



SO FAR AND YET SO CLOSE: FRONTIER CATTLE RANCHING IN WESTERN PRAIRIE CANADA AND THE NORTHERN TERRITORY OF AUSTRALIA
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INTRODUCTION

It can be said with confidence that this study is the first in-depth comparison of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cattle ranching societies in western prairie Canada and the Northern Territory of Australia. The central theme is the impact of the environment on human behaviour. It is beyond doubt that Mother Nature played a major role in sculpting and conditioning virtually all agricultural settlements pretty much everywhere in this world. In the process of delineating that role in these two regions, the pages that follow will also look closely at the power of man-controlled or man-influenced environmental circumstances. At the instigation of ranching in both regions those circumstances reflected a particular stage of development that we usually designate with the term “frontier”; and that refers to the earliest period when the incoming people were relatively unfamiliar with the land and liable to make mistakes, when populations were sparse and labour in short supply, when gender ratios were way out of balance, and when newcomer and Native populations met in relatively large numbers for the first time. In so far as pastoral practices were concerned, it also speaks of a period before basic infrastructure such as fences and barns could be built to enclose and contain the livestock, or roughage could be put up in sufficient amounts to ensure the animals always had a proper food supply, or enough good wells could be drilled to safeguard their drinking water. Factors of these sorts encouraged the first western Canadian and northern Australian graziers

to embrace strikingly similar cultural and agricultural ways though they operated a world apart and under very different ecological, climatic, and topographical pressures.

To elaborate on the latter statement is, one hopes, to make a worthwhile contribution to both Canadian and Australian scholarship. Over a century ago, Frederick Jackson Turner in America and, later, Russell Ward in Australia, argued that conditions in a frontier region brought a deterioration in the traditions to which migrating people had been accustomed in their original society.¹ This stimulated new ideas and values that deeply affected the way they went about their day-to-day lives. In its most fundamental form, the two men's common thesis is simply that frontiers alter human behaviour. With respect to the early grazing industry in each of these countries, that line of reasoning is beyond doubt.² But in demonstrating that early Anglo society in their West was not merely an expansion of that society found in the United States, Canadian ranching historians have tended to employ a metropolitan analysis that stresses the predominance of Eastern laws, legal agencies, and culture.³ Down under, ever since Henry Reynolds estimated in 1981 that over one hundred fifty years European invaders killed some twenty thousand Aborigines, researchers have been examining the process whereby indigenous societies were dispossessed of their territory.⁴ Some have disputed Reynolds's findings, igniting in the process a heated battle about both numbers and blame.⁵ The ensuing controversy has encouraged frontier scholars to concentrate almost exclusively on race. The present study attempts to illustrate how a wide range of "New World" conditions in both countries affected the lives of the first ranchers and gave them a common set of challenges that, for a time at least, they handled in much the same way.

At the operational level, this is discernible in the ranchers' adoption of the so-called "Texas system" to work their herds.⁶ That system was the most basic, unrefined, and extensive form of agricultural production in existence. Anglo-Americans originally embraced it after the annexation of Texas from Mexico in 1845.⁷ Like the Mexican graziers before them, the Anglo cattlemen allowed their stock to "range indiscriminately over a large surface of country, thirty, forty, and even fifty miles in extent."⁸ Key to the system was low costs.⁹ Huge spreads of tens of thousands of acres were established with little more capital expenditure than what was required to build the most rudimentary facilities for the cattle and some

very modest housing for the workers.¹⁰ Since the stock grazed year round the men who ran the spreads did not have to put up any feed. They did have to round up the cattle twice a year so the calves could be branded and castrated and the big steers could be cut out for slaughter. Thus was born the iconic American cowboy. The business of roundups was “no easy task.” Men had to be expert horsemen with loads of “cow sense,” and they needed to be able to handle a “lasso,” which they carried “at saddle-bow.” Their job was to gather the animals into bunches and drive them into hastily constructed pens where some men, working from the backs of their frisky little horses, cut out the fats and roped the calves while others worked methodically with branding iron and knife. Many took pride in “this ‘Cow-Boy’ life” and “notwithstanding its hardships and exposures, generally” became “attached to it.”¹¹ These men also soon caught the public imagination as the swashbuckling, freedom loving knights of the plains.¹²

It was mainly upon the expertise of these young males, creations of the Deep Southern cattle frontier, that open range grazing was destined eventually to expand north along the edge of the Rocky Mountains all the way to Canada. After a period of stagnation and decline the Texan beef industry experienced growth like never before in the late 1870s and early 1880s. A host of new pastoral companies with wealthy stockholders from the East and Great Britain poured into southern and north-central regions and then entered the foothills country of the panhandle in the northwestern part of the state. Most of the owners were urbanites with little knowledge either of grazing techniques or ecological conditions in the West and they entrusted their stock to the skilled hired men who had cut their teeth on the cattle ranges. As the grasslands of Texas filled, tender-foot investors were able to take over major regions of Arizona, Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana. Finally some of them entered the plains and foothills of southern Alberta and Assiniboia (which in 1905 would become the southern region of the province of Saskatchewan).¹³

In the beginning the so-called “great ranchers” of western Canada adopted all the assumptions of the Texas system – “profound neglect” of the herds for most of the time, open range, low costs, and large-scale production.¹⁴ The Canadians endorsed this system because it fitted the frontier environment almost perfectly. They were starting up an industry where it had never existed before; and because it would have been costly,

and exceedingly difficult without a more substantial labour force, to build fences and barns and put up large amounts of feed, it seemed appropriate to embrace a system that deemed those tasks unnecessary. Unfortunately, this put the ranches into a head-on collision with the natural environment. More than anything else, what was to bring them all down within two and a half decades was the inferior quality of their stock and low reproduction and survival rates due largely to the harsh northwestern climate, the short growing season, predation, and a disease that plagued the cattle as they mingled on the open range. The same ecological forces would ensure that this system and all the ranches that utilized it were to be replaced by a much more intensive, more refined, and smaller-scale family-run agricultural form.

At almost exactly at the same time that the Canadian cattlemen were assembling their ranches on the northern Great Plains of North America, Australian pastoralists were erecting very similar operations in formerly unsettled lands in their Northern Territory. One might be accused of applying the term the “Texas system” to their practices rather loosely since, geographically speaking, they were so far removed from it and, given their natural setting, they almost certainly would have adopted a similar technique even had the Texans never existed. On the other hand, the Texans did implement the system on a wide scale first, and it is clear that the Australians had ample opportunity to read about it, so that initially this must have bolstered their confidence in its fundamental attributes. The best-known agricultural journal in the country, the *Pastoral Review*, carried numerous pieces concerning American beef cattle production from the early nineteenth century on, and regular newspapers often featured Texas ranching in their articles.¹⁵ “From the grassy plains” of Texas “cattle are purchased by men who somewhat resemble the squatters of Australia,” pundits informed the general public. They “take up land in ranches and graze over wide regions.”¹⁶ It is also to be acknowledged that employing the term “Texas system” here to describe pastoral practices in both countries is a matter of convenience. It enables us to, for one thing, comment on the characteristics of this approach that the Australians and Canadians maintained and, for another, at the same time visualize any specific ways in which they eventually deviated from it. In that sense it is a sort of measuring stick from which to gain a better understanding of how cattle grazing was carried on in both countries.

Australian cattlemen headed to the Territory mainly to expand the land holdings they were already managing in more settled parts of the country. They too were reacting to frontier environmental influences. Open range grazing was the easiest approach for them to adopt in the earliest stage of settlement, just as it was for their Canadian counterparts and for the same reasons – labour was short and infrastructure, particularly in the form of water wells and all the paraphernalia they required, was incredibly expensive. The first Australian graziers misjudged particular circumstances in their new land too and it cost them dearly. However, they were better equipped than the Canadians to understand the natural elements they would have to deal with. Most of them had previously started up successful pastoral ventures when opening hinterlands of South Australia, Queensland, or New South Wales and they had a fairly good grasp of climate and ecology throughout the continent. They felt the large-scale open range approach for which the Texan ranchers were renowned would work in the Northern Territory and they were right. Ultimately, after an initial period of disappointment and failure, this system, with minor adjustments, was to take hold in the outback because the climate, terrain, flora, and fauna were amenable.¹⁷

An environmental analysis is by definition a “bottom up” rather than a “top down” one. It is interested in how and why men and women and their pastoral operations were affected by their environment and not as concerned with political or legal stimuli (or a lack of thereof). In both regions it was the natural surroundings that were destined to rule in the establishment of appropriate agricultural techniques. Ross Duncan ends his study of the cattle industry in the Northern Territory between 1863 and 1910 with a firm criticism of the South Australian government, blaming it for not doing more to help the graziers by building better railway and steamship facilities for them and for not establishing better roads and stock routes or doing more to help in the fight against bovine disease.¹⁸ What he is saying, and quite rightly, is that government intervention played a very small role in determining the historical development of this form of agriculture in the Territory. The big ranches that came to life there eventually found a way to carry on by adapting to the elements rather than attaining outside support. In Canada, Max Foran has recently shown that the federal government’s homestead policy, its various iterations of the original lease legislation, and its failure to provide lease security before

1913 were all influential in the expansion and contraction of the ranching industry. He also notes that the British embargo on Canadian cattle starting in 1892 and a 27.5 percent ad valorem tariff in the United States placed limits on outside markets. There is no denying these facts.¹⁹ However, what becomes evident here is that the major changes in the Canadian industry – the eventual demise of the great ranches and the rise of a much more sophisticated form of production – were predestined to occur irrespective of government policies and programs. Foran acknowledges that fact. “Large-scale open-range ranching,” he reminds us, “may never have been as viable” on the northern Great Plains “as romance would have it . . . Indeed, one is led to wonder if the big cattle companies would have come to the Alberta foothills country in the 1880s had they been aware of the realities of cattle survival on the open range” in such an inhospitable setting.²⁰ One objective of this study is to illustrate in detail all the reasons why that was so in the Canadian Prairie West and not so in the Northern Territory of Australia.