



SO FAR AND YET SO CLOSE: FRONTIER CATTLE RANCHING IN WESTERN PRAIRIE CANADA AND THE NORTHERN TERRITORY OF AUSTRALIA
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PRODUCING “FATS”: THE CANADIAN WEST

The future would gradually bring a more orderly culture to both of these regions as law enforcement agencies improved, gender ratios became more balanced, and families rather than single young men increasingly set societal norms and values. In the meantime, there were two other substantial challenges western Canadian and northern Australian pastoralists faced in common. Both derived to a significant degree, if not totally, from New World circumstances. One fundamental challenge was overcoming the barriers to the production and marketing of high-quality finished beef in a geographically remote, open range setting. The other challenge involved compensating for the ranchers' own failures in pasture management. This chapter will illuminate the situation in Alberta and Assiniboia, and the next chapter, that in the Northern Territory.

The Canadian ranchers, on the whole, started out with inferior stock and then attempted to clean it up by selling the worst of it for meat. They also worked slowly over time to upgrade the overall quality of their herds by bringing in well-bred bulls and cows via the Canadian Pacific Railway from the East and overseas. Upgrading the herds proved daunting, however, because the range on both sides of the Canadian-American border was quite saturated with inferior scrub bulls. Some of these seem to have originated as calves that were missed during the roundups and were never subjected to the knife. Many, however, were, as James Cox pointed out, simply poor-quality animals that the corporations imported from the American Midwest during the period when they were most euphoric



POORLY FINISHED RANGE CATTLE, HAND HILLS, ALBERTA, PRE-1908. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, CALGARY, NA-3929-8.

about the future of western ranching and clamoured to find stock. “A very large number of bulls that, under ordinary circumstances would have been” culled out of the herds in the Mississippi Valley and butchered, had been “preserved and shipped to these Western ranges” where they fetched the high prices of prime breeding stock.¹

The other thing that damaged beef herd quality in western Canada as time went on was the tendency of the ranchers to augment their herds by purchasing unsuitable stock from dairy farmers in the East. As their livestock numbers declined due to severe winters, wolves, and the mange, the cattlemen became desperate to find ways to recoup. They discovered that there were large numbers of relatively cheap one- and two-year-old steers and heifers that the dairymen in the more eastern provinces of Manitoba and Ontario produced in the process of keeping their cows bred and lactating. These, the western ranchers purchased in large numbers and shipped to the frontier by rail. They then grazed them on their ranges, hoping to bolster their sales as yearlings would mature and, they hoped, be ready for the slaughter market in significantly less time than their newborn calves. The integration of the dairy breeds illustrates the naivety of some of the owners. Holsteins, Jerseys, and Guernseys, or crosses thereof,



POORLY FINISHED RANGE CATTLE, MILK RIVER AREA, ALBERTA, 1904. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, CALGARY, NA-3914-5.

tend to have a stringy, less well-rounded and fleshy body than beef breeds such as Angus and Hereford and they do not fatten up well. On the slaughter market they tended to grade about the same as the other rougher cattle. Moreover, while the males were normally relieved of their propagatory organs before the ranchers purchased them, the females usually came with their ovaries intact and few of the ranchers bothered to remove them. The low qualities of these cattle also diluted the quality of the herds.

Consequently, the western ranchers not only dug into their company purses to cover extra expenses, they also failed to attain the desired recompense. When it came time for them to put their “fats” up for sale, the brokers discounted the rougher sorts, usually marketing the beef locally rather than trying to compete for the more discriminating palates of Europe. The two photographs above are typical of those found in the images of early range animals in the Glenbow Archives in Calgary. The motley cattle are generally on the thin side with a sinewy, “shelly” carcass and a slight, rather boney rump. The spotted colouring of many reflects dairy bloodlines.

The other obstacle for the western ranchers when trying to produce quality beef was their own distinctly cavalier attitude towards pasture

management. On the northern Great Plains the growing season is short – basically four months – and it has become clear that the only way to get the best production out of it, particularly when attempting to graze year round, is to practise a sophisticated form of grasslands conservation. This technique, often called “rest rotational grazing,” is hands on and refined, and requires substantial infrastructure, particularly extensive networks of fences and mechanical watering systems. It is, in short, more or less the antithesis of the profound neglect approach. Ranchers who practise it fence their ranges into a multiplicity of relatively small pastures and then *rotate* their cattle every few to several days from one pasture to the next so that the leafy matter on the grasses is never eaten off by more than about two-thirds. “Grazing or browsing too much of the leafy material, the collector of solar energy, will wear the plant down and reduce its ability to store energy in its roots.” This keeps it “dependent on surface water” and unable to access “deeper, more abundant supplies.”² During the summer months rains sometimes fall infrequently on the Great Plains and, with limited moisture, overgrazed plants suffer.³

Under the rest rotational system, each fenced-in pasture is given a number of rest periods over the course of any one season and then is allowed to replenish for an entire year every several seasons.⁴ The other important management approach cattlemen are utilizing along with it is known as “time-controlled grazing.” The purpose is specifically to enhance the dominant grass species that nature selected for the area long before European pastoralists appeared. Rough fescue is dominant among these species on the northern plains. When the land is good to it, the rough fescue returns the favour as it produces substantial “litter” that contributes organic matter to the soil and enhances moisture retention and infiltration.⁵ Moreover, its long roots help to conduct moisture down into the subsoil. Its growth cycle begins early in the spring and is complete by early summer. Rough fescue is particularly ideal for winter grazing. It cures on the stem and retains its food value after the summer months, and its long, stiff leaves will stand through even deep coverings of snow.⁶ Efficient ranchers who graze cattle year round keep their stock off their winter pastures in the spring and summer to maintain it in the healthiest possible condition. On many ranches, lowland fields are grazed early in the growing season (early June to late July) since the other tall species there – wheat grass – matures early and loses its nutritional value if not

eaten down at that time. The drier upland ranges are kept free of livestock until the dormant period from August on, when the rough fescue can be used to best advantage. These practices allow the regrowth that plants require for rebuilding roots

Many modern ranchers have been particularly determined to find ways to protect their grass in delicate riparian areas – that is, those along and around natural water sources. Left on their own, cattle will inhabit these areas almost exclusively in the warmer months. There the stock finds the thickest stands of grass and can readily access water. The problem is that as the animals crowd in along the water's edge they eat the grass down to nothing and trample it into the mud. They also kill off woody vegetation (saplings and bushes), the roots of which help to maintain bank stability along rivers and streams. Once the grass in one riparian area is depleted to the point where grazing becomes impossible, the animals move on to another area inflicting similar damage on it. Eventually all the prime grasslands on a particular ranch may be affected. If, after time, the animals can no longer find good grazing by a water source they will move some distance away from one, making the trek back to it when thirsty. This will cause them to “walk off” much of the nutrition they take on from grazing and, therefore, to fail to gain weight properly. To protect riparian areas, ranchers place a tank some distance from a natural water source and pump the water to it. Usually the animals prefer to drink from such a facility rather than wading into a stream, lake, or slough. The tank is moved from time to time to prevent damage to the grass around it. Particularly conscientious operators also fence off their natural water source to ensure that their cattle stay well back from its edges.

Refining management techniques can improve productivity on any particular grasslands area as much as three-fold.⁷ Those ranchers who practise these methods on the better western ranges expect to graze at a rate of about twenty acres per mature steer or cow calf unit per year. Many of them are aware that, in using a rest rotational approach, they are emulating the grazing habits of the buffalo, which fed off the plains and foothills in the millions before the arrival of Europeans.⁸ These animals constantly moved around during each season and thus avoided overtaxing or despoiling particular grazing spots. Normally they also inhabited the lower plains in the warmer months and then migrated to the shelter of

upland hills and forests during the cold winter period, giving the grasses in each area several months of rest every year.⁹

The frontier cattlemen used none of these techniques. They did not attempt to control herd movements much further than to try to keep the animals on their leased and/or freehold terrain, and they did nothing to protect the banks and flood plains of their rivers, creeks, and lakes.¹⁰ Cattle do not instinctively follow the migration patterns of the buffalo, so some of the early cattlemen drove their stock down onto the plains in the spring and then back up into the protection of the heavily forested hills as winter was setting in. However, cattle lack the heavy fur around the head the buffalo are endowed with, and so, when the colder winds started to blow out of the northwest, they would instinctively turn their backs to it and then move in the direction it was blowing. Before the range was fenced, therefore, numbers of them would end up on the plains in winter. During the summertime, on the other hand, as riparian areas on the lower pastures became eaten down, some of the cattle would roam back up into the high country seeking better pickings around the streams, sloughs, and lakes there. The net result was that throughout virtually any year domestic animals could be found grazing high and low, and none of the grasslands was afforded time to recoup.

Given their carelessness with respect to grasslands conservation, it became increasingly easy for the ranchers on the northern plains to overgraze, as once stunted, natural grasslands become less and less productive. Pasture mismanagement generally should be seen as a frontier circumstance in the sense that, to some degree at least, it related to the ranchers' ignorance of conditions in their new land; and it occurred throughout the entire North American West.¹¹ In 1888 an expert testifying to the commission investigating the collapse of beef prices in the United States argued that "the present state of the cattle markets . . . [is] due" in the main "to the overproduction, especially of grass-fed cattle, the marketing of immature animals, which are too thin for the block" and the flooding of the market by "ranchers of the West and Southwest, who herd thousands of . . . inferior cattle upon public lands or lands of little value." The "overproduction of range cattle, has greatly overcrowded the . . . range country, and has, consequently, lessened the quantity of grass and impaired its nutritive quality."¹² The truth is, wrote James Cox, "the feed" in past years has been eaten down "clear to the ground, so that now,



HEREFORD CATTLE ON LUSH GRASSLANDS, DOMBURG RANCH, SOUTHERN ALBERTA, 1892. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, NA-1940-12.



ROUNDUP CREW ON LUSH GRASSLANDS, HIGH RIVER AREA ALBERTA, 1892. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, NA-2294-26.

instead of raising such cattle as we did ten years ago, we are producing half-starved, ill-shaped beasts, that do not carry flesh or make weights as beef steers, even when fully matured.”¹³ Speaking of the impact of the infamous winter of 1906-7, well-known Calgary newspaper reporter L.V. Kelly wrote that on the Canadian side of the border “prairie fires and crowded ranges took the grass off and left little for winter rustling – in fact, in some districts the range was so overstocked that cattle went into winter in very poor condition, even hay being insufficient to strengthen them against the cold.” Scarcity “of food, poor condition, and exceptional storms, snow and cold, demanded a fearful toll from the range stock and depleted the herds of the Province by about half.”¹⁴

The two photographs above of land that was clearly not mistreated illustrate what the pastures in the foothills of Alberta would have been like when cattle first appeared on them in the early 1880s. “In some places,” Duncan McEachran, the general manager of the Walrond, observed, the grass “was so thick and so long as to impede the progress of horse drawn wagons.”¹⁵ The photographs below, taken on ranches from various localities where cattle were pastured extensively, are strong confirmation that grassland abuse was widespread.

The rough fescue and wheat grass have been more or less completely obliterated, and even the shorter indigenous varieties – needle and thread and blue grama, which, respectively, can reach heights of from thirty to forty-five centimeters – have been severely eaten down.

The net carcass yields of the cattle the Walrond outfit’s cowboys delivered to the Blood and Peigan Indian agencies in the 1890s provide one of the best and clearest pieces of historical evidence available of the decline in Canadian grass-fed beef resulting from depleted grasslands. In the fall, winter, and spring of 1894 through 1898 the ranch clerk kept meticulous accounts of the dressed weights of these animals.¹⁶ The accounts demonstrate not only that the weights were consistently low but that the drop in the wintertime was always great, and that the average per animal worsened with time. A mature, fully finished grass-fed steer carcass could be expected to yield more than 900 pounds. In the fall of 1894 the August steers at the Blood agency weighed 744 pounds, those for October weighed 808 pounds, those for February 672 pounds, and April 600 pounds. In the same period the cow carcass weights, which one would expect to be around 720 pounds, dropped from 622 pounds to 518



RIPARIAN DESTRUCTION, BEYNON AREA, ALBERTA, 1900. THE MORE OR LESS COMPLETE DESTRUCTION OF A RIPARIAN PASTURE. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, NC-43-136.



BAR U RANCH COWBOYS, SOUTHERN ALBERTA, 1901. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, NA-1035-1.



COWBOYS ON ROUNDUP, WEST OF OKOTOKS, ALBERTA, 1892. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, NA-2084-50.



CATTLE ROUNDUP AT STAND OFF, ALBERTA, CA. 1907. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, NA-100-30.



CATTLE ON RANGE, SOUTHERN ALBERTA, CA. EARLY 1900S. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, NA-4035-199.



COW AND CALF
ON PASTURE, NEAR
BEYNON, ALBERTA,
CA. 1900. GLENBOW
ARCHIVES, NC-43-332.

pounds. In November 1896 the onsite manager told Duncan McEachran that “after working over the range John,” the cattle foreman, “thinks we will need all the beef” we have “to fill the Piegan [*sic*] contract. A great many of the cows are not fat enough to make beef in January and February and numbers of them will not hold their condition this winter. Stags [i.e., very rough steers] too are not in the condition they ought to be.”¹⁷ In April 1897, at which point the long winter season was coming to an end and spring about to set in, his prediction proved true. The animals “are very light now, and it seems a pity to sacrifice them in that way. They could bring far more money three or four months hence.”¹⁸ At that time the dressed weights of the steers had dropped from 764 pounds net the previous November to 583 pounds; and the weight of the cows had declined from 647 pounds to 472 pounds. The following winter the Blood weights declined precipitously once again. In September 1897 the steers weighed 647 pounds and in April 498 pounds; and the cows dropped from 575 pounds to 425 pounds.¹⁹

It is seldom recognized how much slaughter cattle carcasses of a small size reduced total ranch income. At six cents per pound, steers averaging 900 pounds net were worth \$54.00. The Walrond ranch could sell a thousand slaughter steers a year. If properly finished it could expect them to bring in a total of \$54,000.00.²⁰ However, poorly or unfinished steers such as those the ranch sold in April 1898 were worth only \$29.88. The difference was more than \$24.00 a head. The overall difference for the ranch in any given year might be as high as \$24,000.00 on steers alone. This was some \$7,000.00 more than the ranch was spending to run the entire operation for a full twelve months.²¹ The fact that the numbers consistently show carcass weights for both genders clearly trending downward over a relatively long period suggests that the Walrond company was slowly (or perhaps not so slowly) going bankrupt.

As revealed in the photographs of the grasslands in other parts of the high country where cattle were pastured, the Walrond inability to fatten the cattle properly must not have been uncommon. The legacy of pasture abuse in southern Alberta and Assiniboia has cast a long shadow. Even today the native foothills fescue, which “once occupied about 3.8 million acres in southwestern Alberta,” is abundant on only “about 16.8 percent of the original grassland landscape.”²² In the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, moreover, the ranchers’ propensity to send light

cattle off to market reflected the same financial circumstances that had led to pasture abuse and depletion. Mounting financial pressures made it difficult, indeed impossible, for them to allow their cattle enough time on the ranges to reach full maturity. The theory of open range grazing called for the marketing of fat cattle – both steers and heifers – at from four to five years of age. Yet everywhere on the western plains, including the Walrond lease, the tendency was to send them off when they were as young as three years of age. Thus, for instance, L.V. Kelly noted that in 1896 “a large number of three-year-old steers were tempted off the range . . . leaving a void in the ranks of the prime four-year-olds for the next year”²³ Had the ranches been able to hold the cattle longer, it might have allowed them to at least reach maximum bone growth and thus to net a more acceptable carcass weight even without the optimal amount of flesh and fat. What underlay their inability to do so was a chronic cash shortage.

As we have seen, all the ranchers on the northern plains had found it necessary from the spring of 1887 to spend money they had not budgeted for on hay, greenfeed, and labour to get their weaker and more vulnerable cattle through the long winter months. On top of that, from 1896 when the government effectively cancelled their leases to accommodate hordes of incoming homesteaders and squatters, most of the big outfits in Canada had suddenly found themselves having to purchase land they needed to continue to operate. Thus, for instance, around the turn of the century the Bar U purchased close to 19,000 acres of deeded land, the Cochrane 65,000 acres, and the Walrond 38,126 acres. To get the necessary capital many took on mortgages or lines of credit from the banks, or they used any monies they still had left from selling shares to those investors who had believed all the hype about the enormous bounties the frontier would ultimately bring. Either way this strained their cash reserves. It left them obliged to service loans and pay interest, or it forced them to make out annual cheques for shareholder dividends.

The latter part of the above statement requires an explanation. The Walrond example is instructive in that regard too. From its inception in 1883 until it ended active operations in 1907, the ranch’s economic performance was anything but impressive, and yet year after year – after paying all its bills for labour, feed, and custom work and setting aside capital for land purchases – the general manager, McEachran, returned a 5 per cent dividend to the shareholders.²⁴ He felt compelled to do this because

he realized that, should his shareholders decide that their investment was a bad one, they might well liquidate their holdings. And since that was the ranch's only source of capital this could ultimately shut the business down. In other words, McEachran treated the shareholders' investment capital exactly as one would an operating loan at the bank. Dividends, which are supposed to be a return on profits, he paid without considering whether the company was making money, simply to maintain his financing. The truth of this assertion is evinced in the fact that while he was approving the dividend payments year after year his marketable cattle inventory, the Walrond's only source of income, actually declined in numbers and value.

There can be little doubt, moreover, that McEachran was aware of this. What usually induced him and his onsite manager to look closely at the ranch's herd size was any particularly severe winter that they feared had exacted a heavy toll. After the first really bad winter – that of 1886–87 – McEachran “rode industriously over the range, in all places where . . . [cattle] were said to be lying dead” and he convinced himself that the loss was not heavy. “I am justified in believing,” he asserted, “that not even 2/3 of these were ours.”²⁵ Unfortunately, later, after the spring roundup, he discovered that he was wrong. “It is a fact,” he said, “that we are short of cattle – to a larger extent than the carcasses would represent.”²⁶ He estimated that 18 percent of the pregnant cows and heifers had died. This figure fits with the number of calves branded that year, which was down by about 24 percent from the previous year and, incredibly, by more than 40 percent from the year before that.²⁷ McEachran calculated that losses of steers, bulls, and “adult she stock” (dry cows) were about 5 percent. His only consolation was that almost “every other Ranche [company]” was “in the same position” as the Walrond. Indeed, “many” were “even worse off.”²⁸

During the 1888 spring round up the Walrond cowboys conducted a “rough count” of all the cattle. There were *roughly* 8,225 cows, steers, and heifers plus about 1,380 newborn calves (9,605 overall).²⁹ In 1891 the ranch did a precise count during the fall roundup. There were 10,433 cattle including newborn calves. Thus for a short period the herd may have grown a little. However, the next several winters were severe and quite a lot of cattle were lost on many of the foothills operations.³⁰ To make matters worse, in 1893 wolves began to prey more heavily than ever before on the calf crop.³¹ No counts were done, but in these later years McEachran

figured in an overall annual death rate of 5 percent.³² In 1895 he began to bolster his inventory by purchasing yearling and two-year-old steers, or “doggies,” from Ontario to fatten on grass along with the progeny of his breeding stock.³³ With those included he calculated that by the end of 1897 he should have more than 12,000 animals.³⁴ This would have comprised the cows, steers, heifers, and breeding bulls and all the calves from the previous spring and summer that had been weaned and separated from their mother as well as the doggies. When McEachran asked his men how many cattle they thought there actually were, he was unquestionably perturbed by the answer. John Lamar, the cattle foreman, had been told to get as accurate an estimate as possible during the previous fall roundup.³⁵ Whether he conducted a thorough count is unclear, but he was a veteran cattleman from the United States and he must have been accustomed to gauging herd numbers. He figured there were only about 9,000 head. After speaking at length with Lamar, the onsite manager David Warnock told McEachran he felt the cattle foreman was not erring on the low side. In other words he believed that 9,000 might well be high.³⁶

Even with the Ontario cattle, therefore, the herd had almost certainly deteriorated again. The next thorough count was done in 1901. The ranch papers do not show the actual figures, but Warnock and McEachran were clearly shocked by what they found. The former felt obligated to come up with an explanation of why the numbers were not higher. Interestingly, he wrote two letters to his superior. In the first he simply admitted the deficiency. He did not send that letter. Instead he wrote a second one in which he tried to soften the blow. “I am enclosing a memo,” he wrote, “showing number and classification of cattle on [the] books, and number and classification counted. You will notice that there is a considerable shortage in the number counted principally in cows and aged steers.” He also noted, “the calf brand was very disappointing” for 1901, “only totaling 1000.” The one glimmer of hope he could offer was that a large number of cattle may have evaded the roundup crews when the tally was taken.³⁷ On that ground he claimed that it was safe to add 10 percent to the steer count. We should note, this was merely a guess and based on a strong need for self-rationalization and, even if it were true, Warnock was far from comfortable with the overall numbers. The upshot, he said, is that “we are short principally in cows ranging from six to ten years old.” This, he argued, was a product of circumstances that predated his

appointment as the onsite manager. “I think” it “is largely due to the ravages of wolves in the early 1890s . . . In /93/94/95 and 6 wolves caused us heavy losses in horses, and I am afraid they did much more damage among cattle than we suspected. The winters of 95 and 96 too were severe, and the loss among breeding stock may have been heavier than we realized.”

The final count that we know of had to be conducted when the ranch sold off its entire herd after the immense losses of the 1906–7 winter. There are no figures for the count in the Walrond papers. However, the sales contract with Patrick Burns is in that collection.³⁸ The cattle brought \$26.00 a head with calves thrown in for free. McEachran decided to use the proceeds from the sale to pay back the shareholders as much of their original investment as possible. After settling the ranch’s bills, totalling at most \$15,000.00, he was able to send them a mere \$36,748.89.³⁹ This means that there could not have been more than some 2,000 animals left in the entire herd. The ranch was broke.⁴⁰ After the repayment it still owed its investors more than \$208,000.00, and all it had left for assets was 38,126 acres of land for which it had recently paid \$2.28 an acre, or about \$89,000.⁴¹

The severe winter of 1906–7 was the final deathblow for the Walrond ranch, but it is apparent that McEachran had struggled unsuccessfully to maintain the resources of the operation over the course of the twenty-five or so years preceding that event. The fact that he paid dividends year after year indicates that he felt it impossible to come clean with his shareholders for fear of losing their capital. People who go into a particular venture anticipating great rewards are liable to sour very quickly if their expectations are not fulfilled. We are not sure exactly what McEachran had told the interested parties when he initially put together the financing for the Walrond operation, but we have seen that he was prepared to be very imaginative to make the ranch investment look as attractive as possible. This, and the fact that he had almost certainly read all the promotional literature, strongly suggests that he had made grand promises. We know too that after the Walrond met with early reversals and the value of the shares had to be reduced, some of the shareholders expressed the desire to pull out because “the returns for the years past” had not “been what was expected.”⁴² Under that kind of threat there can be little doubt that the general manager felt enormous pressure to pay out annual returns even while evidence suggested that his inventory (and profits) were dwindling.

There is no doubt that other companies were struggling either to pay dividends or to service substantial loans. The Powder River Cattle Company of Wyoming brought four big herds of 2,500 head into southern Alberta in 1886 after its manager, the irrepressible dreamer Morton Frewen, had run it nearly into the ground attempting to woo investors with large dividend payments.⁴³ By 1889 its herd numbers were down to 5,800 and the company sold out. At the same time Sir John Lister Kaye and the Canadian Agricultural Coal and Colonization Company, financed by British investors, was acquiring land along the railway from Crane Lake, Assiniboia, to Namaka near Calgary. Kaye bought the Powder River's headquarters and its cattle. He got into trouble and dissolved the company in 1895. The company that re-emerged from its ashes was the Canada Land & Ranche Company, which, like its predecessor, was commonly known as the 76 or Stair ranch. Basically, on the evidence of shareholder dividends, it was rumoured to have done well.⁴⁴ That the ranch failed in 1909 because of depleted financial resources strongly suggests that its returns were no more a true reflection of its profitability than were the returns paid to the Walrond's investors.⁴⁵

Among the companies that faltered under traditional rather than shareholder debt was the Bar U outfit, some twenty miles north of the Walrond. The owner, George Lane, was deeply leveraged for most of his life as a Canadian rancher and particularly so after his partner, the cattle-buying firm of Gordon, Ironside and Fares, abandoned him in 1919.⁴⁶ When he died in 1925 the banks took all his land and cattle. High financing charges, like so many other financial obstacles, seem to have been common throughout the Great Plains. In 1890 a Select Committee of the United States Senate investigating the fall in beef prices during the years 1888 and 1889 interviewed Philip D. Armour of the giant beef packing company that bore his name. He cited two factors in the decline: "overproduction" which indicated the overstocking noted above, and "over-marketing" by which he meant "many engaged in the business" had been compelled "to prematurely market their cattle" because "incorporated companies and wealthy individuals" needed to bring in money "to meet the payment of guarantee dividends or of interests and mortgages."⁴⁷

In 1909 the Canadian Veterinary General, J.G. Rutherford, was pointing the finger at overstocking and overproduction when he asked

rhetorically, “Is it matter for wonder” that our western cattle “arrive in British lairages . . . gaunt and shrunken . . . looking more like stockers than beeves, that our Scottish friends think we have no feed, or that I should declare” the western grazing business “as sinfully wasteful.”⁴⁸ He also recognized that the immense distance the western cattle had to travel to reach densely populated overseas markets exacerbated these deficiencies. At this stage refrigerated conveyance for dead meat was available but it had not yet been perfected and was far from reliable.⁴⁹ Thus in the late 1890s, many of the bigger Canadian outfits looking for an outlet beyond the domestic market had begun sending their live cattle by rail and ocean liner directly to sales rings in London, Edinburgh, Liverpool, and Glasgow.⁵⁰ Most of these operations found that, whatever they gained in price, they lost because of the wear and tear on the cattle from the long trip by land and sea. Relatively feral three- and four-year-old animals that had been loose on the open range basically since birth found the gathering process on their home ranges traumatizing enough. Then the sound of whips whizzing over their heads and screams of handlers when they were being loaded onto trains for the overland trip to Montreal terrified them, and crowded conditions on very noisy railway cars did nothing to ease their anxiety. The Canadian Pacific Railway stopped the trains at various intervals to give the stock rest as well as feed and water. However, that entailed more handling, whips, and screams and probably relieved the stress only minimally. On the ocean voyage between Montreal and Britain the cattle were subject to a good deal more anguish. A first-hand report by a man who was employed on one of the ships in 1889 dramatically substantiates this. On the boat the man was put in charge of twenty-five head of cattle in six pens. His duties included feeding and watering them and poking them with a stick to keep enough of them standing that no more than two in each pen could lie down at one time. Presumably this was to cut down on seasickness. In the beginning everything went well. “The first three days out were passed in routine duty beneath a cloudless sky and over the most beautiful, the smoothest sea that I have ever sailed.” Then calamity struck – soon after breakfast on the fourth morning:

I had barely finished my round of dealing out hay and water when suddenly a mighty gust of wind struck the boat. My cattle were on the upper deck and I realized the full force of

the hurricane, as its battering rams punched our ribs. Quicker than I can write it, another broadside struck us. Black clouds instantly blotted out the sun. The sky grew as dark as night. All hands were called on deck. Coming up from the southwest, we could see a hideous mountain of storm rolling towards us, bounding at us, and the dense, frowning clouds split by blinding forks of lightening [*sic*]. In a moment the storm stood like a towering wall of death before us. The treacherous seas reared and bucked and pranced like a mad monster. The winds raved and tore and shook the boat as if it had been a toy, heaving her high on the crest of a frantic wave. Back we sank, with a swift and sickening lunge, into the valley of the waters, and the sea that had reared now pounced down upon our deck and broke with the thunder of a million guns.

I have seen animals panic-stricken in a billow of flame: but never before had I witnessed a scene such as this. Never do I want to see another one like it. My heart wept for the poor brutes as they caught the spirit of the coming disaster and bellowed and moaned in frightful distress . . . Another wave, almost scaling the sky, it appeared, washed up and fell to pieces on our deck, crashing through all barriers. To save my own life I climbed in the hold and waited for the storm to die away.⁵¹

By the time the storm abated three men and seventy-nine cattle were dead. This was obviously an unusually difficult crossing. However, the north Atlantic is susceptible to high winds and towering waves under normal circumstances, particularly in the fall of the year when most of the cattle were being shipped, and the animals often suffered from seasickness and stress and lost substantial amounts of weight.⁵² In the words of one Great Plains rancher, “Cattle cannot be sent five thousand miles by land and sea without such a shrinkage that the profit on the transaction is destroyed.”⁵³

Many of the cattle from the western United States that were sold in Chicago auction rings were purchased by farmers from the corn states – Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska – who then finished them properly on excess supplies of corn before sending them to Europe.

Canadian ranchers were well aware that those cattle were doing much better in British sales rings than their own. This was because they not only were bigger and fatter before they left American shores but also because the extra coat of “hard fat” resulting from grain finishing held up better during the voyage. “Our friends in the United States long ago realized the folly of shipping to Europe” live steers “direct from the range” and “soft off grass,” the Veterinary General noted in his 1909 report. “Their range cattle are brought to the Middle West, dehorned, if this has not been earlier done, fed for at least sixty days on a ration comprising a liberal allowance of grain, then sent to market . . . carefully inspected and culled. Those deemed fit for export are then taken to the seaboard by fast trains . . . As a result of these superior methods, United States cattle, even when from the Western ranges, arrive in Britain in much better condition than Canadian cattle and, of course, command correspondingly higher prices.⁵⁴

The Canadian ranchers were restrained from selling their cattle in the United States by the ad valorem import duty of 27½ percent, and, before homesteaders fully occupied the farmlands in the West, there was not a vast and very productive agricultural region anywhere in their own country where their animals could be finished on cheap feed grains.⁵⁵ Therefore they were forced to continue sending them to Old World sales rings where, in their under-finished and emaciated state, they were severely discounted. “From abroad the supplies of stock consisted of 700 cattle from Canada which were a moderate lot,” said a typical British media report. “Some of these were taken for keep,” to be finished by British farmers, “the rougher description meeting the worst trade of the season, entailing heavy losses for the exporters.”⁵⁶ Similar media coverage stated: “the Canadian cattle were a middling and ordinary quality receiving over the whole 56 s[hillings] to 62 s[hillings]” per hundred weight while the grain finished cattle “received 60 s[hillings] to 63 s[hillings]” per hundred weight;⁵⁷ “foreign supplies for the week comprised 1,083 Canadians . . . nearly half of which were bought for feeding purposes.” Well-fattened cattle “met a better demand.”⁵⁸ This situation was made worse by the British pleuropneumonia embargo on Canadian stock in 1892. It completely negated the demand for feeders by stipulating that any cattle imported from Canada had to be slaughtered at point of debarkation.⁵⁹

In the final analysis, it seems beyond dispute that large-scale open range ranching in western Canada was doomed from the first. The great operations were unable to overcome the natural environmental challenges associated with grass fattening, all of which were exacerbated by the frontier environmental deficiencies of poor breeding, inadequate grasslands management, geographic isolation, and financial pressures at least in part resulting from the attempt to start an industry in an unfamiliar land where it had not existed before. The following chapter will demonstrate that in northern Australia, where the nearly identical basic open range approach the Canadians were using would endure to the modern era, the first pastoralists faced all the same obstacles.

