

BACKYARD ALIENS

As a kid I pictured the first settlers' North America as an unchanged wilderness, one with which its native peoples had always lived in harmony.

John Leland, in *Aliens in the Backyard: Plant and Animal Imports into America* (248 pp, University of S. Carolina Press, 2010) shows that's a myth.

His is a cautionary tale, letting us learn from bungled attempts to manipulate nature for our own ends and profit, so we don't need to repeat.

So how pristine *was* the land the settlers first saw? Instead of primeval, unchanged forest, picture everything north of Pennsylvania 10,000 years ago as ice-covered, and a boreal forest in Florida. Once the ice started receding, trees rushed to colonize the opening territory. So what the Pilgrims found was relatively new.

And the thick forests they found were younger still. Between 1500 and 1700 the indigenous population plunged from 18 to one million, most killed by disease. Before that they had burned vast acreages, to suppress trees and encourage grass and shrubs, to attract grazers such as buffalo. So trees had had two or three centuries to recover.

And before their populations crashed, Native Americans may have virtually eliminated the big mammals. "Though the cause of these exterminations is debatable, no one questions the massive environmental transformation that Indians undertook throughout the [pre-Columbian] Americas."

And what of the settlers themselves?

“By 1619 tobacco was the principal cash crop of the Virginia colony.” And we were importing everything else: “Our food is almost entirely un-American. Only sunflower seeds and Jerusalem artichokes in our groceries can boast American roots.” “Even our forests are suspect” And virtually everything growing in our lawns is non-native. Some arrived as bedding in African slave ships, along with cowpeas, okra, barley, sesame, beans and watermelon.

From the beginning Americans tried to grow rich making silk, first with Mulberries, then with Ailanthus and its silkworm, with short success and lasting problems. We even introduced Gypsy moths, in another failed try. Then, to control them, lead arsenate, DDT, and Bt, which itself threatens to become a pest.

To control pain we imported Opium poppies, cultivated throughout the U.S by the mid-19thC, the opium available to anyone, including babies, thus assuring early addiction. Now illegal, Opium poppies nevertheless grow wild in 34 states. Their seeds remain legal and indeed sought after as garnish for breads.

We grew Cannabis with government help and approval as late as World War II – to make rope for navy ships. Farmers promised not to use the plants illicitly.

To combat malaria we imported curative willows, including the weeping willow from China, along with eucalyptus (blue gum), for medicine and to dry up wetlands. And, again, Ailanthus, first to absorb malarial air, and later blamed for exuding it as poison. Eucalyptus and Ailanthus had big promoters as beautifiers, so that the “Tree of Heaven” at one time lined New York City’s streets.

When we discovered that moving cattle in huge numbers across country also moved diseases, we introduced Texas Osage Orange as fencing – easy to propagate, fast growing and thorny. Barbed wire soon replaced it, but by then it grew wherever there had been cattle.

Leland's irony keeps things lively: “All our kitchen herbs [he says] . . . derive their culinary attractiveness from compounds that the plants produce to deter herbivores.” Or, “[Weeds] can be a stand-in for unwanted immigrants: both can be seen as promiscuous, having too many kids, debasing property values, living everywhere, and out competing established flora, fauna, and first families.”

-- Bill Keep