

Cattle Ranch: The Story of the Douglas Lake Cattle Company, by Nina Woolliams. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre. Paperback, \$7.95.

Somewhere near the end of *Cattle Ranch*, the history of Canada's largest primary-level meat-producing operation, the Douglas Lake Cattle Company, Nina Woolliams talks of the flood of writers and film-makers who began to converge on the Douglas Ranch in the Nicola during the 1970s.

The articles, films and publicity media all stressed the romantic aspect of cowboying, as did the one book written about the ranch in the '50s, and their creators almost ignored the equally important undertaking of farming.

The implication of this remark is that in some way her own book offers a more realistic view of the largest of all Canadian ranches than the mine of material on the Douglas Ranch which at the time was appearing in weekend magazines and pseudo-documentary films catering to the escapist instinct of urban Canadians so belatedly discovering the frontier and the pioneer life as the time-travelling destinations of brief self-deluding vacations of memory.

And in a way Mrs. Woolliams is right. *Cattle Ranch*, first published as a hardcover book in 1979 and now appearing in a paperback edition, is a hardnosed kind of book that deals frankly with the ranching life and that shows — perhaps more starkly than its author quite realizes — how the ruthlessly organized exploitation of land and animals and men enters into the ultimate success of an undertaking like the Douglas Lake Cattle Company.

It must be obvious already that I have not in the last resort been greatly edified by the reading of *Cattle Ranch*. Before I describe my more negative reactions, let me discuss the book's undoubted merits. It is written with honesty, with a feeling for serviceable prose, and with a sense of historical structure. As a narrative of what happened to the cattle industry in central British Columbia since the demand for large quantities of beef first emerged at the time of the Cariboo Gold Rush it is highly informative. Mrs. Woolliams has researched well not only the events that led to such a monstrous accumulation of ranch lands as the Douglas Lake spread represents, but also the backgrounds of the people involved; one of the strengths of her book is the series of vivid portraits of ranch owners and cowhands she presents to us.

There is also a sharp realistic edge to her description of the ranching life. She makes no attempt to minimize its hardships, to gloss over the

unpleasant tasks that no Hollywood film ever shows. Her cowboys are often violent men, human beings in some way grotesque and exaggerated, as in fact men of the frontier often have been, but she does not confuse romantic image with true worth, and she is especially good at portraying the dull, methodical man on whose presence every venture of this kind depends for its ultimate success. At the other edge of the picture, without in any way romanticizing them — her own period as wife to a manager of the Douglas Lake Ranch seems effectively to have removed that temptation — she shows clearly the kind of satisfaction life in a vast space of almost uninhabited grassland and pinewood like the hills behind Nicola Lake can offer. She makes quite evident, for those who did not know it before, why so many men were impelled to return to the ranching life and why so many stayed in it until death was almost on top of them.

That is one side of the story — the one that makes us admire certain ways of life for the opportunity they give men to dramatize rather than merely to endure a life of effort and danger. But just as the *Iliad* fills us with a pride at human courage, yet leaves in the end a great sadness, a sense of the pity of it all, so there is a bitter taste to a book like *Cattle Ranch*, perhaps all the more so because the author seems hardly aware of it.

Look at *Cattle Ranch* in the other way — the way an inhabitant of Erewhon or some other detached utopia (or for that matter an ecologically minded libertarian like the present reviewer) might be expected to observe it. We find (a) a story of the engrossment of a vast area of the most beautiful land in British Columbia (“163,000 deeded acres controlling more than 350,000 acres of Crown grazing”), over a century and more, into the hands of a series of syndicates of rich men and finally into the hands of a single owner with other vast interests, C. N. Woodward, and (b) a story of the exploitation over the years of hundreds of thousands of living beings (which we call by the unemotive name “cattle”), not exactly with cruelty, since none of the people involved shows any sign of sadism, but entirely cold-bloodedly so as to provide most meat on the hoof to be sold at the best prices.

Other disquieting aspects of the story are the destruction of wild life — bears, cougars, coyotes — which turning land over to a single species inevitably involves, and the turning of the Indians, to whom the land originally belonged, into a kind of helot class, glad to get jobs as cowboys. There are also the ironic, unintended compensations. For, like the private golf courses which are another feature of an inegalitarian society, large

ranches like Douglas Lake and the Gang Ranch do in fact help to keep vast areas of the countryside, for the time being at least, out of the hands of the speculative developers, who are even more negative in their deeds than the men who merely set out to accumulate vast areas of grazing land and turn a fair profit on the deal.

I do not of course attribute any of the reflections in which I have been indulging to Mrs. Woolliams. She clearly sees the record of the Douglas Ranch as an admirable one, and given her husband's role as one of the managers it is hard to imagine her thinking otherwise. When she does criticize former owners — as she does William Studdert and Frank Ross — it is mainly because they starved the ranch of funds in order to make the greatest personal profit. She never at any point suggests that there was anything less than beneficial to humanity in the long task of land-grabbing that ended in a single man controlling about 800 square miles of British Columbian land.

Whatever one's view on the social morality of what she is describing, it must be said of Mrs. Woolliams as an industrious amateur historian that she has written her book with a respect for fact and a clear style which makes it possible for both those who admire and those who deplore the achievement she narrates to have a very lucid idea of what they are discussing. As a piece of localized agrarian history *Cattle Ranch* is interesting to the end. It will doubtless give comfort to those who believe in unlimited free enterprise in the use of the land, just as it will give plenty of ammunition to those who believe — even if they have no use for state control — in some more communally oriented form of land use. Good history tends to serve all sides in an argument.

Vancouver

GEORGE WOODCOCK

The Rainbow Chasers, by Ervin Austin MacDonald. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1982. Pp. 272.

Ervin Austin MacDonald's biography/autobiography of his father, his family, and himself, *The Rainbow Chasers*, is a memoir of the frontier, of "westerling"; both Frederick Jackson Turner and Wilfrid Eggleston in action. The father, Archie from Bytown, never could settle down, at least not until almost too old to go much further; by that time, 1907, he had arrived at Lac des Roches "at the end of the road from the 70 Mile House and at the beginning of the old trail to Little Fort on the North