

Resettling the Range

Animals, Ecologies, and Human Communities in British Columbia

JOHN THISTLE

FOREWORD BY GRAEME WYNN



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Contents

List of Illustrations / ix

Foreword: Mapping the Ecology of Place / xi
Graeme Wynn

Acknowledgments / xxii

1 Introduction / 3

PART 1: WILD HORSES

2 Wrestling with Wild Horses / 13

3 The Biogeography of Dispossession / 32

4 Eradicating Wild Horses / 59

PART 2: GRASSHOPPERS

5 Grappling with Grasshoppers / 85

6 Resisting Range Monopoly / 108

7 New Enemies, Enduring Difficulties / 130

8 Conclusion / 158

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Appendices

- 1 Accounting for Extermination / 163
- 2 Grazing Fees, Nicola Valley, ca. 1920 / 164

Notes / 167

Selected Bibliography / 193

Index / 208

FOREWORD

Mapping the Ecology of Place

Graeme Wynn

Grasslands are not easy to know. Massively transformed in the short span of ten to fifteen decades, North American grasslands challenge ecologists, who have had little time to understand their “original ecology and function.”¹ Contemplated from afar, “they are almost featureless, a horizontal, double-stitched seam between earth and sky. Moving up close is equally challenging. By the time the infinitely narrow, windblown stems and leaves come into focus, all larger perspective is lost.”² So mused Don Gayton – a student of western Canadian landscapes whose collection of lyrical essays exploring the transformation of the prairies, titled *The Wheatgrass Mechanism*, won him a reputation as a writer with “the eye of a scientist and the soul of a poet” – as he contemplated *Spirit in the Grass*, a coffee-table book on the Cariboo-Chilcotin region of British Columbia.³

The photographer’s challenges are real. Every “shot” encapsulates a series of decisions: which lens to use; where to direct it; when, in what light, to press the trigger. Every image is composed and framed, as a close-up, a long shot, a view of the middle distance. But are grasslands more difficult to encapsulate than other landscapes? Rugged snow-capped mountain peaks, the impressively broad and soaring trunks of old-growth rainforest, rugged shorelines – the classic images associated with western Canada’s parks and protected areas, and beloved of tourists and camera buffs – are not typical of these areas.⁴ But does the photographer out on the range really face a stark choice between uninteresting depictions of a horizontal world and myopic close-ups of ground-hugging vegetation? Although Gayton suggests as much, he praises photographer Chris Harris

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for images that focus on the “broader landscape,” a sort of middle ground that is certainly not without its charms. Harris “feasts,” observes Gayton in one telling phrase, “on the contrasts of the velvet-textured grasslands as they press against the jagged bareness of the cliffs”; in another similarly evocative sentence, Gayton marks the scale and grandeur of an image by noting the presence of two hikers, tiny figures “in the tawny, contoured grassland expanse of Churn Flats ... like two insignificant ticks on the broad, muscular back of some huge animal at rest.”⁵

Yet, Harris’s pages include close-up studies of birds and butterflies, and stems of bunchgrass backlit by the burning orb of the sun dominate his book’s arresting cover. Effective photographic essays – and the most reverberant coffee-table books – usually encompass a range of scales. They are grounded in detail: they depend upon their materiality, upon their capacity to make things recognizable, imaginable, real. But they cannot stay there alone. To be effective they must move beyond the myopic close-up and attend to wider horizons, both actual and figurative. Sweeping vistas and wide perspectives are essential complements to tightly focused imagery. They allow viewers to “place” or find larger meaning in the specifics.

But there is more to it than this. Exhibitions and picture books juxtapose particular representations – and the selection of these images, and the order in which they are presented, shape the story they tell. Yet, the moral (so to speak) of that story is not quite the same for all who come to (or go from) it. As Gayton’s focus on representations of the “broader landscape” in *Spirit in the Grass* suggests, curators and photographers may make decisions about the inclusion and placement of particular images according to the message they seek to convey, but viewers make their own interpretations of what they see.

All skillful storytellers know that much the same is true of the webs they weave in words. The historian, the novelist, the student of this or that “human science,” the raconteur – all these people need to make choices and shape their material. Like Gayton’s cameraman in the grasslands, they need to frame a point of view that lies somewhere between the dull banality of generalization – that uninteresting line between earth and sky – and the overwhelming, indecipherable welter of specificity symbolized by the stalks and shoots of dryland vegetation. The challenge, expressed in terms made famous by English philosopher Isaiah Berlin, is to stand between the hedgehog (oblivious to all but the big idea it holds dear) and the fox (driven to distraction by an insatiable curiosity about all things).⁶ Yet, wherever this ground is found, and however compelling the resulting narrative, the account it offers remains malleable, subject to

interpretive whim, vulnerable to misreading, and open to question for what it emphasizes and ignores.

These are the challenges and perils of discourse, and they are well worth bearing in mind when considering John Thistle's achievement in *Resettling the Range*. This is a book about the grasslands of British Columbia. Its story is important. But it is also partial. Grappling, as historical geographers have done for years, with the challenge of tracing change through time and across space, Thistle offers neither a thorough chronology of grassland settlement nor a complete treatment of the almost two million acres of grassland in British Columbia.⁷ Although his book is concerned (as he notes) "with the different ways that ranches and cattle interacted with natural and economic processes, and each other, to remake, and in some cases degrade, the grassland environment," it is neither an economic nor an ecological history (p. 7). Nor is it a social study, or a work akin to Michèle Dominy's exploration of "the mutuality of spatiality and cultural identity" in New Zealand's high country, intended in part to address the atopia or neglect of place in social scientific research.⁸

Resettling the Range is a work of regional environmental history, and as such it reveals something of the ways in which "human communities and their environments change and become tangled together through time" (p. 7). But it is also less, and more, than this. Less because its main focus is on how people understood and responded to wild horses and swarming grasshoppers in the grasslands, and more because the spotlight it turns on these unlikely topics reveals each of them to be a synecdoche – a part that represents a rather more complex whole. So Thistle's stories of horses, grasshoppers, people, and cattle on parts of British Columbia's rangeland encourage readers to "fill in gaps," and to consider the larger implications of human-environment interactions. To put this somewhat differently, the twinned accounts unfolded in these pages invite readers to think again, and anew, about the processes of dispossession that newcomers inflicted, in different ways, upon indigenous peoples across the American hemisphere and beyond. They also offer new understanding of the course of development in North America's interior grasslands, make a fresh and distinctive contribution to the history of British Columbia, and limn new ways of thinking about questions of importance to environmental historians, historical geographers, and historians of science.

The strikingly beautiful Cariboo-Chilcotin region photographed by Chris Harris has been described as "one of the great ecological jewels of Western North America."⁹ Encompassing some 550,000 acres, it accounts for almost a third of the Interior grassland of British Columbia.

Far from being homogenous, it includes about 310,000 acres of river terraces, benches, and slopes along the Fraser River and its tributaries between Big Bar and Williams Lake, as well as extensive undulating plateau areas to east and west – described by one of their early chroniclers as a series of “gentle swells and swales in a mantle of drift.”¹⁰ In sum, almost 80 percent of the grasslands in this region occur within twelve miles of the Fraser and Chilcotin Rivers and their tributaries. These grasslands occupy an important place in Thistle’s account of rangeland resettlement. But they are neither the whole of that ecosystem nor the sole focus of this book. Rolling to hilly grasslands, with fewer swamp meadows than occur further north, are also extensive in the valley bottoms of the Thompson and Hat Creek Valleys and, as in the Cariboo-Chilcotin, they interlace with ponderosa pine and Douglas fir forests at higher elevations. There are another 250,000 acres or so of grassland/dry forest south of the Thompson River in the Nicola Valley, and Thistle draws upon developments in both these areas in telling his story. Beyond this, but less central to Thistle’s account, grasslands occupy approximately 250,000 acres of land in the valleys of the Okanagan, Similkameen, and Kettle Rivers and, further west, extend over about half this area in the East Kootenay Trench.¹¹

Developed through millennia in the absence of large herds of grazing animals, all of these grasslands are differentiated most markedly from those of the prairies east of the Rocky Mountains by the presence of a fragile microbiotic or “cryptogrammic” surface crust that profoundly affects their capacity to sustain herds of introduced cattle and other species, and that therefore imparts a particular inflection to their ecological histories. Part of a once considerably more extensive realm of grasslands and savannahs that encompassed much of the semiarid intermountain west from the Palouse country of eastern Washington, northeastern Oregon, and northwestern Idaho through the Interior valleys of southern British Columbia, this ecosystem now occupies less than 1 percent of British Columbia, and its current extent has been reduced (in various ways) by approximately a third in the last fifty years. Elsewhere, as in the Great Columbia Plain south of the forty-ninth parallel, large parts of the bunchgrass range were turned to cultivation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and extensive areas were lost to the plough.¹²

Writing of ranching on the interior range of British Columbia in the 1950s, geographer Thomas Weir – one of the first, and for a long time one of very few, scholars from beyond the rangeland sciences to focus attention on this region – identified three kinds of grazing practice that

had evolved since the 1860s.¹³ By his account, these practices were shaped by “physical controls,” among which the “natural vegetation” was the most important. Drawing upon the work of ecologist Edwin Tisdale, Weir identified three grassland zones shaped by the impact of altitude (and, indirectly, the influence of precipitation – which increased from less than 6 inches per annum in the lowest, driest areas to exceed 25 inches above 3,300 feet) – on grass and tree growth.¹⁴ The first zone, between 1,100 and 2,300 feet, was characterized by bunchgrasses and sagebrush; between 2,300 and 2,800 feet, forbs were interspersed with bunchgrasses; and between 2,800 and 3,300 feet, a heavier growth of forbs as well as bluegrass and other sod-forming species largely replaced the bunchgrasses. Fairly open stands of aspen and aspen fir above the grasslands provided good range too, but above 4,000 feet, thickening stands of lodgepole pine and spruce reduced grazing opportunities. Overall, stocking ratios estimated by Weir were lowest in the dry, low-lying – and by 1950 often degraded – areas, where as many as 40 acres were required to maintain each steer; in the best of situations, other parts of the region were capable of sustaining stock at four times this density. But these limits were in some sense notional, as cattle were moved from one environmental zone to another to take advantage of changing seasons and available grazing.

The superimposition on such a diverse landscape of tenure arrangements that allowed the preemption of 160 (later 320) acres and gave access to extensive tracts of rangeland through leases and permits led, said Weir, to markedly different patterns of ranching in lowland, upland, and transitional zones. The largest ranches, with hundreds of thousands of acres and up to ten thousand cattle, were based in the southern lowlands, where they were able to use the vast expanses of bunchgrass found on valley slopes and terraces for spring and fall grazing. Typically, they moved cattle onto the timber-covered Crown ranges in early summer and continued upslope as the season progressed, sometimes grazing areas 2,000 vertical feet above their home paddocks. These operations had to put up winter feed, but this was generally required for only a few weeks, and in favourable winters the most favoured operations might not have to feed at all. The smallest, and perhaps least profitable, ranches were in the northwestern uplands, where stock might have to be fed for three to five winter months before being turned onto limited areas of home range and then moved to graze small upland meadows sequentially during the summer and early fall. Typically found at intermediate elevations, in the north-central part of the grasslands, transitional ranching

units used the limited bunchgrass of shallow valley sidehills for spring grazing their herds of several hundred to one thousand cattle, before moving them through 500 to 1,000 vertical feet to forage in the timbered uplands during summer and to rustle in upland meadows in the fall. They too depended upon winter feed, but less markedly than did the upland ranches.

To read Thistle and Weir together is to recognize how scholarship changes, and to be reminded of the ways in which shifting societal and disciplinary concerns produce radically different accounts of phenomena. Geographers writing about the same region, and about the major economic activity that shaped its landscapes, Thistle and Weir actually have a lot in common. Beyond their shared interest in ranching and the Interior grasslands, they draw upon many of the same sources (Tisdale's work is important to both, for example), have things to say about the same operations (such as the Douglas Lake Cattle Company), and ultimately tell us a good deal about the development of the inland range of British Columbia. But writing sixty years apart, they tell very different stories about this place. Weir's pioneering work reflected the descriptive regional approach of a discipline still tinged with an environmental determinism in its concern to characterize types of economic activity (ranch units) and its ready attribution of land-use patterns to physical factors. The grassland was a *tabula rasa* upon which the ranchers effectively wrote the destiny dictated by nature. Land tenure regulations and market circumstances had some small influence on the pattern of human activity, but imprinted in response to the challenging and limited opportunities afforded by the physical environment, this pattern seemed entirely natural and secure.

Thistle's grasslands are, by contrast, places of ongoing contestation and change, unstable in all sorts of ways. Whereas Weir took the idea of "native grassland" as a convenient enduring given, Thistle interrogates it and recognizes that Interior grassland ecosystems existed in almost constant flux, sustained by light fires every decade or so, and subject on their upland, forested margins to more severe conflagrations every century or two. For Weir, overgrazing – putting too many animals on the range – was one cause of low carrying capacity; for Thistle, overgrazing is not just a matter of stocking densities but a contingent outcome of weather conditions, prices for stock, the rhythms of transhumance (or the timing of stock movements), the presence of sheep, and so on. Rather than offering a view, as Weir did, of a landscape produced by "impersonal, even autonomous underlying forces," Thistle aspires to know "how people

and groups understood change, both social and ecological, and how they responded when those changes came to seem undesirable” (p. 7). Here, both people and “nature” are actors, and the former often face the need to make choices without a complete understanding of circumstances or full knowledge of the consequences of their actions.

Weir paid no heed to indigenous people, whereas Thistle marks their presence in the grasslands in his title (by describing the development of the ranching economy as a “resettling”) and makes the dispossession and marginalization of the region’s original human inhabitants a centrepiece of his book. For Weir, the extension of ranching into the Interior plateau was an unproblematic part of the great and continuing story of Canadian economic development. For Thistle, the Victoria *Colonist’s* perhaps somewhat incredulous observation, in 1930, that “the Indians assert that the country and the ranges belong to them,” is literally and figuratively a starting point for analysis. As elsewhere in the province, Indian Reserves were created in the grasslands as European settlement advanced, but no formal treaties ceded indigenous territory to newcomers. Today, the Grasslands Conservation Council tells us that slightly less than 10 percent of BC grasslands lie in Indian Reserves – although the proportional significance of these reserves varies considerably, as they account for barely 3 percent of the Cariboo-Chilcotin and almost a quarter of the Okanagan basin.¹⁵ But, Thistle shows, even these stark figures reflect contested histories: colonists, indigenous people, and officials held different views of how much land Native people needed, and how much they should be allowed. A few, such as the Oblate priest C.J. Grandidier and Indian Reserve Commissioner Gilbert Malcolm Sproat, noted the injustices being perpetrated and the sense of grievance stirring among indigenous people as newcomers allowed their cattle to graze on reserve land and tightened their grip on the range.¹⁶ But their voices, like those of the indigenous people of the region, were soon drowned out by endorsements of economic growth and the benefits of making the grassland “productive” through “rational land use” and “range improvement.”

By Thistle’s account, tension and conflict also marked relations among ranchers. As the Douglas Lake Cattle Company and a small handful of other operators expanded their already significant holdings late in the nineteenth century, those with smaller ranches and fewer cattle feared the engrossment of both land and water by the larger companies. Size conferred all manner of advantages: it allowed strategic seasonal use of different types of range; it offered economies of scale in the development of improvements such as irrigation ditches; it encouraged labour

specialization and the employment of workers with special skills; and it made for more efficient marketing arrangements. “Smallholders,” a diverse group of people who did not share these benefits, grew anxious about the growing concentration of resources and lobbied for changes – such as the creation of grazing commons and community pastures – that would help their operations and interest. Some government officials suggested that large corporate enterprises damaged the range, and others denounced the drift toward oligopoly as undemocratic and contrary to the agrarian vision that enshrined yeoman farming as a way of life and underpinned the development of agriculture through British North America and early Canada.¹⁷ When grasshoppers swarmed and the need to do something to counter their decimations seemed urgent, ranchers and government officials argued over who should implement and pay for extermination programs or anticipatory precautions. Buffeted, if not silenced, by circumstances, people sought variously to take advantage of propitious situations, to hold what they had, or to resist or reduce the effects of change driven by forces beyond their immediate control. Recognizing this, we begin to see how the three kinds of ranch units that Weir “naturalized” as the logical consequences of environmental conditions were actually created from a complex conjuncture of economic, entrepreneurial, historical, legal, social, and even perhaps psychological circumstances.

Grasslands may not be easy to know, but *Resettling the Range* develops a nuanced and complicated picture of British Columbia’s Interior rangelands and offers a distinct and unusual perspective on British Columbia and the environmental history of settler colonialism. It makes clear that the ranching industry that drove development across the province’s broad expanses of bunchgrass and forbs was (and is) a “modern capitalist institution” (p. 161). Its underlying rationale was that very human concern, “improvement.” But it also notes the ironies implicit in this narrative of progress. So Thistle demonstrates (among other things) that the newcomers’ notions of rationality and improvement spelled dispossession, marginalization, and death for people and creatures. His stories reveal officials and ranchers with little capital opposing range “monopoly” and describing “the fencing of large tracts of public land by private individuals [as] a great evil” while barely pausing to wonder at their own society’s metaphorical “fencing in” of other people and animals on reserves, and the exclusion of indigenes and their once sizable herds from the range (p. 23). Nor, Thistle makes clear, did the newcomers’ rhetoric of complaint about huge bands of wild horses eating out the grass, or

government legislation encouraging their elimination, pay much heed to the fact that many of these animals belonged to local Native people who had earlier been encouraged to become (as surveyor Peter O'Reilly observed of members of the Alkali Lake, or Esk'etemic, band in 1881) "heavily involved in ranching," to the point that they owned "significant numbers of cattle and horses."¹⁸

Neither the wild horses nor the grasshoppers that are the focus of Thistle's approach to the Interior grasslands offered a simple target for those who wished to eradicate them from this ecosystem: "wild" horses ran free, but some were owned, and it was often difficult to tell these apart from their truly feral cousins; grasshoppers irrupted on no predictable schedule and then almost disappeared, and they also confused the entomologists, who posited phase-changes to explain their seemingly inexplicable behaviour. Thistle's accounts of attempts to grapple with the problems that wild horses and grasshoppers became for many British Columbians draw much detail from local archives, but they also have an eye to wider horizons as they attend, for example, to the potential value of wild horses to the military and the ways in which early-twentieth-century campaigns against pests were shaped by the discourse of warfare. Beyond this, Thistle's work also gives careful consideration to scientific efforts directed, in Canada and elsewhere, to understanding grassland ecology and "locust plagues." Yet, this book is, above all, an account of some important facets of the human history of the Interior grasslands, a work in environmental history that sits firmly in the humanistic tradition.

Much has been written in the last quarter-century about "putting science in its place," and there is a significant double entendre in this phrase. Used forthrightly, it signals the claim that geography (or location) is crucially influential in the development and dissemination of scientific understanding. In short, this is to maintain that inquiry is shaped by the spaces in which it is carried out, that scientific inquiries are affected by provincial cultures and the social milieu, and that scientific practices have influenced the formation of local identities.¹⁹ Used obliquely, the phrase can also connote a certain skepticism about scientific claims to objectivity and universality: science is put in its place as just another story about the world, one no more efficacious or deserving of attention than any other. This second implication fuelled the so-called science wars of the 1990s, and it has not entirely disappeared from scholarly imaginations.²⁰ Thistle, by contrast, seeks to develop an engaged and rigorous discussion of the relations between science and rangeland resettlement (and vice versa) by following the dictum of historian of science Theodore

Porter: that although science is made by interested human actors subject to various influences, “they cannot make it however they choose” (p. 9). Working along this line, Thistle considers past and present scientific research on the grasslands in context, mindful of the “epistemologies and past worlds of the historical actors” who produced and consumed it, to shed light on the scientific as well as the economic, material, and social relationships that mediated human interactions with the nonhuman world and to offer an environmental history “deeply informed by the technical content of science.”²¹

In this way, *Resettling the Range* tills the “very fertile ground” that Don Gayton found at the “mutual border” between the “aged realms of ‘science’ and ‘the humanities.’”²² Writing in 1990, ecologist Gayton saw this liminal space as “a narrow seam that may someday blossom into a domain itself”; in the quarter-century since, scholars have approached it from many different directions, to encourage its cultivation, to ensure its flowering, and to uncover antecedent interest in its promise. So Canadian literary scholar Laurie Ricou argued, less than a decade after the appearance of *The Wheatgrass Mechanism*, that “students of literature interested in writing about place ... need now to be students of ecology at some level.”²³ A few years later, American historian Dan Flores, reacting to the “cultural turn” in humanities scholarship that privileged “the World according to the Word” over more material considerations, felt it necessary to remind his colleagues that “we remain biological even with all our bewildering array of cultural dressings.”²⁴ History, he averred, required a bioregional perspective and a commitment to understanding the “tangible ecologies of place.” At much the same time, eco-critics began to celebrate the “intertextual, interdisciplinary, and multi-vocal nature” of an “incipient” form of environmental literature.²⁵ Drawing from William Least Heat-Moon’s *PrairieErth (A Deep Map)*, they quickly termed work of this sort “deep mapping” and associated it with Stegner’s *Wolf Willow*, Lopez’s *Arctic Dreams*, McPhee’s *Annals of the Former World*, and even Thoreau’s *Walden* and Leopold’s *Sand County*, to sketch a tradition and identify a genre.²⁶

According to Susan Naramore Maher, one of the leading commentators on this approach, also known as the literary cartography of place, its significant features include a “multivalent, cross-sectional understanding of history,” close attention to the environment, a bioregional sensibility, and “an interest in a specific place, a particular biome, or a unique landscape.” *Resettling the Range* is not a deep mapping exercise in the eco-critical sense of that term, but it does share important characteristics

with work of that kind. Indeed, it might well be described – as Maher has written of Gayton’s *The Wheatgrass Mechanism* and John Janovy Jr.’s *Dunwoody Pond*, both of which she places firmly within the deep mapping genre – as a work that forces us “to decenter the human, to reconsider the primacy of a larger biological reality, and to reexamine the political and cultural precepts that attempt to control natural systems.”²⁷

In the end, though, the stories at the heart of *Resettling the Range* are stories about people making choices. Thistle’s purpose in telling them is to emphasize that history is contingent: “There was nothing inevitable about the decisions early British Columbians made: they might have restored the range rather than simply put poison in it; they might have reclaimed wild horses” instead of annihilating them; they might have envisaged a land-use system weighted toward communal rather than individual property rights; they might have heeded the voices of Native peoples and listened more attentively to those of their own recognizing the inequities of Indian reserves (p. 162).

There are big “ifs” around most of these conditionals. But long immersion in the archives, close observation of what transpired on the landscape, and prolonged reflection on the history that you hold in your hands has left John Thistle convinced that “early British Columbians could have done better, not just by each other, but also by First Nations peoples, and the nonhuman world of nature” (p. 162). He comes to this conclusion with characteristic humility. His purpose is not to condemn those who came before us as benighted fools, but to draw wisdom from the past and foster a thoughtful approach to the future. It was Shakespeare who wrote that “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players.”²⁸ Plays are structured by their texts, just as powerful streams of tendency shape the thinking of all who act in the world, but Thistle would remind us that both playscripts and zeitgeists are pliable, and that the measure of any performance lies in the choices made by those who deliver it. Like Don Gayton’s and John Janovy Jr.’s very different books, this one encourages us to ponder our humanity, and to be more considerate of humans and the rest of nature than the societies to which we belong have been in the past.²⁹

I

Introduction

My interest in British Columbia's Interior drylands began with a weekend field trip through the lower Fraser River Canyon with graduate students and faculty members from the University of British Columbia Geography Department. The purpose of the trip was to see the remnants of Aboriginal house pits, as well as some of the landscapes made more recently by colonialism. Starting off from the coastal city of Vancouver on a misty Saturday morning, we slowly made our way to remote Cameron Bar, on the west bank of the Fraser River.

Like all good "archival fieldwork," our route through the canyon revealed traces of an astonishing sequence of human occupation: at Yelakin, the edge of an Aboriginal village otherwise obliterated by the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the early 1880s; at Boston Bar, a small Aboriginal cemetery elevated several feet above the surrounding surface, sacred space left behind as the rest of the landscape was desecrated (washed away by the powerful jets of hydraulic mining operations) and then essentially abandoned to its current use as an industrial log sorting yard (guarded by two large dogs); somewhere near the mouth of the Stein Valley, a failed settler farmstead, one of many in the province; and, finally, at Cameron Bar, the remains of an orchard and farm buildings, a desiccated pocket of land designated as an Indian reserve, the great linear piles of rock left by Chinese miners, and the impressions left in the land by a pair of long abandoned Aboriginal house pits.¹ The precise history and meaning of these places was often far from obvious, but each had something important to say about the "resettlement" of British Columbia.² I remember being

deeply impressed by what I saw, and anxious to learn more: about the origins of these features; about the people who made and gave meaning to them; and about how and why they had changed over time.

Equally impressive as we moved through the canyon was the way the land itself changed. At some point, dense coastal rainforests of cedars and Douglas fir gave way to relatively spacious stands of ponderosa pine, and even patches of open grassland. The reason for the change, I later learned, was the north-south trending mountains uplifted millions of years ago, which block the movement of moist maritime air, creating what climatologists call a rain shadow – basically a big dry patch – over much of the interior of the province. Bunchgrass, sagebrush, cactus, and many other plant and animal species adapted to dry conditions are common in this place. So are cattle. The largest herds were along the middle Fraser and Chilcotin Rivers and in the Nicola Valley near Douglas Lake – too far to travel in a single weekend field trip. Just past the settler community of Lytton, however, we saw a few head of cattle in the shady understory of a ponderosa pine forest. We also saw what appeared to be a ranch, or perhaps it was a farm, or a vineyard. Whatever it was, the only green patch in a dry yellow landscape dotted with dark green pine trees was irrigated.

By early Sunday evening, we were back on the coast (if memory serves, it was still misty when we arrived). I knew then that I wanted to write a history of the rain shadow environment we encountered on the weekend. I also knew that I wanted my environmental history to be basically ecological, both in the broad sense of thinking relationally about species (including our own) and the spaces they inhabit, and in the narrow sense of documenting changes in the land. Essentially, and in retrospect too ambitiously, I wanted to do for the drylands of Interior British Columbia what it seemed to me William Cronon had done for New England, or Arthur McEvoy had done for coastal California, or Richard White had done for Island County, Washington.³ Years later, this book is the result.

The plan to write an ecological history of the ranching economy held promise for several reasons. I knew from reading Cole Harris's work that ranching had been the leading edge of settler colonialism in the drylands and that it remained the dominant land use there during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴ I also knew that, unlike other forms of settler agriculture, ranching was spatially extensive. In addition to fenced winter lowlands that ranchers reserved for winter pasture or converted to hay crops, the province's ranching landscape included huge areas of unfenced upland, collectively known as Crown range, that was grazed in common by settler and Native livestock for eight or nine months each year, from about mid-April to mid-December, depending on the weather. Ranchers also used

forested areas for grazing. Together, forest and range covered pretty much the entire Southern Interior (Figure 1.1). It stood to reason, in other words, that an ecological history of ranching would also be a story about the wider rain shadow environment we encountered en route to Cameron Bar.

An ecological history of ranching also made sense in the context of Canadian historical scholarship. When I started working on this project, the “standard,” and only book-length, study of cattle ranching west of the Rocky Mountains was geographer Thomas Weir’s *Ranching on the Southern Interior Plateau*.⁵ First published in 1955 by the Dominion Geographical Branch, *Ranching on the Southern Interior Plateau* was a work of regional economic

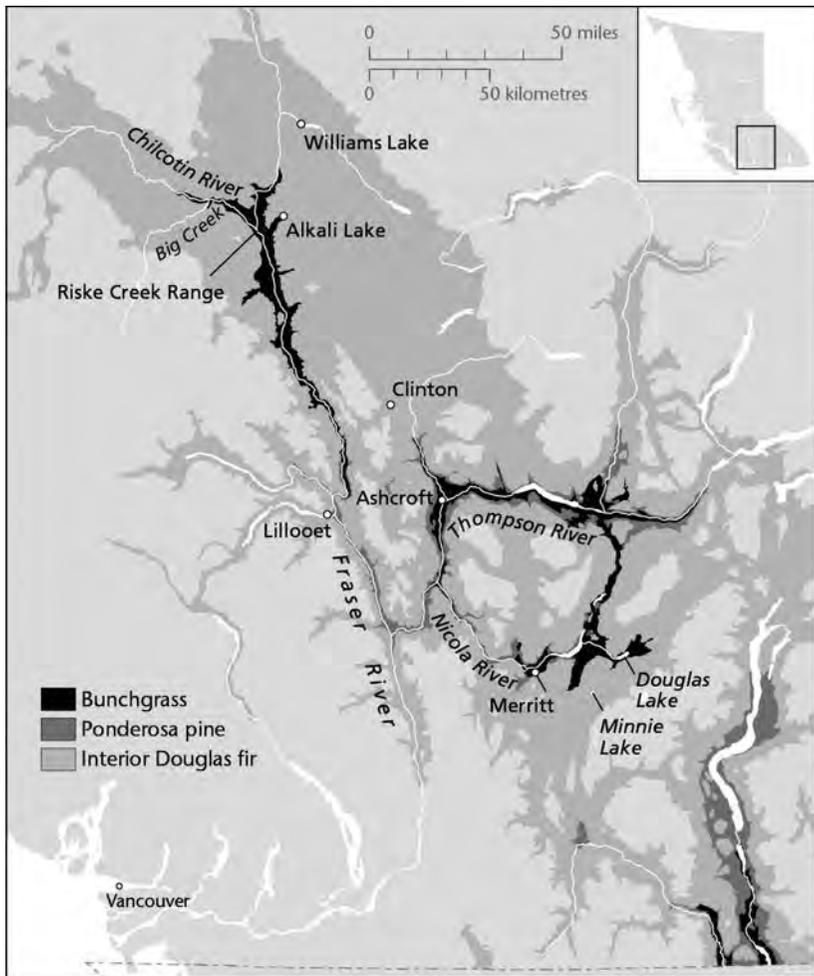


FIGURE 1.1 Study area map. *Eric Lavoie/UBC Press*

geography that sought, in Weir's words, "to show the relative importance of physical controls underlying ranch practices; to describe and analyze such basic patterns as the distribution of cattle, sheep, range types, and ranches; to analyze the historic and economic factors responsible for the form of settlement and finally to analyze the ranch as a functioning unit." This was a narrow analysis in some ways, but Weir also had a wide vision of his subject. His argument was that the "integration of the physical and the cultural, of time and place" had "fashioned a landscape predominantly rural with an elementary economy."⁶ At the heart of that landscape were lowland areas that ranchers fenced for winter pasture. The pastoral landscape revolved around these spaces because they could easily be irrigated, and because in most cases upland areas were useless for ranching without them.

I admired Weir's emphasis on ranching as a way of organizing space and environment (and still do). In particular, I appreciated his attention to environmental factors, especially the role of winter range, in shaping the regional economic landscape. Like all books, however, *Ranching on the Southern Interior Plateau* was the product of a particular historical context, and that context had changed considerably in the fifty years since the first edition was published. Perhaps because he was writing in the early 1950s, when colonialism tended to be assumed rather than questioned, it never occurred to Weir that the rural landscape he sought to describe and explain depended on, and ultimately was made possible by, the dispossession of Native people. But it did, and it had been. Unlike in some other parts of Canada, no treaties were ever signed in British Columbia. Instead the colonial state created small Indian reserves. By the time Weir arrived in the late 1940s, indigenous people lived on Indian reserves that were but a tiny fraction of their former ancestral territories. According to Cole Harris, *all* Indian reserves account for a little more than one-third of 1 percent of the provincial land base. But indigenous people never disappeared. Moreover, in addition to being hunters, fishers, gatherers, guides, and wage labourers, indigenous people were stock raisers. Yet, apart from a single passing reference to "Indian" fur traders in the "colonial period," no Aboriginal people featured at all in this book. It was as if they did not exist.

On the other hand, in a sense, there were no white or other ranchers in his book either. Weir provided wonderfully detailed maps depicting the seasonal movements of people and animals through the pastoral landscape. He discussed the role of provincial range policy in promoting or discouraging settlement and good land use (as Weir understood it). He also interviewed numerous ranchers and range managers to learn how ranches worked and to

understand what kinds of economic challenges they faced. But he never gave these people voice. Nor did Weir allow readers to hear from the government scientists and administrators who were responsible for range management in the province (although their work informed his analysis). In the final analysis, *Ranching on the Southern Interior Plateau* was less a book about the interactions of people and place than it was a geographical analysis of impersonal, even autonomous, underlying forces – the physical environment, technology (especially the railway), and above all the invisible hand of the market. The overall impression was one of rational economic actors using scarce resources to make a commodity for the market. I had no doubt that technology and market forces were important, or that ranchers and range managers aspired to “rational” land use. But I also suspected that in real time the story of ranching was more complicated. After all, as Weir observed, much of the range was overgrazed. Rational land use may well have been the espoused goal since the gold rush years (1858–65), when range use was both transient and unregulated, but it was by no means always the outcome.

So I began, and *Resettling the Range* is the result. It can still be read as an ecological history of the province’s ranching economy in the broad and narrow senses described above, and as a response to some of the absences and shortcomings in Weir’s analysis of *Ranching on the Southern Interior Plateau*. It deals with the different ways that ranches and cattle interacted with natural and economic processes, and each other, to remake, and in some cases degrade, the grassland environment. It also examines how individuals and groups understood environmental problems, and when deemed undesirable, how they responded. In these ways, it is a work of regional environmental history that, like others in the field, seeks to show how human communities and their environments change and become tangled together through time.⁷ But it does so, I think, from a unique, even unlikely, vantage point.

Rather than focus on ranches and cattle or even range science, the focus of *Resettling the Range* is on wild horses and grasshoppers. Partly this is because, like other environmental historians, I am interested in telling stories that are not confined to humanity alone. As Reviel Netz observes, “We tend to concentrate on humans because we consider humans as actors in history – they have desires, they move about, and thus they shape history. But all living things have desires and move about, and so they shape reality as well; and in another way the same is true of material reality itself.” I do not think that nonhuman entities and natural processes shape reality in the same way, or to the same extent, that humans do. Unlike penguins, humans as a group

now have the power to render the planet uninhabitable for all but the most resilient living things. They (we) also have the power to *choose* to do otherwise. This book is a lot about the choices some early British Columbians made when faced with complicated environmental problems that were also complicated social problems. Yet, it is also a book about the historical and geographical *contexts* in which these problems and their solutions unfolded, and those contexts, I argue, were as much ecological as they were social. To borrow again from Netz, in this book “there are no extras, and they are all actors – humans, animals, and their shared terrain.”⁸

Mainly this book is organized the way it is because of the archival records I consulted. Even though I studied many kinds of documents for this project, at some point I began to realize that a lot of what I was learning about the ecological history of ranching, my original project, was coming not from records related to cattle but from records related to pests, particularly herbivores that competed with cattle for grassland. Animals targeted for extermination thus opened windows onto ecological history. Even more surprising was how much I learned about the human communities of the grasslands by looking at these animals. It turned out that one could learn a lot about the ecological history of a place, and of the people who lived there, by looking carefully at the animals those people sought to exterminate.⁹ What I learned was that all three – the people, pests, and ecological history of the place – were connected. Perhaps not always obviously or directly, but nevertheless connected.

The histories of wild horses and grasshoppers overlap in time, and many actors appear in both narratives. But rather than adopt a strict chronological approach, I have found it useful, even necessary, not only to write thematically but also to move between time scales, placing early-twentieth-century debates about overgrazing and environmental change, for example, alongside earlier ideas as well as more recent understandings that are essentially evolutionary in nature. The point is not to suggest, ahistorically, that more or better science would have solved or avoided environmental problems in the past. People in the past knew what they knew, just as we do now. The reason for tacking back and forth between time periods in this book is that the contexts being described defied neat and tidy chronologies. To tell the stories of grasshoppers and horses, it was necessary at times to step back from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – sometimes way back – to a time when there were neither grasshoppers nor horses, nor even any grass in the grassland. Likewise, it was useful to look ahead to future understandings of range ecology, especially when such understandings were clearly anticipated in the past.

Science was hardly determinative in establishing British Columbia's early range policies. It barely figured in the story of wild horses, and in the case of grasshoppers its central conclusions were largely ignored. Entomologists in the early 1920s concluded that worsening grasshopper outbreaks in the grassland were directly associated with overgrazing, which among other things had created favourable breeding areas for egg-laying insects. But rather than reform land use in the region – the preferred strategy of early scientists – for a variety of practical, political, and economic reasons, the province opted to put arsenic, and later more harmful synthetic chemicals such as DDT, in the grassland. Entomologists were only too willing to help with poison control, but it was not their preferred strategy, at least not initially. The more durable solution suggested by scientific research in the first half of the twentieth century was range restoration. In fairness, new land-use practices were introduced after 1919, when the province passed its first Grazing Act, but only slowly, and often subsidiary to quicker, and usually less controversial, fixes such as pest extermination. Thus, while the rhetoric of “rational” land use was pervasive in British Columbia, particularly after 1919, the influence of actual scientific research was often secondary, and at times was simply irrelevant, in determining range policy in the province before the early 1960s, the point at which the discussion in this book ends. Science mattered. Just how it mattered is one of the central themes of this story. But economic considerations and political expediency were almost always more important. It was always easier to advocate new land-use practices than it was to implement them.

Nor, in occasionally drawing from past and present science in a work of environmental history, am I insensitive to the epistemological difficulties involved, though I do think these can be overstated.¹⁰ I am not convinced that science is merely one “cultured way of knowing” among others; that it is simply “made up ... like fairy tales and nursery rhymes”; and that by implication it must be irrelevant or meaningless to historians and geographers except as a discourse or set of ideas and practices to be studied.¹¹ It is a culture; it is a discourse; and it is a set of ideas and practices to be studied.¹² But this is not at all the same as saying it is simply made up, like *Mother Goose* or *Green Eggs and Ham*. As historian of science Theodore Porter puts it: “Interested human actors make science, but they cannot make it however they choose. They are constrained, though not absolutely, by what can be seen in nature and what can be made to happen in the laboratory.”¹³ With Porter's comments in mind, I use past and present science selectively, and as much as possible contextually, in this study while appreciating the practical and epistemological difficulties in doing so. Science may be cultured

and socially constructed (how could it be otherwise?). The fact remains, though, that many of the stories in these pages – and arguably many environmental histories – would have been impossible to write without it.¹⁴

For the most part, this book avoids explicit engagement with these issues, seeking instead to tell contextualized stories about how people and nonhuman nature have changed together through time. To tell these stories, I have relied heavily on historical materials held in federal and provincial archives. Using old government records, provincial statutes, private correspondence, maps, surveys, newspapers, photographs, scientific studies, and unpublished transcripts from public meetings and royal commissions, I have assembled paired historical narratives about the relations among animals, ecologies, and human communities in a large but little known part of northwestern North America: the drylands of present-day British Columbia. I begin with a “war on wild horses” that also worked to dispossess Aboriginal people and discredit their competing claims to land, and conclude with a campaign against grasshoppers that exposed economic inequities among immigrant cattle ranchers. If this seems unconventional, my argument in this book is that it is also a powerful way of doing environmental history.¹⁵ In the pages that follow, horses and grasshoppers become lenses through which we come to understand that stories about “range improvement” and “rational” land use in British Columbia were also – and for some people and creatures primarily – stories about dispossession and marginalization, and that these were not just social but deeply ecological conditions. Neither narrative has a happy ending, and several disheartening subplots thread through the larger plotline: some people suffer arsenic poisoning; others become embroiled in bitter, even violent disputes; and countless animals are killed. I am convinced that these are important stories to tell because of the unique perspective they provide on the resettlement of British Columbia. I am also convinced that these stories have something important to tell us about the danger in separating “environmental problems” and their solutions from their intertwined social and ecological contexts, because when some British Columbians did this in the past, they not only made matters worse in many cases but also created new problems that nobody anticipated. Even though it only gestures toward recent events on the range, and makes no policy recommendations, this book, I hope, will inform current discussions about how to achieve fairer and more sustainable futures for people and nonhuman nature alike. At least, and more assuredly, it will point to what has been unjust and unsustainable in British Columbia in the relatively recent past.