

# WHAT THE HORSE HAS DONE FOR US

## *A Review Essay*

BY RODERICK J. BARMAN

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### *Comparing Cowboys and Frontiers*

Richard W. Slatta

Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997. 336 pp.

Illus., maps. US\$24.95 cloth.

### *Legends of Our Times: Native Cowboy Life*

Morgan Baillargeon and Leslie Tepper

Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998. 262 pp. Illus., maps. \$45 cloth.

*mayx twixmntm tl q'sapi lats k'ulmstm i snkl'askaxa*  
*stories and images about what the horse has done for us:*  
*an illustrated history of Okanagan ranching and rodeo*

Bill Cohen, editor

Penticton: Theytus, 1998. 102 pp. Illus. \$18.95 paper.

**I**N THE SPRING OF 1859, while travelling through the new colony of British Columbia, Lieutenant Richard Mayne came to the Nicola Valley: "Here for the first time I saw mounted Indians of the interior." This encounter should remind us of a facet of the province's life that tends to take second place to our fascination with the sea and its resources, the subsoil and its wealth, and the valleys with their orchards and crops. The horse, adopted by the peoples of the southern interior, notably the Okanagan and the Kutenai, well before European settlement, was the key to the establishment of cattle ranching that still flourishes on the interior plateaus of the province. The Gang Ranch and the Douglas Lake Ranch, to name but two of the cattle-raising outfits established in the later nineteenth century, have found their own

historians, while Richmond P. Hobson Jr.'s several narratives about establishing and running a ranch in the inter-war years have now been transmuted into a television mini-series on the CBC.

Significant as individual ranches are, focusing upon them alone limits and distorts our understanding of the horse and cattle frontier in British Columbia. These three books provide, in very different ways, the larger view that we need. Richard Slatta's volume, really a collection of ten overlapping essays, helps to set the BC experience within the context of cowboys and frontiers across the New World. *Legends of Our Time*, the product of an exhibition at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, shows how central, indispensable, and autonomous a role the Indigenous peoples of the Northern plains and plateaus (see the map on

pages 12-13) have played and still play in the evolving cattle frontier. *mayx twixmntm*, as its title indicates, recounts and celebrates the role played by the horse in the culture of the Okanagan people, the "mounted Indians of the interior," whom Richard Mayne encountered in 1859.

Designed to "serve historians of the American West as a guidebook in comparative research and as a text for classes in comparative frontier history" (xi), *Comparing Cowboys and Frontiers* reflects all the strengths and the weaknesses of that intent. As the author is a historian of Latin America, his text is understandably strongest in its discussion of the cattle frontiers in Argentina and Venezuela and of the cowboys (*gauchos* and *llaneros*) there. Dr. Slatta's forays north of the forty-ninth parallel are not uniformly successful. The sole reference to British Columbia, based on a single source, asserts that cattle ranching was introduced in the "Fraser River valley" during the 1860s and "declined thereafter," except during the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1883 and during the Klondike gold strike of 1898 (9). The Prairies and the Alberta foothills merit more interest and more sources, but nowhere does the text provide a succinct and incisive analysis of cattle raising in those areas.

If the essays in *Comparing Cowboys and Frontiers* do not always possess the conceptual sophistication and familiarity with diverse regions that comparative history requires, they do serve to "inspire other researchers to expand their horizons and to place their own work within a broader comparative framework" (xiii). Reading the essay "Indian Equestrian Economies" in conjunction with *Legends of Our Time* and with *mayx twixmntm* enriches all three works and gives the reader a better

understanding of the complex relationship that exists between Indigenous peoples and the horse across the New World. As might be expected from its origins as an exhibition, *Legends of Our Time* is a visual joy, particularly the colour photographs of artefacts, ranging from parfleches to Western-style shirts and from saddles to horse dance sticks. The historical illustrations – paintings, sketches, and photographs – demonstrate graphically how the Indigenous peoples of the plains and plateaus adopted the horse into their ways of life, making that animal an integral part of their culture. The skill, the dignity, and even the contentment that Native men and women display as ranchers, cowherds, and rodeo stars are patent in many photographs (see 83, 99, 115, 134, 155, 170, 190, and 214). Understandably designed to be as inclusive as possible and to let the Indigenous peoples speak for themselves, the text of *Legends of Our Time* ranges very widely in time, space, and subject. Accordingly, the reader interested in British Columbia will do well to sample the contents rather than to attempt a consecutive reading. The illustrations relating to this province (specifically those from 82 to 114) are particularly rewarding, the captions being as informative as they are incisive. This book richly deserves a large audience north and south of the border.

In its looks and layout *mayx twixmntm* may not compete with *Legends of Our Time*, but the book has exceptional merit and interest on its own terms. It is the result of the dedication and hard work of seven students enrolled in the En'owkin Centre Quilmist High School Program, Penticton, British Columbia, who sought to make a permanent record of the role of the horse in *sqilxw*

(Okanagan) culture. Drawing directly on the experience, memories, storytelling, and photographs of many *sqilxw* elders, the book conveys, with immediacy and authenticity, the nature of life among the Okanagan people during the last 100 years. The photographs, some of them very fine (particularly that of the Pierre family on page 15), reveal a whole range of ordinary activities, not only stock raising and rodeo but logging, hunting, onion picking, and socializing after church. The illustrations also show how the penetration of modern forms of transport – car, truck, and bicycle – have changed the role and importance of the horse in the *sqilxw*

way of life, perhaps the one note of sadness in this fascinating compilation. Theytus Books (a First Nations publishing house) is to be congratulated on recording and so perpetuating an integral part of Indigenous culture.

These three books are very different in their style, scope, and purpose. Read together, they transcend their particular limitations and provide a coherent analysis of the role of the horse in British Columbia and in the Northwestern Interior as a whole. Hopefully the works will stimulate both scholarly and popular interest in an understudied dimension of our common existence.