

According to Eaton, people from rural Saskatchewan perceive oil as “essential to notions of freedom” and “synonymous with reality itself.” Any “criticisms of fossil fuels ... are understood as threats to the present and future of life and livelihood” (p. 9) What is fascinating about these perspectives is the extent to which they can be extrapolated and reframed to reflect not just the popular sentiment across Canada, North America, and the West in general, but also the material realities of the twenty-first century: oil *is* closely associated with all sorts of freedoms, which *does* makes it synonymous with our society’s sense of reality, and *absolutely* entails serious and fundamental transformations to our lives if it disappeared. Eaton and Zink elucidate this sentiment well and offer a starting point for evaluating its limitations as a response to rural vulnerability.

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ELOFSON, Warren M. – *So Far and yet So Close: Frontier Cattle Ranching in Western Prairie Canada and the Northern Territory of Australia*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2015. Pp. 329.

So Far and yet So Close is an environmental history comparing the nineteenth-century cattle-ranching industry in Canada’s Prairie West with Australia’s Northern Territory. The two industries had a great deal in common: their foundation was the natural resource of tens of thousands of hectares of arid grassland supporting free-ranging cattle at low stocking densities; they relied on an equestrian labour force that was largely young and male; and both regions had to overcome the challenges of animal disease, climatic adversity, and remoteness. The narrative focuses on the impact of environmental conditions on human behaviour and observes the remarkable similarity in the ways that humans adapt to environmental constraints using similar cultural and technical practices in remote regions of the world. The story is dominated by the Texas system of beef cattle husbandry, distinctive because of its low grazing density on the open range, unregulated land tenure, and minimal animal husbandry. This system diffused contagiously from Texas to Canada in the 1870s and, in the same decade, made its way to Northern Australia, thanks largely to the nineteenth-century agricultural journals extolling its virtues. However, the Texas system was ultimately unsustainable and came to a ruinous end on the northern Great Plains as a result of uncontrolled overgrazing and due to the vulnerability of European cattle breeds to severe winter conditions, contagious diseases such as mange, and predation by both humans and wolves. All of these problems were complicated by the debilitating effects of shipping live cattle over long distances to market, a sad level of ignorance on the part of investors, and a sorry lack of accounting for cattle purchases and mortality.

The book’s most significant contribution to ranching history is its examination of the contrast in the early and long-term fortunes of Australian and Canadian ranchers. Australian ranches lost massive amounts of money and failed in the largest

numbers soon after the birth of the pastoral industry in 1879. On the other hand, the ranches of Canada's Prairie West were more successful in their early years, largely because the initial challenges were less severe (p. 59). In the long run, however, some semblance of large-scale cattle ranching persists in the pastoral regions of the Northern Territory, while large corporate ranchers had disappeared from the Prairie West by the early twentieth century. Explaining these contrary trends becomes the principal goal and major achievement of this comparative history.

For those familiar with Elofson's research, chapter 9 reworks a theme developed in earlier works. The great leasehold ranches on open grazing land with minimal control over the animals were a fleeting phenomenon extending from the late 1870s until the start of the First World War. The ranch industry of Alberta and Assiniboia was transformed in the first two decades of the twentieth century as the big corporate ranches were so poorly adapted to their environment that most became insolvent. Frontier open-range ranching was gradually replaced in Canada by smaller and more diversified farmer-ranchers who owned a significant amount of deeded land and closely controlled it with barbed wire. Fencing allowed ranchers to improve the quality of their animals and reduced overgrazing and predation by both animals and humans. Though Elofson has made this argument before, it bears repeating as the transformation is vastly different from experiences in Australia's Northern Territory.

While the Texas system of cattle husbandry had collapsed in North America by 1887, extensive open-range cattle ranching persists in the Northern Territory. For one thing, the top end's torrid monsoonal climate makes the land ill-suited to any alternative economic use. Notwithstanding their inauspicious start, the great cattle stations of Australia survived as the most expansive private land-using institutions on earth, practising a form of pastoralism that is most distinctive for its profound neglect of the animals upon which it depends. In the long run the awesome challenges facing large-scale open-range cattle production in tropical Australia were not as severe as those in the Great Plains. Both regions were far from markets for their cattle, but the Australians had a much more favourable cost structure to get their cattle to market (p. 178). Dingoes were ferocious predators, but smaller than Alberta's wolves. The most severe climatic limitation—drought—was not as destructive as the Prairie winter, and it was more amenable to amelioration by drilling bore holes, especially in the Great Artesian basin.

In addition to being an environmental history, *So Far and yet So Close* is also an engrossing social history. Elofson describes the macho "crew culture" of frontier ranching in considerable detail; yet he also provides some vivid examples of the active roles played by women in the ranch economy in both Canada's Prairie West (pp. 154-160) and in the Northern Territory (pp. 191-192). Indeed, the concluding chapter makes an important statement about how the rough-and-tumble crew culture of the frontier was tempered by a growing institutional framework for family-based farms, even though the frontier ranch culture persists in distinctive regional customs and social traditions.

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