

Peacock by Christine E. Jackson.  
Reaktion Books Ltd 2006.

Peacock is another book in Reaktion's superb Animal series, each of which takes a particular animal, or, to be less specific, living organism, and presents a biography of the subject in biological, historical, literary, artistic and even, occasionally, culinary detail.

Peacock covers all these areas and adds the religious for, in spite of being attributed with the voice of a devil by Christian society, peacocks figure regularly in European art as symbols of the incorruptibility of Christ and the Resurrection. This is expressive of the ambivalence felt towards peacocks in western culture, in which they have figured for millennia, since their export from their native Indian habitat in biblical times.

As well as exhaustive analysis of the peacock's artistic representation, at its peak in Mughal art and architecture, Christine Jackson writes fascinatingly about the different kinds of peacocks that may be found: the blue, with which we in the west are most familiar, the green, a much more secretive fowl with three sub-species of its own, and a favourite of oriental artists, and the Congo, only 'discovered' by ornithologists in 1937.

Peacock, which is sumptuously illustrated throughout concludes, as do others in the series, with a timeline from pre-history to contemporary times, and an excellent bibliography. Christine Jackson has produced a highly readable and informative biography of a beautiful bird that takes its place in a series that should delight all who love the natural world and warm to a less than predictable approach to its more intriguing denizens.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh