

Bovine Invaders, Porcine Imperialists

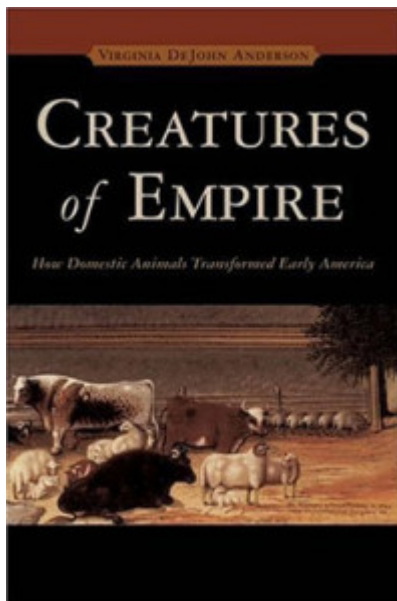
VIRGINIA DE JOHN ANDERSON

CREATURES *of* EMPIRE

How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America



Did cattle cause King Philip's War? Might swine give new meaning to the term *Bacon's Rebellion*? Could dumb brutes exert agency in shaping human history? The answer to all three questions is "Yes—sort of." And yes, there are many more, and probably better, questions to emerge from this smart and fascinating study of the role of farm animals in seventeenth-century American society. With a clear sense of where she's going and how to get there, Virginia DeJohn Anderson skillfully shepherds us through a familiar time and territory that we thought had already been grazed over far too many times, leading us into greener intellectual pastures, which give us plenty of fresh ideas to chew on.



Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America

Anderson is by no means the first historian to focus on the importance of animals in early American history—works by Alfred Crosby, Calvin Martin, William Cronon, and Richard White come immediately to mind—but she does offer one of the most sustained studies of the ways Native Americans and English colonizers thought about animals and, by extension, about each other. With a nod to Crosby and Cronon, she notes that domesticated livestock had a profound effect on the environment of the eastern woodlands of North America: cows and pigs “not only infiltrated places where Indians lived but also changed them” (185) by grazing selectively on certain plants, tromping down the ground to compact the soil and cause erosion, and displacing other animals, like deer, that could not accommodate the intrusion of these seemingly greedy beasts. But Anderson maintains that her book “moves the story in a new direction” by arguing that “animals not only produced changes in the land but also in the hearts and minds and behavior of the peoples who dealt with them” (5). In that sense, domesticated animals emerge here not just as an environmental nuisance, but as a cultural nexus that helps explain the nature of both contact and conflict between the peoples of early America.

Indians and English people shared a measure of common ground in their understanding of animals. They hunted and ate them, of course, but they also endowed them with a spiritual significance that went far beyond merely feeding the body. Native peoples in what came to be called New England often ascribed manitou to the deer, bears, foxes, rabbits, and other game animals that were so important to their survival but also so elusive to their arrows. In both New England and the Chesapeake, native inhabitants sometimes described their deities as having the ability to take the form of animals. In turn, Indian people often adorned themselves with the symbolic images or body parts or even whole bodies of animals for the sake of ornamental display and power. Animals likewise figured prominently in the folklore and Christian cosmology of the English. The robin, with its red breast, could be a sign commemorating the blood of Christ's crucifixion. Black cats and crows could be omens of bad luck, while owls, pigeons, and ravens could be even more disturbing portents of death. Cats, dogs, pigs, and swallows could predict changes in the weather, and so on. In discussing the various meanings that Indians and Europeans gave to animals, Anderson does not condescend to her subjects, nor does she conflate their beliefs into a common culture of pre-scientific superstition. Rather, she makes the sympathetic and very sensible point that "people who regularly encountered animals (not to mention the forces of nature) in their daily lives . . . took refuge in the search for correspondences between unusual behavior in animals and unexpected turns in human fortune" (48). In this sense she reminds those of us who live in the twenty-first century, perhaps keeping the occasional dog or cat or caged bird as a house pet, that people who lived in the seventeenth century had a much deeper and more immediate relationship with a much greater diversity of animals in their midst.

For seventeenth-century English settlers, of course, the animals most prominently in their midst were cattle and pigs, those four-footed imports that had long been so central to early modern English culture and economy. Anderson notes that seventeenth-century England, with a human population of just over five million, also contained an estimated four million cattle, twelve million sheep, and two million pigs. Indeed, she also cites a contemporary reckoning that "the ideal husbandman spent far more time each day with his livestock than with his wife and children—as much as 14 of 17 waking hours" (85). Such familiarity could breed something other than contempt, and some farmers "developed sentimental ties with their animals that seemed to match in emotional intensity their connections to relatives and friends" (91). This emotional intensity occasionally led to licentious excess, and bestiality became both a concern and a capital crime on both sides of the Atlantic, especially in Puritan New England, where four men suffered execution between 1640 and 1647. For the most part, though, English husbandmen in America considered their livestock to be a living form of private property, domesticated capital that could provide for subsistence and could produce—and reproduce—wealth. As such, farm animals had to be "managed in such a way as to maximize economic benefits and minimize costs" (88). But the management of these animal assets took different forms in different regions. In New England, where both the standards of community and the severity of the climate

encouraged enclosure, townspeople attempted to govern their livestock in an orderly fashion, emphasizing common grazing, well-marked cattle, and well-fenced fields. Taken in the larger context of seventeenth-century society, the concern over undisciplined animals represented an extension of Puritans' problems with undisciplined people; in both cases, Puritan practice never quite lived up to Puritan prescription. In the Chesapeake, by contrast, the control of animal movement came to seem as haphazard as the pattern of human settlement, with unpenned pigs and cattle roaming on their own to forage for food in the woods. This free-range approach to animal husbandry deviated considerably, of course, from the standards that pertained both in England and in New England, but that, writ large, seems to be the standard story of the seventeenth-century Chesapeake. "Had they been able to examine their own behavior objectively," Anderson observes, "Chesapeake colonists would surely have been stunned to see how far they had drifted from English practices. For all their presumptions of civility, they acted more like native farmers than English husbandmen" (116).

The question of the English husbandmen's relationship with those native farmers emerges as the main issue in the book. To be sure, Indians had their own domesticated animals, especially dogs and occasionally birds of prey (the latter kept near cornfields for the sake of crow control). But native peoples had never kept large domesticated animals like cows and pigs—at least not until the English settlers encouraged them to do so. From the English perspective, Indians who learned to live with livestock would also learn to live in a more generally "civilized" manner, accepting a settled form of habitation and adopting different gender roles in which men, not women, did most of the main farm labor. English cattle thus became a means of Anglicizing Indians, and "English people . . . never doubted that domestic animals would become their partners in colonization" (170). If Indians could not grasp the finer points of English law and religion, colonists hoped, they could at least cope with cattle.

Yet living with English livestock became the bane of Indians' existence and eventually a critical point of contention. Even though native peoples did understand the possible benefits of acquiring English livestock—especially hogs, a more self-sufficient source of food than cattle—they never fully followed the English model, nor did they ever find a workable way to coexist with land-hungry colonists, not to mention their equally land-hungry cattle and swine. No matter how much English settlers tried to organize the landscape with the visible and invisible lines of fences and deeds, "colonists' animals did not respect boundaries" (221). Allowed to forage for food, they ranged beyond the legal limits of English settlement and claimed land as their own. Thus they became, as Anderson explains, "agents of empire . . . forcing native peoples who stood in their way either to fend the animals off as best they could or else move on" (211). In turn, native people came to see these slow-moving shock troops of settlement as the essence of Englishness, and they therefore determined that one way to strike back at the colonists was to capture or kill their animals: "no form of property offered a more tempting or appropriate

target than livestock" (226). This tension between trespass and retaliation came into especially sharp focus during the concurrent crises of 1675-76: King Philip's (or Metacom's) War in New England and Bacon's Rebellion in the Chesapeake. "Livestock acted in several ways as necessary, if not wholly sufficient, causes for these tragic confrontations" (232), Anderson concludes, and by the time she says that, it actually makes sense.

Throughout the preceding pages, Anderson has made a clear, compelling, and sometimes surprising case that the barnyard can no longer be mere background in the study of early America, and her book challenges other scholars to roam even farther afield than the familiar limits of seventeenth-century New England and the Chesapeake. Do the docile-seeming animals in Edward Hicks's painting of *The Peaceable Kingdom*, for instance, reflect the reality of early Pennsylvania, or would livestock turn out to be as big a blow to native inhabitants as the Walking Purchase? Do the cattle—and African cattle-drivers—of early South Carolina, which Peter Wood mentions in *Black Majority*, deserve a more detailed treatment? Anderson has shown us that people in the past lived closely with animals and knew them well, appreciating both their prosaic value and their symbolic meanings. To understand those people better, she tells us, we need to learn more about their animals as well.

This article originally appeared in issue 6.1 (October, 2005).

Gregory Nobles is professor of history at Georgia Tech, where he teaches early American history and environmental history. He is working on a book, *Naturalist Nation: The Art and Science of Birds in Audubon's America*.