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Book Review: *Aryan Cowboys: White Supremacists
and the Search for a New Frontier, 1970-2000* By
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Aryan Cowboys: White Supremacists and the Search for a New Frontier, 1970-2000. By Evelyn A. Schlatter. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006. xv + 250 pp. Map, photographs, bibliography, index. \$50.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

In the late summer of 1983, nine white men gathered in a secret moonlight ceremony beneath the Hooknose Mountains near Metaline Falls, Washington. Circling an infant girl, they swore an oath “upon the green graves” of their sires to do whatever was necessary to deliver white people “from the Jew and bring total victory to the Aryan race.” Declaring a “full state of war,” the men pledged not to rest until their enemy had been “driven into the sea.”

Thus begins the saga of Robert Mathews and the Order, unquestionably the most sophisticated domestic terrorist organization of the American twentieth century. The Order’s extreme ideology, argues Evelyn Schlatter in this informative book, was rooted in Manifest Destiny and frontier imagery of the white male archetype—an archetype that is “pushing ever westward, seeking new homelands and new beginnings.”

Drawing from diverse sources—historical, journalistic, the Internet, and interviews with several imprisoned members of the Order—Schlatter offers a panoramic view of the American white supremacy movement. In many ways, this movement is emblematic of late modernity’s defining trait: a world always in flux, awash in marginality and exclusion. Schlatter argues that the eccentric beliefs of white supremacy groups are sewn together from the threads of previous movements. The Klan of the 1920s and William Dudley Pelly’s Silver Shirts of the German Nazi era are threaded to the millennialism of Aryan Nations, the Posse Comitatus, and Timothy McVeigh through Protestant agrarianism and western mythology; xenophobia and the apocalyptic; white hegemony and oversized masculinities. In connecting these historical dots Schlatter makes a unique contribution to the field.

Sociologically, however, the work is less impressive. Schlatter dismisses structural explanations of extremism, arguing that the movement is *not* “populated by downwardly mobile lower-middle-class men.” But that is precisely what the research says. After examining the records of 447 terrorists tried in federal courts between 1978 and 2002 (including the Order), criminologist Brent

Smith found that right-wing terrorists are predominately male, with an average age of 39. One-third of them had a GED or less; the vast majority came from rural areas and were unemployed or impoverished at the time of their indictments.

Schlatter's goal is to demonstrate "that the extreme right in this country is an organic, home-grown movement." Yet that idea could have also benefited from sociological insight. Between 1987 and 1999 the U.S. experienced a surge of ideologically-motivated violence, much of it attributed to neo-Nazi skinheads. The skinheads emerged not from rural areas but from urban landscapes swaying under the weight of globalization. While some white supremacists have undoubtedly shaped their cultural and racial identities from the western archetype, skinheads drew their inspiration from the values, style, and music of British youth subcultures.

Finally, if these limitations do not throw the premise of *Aryan Cowboys* into question, there is Schlatter's fascinating discovery of the incident that led Robert Mathews to resettle in the Pacific Northwest. Dissatisfied with his life in Phoenix, one day in 1972 Mathews "closed his eyes and put his finger on a map." Opening his eyes, he found his finger pointing at the Hooknose Mountains of Washington State. Not exactly the spirit of Manifest Destiny, is it? **Mark S. Hamm**, *Department of Criminology, Indiana State University*.