CHICKEN: A HISTORY FROM FARMYARD TO FACTORY (ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY)

by

Paul R. Josephson
Why has the chicken become the meat par excellence, the most plentifully eaten and popular animal protein in the world, consumed from Beijing to Barcelona? As renowned historian Paul Josephson shows, the story of the chicken's rise involves a whole host of factors; from art, to nineteenth-century migration patterns to cold-war geopolitics. And whereas sheep needed too much space, or the cow was difficult to transport, these compact, lightweight birds produced relatively little waste, were easy to transport and could happily peck away in any urban back garden. Josephson tells this story from all sides: the transformation of the chicken from backyard scratcher to hyper-efficient industrial meat-product has been achieved due to the skill of entrepreneurs who first recognized the possibilities of chicken meat and the gene scientists who bred the plumpest and most fertile birds. But it has also been forced through by ruthless capitalists and lobbyists for “big farmer”, at the expense of animal welfare and the environment. With no sign of our lust for chicken abating, we're now reaching a crisis point: billions of birds are slaughtered every year, after having lived lives that are nasty, brutish and short. The waste from these victims is polluting rivers and poisoning animals. We're now plunging “egg-first” into environmental disaster. Alongside this story Josephson tells another, of an animal with endearing characteristics who, arguably, can lay claim to being man's best friend long before the dog reared its snout or the cat came in from the cold. Lionized in medieval romances and modern cartoons, the chicken's relationship to humanity runs deep; by treating these animals as mere food products, we become less than human.
Hande Z, “Humans most fowl. This is chicken encyclopaedia. There surely cannot be a more comprehensive book on the chicken than this? To satisfy my own curiosity, I browsed Amazon Books for books on chickens and found that if I wanted a book on the history of the chicken as an evolved animal, as a pet, as a farmed animal, and as a food, there is no better book than this. It is utterly filled with information and is organised in just six chapters with a total of 250 pages, including footnotes. It has a share of fascinating snippets – what was the origin of Paul Simon’s song, ‘Mother and Child Reunion’? Simon went to a restaurant in China that served a dish comprising chicken and egg, and the dish was called ‘Mother and Child Reunion’. Chicken became a transnational dish only in the 1990s. This meant that it was about that time that mass production from various parts of the world sent chickens to the rest of the world. There is a very comprehensive account of concentrated animal feed operation (CAFO) regarding the raising of chicken as a commercial food. We learn how (cruelly) chickens are raised. Cooped with no room for movement. They are slaughtered before their immune system could develop, and so they had to be injected with antibiotics. Josephson also discusses other ailments that afflict the chicken – salmonella is one. We learn about the term ‘pecking order’ and how it comes from the chicken. In groups of less than 90, chickens establish a pecking order, using their beaks, but when the community gets beyond that number, the pecking order breaks down, resulting in chickens pecking each other to death. And to prevent this, farmers resort to debeaking them. That is cruel because the chicken uses its beak as a sensory organ. Josephson is an animal historian, and embarked on his research for this book when he found the taste of European chickens different from that of American chickens. Thus, we have this book that shows how the chicken was our best friend long before the dog was.”

C. Dale W. Angney, “Did the trick! I needed this for a paper I was writing. It’s an excellent overview of the subject—well researched and an easy to read.”