Hindrances of the Hinterland: Ranching in Robert Wilcox's Mato Grosso

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BOOK REVIEW

Robert W. Wilcox, Cattle in the Backlands: Mato Grosso and the Evolution of Ranching in the Brazilian Tropics. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2017.

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Historians of Brazil and of ranching can be grateful that Robert W. Wilcox's decades of research on cattle in Mato Grosso has finally culminated in a comprehensive monograph. As the commentary on the back cover suggests, "While ranching in the Amazon receives attention from both the media and scholars, the states of Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul actually host the most cattle". Thus Wilcox deserves applause for pursuing a path less treaded, yet of immense relevance. The details in Cattle in the Backlands are something to behold, and reflect careful and thorough work in archives. Readers will come away well-informed on topics ranging from the anatomy of zebu cattle to the practices of field burning to the logistics of getting jerky to markets. These extensive findings lead Wilcox to his core argument that "even where the will existed for the expansion of ranching, the opportunities and successes were limited by geographical, ecological, and economic restraints" (p. 223). Analyzing the transformation of ranching in Mato Grosso through the themes of locational challenges, economic transformation, and environmental forces, Wilcox succeeds in the daunting task of trying to be a historical geographer, an economic historian, and an environmental historian in one tome.

Location was both the biggest boon and the biggest hindrance to ranching in Mato Grosso. One of Wilcox's most useful discussions is about the growth and decline of the city of Corumbá in light of the prospects and limitations of river, road, and rail transport. Not only does he provide a cogent argument, but he also shows the relational nature of Mato Grosso's growth with the cities of the Río de la Plata. For example, it is astonishing to note how so much of the capital propelling ranching modernization in late 19th and early 20th century Mato Grosso emanated from Montevideo. The fates of Corumbá and Campo Grande were so often tied to the whims of merchants in the Uruguayan capital, such as Jaime Cibils, and on the eve of World War I, all but one charqueada in Mato Grosso was owned by Uruguayans.

Wilcox's attention to logistics is arguably the most forceful part of the book. Perhaps this is also because the sources, such as the wealth of documents left behind by foreign merchants, allow for it. Statements like: "it was simple financial logic to favor the São Paulo sector over that of Mato Grosso. By transporting coffee, the

railroad operated at a profit in São Paulo, while it ran a constant deficit on its Mato Grosso run, where cattle products were available for transport" (p. 96-97) are well researched and also show that running a profit was contingent on so many factors beyond the quality of the beef. As with the earlier point about Montevideo, we constantly see that development of ranching in Mato Grosso is a result of what happens elsewhere. Another great example is the debate over the value of zebu cattle (p. 209), which had little to do with matogrossenses, but was actually part of a larger political battle between mineiros and paulistas. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis, Wilcox argues successfully that cattle are an extractive commodity that drove foreign investment in Brazil just like coffee, sugar and rubber.

Wilcox's environmental analysis and his guiding assertion that "distinct ecologies are not always recognized by travelers, scientists, government officials, or even by some local ranchers" (p. 14) are equally valuable. His descriptions of the distinct Mato Grosso landscapes in the first chapter cleverly titled "Mirror of the Land: Regional Geography and Environmental Imperatives" are an indispensable primer for anyone looking to do research on this part of Brazil. As Wilcox argues forcefully, it is a fallacy to look at Mato Grosso as a single ecological region, which would be the tendency for an outside observer with little knowledge of the state(s). After all, its name simply means big forest. But a more accurate term would be Matos Grossos. This is a giant area, and the Pantanal, Cerrado, and Campo Limpo have vastly differing realities that have influenced cattle ranching from its inception up to the present.

It is with respect to the social that Wilcox leaves the most unanswered questions, something attributable both to his personal preference and to the limitation of sources. He professes to prefer a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down one, eschewing politics in favor of "an emphasis on the ground level" (p. 7). The book benefits from not being all about barons and oligarchs, yet there is far more detail about trees, shrubs and cattle than there is about any individuals. There are a few interesting anecdotes about labor hierarchies, yet little sense of the characters involved. For example, the overwhelming significance of gaúcho migration to Mato Grosso was the subject of a few sentences (p. 62) rather than an extended discussion.

In another example, Wilcox frequently uses the term neo-Europeans to describe settlers, without discussing why he adopts an explicitly Crosbyian framework.[2] These omissions help furnish the imagination of social historians and cultural geographers with questions such as, how much of the settlement was driven by ranching as opposed to other pursuits? How and why do the settlement patterns differ from other ranching regions? As cities are settled, who lives in what parts and in what kinds of buildings? Additionally, given that only in the conclusion does the study discuss developments over the last half-century, Wilcox provides a historical grounding for scholars wishing to address more contemporary matters pertaining to Mato Grosso ranching.

The constant attention to export markets, breed type, landscape, and logistics are both what define ranching in Mato Grosso, and what makes Cattle in the Backlands a study worth consulting. Credit is long overdue to Prof. Wilcox for compiling a treasure trove of information about ranching in Mato Grosso and assembling it in one place. His study reminds us that ranching in Brazil is not just small-scale family farms in the colonial period, the gauchos of the Southern grasslands, or deforestation in the Amazon.[3] [4] Mato Grosso is a different story, yet one inextricably linked to the three above. Moreover, it is one of immense relevance today, not just due to the volume of cattle in Mato Grosso, but also because of the urgent vulnerability of the regional ecologies Wilcox takes such care to spell out. The very week I write this, The Guardian features a new photo essay on this year's wildfires in the Pantanal, the worst on record, with over 12% already burned.[5]

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[2] Crosby, Alfred. *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
[3] Bell, Stephen. *Campanha Gaúcha: A Brazilian Ranching System, 1850-1920*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.
[4] Hoelle, Jeffrey. *Rainforest Cowboys: The Rise of Ranching and Cattle Culture in Western Amazonia*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015.
5 "Brazil's Pantanal Wetlands on Fire – in Pictures." The Guardian, September 17, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/gallery/2020/sep/17/brazil-pantanal-wetlands-on-fire-in-pictures.

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