Assessing the Stakes of the Rise of Steak

Specht, Joshua. *Red Meat Republic: A Hoof-to-Table History of How Beef Changed America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. 368 pp. $27.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9780691182315.

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In *Red Meat Republic,* historian Joshua Specht serves up meat-and-potatoes themes familiar to historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. The book's "hoof-to-table" approach begins on the Great Plains, where the author details the violent expansion of state power and the subsequent consolidation of the cattle culture into a centralized market. While the "Big Four" meatpackers faced challenges from slaughterhouse workers and butchers, ultimately the packers achieved hegemony by lowering costs to consumers and using low costs as a rationale for their actions. As partaking in a slab of fresh beef became possible for most Americans, it served as an important marker of American identity, and especially of whiteness and masculinity.

Red Meat Republic is not the first work to take a sweeping view of the beef industry in this period. But as Specht employs a wide-angle view across the spaces of production and consumption, he also zooms in on a host of conflicts through which the system of decentralized cattle ranching and centralized food processing took root. By so doing, Specht seeks to demonstrate that the structural transformations in the beef industry were not foreordained or inevitable, but the result of human decisions rather than the actions of the market.

This book broadens and deepens the existing literature on history of the beef industry, employing a similar commodity-chain analysis as William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis* but incorporating newer scholarship from Native American history, the history of capitalism, the history of animals, and the histories of food and consumerism.[1] Specht especially does more to recognize and emphasize the violence that ranchers inflicted upon native peoples, and the state power that fostered the expansion of the cattle culture on the Great Plains. The federal government did not simply back ranchers through its military campaigns of conquest but continued to sustain ranchers' expropriation of native lands in subsequent generations. Federal Indian agents welcomed leasing agreements on reservation lands, and provided a market for ranchers to sell second-rate cattle used as meat. Ranchers benefitted from a legal system that recognized their accusations that natives confiscated livestock, even when such depredations were political acts, not criminal ones.

Taking a page from recent works in the history of capitalism, the author traces the international capital that invested in western ranches. From 1879 to 1890, British investment firms saw ranching as a promising investment venture, purchasing cattle from smaller firms and seeking to control access to land to boost profits. Although the

foreign investment boom in cattle ranching was short-lived, Specht argues that its cultural importance was long-lasting. Historians have traced small-scale ranchers' acts of resistance—such as cutting wire fencing to allow cattle to access to water or rangeland. While such conflicts were tamped down relatively quickly as the state sided with large corporate ranchers, small-scale ranchers' long-rooted complaints helped create the myth of the cowboy who prized independence and the open range.

Specht's analysis of the range, grounded in close examination of ranching companies' business records, provides a deeper analysis of how ranching companies translated investors' desire for profits to Great Plains realities. The vast number of cattle and land involved made it impossible to closely monitor births, deaths, or depredations, or to determine whose animal was whose. Hence, investors' main metric of success—an increase in herd size—often bore little basis in fact. Such imprecisions in actual numbers of cattle, Specht asserts, make it difficult to substantiate the claim that an overstocked range led to ecological collapse by the late 1880s. The book also traces the unenviable position of ranch managers responsible both for bearing the risks of ranching and for reporting the bad news of low cattle prices to investors. By assessing how "the logic of capital" worked from the perspective of periphery ranching companies rather than from that of railroad magnates or metropolitan slaughterhouses, Specht offers a fresh take.

If *Nature's Metropolis* took a birds-eye view, Specht seeks to humanize the creation and maintenance of the "cattle-beef complex." *Red Meat Republic* brims with a legion of individual characters. He begins his first chapter—on the plains war that cleared land and slaughtered bison—with a poignant and telling image drawn by Kiowa artist Wo-Haw. Readers saddle up with Way Hamlin Updegraff, an upstate New Yorker turned New Mexico cowboy. To open a section on the exploitative labor of the slaughterhouse, Specht introduces fourteen-year-old Vincentz Rutkowski, a young man seriously injured by sharp knives and the blistering pace of the tallow-trimming floor at Swift and Company. Specht gives voice to the impact of dressed beef by quoting the congressional testimony of butchers like Warren Buckmaster and Mathias Schwabe. Such cases underscore the author's storytelling and research skill alike: to expand beyond well-documented individuals like Philip Danforth Armour or Gustavus Swift required scouring sources like case law and diaries with care.

Although the book benefits by punctuating the wide-view approach to the cattle-beef complex with individual stories, the author faces a big challenge in modulating across scale. Readers aren't always moored enough in context to assess the individual examples in light of the larger mosaic to which their lives contributed. Many vignettes prompted further questions about the individuals and the research process. What prompted Susan and Samuel Newcomb to commit to the life on the Texas range in the 1860s? Were they uniquely committed to the cattle-beef complex or was their dedication to ranching despite the economic uncertainty, social isolation, and exposure to violence typical of Anglos in the region? Of all the Indian Wars to which ranchers contributed material and political support, why focus on the Red River War, specifically? A reader can puzzle together reasonable explanations of the methods and authorial choices, but more overt gestures toward intent and context would allow readers to assess these vivid examples more fully.

Red Meat Republic integrates fields of history as seamlessly as the cattle-beef complex incorporated space, ably capturing its political, cultural, and economic dimensions. Were social and political critics to treat beef as comprehensively and thoughtfully as

Joshua Specht, they might begin to forge a path to a more just, sustainable, and equitable food system.

Note

1 William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991).