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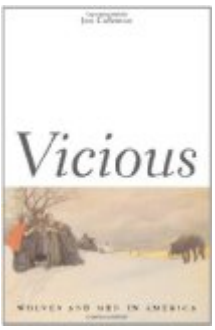

Jon T. Coleman. *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. 270 pp. $28.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-10390-8.

Reviewed by Tim Lehman

Published on H-Environment (October, 2006)

One winter morning in 1814, the famous naturalist John James Audubon went out with an Ohio farmer to check the pit traps that the farmer had set for wolves. Having baited the traps with venison, the farmer caught three wolves. The farmer surprised Audubon by jumping into the pit with the wolves, armed only with his knife. While the wolves cowered in submission, the farmer cut the hamstring muscles of each wolf, then lifted them one at a time out of the pit and set his dogs on them. After the dogs had chased and fought each wolf, the farmer then shot the wolves, pronouncing that he was "paying them off in full" for their depredations of his livestock (p. 2).

Jon Coleman starts his marvelous new book with this anecdote, which is the springboard for the questions that guide his work. Why did Euro-Americans hate wolves so much that they resorted to such ingenious methods as pit traps to destroy them? Why, especially, did they treat the animals with such vicious cruelty? Given this hostility, how is it that Americans came to value and, eventually, to reintroduce wolves? Coleman blends an intriguing mixture of history, biology, and folklore across four centuries and three time zones to explore answers to these questions. Like the wolves he studies, Coleman is a brave traveler who is not afraid to cross conventional boundaries. In his case, these boundaries are of genre, region, period, and methodology. He follows a stream of settlement from Puritan New England in the seventeenth century, to Ohio's Western Reserve in the eighteenth, to Mormon Utah in the nineteenth, and pursues wolves as they appear in travelers' descriptions, literary references, local histories, and bounty records. He moves from the specific--each chapter begins with a story similar to the one above--to explore larger concerns that should give this book a wide audience.

According to Coleman, wolves roamed the mental and ecological landscapes of colonial New England with an almost ghost-like presence. Wolves and people avoided each other out of mutual fear, so much so that one Puritan in 1637 described wolves as "fearfull Curres" who would run from a person just as would a "fearfull dogge" (p. 9). Wolves howled in the night, which Coleman

concludes was a biological strategy to maintain distance from other wolves but which colonists interpreted as a menacing threat. Colonial New Englanders may have seldom seen an actual wolf, but metaphorical wolves abounded. Although the magical and supernatural wolves of European legends apparently did not cross the Atlantic, the Biblical wolf certainly did. The pastoral imagery of the Bible, reinforced by the colonists' own experience in protecting livestock from predators, led to the view of wolves as "skulking criminals" characterized by greed, corruption, and theft (p. 42).

Coleman is especially insightful in his descriptions of how wolves played a role in the miscommunication between colonists and Native Americans. Both societies understood the wolf in much the same way. Algonquians hunted wolves, usually only during the fall when they would sometimes eat the deer that the Indians had trapped, and valued black wolf skins as a gift that symbolized friendship. The colonists viewed the gift of wolf skins as an admission of fealty. Both societies understood well that the public display of wolf heads at the edge of colonial towns was a sign of domination over nature, or an enemy. Coleman's description of the complex relationships between colonists, Indians, and wolves is both ethnocultural and environmental history at its best.

The next section of the book follows these New Englanders as they moved into Ohio's Western Reserve in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The cruelty towards wolves continued. As in New England, wolves were hunted with guns, dogs, and traps of all sorts, often tortured as they were killed. Coleman's analysis of bounty records shows that most who collected a bounty were part-time hunters and full-time farmers who killed wolves during the spring planting season, the time when farmers were most busy but wolves were most vulnerable. Here Coleman is especially interesting in juxtaposing two ways of understanding wolves: the community circle hunt and the traveler's tale. Some variation of the traveler's tale is familiar in popular folklore and was retold in many local histories throughout the Midwest. A lone traveler is lost in the woods, as night approaches wolves begin to howl menacingly and close in on the traveler, who is saved by cleverness or the timely intervention of others. The story plays on the fears of an inverted moral order with wild nature beyond the control of humans, a world in which animals eat people. The circle hunt, a common community event during the winter season, reverses this tale. Community members would surround large sections of forest and, at the designated time, gradually walk towards the center while making great noises and killing all wild animals in the circle. Feasting and merriment, paid for by turning in the wolf heads for bounty payments, often followed the hunt. Thus the human domination of nature was symbolically and actually restored, and the community could celebrate a world in which people eat animals rather than the reverse. The viciousness attributed to the wolves of folklore justified the human viciousness practiced against animals in community ritual.

This blend of folklore and history, according to Coleman, helps to explain the particular animus that humans directed at wolves. Killing them was not enough, because wolves not only threatened livestock in an economic sense but, Coleman argues, wolves as portrayed in these folk stories represented a morally upside-down world that threatened Euro-American settlers in a fundamental way. In Coleman's history, the biological wolf suffers for the sins of the folkloric wolf.

Coleman next follows these settlers into the West, focusing on Mormon Utah. Despite the Mormon's many innovations in religion, they brought their wolf-killing habits with them unchanged from the east. What changed was the number and apparent variety of wolves that settlers encountered in the West. Coleman recounts how wolves followed the buffalo herds and even learned to

come to the sound of a rifle shot because it meant fresh killed meat. Perhaps Coleman's most original assertion of this section is his argument that Mormons began using the term "coyote" to refer to what they had previously called "prairie wolves" so that they could feel safe about taming the difficult land and safely put wolves in their pioneer past. "Wolves" were thus extirpated in this part of the West, Coleman asserts, by a mid-nineteenth century nomenclature shift, while "prairie wolves" or coyotes became more widespread than ever.

Probably the most famous wolf story among environmental historians is Aldo Leopold's encounter with the "fierce green fire" in a dying wolf's eyes that, as he tells it, served as his environmental epiphany. Coleman's treats this moment of "extinction and enlightenment" (p. 192) in the context of the "last wolf stories" that became common in the early twentieth century as the government's professional, scientific hunters replaced the amateur folk hunters of the bounty years. This new breed of hunters, notably Stanley Young, told sentimental stories of wolves that were noble adversaries with names. This nostalgic, sometimes even affectionate, treatment of wolves undermined the traditional folk hostility towards the creatures and, according to Coleman, laid the groundwork for the sympathetic reappraisal that is the basis for wolf reintroduction.

Vicious deserves a wide audience. The storytelling is superb, the analysis fascinating, and the descriptions of both science and folklore bring clarity and life to what can be technical and arcane. Coleman even adds a dash of humor to the mix, making this the sort of book that undergraduates and general readers will appreciate. Coleman asks exactly the right questions, frames his answers with the right mix of historical evidence, wolf ecology, and traditional folklore, and suggests much about the sources of our cruelty and kindness towards predatory animals.

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Citation: Tim Lehman. Review of Coleman, Jon T. *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America.* H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. October, 2006.

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