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Preface to the First Edition

The archaeology of this book is slightly unusual. It begins on a Greek island. For the benefit of the island's muleteers and donkey drivers, in 2005 I had organised an international Donkey Conference on the Greek island of Hydra. Largely in order to provoke the island's mayor, I then suggested that we should organise an international Camel Conference on the island, complete with camels. That conference was eventually done at the School of Oriental African Studies in London [SOAS], complete with camels. A weekend to remember. By this time I had entered into harness with my colleague William Clarence-Smith in the matter of quadrupeds. Since a camel rampant features in our school's coat of arms, opposite an equally rampant elephant, we decided that, as a follow-up to the camels, we would organise an international Elephant Conference.

We had read that the Indian government had planned to organise an Elephant Conference in November 2013. But then they cancelled it, at short notice. We saw this as a challenge, and we thought that we could rise to it – we could organise such an international conference, even though we had not a penny to our names and virtually no institutional backing.

Location is always a problem – and we were fortunate that Professor Sukumar of the Centre for Ecological Studies in Bangalore offered to host us at his institute. We record our thanks to him for this act of generosity.

Now, I am also a fiddler and dance caller in our SOAS Ceilidh Band. We love to travel with our musics. One of our members was living with tribal peoples in the sundarbans in northern India. Together we hatched a plan that we would take our musicians to the sundarbans, and then travel south, by train, stopping off to play at towns en route, until we reached Bangalore, where we would organise a grand elephant ceilidh. for the pleasure of the conference attendees.

In the end the musical tour never happened. But the conference did. In the science campus in Bangalore, on 4-6 April 2016. It was a wonderful event. Most especially because it was thoroughly interdisciplinary – we covered elephants and elephant cultures from every possible angle, and the sense of community excitement was palpable. We had 27 speakers, each providing unique perspectives from their own particular disciplines.

I take the opportunity here to register my personal gratitude to Dr Ishani Sinha, a researcher in Professor Sukumar's lab, who very kindly undertook to help with the administrative details of conferencing in India. Without her help the conference would not have happened.

Since then William and I have developed further conferences. The list includes camels, donkeys, mules, elephants, war horses, sponges and oysters, and has conferences on water buffaloes and vultures upcoming.

With the conference finished, we all went home. It then fell to me to gather in the papers in order to publish the proceedings. The contributing authors in this volume will testify that for the past five years I have pursued them relentlessly and whipped them mercilessly, until eventually they delivered their goods.

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The papers published here include contributions from a second follow-up conference, held in London [SOAS, 2019]. I confess to a sense of guilt in relation to the African elephant. Our Bangalore conference did due homage to the Asian elephant. We decided that the second conference had to be held in Africa, to respect the African elephant. To that end, we booked a conference venue in Arusha, Tanzania. But it soon became apparent that very few people wished to join us there. Hence the decision to meet in London instead. It remains my hope that one day we shall be able to meet in Africa.

This volume is one outcome of our labours. We have gathered together all the papers that are available for publication (a few were under contract for publication elsewhere), and we present them here for a general readership. Some of the papers reproduced here have been updated to take account of the passing of time – our contributors having moved to new posts, and having new publications. For the benefit of the wider public we are also posting the papers on a dedicated website. The audio recordings of the spoken presentations are also available on that site.

Website for the 2016 conference

www.geocities.ws/soaselephantconference2016/

Website for the SOAS Elephant Reader

www.geocities.ws/theelephantreader

Website for the Interdisciplinary Animal Studies Initiative (IASI) @ SOAS

<http://www.geocities.ws/soasanimalstudies/>

This volume is dedicated affectionately to Ojas, the Elephants' Child.

E.E.
London
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