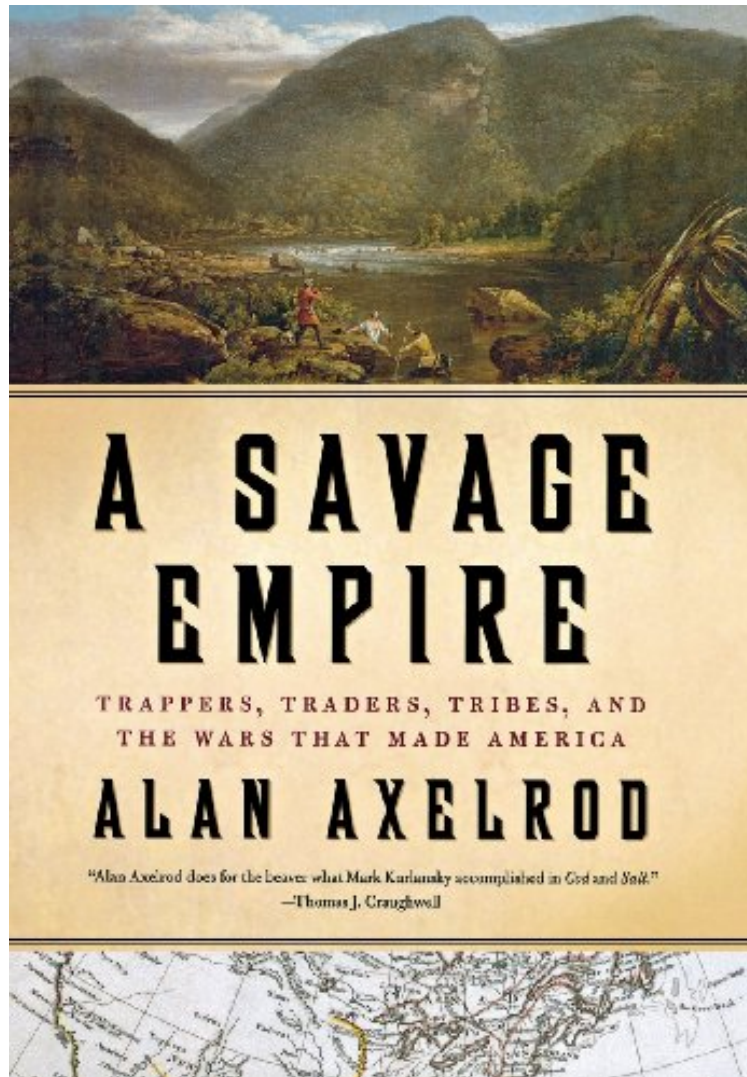


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A Savage Empire: Trappers, Traders, Tribes, and the Wars That Made America

Alan Axelrod

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Alan Axelrod : A Savage Empire: Trappers, Traders, Tribes, and the Wars That Made America before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Savage Empire: Trappers, Traders, Tribes, and the Wars That Made America:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. mostly a repeat of pre-revolution, revolution and post revolution ...By david e gibbsmostly a repeat of pre-revolution, revolution and post revolution conflicts between Indians, the British, the French and the colonies. very little about influence of beaver trade on early colonies. the extensively over

use of the phrase as well as, as well, distracted the reader from the subject matter. 0 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Historically Informative By wiliam martineau Have not had a chance to finish reading this Historical book. So far, so good with the info that i've gathered. 15 of 17 people found the following review helpful. Not the best on the block By historybuff A Savage Empire is a nice, readable popular account of the way people treated each other horribly in the early years of the settlement of the continent. It does not say a lot about the fur trade, to learn more about which was the reason I picked it up. It provides interesting details about Washington's encounter with the French at Fort Necessity near present day Pittsburg that started the French and Indian War in America--that the French claimed they were on a diplomatic mission--and about why alcohol was called "firewater" by the Indians. But I didn't find it very satisfying, mostly because it does not provide any references or authorities for its statements. I may be old fashioned, or it may be my training in history and in law, but I look with suspicion on works of history that do not provide footnotes of some kind so that when a statement peaks my interest, especially when it is contrary to what I have read before, I can find the source of the assertion. This book has no footnotes. It has a bibliography, and although this seems to be increasingly thought of sufficient in the publishing world, I do not find it adequate. For example, the author says that the practice of scalping predates the arrival of Europeans in North America. I've read otherwise, so I would like to know the source of this view, but, alas, there is no source or reference provided. So, this is a easy to read book if you didn't know that people were generally nasty to each other as the Europeans were invading North America. Otherwise there are other books to provide you with more meaty introductions to the period. As for the fur trade, a book that does not mention the use of wampum to "pull the beaver out of the woods" as a colonial governor of Pennsylvania remarked, is pretty unsatisfying.

A surprising and sweeping history that reveals the fur trade to be the driving force behind conquest, colonization, and revolution in early America. Combining the epic saga of Hampton Sides's *Blood and Thunder* with the natural history of Mark Kurlansky's *Cod*, popular historian Alan Axelrod reveals the astonishingly vital role a small animal the beaver played in the creation of our nation. The author masterfully relays a story often neglected by conventional histories: how lust for fur trade riches moved monarchs and men to launch expeditions of discovery, finance massive corporate enterprises, and wage war. Deftly weaving cultural and military narratives, the author chronicles how Spanish, Dutch, French, English, and Native American tribes created and betrayed alliances based on trapping and trade disputes, producing a surprisingly complex series of loyalties that endured throughout the Revolution and beyond.

Offers a unique take on our country's origins by exploring the bloody history of fur trading, an industry that affected not only fashion but the face of a nation.... Thoroughly researched and lucidly composed. Publishers Weekly In *A Savage Empire* Alan Axelrod does for the beaver what Mark Kurlansky accomplished in *Cod and Salt*. This is first-rate narrative history. Thomas J. Craughwell, author of *Stealing Lincoln's Body* In *A Savage Empire*, Alan Axelrod brings to life a time when empires were built on control over beaver pelts. Before Europeans imposed a new economic system on America, they digested the trapping, tanning and trading system of the Native Americans. Axelrod adeptly outlines the wars in which the French, British and Spanish battled each other and swindled Indian tribes out of the furs on their backs. Alex Storzynski, Fraunces Tavern Book Award winning author of *The Peasant Prince: Thaddeus Kosciuszko and the Age of Revolution* Magnificent. Filled with feats of superhuman endurance and heroism, as well as stories of horror and unimaginable cruelty. Joseph Cummins, author of *First Encounters* Alan Axelrod takes a dramatic story - the carving of a new nation out of a formidable wilderness, and the motivations for doing so - and tells it with all the richness and historical accuracy that it deserves. *A Savage Empire* is at once well researched, thorough, and well written. It's the kind of page-turning history that should be written about this utterly unique period in time, America's colonial frontier experience. James L. Nelson, author of *With Fire and Sword* Axelrod weaves it all into a whopping good story, an epic saga of exploration, cutthroat trade wars, international intrigues, Indian confederations and the hard life in the North American wilderness, a place perilous for everyone, not least the humble and industrious beaver. The Washington Independent of Books About the Author ALAN AXELROD is the author of *The Real History of the American Revolution*, *What Every American Should Know about American History*, *Elizabeth I*, *CEO*, and many other works. He is the president of The Ian Samuel Group, a book packager. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. 1 The Middle Ground FROM 1492 TO 1580, the year Philip II, king of Castile and Aragon, united for the time being the bulk of Spain with Portugal, thereby consolidating the vast New World holdings of all Iberia, Spain held a monopoly on American conquest and thereby came to control the largest empire in geographical extent the planet has ever known. Founded mainly on agriculture, the cultivation of cotton, sugar, and tobacco, and the raising of cattle, it was maintained by slaves, black as well as Indian. The empire was based on slave labor in one form or another, yet the lure that drew Spain westward was neither vegetative nor fleshly, but metallic overlaid with something resembling divinity. Driving the many Spanish voyages into the sunset lands was gold, gold plated with the thinnest layer of God. Never mind that few of the Spanish expeditions actually returned with the coveted ore. A handful of discoveries was quite sufficient to inspire many more, the most seductive of which were those of Hernn Cortes. When in 1519 he landed a small force at what is today Veracruz, Mexico, he was greeted by ambassadors of the

Aztec king Montezuma II, who bore dazzling gifts, mostly of gold. Doubtless, they were intended to appease the newcomer. Cortes, however, was anything but sated. Send me some more of it, he reportedly told Montezuma's minions, because I and my companions suffer from a disease of the heart which can be cured only with gold. From this point on, the story is a familiar one, perhaps too familiar any longer to generate much excitement. Driven by this sickness at the heart, a disorder all of us understand, Cortes and his companions marched on Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital known today as Mexico City. The conquistador took care first to bore holes in the hulls of his ships (Shipworm! he told his men) so that none of them, least of all he himself, could turn back. He recruited allies among the ever-warring city-states of the far-flung Aztec realm, winning some by promising to make common cause against the Aztecs, others by sheer terror, as when he slaughtered three thousand Cholula tribespeople in the space of two hours, stopping only when volunteers answered his call to arms. Perhaps it was word of this and other bloodbaths that made Montezuma go weak in the knees. Or perhaps he believed the Spaniard to be the incarnation of the birdlike god Quetzalcoatl, who created man out of his own blood. In response to whatever prompting, the Aztec ruler threw open Tenochtitlan to Cortes and his conqueror band. For Montezuma, it meant his death; for his people, their ruin. For Cortes, it meant mountains of gold. For those in Spain who spoke to Cortes he returned twice to his homeland or who heard of the reward of his audacity, it inspired envy and emulation. So powerful yet so familiar did the story of Cortes and the conquest of Mexico become that for a long time gold outshone all else as a motive for risking everything on a voyage to the New World. Its glow suffused sober history itself, and generation after generation has been satisfied with this formulaic justification for New World exploration and conquest: It was all about gold. Gold and spices. In every grade-school text, a dash of spice completed the recipe. European exploration and settlement of the Americas was all about gold and spices. Naturally, the gold was always easier to understand. Universal shorthand for value and worth, when monetized, it is value and worth themselves: a commodity fully fungible, capable of instant conversion into real property, the service of slaves or kings, and the satisfaction of every desire. Spices well, that requires explanation. Food is life, but food is also dead, and, like all things dead, food rots. Spice fights rot, slows rot, and what it can neither fight nor slow, it disguises with strong taste and intoxicating aroma. Like gold, then, spices possessed power, and their power exercised allure. Ounce for ounce, pound for pound, spice, sovereign against the rot of death and therefore an elixir of life, was even more valuable than gold. Yet as a motivator of contact and commerce between people uprooted from the Old World and those rooted in the new, neither gold nor spice was as enduring as fur. ***

Between 30,000 and 130,000 years ago, a member of the subspecies *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* Neanderthal man compared himself to a furry mammal, found his own nakedness wanting, and began clothing himself in fur. The physical advantages are obvious enough. Animal hide provides protection against superficial injury, and fur, which traps air in the spaces between its fibers, is a superb insulator, enabling the wearer to conserve one of life's most precious commodities: the energy represented by body heat. The symbolic, emotional, and cultural advantages of fur are far more speculative. Anthropologists and historians have pointed out that Native American (among other) hunters frequently made it a practice to consume the heart of a freshly killed animal in the belief that by doing so they would take on some of the beast's strength, ferocity, and courage. The early hominid hunters who appropriated animal fur certainly derived the physical advantages of their prey's coat, but perhaps they were driven as well by a belief at some level of consciousness that they were also taking on certain aspects of the animals being, spirit, nature, or virtue. Through history, fur has been associated with warriors, conquerors, and kings. Such modern trappings as the fur trim on the highly ornamented pelisse (jacket) of the hussar, the type of light cavalry soldier that emerged in Hungary in the fifteenth century and rose to prominence in the early nineteenth century, and the busby (tall fur headdress) of the British Horse Guard are meant to convey a kind of animal ferocity. In a far more general context, clothing made of leather or fur connects the wearer to the natural world (though vegans and antifur activists are quick to point out the paradox that this connection comes at the price of nature's destruction). The value of gold is so universally perceived as inherent that it is readily monetized. Although today the value of spices is as a flavor enhancement, for most of history they were inherently valued as powerful food preservatives. The inherent value of fur is chiefly in the warmth it provides, rendering the coldest climates survivable. Yet, as with gold and spices, fur has always had a value beyond its inherent physical properties. Its emotional allure may well be rooted in the intimate connection fur creates between the wearer and the animal world, but, in the course of history, it also became a widely sought emblem of cultural and economic status. Like other badges, articles of fur both denote and confer authority, power, and status. For men of the time and place Samuel Pepys occupied, for example, a fine beaver hat was both token and mojo, symbolic of as well as productive of cultural and economic stature above the ordinary. So the material commanded a sufficiently high price to drive people to cross the ocean, to penetrate the frontier, and to dare death in the many forms the wilderness deals it. ***

In *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire* (1984), a study of the confederation between Indian tribes and the English colonies, Francis Jennings dismisses the fur trade as a misnomer for what is usually meant, namely exchange between Indians and European, Euramericans, or Euro-Canadians. Jennings observes that there were many kinds of such exchange, involving many different commodities, not just fur. True, of course. Yet Richard White, in his history of Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815, *The Middle Ground* (1991), explains that the fur trade bound people to each other in unique ways. Furs acquired a special social meaning because, more than any

other goods produced by the Algonquians [by which White means the largely French-allied Indians of the Great Lakes region], they could be transformed into [the] European goods the Indians so strongly desired. By the seventeenth century, the fur trade was transforming American civilization in ways more profoundly consequential than the trade in gold, spices, or other commodities. For both suppliers and buyers, for Indians and Europeans/Euro-Americans alike, fur was so culturally charged a commodity that it drove the creation of what White calls the middle ground, a society, culture, and civilization that blended Native, European, and Euro-American destinies, creating a network of cultural, economic, genetic, and military relationships, blends, alliances, and enmities that would ultimately express themselves in the revolution by which the colonies broke free from Europe to create a new American nation. However, it was not to America that Europe looked first to find the furs it craved. During the early Middle Ages, before Europe knew of the New World, Russia and, to a lesser extent, Scandinavia were the major suppliers of pelts not only to Western Europe but to Asia. Before the seventeenth century, Russian furs were hunted primarily in the west and included wolf, fox, rabbit, squirrel, and marten in addition to beaver. By the mid-seventeenth century, Russian trappers and hunters were venturing into Siberia, and their exports accordingly expanded to include lynx, Arctic fox, sable, and ermine (stoat). Sea otter also came into demand, prompting the Russians to push beyond the Siberian coast and across the Bering Sea to Alaska, the only Russian exploitation of North American peltries. Russian and Northern European fur so stimulated the Western European demand for...