

Social Reform and Gender: Henry Bergh, "Manliness", and the Early Animal Rights Movement in America.



In 1867, New York resident and philanthropist Henry Bergh founded the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (better known now the ASPCA). He was responsible for creating the first animal cruelty society of its kind in the United States, only a few years after the United States had abolished slavery and decades before women would be given the right to vote. While Bergh's work would start a revolution into the way Americans treated animals legally, he did not do so without controversy.

During the Gilded Age, (1865-1890s), upper class men worried that there was a decline in "manliness" during this time. As men began to work less labor intensive jobs and more "white collar" ones, there was a fear that elite men were becoming weak, even "womanish". If there was any hints of sentimentality, even from someone as widely known and respected as Bergh, that person would have been publicly mocked. During his years as the leader of the ASPCA, Bergh would be ridiculed for his work against animal cruelty, which was considered "too sentimental" for strong men.

By contrast, he would also be ridiculed for as well as his zealous aggression against those who committed acts of violence against animals, women, and children. For example, Bergh proposed during his later years as President of the ASPCA that those who were found guilty of beating their animals be flogged themselves. He was no stranger to physical confrontation himself, throwing offenders in horse troughs and into the street when they refused to stop.

The greater work of my thesis will examine how Henry Bergh, as well as other leaders in the early animal rights movement, fit into the Gilded Age ideas of manliness and womanhood. Henry Bergh, Caroline Earle White, the male deputies who worked for these anti-cruelty societies, as well as the many other reformers working in the movement during the Gilded Age and into the Progressive Era. I will examine what kinds of difficulties these reformers encountered while working in a movement based on kindness, and how their efforts were effected based on ideas of gender.



Works Cited

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