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Simon M. Evans

Memorial University of Newfoundland

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THE ORIGIN OF RANCHING IN WESTERN CANADA AMERICAN DIFFUSION OR VICTORIAN TRANSPLANT?

SIMON M. EVANS

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a number of factors combined to promote the rapid advance of the ranching frontier throughout the Great Plains of North America. The demands of rapidly growing urban populations in the northeastern United States and northwestern Europe provided an apparently insatiable market for meat. The grasslands were linked to these markets by an expanding railway network and steamships that crossed the Atlantic on regular schedules. Rumors of the huge profits to be made from investments in mines, railways, and ranges lured a flood of risk capital to the West. The interplay of these and other factors in the United States has been subjected to intensive scrutiny by writers and researchers from a variety of disciplines.¹ The fact that ranching dominated the land use pattern of much of the Canadian

West for a vital twenty-year period is much less well known.

It was the cattlemen who initiated settlement in the foothills and valleys of the Canadian Rockies and explored the short-grass prairies around the Cypress Hills. During this brief period of unchallenged occupation, a new volume of population was spread unevenly over the land, new patterns of circulation and interaction were established, and new and long-lasting elements were added to local society. Yet settlement studies of the Canadian prairies have paid but scant attention to the ranching frontier and pass from discussion of the fur trade to analysis of homesteading and the wheat economy.

The tacit assumption has been that ranching in Canada was merely an extension of the Cattle Kingdom of the United States and hence was hardly worthy of particular study. This was certainly the view expressed by A. S. Morton and J. F. Booth, who contributed to the benchmark study *Canadian Frontiers of Settlement* during the 1930s.² More recently, W. L. Morton endorsed this point of view and summarized in these words: "The advance into the plains, led by the spearhead of the Canadian Pacific Railway, had begun as a broad front of settlement

Simon M. Evans is an associate professor of geography in Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, Memorial University of Newfoundland. His publications include articles in Canadian Ethnic Studies, Agricultural History, and Prairie Forum. His research interests include ethnic settlement patterns in the Canadian West.

to Indian Head, to Regina, until the dusty core of Palliser's triangle was reached, and the farming frontier from the east was stopped by the ranching front advancing from the south."³ At this level of generalization it seemed obvious that ranchers north and south of the line were linked by common objectives, used broadly similar techniques, and faced the same challenges.

During the past few years a vigorous revisionist analysis of the Canadian ranching frontier has been proposed by David H. Breen.⁴ He has identified significant social and attitudinal contrasts that existed north and south of the border. He has stressed that the majority of people who took up ranching were of British, not American, origin and that the industry was dominated by a wealthy and politically powerful elite to whom the imperial connection was all-important.

Thus two explanatory models have been proposed to provide an organizational framework for discussion of the relationship that existed between open-range ranching in Canada and in the United States. Both models have undeniable charms; they are selective, they search for pattern among a mass of data, and they can be used as "speculative instruments" for further study.⁵ There undoubtedly was a diffusion of men, herds, techniques, and ideas from the United States into Canada. Just as surely, the Canadian ranching frontier exhibited some uniquely regional characteristics. My purpose here is to attempt to weigh "diffusion" against "uniqueness," to evaluate both explanatory models from a geographer's perspective, and to draw on the geographical literature for an alternative approach.

Geographers view the frontier not as a crucible in which was forged a new society, but rather as an interface between two contrasting types of land use. They see the advance of the frontier in terms of the diffusion of a new way of using resources, which in turn involves an influx of people, capital, technology, and transportation.⁶ Patterns of occupancy are viewed as dynamic distributions that change as the interrelationships between forces of different

strengths also change. New patterns are visualized as emerging from competition and rivalry between successive resource users.⁷

The cattlemen, as they advanced into the Great Plains, successfully shouldered the Indians aside and replaced the indigenous buffalo with their own herds of cattle. After a few decades of occupation, the ranchers too gave way before the honkyockers, the grangers, and the sodbusters. Four key variables profoundly influenced the advance of this most volatile pastoral frontier; they may serve as a useful basis for a comparison of progress and practice north and south of the line. First, for all their independence, cattlemen were profoundly affected by the institutional framework in which they operated. National governments in Ottawa and Washington had strikingly different perceptions of their western domains and legislated accordingly. Second, the advance of the open-range frontier was spurred by a flow of risk capital toward the West. The ups and downs of international money markets produced periods of frenzied bonanza and likewise periods of retraction and consolidation. Third, the occupation of the Great Plains and prairies was an extension of a global movement provoked by the demands of rapidly growing urban-industrial populations for food. Markets, prices, and the ebb and flow of international trade influenced every decision made on the cattleman's frontier. Finally, the nature of the open-range frontier owed much to a wonderfully heterogeneous group of people who evaluated the changing economic milieu created by these interacting variables according to their several goals and objectives.

The region with which this study is primarily concerned is depicted in a map of the "Grazing Country" of the North West Territories, prepared for the Canadian Department of the Interior in 1881 (Fig. 1). It comprised a vast triangular area bounded by the United States border to the south and the Rocky Mountains to the west. The "park belt" of aspen woodland along the North Saskatchewan River provided a much less definite boundary to the north and east. The townships along the foothills in the

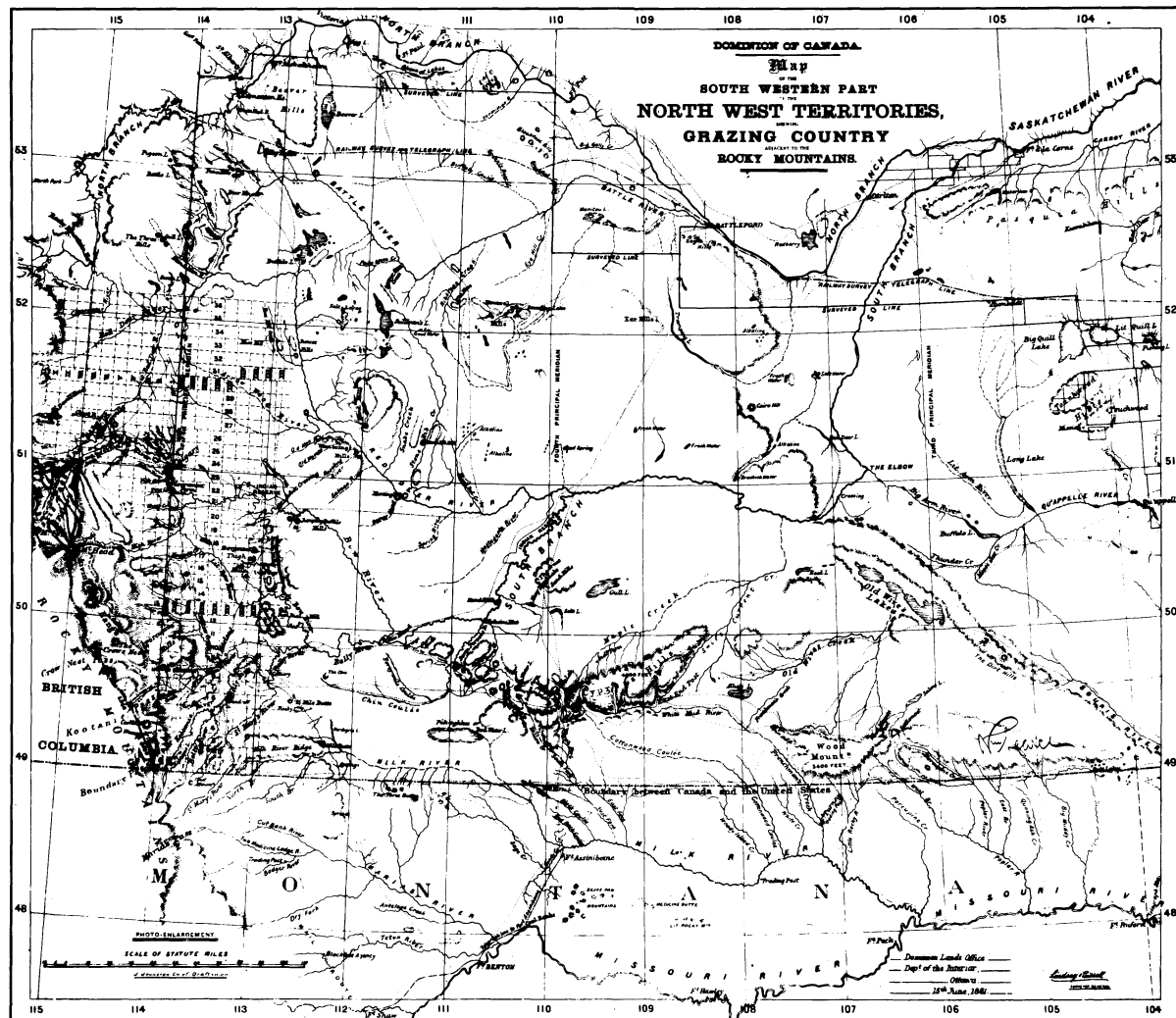


FIG. 1. Original map of "Grazing Country" of the North West Territories, drawn for the Canadian Department of the Interior in 1881.

chinook belt had already been surveyed for settlement in 1881. This was the area taken up by major British and Canadian ranch companies in 1882 and 1883. Continued dependence on the Missouri River route and the port of Fort Benton in Montana is hinted at by the inclusion of this region within the map. Later American penetration of the Canadian range during the 1890s occurred along the line of the north bank tributaries of the Missouri up into the Cypress Hills.

During the 1880s the North West Territories were divided into four administrative districts. Assiniboia occupied the southern part of the present province of Saskatchewan; the district of Saskatchewan lay to the north. The district of Alberta was the southern of the remaining two districts, while Athabasca stretched across the north. In 1905 the present provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan were established and granted provincial autonomy.

GOVERNMENTS AND THE RANCHING FRONTIER

No more stark contrast exists between the cattlemen's frontier in Canada and in the United States than the differing roles played by the central governments of the two countries in the management of their western lands. In Canada, a comprehensive legislative package was introduced in 1881 that enabled individuals or companies to lease large acreages of grazing land for a period of twenty-one years.⁸ At much the same time, the men who occupied the grasslands of Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado rejected proposals that might have resulted in the modification of existing land laws and in the formation of large landholdings, on the grounds that such a "land grab" was contrary to their theory of government.

In the United States the cattlemen were regarded "as merely an advanced screen ahead of the real conquerors of the land, the pioneer farmers."⁹ Few legal concessions were made to the stockmen. The Timber Culture Act (1873) and the Desert Lands Act (1877) were outgrowths of the 1862 Homestead Act and had

the objective of luring farmers westward, not of providing a realistic framework within which ranching could be pursued legitimately.¹⁰ Those who were charged with administering the public domain were quick to appreciate the need for new methods of landholding in the semiarid grasslands, but their efforts at legislative reform were thwarted because most western settlers regarded any system that encouraged control of large tracts of land by a single party with deep suspicion.¹¹

The cattle boom, that explosive surge of men, stock, and capital onto the western range-lands, occurred outside the protection afforded by the law. As more and more cattlemen moved their herds north and west to appropriate for themselves by prescriptive right an "accustomed range," crowding developed. Illegal fencing, fraudulent acquisition of land, and range wars were the results. In his recent book, *Failure on the Plains*, Dan Fulton argues that this basic problem of providing security of tenure to ranchers who use the public domain has yet to be solved.¹²

In Canada the frenetic growth of the five years from 1881 to 1885 took place within a legal framework and was regulated on the spot by agents of the federal government. The Dominion Lands Act was amended in 1881, and regulations under which the act might be implemented were published as an order in council in December 1881.¹³ Leases of up to one hundred thousand acres in extent were made available for a period of twenty-one years at a rental of one cent per acre per year. These provisions were attractive enough to lure eastern risk capital to the Canadian West and to ensure that the ranching frontier in the North West Territories developed within a much more rigid institutional framework than was the case south of the border. The lessee of grazing land could rely on the support of the North West Mounted Police, while the Department of Agriculture was actively promoting his product in Great Britain.¹⁴ For a time at least, and to further the purpose of the Dominion, the Canadian government set aside the image of the homestead settler and the family farm and created a "Big Man's Frontier."¹⁵

This is a significant contrast, and it has far-reaching implications. In almost every case involving land policy, Canada followed the course already pioneered in the United States.¹⁶ However, the manner in which the Dominion handled its western grazing lands is an exception. It is to legislation evolved in Natal and the Australian colonies that the origins of the lease legislation must be traced. The precedent for this departure from North American norms came to Canada by way of imperial connections.¹⁷

CAPITAL FLOWS TO THE WEST

The rapid advance of the ranching frontier in the United States and in Canada between 1881 and 1885 was spurred by a massive influx of eastern capital.¹⁸ More than five hundred cattle companies were founded in Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico, while twenty-three companies were established in the Canadian Northwest. Many of these companies never got beyond the stage of incorporating themselves and publishing a glossy prospectus, but the figures indicate the dimensions of the surge of interest that occurred during the boom period. The book capital of the United States companies amounted to 170 million dollars, while some 5.5 million dollars were subscribed to establish Canadian companies.¹⁹

Most of the capital used to underwrite the development of the cattle kingdom in Canada and the United States came from eastern financial exchanges. The investors were very much a part of the North American business milieu and shared common characteristics.

It is hard to pinpoint any fundamental contrasts in the origin and the manner in which capital was made available to the ranching frontier in the two countries. Alberta and Assiniboia were linked to Montreal and Toronto, while spreads in Montana and Wyoming were tied to Chicago and New York. The provision of capital for ranching was yet another example of metropolitan dominance.

The flow of British capital to the range country excited much comment and concern

from contemporaries.²⁰ During the middle years of the nineteenth century, capital accumulation in Britain outstripped the capacity of expanding industry to absorb it. Investors with idle capital began to search out investment fields in the United States, where a shortage of capital meant high returns. A series of changes in the law concerning joint stock companies and limited liability made it easier and safer for both landed proprietors and the middle classes to share investment opportunities with financiers and businessmen.²¹ These developments coincided with the end of the Civil War and a sudden demand for the development of the resources of the American West. More particularly, the North Atlantic cattle trade grew over a period of a few years to become a multi-million-dollar business.²² In 1879 the British government sent two members of Parliament to the plains to review the prospects for investment. On their return to Britain the two commissioners reported that annual profits in the range cattle business were often as high as 33 percent.²³ This report and the spectacular success of the Prairie Cattle Company, incorporated in 1880, made ranching something of a cause célèbre. The "beef bonanza" became a topic of conversation in the House of Commons, the queen's drawing room, and in the clubs of Montreal, Boston, New York, and Chicago. The promotional tracts published by General James S. Brisbin and others fanned the flames of enthusiasm.²⁴ English and Scottish newspapers, as well as financial journals in Canada and the United States, investigated and evaluated opportunities for investment.²⁵ Ten major British-American cattle companies were incorporated in 1881 alone.²⁶ By 1884 a speaker on the floor of the United States Congress gave figures to show that some twenty million acres, mostly in the range cattle area, had been acquired within the space of a few years by foreigners, mainly citizens of Great Britain.²⁷

The Canadian government must have eyed with dismay the millions of pounds of sterling that were pouring from the heart of the empire to the American plains while the western lands of the dominion remained painfully

undeveloped. The liberality of the lease legislation, implemented in 1881, may be interpreted as an attempt to lure at least part of this transatlantic investment to the Canadian Northwest. If this was the case, the effort was only partially successful.

Compared with the flood of investment that flowed from Britain to the American Great Plains, British interest in the Canadian range seems somewhat paltry. The three British-Canadian companies—important as they were locally—were not even public companies during their early years; they were the result of capital put together by individual investors.²⁸ In this characteristic they paralleled a large number of small and middle-order companies founded in the United States, but they do not bear comparison with the Prairie, the Texas, the Matador, and the other great British-American cattle companies.

There were a number of reasons why British investors showed more interest in ranch enterprises in the western United States rather than in Canada. Most British investment, from all sectors of society, took place through investment and mortgage companies. The managers of these interests had well-established contacts in the western United States. They had already invested in mines, railways, and land companies. Cattle companies were a new facet of a much larger investment program. Their profits were based on the fact that they could borrow cheaply at home and lend at much higher rates of interest in the West. Good intelligence was essential, and it was provided by agents who investigated investment prospects with care. Neither long-standing contacts nor the agents were present in Canada. Moreover, British investors expected immediate returns on their capital. In the American West they took over going concerns and often employed the previous owner as manager. The first- and second-generation entrepreneurs who had built the cattle industry in Texas, Colorado, and New Mexico during the 1860s and 1870s had no counterparts in Canada. The institutional framework might have been enticing in Canada, but profits were unlikely to accrue for several

years and the enterprises were threatened by all the risks that attend pioneering.

In summary, the pattern of capital flow to the Canadian West during the 1880s does not fit neatly into either of the explanatory models proposed. There seems to have been little or no flow of American capital northward from financial cores such as Chicago and Saint Louis, or even from Cheyenne and Helena. The British contribution was locally important, but when it is weighed against the total British investment in North America, the amount of capital committed to the Canadian range was small indeed. Investment did not follow the flag onto the plains of Assiniboia and Alberta; there were more alluring prospects in the republic to the south.

THE TRANSATLANTIC CONNECTION

The rapid expansion of the North Atlantic cattle trade had an immense impact both on the countries supplying the stock and on Great Britain, the major recipient. Not surprisingly, the trade received much attention from contemporary observers and it has been the subject of several recent books and articles.²⁹ In the space of a few years an entirely new staple sprang up and began to play an important role in the national trade of both Canada and the United States. The advance of settlement across the world's temperate grasslands has been related to the demand of European markets for agricultural products.³⁰ Nowhere was this relationship better illustrated than in the case of the cattlemen's frontier.

The number of steers shipped from Canada rose from only 20,000 head in 1877 to some 212,000 in 1898, while the corresponding value of this trade increased from \$1 million to \$10 million. Live cattle rose to rank third among items exported to the United Kingdom.³¹ Vital though this trade became to Canada, it was dwarfed by the flow of cattle from the United States. During the 1880s and 1890s the United States provided about 70 percent of Britain's imports of cattle, as compared with Canada's contribution of about

20 percent. The United States also monopolized trade in chilled and frozen beef at this time and was shipping enormous quantities of pork. In 1890 meat products made up 30 percent of the total exports of the United States.³²

Shippers in Montreal and New York reacted as one to price changes in Smithfield and Birkenhead. They faced common problems of timing and logistics. Cattle originating in the United States were sometimes shipped from Canadian ports, and at other times Canadian cattle found their way to the docks of Portland and New York. To a considerable extent it is possible to regard the North Atlantic cattle trade as an integrated whole, but there were important differences in the manner in which the trade was managed in the two countries.

From the very beginning the Canadian government played a significant role in supervising and promoting the cattle trade. During the 1870s, conditions at ports of embarkation were enormously improved under the direction of Duncan McEachran, the chief inspector of quarantines. Inspection of cattle on shipboard was carried out with increasing vigor, and losses of animals on ships of the Canadian Allan and Dominion Lines were considerably lower than those experienced by other companies. Close supervision paid dividends in 1879, when the imperial government placed a "schedule" on cattle imported from the United States. This meant that, under the provisions of the Contagious Diseases (Animals) Act, all stock from the United States had to be slaughtered at the port of entry within ten days.³³ Canadian cattle were exempt from this regulation and the dominion secured a privileged position in the great and expanding livestock market of the mother country.

In the United States, mechanisms by which efficient and impartial inspections of cattle could be carried out were slow to emerge. This was due both to conflicts between state and federal jurisdictions and to the enormous lobbying power of the meat packing and shipping companies. The Bureau of Animal Industry was not established until 1884, and at that time the entire veterinary force for regulating and sup-

pressing cattle disease in the United States comprised fewer than twenty persons.³⁴ It was not until 1890 that meat inspection became the responsibility of this department. During the formative period, the manner in which live cattle were shipped was a function of the unregulated forces of the market place.

The meat trade was controlled by great corporations like Armour and Company, Swift and Company, and Morris and Company. These firms expanded both vertically and horizontally until they dominated every facet of the trade, from production to retailing.³⁵ Their success in the export market was firmly founded on the growing home market for meat within the manufacturing cities of the Northeast and upon the ability of industry to absorb by-products such as leather, lard, and bone. The development of these corporate giants had no counterpart in Canada, where meat packing was organized on a small scale in response to regional demand. It was not until World War I that Canada established modern packing plants and bid for a share of the more lucrative and efficient dead-meat trade.³⁶

Thus Canada was able to capitalize on her geographic location and imperial connections to build a privileged position for herself in the greatest meat market in the world. Unique linkages were forged that bound Canadian ranches to British markets and created a vital staple for the dominion during the last quarter of the twentieth century.

DUDES, COWPOKES, MILORDS, AND CATTLEMEN

Who were the men who accepted the challenge of the Canadian government to establish ranching on a large scale in the North West Territories? Canadian historiography has tacitly assumed that they were mostly Americans. Breen, on the other hand, has built up a convincing picture of a ranch society drawn from the "ranks of the lesser landed gentry and military families" in Britain and eastern Canada, and espousing many of the ideals of the Victorian era.³⁷ Certainly, from the Marquis of

Lorne in 1881 to the Prince of Wales in 1921, the beauty of the ranching country in the foothills caught and held the imagination of the highest in the land, while the attractions of the region, for those who enjoyed an outdoor way of life and plenty of sporting activity, were obvious.³⁸

The danger is that this "Victorian ideal" be set uncritically against a stereotypical image of the American "Wild West." British travelers and sportsmen were drawn to the Great Plains in ever-increasing numbers during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Buffalo hunting, prospecting, making contact with Indians, and exploring—all drew supporters.³⁹ The "beef bonanza" attracted foreigners not only as an investment but also as an adventurous and enjoyable way of life.⁴⁰ Men from the eastern states and from Britain played a significant role in building the cattlemen's frontier in the United States as they did in Canada. They

established themselves within all strata of society. Harvard men and "milords" were found in many a dragline on the drive from Texas. Polo, fox hunting, tennis, and even tea became familiar features at the Cheyenne Club as well as the Ranchmen's Club in Calgary.⁴¹ Ranching societies, as they grew up on either side of the border, were above all else heterogeneous. They included all sorts and conditions of men. If there were differences, they were of degree, not of kind.

Nor can a peaceful and law-abiding Canadian frontier be contrasted in simple terms with the supposed violence and mayhem south of the border. In his carefully balanced evaluation, Paul Sharp has argued that such differences as did occur were due more to institutional and structural contrasts in the organization of law keeping than to any fundamental differences in the type of society.⁴² The literature of the American cattle industry suggests that northern

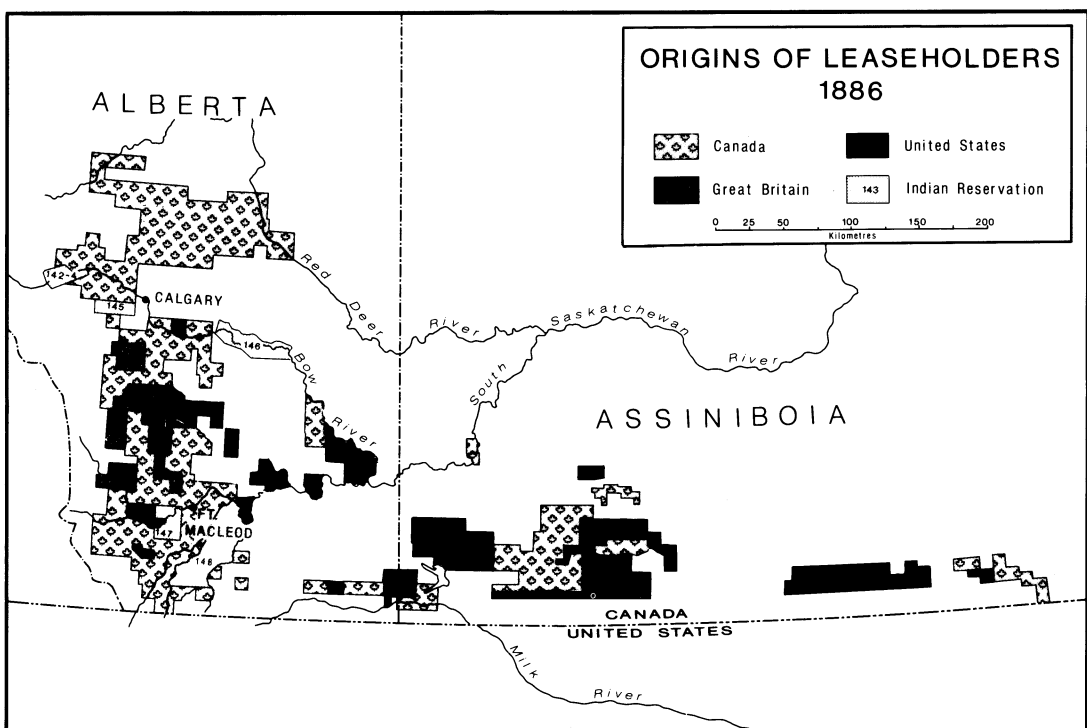


FIG. 2.

ranges were much more law-abiding than the southern. Matt Winters explained, "the alkali water they dranked up here took it [the violence] out of them, and the winters froze out what was left."⁴³ More plausibly, it could be argued that much of the violence that became part of the myth of the West was associated with the bitter aftermath of the Civil War and the ongoing conflict with the Indians. Later and more localized outbursts of violence were a product of intense competition for scarce resources, particularly the clashes between cattlemen and shepherds and cattlemen and farmers. None of these conditions existed on the Canadian range.

Analysis of the lease agreements between the Canadian government and prospective ranchers suggests that there was some degree of spatial separation between "Anglo-Canadian" and "American" influences in southern Alberta and Assiniboia.⁴⁴ This occurred because the two groups took up leases at different times. The promulgation of the lease legislation in 1882 led to a flurry of activity on the Alberta range. Ranch companies, hastily formed in Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto, poured capital into stocking the grassland. Leases covering some 4 million acres were granted in 1882, and major Canadian and British cattle companies established a firm hold over the choice grazing lands of the chinook belt. Not one of these companies was American. (See Fig. 2.)

When American cattlemen began to show an interest in the Canadian range during 1885, they were looking for pasture along the border—a northward extension of their home ranges in Montana. They secured leases covering about three-quarters of a million acres around the Cypress Hills and in the short-grass prairie lands well to the east of the main Canadian holdings. The catastrophic impact of the winter of 1886–87 curbed this thrust of American cattlemen into Canadian territory, but not for long. The opening years of the twentieth century saw another surge of optimism in the range cattle business, and several great cattle companies legalized their *de facto* occupation of pastures along the border by taking out leases.

Other American interests took up land north of the Canadian Pacific mainline and on both sides of the South Saskatchewan River.⁴⁵ (See Fig. 3.)

The social significance of this "American invasion" was great. Incoming farm settlers, whether from the eastern provinces, the mid-western states, or from Europe, had their stereotypical images of "cowboys and cattle kings" confirmed by their contacts with the great cattle companies that dominated the dwindling short-grass range during the first decade of the twentieth century.⁴⁶ This has done much to obscure the fact that a robust and uniquely Canadian variant of the cattle kingdom had taken root in the foothills area twenty years earlier. Two different traditions evolved side by side. One, located in the foothills and valleys flanking the Rocky Mountains, was the creation of the eastern Canadian establishment and was closely linked to imperial markets. The short-grass prairies to the east, on the other hand, were occupied briefly by the last survivors of a colorful company of men who had ridden the trails and followed the grass up from Texas.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The period of pastoral occupancy of the Great Plains of North America displays a certain unity and coherence. A familiar sequence of events accompanied the advance of the cattlemen, whether it was along the Rio Grande or in the Oregon Country.⁴⁷ The first ranchers supplied local markets at "way stations" along major trails and at military posts. They often mixed ranching with farming. As large-scale operations began to develop, the most sequestered range was taken up first and topographical boundaries were used to enclose stock. These early beginnings were followed by a halcyon period when "free grass" seemed limitless. Almost immediately the seeds of change were sown by innovators who saw the advantages of improving stock by selective breeding. This strategy inevitably led to fencing, both to exclude scrub bulls and to make

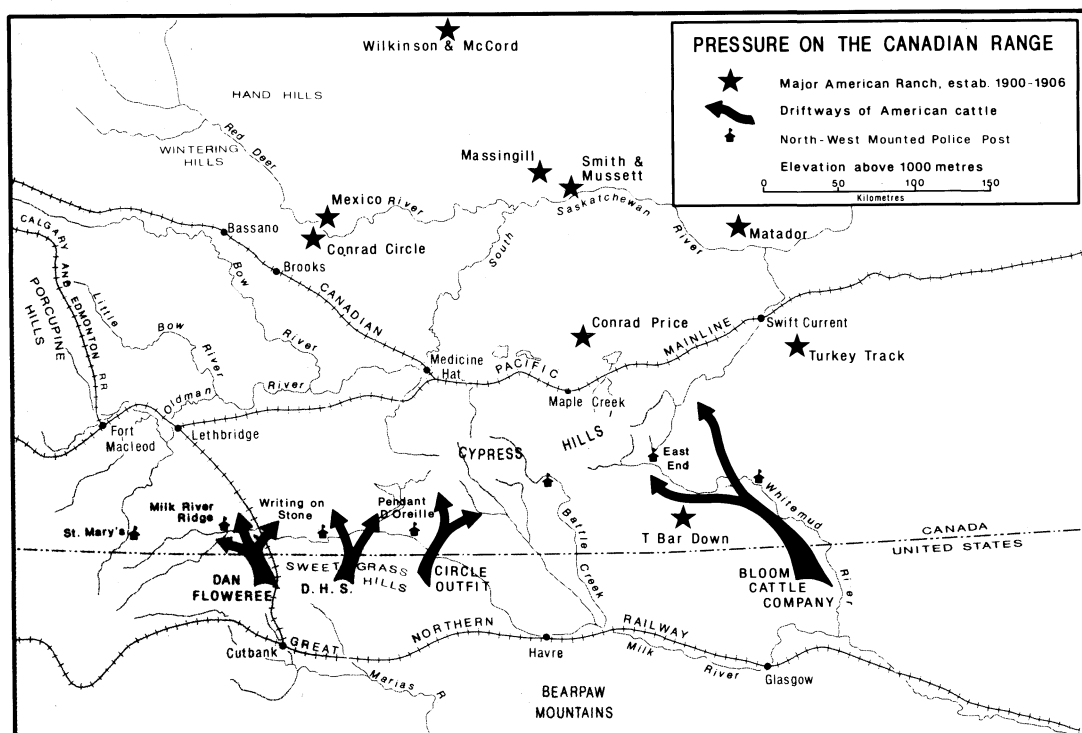


FIG. 3.

practical the provision of winter feed to valuable livestock. Purposive adaption of this kind was paralleled by changes external to the industry that forced even the laggards to purchase land and to intensify their operations. Cattlemen became farmer-ranchers, and cowboys had to learn to undertake some chores that could not be handled from the back of a horse. Terry Jordan's work has shown how individual histories blended as the culture and the technology of the open range evolved and changed.⁴⁸ The process of settlement in the Canadian West must be treated within this continental context. Ranching traditions in the foothills of the Rockies involved a fusion of Laurentian, Oregonian, and Montanan cultural traits, while the short-grass prairies were influenced by the mixed Spanish-Anglo tradition.

Yet, there was not one frontier, but many. Ohio, Florida, Mexico, California, Texas, Oregon, Dakota, Wyoming, and Montana—each acted as a core area of pastoral occupancy.

The individual characteristics of each region reflect differing institutional arrangements, capital flows, markets, and personalities, although metropolitan dominance appears to be a common theme. The Canadian range must be added to this list, for the role of the national government in promoting and regulating the range cattle industry in that country had no parallel in the United States.

Further understanding and interpretation of the relationships between the American and Canadian Wests in the late nineteenth century may require the adoption of an entirely different framework of inquiry. Perhaps it is time that strictly thematic studies of ranching, homesteading, banking, and railway development should be supplemented by a focus upon the evolution and development of regional nuclei. It is ten years since Donald Meinig proposed a comprehensive model of the West as a set of dynamic regions. Focusing as it does on the intermediate or regional scale, his model

describes "a cycle of divergence and convergence as between western regions and the national core and culture."⁴⁹ The Canadian plains as a whole, separated from the rest of the Great Plains by an institutional fault line, would fit into this schema, while the grazing lands of southern Alberta and Assiniboia would form a subregion. This approach would undoubtedly further illuminate the variety of the cattlemen's frontier.

NOTES

The author acknowledges the assistance of Gary McManus of the Cartographic Laboratory, Memorial University of Newfoundland, in preparing Figures 2 and 3. Earlier versions of these maps appeared in *Prairie Forum* 4 (1979); reprinted by permission.

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10. This argument is developed in Walter M. Kollmorgen, "The Woodsman's Assaults on the Domain of the Cattleman," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 59 (March 1969): 215-39.

11. Roy M. Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage: The Public Domain, 1776-1936* (1942; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), p. 220; John Wesley Powell, *Report on the Arid Region of the United States*, ed. by Wallace Stegner (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1962).

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15. Brian Fitzpatrick, "The Big Man's Frontier and Australian Farming," *Agricultural History* 21 (January 1947): 8-12.

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17. During 1903, Robert H. Campbell reviewed the situation with reference to grazing leases in western Canada. He compared practice in other parts of the world and observed, "In

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