

Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America

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At first glance, Virginia DeJohn Anderson's *Creatures of Empire* is a welcome addition to the growing literature on the environmental history of early America; on closer observation, the work is very much more than this. Indeed, it is more a cultural history than an environmental history. Focusing on the first seventy-five years of English colonisation, Anderson examines the ways in which 'animals not only produced changes in the land but also in the hearts and minds and behavior of the peoples who dealt with them' (p. 5).

At one level, little of the study is intrinsically new. For several years historians, including Anderson herself, have examined the role of the colonists' livestock in provoking confrontations between settlers and Indians, particularly in New England. Nor does Anderson exploit previously underused source material; indeed, the work relies almost exclusively on published personal accounts and town and colony records. What is new is the masterful way in which Anderson analyses 'details of life so ordinary that they have rarely been considered the stuff of history' (p. 7) to present a highly original study of the development of the English American colonies.

The work is divided into three sections. Part 1, 'Thinking about animals', examines the contrasting ideas about animals held by Native Americans and colonists. Native Americans viewed themselves as part of, rather than distinct from, the natural world. In Indian languages, for instance, there was no word to distinguish 'animals' in general from humans, simply words to identify separate species. Native Americans' relationship with animals was largely reciprocal, reflecting the belief that many creatures possessed their own spiritual power or manitou. For English colonists, in contrast, animals were property over which they

had a biblically ordained right to assert dominion; they were an economic resource to be manipulated and exploited.

Part 2, 'Settling with animals', examines the development of English livestock husbandry in seventeenth-century North America. When English settlers first arrived they saw an untamed wilderness waiting to be civilised. Central to this 'civilisation' was the introduction of European agricultural practices, in particular the introduction of livestock. The cow more than any other animal, requiring constant attention and care, providing meat, milk and manure, symbolised English agricultural superiority. Not only would the landscape become civilised, but most settlers believed that by converting Indians into herdsman of cattle they would quickly become settled and civilised. New World conditions soon began to challenge these presumptions. English settlers had imagined that they would replicate patterns of agriculture from England. However, the high cost and chronic shortage of manual labour meant that colonists were forced to allow their animals to roam free in the woods, rather than penning them into enclosed fields. Soon the colonists' free-range husbandry came almost to resemble the Indians' hunting of wild animals, rather than the Indians coming to resemble English farmers. Even the animals themselves became wild, with herds of feral hogs roaming the woods.

Part 3, 'Contending with animals', examines the conflicts which developed between colonists and Indians over livestock. By the second half of the seventeenth century, as English herds, and English colonies, expanded, conflicts with Indians increased. Initially, there was hope that some form of mutual accommodation could be reached, but as the number of English animals increased, so the instances of animals trespassing on Indian fields or of Indians killing feral hogs or cows increased. Indians and Englishmen began to clash over a wide range of issues from the marking of animals to compensation for the loss of animals or crops. As Indians became more accustomed to English ways and more accustomed to their animals, they became less tolerant of English abuses and less inclined to accept the rulings of colonial courts. Finally, along the entire frontier, from New England to the Chesapeake, Indians began to retaliate by killing and maiming animals. Eventually these disputes escalated into King Philip's War in New England, and Bacon's Rebellion in the Chesapeake and resulted in Indians being forced from their homelands.

Throughout the work Anderson examines several core issues. The first of these is the role of animals in culture and society. Animals were central to the lives of both Englishmen and Indians. Practices of animal husbandry dictated the rhythms of life in English villages and English towns. Livestock farmers typified the English ideal of the civilised man. 'They were prudent and well-organised, following rigorous daily and seasonal routines dictated by climate, habit, economic goals, and their livestock's needs. They were economical, saving table scraps for hogs and manure for their fields, as well as experimental, adopting new agriculture techniques' (p. 89). In towns, artisans would supplement their meagre wages by raising a hog or two, or keeping a cow, even in the centre of London. Animals were also central to the lives of Native Americans but in a slightly different way. Hunting provided an important source of food and calories for the Indian peoples of north-eastern America. Some villagers even moved on a seasonal basis to make the best advantage of the available resources. However, hunting was not a pure exploitation of animal resources, for in Indian culture animals possessed a spiritual power that was recognised by important rituals when hunting. Hunting was thus a reciprocal rather than an exploitative process, in which animal spirits were honoured and rewarded.

These differences reflected a fundamentally different view of the importance of animals in Indian and English culture. The English were interested in taming and domesticating animals. Indeed, taming a wild animal gave a degree of ownership over the animal. Ownership of animals was a concept completely alien to Native Americans. North America's Indians had no important domesticated animals before contact with Europeans. In part, this was simply an accident of geography; North America had lacked suitable animals for domestication. Native Americans had, at least partially, managed to domesticate dogs, but they roamed semi-wild around Indian villages, and to English eyes their similarity to wolves was proof of the Indians' inability to domesticate any animal. Englishmen and Native Americans both saw hunting as an enjoyable and worthy pursuit, although Native Americans would not have understood the concept of hunting merely for sport. However, to many Englishmen hunting was an aristocratic pursuit not one which could unify all the men of

a village. Indeed, the Game Act of 1605 had set strict property qualifications for hunters. An Englishman needed an annual income of at least £40 from land or the ownership of goods worth £200 to be allowed to hunt. The law even went so far as to prohibit those with insufficient property from owning hunting guns or hunting dogs.

Nowhere were these fundamental differences in attitudes to animals more apparent than in the ways in which English settlers turned animals into commodities for trade. It was possible to put a price on every animal from a cow to a swan, from a deer to a hog. As Anderson argues, 'classifying animals not just in terms of their utility but also their market value added a new dimension to the relationship of dominion. Putting a price on animals symbolized the conversion of creatures into commodities' (p. 68). This again was a concept entirely alien to Native Americans.

However, Anderson stresses, that not all the attitudes of colonists and Indians towards animals were at odds. While Christian, and especially Protestant, ministers may have denounced the paganism of concepts of animal spirituality and manitou, some of these ideas were echoed in traditional English folklore. Perhaps in a legacy of pre-Christian days, many animals in England were viewed as particularly fortuitous or inauspicious. Ladybirds and black cats were bringers of good luck, while in Lancashire magpies were viewed as bringers of such bad luck that people would raise their hats in greeting to the birds and make the sign of the cross or cross their thumbs and spit over them. Such ideas, however, came under increasing attack in the wake of the Protestant Reformation as Protestant preachers denounced these beliefs as popish superstition. Anderson concludes that 'in one of history's many ironies, religious developments in England encouraged greater disdain for non-Christian ways of viewing the world just at the point when English people encountered the inhabitants of the New World' (p. 57).

Anderson also pays substantial attention to the demographics of the livestock population. While many studies have examined the demographics of early settlement, none have paid attention to this important feature of colonial society. Colonists for the most part brought some domestic animals with them. In first years of colonisation, as with the human population, the livestock population found itself prone to disease and malnutrition. The North American environment did not replicate the lush meadows of England. American grasses were not as nutritious for animals. The trans-Atlantic voyage weakened many animals and made them susceptible to disease. The heat of the summers and the cold of the winters, especially in New England, also took their toll. Most importantly, the existence of large numbers of predators, in particular wolves, also reduced the livestock population. It took three decades or more in the Chesapeake before the livestock population became self-supporting. In New England, as with the human population, this occurred within little more than a decade.

Animals played such an important role in the colonists' lives that converting Indians into husbandmen, into livestock herders, was seen as an essential part of the English mission of civilising them. While other historians have noted the drive to convert Native Americans into European farmers, few have noted the particular significance of livestock here. By converting hunters into herdsman, Anderson argues, English settlers hoped that they could spread the qualities of the sedentary farmer amongst their Indian neighbours. However, Indians were reluctant to adopt English practices of livestock husbandry. Indeed, when Indians did begin to raise their own livestock, much to the horror of their English neighbours, it was not in the English fashion. Indeed, Indians were very selective about which animals they raised. Scorning sheep and cows, by the mid seventeenth century many Indians were successfully raising herds of hogs. Hogs appealed to Indian sensibilities because they did not require a major cultural adaptation. They could rummage around the edges of villages in much the same fashion as their dogs. They could be set loose into the woods with the minimum of supervision to be hunted in much the same manner as deer or other wild animals. Soon many Indians were successfully raising hogs, perhaps of most concern to English settlers, successfully competing with them. Indian herdsman soon were purveying meat to the important markets of Boston and Manhattan. Indeed, Indian herdsman displayed a remarkable degree of understanding of colonial markets. Rather than directly selling livestock, Indian herdsman sold the butchered meat. This was exactly what English colonial consumers desired. In addition, they sold their meat principally in the late spring when the demand from settlers for provisions was at its highest, and hence prices were at their highest. So successful were Indian

herdsmen that they soon attracted the ire of colonial farmers who made it clear that owning livestock did not turn Indians into Englishmen.

The economics of livestock rearing, and the ways in which economic pressures increased tensions between colonists and Indians, also attract Anderson's attention. In New England in particular, the profitability of livestock raising soon made it a central export for colonists. As the price of meat increased, and the demand from other colonies and from the West Indies increased, so New England farmers responded by seeking to increase their production. As colonists sought more lands for their herds, and increased the numbers of animals grazed in the woods, tensions between colonists and Indians increased.

The role of livestock in generating these tensions between colonists and Indians is perhaps the aspect of this book which has been most studied by previous historians, but Anderson adds a new dimension to these studies by placing these tensions in a much broader context, and by demonstrating that such disputes were not limited solely to New England. Livestock generated tensions in several disparate ways. Most basically, colonists and Indians argued over the ownership of livestock. Indians who killed livestock, even feral animals, in the woods were hauled before the courts and prosecuted, even though it was not always clear who owned the animals. However, it was difficult for Englishmen to conceive that pigs or cattle, even those which roamed in the woods, could not be someone's property. Livestock broke into Indian corn fields and trampled upon their crops, but Indians found that if they retaliated by killing the livestock it was they who would be prosecuted. Indeed, Massachusetts authorities ruled that Indians should build fences around their fields and even went so far as to order colonists to help them. If unruly livestock broke into a fenced field, Indians were simply to seize and impound them, often being required to herd the animals several miles to the nearest provincial pound. Such rulings hardly seemed fair to most Indians. It was the colonists' livestock who broke into Indian fields, yet it was the Indians who were punished if they tried to protect those fields. If Indians sought compensation in the colonial courts, as they could in theory, any compensation was assessed by the neighbours and friends of the farmers whose livestock had created the problem. Not surprisingly, many Indians began to take matters into their own hands. By the late 1660s increasing numbers of Indians began to kill any English animal that they found in the woods. Such activities were not limited to New England, but could be found wherever English livestock had been established, from Long Island to the Eastern Shore of Maryland, from the James River in Virginia, to New Hampshire.

English colonists could not tolerate such behaviour towards their livestock and as Englishmen sought to discipline Indians and bring them into line, Indians responded by resorting to war and descending upon the colonial frontier in King Philip's War in New England, and Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia. As war spread Indians specifically made clear their hatred for English animals, in particular the despicable cow. Rather than killing the animals directly, Indian raiders would mutilate an animal by cutting off its leg or cutting out its tongue, and letting the animal die a slow and painful death, a death that their English owners would most likely witness.

Anderson's final, and almost certainly most important argument, is that the animals which colonists brought with them were the principal agents responsible for dispossessing the Indians of their homelands. Anderson argues that 'as agents of empire, livestock occupied land in advance of English settlers, forcing native peoples who stood in their way either to fend off the animals as best they could or else to move on' (p. 211). The free-range husbandry practised in North America meant that colonists required much more land to support their herds than would have been required in England. In New England the growth of the trade in livestock and meat, first to other mainland colonies and then to the West Indies, provided the region with its principal export. Colonists consequently required grazing land, and lots of it. The land on which colonists sought to graze their herds was often the land occupied by Indian towns and villages. In the mid 1630s, for instance, colonists moved rapidly into the Connecticut River Valley, overrunning the rich meadows along the river, and prompting a violent response from the region's inhabitants in the Pequot War. By the second half of the seventeenth century, colonists began consciously to use livestock to dispossess Indians of their lands. This dispossession occurred on several levels. English livestock destroyed the habitats that supported native game and the plants that provided medicines and utensils. Hogs and cattle trampled on Indian cornfields and rooted out buried supplies of corn and other provisions. Perhaps most importantly, Indians

and settlers clashed repeatedly over the ownership of animals that wandered all but wild in the forests. On occasion, colonists even actively sought to provoke disputes by breaking down Indian fences and refusing to allow Indians to brand or mark their own animals. Simple frustration at the repeated trespass of animals on their lands was often enough to force Indians to move.

Anderson's argument is compelling, and by the end of the book, the reader is all but convinced that the main actors of early American history, the great agents of empire, were not men like John Smith and John Winthrop, but rather the herds of cattle and hogs which the settlers brought with them. Anderson concludes that 'although livestock could hardly be blamed for everything that happened in early America, they certainly helped to shape the course of events. As indispensable to colonial survival as they were inimical to Indian sovereignty, livestock enabled the English to extend their dominion over the New World with remarkable speed and thoroughness' (p. 242). Only in her study of the demographics of the livestock population and the economics of livestock could Anderson perhaps have probed a little further. A study of early probate records may have allowed her to paint a slightly fuller picture of the ownership of animals in early America and perhaps to have had a clearer estimate for the speed with which the animal population was growing. Similarly, her discussion of the economics of livestock husbandry in early America lacks specific details and economic figures. Such omissions, however, do not significantly detract from the importance of this work.

Creatures of Empire is an impressive and highly significant work. By considering the role of animals and livestock in the culture of early America, Anderson has presented a novel picture of early American history. The work prompts a major re-examination of the forces that shaped both the internal economic and cultural development of the seventeenth century English colonies, and the colonies' relations with their Indian neighbours. As such it must provide essential reading for all those with an interest in early American history and the nature of English seventeenth-century colonisation.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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