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Review of *Cowboys, Gentlemen and Cattle Thieves* By Warren M. Elofson

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Cowboys, Gentlemen and Cattle Thieves. By Warren M. Elofson. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000. Illustrations, notes, index. xvii + 202 pp. \$34.95.

This book focuses on the golden age of the ranching industry in western Canada from the early 1880s to the early 1900s. During that period large ranches were established in what is now southwestern Saskatchewan and southern Alberta, many of them owned by wealthy investors in England and eastern Canada; some of the spreads were managed by graduates of prestigious agricultural colleges. The owners, the managers and their families, and the cowboys they employed comprised a community that was cultured, conservative, and generally law-abiding.

Warren Elofson doesn't see it that way. He argues that the ranching frontier in the Canadian West was a rough, tough, lawless place. Ranching society in western Canada, he says, "was like its counterpart to the south, deeply affected by its environment." The term "environment" is never clearly defined, but the author claims it accounted for the "thievery, prostitution, the whiskey trade, gunplay, and other forms of disorder" that characterized the ranching industry north of the 49th parallel. The Canadian frontier, he insists, does not deserve the title, "The 'Tame' West."

In asserting this view, the author runs counter to the scholarship of Lewis G. Thomas, the dean of Alberta history, of David Breen, and of other historians who have shown convincingly that the Canadian ranching frontier was comparatively orderly because of the influence of middle-class settlers from England and eastern Canada and the presence of the North West Mounted Police.

This study suffers from what might kindly be called frontier envy. Elofson is clearly thrilled with accounts of range wars and hired guns in the American West and has gone to great lengths to find evidence of "disorder" in western Canada. In constructing his revisionist history he has drawn heavily and uncritically on *The Range Men*, a collection of

anecdotes compiled by journalist Leroy Kelly. *The Range Men* was published in 1912, the same year as Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage*.

Still, this study is not without value. A rancher and an academic, the author provides good descriptions of cowboy skills and activities, such as riding, roping, branding, and cattle dipping. A chapter, co-authored with Joel W. Bulger, on the devastating effects of winter storms and prairie fires on early ranches is also instructive. The book is liberally illustrated with photographs from the Glenbow Archives.

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