Review of *Wyoming Range War: The Infamous Invasion of Johnson County* by John W. Davis

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This book offers a thorough indictment of Wyoming Plains cattlemen at the end of the nineteenth century. It is worth asking if we really need another thorough indictment of a group so thoroughly indicted that one more thorough indictment seems like taking yet another swing at a worn-out punching bag. Yes, the Wyoming Stock Growers Association in 1892 was controlled by bad men whose arrogance was reflected in a ridiculous scheme doomed to failure. Asa Shinn Mercer told us that in Banditti of the Plains, published only two years after the Johnson County War. And much of his account was based on articles by O. A. “Jack” Flagg, a prominent “rustler” from Johnson County, who published his version only three weeks after the invasion.

But John W. Davis does consider some interesting new primary sources. And the “War” has become such a central part of Old West myth that its importance still reverberates into a new century. The incident pits cattle barons against settlers. Cheyenne stock growers that year decided once and for all to eliminate those up north who, they supposed, were rustling their cattle and ruining their livelihoods. With the connivance of the governor and probably everyone else of importance in early Wyoming, about fifty vigilantes slipped up north for a killing spree. It failed. Two “rustlers” died.

The contribution of Davis’s work is to draw on archives of Buffalo, Wyoming, purported capital of the purported rustlers. Legal and journalistic accounts not examined extensively before add interesting insights. For example, Davis found that the famous “Nate Champion Diary” of a murdered rustler, never discovered but quoted by a Chicago newsman accompanying the group, was referenced in a Douglas, Wyoming, newspaper. That account seemed to indicate the widely quoted Chicago publication had been heavily embellished by the reporter and quotes a more plausible version. These sources help add accuracy to the larger story.

Still, it must be noted that Johnson County sources were biased, coming as they did from those opposing the cattlemen. And while there’s not much good to say about those willful invaders, it is worth acknowledging some reasonable historians who found evidence that rustlers were, indeed, stealing cattle. And that the stock growers were, indeed, much reviled back East as nefarious cattle barons. Their livelihood was squeezed by time and change, and impending doom does not encourage rational behavior.

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