

They Also Serve

a review by John M. Joyce (March 2016)



[here](#).

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There's no equivalent of Saint Francis of Assisi in the Muslim world, and there never can be. The vile preachings of the devil's servant Mohammed has seen to that. If you want to know the difference between the words and practices of that gentle Saint and the horrors of Islam you need look no further than behind these links:

<http://www.barenakedislam.com/category/muslim-animal-abuse/>

and

<http://www.barenakedislam.com/category/halal-slaughter/>

but be warned – you will need a strong stomach to look at any of the pictures or videos that they will offer you.

Francis Phillips in [the Catholic Herald](#) wrote something about Saint Francis that I agree with. It was this: 'Aidan Nichols, in Vol. 1 of his *Homiliary for the Roman Liturgy*, has a thoughtful comment on the Saint's relationship with the animal kingdom: he describes it as "a renewal of the original peace of creation by way of a foretaste of the peace of the Age to Come" and suggests that God "(this was Francis' intuition) has put us into a world that is a 'cosmic friary' where in different senses we are in a condition of brotherhood and sisterhood, not just with fellow Christians or fellow-humans but with a wider fellowship too." In other words, Francis seems to have been given the rare gift of empathy with men and animals alike. He would have been quite at home among the talking beasts of Narnia.'

Now that's not to say that the good Saint's mission to make us all realise that the 'cosmic friary' includes animals and birds (*i.e.* all of God's creation) has

been entirely successful. Manifestly it hasn't, for not a few of us in the civilised world still treat animals badly. However, most of us, unlike the vast majority of Muslims, do attempt to take good care of our animals, and we usually succeed in that endeavour. We do so because we acknowledge that it is morally and spiritually wrong to treat God's gifts with carelessness and cruelty. We have learnt, or realised, that the Saint was correct in his approach to creation.

That said, we also know that animals can get caught up in the complexity of the human world and that sometimes we press them into service to make life easier or safer for ourselves. That often makes us feel guilty (though a Muslim wouldn't in such a situation) and we strive to do better.

Since the earliest times, animals have served alongside man on the field of battle – as beasts of burden and cavalry mounts; carrying messages and seeking out the wounded; guarding, patrolling and detecting explosives. For most of that time their contribution has gone unrecognised and unremembered, except by those who were close to them and, in many cases, owed their lives to them. And then in 1943 the Dickin Medal was created, to honour the bravest and recognise the contribution of all the animals sharing the danger and hardship alongside their military masters. The story of animals in the service of man in times of war is an inspiring and moving one, and never more so than in the case of the 65 dogs, horses, pigeons – and a cat – who have been awarded the Dickin Medal. *They Also Serve* (the title is taken from the inscription on the obverse of the medal) is the story of those animals.

Recently I read, but alas I can't remember where, a journalist sounding off about how silly we were to give medals to animals. Rightly he pointed out that the animals in question would neither know nor care. He missed the point, in fact he missed the salient portion by so much that he made me laugh. We don't award medals to animals so that they can wear them and strut around and feel better about, or rewarded for, whatever they did. We award medals to animals so that we can feel better – it's a form of atonement and it's a reminder that we may have fallen far short of what is required of us in this 'cosmic friary.' The practice is also to remind us that our animals are very important to us and that we should treat their lives as precious.

There have been other books on the subject, but this one is unique in featuring

all the Dickin Medal winners, and only them. The book is not illustrated, which is a pity, but the animals are brought to life in words. Most are British and Commonwealth recipients, of course, although an American pigeon was honoured in Italy (even if it was for saving the lives of British soldiers!) and three Medals were awarded in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in New York.

Here is the story of Judy, the pointer dog who was captured by the Japanese, became an official prisoner-of-war, and starved and suffered alongside her soldier friends on the Sumatran 'Death Railway'; and of Simon, the ship's cat, who served on *H.M.S. Amethyst* and was wounded under fire during the 'Yangtze Incident'. Here is Tich, a little Egyptian mongrel who adopted a British battalion and served gallantly with their medics throughout the war, from North Africa and up through Italy; and Antis, a German Shepherd, rescued as a puppy in Germany by a fleeing Czech airman, who subsequently flew with him on 32 missions with R.A.F. Bomber Command. And Gander, a Newfoundland who saved his platoon by grabbing a live grenade and carrying it away from them.

At home in the U.K. in the dark days of 1940-41 many cities came under heavy bombing. As the rescue squads laboured to find casualties under the rubble, they were joined by dogs – unofficially at first, what you might call enthusiastic amateurs, and then, when their value was recognised, by trained search-and-rescue dogs. The whole ethos of SAR dogs, who are now deployed to disaster sites all over the world, was developed in these years. When next you see and admire the work of these clever dogs, on some news report of an earthquake or a bombing, give a thought to Beauty, a scruffy little wire-haired terrier who used to accompany her master on rescue missions. Other search-and-rescue dogs are featured as well. And Sheila, a sheepdog who located and rescued the crew of a downed American B17 in a blizzard in the wild hills of the north of England gets a good mention as well.

Here too are the pigeons of the National Pigeon Service, who carried vital messages under horrific conditions, even when terribly wounded. They saved many lives, and the Disney film *Valiant* was inspired by their deeds. Pigeons went into battle in tiny cages in soldiers' kit; on bombers (to release with co-ordinates in case of a crash-landing); even stuffed into socks and dropped by parachute behind enemy lines. A gallant band of little warriors, and of an importance we may struggle to understand in this age of sophisticated communications.

After the Second World War there were no more Dickin Medals awarded until the aftermath of 9/11. As the world reeled in horror, stories of exceptional valour and devotion to duty began to emerge – not least, of course, the brave men and women of the NYPD and the Fire Department of New York. And among them, as usual, were loyal and courageous animals. Dickin Medals were awarded to two guide dogs (seeing-eye dogs) who brought their unsighted masters down the crowded, hellish stairwells from high in the North Tower; and to a NYPD police dog, chosen to receive the Medal on behalf of all the police and rescue dogs who laboured in the debris of Ground Zero. The stories of the two guide dogs are told in edge-of-the-seat style.

Since then, there have been half a dozen awards to sniffer dogs serving in Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan, often preventing considerable loss of life; and in 2014, to mark the centenary of the First World War, the first Honorary Dickin Medal was awarded to Warrior, an officer's charger who served on the Western Front, to represent all the other half-million or so animals who died in that conflict. Read that again. Half a million. And that's just the ones who died. Warrior's story is remarkable; he arrived in France in August 1914 and spent the next four years (the whole of the war) being, apparently, just feet away from where the bombs, bullets and shells were exploding. This, indeed, seems like a fitting conclusion to the story so far of the Dickin Medal; although all too often it was a posthumous award, this is nevertheless an ultimately uplifting and inspiring tribute to the stoic courage of our animal companions.

This fine little book often brought a tear to my eye as I read it. For me, it highlighted the essential differences between the civilised world and the barbarity of Islam – compassion and empathy. I hope that it will do that for you as well. I hope that it will lift you up and help you to appreciate even more fully all the creatures in the 'cosmic friary,' just as it did for me.

Before I finish I have to tell you that the author, Rosemary Greenlaw, is known to me. I was surprised when she sent me a review copy of her book, but I'm glad that I didn't toss it aside as I do with so many other unsolicited review copies. I know that she lives happily in the Highlands of Scotland. She has three grown-up children, who have left home to be replaced by a serious chocolate habit and two small but very imperious dogs. She says she considers writing to be a perfectly valid alternative to housework! I've seen her house and I can assure you that that isn't completely true.

As well as this book she has written and published [Old As The Hills](#) is also available on Amazon (£6.99/\$9.99).

There you go: two reviews for the price of one. What more can you want?

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