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### *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*

#### *The Epic History of the Fur Trade in America*

By Eric Jay Dolin

(New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010. Pp. 442. Illustrations, notes, bibliography. \$29.95.)

Eric Jay Dolin sees the story of the American fur trade as nothing less than an epic tale of the formation of American empires, particularly those of Great Britain and the United States. The fur trade as a source of wealth, a claim to jurisdiction, and a spur to expansion factored heavily, Dolin argues, into imperial rivalries between the English, French, Dutch, and Swedes, and later, the United States and British Canada. Over the course of three hundred years, fur trade merchants seeking new Indian suppliers or fresh hunting grounds explored the North American interior and thus dramatically enhanced Euro-Americans' geographical knowledge. Their catch—beaver furs, deer skins, otter pelts, buffalo robes, and numerous kinds of “small furs”—earned them enormous profits and provided the seed capital for the creation of several frontier American towns, from Albany in the East to Astoria in the West. Not least of all, the fur trade was full of colorful characters, many of whom figure at the heart of Dolin's book.

Dolin has little new to say, but the scope and style of his book are

virtues. He begins with the Dutch and French fur trade in the seventeenth century East and continues to the collapse of the bison population on the plains in the late nineteenth century. Along the way, he touches on all of the major fur trade outfits and major Euro-American players, pausing to develop the personalities of some of the more memorable actors, such as Peter Stuyvesant, the director-general of New Netherland, and John Jacob Astor, the head of the American Fur Company. Lesser players are here too—French *coureurs de bois* canoeing the Great Lakes and Mississippi River, grizzled American mountain men braving Blackfoot raids to catch beaver deep in the recesses of the Rockies, New England ship merchants navigating the dangerous fogs of the Northwest to trade with local Indians for otter skins prized by Chinese traders in Canton. Dolin has an eye for telling anecdotes and an ear for the apt turn of phrase that brings these compelling stories to life.

Unfortunately, Dolin takes an anachronistic approach to his research and writing. He pays little attention to Indians, who acted both

as the main suppliers and important customers of fur trade companies. When he does pay heed to Indians, he tends to homogenize them into a single group, regardless of time and place. In this, he fails to draw on a rich body of scholarship illustrating that the fashions, needs, and especially intertribal politics of particular Indian nations were as critical to the fur trade as were the concerns of colonial states. He also slights the effects of the fur trade on Indian material culture, focusing too exclusively on alcohol and its ravages and not enough on the cloth, kettles, knives, axes, and guns that constituted an Indian consumer revolution. In short, Dolin has written only half of the story of the North American fur trade. Likewise, he has a tendency to adopt an outdated tone in his repeated celebrations of the “first white man” to appear in various parts of North America, the implication being that American empire was

bound to follow. Despite some occasional environmentally minded qualifications, his tone reflects the patriotic spirit of Manifest Destiny. The contingent processes of American expansion, which also deeply involved Indians, are swept away by such rhetoric.

What Dolin has provided, then, is a readable synthesis of our knowledge of the fur trade as it existed in the early twentieth century. For readers who want to hear the basics of the Euro-American side of the ledger told in an engaging style, that will be enough. Others who seek a more rounded story, including the part played by indigenous people for whom the fur trade was sometimes a matter of life and death rather than just of profit, will have to turn elsewhere.

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### *Painting Indians and Building Empires in North America, 1710-1840*

By William H. Truettner

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. Pp. xi, 159. Illustrations, notes, index. \$39.95.)

As senior curator of painting and sculpture at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, William Truettner has made many significant contributions to the field of art history over the course of a lengthy and admirable career. The present volume focuses on the role played by white artists in

painting Indians of North America during two specific time periods. First, the author examines images (primarily British) of Mohawk and other Iroquois leaders in the eighteenth century. These paintings, as Truettner shows, largely depict their subjects as “Noble Savages.” The Indi-