

Deceptive Land Purchase: Ox Hide Measure

Familiarity daily increasing between them and the whites
The latter now proposed to stay with them
Asking for only so much land as the hide of a bullock would cover
Which hide was forward and spread on the ground before them
Whereupon the whites took a knife and cut it up to a rope
Not thicker than the finger of a little child

There brought them soil, such space of ground
As one bull's hide could compass round

The true version is, that Oloffte Van Kortlandt bargained
For just so much land as a man could cover with his nether garments
The Manhatesen, whose ideas of a man's nether garments
Never expanded beyond the dimensions of a breech clout
Beheld this bulbous-bottomed burgher peeled like an onion
And breeches after breeches spread forth over the land

A colony is therefore denominated, because they should be Coloni
The Tillers of the Earth, and Stewards of fertilitie

The Delewares replied to the Wyandot that it could not be helped
He could not refuse him just the size of a cow's hide of land
The Wyandot, having learnt how the stranger had cut the hide
Spoke in these terms, "So it is, and so shall it always be!
The white fellow shall always undermine the Indian
Until he has taken away from him his last thing."

As you think so much about the bird, if I make him whole and sound
Will you give to me the taste of land the gander will fly round?

ABOUT THE POEM & AUTHOR

Jarrett Moran created “Deceptive Land Purchase: Ox Hide Measure” from a variety public domain sources, listed here in the order of their appearance in the poem:

New-York Historical Society Collections (1841)

John Conington’s translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid* (1866)

Washington Irving’s *Knickerbocker’s History of New York* (1809)

William Strachey’s “True Reportory of the Wrack and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates Knight”
in Samuel Purchas’ *Purchas His Pilgrimes* (1625)

C. M. Barbeau’s *Huran and Wyandot Mythology* (1915)

D. J. O’Donoghue’s *Humor of Ireland* (1894)

About the poem and the process of composing it, Jarrett writes:

For years, I collected examples of stories about settlers cheating Indigenous people with a particular trick, a story widespread and common enough to have been given a label by folklorists, “K185.1, Deceptive Land Purchase: Ox Hide Measure.” The stories go something like this: Strangers arrive, usually on a boat, and ask for only as much land as can be covered with the hide of an ox, so that they can rest and repair their ship. Having reached an agreement, they then cut the hide into a tiny strip and encircle enough land to found a colony. Dido was said to have founded Carthage in this way, and these stories were also told in many of the places where European traders and settlers founded colonies, in South Africa, Southeast Asia, and North America. The deceptive land purchase stories, with their layered voices and unruly recursiveness, resisted any particular project that I tried to build around them, until one day, some of them fell together into this poem.

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