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A Wilder West: Rodeo in Western Canada by Mary-Ellen Kelm
(review)

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A Wilder West: Rodeo in Western Canada.

By Mary-Ellen Kelm. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011. xii + 296 pp. Maps, photographs, tables, glossary, notes, index. \$94.00 cloth, \$26.95 paper.

This meticulously researched book tells much. Written authoritatively but engagingly, the narrative delves deeply into a little-studied and less-understood aspect of western American history. Focusing on small towns, communities, and First Nations reserves in British Columbia and Alberta, Mary-Ellen Kelm tells the story of rodeo in western Canada from its beginnings as informal bucking contests, through its halcyon years as a leading festive event in many small towns and communities, to its organization as a professional sport. But Kelm does much more, and it is her perceptive observations about the sport of rodeo on other levels and her integration of Aboriginals into her narrative that make this book so valuable historically.

Kelm recognizes rodeo for its significance in keeping alive the spirit of the ranching frontier by ritualizing the conquest of Nature. She further agrees that rodeo reinforced the values of the new West by advertising the triumph of settlement. She follows familiar lines when she stresses gender bias and masculinity in the rodeo cowboy, and discusses how professional rodeo organizations have used the rodeo performer to craft an acceptable, modern, and somewhat sanitized image of the cowboy.

These, however, are not major themes. Instead, Kelm concentrates on showing how rodeos were cultural performances that helped build communities economically and socially. By celebrating the past through rodeos, small towns legitimized their own social memories. In short, Kelm contends that small communities came to define themselves by the

values they believed were inherent in rodeos. With respect to Aboriginals, Kelm sees rodeos as sites of contested meaning. She brings out the ambivalent attitudes held in small towns toward Aboriginals by showing that while they were mistrusted and shunned, they were also seen as necessary to add color to the parades and pageants that often accompanied rodeos.

Kelm tries to give added meaning to rodeo by referring to it as a contact zone. She implies that the range and type of encounters afforded by rodeo provide an interpretive window into relationship formation. While I do not think she articulates this concept meaningfully enough, she does use it successfully to demonstrate how Aboriginals were able, at least in the early years, to achieve a level of acceptance and comradeship in the rodeo contact zone. The increasing integration of Aboriginals in rodeo competitions and related activities presented a positive dimension to traditional Indian-white dichotomies. Later in the narrative, Kelm argues that the professionalization of rodeo has fragmented this contact zone by making it difficult for Aboriginals to compete, forcing them away from the mainstream to the realm of Indian rodeos.

A Wilder West is a fine book, and given that rodeo is a true hemispheric sport, it should have wide appeal to readers of *Great Plains Quarterly*. Indeed, it would be interesting to see if Kelm's assertions about Aboriginals and rodeo hold as true for small-town Montana and Washington State as they do for British Columbia and Alberta.

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