pp. 4–5: Garry Winogrand's *Hand Feeding Elephant Trunk*, Zoo. New York City, USA, 1963.

When Elephants Come to Town

A Visual Anthology

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Text by James Attlee

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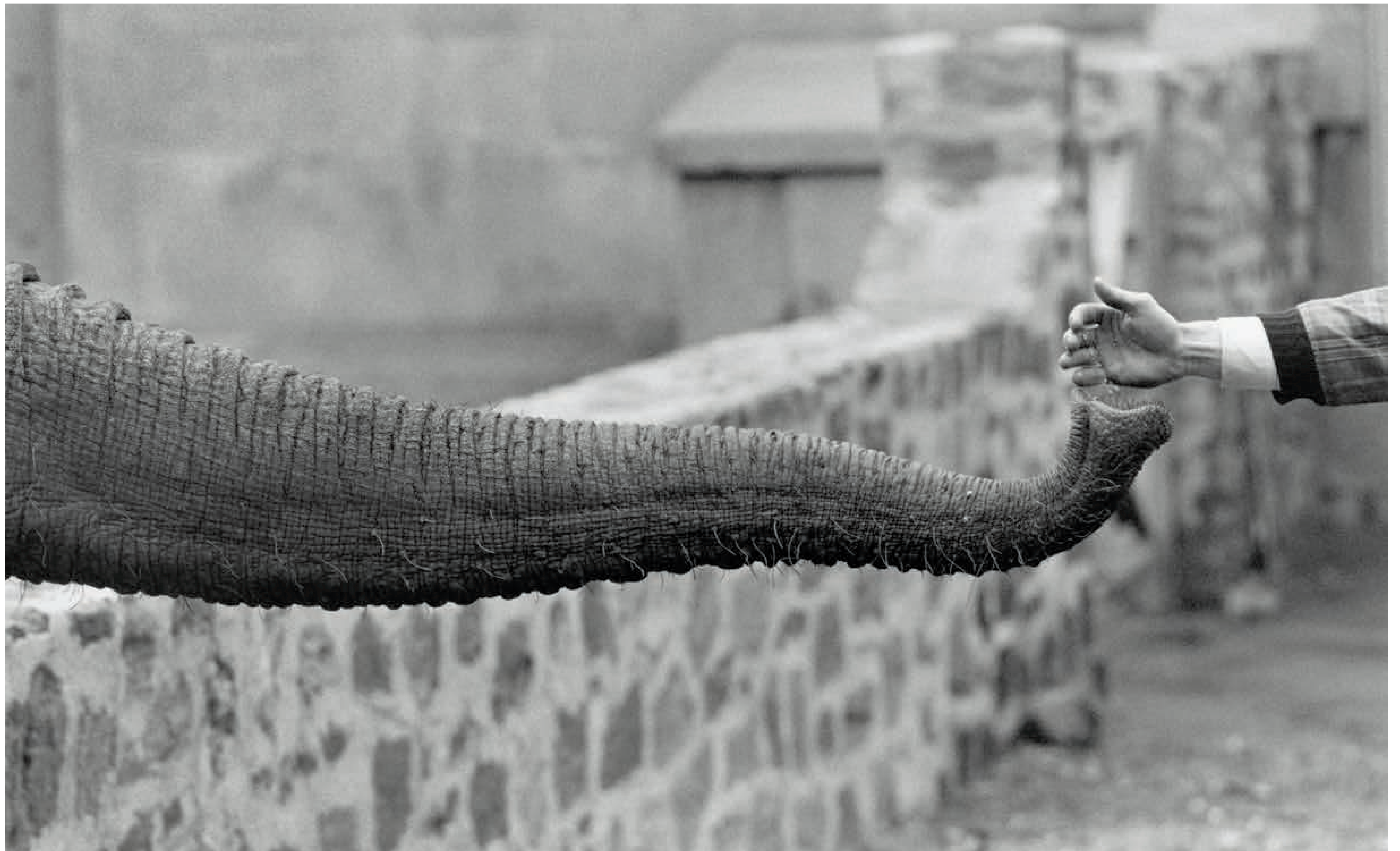


The Greatest Show on Earth
James Attlee

The final performances by live elephants in Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus took place in Providence, Rhode Island and Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania on 1 May 2016.[1] The elephants processed into the spot-lit ring ridden by exotically dressed women, accompanied by the cacophonous cheers of the crowd and the amplified voice of the ringmaster, to perform a repertoire of tricks that had changed little over the 145 years they had been a feature of the Ringling show. It has never been the elephant's dexterity as a performer that has made it an attraction on such occasions; instead, it seems the mere *presence* of such a huge and imposing animal so far from its natural habitat is sufficient to elicit a response from its audience.

The combination of awe tinged with fear they provoke is not so far from the definition by the 18th-century philosopher Edmund Burke of the 'sublime', which he believed the strongest of all emotions, evoked by Romantic poets and painters through their depictions of wild and rugged landscapes and moonlit seas. In the second half of the 19th century, touring shows and menageries provided not dissimilar excitement for a popular audience; close enough to wild animals to smell them, almost to feel their breath, they were kept safe only by the bars of a cage or the consummate skills of circus professionals. The law of all such spectacles is one of diminishing returns; disappointment stalks closest behind those who make the most extravagant claims. Nevertheless, a circus like Ringling Brothers filled seats year after year for almost 150 years. How did they do it? The clue lies in the decorative headwear the elephants wore for their final performance; in the centre of their foreheads, on a blue leather disk, were emblazoned the words that had decorated countless Ringling Brothers posters down the years: THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH. Circus advertising has always dealt in hyperbole, but one thing is certain – however many acrobats, fire-eaters, clowns and knife-throwers it boasts, a circus could only truly be called great when it included the biggest star of them all.

The training of elephants began around 4,000 years ago in the Indus valley. While some were used as beasts of burden, mighty tree-draggers and earthmovers, others spent their lives as richly decorated participants in religious festivals and royal processions, objects of veneration associated with kingship and the god Ganesh. Still others were conscripted into the armies of the Dravidian and Mughal rulers, unleashed to terrify and crush the enemies of empire. This ambivalent status followed elephants that were captured, crated and shipped to lands far from their native habitat. As if to counter the emotions provoked by their sheer size they were put to work giving rides to children in public parks and zoological gardens, perhaps to demonstrate that the least among humans was superior to the greatest nature could offer.

Pliny the Elder assures his readers in *Natural History*, published in the first century AD, that the elephant 'is pleased by affection and by marks of honour', suggesting that, if well treated, it will aspire to satisfy its trainer's demands. Sometimes that emotional connection goes further. 'An elephant once fell in love with a girl who sold garlands in Egypt,' he writes, 'and lest anyone think the elephant had chosen a common sort – this woman was also greatly admired by the famous scholar Aristophanes. Another elephant is said to have fallen in love with a young man from Syracuse named Menander who served in Ptolemy's army; whenever he was prevented from seeing his beloved, the elephant showed how much he missed him by refusing to eat.'

Just such a bond existed between Jumbo, the African elephant who arrived at London Zoo in 1865 and became known as the largest elephant in the world, and his trainer – that is, if we are to believe the account in *Jumbo's Biography, by his Keeper and Friend Matthew Scott*, published along with Scott's autobiography in 1885. 'One of Jumbo's faults is that when I am out of his sight, or rather when I go away,' Scott wrote, 'he knows it, and if I don't come back at regular times he always makes me aware of it, both day and night. And he is selfish, for if I am an hour or two overdue after the time he is looking for me, he commences to whine and cry, and becomes very naughty, just the same as a child crying after its mother.' Scott lived in close proximity with Jumbo at London Zoo for over 20 years: he often refers in his book to the elephant as his child, as if he could replace the beast's natural mother who fell to a hunter's bullet in his native Sudan. 'I have nursed [him], the largest, most intelligent and certainly the most powerful living animal in creation,' he writes. 'I have been more than a father to him for I have bestowed the affections of a mother. We are close companions and if he lives until my death I verily believe it will break his heart.'

Such complicated relationships – between adult and child, jailer and captive, force and gentleness – are captured in the first photograph in the book. *Hand Feeding Elephant Trunk* was taken by Garry Winogrand at Central Park Zoo in 1963, part of a series taken at the same location that he published in book form as *The Animals.* In the photograph, elephant and human reach out towards each other, but we cannot see their bodies, only a hand releasing peanuts and a questing, interrogative trunk extended over the wall that divides the two worlds, animal and human, as well as the space of the photograph. If we allow ourselves for a moment to see the trunk in the photograph as a kind of animated question mark, what is it asking? As the two species confront each other, questions arise concerning the equitable nature of the bargain being struck: freedom in exchange for a handful of peanuts, the kind of deal on which empires are built. As John Berger has written: 'In the 19th century, public zoos were an endorsement of modern colonial power. The capturing of the animals was a symbolic representation of the conquest of all distant and exotic lands.'[2]

In Winogrand's photograph, man and elephant are each represented by the part of the body through which they interact with the world. An elephant's trunk is controlled by four major external muscles and up to 150,000 internal muscles, known as fascicles – by comparison, there are around 639 in the entire human body – and is said to contain the most sensitive tissue ever studied. It can be used to pick up an object as small as a coin or as large as a tree; detect smells at a distance of several miles; act as a chemical receptor; produce a wide range of sounds; siphon up water or dust; and signal moods from tenderness to aggression. Pliny, with reason, called the trunk a hand, in which case what we are looking at is two hands reaching out to each other; yet it is the human hand that has emerged as victor in the evolutionary struggle to dominate the planet. Endlessly versatile, it is as likely to curl its fingers around the trigger of a hunter's rifle or pick up a pen and sign away swathes of territory, along with the lives of its human and animal inhabitants, as it is to express tenderness or dispense peanuts. Winogrand's photographs do not sentimentalise or anthropomorphise zoo animals: the bars, walls and cages that contain them are as much a subject as they and their human observers are. The

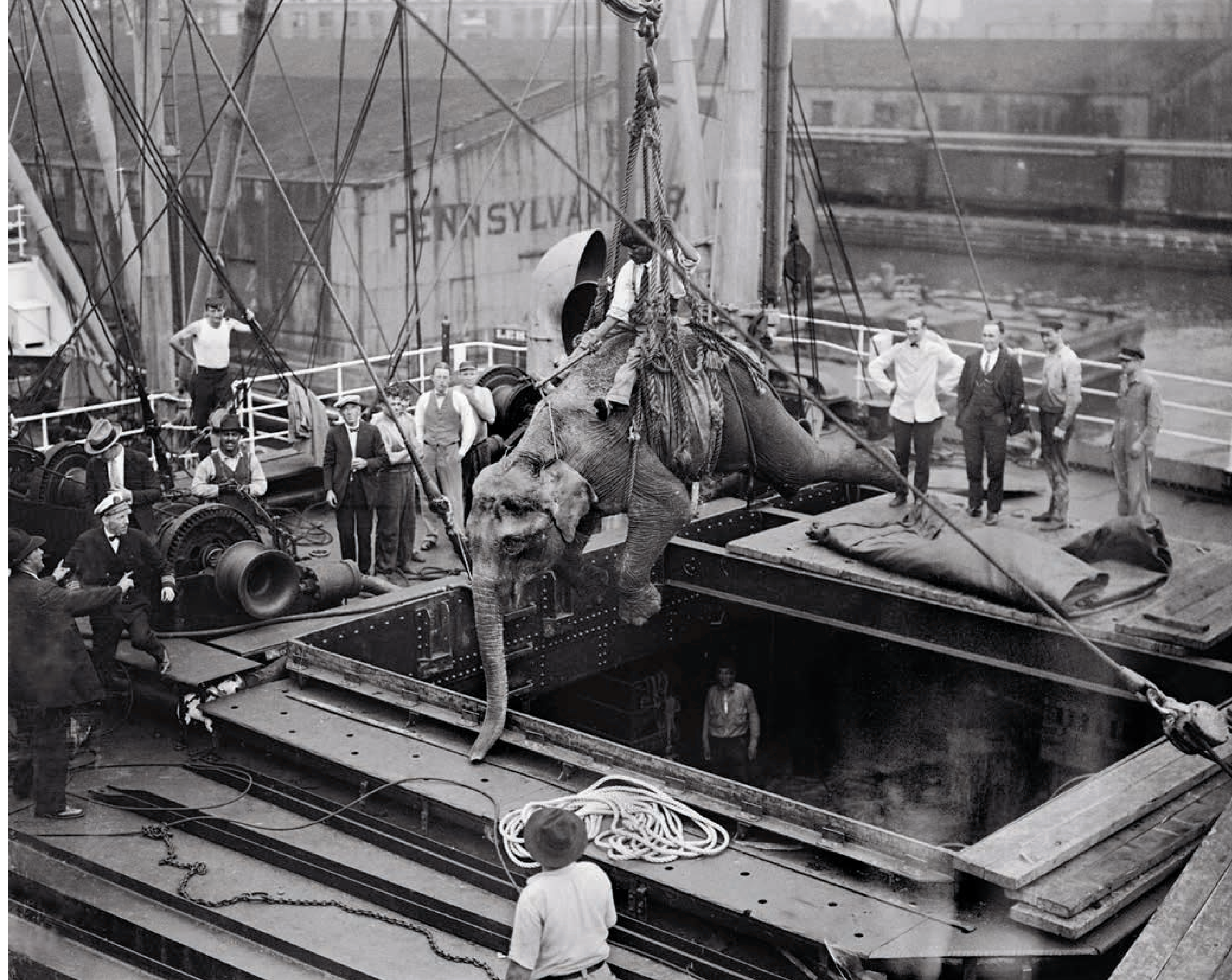
An elephant from the Ringling Brothers Circus disembarks from a train carriage on the Bronx railway. The circus performed at Madison Square Garden for 40 days, presenting itself as 'The Greatest Show on Earth'. New York City, USA, 1 April 1963.

pp. 12–13: Circus elephants parade into Manhattan. New York City, USA, date unknown.

LUNCH
Coca-Cola
HARLEM
FLORIST

Four-year-old elephant Sally was transported from Ceylon to Chipperfield's Circus on the SS Trevaylor. King George V Dock, London, UK, 20 March 1947.

Elephants from a Parisian circus crossing the city to go to a film set at the Bois de Boulogne. Paris, France, 15 November 1949.

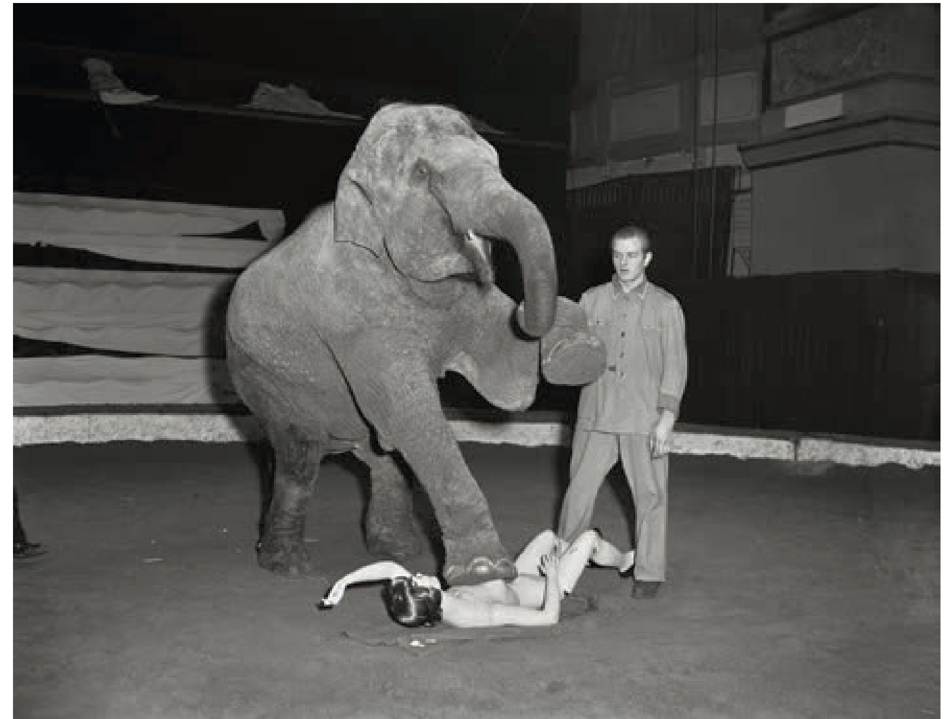


The cranes groan as this mighty elephant, securely fastened, is lowered from the SS American Farmer. Along with its companions, it is en route to Ellis S. Joseph, wild animal trader. New York City, USA, 21 July 1925.

pp. 42–43: Captain Taylor's elephants performing dressage in a circus. London, UK, c. 1904.

Elephants, long a symbol of the Republican Party, at the White House. Washington, USA, 5 September 1921.

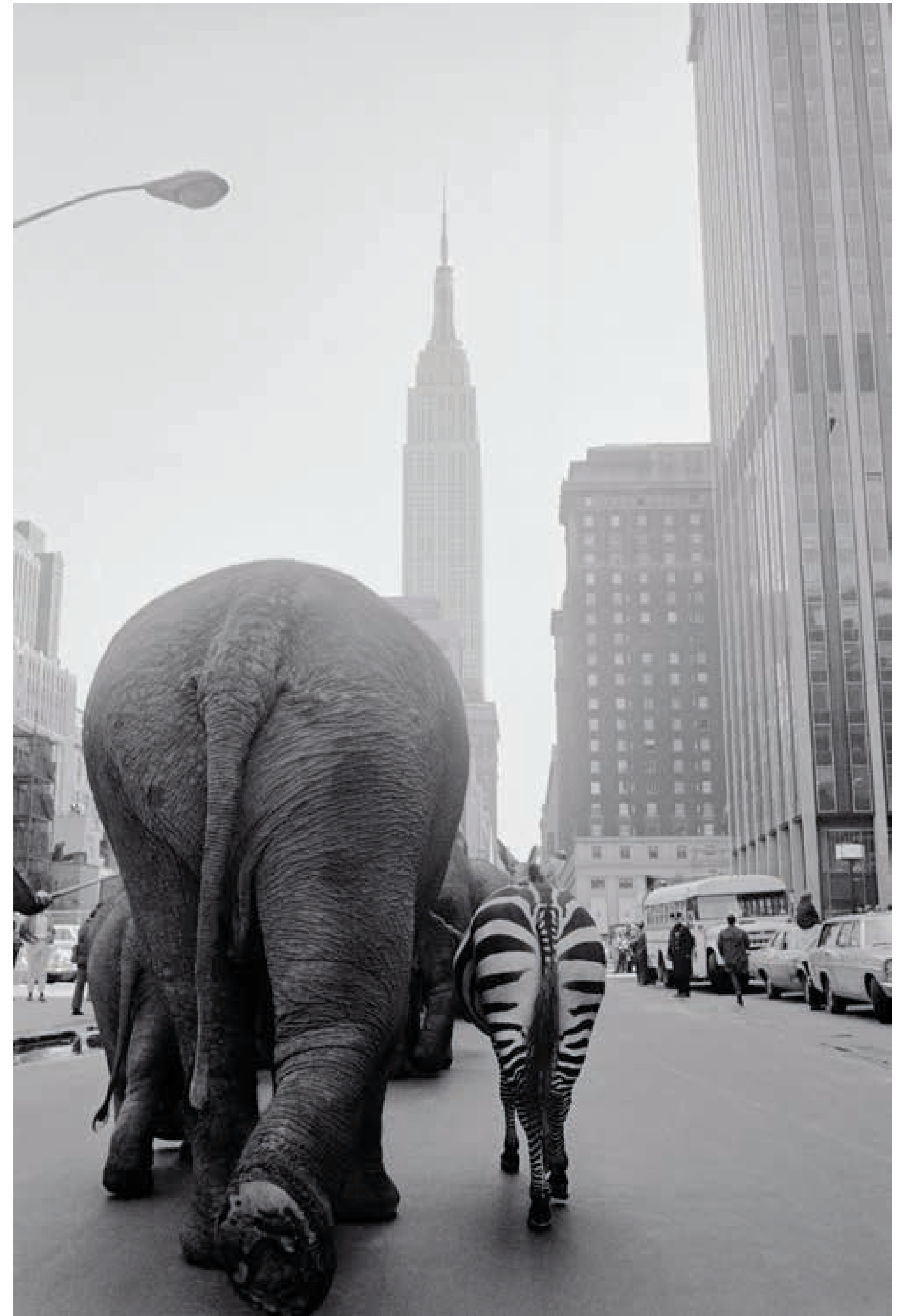
A circus elephant balances on its front legs. Location unknown, 1920.



Manikin withstands Rany the elephant’s strength test in the Carré theatre. Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 20 February 1956.

pp. 78–79: Blind children with elephant from Ringling Brothers Circus. Chicago, Illinois, USA, 20 April 1917.

A troupe of circus elephants and a zebra walk down 33rd Street in Manhattan towards the Empire State Building, heralding the arrival of Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus. New York City, USA, 1968.



At Work in Peace and War

As well as being a beast of burden, the elephant in the ancient world was an instrument of war, as Alexander the Great discovered in northern Iraq at the battle of Gaugamela in 331 BCE when he faced the war elephants of Darius Codomannus, and again when he confronted the army of Porus, king of the Pauravas, in the Punjab five years later. The fierce animals his troops encountered were Asian elephants. Hannibal, the Carthaginian general, used African forest elephants as his Panzer division, descending after his famous crossing of the Alps to sow havoc and destruction in northern Italy in 218 BCE. By CE 44, when Pliny published the first ten books of his *Natural History,* elephants were more common in Europe than at any time until the 20th century. They were used as draught animals and in displays and gladiatorial contests, and had been extensively employed in the imperial army; some were bred in captivity. Caesar had his own personal herd of elephants kept at Ardea, near Laurentum, said to only answer to his command. During the rule of Tiberius there was even an official civil servant in Rome known as the *procurator ad elephantos* (elephant manager), a freed slave called Tiberius Claudius Speculator.[1] At some point, however, elephants disappear from the Eternal City: Hanno, the white elephant presented to Pope Leo X in 1514 by King Manuel I of Portugal, was the first to be seen in Rome since classical times, explaining the hysteria of the crowds that assembled to see the beast whenever he was marched through the streets. When Hanno died, he was buried by order of the Pope beneath the Belvedere Courtyard in the Vatican, where he lay forgotten until his body was discovered by engineers carrying out maintenance work in 1962.

The deployment of elephants in warfare was the equivalent of the ‘shock and awe’ tactics used by the US army in Iraq; the psychological impact their presence had on the enemy outweighed their military effectiveness on the battlefield.

Wild elephants were captured for use in war, to guarantee their strength and aggression; however, they remained unpredictable. Frightened by loud noises or burning arrows on the battlefield, maddened by the wounds they sustained, they were often known to stampede through their own lines, crushing the soldiers they were supposed to protect. Ultimately, the possession of elephants has always spoken louder about the power and status of their owners, from Mughal emperors to Las Vegas casino owners, than it has of their military strength. Long after elephant warfare had been abandoned in Europe it persisted in south Asia, reaching a peak in late 16th-century India under the Mughal rulers Akbar and his son Jahangir, who both maintained stables of thousands of war elephants at huge expense. As an anonymous ancient Indian author suggested, ‘an army without elephants is as despicable as a forest without a lion, a kingdom without a king, or as valour unaided by weapons.’

Elephants are even more impractical as substitutes for horses or oxen for ploughing as they require vast amounts of food. Circuses in the quiet season might undertake such a task for publicity purposes. In his relentless quest for public attention, P.T. Barnum had one of his elephants plough a field that lay alongside a main commuting railway line, repeating the process again and again until he had provoked a lively debate in the letters column of a national newspaper.

Ironically, the very thing that made elephants effective in war in earlier times – their great size – made them useless once modern weapons had been developed as they were easy targets for rifle fire and cannon. However, they continued to be used for logistical purposes by armies well into the 20th century. They played a vital part in the Asian Theatre during World War II, the Korean and Vietnam Wars and are still used today by the Karen National Liberation Army in their struggle for independence in northern Myanmar. They were just as essential to American forces in World War II, as there was no land route open through Japanese-occupied Burma and sea routes were dominated by the Japanese navy. Instead, US Air Transport Command staged an airlift of supplies to the army in China over the Himalayas. Planes had to carry all their own fuel for the return journey, as there was no opportunity to refuel in China. Elephants were used to load the planes with heavy barrels of fuel, allowing them to take off again as swiftly as possible. They flew via a treacherous route, encountering sudden storms, freezing conditions and thick cloud. During some months of the war, 50% of the planes were lost. ‘Judge for yourself,’ a reporter wrote in the Benton News, after listening to the recollections of a veteran airman: ‘One of the peaks they flew over translated into English as “Elephant Head Gouge Mountain”, because at one place [elephants] have to turn such a sharp corner that their tusks scrape grooves into the rock.’[2]

Elephants used to working in the circus or entertaining the public in a zoo have often been called on to serve their nation in a different way during times of war or national emergency. In Germany, elephants were conscripted from circuses and zoos to help with logistics in both world wars: to plough the fields (p. 85), to shift heavy tree trunks by pushing them with their foreheads (p. 93) or to move a heavy boiler on wheels through the snow-covered streets of Berlin in the bitter winter of 1917 (p. 84). The American army even experimented with mounting them with machine guns (p. 87), perhaps in imitation of the colonial potentates who had used the vantage point of an elephant’s back to seek out and decimate Indian wildlife (p. 86).

During World War I in Sheffield, England, an elephant named Lizzie became a local celebrity when she was leased from William Sedgwick’s menagerie, along with her handler, and pressed into service at Thomas Ward’s ship-breakers and scrap metal business. Scrap metal was a sought-after commodity for the manufacture of munitions, but the horses usually used for haulage at Ward’s had been sent to the front, so Lizzie proved invaluable for moving weighty material (p. 88). It became an expression in the area for years afterwards – if anyone was carrying a heavy load they were said to be ‘done up like Tommy Ward’s elephant’. This was not the summit of Lizzie’s cultural impact, however: she attained the highest honour possible, in this football-mad city at least, when she played in goal during a Steel City derby match between Sheffield Wednesday and Sheffield United. Today, a local bus (the Lizzie Ward) is named in her honour.

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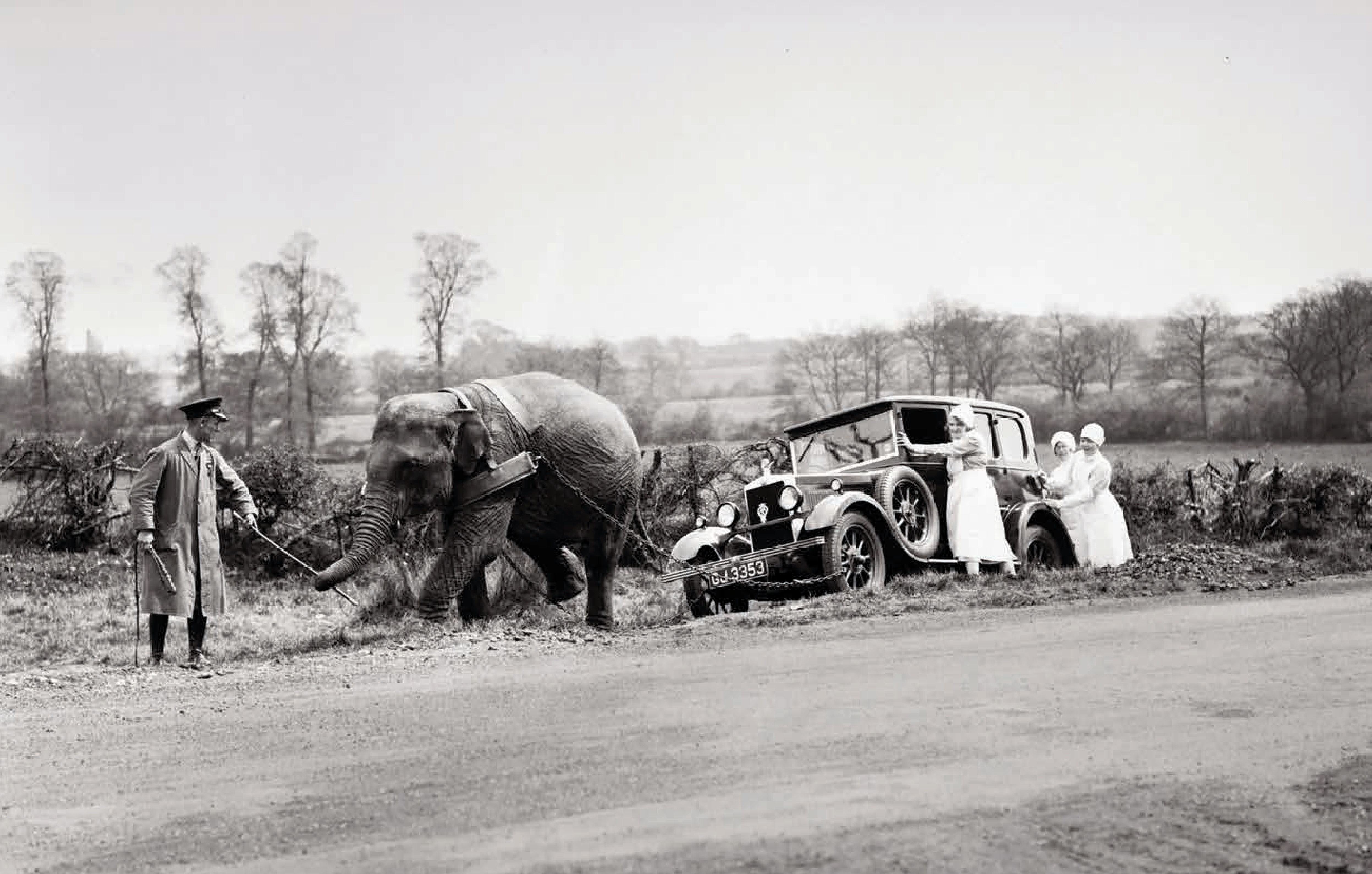
1 David Bomgardner, *The Story of the Roman Amphitheatre*, London: Routledge (2013), p. 24.
2 ‘The Wartime Years of Dayne Kline’, *Benton News*, 29 December 2011.

Elephants from the Hagebeckschau transport a huge boiler for the firm of Koerting Brothers during the winter of starvation. Berlin, Germany, 1917.

Used as a draught animal as well as an instrument of war on the battlefield, the elephant has occupied many functions. In World War I, in Europe, circus elephants were used to haul wood in the Forest of Mormal in northern France, to pull wagons in munitions factories or – as here – to plough. Alsenborn, Germany, 1917.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An elephant from Earl's Court Circus with a man in its mouth. London, UK, 1 December 1928.

Hattie the elephant and Bill Snyder, who had trained elephants at Ringling Brothers. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. In 1903 he purchased Hattie the elephant from Carl Hagenbeck, a German merchant of wild animals, and trained her for the Central Park Zoo. Hattie was named after Snyder's daughter. Location unknown, c. 1910–15.

Actress Rhonda Fleming being picked up by an elephant. Location unknown, c. 1950.

Workers at Central Park Zoo
give an elephant a manicure.
New York City, USA, date unknown.

London Zoo keeper Stan Smith plays football with a baby Indian elephant named Anna. London, UK, 1972.

Model elephant on top of a vintage car.
Location unknown, 20th century.

The world's first robot elephant constructed by Mr Frank Stuart, a Scotsman. It could go as fast as 28mph, could wave its trunk and fold its ears, and was powered by a petrol engine. Scotland, 7 July 1950.

pp. 172–173: Wilhelmina the mechanical elephant, constructed of papier mâché and canvas over a tubular steel frame, was built by Frank Stuart in the early 1950s. She served her time giving children rides on the promenades of famous northern seaside towns and later in Belle Vue Zoo, Manchester. Four children could ride on the howdah. Wilhelmina is propelled by a four-stroke petrol engine with a centrifugal clutch. She is steered by an adult walking along beside her and her head nods as she moves. Ramsgate, Kent, UK, 1972.