



Winter 1983

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**Recommended Citation**

Fred L. Ragsdale Jr., *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade, Calvin Martin*, 23 Nat. Resources J. 281 (1983).

Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol23/iss1/25>

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# KEEPERS OF THE GAME: INDIAN-ANIMAL RELATIONSHIPS AND THE FUR TRADE

By CALVIN MARTIN

Berkeley: The University of California Press. 1982 (softcover). 1978  
(hardcover). Pp. 226. \$6.95, s.c.

Calvin Martin's thin book is a valuable and controversial piece of scholarship that deserves a wider audience. A note on the back cover informs readers that a collection of essays entitled *Animals and the Fur Trade: A Critique of Keepers of the Game* is available from the University of Georgia Press. I have not read the critique; however, its existence establishes that *Keepers of the Game* has created an important dispute among scholars of Indian history.

The value of Professor Martin's book can be found at two quite distinct levels. At one, it contributes greatly to our knowledge of the fur trade and its effect on Indian society; at another, the book is a significant attempt to move Indian scholarship towards integration with mainstream history. Much contemporary scholarship focusing on Indians discusses them in relative isolation, while attempts to include Indians into general works of history usually rely on fringes here and there consisting of a few inserted paragraphs, rather than a weaving of the Indian thread into the fabric. Professor Martin has, with real success, taken an approach which does not continue to compartmentalize Indians.

The almost five hundred years of intercourse between the Indian and white man is fascinating and complex. Unfortunately, Indians have been accorded an almost mythic status in history, rather than the analytical and accurate portrayal actors in history deserve. It is notable that the Indian myth has not been consistent, but has varied with the felt needs of the dominant society from which they derive. Roy Harvey Pierce's excellent study, *Savages of America*,<sup>1</sup> and Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence*,<sup>2</sup> provide insight into the mythic process. Professor Martin's book further details and criticizes this phenomena.

*Keepers of the Game* discusses one myth and, in destroying it, does away with a second as well. The first of these myths is that of Indians as the first environmentalists. The second (and quite inconsistent) myth represents Indians as rapacious consumers, feathered Babbitts exchanging two pots for every beaver. The upper portion of the North American continent was, through the rivalry and greed of the Hudson Bay Company

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1. R. PIERCE, *SAVAGES OF AMERICA: A STUDY OF THE INDIANS AND THE IDEALS OF CIVILIZATION* (1953).

2. R. SLOTKIN, *REGENERATION THROUGH VIOLENCE: THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE AMERICAN FRONTIER* (1973).

and the Northwest Company, almost stripped of fur-bearing wildlife. Historians have debated the reasons as to why Indians, who were the only significant trappers in the time and place, so avidly aided in the destruction of the animals. Conventional wisdom resolved the problem by reference to the market place: Indians wanted the fruits of western technology to such a degree that they were either willing or unwittingly able to destroy their environment to obtain the trinkets. Martin believes that this analysis is wrong because it fails to appreciate the culture of the Indians and, in fact, is ethnocentric in that it ascribes to Indians the same motives that would be ascribed to western man.

His thesis as to why Indians were such avid participants evolves from a careful review of contemporaneous manuscripts and—in defiance of Occum's Razor—seems to me to make more sense than an explanation which imposes simple capitalism on primitive people.

It is apparent that all societies are much more complex than they were believed to be. The adjective "primitive" may refer to an aspect of society such as technology, but the mere presence or absence of a specified degree of technology is no indicator of a society's structural complexity.

Professor Martin's analysis begins with the decline of aboriginal population, and he concludes that something terrible happened to Indians long before we had previously thought—that many, if not most, Northeastern Indians were ravaged by disease before actual contact with Europeans.<sup>3</sup> He estimates that up to 90 percent of the original population may have perished. Contemporary studies indicate that many of the deaths were the result of animal-borne diseases and that fleas and ticks were early immigrants that caused major epizootic destruction of the native wildlife population. In addition to decimating wildlife, the diseases spread to the populace. This spreading of death by the animals was viewed by the Indians as in Professor Martin's phrase "a breach of contract."

In his reconstruction of Indian cosmology he found that the Indians did not distinguish between the natural and the supernatural world. Within their cosmology, animals and Indians had a contract of mutual obligation and courtesy. Indians owed to the animals they hunted and killed specified formal duties, such as treating the remains in a certain way or refraining from killing certain species. In return, the animals, who knew that they were hunted, followed certain predictable behavior to ease the hunt and provided themselves for the sustenance of Indians if ritual was obeyed.

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3. Estimates of the aboriginal pre-Columbian population have been the subject of a long-standing debate. The numbers for North America range from less than a million to over 9 million. Professor Martin uses the latter and from that figure, which was determined by extrapolation backwards from known base population, places the estimated aboriginal population of the Western Hemisphere in excess of 90 million. Early estimates were less than 10 million. This dramatic difference is the base for his theory.

With the sudden emergence of epizootic destruction, the scarcity of game, and the contagiousness of the animals, the contractual relationship was severed. Professor Martin postulates that these events happened before Indians were aware of the possible connection of the white man. Indians treated the new disasters as the start of a war with animals, a war led by the beavers who had always coveted their land.

The arrival of western trade goods, the musket and the steel trap, at precisely the same time as a war with the animals was treated as divine intervention. The sincerity of the idea of war is poignantly expressed when the Indians tell the beavers that if they will just talk, the war will end, but the beavers remain silent.

Contemporaneously with the war with the animals, other events occurred to further separate Indians from their culture. The new disease was incurable by the shamans and their traditional method. In contrast, the French Jesuits promised redemption and cure, the trading companies imposed a system of hunting land tenure, and the introduction of firearms changed the balance of power between the tribes. The cumulative effect of these pressures was the abandonment of the existing social structure for the new order promised by the traders and the priests. A seemingly pleasant ideal existence was implicitly promised until the game disappeared. Like the Aztec's fatal mistake, the germ of destruction of Indian society was hidden in the society itself.

The second myth that Professor Martin discusses, as almost an aside, is the rather common belief that Indians were the first environmentalists. This, too, he writes, is a result of ethnocentric behavior. For, just as the explanation for the participation in trapping is dependent upon an understanding of Indians' relationship with animals, so a grasp of their attitudes towards conservation is dependent upon their cosmology. He points out by quotation and example that many environmentalists believe that if western civilization could adopt the land ethic of the Indian, present society would be much more compatible with nature. But he argues that it is impossible to adopt the ethic because the ethic is inextricably bound up in Indian cosmology.

His explanation of how the Indian relationship with animals and the rest of nature is a complex and pervasive system points out the foolishness of an attempt to isolate out the attractive portions of their beliefs. Sadly, even if it were possible, we the heirs of a different cosmology would not listen anyway. Ironically, to make Indians projections of our ideals of perfection is, in essence, to dehumanize them one more time.

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