

Europe and the Peoples of America

“LET US NOW EXAMINE WHY the reptiles and insects are so large, the quadrupeds so small, and the men so cold, in the New World.” These few words, written in 1761, capture the arrogance of Buffon’s attitude toward the Americas. Of all Buffon’s writings on nature, none seems to have been more provocative or more biased by philosophical and hypothetical considerations than his view of the native peoples of the Americas.

Jefferson’s anger at Buffon’s dismissal of Native Americans is shown by the fact that he copied Buffon’s remarks into *Notes on the State of Virginia* for his readers to see. “Although the savage of the new world is about the same height as man in our world, this does not suffice for him to make an exception to the general fact of the reduction of living nature in all that continent. The savage is feeble, and has small organs of generation; he has neither hair nor beard, and no ardour for his female; although more agile than the European because he has the habit of running, he is, however, much less strong in body; he is much less sensitive, and yet more timid and cowardly; he has no vivacity, no activity of mind . . . Nature, by refusing him the power of love, has treated him worse and lowered him deeper than any animal.”¹ The original passage in *Histoire Naturelle* continued in this vein.

For Buffon, the animals and native peoples of the Americas were one and the same in their undeveloped, primitive, or degenerate condition, and he consigned them to a lesser status in the natural scheme of things. In answering him, as least as far as the indigenous people of Virginia were concerned, Jefferson felt on sure ground. He had grown up knowing the Indians who traveled across his father’s lands on their way to treaty with