British Remittance Men as Ranchers: The Case of Coutts Marjoribanks and Edmund Thursby, 1884-95

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Frederick Jackson Turner’s is only the most compelling of many accounts that portrayed the frontier West as a region of opportunity where sturdy individuals from modest social and economic backgrounds could get a leg up on the ladder of success. This frontier was a healthier place than longer settled areas because westerners valued newcomers for their hard work, for what they could do, not for their family status or wealth, and individuals achieved whatever level of success their own abilities and motivations allowed. But as British and even eastern travelers to the frontier often reported, this egalitarianism often had a negative side, a relentless urge to level anything that might be taken as putting on airs or presuming oneself to be superior to anyone else.

Both popular legend and recent research suggest that western pioneers were most apt to want to level British-born, especially English-born, settlers of the “gentleman class.” Magazines and newspapers, novels, and reminiscences show that westerners, either seriously or in jest, characterized these immigrants as lazy, soft, and impractical, and mistook their accent and reserved manner for standoffishness, deserving of further ridicule. Remittance men, younger sons whose lives in the West were financed by stipends from their aristocratic families, were the particular butts of jokes and demeaning tall tales of their self-indulgence and gullibility. Yet despite these stereotypes, the young Englishmen were, as a class, among the most socially acceptable of all the immigrant groups.¹

If self-indulgence and incompetence are the myth about these surplus siblings who shipped out to the frontier because Britain had few opportunities to offer younger sons, what did characterize the lives of these pioneers? Historians are now beginning to develop a complex collective biography of British gentleman immigrants who came to the North American West during the Gilded Age. Like the nineteenth-century westerners, the scholars are concluding that the young Britishees were naive, lacked

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appropriate training in agriculture and manual labor, indulged too much in sporting and social events, and left little impact on the frontier communities. But the Britishers were not quite as hopeless as the caricatures of them that appeared in the tall tales of the contemporary press.

According to contemporary scholars, many of the sons (and parents) were hopelessly optimistic about the West, believing that quick fortunes could be made by developing farms and ranches there. Sons imagined the West as a place for a brief but grand romantic adventure, which predisposessed them to neglect farming for hunting, gambling, drinking, and generally living exotically. Parents hoped the experience would build character and moral fiber in their sons and often inflated the importance of land ownership in the West to that prevailing in England. Many remittance men had been educated for public leadership in Britain's best public schools. They knew nothing of American agriculture and tended to look askance at the sheer physical labor involved in creating a farm or ranch. Nor were they acquainted with business management. Thus an era of adversely erratic commodity prices usually vanquished their limited skills. Most returned to Britain after a few years of misfortune in North America, but a few remained in the West for the rest of their lives, sometimes marrying local women. Some stayed in agriculture, but more moved to jobs or businesses in towns or cities. Scholars tentatively conclude that, except for upgrading livestock and spending large amounts of money, the young Britishers had little impact on the western communities in which they lived—although their failures were little different from those of young easterners whose families subsidized their usually abortive ventures into western ranching.

Despite the concurrence of the scholars with the popular image of the remittance man, the collective biographers have identified a much more complex set of relations between Britons and the frontier than that encapsulated in popular notions of the remittance man. This essay follows the fortunes of two young Britishers who became ranchers, neighbors, and friends in the Mouse River valley of northern Dakota Territory in the mid-1880s, briefly served as community leaders, and then moved away. The specifics of their interlocking ranching careers and of the very different outcomes to their enterprises enlarge and clarify the emerging collective portrait of the remittance man.

The Two Britishers

The young Scotsman Coutts Marjoribanks (pronounced Marchbanks) was the third and next to youngest son of Dudley Coutts Marjoribanks, first Baron Tweedmouth, whose adjoining estates Guisachan and Glen Affric were in the Scottish Highlands near the town of Strathglass in Inverness-shire. There Lord Tweedmouth hunted wild game and developed a herd of champion Angus cattle. While still a young man Lord Tweedmouth had made his fortune as a director of the Menx Brewery. Prior to his elevation as a peer in 1881 he had been made a baronet in 1866 and had served as a Liberal member of the House of Commons for many years (1853-68, 1874-81). During the annual sessions of Parliament he and his family lived in their magnificent London home, Brook House, and on weekends at their nearby five-hundred-acre Dollis Hills estate. Just to the west of this farm was Harrow, the exclusive preparatory boarding school Coutts attended. Upon his graduation he was commissioned a lieutenant in the Queen’s Own Highlanders Regiment. In 1880 he toured the American West, seeking a place to make his fortune.1

His friend was Edmund H. Thursby, nephew of Colonel John Hardy Thursby, a resident of Burnley, Lancashire, England, who was made a baronet in 1887. I have not found the names of Edmund’s parents nor the particulars of his education, though he was doubtless also a product of an English boarding school and he too may have traveled widely in the West and elsewhere. In the early 1880s he was sent out to Le Mars, Iowa, a colony of aristocratic young British “second sons,” where he probably became an apprentice (“farm pupil”) to one of the
local farmers. In Le Mars he joined the Prairie Club in which the exclusively British membership enjoyed their own sort of food and drink, music, reading material, and social activities. Both Edmund and Coutts were caught up in the tidal wave of interest in western ranching that swept across the home islands in the 1880s and both landed on the same grassy shore.

THE TWO RANCHES

The twenty-four-year-old Coutts Marjoribanks settled in McHenry County in north-central Dakota Territory (Fig. 1) in late 1884 or early 1885. His father provided start-up capital of £6000 and an annual allowance of £400. Between June 1885 and October 1889 Coutts purchased six parcels of mostly improved land, bringing his total holdings to a solid rectangle of 955.60 acres. He spent a total of $3040 or an average of $3.18 per acre, which was well below the average value of $5 for improved land in that county in 1890. Consisting almost entirely of bottomland in the Mouse River valley, his acreage was arranged in two rows of three quarter sections each, with the river running through the west end. Water was plentiful in the river—nearly four feet deep at the ford. The soil consisted mostly of Lamoure clay, with small parcels of Lamoure silty clay loam and Barnes loam. It all produced abundant quantities of native grasses for hay and pasture and while the loam was also suitable for cultivated crops, Coutts grew only a small plot of vegetables. Scattered patches of forest grew along the river. A nearby road ran directly into Towner, the county seat seven miles to the north. Coutts had indeed chosen a favorable location for his ranch.5

Thursby was about thirty-one years of age—slightly older than most remittance men—when he arrived in McHenry County in late 1885 or early 1886. He began his livestock operation in early 1886 but did not complete his first land purchase, 320 acres, until March 1887. Because his family provided only remittances (amounts unknown) and no start-up capital, Edmund had to mortgage his land to obtain operating funds.

In April 1887 he received a five-year loan of $825 at 10 percent interest from the American Mortgage Company of Scotland, Ltd. (Edinburgh) and in December of that year he borrowed $2800 on a note (interest unknown), using his ranch as collateral and due the next April, from the Merchants National Bank of Devils Lake. He repaid both loans on schedule, and in 1889 he bought two more quarter sections, but his holdings were scattered in three noncontiguous blocks, with small parcels separating them (Fig. 1). For his total 640 acres he paid an average price of $3.20 per acre. The ranch was of Mouse River bottomland, the soil Lamoure clay with only about one hundred acres of Valentine sand. This land was free of stones, covered with a variety of native grasses, and best suited for pasture.6 Thus Edmund’s ranch—on a main road that ran to Towner about twenty miles to the south—was reasonably well located and included the best available water and grass.

Fig. 1. Map of McHenry County, North Dakota, showing Thursby’s Anchor T Ranch and Marjoribanks’s Horseshoe V Ranch. Map by Albert J. Richmond and William R. Baron.
STOCKING THE RANGES

Coutts registered his Horseshoe V brand on 5 January 1886. In April the Villard Leader noted that he had just returned from a trip to Boston where he had received six imported Angus cattle from his family in Scotland and had purchased five carloads of choice native cattle. He was only one of a number of Mouse River stockgrowers who were bringing in Shorthorns, Angus, or Hereford cattle to upgrade their herds or to establish breeding farms. In early July Coutts won some prize money exhibiting his imported Angus cattle in a livestock show at Devils Lake. Three bulls and three cows competed for best of breed, and a cow and two calves were entered in the sweepstakes for thoroughbreds. In July 1887 Coutts purchased three registered Angus bulls from Dr. C. J. Alloway, probably the first importer of Angus cattle in North Dakota. The only other purebred stock Coutts is known to have received was a shipment of Angus cattle (number unknown) sent out from Scotland by his mother in 1889 or 1890.7

In 1886 Thursby was also buying cattle. That spring he registered his Anchor T brand and purchased two purebred Angus animals and eighty native cattle from Alloway. According to the Villard Leader, Edmund planned to acquire blooded brood mares, a large number of Minnesota cattle, and additional purebred bulls.
In 1887 he purchased the Norman stallion Grover and advertised his horse’s stud services. Later that year he bought another purebred Angus bull from Alloway, and in June 1889 he bought two Angus bulls and six grade heifers at James J. Hill’s auction at his famous North Oaks farm near St. Paul. The Villard Leader credited Edmund with “doing as much, or more, as any other man to supply the Mouse River country with high grade stock,” but the lasting effects of his work were limited.8

As the principal importers of Angus cattle in the Mouse River country, purchasing stock from the same man, Edmund and Coutts were interested not only in developing a small herd of first-class breeding animals for sale to other stockmen but also in upgrading a herd of range cattle for the slaughter market. In the summer of 1886 Coutts’s herd thrived on the free grass of public lands and wintered well at the home ranch. In 1887 the two Britons, already close friends, pooled their herds and moved them to the public domain forty miles south of Coutts’s ranch. In October the British ranchers and their cowboys successfully completed the fall roundup and branding and a month later brought in the two herds—reportedly about five hundred head in fine condition—to the home ranches where large amounts of native hay had been cut for winter feeding. In November Coutts ended a successful season by shipping four carloads of choice steers to market in Chicago, but the prices were ominously low.9

In 1888 Coutts began to turn his ranch primarily into a breeding farm to supply other cattle growers with upgraded stock. Beginning in the 24 September issue of the Villard Leader he advertised the services of his six-year-old imported Angus bull Cardinal, but there was little market either for the bull’s services or for Angus heifers. By early 1889 Coutts was advertising “Good cows cheap, will sell on time with good security,” indicating his growing desperation with the continued depressed conditions in the cattle business. He certainly was not getting the “50 or 60 dollars apiece” he had earlier anticipated and he was lucky to find buyers at any price in 1889.10 Alloway had also been a buyer at Hill’s 1889 auction and Hill later hired him to manage his farm. In 1890 Alloway convinced Hill to ship a free carload of Angus bulls and Berkshire hogs to farmers along the Great Northern in North Dakota. This helped further depress the market in fine cattle for Coutts and

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**Fig. 3.** Coutts Marjoribanks’s log cabin in a watercolor sketch by his sister, Lady Aberdeen, July 1887. Reproduction courtesy of State Historical Society of North Dakota from the Minot Daily News, 6 July 1946.
Edmund. Although both Britishers were leading importers, raisers, and popularizers of Angus cattle in the Mouse River district, their activities were not crucial to establishing the black breed elsewhere in North Dakota.

Despite discouraging economic signs, Coutts added a number of improvements to his land during his years in McHenry County. By December 1886 he had built a log house that reminded visitors of a hunting lodge. He planted a number of young elm trees and his yard was surrounded by many haystacks. Coutts’s sister described her brother’s cabin in July 1887 as “a nice little log house with wooden roof painted green and surmounted with a pair of elk horns. Has two bedrooms and sitting room with kitchen leading out of it.” (Fig. 3.) His vegetable garden was “thriving well.” Her brother had a new barn and an old one. The following November Coutts bought a railroad carload of lumber in Towner to expand his already large barns to accommodate his blooded stock better. A local journalist congratulated the Scotsman “for his ability in managing with such complete success his fine and profitable ranch.” Also that fall he built a feed mill and a portable saw mill. In early 1890, despite the slipping market, Coutts enlarged his house and built two miles of fence. Years later old timers still remembered that Coutts’s ranch buildings were very well furnished. 11

During their years in Dakota both Thursby and Marjoribanks became leaders in their community, particularly in matters relating to cattle raising. Shortly after his arrival in McHenry County Edmund promoted the livestock exhibition at Devils Lake in July 1886 and joined Coutts in displaying Angus cattle. Edmund raised $3000 in premiums—James J. Hill was among the donors—and arranged for horse, harness, and pony races at the fair. During 1887 he collected the finest specimens of Mouse River crops to display at the North Dakota fair, where the exhibit much impressed its visitors. 12

**Community Leaders**

In 1886 both Britishers helped organize a regional cattlemen’s association. Although the editor of the Villard Leader issued the first call for such an association, Coutts was one of eight local cattlemen who published a notice in the Villard Leader inviting farmers and ranchers in McHenry, Bottineau, and Ward counties to attend an organizational meeting of a protective association. At the 21 June meeting, Coutts and Edmund became two of twenty-eight charter members of the Mouse River Live Stock Protective Association, founded to coordinate the rapid recovery of strayed or stolen stock, apprehend rustlers, protect the range with mandatory firebreaks, and enforce a common herding system. Coutts’s foreman, “Bernie” Kelly, and
Edmund were elected to a five-man committee to write the new organization's constitution and by-laws. Later that year the valley cattlemen elected Coutts vice president of the association and at the January 1888 meeting he became president.\textsuperscript{13}

The Britishers were not interested only in ranching, however. Coutts became a member and clerk of a local school board and often led citizen's delegations to request that the county build new roads and bridges and plow fireguards. In 1886 Edmund became a justice of the peace in his township, but in October 1887 he abruptly and without explanation resigned his office and withdrew his membership in the cattlemen's association. The Villard Leader expressed regret at the news and noted that his generosity and good humor would be missed, but Edmund had not yet left the public arena. In October he hosted a meeting at his ranch house (Fig. 5) to nominate an independent candidate for District No. 1 commissioner of McHenry County, and he was elected secretary of the nonpartisan campaign organization. In 1889 he joined the Republican party and in August became a delegate to the county G.O.P. convention at which he was elected one of seven members of the party's county committee. In September he hosted his party's well attended local rally and barbecue. Only in May 1892 did he announce that he had "departed from the political arena" to devote himself "exclusively to business."\textsuperscript{14}

As we have seen, both the popular and scholarly images of the remittance man showed him forsaking the farm or ranch for town, so it is not surprising to see Edmund's career take this tack in 1889, although he was not yet ready to leave the land. In June, E. H. Thursby & Company, Loan Brokers, commenced business from

\textbf{FIG. 5.} \textit{Edmund Thursby in front of his ranch house, 1887.} Photograph by Kerlon Courteau, Minneapolis, courtesy of State Historical Society of North Dakota.
its new office building in Towner. The office manager was George H. Soule, a fellow rancher, Republican, and lodge brother who had already been operating his own land loan business for several years. The new firm extended commercial and real estate loans to agriculturalists on the basis of chattel collateral. The local press commented favorably on the large but unspecified amount of money available for credit and on the handsome furnishings in the office, but the private, unchartered enterprise left no known records, so it is impossible to determine how successful it was before it sold out at the end of 1892 to the recently formed McHenry County Bank of Towner, where Soule became cashier and later a director.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Social Life}

The two British ranchers did work to improve livestock and livestock management in their district, in keeping with the image of the remittance man, but the community's acceptance of their leadership shows that they were perceived as neither incompetent nor standoffish. Did they, however, fit the social side of the stereotype? Did they waste their time and substance hunting, partying, and otherwise living irresponsibly? The two friends did hunt together and were guests at each others' ranches. Each of them also engaged in his own very active social life and enjoyed playing the role of a British country squire in the American West. Each hosted dances and hunting parties at his ranch. Edmund's handsomely furnished house included a billiards room for his many guests, who were wined and dined lavishly. He was an active member of the Odd Fellows fraternal organization and a Freemason of the highest degree, attending meetings as far away as Minneapolis. He liked to visit editors in newspaper offices; the journalists, grateful for the attention, printed flattering comments about

\textsuperscript{15}
him and his ranch and business. When several young women from Ohio wrote to a local editor for the identities of eligible bachelors in the community, the journalist recommended Edmund Thursby (among others), describing him as very rich, very bashful, a tall and good looking young man, a skilled conversationalist in need of female companionship on his annual treks to Europe. The press noted Edmund's annual departures each winter to visit friends and relatives in Britain and welcomed his return each spring. 15

Coutts did not return to Britain during his years in Dakota and his ranch house was only modestly furnished. Nevertheless, he and his guests—including Edmund—hunted to hounds, riding out from his ranch behind his imported hunting dogs in an attempt to reduce the number of wolves in the Mouse River country. At the agricultural fairs at which Coutts proudly exhibited his cattle, he also enjoyed attending horse races, and although he apparently owned no race horses, he doubtless bet at these events. He was evidently enough of an authority that he was appointed a member of the committee on races for the Fourth of July celebration at the nearby town of Pendroy. For different reasons each of Coutts's parents believed that their son enjoyed his social life too much. His mother worried about her son's choice of friends. When he first became a rancher, she had been pleased with his “fortunate” selection of Bernie Kelly as foreman. “Then came a change. Towner loomed and [Coutts] fell in with a lot who made him their leader and the object of their attention as long as he could treat them and be made a dupe of.” When Kelly left to start his own ranch in Montana, “things went right afterwards down hill . . .” Lady Tweedmouth hoped that her son would leave Dakota and make a fresh start elsewhere. On the other hand, Coutts's father believed that his son spent too much time in local public affairs such as the cattlemen's association and school board and that the young man's problems would disappear if he would single-mindedly devote himself to ranching. 17

COU TT S'S RANCH FAIL S

Coutts's ranch failed in 1890 and that October he traveled to British Columbia to visit relatives and to search for a new beginning. Although local folklorists and students of the district's cattle industry have speculated that adverse weather, cattle rustling, and the Scotsman's extravagant lifestyle caused his financial difficulties, they have failed to identify the principal cause of Coutts's problems. He had entered ranching just at the beginning of an industry-wide recession that had slid into a depression by the decade's end. Failing to recognize this decline, he had specialized in the most speculative and vulnerable aspect of the business: a breeding farm that could prosper only during a period of growing demand and rising prices when other livestock growers could see the benefits of upgrading their herds with pure-bred cattle. 18

Coutts returned to Dakota only once, in August 1894, when he seriously considered letting his old friend Thursby oversee preparations for restocking the ranch—perhaps with the prospect of forming a partnership. They dropped the plan, however, leaving no record of the reason, and on 11 February 1901 Coutts sold all of his 955.60 acres in Dakota to Andrew W. Will for $7001. The Scotsman enjoyed a capital gain of $3961 over the purchase price of $3040. He received an average of $7.32 per acre, only slightly below the $8 per acre average value of improved land in McHenry County at that time. 19

During his trip to Canada in 1890 Coutts had accepted the offer of his brother-in-law and sister, Lord and Lady Aberdeen, to manage the 480-acre fruit farm that they had just purchased on the shore of Lake Okanagan, near Vernon, British Columbia. There he stayed until his father's death in 1894 when, after a brief unsettled period, he returned to Scotland, where he married his childhood friend Margaret Nicholls in 1895. The couple continued to live in Scotland until 1910 when Coutts purchased the Corona orchard on Lake Kalemalka near Ver-
non and moved his family to Invercraig, a charming house of his own design. Some years later his stepdaughter, Kathleen Myhre, recalled that Coutts “had very little money sense” and “a lot” of leisure time. He had “excellent taste and pleasure in beautiful things. His main interest was fishing and shooting.” She concluded: “He was a man of moods and impulses, and I think his upbringing did not fit him very well for life in the world. He was always kind and generous, and my mother was devoted to him.” Although his orchard was unprofitable, Coutts’s later years in Canada were happy ones. He died at his farm on 1 November 1924, far away from the cattle country of Dakota.

The drought and financial problems that convinced Coutts Marjoribanks to leave Dakota impelled his friend Edmund Thursby to gamble on a better future by channeling all his remittances from his family into the expansion of his ranching enterprise. He may even have acquired some of Marjoribanks’s cattle when they were dispersed. By 1891 Thursby’s herd reportedly numbered five hundred head of fine cattle and twenty-five horses, accommodated in large and well furnished barns. But cattle prices were low, and even an expanding livestock business failed to sustain Edmund’s undivided interest.

EDMUND’S DOWNHILL SPIRAL

Coutts’s departure from Dakota in October 1890 filled Edmund with a growing anxiety and precipitated a bout of alcoholism severe enough that the Englishman was briefly admitted for treatment to the state hospital in Jamestown. By the following August Edmund was having second thoughts about remaining in the cattle business. He moved to Grand Forks and then entered into a partnership with George H. Stevens, a local settler, whom Thursby entrusted to manage his ranch. Together the partners disposed of most of the cattle and began acquiring sheep, leading the local press to surmise that the Anchor T was about to become “the principal sheep ranch in McHenry County.” In October Albert and Frank Hankey, local stockmen who were kinsmen of Stevens, purchased and shipped four carloads of Thursby’s cattle. Stevens advertised for sale at the ranch 3000 Merino lambs and 2000 ewes, while the Hankeys shipped in an additional 1750 of what a local stock inspector called the “finest lot of sheep ever brought into this county.” But the accountant brought to the ranch to evaluate Edmund’s assets before he completed the agreement must have told the Englishman to dissolve the partnership.

Thursby had been very sick on the day that the original agreement had been signed. He subsequently began litigation to have appointed a receiver who would supervise the “annulment” of the partnership on the grounds “that at the time the contract was signed by him he was laboring under physical and mental weakness caused by a long and tedious journey, and that the contents of the agreement were not comprehended by him.” The suit ended in an out-of-court settlement to Edmund’s satisfaction. The “Dissolution of Partnership” announcement in the Towner newspaper on 22 January 1892 stated that the Thursby-Stevens venture had ended by mutual consent on 30 December and that “All debts contracted prior to that date will be paid by George H. Stevens.”

After ending the partnership Edmund only dabbled in ranching. Stevens remained at the Anchor T as a renter and caretaker and Edmund retained about thirty Angus cattle on his friend George Soule’s range thirty miles south of Towner. Edmund’s notice in the Towner paper, stating “that I have not sold, or authorized any person to sell, my cattle brand, ‘Anchor T,’ and I still hold and shall continue to use the aforesaid brand,” indicated he was not yet ready to quit the cattle business. A year later, however, on 20 August 1893, Thursby sold his entire 640-acre ranch for $5000 to the Hankey brothers. He received for his land an average of $7.81 an acre, well above the average value of $5 an acre for improved land in that county in the early 1890s, but any real capital gains or even return of the original investment lay in the future, for the Hankeys had borrowed from Edmund the entire purchase price of the ranch as a loan due
in three installments. Edmund continued to list his Anchor T brand in the newspaper until 23 November 1894. By this time he had given up all hope that his old friend Coutts Marjoribanks would return and enter a partnership.

Edmund’s repeated disappointments with livestock ventures in McHenry County probably helped commit him to his new life in Grand Forks. There he could join other absentee Mouse River ranchers who had already diversified into sheep raising. Initially renting rooms, he bought a house in 1892 and immediately plunged into the life of his newly adopted town by working part-time for the editorial department of the Grand Forks Plaindealer and competing for appointment as the local postmaster. The fairs and university activities of the city appealed to him, and he provided a scholarship to the university as well as a silver trophy for an athletic event.

Edmund’s financial difficulties increased in the 1890s. All remittances from England apparently ceased. Although he received some money by selling the Hankeys’ mortgage to another creditor for cash in November 1893, he was soon short of funds again. In 1894 he mortgaged his house in Grand Forks, but he could not keep up the payments, perhaps because the Hankeys apparently defaulted on their two personal notes, due in 1894 and 1895, and in 1897 the property was foreclosed. Edmund’s financial straits were no doubt intertwined with his worsening alcoholism. By 1899 he was an inmate at the Grand Forks County Hospital and after his mind became permanently impaired he was readmitted to the state hospital at Jamestown. He died there 5 February 1912 and was buried in the local cemetery.

**REDEFINING THE STEREOTYPE**

Like all individuals Coutts Marjoribanks and Edmund Thursby were both typical and unique, but the details of their lives enable us to both test and refine the emerging scholarly image of remittance men in the West. Neither individual was a ne’er-do-well younger son dispatched overseas simply to get him out of the way. Both came from families who believed that better opportunities existed in America than in Britain for the success of their young kinsmen. Both men and their families initially expected good profits from ranching in the West. The two immigrants viewed Dakota as a place for a grand adventure and tried in several ways—as culture carriers to the frontier—to improve the quality of life in their Dakota community. Both men became community leaders, fulfilling the responsibilities and enjoying the social status of something like country squires—one of the reasons their families had sent them to the frontier. Their elite educations and their lack of practical business skills did not appear to handicap them in becoming Dakota ranchers but did not help them weather financial hard times, either. No doubt they were both excellent horsemen, though their efforts at learning to ride in the western manner must have initially given their employees and neighbors some hearty laughs. No evidence has been found that reveals their attitudes toward physical labor, but probably they preferred to avoid it—a not uncommon trait even for American gentlemen ranchers in the West.

Neither of the two Britishers lived the extravagant and profligate life that legend has attributed to the remittance man. When Edmund first came to Dakota, he managed his ranch well, repaying his debts from his remittances and ranch income while continuing to expand his operation. Later, however, the lavish furnishings of his ranch house, the many parties and guests he hosted, his frequent participation in hunting trips and sporting events, and his annual trips back to England indicate a growing extravagance. But to what extent this helped cause his troubles and to what extent it was a reaction to increasing economic hard times and his realization that his ranch might never become profitable is impossible to determine from the existing documents. Likewise his sordid death from the effects of alcoholism far exceeds the myth of the profligate remittance man, but the extent to which the alcoholism was cause and to which it was effect remains undiscoverable. Although his ranching career was relatively short, it was fairly typical of other
ranchers in the Mouse River in the 1880s and 1890s and two years longer than that of his friend Coutts. The Englishman’s willingness to experiment with sheep as well as cattle shows both flexibility and determination. And Edmund committed himself to the larger community of northern Dakota Territory, not just to the life of the country squire. His real estate and financial dealings in Towner and his contributions to Grand Forks are those of any frontier entrepreneur with some social and financial standing. Edmund’s decline and death were not dissimilar to those of other would-be community builders on the northern Plains who were ruined by the hard times of the 1890s.

Coutts Marjoribanks lived even more modestly than did Edmund, although his parents’ concerns about his enjoyment of the good life while he was in growing financial trouble indicate that his family, at least, thought him capable of extravagance. Coutts’s return to the rural West after he had married and spent some years back in Scotland indicates his genuine liking for the frontier. Neither of the Britishers was an extravagant spendthrift temperamentally unsuited to the practical work of building a Dakota ranch.

Coutts and Edmund were also apparently comfortable with the egalitarian society of the West and were genuinely liked by their neighbors. Contemporary press coverage of the two was consistently favorable. Of course, the colorful Britishers, the only two foreign remittance men in the county, were good copy and their investments in land and stock appealed to the booster spirit of the editors, but the leadership roles taken and granted to the two friends indicate that they were widely liked and respected. One old settler later recalled that Coutts “was the dominant character; the rough and ready cowboys listened to him more readily than to the Englishman [Edmund].” Although Edmund’s ranch partner, Stevens, may have tried to take advantage of him, other associates, such as Soule, seem to have looked out for him. Nothing indicates that the two were considered as arrogant, standoffish, or incompetent as the remittance man of legend.

The contributions of the two men to the agriculture of the region seem to have been as positive as their contributions to the social milieu. Like many local ranchers, they brought in blooded cattle and helped discover which breeds were best adapted to upgrading the herds of the newly settled Mouse River country. While other ranchers mostly brought in Herefords and Shorthorns, Coutts and Edmund introduced the Angus breed, still popular in McHenry County today. Both Britishers chose land as good as any in the county and both sold their ranches at a profit, though Edmund may not have received full payment for his. Both followed the agricultural practices of their neighbors, summer grazing on public lands and winter feeding with wild hay cut on the home ranch. They knew how to innovate and how to adapt. Most important was their role in establishing a regional cattlemen’s association. Although the editor of the Villard Leader issued the first call for the association, both Coutts and Edmund soon assumed leadership roles in the group. Thus the Britishers proved that they were competent and serious ranchers willing to spend time on the tedious task of developing rules to govern the livestock business in the district. These were not remittance men who dumped money and exotic stock into a frontier ranch then failed and moved on, and their work suggests that other remittance men may have been more substantial contributors to the West than either the popular legend or the emerging scholarly image suggest.

Yet despite their good personal qualities, their agricultural skills, and their flare for leadership, both Coutts Marjoribanks and Edmund Thursby ultimately failed as ranchers and moved on. So did most of their neighbors. A rapid turnover of settlers was typical of the frontier West, though local boomers preferred to minimize such transience. Almost all the twenty-eight charter members of the cattlemen’s association in 1886 had quit or failed and moved away by 1900 as homesteaders arrived and established their own farms and ranches. One who stayed was Thomas Forsyth, considered by his peers to be “the best . . . and most successful” early rancher in the
county. He was a Canadian who had farmed for a few years farther east in North Dakota before purchasing the Poole ranch twenty miles north of Towner in 1888. He brought his foundation herd with him and later ran from 600 to 1000 head. He was a “careful and conservative” manager who continued to operate his ranch until his death in 1937. Financial success on the agricultural frontier depended on many factors: rapid adoption of production techniques appropriate to a new environment; adequate managerial skills; the wise use of credit; the use of accounting skills to balance carefully the needs of capital against operating costs and living expenses; sheer luck, such as arriving during an era of rising commodity prices and enjoying a favorable weather cycle; and the determination or tenacity to survive hard times (or the savvy to know when to quit). There were undoubtedly very few pioneer ranchers in the county who possessed these skills and who could match Forsyth’s record of success.

The two Britishers were no less successful than many of the early Mouse River ranchers and perhaps more successful than some. Although remittances from home—and in Coutts’s case start-up capital—allowed the two to establish their ranches, their funds were always limited. No systematic research has yet been done on the role of remittance men as foreign investors in the West, but it seems likely on the basis of scattered examples that these “second sons” were not major players in the foreign investment games. It was the huge British limited liability enterprises that dominated the western ranching business. Thus Coutts and Edmund, far from being exotics on the range, were modestly well-to-do gentlemen who fitted in well with their neighbors and fared about as well, for about the same reasons, as they.

FIG. 7. Angus and other cattle on Edmund Thursby’s ranch, 1887. Photograph courtesy of State Historical Society of North Dakota.
GROWTH OF A FOLK TRADITION

Despite the image of Coutts and Edmund that survives in letters, journals, interviews, financial records, and the contemporary local press, an elaborate and distorted folk tradition linking the two to more familiar stereotypes of the remittance man has grown up in the Mouse River valley. Beginning in 1946, local rancher and historian John C. Eaton endeavored to memorialize the two Britshers for the community leadership he was sure they had shown. As a result of his efforts, North Dakota’s International Peace Garden placed a bronze plaque commemorating Coutts’s sister Lady Aberdeen and her visit to her brother’s ranch in 1887. Since 1957 the North Dakota Aberdeen Angus Breeders Association has awarded the Marjoribanks Trophy for the state’s champion Angus heifer, an appropriate way to honor Coutts’s early promotion of the breed. The local press responded enthusiastically to Eaton’s efforts but usually combined the amateur historian’s new information with a smattering of the old local folklore.

The folklore mostly relates to names and objects. Both Britshers had school districts named after them, the Marjoribanks School in the district where Coutts was an official and the Thursby Butte School District near the site of the Englishman’s old range. Local legend has it that these schools were founded before 1900 to educate the children of the British remittance men, but both Coutts and Edmund were unmarried and admitted to having no children. An old saddle thought to have been Edmund’s has been kept for many years by a local ranch family. They have, however, recently discovered that the saddle originally belonged to another, less exotic, pioneer rancher.

CONCLUSION

As educated men, the Britshers took leadership roles in the community, but they were neither arrogant nor profligate. They sold out and moved on, like most of the pioneer ranchers in the vicinity, and they left their names and a few tales behind them. Coutts’s old ranch is still in operation—in recent years the owner has raised Angus cattle there. Edmund’s ranch site was purchased by the federal government in 1935 and made a part of the J. Clark Salyer National Wildlife Refuge, an ironic or perhaps fitting use for the land of a man who loved hunting.

Coutts Marjoribanks and Edmund Thursby lived for a short time in an area that a century later still shows the pattern of land use that they helped to pioneer. McHenry County remains an important beef cattle and hay producing area (among the state’s fifty-three counties it ranked fourth in 1979 and seventh in 1987 for beef production, and first in 1979 and seventh in 1987 for hay). The stocky black Aberdeen Angus cattle are still a popular breed there as they are throughout much of the northern Plains. Coutts and Edmund were not apparently arrogant or naive, though their lifestyles—especially Edmund’s—must have seemed extravagant by local standards. They were innovative and adaptable but not innovative and adaptable enough to bring their ranches through increasingly difficult financial times. When they sold out and moved on, Coutts to modest personal success and Edmund to alcoholic disaster, they were doing what pioneers had done throughout the westering process on the North American continent. Thus the negative stereotype of remittance men as elitist exotics who, unlike other pioneers, could not adapt to frontier conditions does not fit Coutts Marjoribanks and Edmund Thursby. The history of these two British ranchers suggests that the image of remittance men in the West needs to be upgraded. Marjoribanks and Thursby emerged as economic, social, and political leaders in their community. As ranchers their management, problems, and departure were typical of other local pioneer stockmen of that era.

NOTES

The author gratefully acknowledges the helpful suggestions of Ramon S. Powers, Virgil W. Dean, James A. Davis, June Dokken, and an anonymous referee during the preparation of this study.

1. Paul Voisey, Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie
Community (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), pp. 26, 28, 31, 98, 161, 220, esp. 230-32. Although this is the story of a community in Alberta, the author concludes that both American and Canadian settlers brought the myth with them from other locations.


4. According to state hospital records at Jamestown, Thursby was thirty-five years old in 1890—making his birth year 1855. This information seems far more reliable than two conflicting and undocumented recent accounts that give his birth years as 1862 and 1865. Apparently only Edmund’s family, and not independent investors, backed his ranch venture in Dakota. Harnack, Gentlemen on the Prairie (note 2 above), pp. 139-40; Jacob Van Der Zee, The British in Iowa (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1922), pp. 222-26, esp. 284; Villard Leader, 22 May 1886, 25 June, 10 September 1887.


7. McHenry County Auditor, Marks and Brands, 5 January 1886, p. 3. This was the second brand recorded in the county. Villard Leader, 24 April, 8, 22 May, 26 June, 3, 10, 17 July 1886, 2 July 1887. The breeds exhibited at the Devils Lake fair were Angus, Hereford, Shorthorn, Holstein, and Jersey. For a survey of fairs in the region see Harold E. Briggs, Frontiers of the Northwest: A History of the Upper Missouri Valley (New York: Appleton-Century Company, 1940), pp. 555-64. Coutts’s sister (Ishbel) Lady Aberdeen mentioned the last shipment in her journal entry of 3 October 1890, Eaton Papers, SHSND.

8. McHenry County Auditor, Marks and Brands, 17 May 1886, p. 13; Villard Leader, 24 April, 8, 22 May 1886, 9, 16 April, 2 July 1887, 15 June 1889.

9. Villard Leader, 24 April, 26 June, 3, 17 July, 4 December 1886, 9 April, 28 May, 11, 18 June, 23, 30 July, 22, 27 August, 17 September, 8, 22 October, 12, 19 November 1887, 10 March 1888; Lady Aberdeen’s journal, 6 July 1887, Eaton Papers, SHSND; Breeder’s Gazette (Chicago), 10 November 1887, p. 744, 4 January 1888, p. 4.

10. Villard Leader, 24 September 1888, 2 February 1889; Breeder’s Gazette (Chicago), 26 December 1888, pp. 670-71, 18 September, pp. 260-67, 18 December 1889, pp. 280-81, 1 January, pp. 6-7, 17 December, pp. 458-59, 31 December 1890, pp. 511-12; Histor-


12. *Villard Leader*, 22 May, 10, 17 July 1886, 10 September, 1 October 1887.


14. John C. Eaton to Lady Marjorie Pentland, 7 December 1955, Eaton Papers, SHSND; and Eaton, "Early Ranching in the Mouse River Valley" (note 3 above), p. 32; *Villard Leader*, 3 September 1887, 22 October 1888, 17 August, 5 October 1889; and McHenry County Independent (Towner), 20 May, 16 June 1892.

15. *Villard Leader*, 26 January, 1 June 1889, 22 September 1888, 15, 22, 29, June, 29 October 1889; McHenry County Independent (Towner), 18 November 1892, 17 February 1893; and The Independent (Towner), 16 February 1894. It is not known whether Edmund's family provided any financing for the loan business. Beginning in April 1889 Edmund bought four city lots in Towner. On two adjoining ones, for which he had paid $225, he constructed the office building (cost unknown) for E. H. Thursby & Company, selling the land and office building to the McHenry County Bank for $1600 on 24 October 1892. The two residential lots he bought in November and December 1890 for $250 and $75, respectively, he sold in June 1893 and October 1891 for $400 and $125. He carried no mortgages on any of these properties. See McHenry County [Deed] Book No. 17, pp. 392, 481, 483, 415, 440-41, 539; and [Deed] Book No. 18, p. 6.

16. *Villard Leader*, 12, 19, 26 February, 10 September 1887, 10 March 1888; McHenry County Independent (Towner), 7, 21, 28 March, 24 April, 22 May, 31 July, 7, 21 August 1891. I have located press reports of Edmund's trips to Britain in early 1889 and during the winters of 1889-90, 1890-91, 1891-92, 1892-93, and 1893-94.


18. Brown, comp., McHenry County (note 3 above), p. 17, summarizes reasons suggested for Coutts's failure. Drought did cause major problems for Coutts's cattle from 1888-90; see Villard Leader, 6 July, 14 September 1889; Briggs, *Frontiers of the Northwest* (note 6 above), p. 428; Lady Aberdeen's journal, 3 October 1890, Eaton Papers, SHSND. Rustlers did not trouble Coutts, and his lifestyle was relatively modest. An excellent summary of the range cattle industry's economic depression is in the Breeder's Gazette (Chicago), 21 December 1892, p. 452. For the situation in Dakota and McHenry County see Second Biennial Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor... for the Two Years Ending October 31, 1892 (Bismarck: Tribune, State Printers and Binders, 1892), pp. 59-66; and Special Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor to the Governor of North Dakota for the Year 1893 (Grand Forks: Herald State Printers and Binders, 1894), pp. 18-19. For the story of the failure of a breeder who was much more famous and more strategically located than Coutts Marjoribanks see Clyde L. Fitch, "William A. Harris of Kansas: His Economic Interests" (Masters thesis, Kansas State Teachers College, Emporia, 1967).

19. The Independent (Towner), 29 June, 17 August 1894; Minot Journal, 17 August 1894; McHenry County, [Deed] Book No. 34, pp. 463-64; and Pressly and Scofield, eds., *Farm Real Estate Values* (note 5 above), p. 37.


21. *Villard Leader*, 10 March 1888; McHenry County Independent (Towner), 7 March, 7 August 1891.

22. Russell O. Saxvik to J. C. Eaton, 28 December 1955, Eaton Papers, SHSND; McHenry County Independent (Towner), 14, 28 August, 9, 16 October 1891.


24. McHenry County Independent (Towner), 26 February, 15, 29 April 1892; The Independent (Towner), 29 June, 24 August, 14 September, 1894; Minot Journal, 17 August 1894. McHenry County, [Deed] Book No. 17, pp. 567-68, filed for record on 2 April 1894 incorrectly states that Edmund still owed two mortgages for $450 and $825 (he had already repaid both of these); he did, however, owe back taxes of $51.65. Pressly and Scofield, eds., *Farm Real Estate Values* (note 5 above), p. 37. For a record of Thursby's loan of $2567.58 on mortgage to the
Hankeys and his two additional credits of $1283.79 each to the brothers, for which they signed promissory notes, see McHenry County, Book No. 26 of Mortgages, pp. 290-91.

25. McHenry County Independent (Towner), 14, 21 August, 11 September, 16, 23 October 1891, 29 April, 17 June, 12, 26 August, 7 October 1892, 28 April, 12 May, 11, 18 August 1893; The Independent (Towner), 1 January, 24 August, 21 December 1894; Towner News and Stockman, 26 April 1895; Mouse River Journal (Towner), 14 March 1896. Edmund's scholarships for students and other charities were sometimes criticized in the press. See Woods, British Gentlemen (note 2 above), p. 160. E. M. Prouty and L. B. Richardson were two absentee ranchers who had moved to Grand Forks.

26. Register of Deeds, Grand Forks County, [Deed] Record No. 14, p. 539; [Deed] Book No. 25, p. 64; [Deed] Book, document number 6089, pp. 102-03, 19 April 1897; and [Deed] Book No. 13, p. 404. For the record of Thursby's sale (assignment) of the Hankeys' mortgage to G. F. Shutt of Shelby County Tennessee, see McHenry County, Book No. 26 of Mortgages, pp. 458-59. While the Hankey brothers paid off their mortgage to Shutt in 1897 (see Book No. 26 of Mortgages, p. 628) there is no indication that they paid their two personal notes for $1283.79 each, due on 20 August 1894 and 20 August 1895 to Thursby. For his illnesses see The Fargo Record, May 1899, p. 428; and Russell O. Saxvik to J. C. Eaton, 28 December 1955, Eaton Papers, SHSND. 27. Pentland, A Bonnie Fechter (note 3 above), p. 69.


32. Mouse River Farmers Press (Towner), 26 June 1989; and Brown, comp., McHenry County (note 3 above), p. 18; North Dakota Agricultural Statistics, 1980 (Fargo: North Dakota Crop & Livestock Reporting Service, 1980); North Dakota Agricultural Statistics, 1988 (Fargo: North Dakota Agricultural Statistics Service, 1988). McHenry County has not been a major sheep producer in recent times. See also Clayton Haugse, “Farm Animals—Do We Need Them?” North Dakota Farm Research 47, No. 4 (January-February 1990): 3-7. This article indicates that a third of McHenry County's current farmland is devoted to raising livestock, just above average for all fifty-three counties in the state, and that the county ranks seventh in dollars earned from livestock sales. It is well below the state's average figures as a crop-growing county.