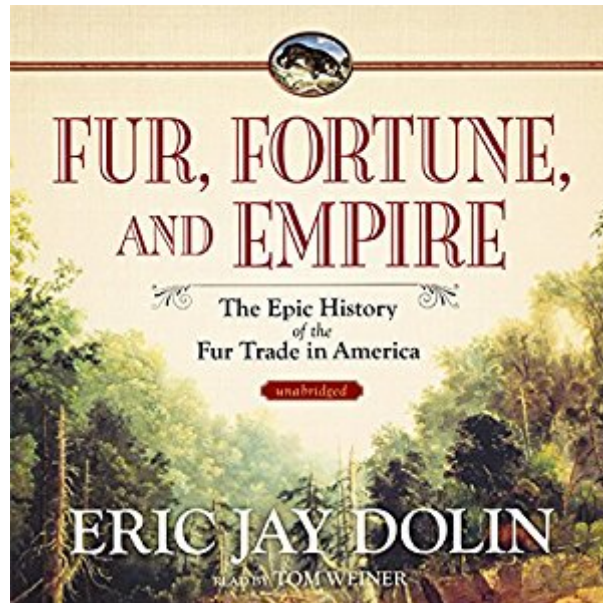


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# Fur, Fortune, And Empire: The Epic History Of The Fur Trade In America



## Synopsis

From the best-selling author of *Leviathan* comes this sweeping narrative of one of America's most historically rich industries. Beginning his epic history in the early 1600s, Eric Jay Dolin traces the dramatic rise and fall of the American fur trade industry, from the first Dutch encounters with the Indians to the rise of the conservation movement in the late 19th century. Dolin shows how the fur trade, driven by the demands of fashion, sparked controversy, fostered economic competition, and fueled wars among the European powers as North America became a battleground for colonization and imperial aspirations. The trade in beaver, buffalo, sea otter, and other animal skins spurred the exploration and the settlement of the vast American continent, while it alternately enriched and gravely damaged the lives of America's native peoples. Populated by a larger-than-life cast, including Dutch governor Peter Stuyvesant, President Thomas Jefferson, America's first millionaire John Jacob Astor, and mountain man Kit Carson, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire* is the most comprehensive and compelling history of the American fur trade ever written.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Eric Jay Dolin, author of *Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America*, now explores the history of the American fur trade in *Fur, Fortune, and Empire: The Epic History of the Fur Trade in America*. I'll be honest, I wasn't crazy about *Leviathan* - it had an amazing amount of detail, but I felt it was more a collection of anecdotes than a historical analysis. *Fur, Fortune, and Empire* suffers from similar defects, but also has a more focused narrative. I felt like the book was a typical freshman college

report - an A for the amount of effort and research, but a B for the depth of analysis and writing. First, the book: *Fur, Fortune, and Empire* follows some of the pivotal events of the American fur trade. While the book claims to cover the period from 1550-1900, in reality it focuses on the early 1600s and early 1800s. Dolin argues that the fur trade was integral to American history, leading to the founding of cities like Springfield, MA (my dad's hometown) and encouraging British settlers to expand into Dutch and French territory.

**SOFT GOLD.** Today furs are often regarded as politically incorrect, and the only mention of beavers is the occasional local newspaper article re the nuisance of a dam to someone's property. However for over 250 years in North America, from the late 1500s to circa 1840, the beaver was a valuable commodity (main market: top hats for European gentlemen), often referred to as "soft gold". Dolin's aptly-titled book persuasively traces the driving force of acquisition of beaver and other furs on U.S. history, from the huge influence on the first colonies of the French (indeed, the fur trade was the primary motivation); British (beaver fur was the Pilgrims' first cash crop); and Dutch. But the influence didn't cease with the colonies. The fur trade also was a major factor in the French and Indian War, the Revolutionary War, and the War of 1812 (and vice-versa--i.e. laws etc. were passed because of the fur trade), and in general drove westward transcontinental expansion. But there were many other influences. One was that the fur trade was probably the largest factor in defining the final U.S.-Canadian border. Two examples: The border through the middle of 4 of the Great Lakes preserved the (canoe) transport route of furs from the interior of Canada to Montreal; the wagon trains led to the Oregon Territory by the (ex) mountain men swung the balance of power in this co-occupied (U.S. and British) region to the U.S., bringing to the U.S. the land west of the continental divide, north of the Columbia river, and below the 49th parallel (the current state of Washington, the Idaho panhandle, and western Montana). Dolin has scoured hundreds of sources, summarizing key information in a compelling succinct narrative for the general reader.

This book simply had to be written...and it is a surprise that it took so long. Different authors have attempted to write about the influence of a commercial product in the making of America...eg. rum, but the argument in favor of the beaver, the otter, and later the Buffalo really makes sense. The author tracks the story from early European penetration of the New World to the end of the 19th century when the herds of buffalo were nearly all killed off and the animal rights movement was born. My title for this review comes from the story of the Pilgrims who were almost as interested in the "beaver" for making a living as they were in the "Bible" for choosing how to make life meaningful.

But, as the author explains, New England exhausted its fur trade even before the end of the 1600's by excessive trapping. This caused the Native Americans to trade what they had left...their land. A sorry experience for native peoples. I was pleased with the author's selection of pictures to illustrate the book. The picture that inflamed my humanity was a Harper's Weekly drawing of 1874 which depicted a lone buffalo giving up its skin to a hunter, saying - "Don't shoot, my good fellow! Here, take my 'robe', save your ammunition, and let me go in peace." The French and Indian Wars (which pre-dated the American Revolution and generated the need for the British Empire to tax the colonists) was fought primarily to control the fur trade. To stir up revolutionary passions, Benjamin Franklin argued to the colonists that this was a conflict between the British and the French, not a conflict involving the Americans.

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