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T. J. Lustig

**'Seeing the Elephant':
Constructing Culture in
Britain and the United States
after Jumbo**

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Tirril Hall, Tirril, Penrith CA10 2JE

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They are also believed to understand the obligations of another’s religion in so far as to refuse to embark on board ships when going overseas before they are lured on by the mahout’s sworn promise in regard to their return.

—Pliny, *Natural History*, Book 8, i, 3

So geographers, in Afric maps,
With savage pictures fill their gaps;
And o’er uninhabitable downs
Place elephants for want of towns.

—Swift, ‘On Poetry’, l. 177

1. The Zoo and the Circus

On 25 January 1882 the Commercial Intelligence section of *The Times* reported the sale for £2000 of a twenty-one-year-old African elephant standing more than eleven feet high at the shoulders. The elephant’s name was Jumbo. His purchaser’s name was Phineas Taylor Barnum. The vendor was the Royal Zoological Society. Jumbo (whose behaviour had become less predictable as he reached sexual maturity) was to be moved from his quarters in the Royal Zoological Gardens and transported to the United States where he would perform in Barnum, Bailey and Hutchinson’s circus. Public response to this disclosure was initially muted. Following reports that Jumbo had refused to enter the crate intended to convey him to the docks, however, the trickle of adverse comment swelled to a flood of protest. A letter to *The Times* on 21