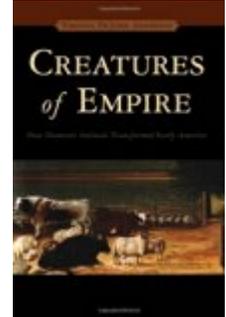


Virginia DeJohn Anderson. *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. xiii + 322 pp. \$37.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-515860-1.



Reviewed by Philip Dreyfus

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Creatures of Empire offers a compelling account of the impact of domesticated livestock on native/settler relations in colonial New England and the Chesapeake during the seventeenth century. Author Virginia DeJohn Anderson acknowledges her intellectual debt to Alfred Crosby, whose seminal work *The Columbian Exchange* (1972) has played a major role in influencing current efforts by environmental historians to treat biotic transfers as essential to the success of European colonial ventures. Unlike Crosby, however, who adopted a rather mechanistic approach to the migration of organisms and their impact on ecosystems, Anderson addresses a broad range of cultural issues that place human relationships with animals, and not just the animals themselves, at the core of her story. In so doing, she has crafted a book that serves as a valuable extension of William Cronon's highly regarded *Changes in the Land* (1983), and her narrative and analysis follow very closely from Cronon's admonition that "important as organisms like smallpox, the horse, and the pig were in their direct impact on American ecosystems, their full effect becomes visible only when they are treated as integral elements in

a complex system of environmental and cultural relationships. The pig was not merely a pig but a creature bound among other things to the fence, the dandelion, and a very special definition of property. It is these kinds of relationships, the contradictions arising from them, and their changes in time, that will constitute an ecological approach to history." [1] Virginia Anderson handles the sorts of connections posited by Cronon very well.

Anderson divides her book into three parts. Part 1 consists of two chapters that compare and contrast Algonquian and British worldviews, concepts of property, and cosmologies insofar as these were reflected in and affected the use, treatment, and understanding of animals. Part 2 comprises three chapters that focus on both the material and ideological dimensions of colonial animal husbandry, as well as practical differences that emerged in this arena between the New England and Chesapeake colonies on account of variations in economy, environment, and political structure. It is here as well that Anderson provides additional evidence of the ways that the British livestock

system became a point of contention between natives and settlers, especially since the human newcomers imagined that their four-legged companions could be used to assert a superior civil right to land the natives had always used. Finally, the two chapters and epilogue of part 3 provide a climax to the whole tale. Anderson once again places the relationship of human beings and animals at center stage in depicting the ultimate breakdown of fledgling efforts at accommodation and adaptation between colonists and natives. The conclusion is already well-known, but the path along which the author takes the reader is a novel and useful one.

Anderson's most significant contribution to our understanding of the colonial encounter may be her delineation of the many ways that the seventeenth-century Algonquians and English were as alike as they were different. Similarities between the two peoples included familiarity with agriculture of one sort or another, male enjoyment of the hunt, the use of tools such as the hoe and the bow and arrow, an understanding of woods as commons, and a basis of potential agreement on property rights at least in regards to chattel and usufruct.

The fact that colonists failed to take advantage of these potential bases of cooperation and accommodation to produce more harmonious relations with their Indian neighbors was, according to Anderson, more a function of ideology than of material imperatives. Granted that domesticated livestock of all sorts, and especially the nefarious swine, pillaged native gardens and clam banks and competed for forage with wild game, yet natives proved, more than once, their willingness to negotiate such environmental novelties within the traditional rules of reciprocal justice to which they were accustomed.

The ultimate tragedy of native/settler relations was the inability of the newcomers, armed with potent justifications for their sense of cultural superiority and their right to dominance, to

seek just terms of coexistence with their Indian neighbors. The English used the Roman law concept of *res nullius* to argue that empty lands became the property of those who improved and transformed them. Another form of private property, their livestock, became a principal means of such transformation. Native Americans found themselves confronted at one and the same time by a menagerie of novel wandering beasts that were not to be considered fair game while these same creatures became agents of land confiscation. This was a conundrum that natives sought to resolve sometimes by seeking redress from colonial legal institutions, sometimes by hunting and trapping livestock, and sometimes by open warfare.

For their part, English colonists could rarely grasp Indian attitudes toward animals, property rights, and land use. Anderson draws astute comparisons early in her book between the nature of human/animal intimacy in the Algonquian and British worlds in such a way as to propose yet another potential but elusive point of common understanding. For example, if the Indian sense of animal spiritual power, or manitou, had a corollary in English folkloric tradition, Anderson is quick to point out that the historical timing of the colonial encounter made it extremely unlikely that the English would see an aspect of themselves in the Indians who became their neighbors. With the revolutionary zeal of young Protestantism to uphold, the English could hardly afford to allow themselves to value their own pre-Christian traditions. This very act of rejection, coupled with Christian missionary impulses, and bolstered by the presumed civilizing influences of animal husbandry, poisoned any likelihood that the Indians and settlers might coexist as equals.

Anderson does a wonderful job distinguishing the inevitable from the potentially avoidable. Her case studies make it very clear that the introduction of European livestock to America brought with it significant ecological changes that both In-

dians and settlers would be compelled to adapt to. Equally important, though, is Anderson's well-argued point that it was not the animals themselves, but the way that colonists construed them, that caused the hapless beasts to become pawns in a struggle for dominance by one group of human beings over another. Her concluding sentence sums it up well: "Indians found room in their world for livestock, but the colonists and their descendants could find no room in theirs for Indians."

Creatures of Empire is highly recommended to anyone interested in colonial or environmental history. Anderson has produced a very readable, elucidating, and incisive piece of work.

Note

[1]. William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill & Wang) 1983, p. 10.

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