

# *The* AMERICAN SCHOLAR

## Wrestling the Moose

Jefferson debunked a French theory of natural history, launching American exceptionalism

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***Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose: Natural History in Early America*, by Lee Alan Dugatkin, University of Chicago Press, 166 pp., \$26**

Last spring, as my husband biked to work through the small Alaskan town where we live, he was charged by a moose cow with a newborn calf. Still rattled, he called me from his office and recounted the experience. He had been terrified. Like me, my husband spends more time in front of the computer than he does running boats, catching fish, chopping wood—activities often associated with life in Alaska. But his run-in with the moose was a reminder of how big a role the natural world plays in the place where we live.

For Thomas Jefferson, this giant ungulate symbolized the spirit and promise of our entire nation. In the new book, *Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose: Natural History in Early America*, Lee Alan Dugatkin, a biology professor at the University of Louisville, explores a debate that shaped not only the way our forefathers came to see natural history in the New World, but the way our nation came to see itself.

In the mid-1700s, as colonial America was growing and gaining economic prosperity, an idea took hold in the academies and living rooms of Europe that threatened to undermine the success of the fledgling nation and its revolutionary cause. This was the degeneracy theory put forward by the French Count of Buffon, the most prominent natural historian of the day. The theory argued that all species in the New World were inferior to those in the Old. In his 36-volume *Natural History: General and Particular*, Buffon argued that harsh conditions in America (its extensive humidity and swamps) led to smaller and weaker animals, fewer species, and an overabundance of unfavorable insects and reptiles. Even Native Americans were a feeble lot, dull, loveless, and without vigor.

Since natural historians of this era spent little time gathering field observations, Buffon's work relied on travelers' tales, many of them tall. No matter. *Natural History* was an instant success, becoming, Dugatkin tells us, "the book to have in the salons of Paris." Buffon's ideas were discussed widely and elaborated by other scholars. The degeneracy theory was soon applied even to Europeans who had immigrated to the New World and to their descendants.

Buffon's theory infuriated Thomas Jefferson and other Founding Fathers both because it threatened the success of the nascent United States—who would trade with America or immigrate here if the theory were correct?—and because it challenged their fundamental beliefs about God and nature. Although Jefferson, a

deist, rejected the notion of God's intervention in the contemporary world, like many Americans at the time he believed that nature was governed by divine architecture. The degeneracy theory suggested that the New World was not favored by God.

Jefferson, then the governor of Virginia, disputed Buffon's argument point by point in his 1785 *Notes on the State of Virginia*. An obsessive collector of data, Jefferson included comparative tables of weights of animal species from America and Europe; tallies of species endemic to each part of the world (the American list was four times as long); an explanation of why cattle were smaller in the New World than in the Old (farming practices, not climate conditions); and a passionate defense of Native Americans. While *Notes* was well received and widely distributed, Jefferson knew that words were not enough to convince Buffon that his theory was wrong, so he furiously set about tracking down physical evidence to present to him. The future president put his faith in a species unique to the New World, the moose, believing that if he showed a sizable specimen to Buffon, the French naturalist would recant his theory completely. Despite Jefferson's ardent attempts, the count never revised *Natural History*, and six months after the remains of a seven-foot-tall moose arrived on the Frenchman's doorstep, Buffon was dead.

For the next century, while European intellectuals kept stoking the fires of Buffon's claims, Americans—from school textbook publishers to poets to novelists—worked to debunk them. The most effective way to challenge the argument, it became clear, was to turn it on its head. The New World's harsh climes did not breed inferiority; they shaped healthy landscapes that reared a vigorous people. Fresh air, wild places—as Thoreau wrote 80 years after the publication of Jefferson's *Notes*: “Will not a man grow to greater perfection intellectually as well as physically under these influences?”

At the heart of Dugatkin's scrupulously researched and well-told narrative is the creation story for American exceptionalism, that combination of truth and myth and aspiration which nourished a budding nation. It is the song we have sung to ourselves for good or ill for more than two centuries. Today, when observations of our dramatically changing natural world make clear that we are confronted with the greatest challenge in our history, the practice of *competitive* natural history seems vain. Instead, we will need to summon this American ethos again to save the moose, save the reptiles, and, just maybe, save ourselves.