

SO FAR AND YET SO CLOSE: FRONTIER CATTLE RANCHING IN WESTERN PRAIRIE CANADA AND THE NORTHERN TERRITORY OF AUSTRALIA
By Warren M. Elofson

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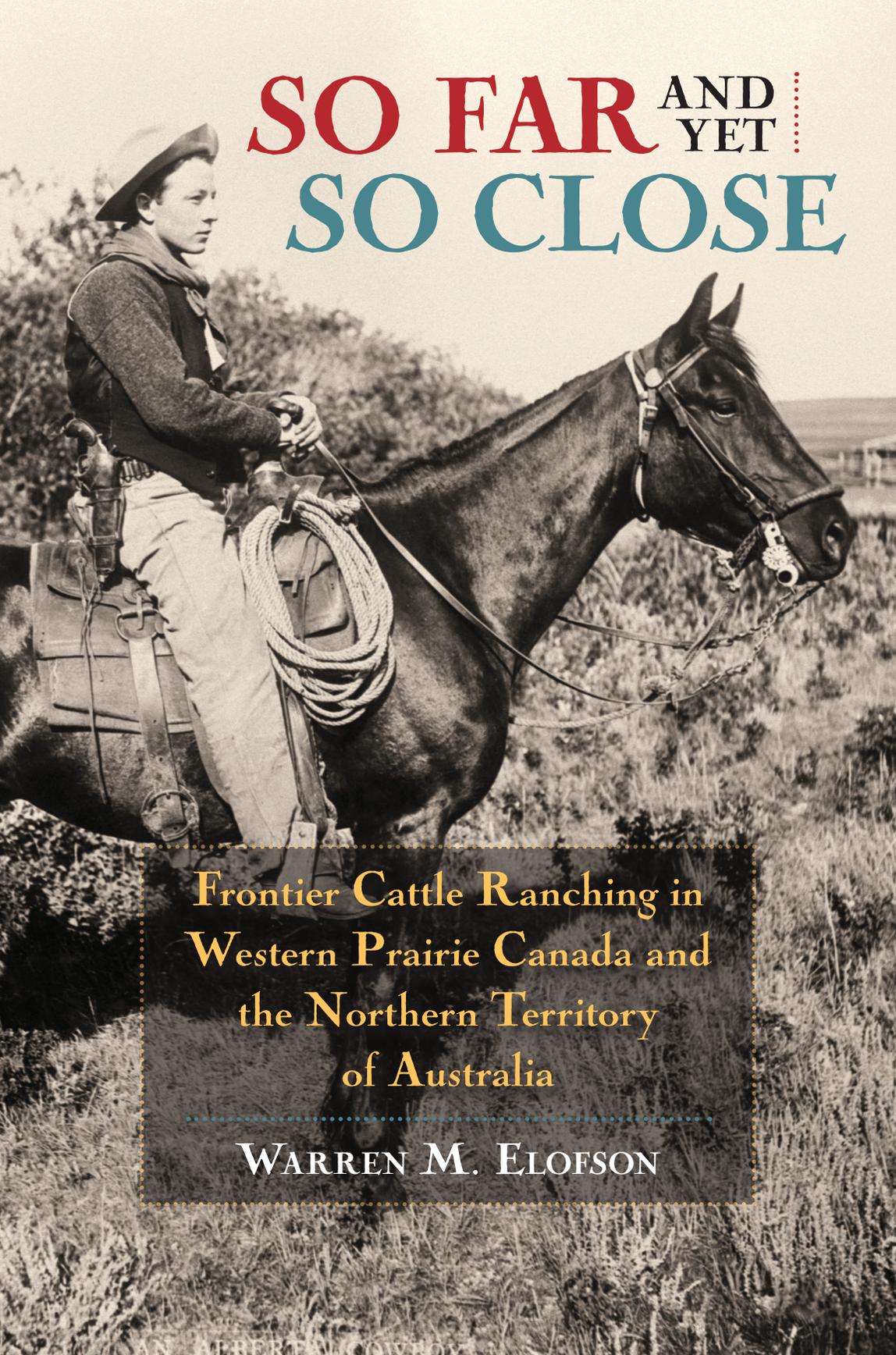
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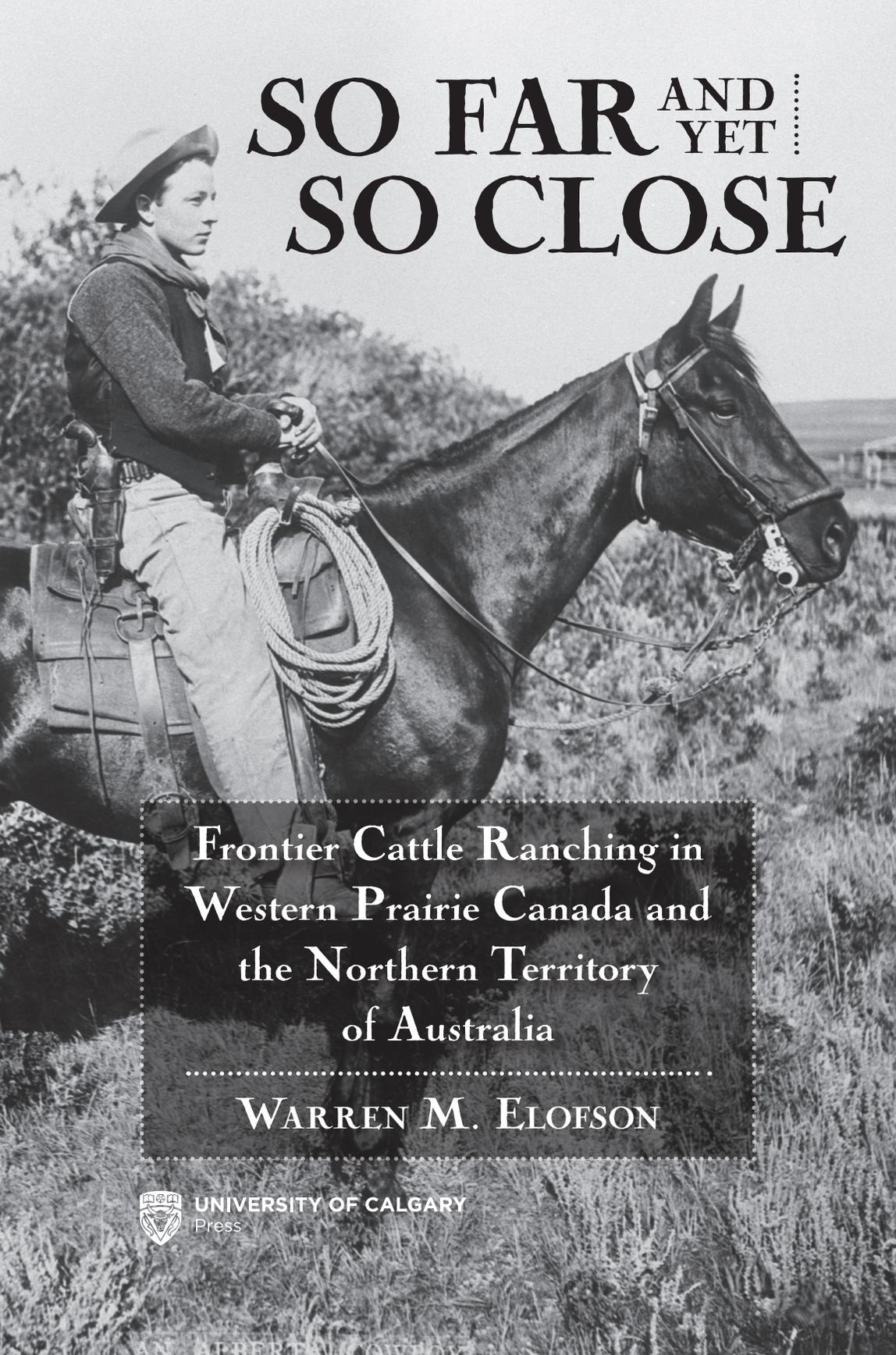


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For Lily Jane and June Lou

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PREFACE

One finds many points at which the cattle frontiers of western Canada and northern Australia evoke comparisons. First and most obviously they came to life at about the same time – between the late 1870s and the early 1880s. In both cases corporations were heavy investors. The ranches utilized an open range system in which tens of thousands of cattle were allowed to roam over thousands of square acres with little human intervention; as the cattle mingled on the pasturelands they were subject to the depredations of two- and four-legged predators and the ravages of disease – the mange in North America and “tick” or “redwater” fever down under. The ranchers in the two regions faced severe losses from the vagaries of weather – primarily extreme cold in Canada and extreme heat and drought in Australia; they also struggled with the problem of accessing distant markets and they grappled unsuccessfully to produce finished (i.e., properly fattened) beef carcasses in surroundings that were agriculturally marginal. In both societies, a numerical predominance of males among the newcomers helped to create an excessively masculine culture, blur traditional gender roles, and promote interracial fraternization. Ultimately, moreover, a nearly indistinguishable “country” culture developed in these geographically disparate and distant lands the imprint of which was to be unmistakable through to the modern era.

The ranching people in these two societies had their differences too. All the above similarities were in one way or another a reflection of frontier environmental conditions – that is, conditions associated with the very fact of the “newness” of society. But as western Canadians and northern Australians took specific steps to respond to certain natural environmental factors – including vegetation, terrain, soil type, precipitation, and seasonal temperature fluctuations – they had to adopt specific methodologies to sustain their businesses. More than anything else, this accounted for the emergence of the family ranch/farm in western Canada and the maintenance of the most extensive form of animal husbandry known to man in the Northern Territory.

Much of the background information about the western Canadian frontier comes from one or more of the books or articles I have written over the years on North American cattle ranching. In every place in the text where I have used this material I have been able to confirm or clarify it by adding significant new primary source evidence. I gathered most of the information on Australian ranching during trips I was able to make over the course of four years to the repositories in Brisbane, Adelaide, Melbourne, Canberra, and Darwin. Because I was working in a country so distant from my own I often had to go through a wealth of documents at a frenzied pace and thus needed to call upon the librarians and archivists in those cities for considerable help and endless patience. I wish to acknowledge my debt of gratitude to them for their kindness, their efficiency, and their professionalism. The research for the book was supported by a Standard Research Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.