

Domesticated Animals & Us

How the early North American colonists used animals to subdue the Native people

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a review of

Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America by Virginia Delohn Anderson. Oxford University Press, 2006, 336 pp., \$19.95

Civilization is a lie. Its images mask violence and its logic is that of genocide. Even the most banal scene of grazing cattle, while seemingly serene, portrays a weapon of war.

Virginia DeJohn Anderson's *Creatures of Empire* is an important work for many reasons. It restores agency to domesticated animals and recognizes their vital role in a key period of American history. By recognizing the role of livestock, her work contributes to a more complete understanding of the European invasion of North America.

It also provides a compelling case study of how civilization has been spread and genocide carried out. While tactics may have shifted according to convenience and circumstance, the goal in North America was always to eliminate the native people either by transforming individuals into pseudo-English Christians or simply through physical removal and extermination.

Anderson focuses on 17th century relations between English colonists and two groups of Algonquian-speaking Indians: those of southern New England and of the Chesapeake region of colonial America. Animals—both wild and domestic—often served as the intermediaries between colonists and Indians prompting both short-term cooperative efforts to minimize disputes as well as reducing intense violence.

Animals became tertiary targets of violence often being killed simply to send a message from one group to another. Anderson argues that toward the end of the 17th century the fact “that animals could help incite a war between human combatants was eminently clear.”

Even before direct contact between colonists and Indians, the two groups often encountered animals that would challenge their conventional understandings of human-animal relations. Indians would encounter domesticated animals such as cattle and pigs brought by colonists from Europe; animals that were deemed property.

For people with a comprehensive and intimate knowledge of the land and its creatures, encounters with unfamiliar, domesticated animals must have been incredibly shocking. Virtually all animals in the Indians' experience were wild and no living animal was considered an individual's property. Similarly, colonists would encounter wild animals who would prey on their livestock, destroy their crops, and generally make highly-controlled, English-style agriculture close to impossible.

Both groups—colonists and Indians—would regularly encounter feral animals that blurred conceptual categories. For Indians, feral livestock most closely resembled wild animals that could legitimately be hunted. And yet to the English, “livestock could no more become [wild] than colonists could become Indians.” For the English, any animal that was deemed property would retain that definition regardless of how far the animal wandered or uncared for it was. Any resemblance to a wild animal was superficial and for another to kill that animal would invite harsh sanction.

Initially, when Indians were in a dominant position and colonists were simply struggling to survive, the colonists' civilizing agenda took a superficially cooperative and opportunistic approach. It was not only prudent to preserve peaceful relations with valuable trading partners, but the English believed they could distinguish themselves from their Spanish rivals by adoption of "an ideological approach [to colonization] that advertised their nation's moral superiority." It was a tactic to make up for the fact that Spain was farther ahead of England in the race to secure colonies.

Furthermore, "[C]olonists took it for granted that Indians would recognize the superiority of an English agrarian regime once they saw how it worked," and so they reasoned that violence may not be necessary. The effort was not only to turn Indians into sedentary agrarians but into Christians as well.

For the English, owning livestock was strongly invested with a normative component; indeed, it was deemed a hallmark of civilization. The fact that native populations had failed to domesticate animals was considered clear evidence of a serious deficiency on their part. To English eyes, the landscape was made for livestock and awaited improvement. But, as Anderson points out, there was little benefit to be gained from domestication and the species on the North American continent were not the sort that would readily submit to it.

This ideological approach was evident when in 1656 the Virginia colony adopted a policy of rewarding Indians who killed a sufficient number of wolves by giving them a cow. The heads of eight wolves could be exchanged for one cow. It was a plan intended to eliminate wolves which threatened English livestock while simultaneously introducing the concept of livestock ownership to native people.

Similarly, an effort in Rhode Island involved taxing colonists' cattle to raise funds to assist Indians in building fences around their cornfields. This was to minimize disputes involving animal intrusions while shifting the burden onto Indians rather than animal owners. Once fences were built, Indians would be required to maintain them if they were to have their grievances heard and be considered for compensation.

By the middle of the 17th century, the civilizing agenda shifted from a strategy of assimilation to outright aggression and "depredations against livestock came to be seen as...acts of war." The fences that Indians were pressured into building were on several occasions burnt down by colonists who then proceeded to let their cattle roam through Indian cornfields. "Roaming livestock acted as the advance guard of English settlement."

It was thought that such routine harassment could compel Indians to simply leave and cede the land to the colonists. Disputes that would have previously been treated as delicate diplomatic issues to be navigated with caution—when the colonists were weak—were now simply regarded as a matter of law enforcement and handled with force.

Anderson concludes by saying that, "livestock enabled the English to extend their dominion over the New World with remarkable speed and thoroughness." Domesticated livestock would advance, Indians would retreat, colonists would move in, and then the process would repeat itself as many times as necessary.

For anyone looking to better understand the specific mechanisms by which civilization encroaches and genocide is carried out, *Creatures of Empire* is an important addition.

Ian Erik Smith lives in Eugene, Oregon. His academic background is in philosophy and his writing has appeared in *Philosophy Now*, the *Journal for Critical Animal Studies*, and the recently released volume, *Animals and War: Confronting the Military-Animal Industrial Complex*. He blogs at uncivilizedanimals.wordpress.com.

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