Terms of Dismemberment

On April 24, 1995, Chad McKittrick, an underemployed lover of guns, beer, and bear hunting, shot an animal he hoped was a wolf outside of Red Lodge, Montana. McKittrick and his associate, Dusty Steinmasel, walked to the canid sprawled in the mud. The scene—two hunters standing over a beast leaking from a high-caliber wound—qualified as a cliché in this part of the American West. Montanans had been pumping bullets into wild things for over a century. This killing, however, elicited none of the customary reactions. McKittrick and Steinmasel stared with anxiety, not victory, at the two red United States Department of Fish and Wildlife tags dangled from the wolf's ears. The black alpha male labeled R-10 (r for red) belonged to the "experimental-nonessential population" of eight Canadian wolves released in Yellowstone National Park in January 1995. R-10 had wandered out of the preserve with his mate, R-9, in search of a denning site. The fight over reintroducing wolves into Yellowstone had raged for years, and the communities around the park buzzed with wolf talk. McKittrick and Steinmasal knew the red tags signaled trouble, and Stienmasal nearly convinced McKittrick that they might avoid thousands of dollars in fines and jail time if they reported the incident immediately to a Fish and Wildlife agent. This was good advice. The "experimental-nonessential" designation voided the harshest penalties of the 1969 Endangered Species Act, giving hunters and livestock owners a pass if they killed a wolf by accident or in the act of slaughtering a domestic animal. All McKittrick had to do was notify the proper authorities within twenty-four hours, say the shooting was an accident, and he could have escaped without punishment. But he had other plans.

He wanted a trophy and would risk federal prosecution to keep the wolf's skull and hide. The men hauled the cadaver into the woods. They strung the body up with bailing twine, sliced off the skin, and lopped off the head. The choice remains of R-10 traveled to McKittrick's cabin in a garbage bag. Steinmasal took charge of the animal's radio collar, tossing the device into a road culvert near his home. The still-transmitting collar (broadcasting in "mortality mode" since the wolf stopped moving) led the Fish and Wildlife officials to Steinmasal. He led them to McKittrick. The killer of R-10 received a six-month jail sentence and a ten thousand dollar fine. He also won a prominent place in Red Lodge's Fourth of July parade, waving to the crowd on horseback attired in a t-shirt that declared his allegiance to the "Northern Rockies Wolf Reduction Project."


Fig. 1

Severing the head of a predator trucked across an international boundary to satisfy an endangered species law signed by Richard Nixon may seem a peculiarly modern transgression, but wolf reintroduction linked the past and the present in ways that help illuminate over three centuries of American colonial history. McKittrick extended a historical relationship when he destroyed and took possession of R-10's skull.

Colonial Rhode Islanders, who displayed their victims' heads in public after collecting the cash bounties offered by the town, would have understood Chad McKittrick's decision to keep incriminating body parts. A jobless construction worker in a Montana town wracked by the fickle economies of ranching and tourism, he collected mementos of power. R-10's skull entered a stockpile of masculine totems—guns, skins, and antlers—that helped a small man feel big.

In colonial Providence, wolf heads set on a fencepost near the settlement's meetinghouse stood for the community's resolve to punish livestock thieves and control their environment. They were tokens of power. But wolf heads are unsteady symbols. Would-be conquerors might hold up animal brain cases as signs

of their authority, but other observers interpreted the disembodied icons according to their own assumptions about power. Over the course of American history, livestock owners, Native Americans, bounty hunters, animal rights activists, and wilderness enthusiasts have disputed and revised the meaning of wolf skulls. Instead of telling a tale of absolute dominion, the heads embody the ambiguity of the North American conquest.

In seventeenth-century Middleboro, Massachusetts, John and James Soule farmed side-by-side in the shadow of Wolf-Trap Hill. A family folktale explained the mound's name. At dawn each day, one of the brothers hiked the hill to check the pit trap they had dug to catch wolves. One morning, the inspector peered into the trench and discovered a wolf balled up at one end and an Indian shivering at the other; both had crashed through the boughs that covered the ditch in the night. The farmer killed the wolf, and "after an examination he found that the Indian was on his way from Nemasket to Plymouth upon legitimate business, so he was released and allowed to continue his journey." The promontory overlooking the Soule's neighborhood swallowed a thieving canine and a suspicious human in one gulp.

Wolf killing in colonial New England created landscapes of frustration and distrust. English colonists imported domestic beasts that ranged beyond the humans' ability to safeguard them, and, to prevent wolves from gutting their investments, they dug traps, offered bounties, erected fences, and experimented with exotic technologies like mackerel hooks and "wolf bullets with adder's tongues." Towns urged residents to purchase hounds and mastiffs and train them to hunt wolves. Governments asked and, when they could, forced Native Americans to help slaughter them. All these efforts failed to eliminate the menace at a pace satisfactory to livestock owners. Wolves continued to eat property and farmers continued to kill wolves well into the eighteenth century. European colonists did not march across New England from east to west driving wolves before them. Instead, humans and wolves co-existed belligerently for over a hundred years in a patchwork landscape of agricultural strongholds and feral interstices.

The region's wolf place names documented this landscape. English colonists affixed wolf names to fields, meadows, brooks, swamps, and forests. In Hopkinton, New Hampshire, there was a local spot called Wolf Meadow, for "the frequency with which wolves were once observed in the vicinity." Colonists fashioned wolf landmarks to notify each other of the location of their pit traps. Indians might survive in a hole with a wolf, but no farmer wanted to see if his neighbor's daughter could survive overnight with a ravenous beast. Place names like Wolf-Pitt Brook and Wolf Pit Neck Plain served as seventeenth- and eighteenth-century versions of flashing yellow construction lights.

Wolf traps lined the border between the wild and the pastoral, danger and safety, loss and profit. The trenches marked a cultural divide as well. The conflict between wolves and livestock gave New England's humans the chance to unite as a species against an ecological rival. The Algonquians destroyed

wolves and exchanged black wolf skins as ceremonial gifts, and the English seemed prepared to enter and expand this trade, offering native hunters cloth, corn, and ammunition in return for wolf heads. But in the end, predator eradication drove the humans apart rather than together. The Algonquians saw the heads as symbols of equality, while the English understood them as tokens of submission. As the Soule episode demonstrated, suspicion and wolves strode the woods of New England together. The Indian who fell into the pit on Wolf-Trap Hill had to prove his legitimacy in order to continue his journey. Unsure of their Indian neighbors' true loyalties, the English tried to make wolf heads icons of certainty and reassurance. Instead, the detached craniums became mementoes of the humans' failure to understand and trust one another.

Instead of uniting New England's humans, predator eradication exposed the fault lines that separated them. The animals' heads became symbols in the colonists' and Indians' struggle over land and political ascendancy. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, New England Algonquians and English colonists fought several major wars and engaged in a series of raids and skirmishes. The violence sometimes plunged the bipeds into the basements of hell. Many of the instances of colonists labeling Algonquians animals came from these periods of intense conflict. John Underhill, an English captain who watched Indian men, women, and children burn at Mystic Fort during the Pequot War, compared his enemies to "roaring lions." William Hubbard called Metacom a den-dwelling "beast" after King Philip's War. A war hostage in the same conflict, Mary Rowlandson likened her Narragansett captors to "hell-hounds," "ravenous bears," and "wolves," while, a few weeks before French, Abaneki, and Canadian Indian fighters raided his town, killing fifty residents and carrying a hundred into captivity, Solomon Stoddard of Deerfield wrote that Indians "act like wolves and are to be dealt withal as wolves."

Violence and heartbreak led English writers to question their Indian adversaries' humanity, but the actual lines of cultural division in wartime were never as clearly drawn as their animal metaphors implied. War generated cross-cultural alliances as well as inhuman violence. The English, for instance, fought the Pequots with the assistance of Narragansett warriors. Later, during King Philip's War, the colonists battled the Narragansetts with the aid of Mohegan fighters. Wolf symbols and metaphors signaled the cultural distance between warring peoples; they also helped span this gap through military alliances.


Fig. 2

Severed wolf heads stood at the juncture of peace and war in colonial New England. Nailed to the side of a meetinghouse or set atop a post in a public space, the heads symbolized the colonists' desire to punish outlaw animals and bring order to a rambunctious natural environment. In England, criminals and traitors received similar treatment. Displayed in public, the human skulls served as warnings to would-be thieves and rebels. Of course, no human signal however vivid could prompt a hungry wolf to mull the consequence of biting a lamb, and the predators' inability to read the messages disgruntled colonists were sending them makes the public display of wolf heads a puzzling activity. They were signs, but signs for whom?

In 1671, Metacom, known to the English as King Philip, negotiated a treaty with the Plymouth Colony, and this document illustrated the multiple signals lopped off heads sent in Colonial New England. The Wampanoag Sachem agreed to abide by Plymouth's laws, to pay a fine of one hundred pounds for past "misdemeanors," to "not make war without approbation," to allow the court at Plymouth to settle future disputes, and to submit to a ban on selling Wampanoag land without the approval of the court. He also promised to send five wolves' heads to the governor every year as a "token of his fealty." Later that year, Metacom escorted Takamunna, Sachem of the Saconet, to the Plymouth Court. Takamunna signed a similar treaty and pledged one wolf's head a year. The wolf head tributes the Plymouth Colony extracted from Metacom and Takamunna represented the colonists' attempt to fashion a symbol that communicated their right to control the demarcation, transference, and ownership of territory. Metacom contested this right. Four years after signing the treaty, he led an uprising against the English. Many skulls rolled during King Philip's War, but only one ended up rotting on a pole in Plymouth town—Metacom's.

Propped up for display like a wolf's head, King Philip's skull was a symbol of English ascendancy. The colonists tried to use human skulls as tokens of power from the earliest years of settlement. In 1623, Myles Standish decapitated Wituwamat, a Massachusett Indian accused of conspiring to destroy the English settlements, and stuck his head on a pole outside of Plymouth's fort. The colonists received Wituwamat's head "with joy;" it signaled their ability to defend themselves and punish their enemies. This was hubris. In 1623, the Plymouth Colony could barely feed itself much less fend off a coordinated Indian attack. Wituwamat's head symbolized the colonists' yearning for power,

domination, and control, aspirations thwarted by the continued presence of human rivals who interpreted skulls differently. Miles Standish seized physical command of an Indian body when he chopped off Wituwamat's head, but the English never acquired the cultural authority to determine the skull's meaning.

During the Pequot War, the colonists' Narragansett and Mohegan allies offered Pequot heads as gifts. For the Indians, the gifts re-enforced their equal partnership with the English. The colonists, however, saw the skulls as tokens of not only the Pequots' subordination but the Mohegans' and Narragansetts' as well. The heads represented the Indians' "service" and "fidelity." In 1637, Roger Williams indulged in the ultimate power fantasy. In a letter to the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, he suggested that the conquered Pequots be dispersed throughout the colonies. They would live in small, isolated groups and send an annual tribute of wolves' heads to the governor: "as once Edgar the Peacable did with the Welsh in North Wales, a tribute of wolves heads be imposed on them . . . which I conceave an incomparable way to Save much Cattell alive in the land."

Williams's plan linked the conquests of wolves and Indians through communication and territory. The vanquished Pequots would destroy wolves to communicate their fidelity to and compliance with English authority. In the process, they would make the wilderness safe for the colonists' meandering property. Williams imagined a line of communication that worked like a chain of command. Indians would subordinate wolves in order to collect the emblems of their own subordination. The plan, however, contained a glaring weakness. Controlling the symbolism of wolves' heads was beyond the colonists' power.

The Algonquians exchanged both human and animal body parts for their own reasons. They traded black wolves' skins to heal alliances and restore reciprocity. Wolf killing was a byproduct of seasonal deer trapping in Southern New England. Indian trappers destroyed the wolves that robbed their deer snares, and every so often they caught an exceptional thief, a trespasser with all black pelage (most wolves are gray in forest habitats). Repairing the damage done by the crime rather than punishing the criminal was a core idea of Algonquian justice. Trappers did not punish wolves as much as exact restitution comparable to the animal's offense. A wolf skin signified atonement. That was why black wolves' skins worked so well as peace offerings. They were rare gifts that signaled the giver's desire to expiate past misdeeds.

It is hard to tell what wolves' heads, as opposed to pelts, meant to Indians, but the events leading up to King Philip's War hold a few clues. Metacom's revolt in 1675 makes more sense if he understood the wolves' heads he committed to give in 1671 as symbols of restored equality instead of imposed fealty. The skulls may have hastened the war by convincing both the English and the Wampanoags that each broke promises neither made.

The conquest of New England teaches many lessons, but three stand out in regard to wolf heads. First, the eradication of wolves involved a tangled cast of

species and cultures. Second, wolves died for their role as ambiguous symbols in human conflicts as well as for their predation of livestock. Finally, wolf heads remained potent icons because wolves survived in southern New England for over a century despite the colonists' best efforts to destroy them. Evasion—a maneuver that grew ever harder to perform as English colonists drained swamps and converted forests into fields—was the key to animals' endurance.

In New England, wolves, colonists, and Native Americans never assembled the elements necessary to share an ecological niche. Rival predators need space, calories, and clear lines of communication to live together in peace. Colonists imported a food supply (cows, pigs, sheep) that invaded their neighboring predators' territories. Unable to impress upon their niche-mates the importance of not eating property, the colonists offered rewards to one rival (Native Americans) to hunt the other (wolves).


Fig. 3

Wolf killing gave the human predators a set of symbols that helped mitigate their communication difficulties, but the bipeds' alliance shattered on the ground beneath their feet. Unlike wolves, the Algonquians inhabited landscapes—cleared fields and villages—colonists adored. The English bought, stole, and negotiated for Indian land, yet they struggled to convince the Algonquians to respect and adhere to their notions of property. The human predators fought over plots of land as well as the rules for creating, maintaining, and transferring territory. Each tried to invent symbols of power that signaled their control over cultural definitions as well as physical resources. Wolf heads represented one such token. The Algonquians and the English wrestled over the heads' interpretation, one predator insisting the craniums embodied fealty and submission, the other equality and reciprocity. In colonial New England, language, land, and domestic beasts trapped three top predators in a pit of violence and misunderstanding and only one escaped to continue its journey. As folkloric beasts and enthusiastic molesters of private property, wolves loped through the breadth of American history. They provide a historical bridge far more sturdy than the concepts scholars lay down to span the gaps in the past. Cobbled together ethnic identities like Euro-American or abstract processes like colonization often fail to make the linkages they imply. Were the ranchers who settled Montana's grasslands engaged in the same conquest as the farmers who plowed rocks in Connecticut? Does the term Euro-

American mean anything when people as diverse as John Winthrop and Chad McKittrick fall into the category? Historians work to come up with synthetic concepts that sew together vast time periods and address the continent's past as a whole. The prime lesson of wolf history is this: life and history create their own connections. Genes bind generations; folktales cross thousands of miles; and wolves integrate the American past through the synthesis of biological, folkloric, and historical time. Wolves can help Americans understand and integrate their past by bringing together divergent people and places across the reaches of space and time. And historians might be able to assist wolves in return. The best reason for letting wolves repopulate the United States may be historic rather than ecological. Wolves may heal ecosystems overrun with herbivores; they may bring a sense of wildness to national parks; their presence may even brighten the human soul. But wolf reintroduction will most certainly preserve a species that unites Americans through a long, brutal, and vital colonial past. Americans spend millions of dollars to safeguard historic treasures and monuments. Tax dollars, foundation grants, and visitor donations safeguard the Constitution, polish the Vietnam Memorial, and keep Richard Nixon's birthplace from crumbling to the ground. Wolves tell a story longer than any nation's, larger than any war's, and more significant than any president's. They push history beyond the confines of humanity to include the creatures and biological processes that shaped the past. Wolves are living reminders of the legacies of colonization, and, when the likes of Chad McKittrick shoot the animals to possess their skulls, the rituals and symbols of colonization thunder back from the distant past to enliven wildlife debates in postmodern America. The predators continue to fire imaginations, ignite controversies, and illicit savage behavior, and their grip on American culture remains fierce. They embody an unbroken history of conquest worth pondering and protecting.

Further Reading: R-10's death is recounted in Thomas McNamee, *The Return of the Wolf to Yellowstone* (New York, 1997). For the public display of wolf heads see *The Early Records of the Town of Providence*, vol. 9 (Providence, 1893); Joshua Coffin, *A Sketch of the History of Newbury, Newburryport, and West Newbury* (Boston, 1845). For the naming of Wolf-Trap Hill see Thomas Weston, *History of the Town of Middleboro Massachusetts* (Boston, 1906). Examples of colonists calling Indians animals can be found in John Underhill, *Newes From America* (London, 1638); Letter from Reverend Solomon Stoddard to Governor Joseph Dudley, October 22, 1703, in *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, XXIV, 269-270. For the display and meaning of human skulls in wartime New England see James Drake, *King Philip's War: Civil War in New England, 1675-1676* (Amherst, 1999); Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York, 1998). See Roger Williams, *A Key into the Language of America* (London, 1643) for an account of Algonquian wolf trapping. For wolf head tributes see Edward Winslow, "Winslow's Relation," in Alexander Young, *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers of the Colony of Plymouth from 1602 to 1625* (Boston, 1841); Glenn W. LaFantasie, ed., *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*, vol. 1 (Hanover, N.H., 1988).

This article originally appeared in issue 4.1 (October, 2003).

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