



Cattle in the Backlands: Mato Grosso and the Evolution of Ranching in the Brazilian Tropics

Robert W. Wilcox

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Brazil has the second-largest cattle herd in the world and is a major exporter of beef. While ranching in the Amazon—and its destructive environmental consequences—receives attention from both the media and scholars, the states of Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul actually host the most cattle. A significant beef producer in Brazil beginning in the late nineteenth century, the region served as a laboratory for raising cattle in the tropics, where temperate zone ranching practices do not work. Mato Grosso ranchers and cowboys transformed ranching's relationship with the environment, including the introduction of an exotic cattle breed—the Zebu—that now dominates Latin American tropical ranching.

Cattle in the Backlands presents a comprehensive history of ranching in Mato Grosso. Using extensive primary sources, Robert W. Wilcox explores three key aspects: the economic transformation of a remote frontier region through modern technical inputs; the resulting social changes, especially in labor structures and land tenure; and environmental factors, including the long-term impact of ranching on ecosystems, which, he contends, was not as detrimental as might be assumed. Wilcox demonstrates that ranching practices in Mato Grosso set the parameters for tropical beef production in Brazil and throughout Latin America. As the region was incorporated into national and international economic structures, its ranching industry experienced the entry of foreign investment, the introduction of capitalized processing facilities, and nascent discussions of ecological impacts—developments that later affected many sectors of the Brazilian economy.

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