

SO FAR AND YET SO CLOSE: FRONTIER CATTLE RANCHING IN WESTERN PRAIRIE CANADA AND THE NORTHERN TERRITORY OF AUSTRALIA
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THE SHORT HISTORY OF THE TEXAS SYSTEM IN WESTERN CANADA

Immediately following the American Civil War (1861–65) Texan cattle traders searched for new markets for largely feral cattle that had been left to wander the plains during the fighting.¹ Many drove their herds to the “corn belt” of the midwestern states where the cattle were placed on farms to be fattened before the final journey by rail to the packinghouses in Chicago. At the same time soon to be well-known paths, such as the Chisholm and the Goodnight-Loving Trails, were opened to stock “new” rangeland in mining districts of the far north. As more and more Texas cattle reached the Montana ranges they interbred with the “westerns” – mostly British breeds including Hereford, Shorthorn, and Angus – principally from California via Oregon – and then with similar stock that the cattlemen began to import from the eastern United States and from Great Britain.²

Starting in the 1870s increasing numbers of cattle were driven into Alberta and Assiniboia to feed Native bands facing starvation with the destruction of the bison herds. The missionary brothers John and David McDougall maintained a few cattle near Morley west of Calgary from the beginning of the decade. In 1877 former whiskey trader H.A. (Fred) Kanouse turned twenty-one cows and a bull loose on the open range near Fort Macleod. Then John Miller arrived from Montana with some twenty-five head, which “he too put out to rustle for themselves.”³ During the spring of 1878 a number of small businessmen including Tom Lynch,

who had migrated west from Missouri, and George Emerson, a Canadian who had teamed up with Lynch in Montana, drove in hundreds of horses and cattle. These they sold to men already on the frontier, the majority of them former North-West Mounted Police officers who had obtained a discharge from the force to take up ranching. In 1879 Emerson and Lynch drove in a thousand cattle and horses to start up their own ranch on the north side of the Highwood River west of the town of High River. By 1880 some two hundred mostly small herds were grazing on the free grass between the United States border and the Bow River near the present site of Calgary.⁴

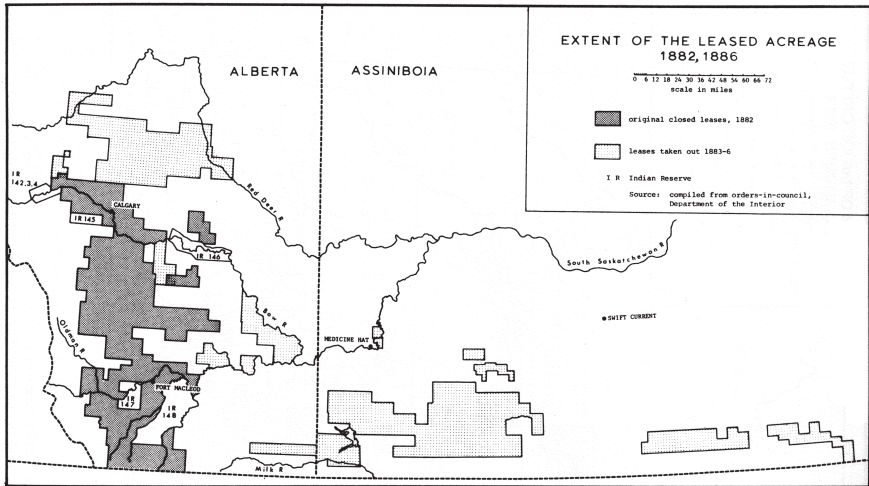
Shortly thereafter the era of the so-called “great ranches” entered full swing. It too developed first in the American West. New grazing corporations, which had been hastily thrown together in Boston, New York, Montreal, Edinburgh, and London, appeared on the Great Plains to invest huge pools of surplus capital. By the late 1870s, thousands of joint stock companies, with hundreds of millions of dollars, descended on Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. The directors and shareholders of these corporations felt they could make great sums of money ranching in the West, in part because they were able to operate on unclaimed and therefore free range. Their exuberance helped to induce politically astute men of influence and considerable wealth in eastern Canada to lobby the Conservative government of Sir John A. Macdonald for the right to take up similar ventures in Alberta and Assiniboia. This led to legislation in 1881 allowing individuals or companies to start big livestock grazing operations on the bases of 21-year closed leases of up to 100,000 acres of land at the bargain price of one cent an acre per year. The response was dramatic. A number of the companies leased well over 100,000 acres by using a variety of names and within the next few years 111 of them controlled several million acres of western land.

The ranching corporations on both sides of the border all required cattle, and thus what had been a stream of incoming stock suddenly turned into a flood. In the summer of 1883 Montana rancher Teddy (Blue) Abbott was driving cattle up from Texas. As he rode along he was “hardly ever out of sight of [another] herd.” One day he looked over the plains from a small hilltop in the relatively flat country near the Platte River. “I could see seven herds behind us,” he remembered. “I knew there were eight herds ahead of us, and I could see the dust from thirteen more of them on

the other side of the river.”⁵ By the end of 1880 the number of cattle in the state of Montana had risen to 555,000 and at the turn of the century to just over 900,000.⁶ In southern Alberta and Assiniboia the numbers soared from a modest 9,000 to around 100,000 in the early 1880s, and then to 355,000 by 1901.⁷

The largest of three cattle ranching “blocks” that formed in the Canadian West ran in a north-south direction along the foothills bordering the Rocky Mountains west of Calgary. It included three of the original “Big Four” operations: the owners of the Bar U were from the Eastern Townships in Quebec, and those of the Oxley and Walrond outfits were mainly Britons. The Cochrane ranch owned principally by Senator Matthew Cochrane, also from the Eastern Townships in Quebec, was established in the area directly west of Calgary in 1881, and two years later moved south to the Waterton region near the American border. Another block of ranches took root in Canada after starting up in the United States. This group included ranches owned by brothers Samuel and John Spencer, originally from Ontario; the Conrad brothers, William and John, from Virginia; and William McIntyre from Utah. These outfits occupied the hills of the Milk River Ridge stretching eastward along the American border from the second Cochrane ranch. A third block – including the Canadian Agricultural Coal and Colonization Company, or 76, ranch owned by a British syndicate under Sir John Lister-Kaye; the Turkey Track controlled by English-born Henry Whitesides Cresswell⁸ and A.J. (Tony) Day; the Circle Diamond outfit of Coloradans Frank G. Bloom and M.D. Thatcher; and the N Bar N outfit of brothers William and Fredrick Niedringhaus of Missouri – settled in the region running eastward from the second block through the Cypress Hills to the Wood Mountain area in Assiniboia Territory.⁹

In this period the northern Great Plains saw a major influx of people as well as cattle companies. A small number of the newcomers were well-healed owners or managers of the big outfits. Far more, however, were the young men who flowed in to work on the big ranches as cowpunchers. A portion of them were Americans who originally helped to drive in cattle from the south and then stayed on, drawn by the relatively good pay offered by the new outfits competing for their cowboy skills. The famous black cowboy John Ware; the manager and then owner of the Bar U, George Lane; the famous bronco buster Frank Ricks; the one-time



EXTENT OF THE LEASES IN WESTERN CANADA, 1886. SIMON EVANS, "THE PASSING OF A FRONTIER: RANCHING IN THE CANADIAN WEST, 1882-1912," UNPUBLISHED MA THESIS: UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY, 1976, REPRINTED IN DAVID H. BREEN, *THE CANADIAN PRAIRIE WEST AND THE RANCHING FRONTIER* (TORONTO: UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS, 1983), 46.

foreman of the Bar U, Everett Johnson; the Cochrane ranch cowboys W.D. Kerfoot, Jim Dunlap, and a Mexican known as Ca Sous; and the first Walrond ranch foreman, Jim Patterson, had, like Emerson and Lynch, all learned their trade in the American West.¹⁰ A lot more of the migrants, however, were from eastern Canada and Great Britain. Many of them, were "wannabes" who were hoping to live up to the heroic image of the western frontiersman they had met in a host of American, and one or two Canadian, dime and romantic novels; and they wanted to do so as quickly as humanly possible.¹¹ After they stepped off the train in the rapidly expanding town of Calgary, they headed to local shops to secure the wide brimmed hat, the boots, the bright shirt and bandanna, and the spurs they needed to play the part of the working cowboy. Some of these young men failed miserably, turning to drink, prostitutes, and general dissipation before heading back home in disgrace. Others, though, signed on with one of the cattle operations and learned to ride, rope, brand, and even handle a six-shooter. Before the late 1870s, according to one rancher, "no one had heard tell of a cowboy" on the northwestern plains, but by 1883 "leather

chaps, wide hats, gay handkerchiefs, clanking silver spurs and skin fitting high healed [*sic*] boots . . . had become an institution.”¹²

The period of the “great ranches” did not endure. A combination of factors saw all the corporations terminated in relatively short order. The North Fork ranch near Pincher Creek in southwestern Alberta closed down after only three years; the Stair or 76 ranch did so in 1909 due to depleted finances; the Cochranes lost heavily in their first years and then sold out when higher land prices enabled them to recoup some of their capital in the new century; the Turkey Track and Bloom outfits quit in 1907; the Scottish-owned Matador, which was part of a much bigger ranching empire that stretched across parts of Montana, Texas, and South America, ceased active operations in the Canadian West in the early 1920s; and a thorough investigation of the Walrond ranch’s accounts, cattle numbers, and stockholder debt has shown that its liquid position was unsustainable before the dreadful winter of 1906–7 severely reduced what was left of its cattle inventory.¹³ All of these vast spreads were to be replaced by much smaller, family-operated units, most of which might more realistically be described as ranch/farms.

There were two important reasons for the failure of the corporation ranches. The most obvious was the beef market. Historians have been inclined to speak of a “beef bonanza” in these years, referring one supposes to a significant period of high prices that netted the western cattle industry great profits and drew many of the capitalists from the East and overseas into the business. This is simply a figment of our collective imagination.¹⁴ Census statistics demonstrate that, after declining precipitously in the mid- and late 1870s, beef prices enjoyed a brief period of recovery from 1880 to 1882 and then dropped year after year through to the turn of the century. They improved only gradually after that and after many of the big ranches had either failed or been too badly crippled financially to endure much longer.¹⁵ As American historian and cattle industry expert James Cox put it, “the magnificent prices, to which we have alluded as making glad the heart of the cattleman in the early 1880s, were succeeded by prices which, while, in some instances, they left a nominal margin of profit, took away the gold-mine appearance and reputation of the trade.”¹⁶

The other reason for the collapse was environmental. Left to fend for themselves on the open range, too many cattle succumbed to predators, including wolves which could prey with ease on cattle spread out across

the plains; the mange, a disease that passed from one animal to another as the herds mingled on the open range; and, above all, ferocious winters. The winter of 1886–87 was remembered by many cattlemen as the worst of all time. It caused huge losses on the Great Plains from Canada all the way south to the panhandle of northwestern Texas.¹⁷ Alfred E. Cross, the well-known owner of the A7 ranch in the Porcupine Hills, some seventy miles south of Calgary, acknowledged that “the custom” when the open range system was first used in western Canada was “not to feed almost any cattle.” The blizzards of 1886–87 were “the most severe known in the country,” he recalled. Cross’s cattle “drifted south in the storms with a large number of new cattle on the range.” He lost “25 to 50 per cent” of his stock during this time, “principally” the gestating cows essential to herd development and future sales.¹⁸ Journalist L.V. Kelly used his literary talent to depict the devastation more generally: “Clustering in the coulees or huddling in the open, the animals suffered and died in enormous numbers. Some, breast-high in packed and crusted banks” of snow “died as they stood; some sheltered somewhat by bluffs or coulees” but unable to get at the grass through the deep cover of white “starved pitifully, ravenously searching for food until the frost had reached their vitals.” In the spring, Kelly remembered, “the bodies of great steers were found . . . heaps of them, with their throats and stomachs punctured and torn by sharp splinters from dried and frozen branches and chunks of wood, which they had swallowed in their anguish.” Many of the cattle just lay down in the snow to die. When cowboys found them “buried in the . . . drifts or lying, too weak to get up,” they used their six-shooters to put them out of their misery.¹⁹

Cross believed that “few of the ranchers lost less than 40 per cent” of the animals they had on the open range that winter, “some losing 100, many losing 75 per cent.”²⁰ The Quorn operation to the east of the A7 lost “nearly every hoof.” To the northwest Tom Lynch was left with a mere eighty out of his eight hundred stockers. The N Bar N outfit, which had brought six thousand cattle to the Wood Mountain area in 1886, pulled out of Canada in the spring of 1887 trailing a scant two thousand.²¹

After that winter most ranchers realized it was necessary for them to make some modifications to the Texas grazing system. They began putting up a small amount of feed for the weakest animals in their herds – principally the old cows and very young calves – when the weather was

at its worst. However, they continued to turn all the rest of their cattle loose on the open range year round. And year after year they suffered financially as a result. The blizzards and extreme temperatures of 1891–92, 1892–93, 1896–97, 1897–98, and 1902–03 also did considerable damage. Finally, the horrendous winter of 1906–7 signalled the end of open range grazing in western Canada, as something like 50 percent of all the cattle in the roaming herds were lost.²²

The blizzards by themselves are evidence of Nature's destructive power on the northern plains, but it is seldom recognized that two other primarily ecological forces also added significantly to the death toll. Before the cattlemen appeared in this region timber and grey wolves had almost died out, excessively hunted for the fur trade and deprived by the depletion of the bison herds which had traditionally supplied much of their diet.²³ When the ranchers turned their first cattle loose, however, the beasts gained a new food source that was much easier to kill than the wild, wary, and relatively powerful buffalo had been. By the late 1880s wolf numbers were on the rebound, and by the mid-1890s these predators had become one of the stockmen's most formidable enemies.²⁴ Fuelled by the abundance of raw meat, the wolves grew to an impressive size and sometimes ran in packs that could bring down a full-grown cow. Most of all the beasts were a threat to younger stock.²⁵ Wolves "have been giving us a hard deal during the last two weeks," David Warnock, the onsite manager of the Walrond ranch, told his general manager, Duncan McEachran, in July 1894. In just "a few nights they killed . . . a number of yearling cattle and calves. . . We found several of the carcasses freshly killed in fact warm and poisoned some of these but the wolves did not touch the bait. We have been doing our best to kill them with the dogs but so far, have only succeeded in killing two full grown ones. The dogs are too light and get a terrible mauling every time they tackle" one of the wild creatures.²⁶ In an attempt to explain why the cattle count fell far short of expectations in 1897, Warnock suggested that four-legged predators were largely responsible. "Take for instance, the damage" they did "amongst horses," he said. They "killed in less than six months some forty odd head of one and 2 years old colts belonging" to the company.²⁷ This was about a twelfth of all the well-bred (and relatively valuable) Clydesdales and Shires the ranch owned; Warnock was intimating that similar damage must have been inflicted on the cattle.²⁸

The other natural force greatly destructive to open range ranching was the mange, a disease that occurs when parasitic mites attack the hides of both cattle and horses, causing them tremendous discomfort.²⁹ The mites usually take hold when cattle are penned up in a corral for a substantial period. After the 1886–87 winter the northern Great Plains ranchers put up hay and enclosed their weakest animals through much of the cold season; these creatures became infected and later infected the range herds when turned loose. Outbreaks became increasingly frequent and severe as the years passed. The diseased animals develop huge sores because they rub against trees, posts, buildings, or anything substantial enough to relieve the itch, until their hair drops out and their hide is torn.³⁰ The disease also stresses the cattle and puts them off their feed so that they lose weight and become susceptible to pneumonia and other ailments. Consequently many of the range animals went into winter in poor shape and succumbed to the cold more readily than they otherwise would have. The only way to treat the mange was to conduct a special roundup and dip the animals in a tank filled with a solution of kerosene and/or sulphur mixed with lime and water.³¹ In 1902 a newspaper editor illustrated how difficult it was to deal with the problem in an open range situation. Rancher A, he said, “goes to the expense of putting in a dipping vat and buying dip” and then “dips his cattle in a thorough manner twice, takes them home and says he is all right so far as itch is concerned. The next evening he rounds up his cattle and finds three or more of [his neighbour’s] diseased cattle in his herd and two weeks later finds his cattle” more severely contaminated than before he dipped.³² The mange became so widespread in Canada that the government erected tanks in strategic locations near the border in which to treat animals imported from the United States.³³ In 1904 it declared a huge tract running east of the Rockies well into Assiniboia “an infected place” and ordered that all animals subject to the contagion in that area be isolated and treated.³⁴ This measure did not sufficiently halt the spread; livestock associations soon began to develop a communal approach to treatment. Dipping was costly, not just because vats, tanks, and corrals needed to be constructed for processing the animals but also because special roundups had to be undertaken. The cattle had to be trailed in over long distances from all directions, and be held in crowded conditions for days at a time waiting to be treated at least twice; they also had to endure the frightening process of being forced by their alien tormentors

through the vats of hot, stinking solution.³⁵ The cattle must all have lost weight during the ordeal, and in their weakened state some unquestionably contracted other illnesses and later died

How thoroughly the great ranchers in Canada adopted the fundamentals of the Texas system in total disregard of the environmental obstacles they faced is demonstrated by an interview Duncan McEachran gave in January 1887 when in Australia in conjunction with his position as Canada's chief inspector of livestock.³⁶ McEachran does not seem to have been aware that, even as he spoke, the cattle herds on his own and all his neighbours' ranches were being decimated by one of the most devastating winters of all times.³⁷ Ranches on the northern Great Plains, he said, "date from 1881. . ."

Since then, large areas in Alberta, lying close to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, for about 400 miles north, and 100 miles east of the United States boundary line, have been utilized for the breeding and feeding of cattle and horses. These ranches are within sight of perpetual snow, being 5000 ft. above the sea level, but the climate is so modified by the proximity of the Pacific Ocean that herds of cattle and horses can find abundance of food the entire year round. Snowstorms . . . sometimes last for two or three days, during which time from 7 in. to 8 in. of snow will fall; but it is light and powdery, and rarely "pocks." The wind, which prevails almost continuously, is known as the Chinook wind – being of a high temperature, the snow sometimes disappears within a few hours. Ice crusts are scarcely ever seen there. On the contrary, the snow seems to evaporate – for it leaves no slush or mud behind it. Consequently, particularly on the slopes of the foothills facing towards the west, from which these winds generally blow, the cattle have no difficulty in getting at the long thick grass. No shelter of any kind is provided for them anywhere . . . So they are left to care for themselves as they best can, after the manner of the thousands of buffaloes which preceded them on the ground. It is customary in ranche companies to write off 5 per cent for losses; but on well-managed ranches in the Alberta district the percentage of loss is less

than 3 per cent, and I know a company where 1 to 2 per cent represented the [average loss.]

Back in Canada McEachran would in future years consistently send his mainly British stockholders annual dividend cheques based on his estimates of the number and value of his cattle. Ultimately his profit analyses were to prove as unrealistic as his assessment of the environment.³⁸

None of the ailments that so severely afflicted the open range business in the Canadian West was nearly as destructive in the region in which that system originated. It was only in the panhandle of the northwestern part of Texas that harsh winter weather was a familiar factor and it almost never struck with the same ferocity there as on the northern Great Plains. Though the Texan ranges too were inhabited with wolves, the lankier, fleet-footed and more powerful Longhorn cattle were much better equipped to protect their young than the more compact and slower Shorthorn-, Angus-, and Hereford-influenced stock on the Canadian ranges. Since the southern cattle were virtually never penned up for any prolonged period, moreover, outbreaks of the mange were almost unknown in the Deep South.³⁹ The historian is left to explain why the Canadians, many of them hard-nosed businessmen, should have been convinced to invest such large sums of capital on a pastoral approach that had only ever proved successful in a region so dissimilar to their own. The knowledgeable James Cox, who was, to put it mildly, unimpressed with all the so-called "cattle kings" of the corporation era, blamed the expansion of the Texas system generally on a lack of expertise and on greed. "Undue haste to become rich and to find the road to wealth," he wrote, caused "the killing of the goose to secure the golden egg."⁴⁰ He pointed out that many of the men who financed the cattle companies were urbanites from the East and Great Britain who knew nothing of ranching or its limitations. Their invasion of the West all up and down the foothills of the Rockies from Texas to Canada ("the British Territories") in the late 1870s and early 1880s, he insisted, had a hysterical quality to it. "There was a wild rush into the range country on the part of people inexperienced in the cattle business but anxious to participate in the profits said to be so easily made by cattle raising there."⁴¹ In this process, he argued, the big ranchers were themselves the cause of poor beef prices between 1883 and 1900. "In the opinion of the most conservative members of the trade,

these were the men who broke down the prosperity of the . . . industry of the West and Southwest.”⁴² They over invested and overstocked the plains and quickly created a great glut of beef on the international market.⁴³

Cox’s description of the men who underwrote the cattle companies rings true for the Canadian West. While some had agriculturally derived wealth there was in most cases no ranching and very little *direct or first-hand* agricultural involvement. Four of the ranch owners considered to be the elite leaders of the industry were typical. Senator Matthew Cochrane had a 1,100-acre farm in Compton, Quebec, where he raised purebred short-horn cattle, but he made his money primarily through a leather processing and shoe factory that employed some five hundred people and as a founder of the Eastern Townships Bank.⁴⁴ Sir John Walrond Walrond was a British member of the upper gentry whose son-in-law was a titled aristocrat. He held a large estate near Exeter in southwest England, but in the tradition of the British landholding classes leased his land to tenant farmers. His two sons, William (who took a close interest in the Canadian venture) and Arthur, were bankers.⁴⁵ Lord Lathom of the Oxley was a British aristocrat who also leased out his large estates, and his partner, Alexander Staveley Hill, was a high-ranking official in the Conservative governments, respectively, of Lord Salisbury and Arthur Balfour; Sir Hugh Allen from Montreal, who financed the Bar U, made his money as a shipping magnate, railroad contractor, and miller.⁴⁶

Cox placed some blame on the media for convincing numerous such men that they could augment their wealth on the basis of the Texas system. He pointed out, for instance, that a London newspaper had fuelled unrealistic enthusiasm by explaining “with great care . . . how a yearling” steer “could be purchased” for the incredibly low price of “three or four dollars, fattened” on western ranges at next to nothing “and then sold at about sixty or seventy dollars . . . net.” He said that “in order to demonstrate the truth of these remarkable figures,” the paper had absurdly estimated “that so rich were the pastures . . . that an ordinary steer of three years” could be expected to weigh from “twelve hundred” to “fifteen hundred pounds” and yield a thousand pounds of marketable meat.⁴⁷ Such figuring was “idiotic,” he insisted, but its influence was evident from “the tremendous rush of inexperienced investors to the West . . . all determined to buy cattle at half or a third current prices,” raise them “at a third or fourth the actual cost,” and sell “them at figures about double

the ordinary quotations for two and three year olds raised in the manner described.”⁴⁸

Writing in 1895, Cox had the benefit of hindsight. He had watched the industry suffer as prices declined over the previous decade. He also knew enough about the cattle business to understand how overly simplistic much of the financial reasoning was. He must have known as well that virtually all the media on both sides of the Atlantic embraced it and that four promotional writers in the United States ranked above the rest in terms of the influence their published works yielded:⁴⁹ a general in the United States Army, James S. Brisbin;⁵⁰ a German aristocrat who speculated in land, Walter, Baron von Richthofen;⁵¹ a surgeon for the Union Pacific Railway, Dr. Hiram Latham;⁵² and Joseph McCoy, a town site promoter.⁵³ They fuelled the passion of other writers and ultimately did much to pique the enthusiasm of Eastern capitalists for ranching on both sides of the Canadian-American border.

All four of these men propagated endless confidence in the Texas system not just in the Deep South but in geographic areas significantly removed from and environmentally unlike that region. In his 1871 pamphlet *Trans-Missouri Stock Raising*, Latham led the way by appealing to his readers on a pseudoscientific level. To maintain a large population of labourers whose products could be sold in the competitive markets of the world, he announced, the United States had to develop an inexpensive and inexhaustible supply of food and clothing. The cheaper the food and clothing, the cheaper and more competitive industrial production would be and thus, by implication, the wealthier and more successful the entire nation. Food must include meat for a well-balanced diet. Therefore it was necessary to use cattle and sheep to convert feed into beef and mutton. The best way to do this was to rely on and expand the grazing approach that was then being so successfully applied in the state of Texas. He argued that there was a never-ending amount of virgin grazing land in the entire Great Plains region and that its potential could easily be tapped. As the land was still unsettled, it could be accessed for little or no cost, and as grazing did not require tilling the soil, the purchase and operation of expensive implements was unnecessary. Moreover, as the animals could largely fend for themselves, few hands were needed to watch over them.

All the media representations propagated the belief that profound neglect could be undertaken with impunity even in the far northern regions

of the Great Plains. Brisbin, in a book of 1881 tellingly entitled *The Beef Bonanza or How to Get Rich on the Plains*, quoted what he claimed were the glowing appraisals of ranchers who had grazed cattle in Montana. These he then used to support his opinion that there was “no place in this section of the country . . . where cattle and sheep will not winter safely with no feed but what they will pick up.” Showing the flare for hyperbole that so disgusted Cox, he estimated that “all the flocks and herds in the world could find ample pasturage” year round on the “unoccupied plains and the mountain slopes.”⁵⁴ The boosters produced incredibly optimistic estimates of investment and yield. Within a few years, profits of 100 to 200 percent were to be the norm. The animals themselves would harvest the prairie flora while their owners did little more than watch and rake in the money.⁵⁵

Joseph McCoy wrote in 1874:

There is an immense belt of country along the Rocky Mountains and extending eastward about four hundred miles, with a length of near two thousand miles which, from its character, climate, and comparatively rainless seasons, is preeminently adapted to sheep husbandry and the breeding of cattle. . . . This vast area is covered with a fine species of grass . . . which is equally nutritious in winter as in summer. Either cattle or sheep not only live well but fatten fast so long as they can get an abundance of Buffalo grass. No matter how cold the air may be, so warm and nutritious is this grass at all seasons of the year, that cattle or sheep do not care for hay or other feed in winter.⁵⁶

What such depictions failed to mention, of course, was that on the northern plains the four main grass varieties – the tall native rough fescue and wheat grasses along with the shorter blue grama and needle and thread – though rich and nutritious during specific seasons, were largely dormant during about eight months of the year when nighttime temperatures tended to drop to near or below freezing and when the grasses were likely to be obscured by snow.⁵⁷ To make the case that anyone could make a fortune in this business, von Richthofen laid out simple figures indicating what one man “who does not wish his name thus advertised” had accomplished while a full-time banker in Denver.

In 1878 he bought 320 head of cattle for	\$4,000
In 1879 he bought 1,000 head of cattle for	10,000
In 1880 he bought 1,900 head of cattle for	20,000
In 1882 he bought 1,900 head of cattle for	<u>38,500</u>
	\$72,500
Horses and ranch	<u>3,500</u>
Total	\$76,000
In 1880 he sold steers for	\$ 5,500
In 1881 he sold steers for	13,000
In 1882 he sold steers for	27,500
In 1883 he sold steers for	<u>150,000</u>
Total	\$196,000 ⁵⁸

The banker's net profit in the five years, von Richthofen insisted, was \$120,000.

The excitement that these writings helped to create induced Canadian ranchers to believe in the open range system and it also persuaded them to invest far more than they should have in their initial livestock herds and ultimately ensured that they got an inferior product. As we have seen, there was a short period of rising prices in the early 1880s. Undoubtedly, the established cattlemen who were efficiently supplying slaughter cattle made some money. However, their relative prosperity helped to set off a veritable frenzy among Old World capitalists to get into the business. Consequently, the cattlemen who made the most money were those prepared to sell the novices breeding stock and one- and two-year-old store or feeder steers that were still in the growing stage for their initial herds. Suddenly, as Cox noted, the "cattle raisers and producers who had been content to . . . risk their lives as well as their capital, with only a prospect of moderate returns . . . suddenly awoke in the spring of 1882 to the fact that their herds were veritable gold mines. Cows and calves had advanced in a comparatively short space of time from eight to ten dollars a head to thirty and thirty-five dollars per head, while youngsters, yearlings and two-year-olds had advanced almost 300 percent in three years."⁵⁹ It is an indication of just how much the new investors lost sight of reason that many bought their cattle without even counting them. In 1888 a United States commission was appointed to investigate problems in the

beef industry. One of the highly regarded expert witnesses told the members that

a great deal of money was sent out from the East and from Europe to invest in cattle; and, in numbers of cases, cattle were bought at very high prices and at book account by men who did not know what they were doing, they representing large capitalists and syndicates. Therefore, . . . in many instances where Texas cattle were bought at twenty dollars, they paid forty dollars on the book account. The same thing held good in Wyoming Territory, . . . the price there being about thirty dollars for stock cattle . . . plenty of sales were made . . . where cattle were sold at thirty dollars a head, and on book account they cost sixty dollars or more.⁶⁰

If some investors failed to count their cattle, they also paid little attention to quality. "Speculators" as well as "ranchmen who wanted [stock] for breeding purposes" went to the American Midwest to find extra supply to feed the demand. "Stimulated by the high prices" they were willing to pay, the cattlemen in "the Mississippi Valley and the great corn belt" allowed themselves to be "virtually 'skimmed' of cows and heifers" many of which were of such poor quality they had been earmarked for the packinghouse.⁶¹

How many of the Canadian ranchers bought their initial herds on the basis of book value is unknown. Given, however, the difficulty of getting proper counts of relatively wild stock in places such as Montana where the cowboys rounded up thousands at a time for the sales without enclosed pastures or corrals in which to hold them and take stock, one suspects their own books were at best imprecise. It is clear, too, that even if they did count them they lost an unknown percentage after the drives north. These cattle were all immediately turned loose on the Canadian ranges and, because there were no fences to keep them from straying, many at once instinctively headed back towards the home from which they had come on the other side of the border. McEachran sent a man from the Walrond back down to Montana the summer after he brought in his first several thousand head to claim and gather all the returnees he could find. In this he needed the co-operation of the American contributors. "Charles

Raymond is now in Montana looking for our strays," he told T.C. Power, who had sold him the stock. He "reports quite a number on your range at Warm Spring. Will you please instruct" your hired men "to deliver all cattle branded WR to Raymond? He says Mr. Brooks claims six cattle" of ours "which he says were crippled" and therefore dropped out of the drive north and were never branded. Brooks "has no right to do so. At the time I did object to a few cripples" among the cattle originally purchased "but he would not let us" reject them "and they were driven out into the herds" for the trek north. Some could not keep up and therefore "fell out" and were left along the way to be gathered later. "I would be sorry if Mr. Brooks would give us any trouble, in the face of the fact that I paid you for two of your cattle, which we found in the herd after reaching here" last summer.⁶² There was, of course, no guarantee that co-operation would be forthcoming. There was also no way to know how many cattle had died on the return trip south or were stolen by one of a number of rustlers operating in the volatile borderlands regions between the Walrond and Warm Springs.⁶³

Therefore, even the Canadian ranchers who took the time to try to count their original cattle could not have known exactly how many animals they had actually been able to keep. There is varied evidence, moreover, indicating that the original herds were typical of many in the American northwest and not of the best quality. In 1887 McEachran reprimanded one of his administrators for overselling the breeding stock. The man assured him that the vast majority he had marketed were sub-standard as there were so many that could be described that way in the original herd. "I have no doubt we killed a few . . . that you would not want killed," he said, but most had various flaws including "big bags" or "big jaws" or were "non-breeders," or "cripples," or "cows as old as to be toothless and consequently almost certain to die within the next year or two." You remember, he said, that the original herd "contained a large number of old cows and we understood that one of the benefits the company would derive from the contract" to provide beef to the Indian bands "would be to turn them into money and get the herd cleaned up."⁶⁴ One cowpuncher from the Bar U remembered that in the beginning that outfit "in common with other ranching enterprises . . . was compelled to purchase as its foundation stock, cattle of a low and inferior type." Then, due to the random mixing on the open range, it took years "to weed-out"

the inferior animals and replace them with “a better type.”⁶⁵ As this suggests, small improvement seems to have come in the early years as the big operations brought in better breeding animals from the East and overseas. However, the problem of inferior quality would remain an obstacle to efficient production as long as the range remained open and the inferior bulls and poor cows could mix and mingle with those animals and with each other.⁶⁶

Ultimately, it is thus evident that large-scale, open range ranching got off to a very bad start in the Canadian West. Its product was inferior, much more expensive than it should have been, and, ostensibly, in many cases less plentiful than the owners had been led to expect. These factors contributed to the inevitable collapse that was to be all but complete before the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. They exacerbated the fundamental problem – that to leave cattle to fend for themselves year round in a northern environment with its ferocious winter storms, periodically plunging temperatures, predators, and parasites was, to put it mildly, unrealistic. One of the important findings of this study, discussed below, is that the first big ranches in the Northern Territory of Australia actually succumbed even faster than their western Canadian counterparts. At first this seems puzzling in view of the fact that the natural environment there was to prove much more conducive to the Texas grazing approach than in Canada. The explanation is complex but, as will become evident, largely environmental as well.

