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# review of *Fur, Fortune, and Empire: The Epic History of the Fur Trade in America*

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*Fur, Fortune, and Empire: The Epic History of the Fur Trade in America.* By Eric J. Dolin. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010. Pp. 442. \$29.95 cloth)

Eric J. Dolin's *Fur, Fortune, and Empire* is a concise, engaging, and remarkably comprehensive survey of the American fur trade. Though aimed at a general readership, the author presents a broad-ranging, sophisticated story of the commerce, supported by nearly a hundred pages of citations. The author says that the inspiration for the book came from a passage in James Truslow Adams's *The Founding of New England*: "The Bible and the Beaver were the two mainstays of the Plymouth Colony in its early years." He knew something about Pilgrims and something about the fur trade, but nothing of the Pilgrim fur trade. From this, Dolin set out to explore the role of the trade in the founding of America and its expansion westward.

The book does a very good job of presenting the importance of fur in the early commercial development of New England, the Middle Colonies, and the South. He includes an effective survey of the more famous fur trade of New France as well. This is followed by successive on the Old Northwest, the Pacific Northwest, the Great Plains, and the Rocky Mountains, and it concludes with the slaughter of the buffalo. The fur trade, according to Dolin, performed an important role in each of these succeeding frontiers. Low start-up costs, high profit margins, and spectacular initial returns made it the first enterprise and each region and helped to finance its subsequent development.

Dolin is equally effective in discussing the diplomatic and geopolitical consequences of the trade. He begins with the comic-opera battles between the Swedes, Dutch, and English for control of the Hudson and Delaware Rivers, and then proceeds to the blood-lettings of the "Beaver Wars" and the murderous Anglo-French struggle for the continent. I was particularly intrigued with his discussion of the fur trade as an irritant in the years prior to the American Revolution. I was aware of the anger the Quebec Act of 1774 aroused as an act of Catholic toleration and as a bar to Anglo-American settlement in the Ohio Valley but had never considered how the restoration of Quebec's "ancient boundaries" gave the traders of Montreal an advantage over their American counterparts. The importance of the fur trade in the Treaty of Paris, Jay's Treaty, and the War of 1812 are presented in turn.

Dolin, whose training was in environmental studies and policy rather than history, is particularly adept in his descriptions of the animals that formed the prize: beavers, sea otters, and bison. He also presents sensitive, insightful descriptions of the roles they played in their ecosystems and the peoples with whom they shared them. The wanton slaughter of these wonderful animals as an integral component of the march of American democracy is a constant irony.

Norton has done an elegant job with the book; it is a lavishly illustrated hardbound with both color and black-and-white plates and prints on good paper for \$29.95. Strangely, for a story in which geography is such an important matter, there are no maps other than the end papers. These present the fur trade of the far west, but there

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