

Horses in Society: A Story of Animal Breeding and Marketing Culture, 1800–1920. By Margaret E. Derry. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. xvii + 302 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$60.00. ISBN: 0-802-09112-1.

Reviewed by Warren M. Elofson

Margaret E. Derry's *Horses in Society* is a remarkably interesting read. Derry sets out to convince us of something that on the surface looks anything but ambitious—simply that the world of the working horse over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was an extremely complex one. However, this central theme allows her to introduce numerous subthemes illustrating that the breeding and marketing of high-bred horses, particularly in Great Britain, the United States, and Canada, were inextricably entwined not just with physical or tangible needs in the three societies but also with a number of deeply rooted cultural values (or prejudices). Thus, for instance, in both Canada and Great Britain the popular Clyde–Shire crosses of early years gave way to the Clydes and Shires from which they were derived, primarily because the American market showed a less than completely rational predilection for purebred steeds with documented pedigrees. This same preference helped to ensure that “type,” rather than mere “quality,” was instrumental in the determination not just of the Clyde and Shire breeds but also of the Percherons in France. It dictated as well that pure breeding developed in order to accommodate the Americans’ craving for the heavier horses rather than to supply the needs of farmers in the animals’ home countries, where the lighter, general-purpose animals were actually being utilized in much greater numbers.

Some of the other, more important, conclusions Derry draws are that the heavier horses were sought after for use in industries such as lumber, mining, construction, and railways, rather than for use in agriculture; that shifting technology and the need to interact with and respond to it added complexity to horse breeding; and that the needs of war in Great Britain affected the horse industry internationally, exerting the greatest impact in North America. Producers bred in response to peacetime needs, and when war came many could not supply the types of horses that were required as remounts. There were alarming shortages at these times of great urgency, and yet many farmers had a

surplus of horses that the war purchasers could not take. Derry provides eminently interesting information about the fraudulent practices of horse traders in claiming pedigrees and in hiding “unsound” qualities in their merchandise. She also underlines the importance of the horse business in Great Britain, Canada, and the United States in the development of veterinary medicine. “Horses and their diseases, as well as ‘soundness’ problems, had always been central to the welfare of veterinary affairs and, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, played an even more critical role in the development of the modern veterinary profession, in the study of comparative pathology, and in the understanding of immunity generally” (p. 239).

Derry manages to bring home such arguments with considerable success. She also tells us a good deal about the rise and proliferation of the Arabian breed in North America. Her writing is for the most part easy to follow, though it tends to be somewhat repetitive in places. Although her terms are on the whole clear, she does not spell out exactly what she means by “type,” “quality,” and “soundness,” words that are, after all, crucial to understanding her substantive points. The title of the book is a bit misleading, in that the central argument applies to the turn of the twentieth century rather than to the earlier period, although, admittedly, Derry does provide a most interesting explanation of the origin and development of the purebred business from the eighteenth century on. Some readers will be intrigued and, I suppose, somewhat shocked, to learn how ideas about what constituted particular breeds were established in individual cultures. Strains such as Shire and Clyde were, to a significant degree, the product of the human imagination based on pragmatic or aesthetic considerations, rather than on careful documentation of pure bloodlines descending out of the distant past.

In the final analysis, then, this is a useful and enlightening work for anyone interested in horses and/or in the societies that selected and produced them during war and peace and in a period of rapid industrialization. It unquestionably achieves the author’s stated purpose to demystify the horse business at a time when it was still vital to agriculture, industry, urban life, and the military and to show that it can help us understand other, larger issues. I applaud Dr. Derry for utilizing her expertise as both a successful livestock breeder and a historian of animal husbandry and science to bring prominence to a subject that most of us know far too little about. While the cattle and

sheep industries in Great Britain, Canada, and the United States have been extensively studied, little hard-nosed historical research has been allotted to horses and to the equine business generally. This is a ground-breaking work that will resonate with social, business, and military historians alike.

Warren M. Elofson is professor and head of history at the University of Calgary. He is author of Cowboys, Gentlemen and Cattle Thieves: Ranching on the Western Frontier (2000) and Frontier Cattle Ranching in the Land and Times of Charlie Russell (2004). At present he is working on a history of the Walrond Cattle Ranch in the foothills of southern Alberta.