

Cows' history brought to life

Cows – when you see them every day it's easy to take them for granted. But the history of our relationship with cattle so fascinated **Hannah Velten** she wrote a book about it. She explains why

I had originally wanted to write a book called *Pig*. They were my favourite animal then. However, this was not to be. Instead I was asked whether I could write about cows – well... er... yes, of course.

I'd grown up around beef cattle, worked on dairy farms in England and beef ranches in Australia, so I knew my cattle (and worked on *Farmers Weekly* as a livestock reporter). But then came the crunch: Please write an historical account of the relationship between cattle and man on a global scale – oh dear! All I could think of initially were American cattle and cowboys, the sacred cows in India and Spanish bull fighting. I had a steep learning curve to climb, as I had to cover myth, legend, literature, art, artefacts, film, sports and farming, all in 40,000 words.

But after months of research on the internet and in, mainly, London libraries, I had collected a vast amount of information about cows, bulls and oxen. Way too much information actually, and the hardest part of writing the book has been weeding out the most important, and interesting, facts about our relationship with cattle.

We have been interacting with cattle for over 15,000 years, when prehistoric man hunted the descendants of all domestic cattle, the aurochs (or wild cattle). These, sadly, became the first documented case of extinction (the Dodo was the second) in 1627, when the last cow died naturally in Poland.

But their descendants live on and cattle are everywhere, once you start looking out for them. Here are just a few instances of our interaction with cattle since we domesticated them in 6000 BC:

- * Bulls were worshipped for their ferocity and virility in ancient cultures, and they were often sacrificed in bloody ceremonies where worshippers would be covered in blood and eat the raw flesh so the bull's power would be transferred into their bodies.

- * Cattle were, and still are, given as "bridewealth" in East African tribes; so for a man to marry he has to have enough cattle to give his bride-to-be's father in exchange for the daughter. If the couple later divorce or the marriage is childless, the cattle have to be returned to the man.

- * The era of Texan cattle drives only lasted for 20 years, yet the romance and legend still live on today. The bloody history of barbed-wire brought the Texan Longhorn cattle to their knees.

- * Britain was "electrified" with a desire to improve the genetic merit of its cattle in the 1800s – when Longhorns, Shorthorns, Devons, Herefords and Aberdeen Angus flew the patriotic flag: We were proud world leaders.

- * Oxen were trained to help in the stalking of prey in the African bush – they would graze near to the target, while acting as a shield for the hunter.

- * Switzerland hosts the annual sporting competition to find the "Queen of the Herd", which involves cows fighting each other to determine which one leads the herd up to their alpine summer pasture.

While writing the book I came to a rather unsettling conclusion about how our relationship with cattle has changed. Chances are most readers of *Farmers Weekly* will have lots, or at least rudimentary contact with cattle. Just think how lucky you are to interact with them – most of the British population don't know one end of a cow from the other; you are, indeed, privileged.

But it is only relatively recently that we have started to view the cow as an almost alien being. In our urban, media-led country, cows are either seen as cutesy animals (especially calves) or are seen in a negative light as environment killers (think "Cow farts destroy ozone"), disease-bearing nightmares (think "Mad Cows") or the pitiable wreckage of intensive

farming (think "Poor Cows").

Like farmers, our British ancestors had a completely different, and more honest, relationship with cattle based on their living with and working alongside each other (as they do in less developed European, African and Asian countries today).

Cattle were truly a lifeline. If your cow or ox became ill or died, you were in trouble. People knew their cows as individuals; they knew their personalities and they even shared the same diseases, such as smallpox (smallpox in man) and rinderpest (measles in man).

So it seems sad to think that the animal that played such a huge role in shaping civilisations has been reduced to a commercial milking machine, a sperm donor, a walking larder and a provider of leather.

I'm hoping that *Cow* will reintroduce the public (and also farmers) to this remarkable animal, by recognising what cattle have contributed to our culture, and also to instil some respect for what cattle produce for us – they work so hard; I am just trying to repay my debt of gratitude.

COW

* This fascinating 208-page book is published by Reaktion Books and forms part of its animal series. *Cow* can be ordered from bookshops or from the website Amazon, priced £9.95.

