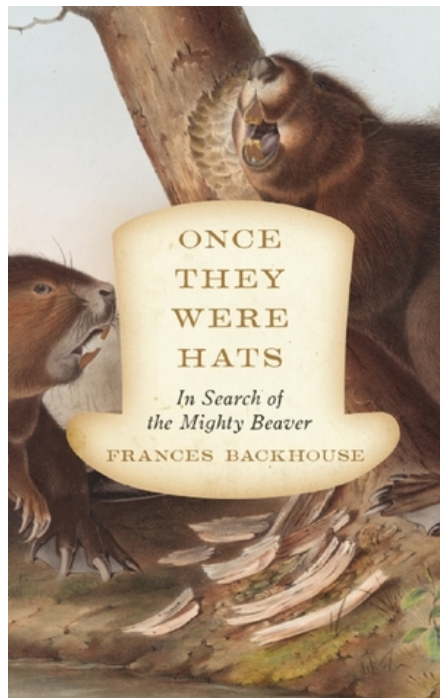




Once They Were Hats: In Search of the Mighty Beaver

Frances Backhouse

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Once They Were Hats: In Search of the Mighty Beaver Frances Backhouse
Finalist for the 2015 Lane Anderson Award and the 2016 Butler Book Prize

Beavers, those icons of industriousness, have been gnawing down trees, building dams, shaping the land, and creating critical habitat in North America for at least a million years. Once one of the continent's most ubiquitous mammals, they ranged from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from the Rio Grande to the edge of the northern tundra. Wherever there was wood and water, there were beavers — 60 million (or more) — and wherever there were beavers, there were intricate natural communities that depended on their activities. Then the European fur traders arrived.

In *Once They Were Hats*, Frances Backhouse examines humanity's 15,000-year relationship with *Castor canadensis*, and the beaver's even older relationship with North American landscapes and ecosystems. From the waterlogged environs of the Beaver Capital of Canada to the wilderness cabin that controversial conservationist Grey Owl shared with pet beavers, Backhouse goes on a journey of discovery to find out what happened after we nearly wiped this essential animal off the map, and how we can learn to live with beavers now that they're returning.

Once They Were Hats: In Search of the Mighty Beaver Details

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From Reader Review Once They Were Hats: In Search of the Mighty Beaver for online ebook

Laura Scott says

This delightful non-fiction book takes us through the history of the beaver, mainly in North America, and the phenomenal impact it has on our environment and landscape. From near decimation during the height of the fur trade to a remarkable rebound, the beaver has played an important role in the shaping of our nation. The book is really well written and takes what could be a dry subject and makes it engaging. It's written in a style similar to that of Mary Roach (although without the delightful footnotes) and the author's blurb describes her as a teacher of "creative non-fiction". I think that's the best description for this work. It's factual and well researched, but there's a story behind the facts. Following the author as she meets with various experts and travels to some off the beaten path (way off, like there is no path) locations pulls you in to understanding the history.

The book has nine chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of the beaver's history. The chapters can each be read as their own mini story and I found them fascinating. The book takes us to a remote area in Saskatchewan dubbed the Beaver Capital of Canada, to the Museum of Nature in Ottawa, to Riding National Park in Manitoba, and back to Ontario. The breadth of people that the author interviewed and researched is as wide as the Canadian landscape that she traversed. From the fur auction houses in Toronto, to research scientists studying the impacts of beaver activity on the landscape, to North American First Nations people who have their own stories of the beaver it was wonderful to meet all the people in this book.

There are so many interesting facts

- a program was designed to parachute (yup, parachute) beavers in boxes into remote areas to help with repopulation. A rather stoic beaver named Geronimo acted as the "test pilot" a number of times before finally being parachuted into his final new location.
- the beaver acts as a "keystone species", one whose presence (or absence) can have a profound impact on an ecological system. In the tidal marshes of the Skagit River Delta (in Washington State) beaver dams actually provide refuges for salmon during low tide.
- a good quality 19th century beaver hat took two-three pelts to make. The under-fur of the beaver is removed from the pelt and felted to make these hats. Beaver fur is still used today for hats.

While this book may not be your typical summer beach read, I found it was both a fascinating and compelling read and it well worth checking out.

Foggygirl says

A great read. Who would have thought that a beaver would have such an impact on the environment? before pesky Europeans showed up and very nearly wiped them out the humble beaver was an environmental engineer of the highest order.

Danielle T says

It was ok, but I can't quite put my finger on why I didn't really like it as much as other natural history books. Perhaps it was the first person perspective as the author learned more about beavers? Otherwise, a good overview of the relationship between beavers and people in a historical, fashionable, and ecological way, with a short sidestep into the paleontology of now extinct species.

Ken says

a very entertaining and informative look at the beaver. from the beavers influence on its landscape, its use as hides and the fur trade and its reintroduction in Canada and the US.

Robert Davidson says

Small and unassuming yet very important to the ecosystem and the exploration of Canada the mighty Beaver makes for an interesting read. The Author goes to a Hat maker in Calgary to see how they still make some very expensive Hats using Beaver fur and then to a Trapper to learn how to skin one with many historical stories about our national symbol. They are making a comeback although they can have annoying habits such as gnawing through fence posts in their spare time. Lastly, fried beavertail is an acquired taste.

J.S. Green says

Francis Backhouse writes about beavers and their relationship with man. Valued for their waterproof fur, they were hunted and trapped to a fraction of their prior numbers, and entirely wiped out in some areas. The book is well-organized, beginning with how extensive beavers were and their ancient ancestors. She moves on to the trapping activities and early conservationists who sought to manage beavers in a sustainable manner. Interestingly, she covers how their fur was used to make hats, the current status of the fur trade, and even details her own experience skinning a beaver. But for me, the most interesting part (and what I was really interested in all along) was the ecology and the way in which beavers fit into the environment. As a parallel, my mother-in-law recently had beavers move into a stream on her property and was amazed at the changes in the birds and other wildlife that suddenly began appearing. Unfortunately, it wasn't as compatible with the horses they graze and the dam had to go, and Backhouse gives plenty of examples of the problems beavers can cause for people and in our communities. A very interesting book, but I wish it had included much more about the ecology. (I received an advance copy from the publisher.)

Clare O'Beara says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book - except one part - in which the author went here, there and everywhere connected with beavers past and present, from a British museum to Canadian network of dams and lodges visible from space. She investigated history - beavers lived at the headwater of just about every river on the North American continent and their ancestors spread across Beringia to Asia and to Europe.

We find out about four million year old gnaw marks on wood, and how beaver lakes created a good environment for early peoples. This changed with the 1700s influx of European fur traders; beavers were almost wiped out over 200 years.

Now the part I disliked; the author visited a fur auction warehouse and even learnt about skinning in person. But it's all research and she didn't enjoy it either. She also found out how hats are and were made from felted fur.

And of course the 20th century conservation movement which has led to today's return of beavers, amazingly even to New York city. We learn that the landscape engineering of beavers - as they forced rivers to spread and slow - changed the face of the continent and the loss of beaver dams may be a reason why aquifers are dropping, rivers are flooding and droughts are spreading. This is a fascinating read and will appeal to many people for different reasons.

Judy says

recommended by Canadian Reader

Lisasue says

More entertaining than you would expect. Extremely well-written, and loaded with funny anecdotes. I would describe it as more of a social history of beavers rather than pure biology, but definitely worth the read, regardless. The author has done her homework here, digging up obscure information about Grey Owl, an Englishman who adopted this moniker after giving up trapping beavers, and took up publicizing them instead. She also attends fur auctions, visits a hat manufacturer, and meets with hydrologists, biologists and First Nations tribal members.

I would recommend this book to anyone who enjoys natural history.

Sarah says

Thanks to ECW and the 49th Shelf for providing me with a free copy of *Once They Were Hats*.

Honestly, my knowledge of beavers was minimal before picking up this book, which is kind of a shameful thing to admit as a Canadian. I knew they built dams, I knew they were crucial to the fur trade, I knew (and kind of wish I didn't) about how they were used in perfume and flavouring. But that was it.

Once They Were Hats delves into the history of beavers -- and how intrinsically linked they are with the history of Canada. Filled to the brim with fascinating information about beavers and their ancestors, this book gave me a much bigger appreciation for this majestic creature.

Margaret Sankey says

This is terrific popular science in the form of a cultural history of beavers--their alteration of the landscape before human settlement, the symbiotic relationship with early people (who likely learned tree coppicing from seeing willow regrowth and who used already cut wood from beaver dams for fires and building), the appearance of giant beavers in indigenous oral traditions because of seeing fossils, the economic revolution of the Atlantic fur trade, beavers and their ecosystem relationship to water lilies and salmon, even how beaver transformed in the 20th century into obscene slang.

Sonya says

I enjoyed the book very much, save one chapter which I found a bit tedious to read (chapter 6), and some of the publisher's editorial decisions (E.g., why cheap out on the photos? Why wouldn't you caption them? They look terrible!). A very interesting discussion in the final chapter of how beavers are "keystone partners" in ecosystem restoration and water conservation initiatives in face of their frequent dismissal as troublesome pests. (I do love me an underdog!)

Maybe the BEST part of this book was learning about skydiving beavers (yes, really).

Ellen says

I won this in a Goodreads First Reads giveaway...thank you! This book was fascinating, and although it was filled with facts, detailed information, and history, it was never dull or boring. I learned so much about beavers, and how important they are to our environment. It's a really great little book and I highly recommend it to readers who are interested in environmental issues, wildlife, Canadian history, or to those who would like to learn a little about the fur industry. There is so much truly fascinating information packed into this book...and it is a surprisingly great read!!

Sherri Anderson says

I thought this was a great book. It was well written. Fun to read and gave me quite a bit of information in a fun way! Great job!

Andrew says

"Dear American Friends: Up here in Canada we're proud of our beavers. We study them. Write about them. And proudly talk about them.

It's not our fault you have dirty minds.

Love, Your Canadian neighbors."

An interesting book full of beaverish anecdotes, facts, and stories. Their prehistoric ancestors, our relationship with them, how they get made into hats, and why they're important to the environment. And for the more adventurous, there's even a short story about parachuting beavers. I'm not kidding.

But there's no overarching narrative to the book. Every chapter could be read in isolation as a kind of "oh, that's interesting" factoid. So, it's good enough to finish, but the world still awaits that great beaver adventure.
