



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 NORTHERN TERRITORY

Station owners and managers in the Northern Territory also hoped in the beginning that they would be able to market slaughter steers. This idea died slowly. At the opening of the twentieth century, industry observers were aware that in Texas grass fattening had become a thing of the past, and some still felt that its continuance in their own country's grazing lands was simply evidence of the superiority of their natural resources. In 1904 the premier of South Australia, who supposedly had a “good knowledge of the pastoral country of America,” asserted that “the best cattle country in the world was the Northern Territory,” and that “Texas was not in it [competitive] with the Victoria River” district as “during the last few years” cattle that had been “born, bred, and grazed” in the latter district had been “sent down” to the slaughter markets “rolling fat by tens of thousands.” Texan cattle, on the other hand, “nearly all” had to be “topped off with maize in . . . Missouri and Illinois before they were killed.”¹

Had the premier really been familiar with the beef industry in the Territory he would have known that in fact few “rolling fat” cattle had ever been sold out of any of the three grazing areas. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s many of the stations had attempted to market beef by meeting local demand – particularly in Palmerston and/or the goldfields.² Because the number of people in the Territory was so small, however, the trade was never brisk. About the largest number of slaughter cattle Alfred Giles at Springvale ever sold in one lot were the fifty he sent to Palmerston in

July 1882.³ The rest of the sales he recorded were even smaller. Though he was thus not making what would seem heavy demands on his supply herds, which numbered in the thousands at three separate runs, his dressed yields were very much like those the Canadian ranchers were getting. On 4 November 1882 he wrote that he was sending twenty head to a butcher named Ping Que. "They are all good," he noted, "and will run" 700 pounds dressed.⁴ When asked for more some ten days later he sent a man to search Delamere for another forty. This he believed "will exhaust my stock of salable cattle." Later the same month, however, he managed to get the butcher to take more, which he estimated would weigh "about" 600 to 700 pounds.⁵ "Cattle at Delamere doing very well but not fattening so quickly as I thought they would," he once wrote in his diary.⁶

Lightweight carcasses such as the above, and, indeed, far worse, were a problem for the stations throughout the Territory, and when some tried in the 1890s to gain customers beyond the local markets this proved extremely costly. Before being forced out of the cattle business in the 1880s, Fisher and Lyons had begun shipping to the Dutch East Indies, principally from their holdings at Glencoe and other stations in the top end. In September 1890 Goldsbrough, Mort and Company, having taken over the Fisher and Lyons's leases, sent their man Hildebrand William Havelock Stevens to negotiate with the South Australia Government for support to run a regular monthly beef transport service to Asian states.⁷ On 18 July 1891 Stevens signed an agreement with the government giving him an annual subsidy of 5,000 pounds to conduct the trade. Thus was born the Cattle Export Service. In hopes that access to the populous Asian cities could bring huge rewards, the board of Goldsbrough, Mort and Company proved willing to put a sizeable amount of their own capital into the venture. Within days it approved a loan of 30,000 pounds to help Stevens design and build a new steamer, the Darwin, specifically for transporting live cattle.⁸ The board also advanced Stevens 500 pounds to upgrade the holding pens and loading facilities at the Port Darwin wharves.

The Darwin made its first voyage from Southampton on 13 February 1892. Unfortunately for the industry, from the beginning the trade was virtually always conducted at a loss. There were a lot of obstacles – from changing exchange rates in Singapore to redwater disease, which eventually got the Australian cattle prohibited in Batavia and Java.⁹ However, the most persistent roadblock was the difficulty of finding enough good

fat cattle in the Territory to bring a reasonable return. Even after he transferred all the cattle from the Glencoe region to the better pastures of Victoria River Downs, Stevens found it impossible to pull out adequate numbers of properly finished animals from his grazing herds. His contract with the government required him to take stock from other stations too, and he would have been happy to comply. However, even when he combed the entire Victoria River and western Tablelands regions, he was usually (and maybe always) unable to find satisfactory supply. The dressed weights of the cattle shipped to the Asian markets whose sales were recorded in the Goldsbrough, Mort and Company papers, now preserved at Canberra, were all incredibly low for so-called slaughter carcasses. The weights also varied considerably from shipment to shipment. “You will find that the average weight of bullocks killed” in Singapore “in December [1892] was only 430 lbs.,” a company representative reported, while for the previous three months “it was 480 lbs.” This, he pointed out, resulted in “a serious reduction” in the amount of money the cattle brought in of “about \$900.”¹⁰ He also noted that a hundred bullocks at Batavia in September 1892 “gave an average weight of 515 lbs.” and “100 bullocks in January gave an average weight of 425 lbs.” “If the 100 January bullocks had weighed as much as those in September,” he said, “we should have realized – taking the average gross price obtained as 9¾ cents per lb. – \$5,115.00” in total “– or say \$14.25 per head more” when all the other costs were figured in.¹¹

In 1893, before the prohibitions regarding redwater were announced, Stevens contracted to supply 750,000 pounds of beef to the Dutch military in Java through an agent in Batavia. The agent offered the potentially rewarding price of 8 pounds sterling a head. Unfortunately, however, the dressed weights of the cattle, expected to be around a very modest 600 pounds, in fact averaged less than 400 pounds, and the agent buying by the head and selling by the pound could not make ends meet. Ostensibly, Goldsbrough, Mort and Company was unable to collect a lot of the money he owed them. Considering that a net yield of 900 pounds would not have been extraordinary for a properly finished carcass, the best of the sales the company seems to have made in the early 1890s were worse than poor; they suggest an altogether dysfunctional business.¹² In later deliveries there may have been some improvement. The company sent 104 cattle to Singapore in May 1893, for instance, that averaged

502.48 pounds.¹³ However, that sort of yield was obviously still far below what should have been considered acceptable.

While records are not complete, evidence suggests, moreover, that small carcasses remained a problem for the company from that point until the end. Both Stevens and then in 1897 his replacement, Thomas Maldrum, must have known that supplying unfinished, low-yielding stock was uneconomic but they were under pressure to fulfill their company's contracts and just did not have access to the kind of cattle that was desired. In October 1897 Maldrum wrote to A.M. Watson, the manager at Victoria River Downs, with strict orders to find cattle no matter how poorly finished so that the company could fulfill its obligations. "My instructions from Head Office are to get the necessary cattle from V.R.D. even if light by weight, both for shipment and local consumption," he wrote. He actually pleaded with the manager not to let him down. "Only on your good self could I rely," he said, "with the assistance of our drovers, for this to be done." He also indicated that other sources of slaughter cattle had all but completely dried up. "Either through drought, or outside purchases" the entire Tablelands area had been "denuded," leaving the company dependent on its own station "for almost every hoof." It is indicative of the pressure Maldrum was feeling that he closed his letter with: "I can only trust to your sending" the drovers "back not empty handed."¹⁴ Apparently he had made an attempt shortly before this to find suitable stock on the station and failed. "Returned today, no bullocks Victoria Downs . . . too poor, Cattle in bad state for grass and water," a drover had informed him by telegram.¹⁵ He had sent this telegram on to the Melbourne office, only to be told to get the cattle no matter what. Watson must have supplied the necessary cattle. However, that did not relieve the pressure for long. At the end of November Maldrum found himself pleading once again for supply. "Owing to the long spell of dry weather, you will not be able to get a mob of prime fats, but I want you to lift as good as you can find," he told his drover, Joseph Davis. I am "writing to Mr. Watson explaining our practical necessities for the ship and local market, and asking him to do his best in giving you as good a lot as he can."¹⁶

In December 1897 the government determined that it was not getting value for its money and withdrew £5,000 subsidy. That pretty much ended attempts to penetrate the Asian market. Shortly thereafter the board

of Goldsbrough, Mort and Company decided to close down its export business because “with the prohibition of the import of meat into Batavia” there was “no prospect of running . . . at any profit.”¹⁷ Along with Alfred Giles’s expectations regarding the beef he sold, this episode prompts one to doubt if any significant number of cattle marketed from the Northern Territory in these years yielded well. The man questioned before the beef commission in 1895 certainly did not think so. He testified that at the time when attempts were being made to access the markets in Singapore and Batavia “small cattle” was the greatest obstacle.¹⁸ Cattle throughout the Territory are “very light,” he said, “a great deal lighter than they should be. It is very hard to get bullocks over 7 cwt. to ship. The average . . . is seldom over that when they go on board.”

The truth is that the Victoria River Downs was unable to grow and fatten its cattle as quickly as H.W.H. Stevens had originally expected when he accepted the local and overseas orders – and considering the station claimed some 30,000 head in its vast herds,¹⁹ and that he could call on other producers as well, supplying the 250 to 300 animals he needed each month should not have been a problem if they had access to decent pasturage year round.²⁰ Clearly they did not. “Nutritional problems in cattle,” which became “most evident towards the end of the dry season,” were an annual concern in both the Victoria River and Tablelands districts.²¹ Since such problems also occurred during dry periods after any substantial rains in the Alice Springs region, it is evident that it was quite difficult for stations anywhere in the Northern Territory to get their animals fat and keep them in that condition. Moreover, any stock the Australians did send off to market must also have lost weight they could not afford to lose from their boney frames due to shrinkage. They had first to be trailed at least a few hundred miles from their home station to the Palmerston–Pine Creek Railway (completed in 1888), and then “trucked” the 240 kilometres north to Port Darwin. Those heading to Asia were then landed, reloaded, and “retrucked” for the short trip to the jetty where they were herded aboard the steamer.²² The overseas portion of the journey was shorter and presumably somewhat less arduous than that from Montreal to Britain, but it would have taken a toll in flesh nonetheless.

Though not exacerbated by overgrazing, the environmental obstacles Territorial producers encountered trying to produce fats quite directly mirrored those the ranchers faced in western Canada, where seasonally

diminished pasturelands and shrinkage were also barriers to efficient production and advantageous sales. When a member of the 1895 beef commission asked the man from Victoria River to explain why he thought Territorial cattle were so light, he introduced two other factors, both of which were also germane on the northern Great Plains of North America. "One," he said was that "people are . . . in too great a hurry to realise" a return on their investment and consequently they "send their bullocks in" when "they are too young."²³ In other words, their need to pay their bills was pressuring them to market their cattle before they had had enough time to fill out properly. Extremely high startup costs, augmented by interest payments on loans and overdrafts with which men like Costello at Lake Nash and Buchanan at Wave Hill grappled, certainly caused cash deficits. Some stations may also have been paying "guaranteed" dividends, though one doubts this was widespread since the experienced Australian owners and managers had a realistic enough understanding of their business not to make the wild promises to their investors that the North Americans made. The second reason the Victoria River man gave for light stock was that the stations "do not pay enough attention to breeding." They "breed from all sorts of bulls" running loose on the open range.²⁴ This testimony is borne out by the 1923 survey of Tablelands cattle stations mentioned in chapter 3. "The breeding of beef cattle . . . throughout the Northern Territory needs greatly improving," it stated. "The standard of the herds must be raised very much higher if cattle for beef export purposes" are "going to compete successfully with" those from "other countries of the world."²⁵ Presumably, most of the more experienced Australian pastoralists brought reasonably high-quality cattle north in their initial herds. There is no evidence of the kind of panic buying of poor breeding stock that underlay the development of the industry on the northern Great Plains. However, inevitably, disadvantageous cross-breeding and, indeed, inbreeding, occurred on all open range pastures and a percentage of young bull calves, not all of which were of desirable quality, also managed to avoid the knife.²⁶

The Northern Territory cattlemen could not solve the problem of low carcass yields by adopting grain finishing any more than the first ranchers in Canada could. This was because, as will become clear in a future chapter, their environment was not, and never would be, suitable to arable agriculture.²⁷ Eventually after the failure of the Cattle Export Service,

most of the stations concentrated instead on accessing the markets of southern Australia where populations, particularly in and around Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide, were denser and ultimately the demand for beef much greater than in central or northern areas.²⁸ They had only one way to reach these markets – by retracing the steps of the men who had driven their stock in via one of the long, hard overland routes. Eventually they had to almost entirely give up the idea of producing slaughter cattle. A few stations began sending bunches of what were described as both “store and fat bullocks” south from the southeastern Tablelands in the 1880s.²⁹ If any of these cattle actually started out with much flesh on their bones, they tended to lose it during the journey, and it soon became clear that they were almost all being bought up by grain farmers from arable parts of southern Queensland or New South Wales or even South Australia.³⁰ Severe drought in Queensland from 1897 to 1902 emptied the pastoral areas of that state of range stock and this brought a greater demand than ever for Territorial feeders. The impact was felt in all three of the grazing districts. By 1906, Alexandria, Brunette Downs, Rockland’s Pastoral Company, Cresswell Downs, and Austral Downs were all sending from six hundred to one thousand head at a time down from the eastern Tableland.³¹ By then it had become commonplace for more distant runs such as Gordon Downs or Wave Hill from the Victoria River area to walk their cattle more than eighteen hundred miles to the market. There were four main routes: from northern Victoria River and Tableland districts to Borroloola to the west of the Bay of Carpentaria to Burketown in north-western Queensland and south from there to the sales ring in Charleville, Queensland; easterly through Newcastle Waters across the mid-Tableland region, along the Georgina River into Queensland at Lake Nash and then south to Charleville; along the old Overland Telegraph Company line from central Australia south to Charlotte Waters in South Australia and then on to the railhead at Oodnadatta for the sales ring in Adelaide; and from the western Tableland region to Birdsville in southwest Queensland and along the so-called “Birdsville track” to the rail yards at Hergott Springs in South Australia and then Adelaide.³² Charleville, where the famous stockman and broker Sidney Kidman dominated the ring, was the biggest sales centre countrywide. Kidman sent lots of the cattle by rail directly to individual farmers in the southern states or to the auction in one of the other centres.³³

The following report of a trip led by William Phillips, droving for William F. Buchanan of Wave Hill, is one of the best and most detailed depictions available of the entire arduous journey from the more distant north. An editor commented that “one of the most striking features” of the journey was “the number of other drovers” who were “‘on the track,’ over a route which a few years ago was one of the most lonesome on the continent.”³⁴ Showing the same high respect for the Australian stockmen that North Americans tended to feel for the iconic cowboy, the report described Phillips as “an unostentatious man, with no bush swagger” who “doesn’t go round boasting of his droving feats.” But if you simply “ask him how he fared” on this thirty-two-weeks excursion “he will just tell you a plain, unvarnished tale of his principal movements.”

The stockmen at Wave Hill mustered some 7,750 cattle all told for the trip and Phillips and his men started out with 1,250 in their group. They set out on April 4 for Burketown in the first stage and then, after taking on provisions, headed for Burrandilla, a feeding station Buchanan owned some twenty miles from Charleville.

By the point compass Charleville is southeast of Wave Hill. However, Phillips went northwest for the first 300 miles. He followed the waters of the Northern Territory down to the coast . . . The party crossed the watersheds of the Daly River and Katherine River, and touched the overland telegraph line at the head of the King River, and then . . . [followed] the watershed to the Roper River. The party zigzagged the rivers as much as possible for water. At times water was very scarce. Phillips rode 75 miles a day in search of water. A mob of 1230 head of cattle and 30 horses on a dry, sandy, spinifex . . . need a good drink occasionally. The party set out . . . with 30 horses, but these were increased to 43 head by purchase en route.

The Roper is not an easy river to cross, for its banks are very steep, and there are only two fordable places in its course – McKenzie’s bar and the Roper bar. Moreover, the river is full of alligators, with insatiable appetites. So the plan is to . . . cross when the tide is out. When the tide is up the water

is salt, and alligators are plentiful. At low water the stock can drink and cross without affording a meal to the reptiles. These are important matters to the drover, for his aim is to deliver with as low a percentage of loss as possible . . .

How unpopulated all this country is may be seen from the fact that the droving party proceeded 600 miles before they struck the first store. Aboriginals are plentiful, and not too tame. If unmolested, and if no gins [young girls] are enticed to the droving camps, the blacks are tractable: but if . . . [otherwise] then they show fight. If treated up to their standard of fairness they are friendly enough; they will give information about the country and where to get water. When you strike two stores in 1400 miles, and practically all the people you see are armed aboriginals in the nude, and as wild as the country they haunt, then their assistance is much more appreciated than their opposition. Phillips and his party carried arms and ammunition, ready to be used at a moment's notice . . . There are no tracks or routes from Wave Hill to the Queensland . . . and although the country from the Katherine River to Borrooloola, on the McArthur River, was bad, he says that the country from Borrooloola to Burketown is the worst bit of droving country in Australia. Leaving Borrooloola there was a 40 mile stage absolutely destitute of water. The country was sandy desert, with spinifex or cypress pine and paperbarked-tree scrub. Some of the rivers between Borrooloola and Burketown were very dry; drought for two years had prevailed where drought of such length was never previously known . . .

They arrived at Burketown on August 4, and thus were 18 weeks travelling 1150 miles with their mob of cattle, which was excellent work considering the nature of the country. On some of the ranges dividing the watersheds the drovers tied up their horses and let the cattle string down the sides as leisurely as they pleased for safety sake. Even then a few were maimed and lost. Along that route . . . was an 80

mile stretch of storm-strewn country, where the packhorses had great difficulty in picking their way. Trees 2ft through at the butt were snapped like carrots. Evidently a whirlwind, tornado, or some other blast from the air furnace had swept along some little while previously. . . The party had travelled nearly 1800 miles, passed three post offices, and seen four white women . . . The party left Burketown on August 6 . . . and they then met open Downs country for the first time; a great relief from the sand and spinifex country that they had passed. Even then there were only 2½ per cent, of losses of cattle; some died through eating poison bush, and others were lamed when crossing the ranges. After leaving Burketown the mob crossed the Leichhardt River, 40 miles out, got on to the Landsborough River and followed it up 80 miles. On these rivers there are only crocodiles, comparatively tame creatures not like their salt-water compeers, the alligators, that are veritable tigers when men or beasts are about. From the Landsborough they crossed on to the Cloncurry, struck Conobie station; got onto roads and tracks, and generally trod on the skirts of civilization. Crossed the Cloncurry on to Eastern Creek, through Dalgonally station with its large herd of Shorthorns. Here it was necessary to carry firewood in the pack bags, to last two nights. Instead of wild, trackless country, where you had to “trust in the Lord, and keep your powder dry,” you now had to keep to the stock routes, and seeing that at Kyuna on the Diamantina, upwards of 70,000 head of cattle had passed this year between January 1 and September 13, the feed was none too good. Most of those cattle came from the Northern Territory and Gulf country.

Leaving Kynuna the Phillips party covered a 45 mile dry stage and feed was very scarce; the preceding mobs left more hoof prints than herbage behind them. The stock routes are one mile wide, but unless rain falls frequently they powder up. Rain now fell three days and three nights, as it knows how to fall in Queensland. The routes were now boggy, and travelling was slow; however, Winton was reached after . . .

27 weeks on the road from Burketown. Moreover, the losses were only 1½ percent from Burketown. On they went from Winton through Vindex to Evesham. Here the heaviest losses were suffered; three inches of rain had fallen, and there was no feed, the routes were boggy, and nine bullocks and five horses succumbed. They pulled themselves to pieces in the bog . . . From there on to Burrandilla 12 in. of rain fell; they had to swim the Thompson, but the rains gave feed and water so the cattle . . . were all right, so only discomfort and not loss was experienced by the drovers to the end of the journey.

Thus a droving party of eight set out with 1250 head of bullocks on a 2100 miles trip, which they covered in 32 weeks with a loss of only 50 head. This is claimed to be for the distance travelled, the number of cattle taken and delivered, a record for Australia. Mr. C. H. Buchanan, taking delivery . . . for Mr. W. F. Buchanan on November 21, 1906, wrote: . . . “I was very well pleased with the condition of the cattle, and the evident way they were handled during that long trip. It was a credit to . . . [the drover]; his losses were only nominal . . . Mr. Phillips . . . thoroughly understands droving cattle through all difficulties that a drover has to meet in such outlandish trips.

Phillips felt he had done a good job too. “My losses amounted to five per cent,” he said, and “Mr. Buchanan was highly pleased” with the cattle, which were “in good store condition.”³⁵ Buchanan used the station at Burrandilla to recondition his cattle on roughage and, possibly, some grain, before putting them through the ring.

The Northern Territorians thus were traversing ground that could be at least as daunting as that navigated by the Canadians on their long excursions from the ranges of the West to Great Britain. Remoteness from densely populated markets was just one of the plethora of strikingly similar challenges and circumstances encountered by the graziers in both these regions. In both cases they started out intending to feed the slaughter market and ended up selling a large percentage of their cattle as stores. The Australians seem to have accepted this development – the Canadians

perhaps not so much – but the outcome was essentially the same. A harsh climate and difficult ecosystem, uncontrolled breeding on the open range, a shortage of capital during a period of extremely costly operation in the one region (Northern Territories) and of both high costs and high expectations in the other, the uncertainty of grass fattening, and the lack of large quantities of locally produced feed grains also impacted the cattle industry as it struggled to gain a foothold in both places. The next chapter will demonstrate that when they attempted to expand their grazing programs to include horses, the tests pastoralists in these two frontiers faced and the outcomes they achieved were again much the same.