagely at us through the iron railings. My poor horse trembled as if shivering with cold at the sight of this ferocious-looking monster."

The stallion was subsequently ambushed and captured, after which the maharaja declared it would fight his prized tiger, Burrhea. It was a one-sided encounter, the stallion ultimately shattering Burrhea's jaw with a mighty blow from his ironclad hooves.

Though contemporary mythology states that horses are hapless prey animals who flee from predators, the English horse left the tiger so terror-stricken, "his tail was between his legs and he ran round not unlike a whipped spaniel."



Known as the "Man Eater of Lucknow," the stallion went on a rampage, slaying and eating the local citizens.

The English thoroughbred lived out its days in an iron cage, bearing his teeth to visitors and kicking at the bars of his prison if strangers ventured too close.



CuChullaine O'Reilly, the Founder of the Long Riders' Guild.

Knighton's remarkable account comes under modern-day scrutiny in a new book entitled "Deadly Equines", by the founder of the Long Riders' Guild, CuChullaine O'Reilly. O'Reilly has probed mankind's equestrian history to deliver an account that will shock many horse lovers. He has not only pulled together remarkable accounts of equine aggression, but has undertaken what is almost certainly the first serious piece of research into meat-eating equines, from the workhorses used to explore the Poles to cultures that trained their mounts to eat flesh.

O'Reilly is quick to acknowledge that "Deadly Equines" will not make easy reading for horse lovers. However, he stresses he is not offering a Frankenstein-style equine horror story, but instead is revealing a part of the horse's nature which many equestrians previously did not know existed.

O'Reilly says he first learned of the existence of meat-eating horses in 1977, before his departure to ride in Afghanistan.

"I read how the historical Long Rider Sven Hedin had encountered meat-eating horses in Tibet during the late 19th century," O'Reilly recalls. "Though I saw the words on the page, my mind was unable to grasp the magnitude of what the Swedish Long Rider had described."

Nor was O'Reilly the only one to struggle with the implication of Hedin's clues. While engaged in recent fieldwork, German anthropologist Toni Huber was told by Tibetan riders that in the past they often fed their horses meat, blood and offal.

"Toni thought the Tibetans were playing a joke on him. It wasn't until he returned home, and found Hedin's historical research, that he realized the Tibetans had been telling the truth."

O'Reilly says his research on the subject might have remained academic, had it not been for an account on Horsetalk of the tragic death of an infant caused by a horse.

"In terms of controversy," O'Reilly says, "I'm an investigative equestrian reporter, not a missionary. It's not my job to convert people, just present them with the research. I believe the research demonstrates that the best way to understand horses is to first admit that we don't know everything about them."

"What we need to consider is that the modern horse world may have lost touch with a special type of wisdom, one which until recently had been common knowledge among earlier equestrian cultures. For example, not only did the Lord Chamberlain of Bhutan confirm that the King's 40 horses routinely received a special meal containing tiger fat, modern horsemen in that nation wrote to say that they are still feeding their horses beef and yak meat."

O'Reilly says blood-eating horses in Tibet and meat-eating horses in Bhutan show that the Western belief that the horse is a herbivore, not an omnivore, is in need of immediate re-evaluation.

O'Reilly said he was stunned to discover that mankind had known about meat-eating horses for at least four thousand years; that they had been known to consume nearly two dozen different types of protein, including human flesh, and that these episodes had occurred on every continent, including Antarctica.

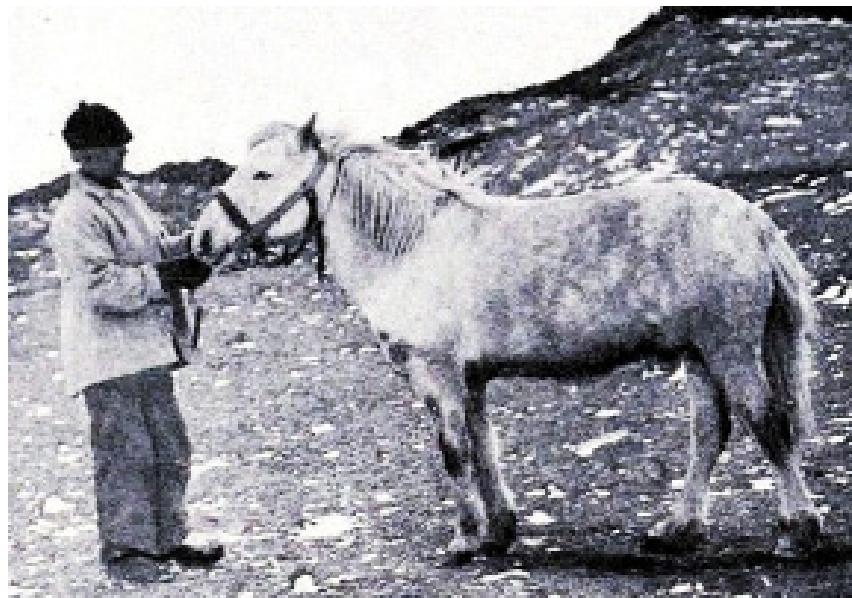
"This wasn't an odd example or two. This amounted to a hidden history of horses."

O'Reilly says tales of deadly and flesh-eating horses arise in mankind's mythology, as well as history.

"For example, mythology states that Alexander the Great's horse, Bucephalus, was a notorious man-eater. Literature has Shakespeare, Steve McQueen and Sherlock Holmes all involved with man-killers or meat eating horses. And we now know that meat-eating horses were used to explore both the Arctic Circle and Antarctica."

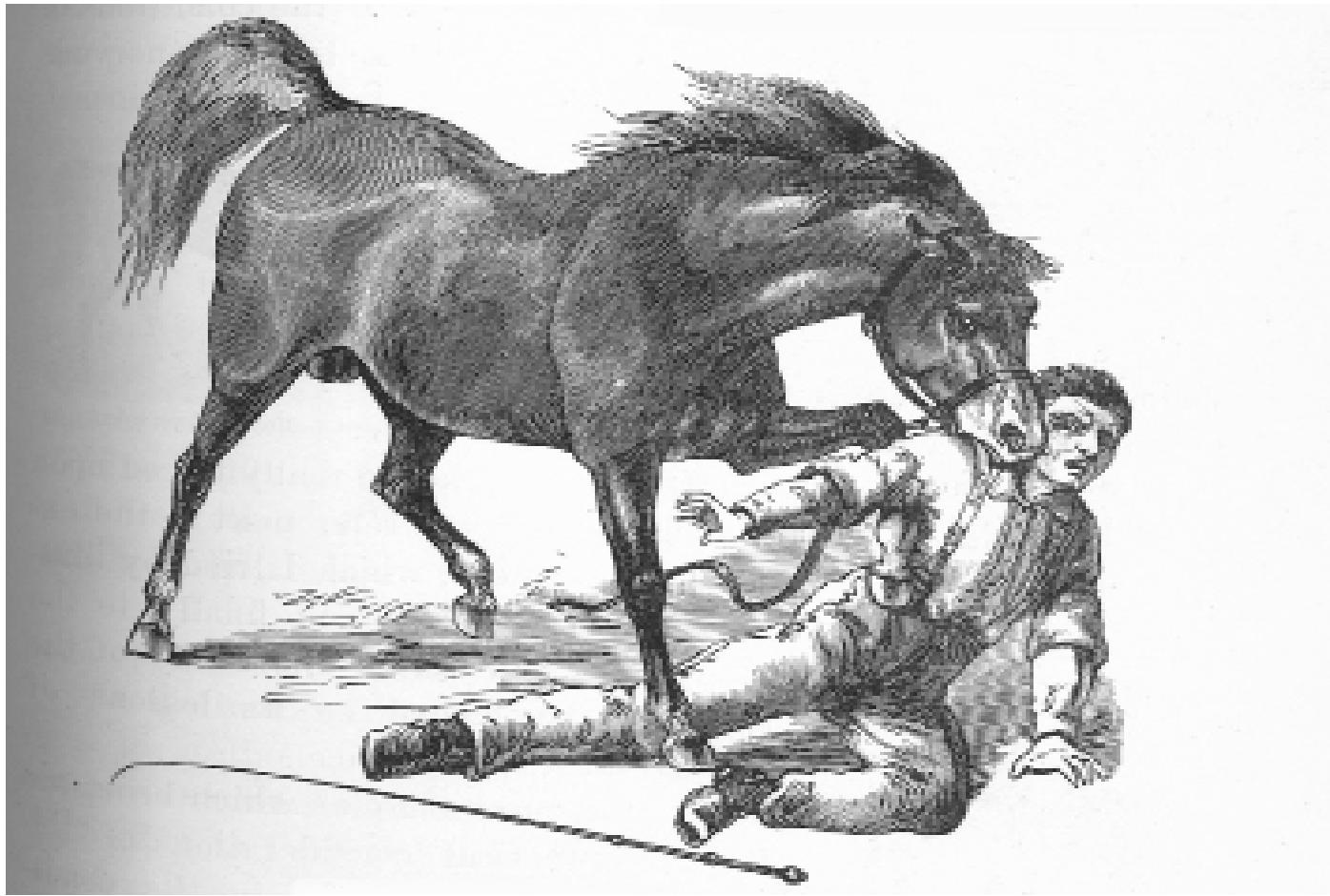
In writing his book, his role as founder of the Long Riders' Guild proved invaluable. "Because the Guild has members in 43 countries, I began querying the Long Riders for evidence. I was surprised to find Long Riders had not only been eyewitnesses to modern meat-eating horses, one of our members rode a meat-eating horse across the Gobi Desert into Tibet. Plus, as word of the project quietly grew, academic allies shared historical episodes of other notorious equines. Finally, fellow horsemen eager to assist in the search forwarded streams of new clues. In a very short time, it became an ongoing international investigation, which is currently seeking new evidence in Mongolia and from assorted horse cultures around the world."

Right up to print deadline, O'Reilly was adding further evidence to his book.



Shackleton's meat eating horse

Another example of a meat-eating equine was Socks, Sir Ernest Shackleton's Manchurian pony, who holds a special place in equestrian history for two reasons. No other horse ever came as close to reaching the South Pole and he is the first recorded horse to have shared a meat-based meal with his master, in 1908.



Horses have consumed nearly two dozen different types of protein, including human flesh, and these episodes have occurred on every continent, including Antarctica.

"First, we confirmed that in 1908 Sir Ernest Shackleton shared a meat-based diet with the horses he employed to reach the South Pole," he says. "That fact alone demonstrated that humans and horses were capable of maintaining a mutual omnivorous existence. Next, we discovered that in 1938 a German expedition to Tibet had filmed that nation's blood-eating horses. This was a custom which apparently only ceased after the Chinese 'cultural revolution' decimated Tibet. Finally, we learned that Kazakh tribesmen claim to still be able to train the meat-eating horses used to cross the Gobi Desert. These were the fabled horses once employed by CIA spies riding from China to Tibet."

"We must not lose sight of the fact that until the end of the 19th century a large percentage of humanity knew that horses were capable of eating meat and behaving in an aggressive manner." "Deadly Equines takes our understanding of violent equine behavior to a whole new level."

So, should horse lovers read his book, unpalatable as some of it may be?

"I believe the majority of readers will realize that what's on offer is not a Frankenstein-style equine horror story," O'Reilly says.

"Quite the contrary. What is under discussion is the strong possibility that we may be witnessing the re-discovery of a part of the horse's nature which many of us previously did not know existed."

O'Reilly, as a Long Rider, has ridden vast distances in the saddle, and is well aware of the place of horses in human history.

"During the long centuries of our mutual existence, the horse has upheld our puny species. He has freed us from the restrictions of gravity, liberated us from the prejudices of the village, and in this darkening world, shown our generation how sweet it is to be alive."

"Yet for too long," he suggests, "the horse world has refused to see what was before our collective eyes. The result, I fear, is that we have been lulled into a set of false beliefs that threaten to bind our minds and fetter our curiosity. We would do well to remember how young Jane Goodall shocked the world in 1960 when she discovered that chimps kill other animals and consume their flesh."

O'Reilly is currently writing full time, but next summer hopes to embark, with his wife, Basha, on a ride around the globe, circling what he calls the equestrian equator.

While he acknowledges some will not be willing to take on board the message in "Deadly Equines", others will accept its findings.

"As Steve McQueen stated in *The Reivers*, the film about a fish-eating racehorse, 'Sometimes you have to say goodbye to the things you know and hello to the things you don't'."