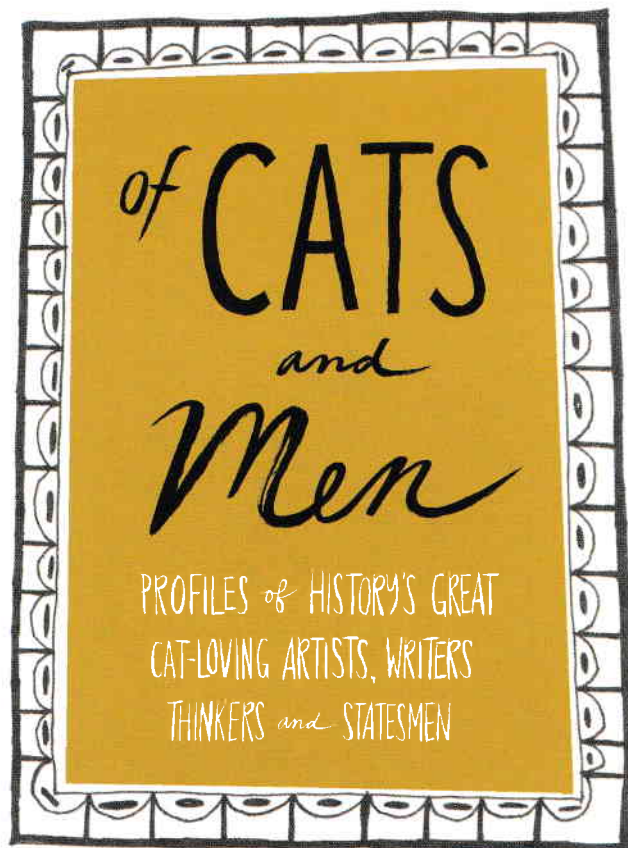


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KING HYWEL *the* GOOD

TENTH-CENTURY WELSH KING

Our tale of cat men begins in the Dark Ages, a bleak time for pretty much everything even vaguely comfortable and civilized in the Western world. For cats, in particular, this was a violent age of superstition and ailurophobia. However, as we are well aware, cats are territorial, regal beasts, so it's fitting we begin in the court of the old kings of the British Isles.

Beginning around AD 920, the medieval king Hywel Dda ruled over much of present-day Wales. After visiting Rome as a young man, Hywel returned to his kingdom and set about bringing order to traditional Welsh law. Hywel the Good, as he is now known, introduced laws to protect domestic cats. Because Hywel recognized that cats were of great value to agriculture and the community as pest controllers, he introduced a scale of prices for kittens and cats that included penalties for killing or stealing a cat. These prices varied from one to four pence according to the age and killing ability of each cat.

Perhaps you wonder if merely placing monetary value on cats makes King Hywel the Good a cat man proper? By placing value on animals, Hywel afforded them protection through law. Considering this was a time when the touch of a king was thought to cure various maladies, such proto-animal rights laws were fairly sophisticated, and certainly deserving of our appreciation.



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SULTAN BAIBARS

THIRTEENTH-CENTURY SULTAN

Long after the ancient Egyptians built temples to their feline-faced goddesses, the cat continued to be held in high regard by the Near Eastern cultures of antiquity. In particular, the cat is venerated in Islamic tradition for its cleanliness and for being loved by the Prophet Muhammad.

In the thirteenth century, a Mamluk sultan named Baibars ruled present-day Egypt. Much like today, large numbers of cats roamed the streets of medieval Cairo. Ever the cat man, Baibars bequeathed in his will a garden near his mosque for the benefit and protection of the cats of Cairo. According to British scholar Edward William Lane, 'Every afternoon, a quantity of offal is brought into the great court before the Mahkemeh; and the cats are called together to eat.'

While Baibars's ruling European counterparts killed cats en masse on account of satanic hysteria, Baibars's feline stewardship provided the cats of Cairo with sustenance and shelter for several centuries, a legacy underscoring the relationship between cats and Islam.

MICHEL *de* MONTAIGNE

PHILOSOPHER AND ESSAYIST

Throughout the last four hundred years, Michel de Montaigne has been regarded as one of the most influential writers of the French Renaissance. An aristocrat and statesman, Montaigne experienced a profound midlife crisis and began writing his much-famed essays.

For all intents and purposes, Michel de Montaigne invented the essay – and not the dreaded essays born of procrastination we remember from our school days. Derived from the French word *essai*, meaning ‘to try,’ ‘to attempt,’ the essays Montaigne wrote were candid explorations into his own psyche. His digressive style left few subjects untouched, from marriage and horseback riding to kidney stones and the proper way to leave a dinner party.

Given the breadth of subject matter he explored in his essays, it’s no surprise that there is a particularly regarded passage in ‘An Apology for Raymond Sebond’ about Montaigne’s pet cat. In the essay, Montaigne writes critically of the vain tendency of humans to feel superior to animals. Wondering what the world might look like from her point of view, he writes, ‘When I play with my cat, how do I know she is not playing with me?’ By imagining the world from the perspective of the other (another species, in this instance), he saw the world through the eyes of a thoroughly modern man – the *first* modern man, some might say. Cherished in the hundreds of years since their publication, Montaigne’s essays helped lay the foundation for the Enlightenment in Europe. To be sure, his words will make us mindful of our cat’s wide-eyed stare the next time we reach for a stuffed mouse.

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WHEN I AM PLAYING WITH MY CAT,
HOW DO I KNOW
SHE IS NOT PLAYING WITH ME?

Michel de Montaigne

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