

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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THE OUTBACK FRONTIER

Alfred Giles noted in later years that “the failures of the leaders” in the Northern Territory became “the successes of the followers.”¹ What he meant was that once the pioneering pastoralists were gone, those who took over their properties were able to use what they had learned and what they had invested to rebuild the grazing industry on a secure footing. That they would also continue to rely on the Texas grazing approach confirms that the problem in the earliest period was not that that system was out of step with climate and ecology. The more germane explanation is that challenges that the graziers encountered in the initial phase of settlement were insurmountable. This chapter argues that it was those “start-up” challenges that destined them to fall away one by one even more rapidly than their counterparts in western Canada.

In 1895 a commission was appointed by the South Australian government to examine why the industry had not managed to gain a secure footing in the Territory. While gathering information the commissioners interviewed one of the principal players from the Victoria River Downs station.² When a member asked him why the industry had struggled so he listed six basic factors. Each was either directly or indirectly related to an obstacle the cattlemen had encountered in the process of setting up their businesses. The first was the “very heavy expense that had to be incurred in taking stock to the stations”; the second, “the distance from market, and the difficulty in securing buyers for the surplus stock”; third, “the extensive staff that had to be kept up to protect the stock from blacks”; fourth, “the high rate of wages”; fifth, “the expense of carriage of stores”;

and sixth, a bovine disease that had attacked the incoming herds.³ While all of these issues impacted the Canadian cattle industry too in its initial stage, only one did so as severely.

Before viewing each of these important factors in detail we need to recognize that there were two that the man from Victoria River Downs did not mention and that were also considerably more problematic in the Territory than on the northern Great Plains. The first was the station owners' lack of familiarity with the land at the time when they chose the parcels they were going to lease. Virtually all frontiers are, almost by definition, remote, with the concomitant reality that the people who first invest in them cannot have a thorough understanding of all their basic attributes. The Australians had a reasonably good grasp of the climate in much of their country and they understood pastoral conditions and requirements in their home state. However, the Northern Territory was very distant from their businesses in southern Queensland, New South Wales, or South Australia and difficult to access. There was no rail transportation in and, as the Alexander Forrest expedition made all too clear, travel to the interior by horse was an extremely difficult and arduous undertaking. For that reason the first station owners had to do some educated guessing when it came time to deciding where to locate. Many thus chose some or all their lands in areas where ecological circumstances were simply inappropriate for grazing purposes. Tropical Australia is the largest of these areas. It is in what is known as the "top end" of the Territory – the northern tip, above the area around the Daly River on the west side and the Roper River on the east. This region has lots of rainfall and fairly abundant natural drinking water. However, deficiencies of phosphates, nitrogen, and various metals in the soil inhibit the nutritional value of the vegetation. Moreover, heavy tropical rainforests overwhelm the native grasses in much of the area. In places that are not heavily treed, the grass is nutritious during the initial spring growing season but then grows too high, developing faster than in any other part of the Territory. The initial herds the cattlemen brought in could not come close to keeping it grazed down as it shot up to over four feet in height. At that stage digestion became not just difficult but impossible. In the midst of abundance, the animals would literally starve – in many cases, to death.⁴

The first two well-known failures in the top end were Glencoe station and Springvale. The owners took out their leases before the 1881

legislation was passed, but they may well have got a special deal by negotiating with the government.⁵ Whatever the case, the new regulations would have been available to both stations from 1881 on. Roderick Travers and Albert William Sergison started Glencoe on the Adelaide River east of Palmerston in 1877.⁶ Sergison had visited and explored parts of the Territory around the Katherine, Adelaide, and Daly Rivers as a government employee and had extolled its potential as an agricultural region.⁷ The partners seem to have believed his written claims that one could make a healthy profit on a fast turnover. They started stocking the station with eight thousand cattle in 1879.⁸ The next year two wealthy businessmen from Melbourne, Charles Fisher and Maurice Lyons, bought the station with visions of making it the headquarters for a Northern Territory empire.⁹ In 1881 they hired Nat Buchanan to drive another twenty thousand cattle in from Queensland. Fisher and Lyons then took out leases to start up Gerowie and Marrakai Stations further upstream. Disaster followed. Glencoe “was prettily situated on the banks of a wide lagoon . . . tall bamboos” lined “the banks of the stream” and “nice-looking open black soil flats” underlay what appeared to be lush grasslands. However, as one pioneer put it, “one can’t judge a book by its cover, and though the first cattle delivered there . . . did fairly well – probably because they had the pick of the sparse top feed” – those that arrived later “died in the hundreds soon after delivery.”¹⁰ In 1883 the partners moved their headquarters and much of their stock to their Victoria River Downs lease.¹¹ The two men did not recover from their early losses, however. Within a few years they were forced to seek investors in England and then to give up control of their holdings to Goldsborough, Mort and Company of Melbourne. In 1886 an assessor for the law firm representing the latter company reported that all the country bordering the Adelaide River on the east side and stretching some thirty miles inland is “worthless for pastoral purposes, being only swamps with rushes” and very coarse grass. He advised “the abandonment” of this and other portions of the lease, as “there is no advantage in paying rent however small for country not likely to be utilized for many years.”¹² The firm accepted this advice.

Springvale was located 200 miles south of Palmerston on the banks of the Katherine River a few miles north of the Daly River system, and as such also in the top end. After reaching the lease with the first cattle and sheep in 1879, Alfred Giles stayed on to run it and the two other

Northern Territory properties owned by Dr. Browne. Browne appears also to have been influenced by Sergison's writing. Losses were severe at Springvale and eventually its stock had to be moved to Browne's other stations – Delamere and Newcastle Waters. By 1886 Browne was in financial trouble and by May 1887 he was forced to abandon all three runs.¹³ Giles remained at Springvale until 1894 running cattle, horses, and sheep but on a much-reduced scale. George McKeddie, a Darwin merchant, purchased the operation in 1896. However, thereafter it was never revived as an active station and eventually the government turned it into a heritage site. Delamere and Newcastle, in better localities, were eventually taken over by bona fide cattlemen and operated into the modern era.¹⁴

There were numerous other failures in the top end.¹⁵ Many of the first pastoralists who leased outside this area discovered that, within otherwise good pastoral regions, there were also substantial pockets of land that were marginal or worse due to factors, or combinations of them, that included very rugged terrain, thin soils, insufficient water, and/or rank grass.¹⁶ In central Australia and the Tableland, sand plains with spinifex that is too sparse for pasture are scattered here and there, particularly in the southern extremities.¹⁷ And all the land along the coastal regions running from 50 to 150 miles inland in the Victoria River and most of the Tableland districts is unsuited to grazing for basically the same reasons as those found in the top end – the soil is mineral deficient and for a substantial time of the year the vegetation is too coarse for the cattle to digest.¹⁸ In the early 1880s, John Costello started his first massive station near the mouth of the Roper and Limmen Rivers, which flow into the Gulf of Carpentaria on the far eastern side of the top end. He was forced to move inland and south to Lake Nash on the Tableland near the Queensland border after only a few years mainly because of the poor quality of the grasslands. As we will see, he never recovered from his early losses.

From the late 1880s, having now had time to observe the peculiarities of the land, men who took over any of the original leases after the first round of pastoralists had left gave up the worst parts of them. In his 1893 annual report, the Government Resident pointed to a process of decline in area leased and stocked that had started some six years earlier. "On looking at past records I find that in the year 1888 the revenue from our pastoral lands reached the highest figure, viz., 26,371 pounds. The following year there was a slight decrease, and since the year 1890 there has been

a falling off at the rate of between 4,000 and 5,000 pounds annually, until last year, when the decrease was 2,622 pounds.”¹⁹ This, he surmised was “chiefly due to the fact that lessees are retaining only the best of the country.” It was also because station owners who increased their holdings in the better areas were able to take advantage of the provisions of the 1881 legislation that allowed the first seven years of all new leases at 6 pence per square mile. Still the total leased area continued to fall. During 1892 and 1893 some 36,000 square miles were given up and fresh leases taken out comprising only 29,380 square miles. The Government Resident believed this was a very bad deal for the state of South Australia. “The result is that the annual revenue derived from all our pastoral lands, at the present time, amounts to the miserable sum of 9,000 pounds; and when it is considered that 5,000 pounds is being expended” from the public purse “in assisting the exportation of stock, that a large portion of the moneys voted for police protection and mail services, is for the benefit of pastoralists, and that 2,710 pounds has been expended during the last two years in boring operations” it is evident “that the industry does not exhibit a very satisfactory state of things.”²⁰

The Canadian ranchers would also have been better off had they been more familiar with the geographic location to which they were transferring large amounts of their wealth in the later nineteenth century. They did, however, have a slight advantage over the Australians, which would ultimately help them survive a little longer. They were able to get a somewhat better view of the land before they leased it and, therefore, to pick out the best (or least bad) portions of it. Even before the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway through to Calgary in 1883, men who were interested in investing were able to make their way to the opening frontier by travelling along the St. Lawrence River from Montreal to Kingston via the Grand Truck Railway, then by steamer across the Great Lakes to Chicago, by rail from Chicago to St. Paul, Minnesota, and by steamer again up the Missouri River to Fort Benton, Montana. From there they could ride horseback the last few hundred miles north to Calgary.²¹ It was a fairly demanding trip but nothing compared to what it would have been from southern regions of Australia to the outback of the Northern Territory. From 1883 on, of course, the Canadian Pacific Railway gave much more rapid and relatively convenient access to the Canadian West to anyone who wanted it. Thus the majority of the cattlemen managed to

locate in the high country of the foothills, the Milk River Ridge, or the Cypress Hills where the rough fescue was the most lush and where evergreen and aspen trees, cut banks, and steep hillsides offered animals some protection.²² This obviously did not save the stock from dying in droves, particularly in the winter, but it helped more of the ranches to survive longer than would otherwise have been the case.

Though the Victoria River Downs representative did not list the cost of poorly chosen land as one of his six issues when addressing the commission in 1895, he clearly understood that it was a factor. Speaking of his own station's coastal regions he said that "when the south-east monsoon blows" these regions are "excessively dry, and . . . there is no pasturage . . . whatever. About, November, thunderstorms come up, and from then to February you have some 70 in[ches] of rain, with intense heat. This brings up a flush of grass, which is only useful for cattle" when it is "very young." After that it rises "above the backs of the cattle" and "you can hardly see through it when riding."²³

The other significant factor this man did not list was the capital that too many Australians wasted trying to get into the sheep industry. In the beginning there was great optimism about the potential of the opening north for a viable wool and mutton trade. In 1881 a reporter chatted with the manager of the Glencoe station and questioned the wisdom of running sheep considering the coarseness of the grass. The manager assured him that "when the country gets well stocked . . . both cattle and sheep will thrive well" because "in time . . . in every country the feed becomes finer and richer for being eaten off."²⁴ Reasoning of that sort persisted even as the years passed and the industry failed to materialize. "When I stop to think and compare" the "miles of well-watered country, in the Victoria River district . . . with other parts of Australia," a newspaper editor mused some two decades later, "I feel it to be a thousand pities that" the people in those other parts "were not blessed with this magnificent country – or, I should rather say, that the Territory is not blessed with the presence of a few of these struggling settlers to its own and their advantage . . . This is admittedly the best pastoral country in the Territory for all classes of stock, and I predict that some day these plains will be covered with hundreds of thousands of sheep."²⁵

Virtually everywhere pastoralists tried sheep, however, they abandoned them, and in the great majority of cases they did so after a very

short period. During the 1880s, Austral Downs on the Queensland border carried 19,000 sheep and 1,400 head of mixed cattle and in 1884 Milne River station, Louisa Downs, and Austral Downs also on the Tableland were making “extensive improvements for sheep.”²⁶ All four stations continued in the business for only a few years.²⁷ In 1885 the Government Resident in Palmerston announced enthusiastically that Victoria River Downs was about to start up a large sheep component. In 1893 he noted “with regret” that Goldsbrough, Mort and Company, which had taken over the station by that time, had “decided to relinquish sheep-breeding and that the flock has been sold.”²⁸ The one station that kept sheep “successfully” for decades was Avon Downs on the Barkly. It finally sold out in 1919.²⁹

Stations gave various reasons for giving up. The small animals were relatively slow moving and comparatively weak, and predation was high. After speaking of the industry in 1895 a manager at Victoria River Downs stated that Native depredations were “one of the great causes of loss and failure.”³⁰ In the early years animal predators were bad in some regions too. “Stock of all sorts do remarkably well and increase rapidly,” Sergeant Major W.G. Stretton reported from the Borroloola police headquarters in 1890, “except sheep, which are so harassed by dingoes and eagles during lambing time that very few lambs can be saved.”³¹ The dingoes must have been particularly troublesome. Many years later researchers at the Fortescue River recorded that many of the beasts learned to hunt and kill sheep very quickly and were actually slaughtering them for sport.³²

Flooding also at times greatly reduced the flocks. Throughout the Northern Territory the sheep were often victims of flash flooding. In one incident reported by a frontiersman’s biographer, “the wide, swift overflow of the rivers swept to death many of the stock on the low, flooded flats and, in other places, trapped them on the . . . long islands” that “became inundated as the rapidly rising waters rose to abnormal heights.”³³ Anywhere that drinking water was scarce, moreover, sheep were less able to cope than larger grazing stock. At most, sheep can graze three to five miles from a water source. Once the grass got eaten down in a wider radius than that by the somewhat more mobile cattle they would lose weight and often die either of thirst or malnutrition.³⁴ Heat and unpalatable grass also presented huge challenges. When the sheep Alfred Giles brought to Springvale proved not viable he stocked Delamere and Newcastle Waters

and lost heavily on those stations too. After Dr. Browne sold out in 1887, Giles reported all the setbacks he had encountered at the three stations.

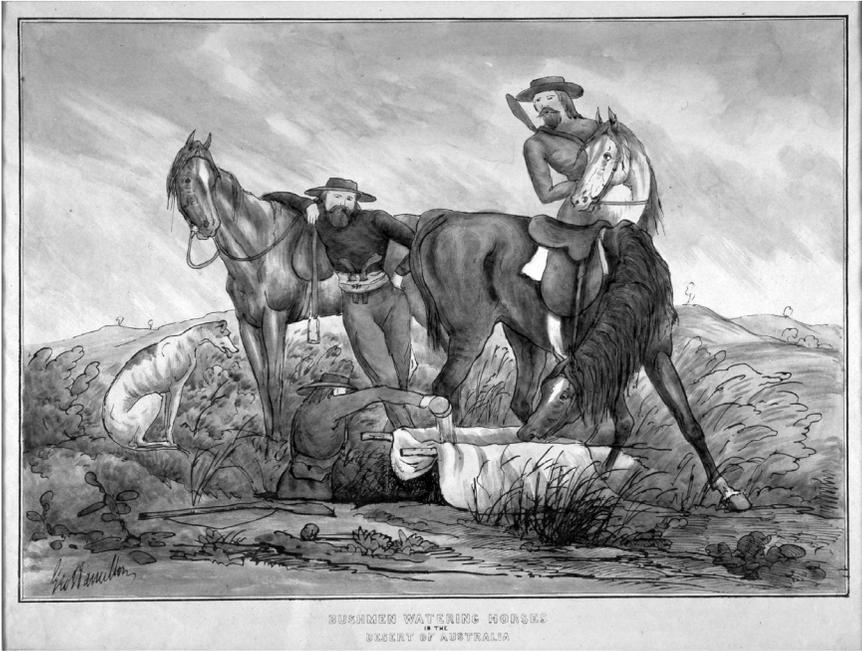
For fattening and healthy condition of the sheep we found the wet season preferable. After the first heavy rains the grass grew so rapidly that we could put three flocks at the one camp . . . The sheep kept the grass fed down within an area of three miles, but outside that area the grass grew coarse to a height of from 6-10 feet that was like a boundary fence. At the end of the wet season this grass "forest" had to be burnt off. The trouble was, however, that as soon as the first new crop was eaten off it never grew a second time until the next wet season. This necessitated shifting the flocks about every fortnight or three weeks . . . As the dry season extended, so did the grass disappear and the sheep lost condition they had gained in the wet season . . . All varieties of grasses produced seed detrimental to wool, but some, such as the spear and black grass, were simply deadly. The latter, especially, was so penetrating that its seeds would work their way gradually through to the bowels of the sheep and many died from that cause. We tried one lambing in the dry season, just before the wet set in, but the result was most disappointing. The lambs were small and miserable, the ewes were poor and had no milk and deserted their lambs. We next tried lambing in the wet season, which is the hot season, but here we had a fresh and unexpected set-back, for while the ewes were in fine condition with plenty of milk and the lambs strong and healthy, the terrible heat of the sun scorched the young lambs' backs so seriously that the tender wool was shed and the skin simply shrivelled and wrinkled up and scores of the young lambs died.³⁵

The peak year for sheep numbers in the Territory was 1891 when there were just over 99,000. By 1898 the total had dwindled to just over 64,000 and by 1910, when there were over half a million cattle, there were only 55,000 sheep.³⁶

The amount of money stations lost (or wasted) investing in the smaller, more fragile animals cannot be estimated in any very realistic way, but there is no question that few could afford this in the earliest period when they were facing numerous other costs. Running sheep was expensive compared to running cattle. It was necessary to hire a large labour force to herd and protect them, to build huts for both men and sheep, and to erect numerous fenced yards or corrals. It was also essential to buy a wool press and other equipment for shearing. One or two exceptions aside, ranchers in the Canadian West largely avoided the industry. Sheep were originally banned there because it was felt they grazed the grass so low to the ground that they would kill it, and, presumably, also to avoid the range wars that had broken out between sheep men and cattlemen south of the border.³⁷

Of the six factors the man from Victoria River Downs did pinpoint when listing the problems in the early industry, the one that was more costly by the greatest amount in Australia than in Canada was trailing in the initial herds. Most of the cattle for the more northern parts of the Northern Territory came from Queensland to the east. In the late 1870s and early 1880s the cattle business in that state was concentrated mostly in the far southern regions and, therefore, even when supplying the Barkly Tableland the stock had to be driven nearly a thousand miles. For the Victoria River area the distances could be more than twice that. A percentage of the cattle were also brought into these areas from New South Wales to the south of Queensland, in which case the distances were even greater. The region around Alice Springs was supplied principally from South Australia. The cattle normally came from the far southern parts of that state as well and, therefore, it might be necessary to drive them some eight hundred to well over twelve hundred miles. In all areas a diverse assortment of obstacles stood in the way. Alfred Giles put it in heroic terms when reflecting back on the entire process. A general account of the movement of stock to the frontier, he said, would be “a history of . . . pioneers, drovers and their attendants who doggedly determined to get there, in the face of almost insufferable obstacles. Alternately blocked by floods, droughts, impassable scrubs [thick bush], hostile savages, sickness and death,” these men “ever kept their faces towards their objective, in some cases thousands of miles from their starting point.”³⁸

For their own nearly two-year trek from South Australia to Springvale, Giles and his brother Arthur engaged a huge contingent of men, stock



MEN SCOOPING WATER FROM DRY STREAM BED. NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA, CANBERRA, PIC-AN557686-V, GEORGE HAMILTON, ARTWORK, 1840.

horses, drays, wagons, and saddlery and they carted in stores at the exorbitant price of “30 pounds and 45 pounds a ton from Port Augusta” on the southwest coast of South Australia.³⁹ The crew carried “ploughs and scoops so to trench” dry riverbeds when there was no other way to get water. They even hauled along their own “well sinking party” and “iron troughs” to find and contain the precious liquid when all else failed. When they reached Leighs Creek, one of Dr. Browne’s properties just south of the Northern Territory border, they encountered “great difficulties and setbacks as the whole country was in a deplorable dry state” and there was “a total absence of feed.” The cattle must have suffered tremendously during that period and Giles had to buy “chaff” for the draught and stock horses at thirty-five shillings per bag.⁴⁰ On the other side of the border the drovers “encountered . . . a perilous 105 miles waterless stage” in which they were forced to rely on their scoops to save themselves and

their stock and then monsoonal rains and the treacherous, overflowing waters of Newcastle River.⁴¹

How many cattle perished on that trip is not known, but evidently the numbers lost on all the cattle drives in the early years were enormous. “Twenty seven thousand head . . . left Moodie and Richmond Downs and other N[ew] S[south] Wales properties for the . . . stations in 1879 and until 1883 the 18,000 odd that arrived safely . . . were constantly on the road and being delivered.”⁴² In 1880 Nat Buchanan brought in the 20,000 head of mixed cattle for Glencoe in five lots of 4,000. Buchanan had to divide them into ten separate groups of around 2,000 and to employ seventy men all told “for five months.”⁴³ Crocodiles in the northern rivers frequently stampeded the cattle, and when one deliriously thirsty bunch of cattle arrived at the mouth of the Robinson River in the northern part of the Territory they “rushed” into the water only to discover that it was undrinkable due to the salt content. The animals panicked and “there was a rather bad smash. Some went mad and got beyond control. A few were steered to fresh water further upstream, and others reached it by themselves and were picked up later by drovers; but a great number were lost.” Near Katherine, “early storms had swollen the Elsey River” and when a bunch of cattle reached it the head stockman neglected to chase “a few coachers” across first to encourage the others to follow. When the herd leaders thus got well out into the stream they lost their nerve and turned back. “The weight and crush of the mob [i.e., the herd] behind smothered and drowned seventy of them.”⁴⁴

The expense of cartage, as the man testifying before the 1895 commission noted, was also enormously onerous, and this continued to be the case when it came to bringing in provisions after the original herds were in because transportation systems were so poor. True, the Australian cattlemen, like the Canadians, needed only limited supplies once they reached their leases. However, what they did need cost them dearly. They did not fence the open range either, but they too required small enclosed paddocks around their home place to keep their working horses accessible and to hold bullocks for short periods after the musters to ready them for the long drive to market. Many stations also built short line fences of barbed wire to help them direct their herds to gathering corrals during the mustering process. And, of course, all the pioneers needed assorted outbuildings for various purposes. Typically these included “a large

store, blacksmith's shop, harness-house, beef house, kitchen, cellar, cart shed, milking and horse yards, [and] stone tank" for watering stock. The buildings were not luxurious.⁴⁵ Most were constructed of galvanized iron sheeting and wood or stone found locally.⁴⁶

However, all the construction materials and equipment, whether iron for roofing or barbed wire and nails for fences or stoves for cooking, had to be carted overland via the cattle trails or shipped to Darwin from southern centres such as Brisbane, Sydney, or Melbourne and then hauled thousands of miles to the stations. In response to Giles's request to put up fifteen or twenty miles of fence at Springvale in 1886, Browne pleaded that "with cartage at present prices," this "would ruin the Bank of England."

My outlay up to the present time is most alarming. I realy cannot make any improvements that can possibly be done without. When you first wrote about [the first] . . . seven miles or so of fencing I did not like to say no to it but now hearing from you as to the cost and seeing the great deficit account . . . [and seeing] the urgent necessity for diminished outlay every where especially in the N. Territory where I fear already it will take some time even with a successful increase of stock to represent it, I must ask you to review all your operation and see if you can by any means reduce the present outlay and as to fencing to keep cattle in bounds we must consider as quite beyond our means at present. In the old days of our cattle business we never created fences on our . . . runs to keep them from straying but trusted our stockmen. I must ask you to do now as you remember we did then and make no improvements nor incur any outlay that you can possibly do without until the stations are at least paying working expenses.⁴⁷

Browne was running desperately short of capital at this time. He ended his lecture with the words "so if you have bought wire for this fence please sell it again."

It was only after they had built basic infrastructure to house themselves and their personnel and to exercise limited control over their stock

that the Australians could think of boring water wells in strategic locations on their leases. Some of them drilled one or two, or as in the case of Alexandria a few, of what in later years would become a whole network of watering facilities throughout their runs. This was a most expensive undertaking and cartage was a big part of the cost because very bulky drilling equipment had to be brought in along with men and provisions, usually from Brisbane on Queensland's east coast. As we will see, the financial charges could well prove to be the final and insurmountable blow to solvency.

For the first Canadian ranchers neither trailing in the cattle nor hauling in materials and supplies was nearly as challenging as it was for the Australian pastoralists. Most of the first Canadian cattle came from Montana and, by walking them north via the level plains to the east of the foothills during the comparatively mild summer months, the drovers normally escaped climatic extremes. Along the way, moreover, they were never short of water. Ample drinking water for men and beasts was provided by the Musselshell, Missouri, and Marias Rivers and Cutbank, French, Lodge, and Sun Creeks in Montana and by the Milk, Old Man, South Saskatchewan, Bow, and Highwood Rivers and too many streams to enumerate on the Canadian side. Moreover, the distances the first Canadian cattlemen had to cover were small in comparison to those faced by the first Northern Territorians. The Canadians purchased most of their stock from brokers either at Fort Benton or Warm Springs, Montana, both of which were under 100 miles south of the international border. Since most of the Canadian ranches were no more than twice that distance on the other side, few had to trail their herds more than 400 to 500 miles. At eight to ten miles a day the journey could be made in weeks rather than months or years. One or two notable exceptions aside, it was usually accomplished without incident.⁴⁸ Once they got their herds to their leases the Canadian cattlemen needed basic infrastructure too, but the railway made it possible to bring in all other goods and services efficiently and at a relatively reasonable cost.⁴⁹

Another expense named by the man from Victoria River Downs that was greater in Australian than in Canada in the earliest period was wages for the stockmen. It does seem doubtful that the Territorial cattlemen had to hire more men relative to the number of stock they were running, since after the 1886–87 winter the Canadians had to take on extra staff

to put up feed for their weaker and more vulnerable animals and then to feed it to them during inclement weather.⁵⁰ However, account books kept by Goldsborough, Mort and Company, now in the National University Archives in Canberra, and by the Walrond ranch, now in the Glenbow Archives in Calgary, illustrate that the Australians did pay more per man. In 1909 the top stockman at Victoria River Downs, R. Townsend, was receiving more than 41 pounds a month, which was equivalent to about 205 dollars and in 1910 he got a raise to 61 pounds or 305 dollars. His counterpart on the Walrond ranch was paid from 150 to 200 dollars a month in the same period. The average wage on the Victoria River Downs station for regular rank-and-file stockmen and station hands was between 6 pounds and 15 pounds a month for an average of about 14½ pounds or 72 dollars. The regular cowboys on the Walrond ranch got 35 to 40 dollars a month.⁵¹ One important reason for the difference was that the population in the Northern Territory was so much smaller than that in western Canada. When pastoralists began the movement to their respective frontiers, the numbers of non-Natives in the opening lands on both continents was, of course, very small. But in southern Alberta and Saskatchewan the newcomer population expanded more quickly with and after the arrival of the cattle, growing to one hundred thousand by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. In the Northern Territory there were still fewer than eight thousand new settlers when South Australia took control in 1911.⁵² This reflected the difference in accessibility and, one suspects, also to some extent, in the amount of literature extolling the respective frontiers.

The man from Victoria River Downs seems to have been correct in intimating that the other reason for relatively higher wages in the Northern Territory was related to Aboriginal hostility and predation. In a later chapter this factor will be examined in considerable detail.⁵³ Here, let it suffice to say that racial conflict was a much greater problem for the northern Australians than for the western Canadians. In the Northern Territory Natives roamed the wilds more or less freely, and in the early years many deeply resented the intrusion into their lands of white Anglo invaders, not the least because the intruders often depleted the natural water supplies with their thirsty stock, basically kidnapped Aboriginal women for their sexual pleasure, and in many cases violently wiped out Native communities that resisted them.⁵⁴ In Alberta and Assiniboia, by

contrast, the North-West Mounted Police placed the Indians on reserves and restricted their movements, mostly to stop them from interrupting settlement. This did not prevent racial violence but it does seem to have moderated it a good deal.⁵⁵

The sixth and final major cost described by the interviewee to the commissioners which was more burdensome in Australia than Canada in the earliest frontier period was contagion. Some diseases such as the mange and blackleg that plagued other frontiers did not pose a great threat in the Territory. Both these diseases commonly develop when animals are penned up and share a common feed for a relatively extended period. But in the Territory the cattle were pretty much all left to wander the open range throughout the year. Outbreaks of pleuropneumonia occurred when the cattle were under stress, as when being driven over long distances, but once the animals were settled into their new surroundings these became less common. In time some cattlemen began to use an inoculant to prevent it.⁵⁶ They would take live viruses from the lungs of a diseased animal, store them in a beer bottle kept cool in a wet bag, and then saturate a piece of wool with the viruses and insert it in the animals' tail "just above the switch."⁵⁷ Far more burdensome than any of these diseases in the minds of most of the early pastoralists was "Texas tick fever," or redwater disease. The babesia bacteria carried by the common cattle tick, *boophilus microplus*, causes babesiosis and anaplasmosis, both of which are a form of redwater. These diseases were fatal in about 80 percent of cases.⁵⁸ One theory is that redwater first reached the continent carried by ticks in Brahman cattle imported from India to Darwin in 1872. It then spread south and east into the Barkly Tableland as more cattle were brought to the top end.⁵⁹ The first major epidemic in the Territory seems to have occurred at Glencoe station "about the years 1880–81." Shortly after a mob was trailed in from Queensland, a large percentage of the cattle died. Later a man with the last name Lawrie bought "a number of [Glencoe] cattle to take to Port Darwin," probably for slaughter. A considerable portion of these animals died en route. "Subsequent arrivals at Glencoe experienced a like mortality."⁶⁰ In 1885 J.H. Gordon was driving some three thousand cattle from Cloncurry in Queensland to Wave Hill. Between the Eley and the Katherine Rivers the disease broke out in the mob and many of the animals became sick. "It was thought that some poisonous plant was the cause, and all haste was made to the Katherine; but in a few days about

twelve hundred head had died.”⁶¹ A year or so later Alfred Giles brought one hundred fifty head of cattle to Springvale from Newcastle Waters and then headed them north, ostensibly to market in Palmerston. Nearly half died before they got there.⁶² At first it was believed the infestations were almost all in the northern droving route through the Roper, Eley, and King River regions. However, it was soon discovered that flare-ups were occurring from time to time “all over the Northern Territory.” Stock “may be healthy on the runs,” one experienced cattleman noted, “but as soon as they are moved they are liable to get it.”⁶³ According to the Government Resident this had become a serious setback to the entire northern industry by 1888 because lessees “will not run the risk of the ruinous loss which may attend the attempt to stock new country.”⁶⁴ Some years later a scientific expedition observed: “all parts of the Northern Territory which are capable of maintaining ticks . . . are affected more or less.”⁶⁵ In 1896 the governments of South Australia, New South Wales, and Queensland banned the importation of infected cattle from all parts of the Territory until they were dipped twice in a solution consisting of arsenic, caustic soda, Stockholm tar, tallow, and water. This was to kill the tick that carried the disease. The process was a difficult and drawn out affair very much like the mange treatment in Canada. In 1907 a concrete tank was constructed at Anthony’s Lagoon near the Queensland/Tableland border and in 1908, 16,556 head were dipped there.⁶⁶

Disease losses from redwater became considerably less severe as time passed. The cattle were no longer subject to the stress of the long and arduous treks inward and had had enough time in the Territory to develop some natural immunity. After the turn of the twentieth century science was to play a significant role in controlling the disease worldwide.⁶⁷ On the northern Great Plains of North America, redwater did not cause major damage even before that because the Texas tick was unable to survive either the cold winter weather or the dry inland atmosphere. Arguably the mange was significantly more expensive in Canada than redwater was in Australia, but it did not become a substantial problem until near the turn of the century – some fifteen to twenty years after most of the great ranches had come into existence. It did not take a toll early and, therefore, cannot be considered a start-up cost. Some frightening outbreaks of blackleg did occur on the northern plains.⁶⁸ It was, however, only the small numbers of Canadian cattle that were penned up in the winter that

were at risk. Furthermore, a vaccination for blackleg became available in 1895 and it seems to have been used quite widely.⁶⁹ Pleuropneumonia also struck Canadian cattle but it does not appear to have been any more destructive on the northern Great Plains than in the outback.⁷⁰

One other major impediment to the Australian industry that the witness pinpointed in 1895, the lack of markets, was also greatest in the earliest frontier period. Another was predation by Anglo-European humans (which he did not mention). However, both were approximately equally problematic to ranching in western Canada and will, for that reason, be examined in a later chapter. How all the main costs of starting business in the Northern Territory combined with a few more commonplace ones to bring about the fall of the first round of pastoralists is clearly seen in John Costello's struggle and ultimate failure to establish a vast grazing empire on the eastern side of the Territory in the 1880s. Costello first tried to launch his cattle enterprise at his Valley of the Springs station on the Limmen Bight River along the coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria extending as far north as the Roper River. His difficulties began as soon as he gathered his herd in Queensland and started the journey to the lease. "The first night it took nearly all hands to keep the mob on camp. Over one thousand seven hundred beasts, all in the wild and restless state, demand some holding in the dark."⁷¹ After travelling some distance the cattle grew accustomed to the ordeal and they settled down. But soon the drovers encountered other problems. "Although the route was on the coastal fall, which, in normal seasons, gets rather too much rain, yet on this occasion the whole area was suffering, more or less, from the dry weather," which put the stock under considerable stress.⁷² When Costello and his men reached Burketown in the northern part of the state, they discovered that it had only one store "and from this, large quantities of rations would have to be bought."⁷³ The carriers had Costello at their mercy and they demanded "special inducements" to haul the provisions to the new station. Finally, he was able to hire an outfit for the astounding price of seventy-five pounds sterling a ton. "It was a case of take it or leave it, so far as the staggering prices were concerned. Men were scarce, also very independent, and rendered inferior service. The cost of stocking new country under these conditions was formidable in the extreme."⁷⁴ To make matters worse, half or so of the high-priced supplies were eventually lost on the long trek to the station headquarters, ostensibly because the

wagon used to haul them broke down in the rough terrain.⁷⁵ The journey was also very costly in terms of the pounds of live beef lost. Much of the country consisted of “heavy sand, covered with a dense, low non-edible scrub. Here and there, patches of ti-tree flats growing a sour, wiry grass of little nutriment.” The daily ordeal of “rough, dry feed had a decidedly weakening effect on the stock and they fell away in condition as time wore on.”⁷⁶ Inevitably pleuropneumonia struck the emaciated animals.⁷⁷ After he finally got them to Valley of the Springs, Costello watched his numbers dwindle because of ticks and redwater disease, hostile Aborigines, Anglo gold prospectors, and, most of all, the coarse, mineral-deficient grasses in the coastal region.⁷⁸ Finally in 1890, after malaria and other diseases, white ants, and bush fires had also plagued him, his men, and his family, he realized he had not chosen his rangeland well.⁷⁹ In 1890 he decided to move the entire operation some four hundred miles south to the Lake Nash area on the Barkly Tableland.

At the new lease the grass was somewhat finer and a little easier for the cattle to digest, but Costello soon found himself struggling with severe flooding caused by heavy seasonal rains. He realized, however, that the greatest threat was the tendency of his natural water sources to dry up. He tried expensive “overshot dams” in the rivers and creeks. These were valuable, and at times no doubt saved the stock, but “the periodic droughts would see them all dry.”⁸⁰ He was finally forced to bring in a big boring outfit from Brisbane to drill for water. He knew this was extremely expensive and it was risky since there was no guarantee that water would be found.

The drilling machinery was erected . . . and . . . operations were commenced. But it took several hundred feet of . . . sinking before . . . [water] was struck, and it was of a remarkable and somewhat inky appearance, giving a strange, unpleasant odour. Sinking was continued, the unsatisfactory fluid cased off and, at last, an abundant and unexhaustible [*sic*] supply of good, clear water was obtained.

It was what is termed sub-artesian, and had to be equipped with a powerful and expensive pumping plant. This consisted of an eight horsepower steam engine, heavy walking beam,

with it accessories, as well as inner casting, rods and pump and when these were in fullest operation, the capability of the bore was thoroughly tested.

No impression could be made on the wonderful underground reservoir, though the engine and pump worked day and night without ceasing for a moment. Another bore was put down on an excellent piece of country . . . with a similar successful result.

These cased wells had an immense capacity for watering stock and countless numbers [of cattle] could obtain sufficient drink. Thus . . . the permanence of the water supply was secured – never again would the station be absolutely dried out.⁸¹

The bores required Costello to invest, as well, in windmills or engines and huge earth storage tanks and troughs. Unfortunately “the high price of material and . . . carriage, coupled with wages and many other charges, all in the aggregate, involved a payment which strained” Costello’s finances “to the utmost limit.”⁸² He found himself running a large overdraft, and a short time after the well water became available his bank manager arrived with a legal document authorizing seizure of the Lake Nash station.⁸³

One of the facts this case helps to demonstrate is that many of the big stations in the Territory were in very rough shape before the international depression that started in America in the early 1890s, quickly spread to Europe and other countries including Australia, and kept the price of beef declining worldwide through to the end of the decade.⁸⁴ Costello’s finances – like those of Charles Fisher, Maurice Lyons, and William J. Browne – were in a precarious state before that widespread financial decline took hold. Nat Buchanan kept Wave Hill going in the 1880s and made it into the early 1890s by selling “a few lots” of cattle “in the Darwin markets, and . . . a few to the Kimberly goldfields.” When the depression began he was already staggering “under an ever-increasing overdraft and interest burden.” He finally surrendered Wave Hill to his brother, William F. Buchanan, in 1894.⁸⁵ “So, like many another pioneer of the interior,” he dropped out after making “the track easy for others

to prosper.”⁸⁶ E.A. Macpherson of Corella Downs on the Playford River told the Government Resident in 1890 that he was “one of the pioneers from New South Wales who, nine years ago undertook the hazardous and expensive task of stocking the Northern pastoral blocks.” I have, he said, “spent near 26,000 pounds, without yet a return” and many are in a similar situation. This business as a whole “is acknowledged on all sides to be a failure.” Faced with “enormous expenditure year after year without profit I do not see how the present state of things can continue.” We need “some substantial assistance from the Government” to develop markets and to help with the cost of sinking new bores.⁸⁷

It seems evident, then, that at this early stage the big ranches in the Northern Territory were generally in a weaker position financially than those in the Canadian West. To say this is not to suggest that all the latter were immune to enormous losses in the first years. Indeed, in one or two cases their operational deficits were enormous. Senator Matthew Cochrane purchased his first cattle – 6,634 head – in Montana in 1881 and hired the men he needed to trail them north.⁸⁸ The drive, bigger by far than any that had previously brought stock to Alberta, soon proved disastrous. It was late in the fall season when the cattle arrived and the trail-weary beasts were wiped out in droves by a severe early winter storm. The second big drive, conducted the next fall, had a similar result. Cochrane decided the weather was too extreme around Calgary, and he took out a new lease and moved his cattle operation some 125 miles south to the Waterton area near the American border. He then transferred the Bow River lease to the British American Ranch Company, got a special permit from his friends in the federal government, and brought in over seven thousand sheep from Montana and Wyoming. Hundreds of these animals died in prairie fires and one particularly severe blizzard.⁸⁹ Later, Cochrane’s sons disclosed that the first years in the West had cost the family something like \$400,000.⁹⁰ Some other operations that were unfortunate enough to mis-time their arrival in the West lost so much before they had a chance to properly settle that they had to almost immediately give up the fight. The N Bar N outfit arrived in the Wood Mountain area in the summer of 1886 with several thousand cattle. After the horrendous blizzards that struck that winter only a small remnant of the herd remained alive. In the spring the ranch closed its Canadian venture for good. The Turkey Track ranch brought its initial herds into Assiniboia

just in time to collide with the notorious winter of 1906–7.⁹¹ It too pulled out of Canada the following spring. On the whole, however, most of the first Canadian ranches had somewhat more staying power than their Australian counterparts, largely because their initial challenges were not quite as severe. For them the process of decline had just begun when Fisher and Lyon, Costello, Browne, Buchanan, and many of the pioneers in the Northern Territory were on their last legs. Much of the rest of this investigation will attempt to explain why the tables would turn – why the big, open range cattle stations were able to re-establish and find ways to carry on in the three pastoral regions of the Northern Territory while the Canadian corporations would disappear for good.

