

The Way of the Panda – The Curious History of China’s Political Animal
by Henry Nicholls.
Profile Books 2010.

I concluded this book shortly after the announcement that the Chinese Government was gifting two giant pandas to Edinburgh Zoo, and having just read it the full significance of the gesture was much more meaningful than would have been the case hitherto.

The Way of the Panda is a multi-faceted and highly readable book about this captivating animal. Divided into three parts, Extraction, Abstraction and Protection, the author tells the story of the discovery of the panda, the development of its profile both as a symbol for endangered species across the globe and as a totem animal for communist China and its realpolitik, the development of ever more sophisticated breeding programmes within China and the abortive efforts to breed captive pandas elsewhere in the world, and the work to preserve the panda’s habitat as the human population in China burgeons and puts more and more pressure on its remaining wild places.

Nicholls tells the story of the giant panda with panache and some humour, not least when he writes about the various attempts to get pandas to breed, and he weaves in to his narrative some fascinating material on the choice of the panda as the symbol for the World Wildlife Fund and the drawing of its iconic image.

This is a fascinating chronicle of a truly charismatic mammal.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh