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Review of *Cowboy's Lament: A Life on the Open Range* by Frank Maynard

Kenneth L. Untiedt
*Stephen F Austin State University*

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Jim Hoy, who edited this volume of the Voice in the American West series, discovered a gold mine when he happened upon Frank Maynard’s unpublished autobiography and personal papers. *Cowboy’s Lament*, comprising these documents, is a beneficial resource for Great Plains historians, scholars researching the literature of the American West, and even folklorists. Maynard, who is credited with penning the lyrics to what most people recognize as “The Streets of Laredo,” was a mostly self-educated “rangler” who had the good sense to record his adventures on the frontier. Although he had limited success in publishing his narrative during his lifetime, Hoy has given Maynard’s story new life in this volume.

The work is broken into three sections, but a fourth section—Hoy’s introduction—is equally valuable. In it, he summarizes critical events in Maynard’s life, including the young cowboy’s accounts of meeting famous outlaws and lawmen, because of whom the Wild West experience was romanticized. What is more fascinating, however, is Hoy’s description of Maynard’s early attempts at writing, and his relationships with those who gave him literary advice and direction. Plenty of cowboys had tales to tell, but not many of them were fortunate enough to receive criticism and encouragement from Jack London or Elmo Scott Watson, as Maynard did. Even the correspondence he shared with E. D. Baker, another former cowboy, shows the significance of the oral tradition to those working on the range.

The first section of Maynard’s writing is his memoir, which focuses on one decade: 1870–80. As Hoy points out, part of the account’s value is its having been written fairly soon after Maynard experienced the events described. While he embellishes some of the details—as would any good storyteller—his adventures seem to be told without hyperbole or mistakes of fact. Though some of the material is not politically correct by today’s standards, the fact that the memoir is not heavily edited makes it even more worthwhile.

The next section includes selections of Maynard’s poetry, and the last contains newspaper pieces he wrote. Hoy includes plenty of photos, and there is a handy glossary of names referenced in Maynard’s works. Overall, this book offers personal insight from someone who truly lamented the passing of the cattle-drive
era in the Great Plains—and was conscious of the need to preserve it.

KENNETH L. UNTIEDT
Department of English
Stephen F. Austin State University