

Crossing Home Ground: A Grassland Odyssey through Southern Interior British Columbia

By David Pitt-Brooke. 2016. Harbour Publishing Co. Ltd., P.O. Box 219, Madeira Park, BC, Canada, V0N 2H0. 310 pages, 32.95 CAD, Cloth.

Resettling the Range: Animals, Ecologies, and Human Communities in British Columbia

By John Thistle. 2015. University of British Columbia Press, 2029 West Mall, Vancouver, BC, Canada, V6T 1Z2. 218 pages, 29.95 CAD, Paper.

The two books reviewed here form a “literary cartography of place” – in this case, the dry grasslands of British Columbia’s interior valleys. For most travellers, our only exposure to these grasslands is through our car window as we drive the Trans Canada Highway along the Thompson River Valley through Kamloops or south from there through Merritt on the Coquihalla Highway. Heat waves in the summer sun, wind-drifted snow in the winter. The two books could not be more different. *Crossing Home Ground* takes the form of daily diary entries, ruminations, and reflections of David Pitt-Brooke’s 75-day pilgrimage from near the USA border north and west to Williams Lake in the Chilcotin country. He wanted to experience that dry interior intimately, and over two years he walked over a thousand kilometres, one foot in front of the other. On the other hand, John Thistle’s book, *Resettling the Range*, is an academic treatise, laden with over 40 pages of notes and references, that explores the ecology and history (human and non-human) of the same grasslands through the lens of attempted eradication of “wild” horses and grasshoppers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But they are complementary.

Each of the seven chapters in *Crossing Home Ground* covers a geographical area or length of time or season on Pitt-Brooke’s journey. Many of his daily entries dwell on the logistics of finding a route and somewhere to camp that was relatively flat and had potable water, preferably on public land, in areas where there are no hiking guidebooks. At times he suffered from mild dehydration because of a shortage of water in the hot, dry climate. He sprinkles in lessons on the natural history of the bunchgrass meadows and Ponderosa Pine-Douglas-fir parklands that he hikes through and camps in. Long hours and days alone lead to reminiscences of growing up in the Okanagan, ruminations and reflections on what it means to love a landscape, to understand the intricacies of its ecology, and anger over desecration by all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), mines, cattle, and rampant housing development. He wonders “what if we started to see land not as a possession but as a cherished responsibility, like a child or a spouse or an ageing parent?”

The first third of Pitt-Brooke’s journey was spent linking together remnants of native grasslands, pockets of bunchgrass that were often on steep slopes too

rugged for logging or livestock. Many of these were legally protected, although some were still suffering abuse, particularly from ATVs. He felt like an urban backpacker, seeking out “little corridors of greenery through the concrete and asphalt”, as many of these remnants were surrounded by decades of development, subdivisions, malls, vineyards – the “uglification” of paradise. He likened this to reverse alchemy, changing gold into lead.

But as Pitt-Brooke bushwhacked his way west from Vernon, he rose up onto the high plateau that lies between the Columbia and Fraser river valleys, where there are still vast valleys of native grassland. This isn't to say that these are all healthy ecosystems. As Thistle details in *Resettling the Range*, the Nicola Valley grasslands and those along the Thompson River between Kamloops and Ashcroft and the Fraser River between Lillooet and Williams Lake (nearly 500 000 ha or 1.2 million ac), have been heavily impacted by grazing and associated activities since the 1858 Fraser River gold rush brought thousands of head of cattle, sheep, mules, and horses to the area. Prior to that there were no large herds of grazing animals. Bison never made it to these grasslands and, while horses evolved in North America, they died out 11 000 – 13 000 years ago and were only reintroduced in the 15th and 16th centuries by the Spanish invaders. By the time settlers arrived, First Nations peoples had been using horses for travel, hunting, warfare, trade, and profit for several hundred years. While not branded like settler horses, most of these animals were owned, although there were horses that became feral when their owners died in the 1862 smallpox epidemic. And settlers themselves often let their horses roam and graze freely on Crown (provincial) land.

By the turn of the 19th century, most of the available grasslands were owned, or leased from the provincial government, by three large corporate ranches (Gang Ranch, Douglas Lake Cattle Company, and the BC Cattle Company) and numerous smaller family ranches. Meanwhile, starting in 1861, First Nations groups were being squeezed onto smaller and smaller reserves. One of the big problems was that settler lands included lowlands where they could grow forage (often irrigated) to winter their livestock, while the reserves were usually in uplands (meadows interspersed with forest) where neither winter forage nor water was available – the “biogeography of dispossession”. Settlers considered First Nations' horses as “useless” (not part of the capitalist economy) and competing for grass with their cattle. Thus started a war on wild horses, which included

hiring shooters to kill horses found on Crown land between January and May, which Thistle describes as being “little more than a proxy war on Aboriginal people”. His contention is supported by many excerpts from letters and reports, showing at a minimum paternalistic viewpoints and often outright racism. During the period 1924–1955, over 13 000 horses were killed, the vast majority of which belonged to First Nations people.

Through much of this same period the government was also waging a war on grasshoppers. Major irruptions occurred in 1898, 1907, 1914, and 1922. Even decades later entomologists struggle to understand what triggered the large outbreaks, but their abundance and distribution was a response to a range of environmental variables: weather (hot, dry conditions in early spring and fall), predation, parasitism, and disease. By the early 1900s, some range managers were starting to sound the alarm about overgrazing of Crown lands, which exacerbated the other variables and made the outbreaks more destructive. But rather than tackle the thorny issues of land allocation and range monopoly, and the need to reduce herd sizes to something resembling carrying capacity, the government took the politically expedient route and started poisoning grasshoppers, first using arsenic and later DDT. Neither eliminated the grasshoppers but did wreak havoc on the grasslands, impacting not only wildlife, but also the health of livestock and people.

After the grasshopper war (the use of military terminology was good psychology for bringing people outside) there were new enemies for settlers to battle: fire suppression was allowing tree encroachment into grasslands, while bark beetles killed swathes of forest that impacted fences and travel to far pastures. By the late 1960s, refrigeration and easier transportation gave rise to factory feedlot systems, to which large corporate ranches had the resources to adapt, while smaller family ranches and First Nations ranchers did not.

As Pitt-Brooke said, “Falsifying the past destroys any value it might have had as a guide to the future”. While *Resettling the Range* is not an easy read, Thistle has done an admirable job of sifting through the details of early settler history to document how we arrived at the state of our present-day grasslands. But read *Crossing Home Ground* for its message of hope. As Pitt-Brooke observes, “given half a chance they [grasslands] do come back. And it doesn't take centuries ... Protection and lots of time. That's the key”.

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