

SO FAR AND YET SO CLOSE: FRONTIER CATTLE RANCHING IN WESTERN PRAIRIE CANADA AND THE NORTHERN TERRITORY OF AUSTRALIA
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ISBN 978-1-55238-795-5

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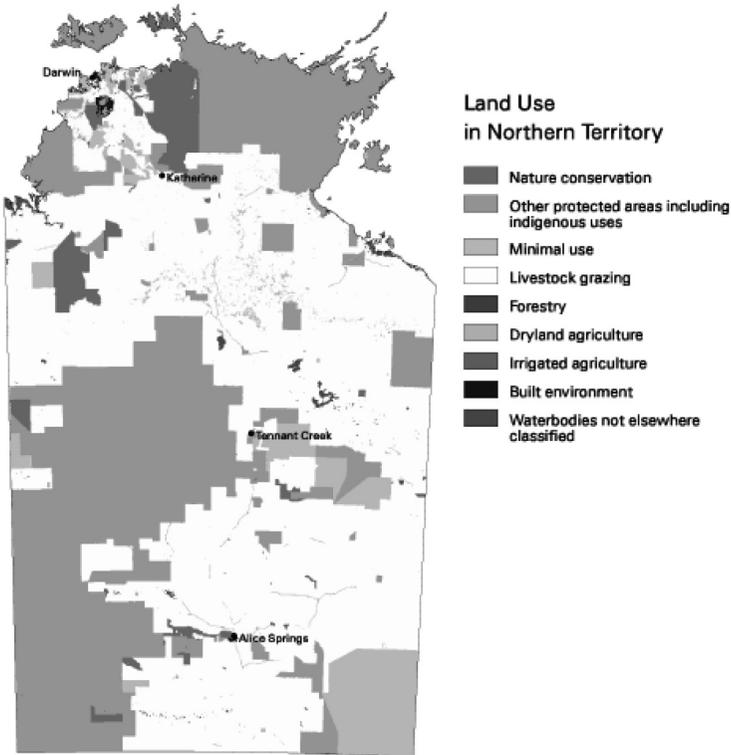
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THE TEXAS SYSTEM AT HOME IN NORTHERN AUSTRALIA



MAP OF LAND USE IN NORTHERN TERRITORY, 1996-97. AUSTRALIA. "NORTHERN TERRITORY" IN UNDERSTANDING BUSHFIRE TRENDS IN DELIBERATE VEGETATION FIRES IN AUSTRALIA, [HTTP://WWW.AIC.GOV.AU/DOCUMENTS/2/E/5/%7B2E5011BF-009F-420B-8435-1A335578CE5A%7DTBP027_09_NT.PDF](http://www.aic.gov.au/documents/2/E/5/%7B2E5011BF-009F-420B-8435-1A335578CE5A%7DTBP027_09_NT.PDF).

As the above map of land use in the Northern Territory 1996–1997 demonstrates, the region was not destined agriculturally to become much of anything but a beef cattle grazing area. Statistics provided with the map indicate that at the most recent turn of the century diversification was almost totally lacking. This is quite obviously due to the climate and terrain more than anything else. Because long dry spells in much of the Territory alternate with heavy rains and floods, domestic crop endeavours are extremely risky. Moreover, the soils generally are not arable. Without mountain and glacial renewal the more than a dozen different soil types have been under continuous weathering for more than a quarter of a billion years.¹ This has robbed them of all the soluble minerals, leaving disproportionate amounts of iron and aluminum oxides, which have reduced the PH and removed or diminished the phosphorus content. The extremely hot northern sun in conjunction with the oxides has also hardened the soil in most areas north of the centre, making it next to impossible to cultivate. In the south, much of the soil is too gravelly or too light (and subject to wind erosion) to be worked.

Deeper soils are found in small areas in the Northern Territory such as parts of the top end and on the Sturt Plateau south of the town of Katherine. Possibly it was knowledge of this and failure to recognize other deficiencies that encouraged some early though futile attempts at arable production. In the 1870s and 1880s an area on the outskirts of Palmerston was designated “the Gardens,” with the mission to experiment with “rice, sugar, maize, tobacco, and . . . other tropical products, which would yield handsome returns to the practical farmer.”² In 1881 the *Northern Territory Times* optimistically reported other ventures: “We may be certain of having a good crushing of sugar cane at Delissaville in August or September, and . . . [another] will probably be ready on the following season at the Daly River. A coffee plantation, under the direction of experienced and competent managers, is being formed at Rum Jungle.”³

All such undertakings soon failed or just never materialized. Some Chinese took up market gardening, selling their vegetables and fruits in the gold fields and/or in Palmerston. Their ventures were, however, only on a small scale and conducted on lots in areas of reasonably dense settlement rather than in the countryside. On the stations themselves, there was virtually no expansion into traditional farming sub-industries. Sheep raising, as we have seen, failed everywhere. And horses fared only slightly

better. One should mention that a handful of graziers do seem to have begun producing a small number of fairly decent working horses by the end of this period by breeding a Waler type of their own. After shooting the wild stallions roaming near their lease, some of the stationers would turn loose better-bred studs to replace them.⁴ The result was progeny that aesthetically conformed more closely than the brumby to Old World expectations, was a little easier to handle, and could adapt better than domesticated animals to the tough environment. Near the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, some of these animals started to turn up at southern auction sales. In 1907 newspapers claimed that a few of the “heavy and medium draughts, gunners, remounts, hacks, harness horses, and ponies” that Kidman brought to his annual sale at Kapunda had originated in the Territory. The general run of animals was of varying “dimensions and quality,” but some apparently brought cash amounts as high as 34 pounds.⁵ It seems doubtful that any of the highest quality were Territorial stock, but a percentage of the decent “grade” animals were. On a number of occasions John Hayes sent horses from Undoolya down to auction that sold quite well. In 1909 one lot brought 15 pounds on average, which was respectable though not competitive with what the elite animals were bringing at the time.⁶ A few horses Hayes sold actually came from north of the MacDonnells. “I was cattle buying at Banka Banka Station, 310 miles north of Alice Springs, and . . . [at another] Station 500 miles north of Alice Springs,” Hayes wrote in 1911, and I “bought several horses from Messers Bathman and Nugent for 6 to 10 pounds. I used these horses on the road from there to Oodnadatta, 800 miles, and proved them to be the best working horses I had ever ridden. I then gave them two months’ spell, sent them to Adelaide, and sold them . . . They realized from 17 to 27 pounds.”⁷

The numbers of horses involved in such transactions were very small relative to the grazing industry as a whole, however, and prior to 1911 one cannot speak of an industry of any real significance. Hogs, despite some positive musings by government officials, never really got a start, presumably because their nearly hairless hide was subject to burning under the scorching sun. Some of the early colonists milked cows. However, they did this mainly for personal use and, again in many cases, in the urban setting. When in 1883 the district council in Palmerston passed a “pernicious resolution” enabling charges to be brought against people whose

horses and cattle were found “at large in this township,” a local resident warned: “It means that there will not be a drop of fresh milk procurable” in the town.⁸ Some of the stations had cows that they milked, usually Shorthorns, which are considered dual-purpose animals, as they are marginally good for both beef and milk. But this was to supply a fresh source for the country table and essentially never a commercial enterprise.⁹ The population base in the Territory was too sparse to provide an adequate market; and the distances to Palmerston, Borrooloola, and Katherine (the only centres that could be called urban) were too great for most stations to ship perishable products during the dries, and the roads were impassable for much of the time during the wets.

Not only did pioneers fail to bring significant diversification to Northern Territory agriculture, they also eschewed even the most fundamental changes within the beef grazing industry. As late as the 1960s two economic surveys of the Northern Territory pastoral industry were undertaken. Three conclusions arising from them are particularly pertinent here: first, most of the cattle stations then functioning had been doing so by 1910;¹⁰ second, though reduced in size somewhat from the earliest frontier period, they were all still very big by anyone’s standards; and, third, they were still utilizing the profound neglect approach that had predominated on the coastal plains of southern Texas more than a century earlier.¹¹

“The present cattle industry is conducted on a very extensive system,” the surveyors concluded, “with large areas (mostly between 1000 and 6000 sq. miles [640,000 – 3,600,000 acres]) in each property . . . and little or no control of cattle movements other than that imposed by distances between watering points.” During the wets cattle on some stations grazed the grass down “near the surface waters.” Then as those sources dried up, the cattle “moved to the bores” of their own accord. As a result, native grasses in both places were randomly allowed periods of rejuvenation. The only other form of “grassland management” was “the periodic, if somewhat haphazard, burning of some pasture types to destroy coarse material and to encourage the production of small amounts of better-quality fodder.”¹² There were only the most modest attempts at quality control in the herds. “Between 23% and 38% of stations culled some cows”; and they seem to have done so in an extremely offhand manner. Graziers tended not to test their cows for fertility but relied on visual inspection alone. They often

made mistakes. Indeed, one of the reports acknowledged: “There have been numerous instances of cows consigned to meatworks being found on slaughter to be pregnant.”¹³ Because bulls and cows were allowed to run together throughout the year, breeding was helter-skelter. No control was exercised over the age at which heifers conceived, nor were efforts made to manage the time of year that breeding took place. Therefore, many of the calves continued to be born during wets and dries, rather than between the seasons when neither drowning during heavy downpours nor over-exposure to direct sunlight would have been so likely.¹⁴ In all districts, some stations practiced pregnancy testing but this was always restricted to a limited number of cows, mainly those used for breeding replacement bulls.¹⁵ Very little if any spaying was done to weed out poorer females, and, therefore, all the surviving heifer calves, whatever their quality, normally became breeders replacing cows as they grew too old or died off.¹⁶ Even weaning was far from universally practised and usually only when the calves were at least a year old; often only the males were weaned – so they could be pulled out of the herd and castrated to combat inbreeding.¹⁷ Few stations produced extra feed to augment natural grasslands and those that did “primarily directed” it “toward drought survival of small numbers of selected cattle.” Only a minority of stations even provided phosphate or protein supplements on a regular basis.¹⁸

Vaccination for pleuropneumonia was common only in the areas where the disease was deemed the most threatening. A vaccination for redwater had been available for decades, but most stations neglected to use it, as few cattle over and above breeding bulls were being imported and major outbreaks of the disease had become quite rare.¹⁹ Some Territorial stations were taking steps to prevent the spread of ticks but a lot more could have been done. “Infestation” was “often serious” in the Victoria River district, which, ostensibly, was the only one of the three where the atmosphere is humid enough for it to prosper. However, even there, only half the stations bothered to dip or spray.²⁰ Ticks could cause discomfort and stress to the host animal to the point of putting it off its feed. Affected animals decline gradually, however, and thus were not likely to die suddenly. Cattlemen could send the animals to slaughter before they were lost, though few appeared to be very vigilant.²¹

As we have seen, the stations in all three pastoral districts in the Northern Territory upgraded their facilities mainly only by boring



CORRAL ON CATTLE STATION, NORTHERN TERRITORY. NORTHERN TERRITORY LIBRARY, DARWIN, BRUCE CLEEZY COLLECTION, PH0327/0055.

increasing numbers of sub-artesian wells.²² By the 1920s the better stations, such as Alexandria on the eastern Tableland, had made “good” improvements in the form of bores, massive water storage tanks, and power sources – mainly windmills and pumping engines, the latter of which they had covered to protect from the weather. They also had improved their buildings, and built fairly extensive sets of permanent mustering corrals in their pastures, and containment yards at their headquarters.²³ This type of upgrading continued, and in the 1960s one owner near Alice would be able to boast of “sixty watering points so well placed that there was no area” on his property “without a man made bore.”²⁴ Numerous stations eventually added to their meagre networks of pasture fences, but in most cases only at crucial points on the periphery of their holdings to prevent the cattle from wandering too far. They did little cross fencing.²⁵

One of the surveys that was conducted in the 1960s noted that rail service had improved to a limited though significant degree as the decades

passed. By 1929 the southern region had service all the way to Alice Springs. At that time those in the other two grazing regions were able to reach rail yards at Dajarra and Mount Isa, both Queensland towns near the eastern Northern Territory border, where stock could be loaded onto cars and shipped to the ports and markets of the east coast and south. By then there was a packinghouse at Wyndham in the northeastern corner of West Australia that had the capacity to take the small fraction of cattle from the closer Victoria River stations that fattened up well enough for killing. However, the majority of the stations from the two northern pastoral districts still had to engage in the arduous process of “walking” their product a good portion of the distance to market and paying for it in carcass weights, though infrastructure on the trails had been substantially improved with watering facilities.²⁶

Stock from the Victoria River and Barkly Tableland districts are sent east to Queensland, whence the original development proceeded. . . . Those from the westernmost properties walk about 1000 miles. They are driven 8 to 10 miles per day along stock routes provided with waterers every 16 to 20 miles and which, by the end of the droving season, are severely overgrazed. Under these conditions only stock old enough and strong enough to walk the distance are marketable and . . . weight losses on the long journey are heavy and the condition of stock normally deteriorates substantially before they reach the killing works.²⁷

If the basic grazing system established in southern Texas in the mid- to late nineteenth century thus survived universally in the three grazing districts of the Northern Territory, so too did its most basic assumptions. The first, obviously, was that there would be low input costs. The cattle looked after themselves year round – little was expended on equipment, facilities, medical treatments, or feed supplements. Losses were higher than they might otherwise have been, but, in theory at least, they were acceptable given that expenditures were so light.

This fitted well with the other assumption of the system – that there would be relatively low productivity. Branding percentages – that is, the number of calves branded in a given year relative to the number of cows

in the herd – were likely to be “about 40% for all districts.”²⁸ Besides profound neglect, “a major reason” for the low rate “was inadequate nutrition,” which was common “throughout” the Territory, particularly near the end of the dry season. Many of the cows aborted or just failed to conceive. The surveyors believed, as well, that a lot of calves were lost between birth and branding. While they could garner little information on the actual numbers, they deduced that, particularly “on the open Mitchell grass plains . . . where shade is scarce and the temperature very high,” many calves succumbed to the heat soon after birth.²⁹

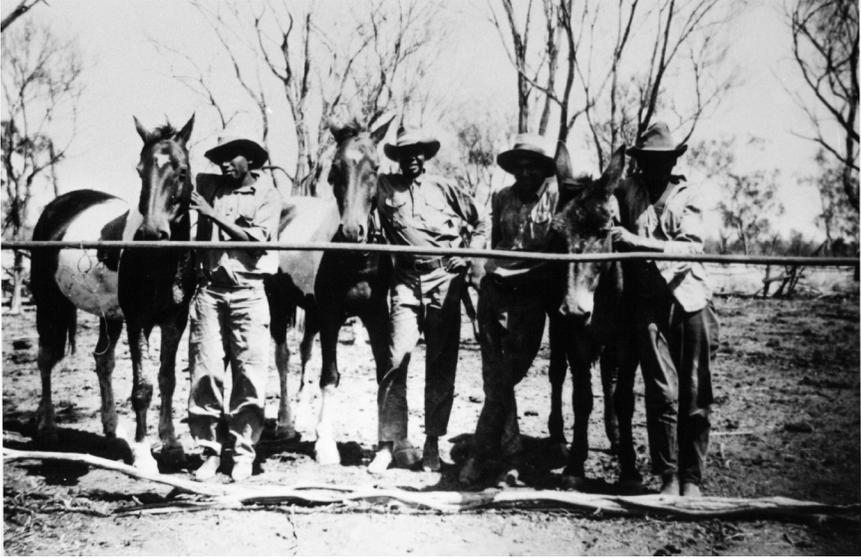
The general lack of pasture management, poor and fluctuating nutrition, inefficient reproduction, high death rates, and very rudimentary property improvements characterized the industry at the later stage just as in the beginning. The fact that the stations in the Northern Territory that were operating in 1910 lived on indefinitely using the same basic operational practices as did their pioneering predecessors underscores the fact that high startup costs were the main cause of failure in the earliest years. It is clear, moreover, that the industry survived mainly because, by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the second- and third-generation pastoralists had been able to surmount most of the more extraordinary challenges associated with beginning anew in a “new” land. First, they had by then discarded most of their poorer holdings and consolidated those that were the more productive. The Victoria River Downs station was typical. When one of the 1895 commissioners asked the representative from that station how much land the run held, he replied, “not so much now as we did . . . because when I was there I found the coast country did not pay – that is, land for 150 miles back from the seaboard . . . therefore we gave up our leases at the [top end] stations of Marrakai and Glencoe.”³⁰ By this time the costs of wages and Native depredations were moderating substantially, in some measure because more and more Aboriginal people were being forced into submission. The “right steps have already been taken,” the above witness asserted, as “police protection” is now much better. He did not mention that station employees everywhere had banded together with the forces of law and order to wipe out as many of the hostile Native groups as they could. “A good many” Aborigines “have been put out of the way by bullets,” a police chief acknowledged in 1890.³¹ The career of the notorious mounted constable W.H. Willshire – who was able to conduct a campaign of

terror against the Aboriginal people around Alice in the early 1880s, and to carry it forward to the Victoria River district thereafter – substantiates that statement.³² Drug and alcohol dependence and sexually transmitted diseases no doubt also helped to temper resistance by the first peoples.³³

But the most important change was that Aborigines who had endured the onslaught had become one of the mainstays of the pastoral industry. They had gradually shifted from enemy and pillager to needy adherent. “The numbers in constant employment vary . . . from two or three to thirty or forty,” a report compiled in 1913 stated: “It is the native living on some of these large pastoral areas who are troublesome in the way of cattle killing, and yet on the other hand it is not too much to say that, under present conditions, the majority of the stations are largely dependent on the work done by black ‘boys.’”³⁴ The report also painted a picture of dependency that went way beyond the small percentage of men and women who actually worked on the stations:

There is always a native camp in the vicinity of every station where a larger or smaller number of aboriginals is gathered together, attracted by the chance of securing food . . . It is a constant occurrence on practically all stations where cattle are killed to distribute the offal and bones, often with plenty of meat attached to them, amongst the natives, who gather round the killing yard like crows round a dying sheep. Everything is eaten and every bone pounded up to get at the marrow. In addition to this, there are many odd scraps distributed and the few natives who are permanently employed unless special precautions are taken, will share what they receive with the others.³⁵

Amanda Nettelbeck and Robert Foster tell us that initially settlers in central Australia “had petitioned the government for officers with Martini–Henry carbines and Colt revolvers” to deal with the Aboriginal population, but by the early 1890s “they wanted flour, tea and sugar to attract” the Native people to work in the cattle industry. That they occasionally killed stock “was of little significance when weighed against the growing importance of their labour.”³⁶ Native manpower was not only essential, it also brought down expenses. Managers and some outside



ABORIGINAL STOCKMEN, NORTHERN TERRITORY. NORTHERN TERRITORY LIBRARY, DARWIN, PETER JAMES COLLECTION, PH0331/0014.

observers remarked particularly on the number of Aborigines the stations fed.³⁷ When, however, it is considered that the food was mostly what European societies considered waste by-products of the beef industry and that animals killed were almost certainly too old or sick or hurt to be marketed, this appears as considerably less of a burden. True, the stations provided other supplies as well to their workers. “In 1912 the remuneration consisted of two or three suits of clothing yearly, two or three pair of boots, one or two blankets and one or two mosquito nets” over and above edibles such as “flour, tea, sugar, tobacco and pies.”³⁸ But records kept by Goldsborough, Mort and Company indicate that from 1909 to 1911 the company was spending between sixteen and twenty-four pounds per month on its entire “Blacks” workforce when the average full-time white stockman or worker was costing about fourteen and a half pounds per month.³⁹ The company must have been employing at least a dozen Aborigines at that time, since it had some thirty thousand cattle and the white population in the Territory was so small.⁴⁰ This would substantiate estimates that the net cost of keeping a single Aborigine in regular employment ranged from one to two pounds a month.⁴¹



ABORIGINAL STOCKMEN, NEWCASTLE WATERS STATION, 1960S NORTHERN TERRITORY LIBRARY, ROY EDWARDS COLLECTION, PH0274/0682.

Any attempt to elucidate the role of Aboriginal labour in establishing and maintaining the northern cattle frontier in Australia will need to give due attention to women. Many stations employed “lubras” not just as domestics or for “chores” around the home place but as stockmen.⁴² They are “good, reliable workers, and will stick to a job,” a reporter once noted after a visit to Urapunga station near Paddy’s Lagoon on the Roper River. “Every house and shed, the wells, and the substantial yards” at the homestead have been built with lubra labour, “and the workmanship is excellent throughout.” “Out in the Territory” they “are accounted better stockriders than the boys, they will stick to any horse any boy will, and . . . when in trouble do not resort to any feminine weaknesses by holding on to the horse’s neck, . . . but sit upright, and if they are to come off, do so in quite a manly fashion.” The reporter singled out for praise one “Princess Polly” on Urapunga “(a strong minded lubra of amazing strength)” who had been appointed head stockwoman.⁴³ Mary Durack

felt sure that the Aboriginal women who worked the cattle herds gained a degree of self-satisfaction and stature. In her first saga about her family's ranching days in the Kimberley area near the Northern Territory border in Western Australian, she claimed that the late nineteenth century was

probably the heyday of the black women who never before or since enjoyed such status and sense of importance. Small-boned and timid-seeming, they soon proved themselves to have more endurance and intelligence than their men in the cattle game. They loved the life of the stock camps, the thrill of riding the plains . . . and if they served other ends than mustering and holding cattle little evil was prevented by confining them to the boredom of the homestead wurlies on the creek banks.⁴⁴

In the long run, cheap Native labour gave the Australian cattle stations the ability to more than overcome the advantage the great ranches on the northern Great Plains of North America initially had with respect to wage costs. In western Canada the big outfits sometimes employed some Indian cowboys, in part because they were able to pay them less than the white men. On 9 April 1887, William Bell, then ranch clerk on one of the big operations, informed his boss that "we have now two Indians herding, Damien has one at the Bloods" helping to bring in cattle for the beef contract, "and we have one herding the beef cattle at Beaver creek." Bell was very pleased that these men were hired at a bargain basement price. "We give them twenty dollars per month each and board and they furnish their own horses."⁴⁵ However, relatively speaking, the number of Indian cowhands on any of the big ranches was small. At this time, this particular outfit had only two on its payroll and more than a dozen whites. In later years it had none.⁴⁶

By the turn of the century the cattle stations in the Northern Territory were also, to a significant if limited extent, reducing in-cartage costs, though in this matter the Canadians would continue to hold the advantage. Some individual stations took their own steps to build and improve transportation facilities. The Victoria River Downs station brought supplies up from southern urban centres by ocean steamer to Port Darwin and then by a smaller steamer along the edge of the Timor Sea and the

northwest coast of the Northern Territory to the Victoria River. The ship could go only part of the distance up the river, then goods and people had to be transferred to a “smaller sailing craft” to go another hundred miles to the station’s own depot. From there it was necessary to take “drays or horses” some hundred miles to the head station.⁴⁷ Overall this obviously was a complex and relatively difficult and expensive trek, but it did help to create some efficiency and bring costs down in comparison to overlanding the nearly six hundred miles from Port Darwin. On the other side of the Territory, the McArthur River station apparently used a somewhat similar setup, transporting goods and people via steamer across the Gulf of Carpentaria to the mouth of the river and then upstream by a smaller vessel.⁴⁸ Outside stations were probably allowed to use both of these facilities and, if so, that must have cut costs for all of them. In 1890 the construction of a railway line was completed from Darwin south to Pine Creek, some 150 miles inland. This was particularly helpful in enabling stations such as Newcastle Waters on the western edge of the Barkly Tableland or Wave Hill on the northeast corner of the Victoria River area to bring in supplies.⁴⁹ Access to the Alice Springs region improved in the same year, when Oodnadatta in the north central part of South Australia became the terminus of the Great Northern Railway, although, as noted above, the line was not extended the nearly 450 miles further north to Alice until 1929.

The main challenge with respect to out-cartage was, of course, to get the cattle to market, and in this case the Australians had a decided advantage over the Canadians. Drought was the greatest threat when it came to droving stock along one of the four long overland routes. In some years marketing came to a complete halt because the water holes dried up along the way and government bores were neither adequate nor properly maintained.⁵⁰ This unquestionably disrupted station incomes. However, as we have seen, men such as William Phillips recognized that their livelihood depended on their ability to get cattle to destination in “good store condition,” so when a route was open they took pains to do so. Most years the drovers were able to keep the cattle on the trail by moving them within weeks after the end of the wet season, when the ground had dried out somewhat but the billabongs were still at least partially full.⁵¹

A regular difficulty even in the earlier period was finding enough good grass along the way to keep the cattle healthy. This was primarily

because so much stock travelled these routes that they became overgrazed. Most of the time, though, the stations sent mainly their hardest animals – the mature bullocks – and the drovers were able to keep them in good enough shape to put on the market as store cattle after their arrival at the place of sale. “From Roxbrough” Downs, just east of the Queensland border, to Marion Downs, some thirty miles further east, “there is not a bite” of grass left, drover H.R. Rose informed his owner in 1909. He knew “two Victoria mobs of cattle” were out there in groups of “800 and 1000” and there were also “5 mobs from Wave Hill about 1200 in each.” The trail “is fearful,” he said; “I have struck a patch of old stuff today and am making the best of it. From here down there is very little” grass “I am told” and “the old cows are [weakening].” Ultimately, however, he believed he would get by. “I will battle all I know to get a bite to eat for my lot,” he continued; “The balance” of the cattle are still “good strong stores.” Indeed, he said, “a hundred or more” are “nearly fat” enough to kill.⁵² A month later he reported: “I have had a rough time from Birdsville. The feed is all too short and the cattle would not eat the old stuff. I have had to drop a few old cows too weak to travel on. The cattle look pretty rough. But I hope to see them mend a lot from here to Hergott as I have just struck good feed and expect to get it pretty well all the way.”⁵³

Generally speaking the wear and tear on the stock was acceptable, comparable to that for shipping cattle by land and sea from the northern Great Plains of North America to Great Britain. Many of the drovers were highly experienced by this time, having conducted these treks for years, and they knew to slow down and even stop in areas along the way where the grass was good to allow their cargo to “mend.”⁵⁴ After the drovers dropped trail-weary cattle at stations along the way, the owners would write to the managers of the stations to retrieve them. Co-operation seems to have been widespread.⁵⁵ Moreover, a number of the owners such as W.F. Buchanan and presumably John Lewis, who was the principal shareholder at Newcastle Waters after Dr. Browne lost it, had holding pens near the place where the animals were to be sold so they could rest them, feed them, and get them back in shape before putting them through the ring.

With respect to monetary costs for droving and also transportation, the Australians were in a much better position than their Canadian counterparts. James Cox got figures from a “thoroughly competent authority” on

the costs for shipping cattle across the ocean from Chicago. He comprehensively figured in rail charges from the city to the American seaports, ocean freight charges, feed costs, the labour cost for someone caring for the cattle during the voyage overseas, insurance fees, and even the cost of the bucket and rope used to feed and water the animals on the steamer. The total, excluding sales commissions in Britain, was about \$20.60 per head.⁵⁶ The railroad, feed, and yardage charges to get the animals from Montana to Chicago were about \$7.80, so the grand per head total to move cattle all the way from the far West to Britain was something like \$28.40.⁵⁷ The charges for moving the Canadian cattle via the Canadian Pacific Railway to Montreal and then by ocean steamer to Britain would not have been identical to those for Americans, but they cannot have been much different.⁵⁸ The cattlemen from the Northern Territory, on the other hand, paid drovers a mere shilling per head per 100 miles. In 1906 drover Hy Grainger contracted to take 1,360 head over 1,400 kilometres from Newcastle Waters through the Birdsville route to Goyder's Lagoon in northeast South Australia. He got 707 pounds in total, or 10 shillings per head, which would have been equivalent to about \$2.50. It would have cost no more than 6 shillings, or \$1.50 per head, to drive and rail them the 500 miles from Goyder's Lagoon to Adelaide.⁵⁹ That made a total for the entire journey of just over 16 shillings, or about \$4.05, per head.⁶⁰

In walking all these cattle to outside markets, the Australians did not have to concern themselves a great deal with the threat of redwater, which had so plagued their predecessors when walking them in. When moving the cattle to market, drovers liked to blame some death loss on that disease as that seemed beyond their control. However, this may often have been a rationalization on their part and, in any case, the numbers involved in single instances were small compared to those that had occurred when the stations were being stocked.⁶¹ There were other types of natural challenges too that, though most damaging to the western Canadian grazing industry, were not of great concern once the Australian pastoralists became established. Cattle losses due to animal predators were tolerable if at times traumatic. Crocodiles swarmed most of the more northern rivers and they did take stock. In the 1870s Arthur Ashwin witnessed a "draught horse" being "dragged" into one of the rivers by a large crocodile, which caught the animal by the head as it was getting a drink. There was a brief struggle,

the two animals emerged twice from the water, and then disappeared for good.⁶² John Costello called one area – the valley beyond the low hills to the north of Leichhardt’s crossing on the Limmen River – “Alligator Plain,” in the mistaken belief that the crocodiles that inhabited it were of that species. He related: “Many of the cattle which pastured on this grassy plain” were ambushed “when they came to the river for water.” Even though “numbers of these huge reptiles were shot,” it was “a common thing . . . to see three or four dead cattle floating about . . . They had been taken by these destructive marauders and were . . . killed – not eaten at the time, but in a day or two.” Meanwhile their “inflated carcasses” were left “drifting in the brackish waters.” Pioneers believed the beasts preferred their meat in a rotten condition and liked to stockpile food and, like the dingo, enjoyed “the sport of killing” even when “gorged.”⁶³ However, the crocodiles inhabited the more northern rivers and billabongs only. This included the McArthur River on the Tableland and the Victoria River, but even there they were never the threat to stock that the wolves preying on the herds of the Canadian ranchers were. Crocodiles are ambush hunters. They wait in the water or amongst reeds for fish or unsuspecting land animals to come close, and then attack. They move swiftly in the water but they do not hunt in packs and are awkward on land. The cattle were justly afraid of them; during a mustering or drive along a river one of the creatures might appear suddenly, perhaps taking a cow. This would startle the rest of the herd sometimes into a costly stampede. But further kills were unlikely.⁶⁴

The other well-known livestock predators in the Territory were dingoes. Though plentiful, they too did not compare to wolves in terms of kill potential. Generally speaking, dingoes are smaller than wolves and, while they can mercilessly slaughter sheep, they are not capable of inflicting great damage on full-grown cattle.⁶⁵ They did at times take a calf, but this required patience and organization to either decoy the mother into running after some of them while others attacked her offspring, or trick the mother into chasing several of them one at a time until she was too exhausted to protect her young. Some cattlemen used poison to control the dingo numbers;⁶⁶ but under normal circumstances dingoes were inclined to prey on any number of the 177 species in their Australian diet – including Red Kangaroo; Euro, Swamp, Agile, and Red-necked

Wallabies; wombats; brushtail possums; European Rabbits; and Magpie Goose and other birds and reptiles – rather than cattle.⁶⁷

The most threatening climatic condition with which the cattlemen in the Northern Territory grappled – drought – was also not *quite* as damaging as the severe winters faced on the northern Great Plains of North America. Drought could be very destructive at times, but as the years passed and the stations bolstered their water sources, it did not equal Canada's harsh winter weather during the open range period in terms of total devastation. We have examined the 1886–87 winter in detail, but to comprehend the magnitude of the destruction, it is instructive to look more closely at some of the other years, and to compare, side by side, the damaging effects of climatic extremes on the grazing industry in the Canadian West and in the Australian outback.

What made the winters on the northern Great Plains truly fearsome throughout the open range period was that the storms hit the roaming herds so suddenly and with such force that the cattlemen had very little opportunity to react. This resulted in heavy losses even during winters that have attracted very little notoriety. In March 1892, for instance, “the bitterest blizzard in twenty years, killed many cattle in every district” and then abated for a while and came back again with even more force.⁶⁸ On April 24 it began to rain in the evening and poured steadily through the night. The following afternoon the rain turned to snow, which continued to fall all through the next night and the following morning. A strong and bitterly cold north wind magnified the effects of plunging temperatures. Great numbers of cattle that had been thoroughly drenched and chilled by the rain were stressed to the breaking point. As the storm raged, “the poor creatures could do nothing but drift before [it] . . . turning neither to the right hand nor to the left, and if any obstruction, such as a fence, barred their onward progress they simply stood there till they died with the snow drifting over them.”⁶⁹ One rancher had recently purchased thirty-five head of cows and turned them loose on his pasture west of Macleod. They disappeared in the blizzard, “neither hide nor hoof remaining, the conjecture being that the entire herd was driven over a cut bank and perished.”⁷⁰ The Circle ranch lost five hundred calves and thirty cows. Later when warm temperatures melted the snow near the ranch, the “water in the springs and small streams was very bad, owing to contamination from the putrefying beef.”⁷¹ As so often happened after a tough winter, the losses

also vastly exceeded the immediate body count. Many of the surviving cows that suffered and were subjected to stress in the storms later aborted or produced stillborn offspring.

The 1892–93 winter was even worse. In the early weeks of 1893 at least eight thousand cattle succumbed in the foothills districts south of Calgary. And the losses were not confined to the foothills. In writing about their holdings in the Cypress Hills in Assiniboia, manager D.H. Andrews of the Stair ranch told his British directors that this had been “the worst weather I ever experienced: the Tuesday morning . . . the thermometer went down to 64 below zero [Fahrenheit], the next day it was 56 below and a wind blowing there. For 12 days it averaged over 40 below, with snowstorms every third day. Three bulls froze to death in the sheds one night and six calves were lost, at Crane Lake 5 bulls and 12 calves, we had to feed everything all they could eat during the storm, and had to feed inside. . . . We shall have a big loss on the range cattle.”⁷²

Andrews went on to estimate losses at the ranch properties near Maple Creek and Balgonie, also in Assiniboia, to the foothills of Alberta. A few weeks later, he informed his owners that he might actually have underestimated the damage: “The loss in the Cypress Hills and Mosquito Creek [districts] . . . you will think a very heavy one. What the loss is in the Cypress Hills no one can tell, as we have not been able to ride to where the cattle have drifted since November and cannot tell what the loss is until the snow goes and we can get a wagon and outfit down there; I hope I have overestimated it, but am afraid it will be more than I have taken off. We have had a worse winter than has ever been known before in this country, it has been almost impossible to move about.” In the later 1890s the problem of weak cows losing their calves again brought springtime losses that many ranchers previously had not figured on. The “very cold and stormy weather in November 1896, was expected to have disastrous results on stock in some sections of the country,” the police commissioner recounted. While “this fear was not directly realized,” there was “a considerable decrease in the calf crop.” In 1898 an officer at Macleod reported that “the calf brand is smaller than usual . . . a great number of deaths occurred among young stock in the early part of the year. From the depth of snow on the ground during March the cattle became emaciated, and were unable to withstand the cold.” The second half of March was especially stormy; “trails were blocked, travel in many localities impossible,

and horses as well as cattle showed the effect of the weather.”⁷³ The Stair ranch book count dropped from around 5,700 to 3,553, but the estimate did not adequately reflect numbers in the Cypress Hills where the largest herd was located. On June 5 Andrews estimated the cattle there at 2,300 (down 500 from March 15) but the cowboys could find only 2,100. “This leaves us about 200 short of my estimated tally but I hear a number of our cattle are on the American side of the line, and we are going over to gather them as soon as they commence their beef roundups.”⁷⁴ Even were they to find the 200 on the American side, the overall drop in the Stair inventory at that point was over 31 percent.

When cows did not produce calves, it meant that all the expenses that had gone into buying, maintaining, and pasturing them and supplying them with breeding bulls went to waste. Moreover, pastures would not be filled in the spring with newborn calves. When that happened the risks derived from winter grazing shot up, as the ranchers were more likely to import highly domesticated doggies from the East that were particularly inept at rustling for feed on their own when the weather was bad.⁷⁵ In the late winter to early spring of 1902–3 it was principally both the doggies and the newborn calves that died. Talk among the cattlemen themselves set the losses in the foothills south and west of Calgary at about fifteen thousand.⁷⁶ Near Maple Creek,

Severe weather [in February] compelled ranchers to begin feeding hay to their stock, and March was a severe month: the snow was heavily crusted in some parts, and cattle were reported to be getting low in condition. April opened with snow followed by rain, and heavy frosts were experienced at the end of the month. A very severe storm set in on May 16, and lasted for nearly a week: a great deal of snow fell, particularly in the western part of the district, where it was very deep. There was considerable frost at night and as a consequence of the storm, stockmen sustained considerable loss, chiefly amongst . . . young calves. A great many of the “doggies” . . . died from exposure, some in railway cars, some in the stock yards, and larger numbers on the prairie.⁷⁷



DEAD CATTLE, BOW RIVER HORSE RANCH, COCHRANE ALBERTA, 1903 GLENBOW ARCHIVES, CALGARY, NA-2084-24.

The next spring another late storm at nearby Crane Lake brought considerable destruction to imported yearlings. “No attempt has been made to hunt up the stock as yet,” a reporter wrote, and, therefore, no adequate picture of the losses could be attained. He estimated, however, that the average everywhere on the southwestern cattle ranges would be between 10 and 20 percent. “The storm was so heavy and continuous that in many cases even if the cattle did get shelter under a cut bank they would starve for the snow was so heavy that they could not travel.”⁷⁸

It was on top of this kind of year-after-year destruction that the truly heartbreaking 1906–7 winter struck. The weather began to turn against the ranchers on November 15 when rain that had been falling for two weeks suddenly turned to snow and the temperature plummeted to 15 degrees below zero Fahrenheit. Some three feet of snow fell in a few hours. Then the temperature climbed above freezing for a few hours and quickly

dropped again, causing a layer of hard crust to form under the fresh snow which made it even more difficult for the cattle to graze. There was no let-up. One blizzard followed another until late spring. By the middle of December all the available hay that had been put up for the cattle was either gone or covered by gigantic snowdrifts.⁷⁹ The cattle began to die from starvation and cold. Many pushed south and west in a futile attempt to escape the northern winds and find food. This left them on the open plains without the protection they could have got from the cutbacks and trees in the high country. Near Fort Macleod, Charlie Brewster and his wife spent much of the winter fighting off starving cattle that had come from the vicinity of the Red Deer River. "They almost walked over his buildings, and desperately tried to get at his small feed stack." The couple spent many hours in the bitter cold "urging the moaning animals past their home."⁸⁰ Some ranchers attempted to hold the cattle back but in vain as the animals flowed around and past them like a mighty river. Other ranchers tried gathering them in bunches out on the plains to drive them back up into the hills.

Think of riding all day in a blinding snowstorm, the temperature fifty and sixty below zero, and no dinner. You'd get one bunch of cattle up the hill, and another one would be coming down behind you, and it was all so slow, plunging after them through the deep snow that way; you'd have to fight every step of the road. The horses' feet were cut and bleeding from the heavy crust, and the cattle had the hair and hide wore off their legs to the knees and hocks. It was surely hell to see big four-year-old steers just able to stagger along.⁸¹

Finally the exhausted riders and horses had to just let the cattle go. As they went they ate everything in their path – small sapling trees sticking through the snow, the hair off the backs of one another. Carcasses piled up everywhere.⁸² In the Milk River area "there were so many dead cattle" dotting the landscape when the storms finally broke that one young lady who was still relatively unfamiliar with the countryside "found them very useful" as landmarks for making her "way about the prairies."⁸³

Against these sorts of year-after-year losses, what drought took from the Australian range people seems . . . well yes, substantial, but in the



DEAD CATTLE, SHADDOCK RANCH, LANGDON ALBERTA, 1907. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, CALGARY, NA-1636-1.

long run, somewhat less so. When the long dry spells occurred on the Tableland in 1883, 1884, and 1889, the stockmen had to try to move the cattle as their water sources dried up. "All too soon the country was scourged . . . Then the weary ordeal of moving stock from great dams which had dried and travelling them to other portions of the run, where some stale and stagnant water yet remained. In these pools" there were "a number of dead and bogged cattle which had to be continually pulled out." The ones that "died quickly polluted the holes, already putrid with dead fish."⁸⁴ In 1893 Walhallow Downs, Corella Downs, Brunette Downs, and Eva Downs trailed some 34,000 animals to the coast of the Bay of Carpentaria where rainfall was more dependable and where the end waters of the Roper and McArthur Rivers continued to flow. They lost many, first on the journey to the coast and then when feeding on the "rank, mineral deficient grasses" that abound in coastal areas.⁸⁵ The 5,000 cattle that died on Alexandria in 1897 and the 1,500 on the Alroy run must have been nearly half their inventory, and one supposes that those cases were not atypical.

Over the years, however, the stations continued to sink wells in the areas that lacked permanent surface water, in many cases until they had enough to protect their cattle from desiccation no matter how long the weather refused to co-operate. While first-round owners, such as John Costello on Lake Nash, pushed their financial resources beyond repair in that endeavour, their facilities remained in place for others to build on once they were gone. Of course, depletion of drinking water for stock was not the only adversity that long dry spells created. These spells could also damage the pastures to the point where there was a real threat the cattle would starve. This was particularly true in the Alice Springs region where average annual rainfall is the lowest.

Photographs and news reports of sandy, desert-like conditions in this region have elicited considerable empathy from the public. In 2006 a radio program opened with the headline “central Australian cattle stations struggle to survive.”⁸⁶ Many stations “are in severe drought,” the broadcaster declared, continuing: “Some have received well below their average rainfall over the past three years. The Northern Territory Government this week deemed 11 properties to the south of Alice Springs to be in drought . . . And while they wait for substantial rain, the pastoralists continue to de-stock their properties and prepare for more tough times ahead.” To illustrate the difficulties the eleven ranchers were encountering, the program gave the members of the well-known Hayes family, who were living on Deep Well station some fifty miles south of the town, a chance to be heard. They spoke openly of their hardships. Mrs. Tracey Hayes expressed concerns about the impact of drought on future generations: “It can be pretty tough,” she said. “We’ve got 4 boys ranging from one to twelve so they grow up pretty quickly. The two eldest ones go out and give a hand quite a bit and it’s quite confronting for them, I guess, to see animals suffering and, you know, the difficulties of running a business in this environmental climate that we face at the moment.” The Hayes had been “moving cattle off” their property “for three years now,” husband Billy said; “We’ve trucked a lot of our steers, they went down to Lucindale. Fattened them and sold them down there.” He also said that he had “sent 2 or 3 lots to an agistment,” and that he was about to rent some Native reserve land that had not been grazed in recent years.

What this indicates, beyond the difficulties associated with drought, is that by keeping a constant watch on their holdings and their herds, cattle

owners in the Northern Territory had designed means for handling it. Among those means, what they did *not* do was critical. Along with not overgrazing, they did not follow the Canadian example and replace the drought-resistant grasses Nature selected for the Territory over the course of centuries with less-hardy domestic varieties. Consequently, wandering cattle were normally able to find enough fodder to survive extended periods without rain. Additionally, when drought persisted past a certain point, the owners had practical steps they could take to mitigate the impact. In the above cases, all were adjusting their herd numbers one way or the other. They were finishing some of their cattle on southern feedlots to sell them as fats and leasing land in areas where pasture damage was not so severe, either because it was out of the affected area or because it still had nutritional vegetation that had not been depleted.⁸⁷ Moving and marketing cattle added unwanted costs, but, arguably, it also enabled the families to significantly reduce their losses until better conditions prevailed.

Periods of dearth do not last forever. The year after the Hayes interview was conducted, other members of the family who were still on the Undoolya station were basking in the revival of good times. They had been “in drought for six long years, and they’re running fewer Polled Hereford cattle, than ever before,” a newscaster announced. “But since December 150 millimetres of rain has fallen. Nicole and Benny Hayes and their 5 young children are hopeful recent rains could be the start of a break in the long dry. It’s a great relief for the Hayes family to finally see these resilient native flowers blooming once again in central Australia.” The world, Nicole Hayes commented, had “changed completely in the last 4 months compared to what it was last year, it was pretty desolate . . . and now it’s just a carpet of green.”⁸⁸

One final point about drought in Australia: although a constant threat, it has not struck all that often in specific regions – at least not in comparison to the blizzards that overwhelmed the open range cattlemen winter after winter in western Canada. In the Alice Springs district as a whole, long periods without rain have been far from rare, but dry spells extensive enough for the government to designate them as droughts have occurred there just three times from the late nineteenth century through to the 1970s: during 1895–1903, 1918–20, and 1958–68. The Tableland area was struck with such droughts just twice, 1911–16 and 1939–45; and the Victoria River district not at all. While parts of both the Tableland

and Victoria River districts experienced drought-like conditions between 1895 and 1903, they managed to sustain most of their cattle inventories while the Queensland herds next door were largely decimated.⁸⁹

To say all this is not to *minimize* the extent to which periods without rain have hurt the pastoral industry in the Northern Territory. Clearly they have done lots of damage. Generally speaking, however, the native flora combined with human expertise and basic infrastructure have kept the Texas pastoral system alive, if at times not all that well, despite them. In the final analysis, that statement could be applied to all the major challenges pastoralists faced prior to 1911. By that time the second and third rounds of lessees had been able to locate the best grazing lands in their respective areas, and to find ways to deal with the high cost of labour, out-cartage, isolation, and predation as well as deficiencies of water, and they no longer had to pay exorbitantly to build up their cattle inventories. Therefore, they avoided the processes of dissolution and contraction that were occurring on the northern Great Plains of North America. Right through to the present, and despite encouragement from government agents and agricultural authorities, they even evaded subdividing their pastures, taking up controlled and selective breeding programs, and all but the most limited forms of supplementary feeding.⁹⁰ In short, they adhered to the precepts of “profound neglect.” In the twentieth century, rancher/farmers in the Canadian West had to embrace more refined and diversified agricultural techniques to escape the most devastating manifestations of their northern setting. And they could do so because, unlike their Australian counterparts, they had adequate soils, appropriate weather conditions – at least during spring, summer, and autumn months – and reasonably dependable precipitation year round.⁹¹ The cattlemen of the Northern Territory understood that to take a similar agricultural path was environmentally unnecessary to their survival and, furthermore, would prove a waste of their money because Nature had given them none of the same attributes.⁹²

