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Review of *The Herds Shot Round the World: Native Breeds and the British Empire, 1800–1900*, by Rebecca Woods

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Note

I wrote this review at the behest of an editor for H-Environment Roundtable Reviews. She requested revisions that would have made this monograph look a lot more significant and original than it is. I declined and chose to publish my review here.

Review

The general topic of this brief monograph becomes clear once past the awkward wordplay of the title. It is *not* a global history about hunting ungulates, as implied by stringing together the words “herds,” “shot,” and “world.” Rather, the “herds” of the title refers to cattle and sheep ranching in the British Empire as it achieved its worldwide dominance during the nineteenth century. More specifically, Woods presents a history of the social construction of some breeds of cattle and sheep in Britain and a few of its colonies and former colonies over the long nineteenth century. Environmental historians have long researched cattle and sheep breeds, of course, from Longhorns and Merinos during colonial times to the “improved breeds” such as Herefords and Corriedales that followed. But British breeds such as Hereford came into being and achieved dominance over the nineteenth century through a contested social process related to breeding knowledge and practice, taste and fashion, symbolism and nationalism, and so on. Understanding that process remains just as salient as the more fully developed literature on how livestock breeds related to transformations in environment, technology, herding ecology, society, and economy. Moreover, Woods promises the sorts of insights about her topic only possible by examining many places at once in relation to their global interconnections, or as she puts it so well herself,

“this study contributes to a growing willingness in environmental and global history to look past national boundaries” (p. 16). While the study directly concerns British livestock breeds, therefore, Woods does not confine her purview to Britain.

Since this monograph barely touches on Latin America and the Caribbean, which along with their northern borderlands and relationship to the Atlantic World have long been my own focus regarding historical livestock herding, I direct the following commentary to the challenges of undertaking global environmental history. Practitioners of global (or world) history on any topic inherently confront the issues of scale and scope. In terms of temporal scale, Woods’s topic certainly suggests the long nineteenth century, which coincides with the capitalization and intensification of agriculture, including the rise to dominance of “improved breeds” of livestock in Britain, its colonies, and elsewhere. The relative brevity of that period presents no great challenge when compared, for example, to those other global historians have faced regarding their monographs on topics that span the entire modern period.

Yet the nineteenth century’s coincidence with the global apogee of British political and economic dominance does intensify the challenges involved in geographic scale. The universe of places potentially relevant to the study of British livestock breeds ranges across, just to name the most obvious, the British Isles themselves, the grasslands of North America, the more limited pastures of the British Greater Caribbean, including British Honduras and Guiana, the Pampas of Argentina and Uruguay, the Falkland Islands, South Africa, East Africa, South Asia, Australia, and New Zealand. That number and diversity of places challenges any scholar to adequately know the relevant archives and primary sources, possess language abilities that minimally include English and Spanish, absorb the relevant regional literatures, often multidisciplinary and

specialized, and conduct fieldwork to collect oral histories and observe firsthand the people, animals, practices, technologies, and landscapes involved.

The topical scope poses just as great a challenge. A history of the social construction of British livestock breeds potentially involves dozens of breeds and the perspectives of actors ranging from scientists and breeders to consumers and sellers of livestock products to ranchers and herders to the sheep and cattle themselves. Meanwhile, the process of social construction relates to parallel, interrelated transformations in technology, genetics, environment, trade, politics, and other elements.

Woods approaches those challenges by sharply limiting the geographic scale and topical scope of her study. Out of five substantive chapters, bracketed by an introduction and a conclusion, the first three focus on the emergence of breeds in Britain and further limit the scope to detailed coverage of only a few issues regarding a few breeds. First, regarding sheep, she details the failed attempt to establish Spanish, Merino sheep in Britain in relation to the eventual dominance of the New Leicester Longwool and similar native, British breeds. The second and third chapters focus on cattle, specifically the conflict between promoters of the Hereford and Shorthorn breeds. The fourth chapter extends the story to the colonies, covering the emergence in New Zealand of the Corriedale sheep breed, derived by crossbreeding the Merino with the British Lincoln and New Leicester Longwool breeds, and the Corriedale's eventual dominance there and in Australia. And the fifth and final substantive chapter addresses the establishment of the Hereford as the major cattle breed in the Great Plains of the United States, by then independent but nonetheless a former British colony. None of the other potential universe of places receive more than passing mention. Argentina and Canada, for example, the former dominated by British capital during the nineteenth century and the latter a British colony for

most of that century, emerged as global livestock producers during that period but remain largely invisible in this book. And many other places in the British orbit during the nineteenth century, such as the colony of South Africa, receive no mention at all. Those choices to limit scale and topic are inherent to any global history, of course, but while entirely legitimate they do constrain the breadth and significance of the scholarly impact of this book.

Moreover, Woods limits her topical scope even further by emphasizing the human breeders of livestock as the main actors and their debates as the main process through which some breeds gained meaning and prominence—while others did not. Thus, the conflict over the introduction of the Merino into Britain features fascinating debates preserved in the pages of agricultural magazines, with proponents and opponents variously touting or critiquing the traits of the breed, appealing to nationalism and prejudice, and even engaging in personal attacks. Similarly, the conflict over the meaning of the Hereford and Shorthorn breeds and their relationship to national and regional identity involves explication of the herd books that breeders kept to demonstrate pedigree, purity, and antiquity. Again, such choices to set topical limits are entirely legitimate, but inclusion of those who actually herded the livestock would have broadened the impact; and the inclusion of non-humans as agents, as some historians have undertaken, would have been particularly applicable to the history of livestock breeding.¹

As a result of the decisions made to address the challenges of producing such a global history of British livestock breeds, the first three chapters are certainly fascinating. They seem, at least to someone like me who is not expert in the history of livestock breeding in Britain, to contribute a well constrained study that draws on archival primary sources such as those of the

¹ For example, Martha Few and Zeb Tortorici, eds., *Centering Animals in Latin American History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

Hereford Herd Book Society. And they consequently seem to constitute a significant contribution to understanding the social construction of several important British breeds of cattle and sheep. Experts on that region and topic will, doubtlessly, provide more extensive and insightful reflections than I can on that aspect of this book.

That said, once the story moves beyond Britain, in the final two chapters, the usual challenges of global history seem to overwhelm the project. Despite the strictly limited geographical and topical scopes, the last two chapters rely on primary sources from period agricultural journals, newspapers, and other published materials rather than archives in New Zealand, Australia, and the United States. Moreover, the literature used to contextualize and interpret the primary sources remains inexplicably incomplete. Items missing from the brief, six-and-a-half page list of “Secondary Sources” that could have improved interpretations include, to mention only a few, well known classics such as Walter Prescott Web’s *The Great Plains* and Andrew Hill Clark’s *The Invasion of New Zealand by People, Plants and Animals* as well as more recent monographs such as Carmen Sesto’s *La Vanguardia Ganadera Bonaerense, 1856—1900*, Judith Carney and Richard Rosomoff’s *In the Shadow of Slavery*, and somewhat “sheepishly,” both for the pun and the self-promotion, my own *Black Ranching Frontiers*.²

² Walter Prescott Web, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn, 1931); Andrew Hill Clark, *The Invasion of New Zealand by People, Plants and Animals* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1949); Carmen Sesto, *La Vanguardia Ganadera Bonaerense, 1856—1900* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2005); Judith A. Carney and Richard N. Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa’s Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Andrew Sluyter, *Black Ranching Frontiers: African Cattle Herders of the Atlantic World, 1500—1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

That decision not to draw on that existing literature results in major issues of interpretation once the story moves beyond Britain. For example, the literature noted in the preceding paragraph as well as many other publications on the North American Great Plains and the Pampas would have helped Woods to understand how the establishment of Herefords in such grasslands related to the invention, development, and deployment of wire fencing to manage the movements of the herds and maintain the purity of such breeds. Woods very briefly discusses fencing—in a few sentences that lack citations to the relevant literature—but does not address the great variation in types of wire fencing over time and among the places discussed (p. 154). Moreover, once ranchers divided the open range with fences, many of the enclosed pastures that resulted lacked access to surface water and therefore required devices to raise groundwater into drinking troughs. Woods does not discuss that issue at all despite how central water-lifting technology was to establishing Herefords and other breeds on the vast grasslands of the Americas. The analysis of the debates among cattle breeders about the relative virtues of Herefords versus Shorthorns that Woods provides, in other words, comprised a significant aspect of the process through which some breeds became so valued and widespread, but what role those debates played in the overall process cannot be rigorously analyzed without detailed understanding of other pertinent factors. The Hereford breed, in other words, would be no more than a faint memory if, despite all the efforts of its promoters, its characteristics in relation to environment, technology, and herding ecology had proved unsuccessful. Technologies like fencing and water-lifting devices that emerged in each place but differed greatly in form, timing, and pace of extension dramatically modulated the establishment of Herefords and other cattle and sheep breeds, as made clear by a large existing literature. As another example, the literature on the Atlantic World has established that African knowledge and biota, including livestock

breeds and grasses, were deeply involved in the establishment of ranching in the Americas, including the establishment of an efficient water-lifting device on the Pampas in the nineteenth century, without which ranchers could not have divided the range with fences to maintain the breeding of their new herds of Herefords. In general, then, the social construction of livestock breeds can no more be reduced to the practices and discourses of the livestock breeders than it can be reduced to environment, technology, or any other factor. Rather, those factors must be understood in relation to one another, as a complex process that no single historian can treat in its entirety at the global scale and that therefore requires drawing on the existing literature.

In sum, this monograph treats a topic of such great interest that, unsurprisingly, others have also taken up the challenge of understanding the social construction of livestock breeds. Some regional specialists do a particularly good job of relating the discursive conflicts and debates of the livestock breeders and breed promoters to a broader process of environmental, technological, and social transformation.³ A global history approach that connects such regional understandings immeasurably adds to our understanding, but Woods's effort left me wanting much more than its slim 175 pages of substantive text delivered, especially regarding the last two chapters that extend the story beyond Britain, and especially in terms of a more rigorous analysis based on archival primary sources and the multidisciplinary literature on the history of livestock ranching in the Americas. Such difficulties are inherent in doing global history on any topic, and

³ Robert W. Wilcox, *Ranching and Market Access in the Backlands: Mato Grosso, Brazil, c. 1900—1940*, *Historia Crítica* 51 (2013) 71—96; Robert W. Wilcox, *Cattle in the Backlands: Mato Grosso and the Evolution of Ranching in the Brazilian Tropics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017).

Woods should be congratulated for accepting the challenge and contributing to the literature on livestock herding.

Author bio. Andrew Sluyter is a Professor in the Geography and Anthropology Department of the Louisiana State University. He has authored over a hundred publications on the peoples and places of the Americas and the Atlantic World, including three research monographs:

Colonialism and Landscape (Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); *Black Ranching Frontiers* (Yale University Press, 2012); and *Hispanic and Latino New Orleans* (LSU Press, 2015). Honors include the 2017 Carl O. Sauer Distinguished Scholarship Award from the Conference of Latin American Geography, the 2015 J. B. Jackson Book Prize from the American Association of Geographers, and a 2012 Fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies.