

"Round spun the herd in a great black wheel": Isabella Valancy Crawford's Cowboy Poem

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Isabella Valancy Crawford, whose poetry we've sampled in the Bulletin from time to time, was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1850. Her family was "educated and cultured" (Ross 145), but her father, a doctor, was an unsuccessful and apparently dishonest alcoholic. He died when Isabella was 25, and the daughter became her mother's sole support. Given the position of women in the work world of those days, that was a significant burden. Although she is known for her extremely artsy poetry, she kept her mother and herself alive (though perhaps not comfortable) with her prose, mostly fiction, which she sold to newspapers and magazines, most of them south of the border. She was, then, a commercial writer.

That's worth remembering when you read that she invested what must have been a dangerous portion of her income on her one book of poetry, *Old Spookses' Pass*, *Malcolm's Katie*, and other poems in 1884. She had 1000 copies printed, but sold less than 20. Very little of her prose is currently in print; I suppose the same might be said of her poetry, but there are a handful of short poems ("The Lily Bed," "Said the Canoe," and "The Dark Stag" come to mind) which seem likely to remain in anthologies for a while. Aside from these items, Crawford is best known for the long poem, "Malcolm's Katie," a strange romance set in homesteading Ontario. A similar (perhaps even more peculiar) poem, which exists only in fragment, "Hugh and Ion," has also received some attention. Both of these, with their complex views of identity and gender, have definitely tickled the fancy of post-modernist and feminist readers, though some find their baroque excesses simply clumsy, evidence of the sort of 19th century poetastering that modernists rejected decades ago. At a Crawford symposium in 1977, Louis Dudek annoyed many scholars and fans by calling Crawford a "failed poet" (124).

Given Crawford's predilection for flowery language, exotic locales, bizarre narratives, and mixed metaphor, "Old Spookses'



Isabella Valancy Crawford

drawing by Daphne Rackstraw

Pass" seems an odd item in her collection. It has in fact not been reprinted (and probably won't be),¹ and the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* says only this about it: "...a dialect poem, set in the Rocky Mountains, concerning a dream vision of a midnight cattle stampede toward a black abyss that is stilled by a whirling lariat..." (146).² Syntax aside (and I'm not sure I read the stampede as a dream), I think we may consider this a dismissal. None of my scanning of the academic literature has turned up any more discussion of the poem. Why did Crawford give it top billing in her lone book? It obviously wasn't to create alphabetical order; perhaps she thought this item might

sell the book? *Or perhaps she even liked it?*

The term "dialect poem" is probably enough to condemn a work these days. Yes, sometimes Crawford's use of dialect in "Spookses" seems to be a bad joke ("leettle crick," "fur argy-fyin"—the worst is probably "har an' thar" for "here and there"!), but sometimes she can reproduce western dialect fairly accurately (though there's no way of knowing where she got it—as likely from dime novels and the Toronto stage as from her own ear). Even now, it is virtually impossible to present cowboys without some sort of hokey dialect; take a look at a Calgary newspaper during rodeo week, if you doubt me. Dialect literature was, of course, more highly regarded in Crawford's day than in ours—though perhaps if we included electronic and film media in our discussion, we'd have to admit that though we are uneasy with reading dialect (both because it can be a difficult read and because racist/hegemonic overtones are less easily avoided in a visual format), our century loves peculiar speech (and the prejudices it reveals) as much as did Crawford's. Given her predilection for poetic devices like enjambment and imagery, as well as some of her content, and, above all, the fact that she certainly never witnessed any of this, it's surprising how well she does evoke this world and her narrator's situation.

"Old Spookses' Pass" consists of 53 eight-line stanzas, each line of four beats, rhymed ababcdcd: were the stanzas not clearly demarcated, one might even read it as 106 ballad stanzas. By contrast, "Little Joe, the Wrangler," (also about a stampede) as printed by John Lomax, also has its quatrains connected into octaves, though Lomax's tune does not contain the chorus which some singers add to the basic "Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" melody. "The Walker of the Snow" appeared as quatrains in one source, but its lines are only two beats long, so one might make each couplet one line, connect the new quatrains thus created and end up with eight stanzas instead of 16, as Billie Maxwell did in her recorded version of the song.

Verses I-VI of "Spookses'" set the scene: three cowboys are travelling through the mountains with a herd that is really too large for them to manage. One of them, the narrator, briefly characterizes the other two, but Possum Billy and Tom are in camp, and the narrator is night herding. His companions sleep through all of the action.

In verses VII-XIX, the narrator fantasizes as he guards the cattle, spinning out his transcendental religious philosophy, which is vaguely Buddhist or Atmanic/Karmic. He believes that that even the worst humans can work their way to God and does not believe in punishment for sin. However, he acknowledges that he is in fact a sinner.

The action begins in XXI-XL. The cows are spooked and stampede. The narrator spends 11 verses trying to stop them as they approach a 300 foot-deep gulch, with his hopes diminishing, when...

In XLI-LIII ... an invisible cowboy shoots by, swinging his rope and forcing the herd to turn and mill and calm themselves. This newcomer won't identify himself in the darkness, but the two cowboys sing "Betsy Lee" together, and when all is safe, the narrator hears the invisible cowboy ride off.³ The spectral benefactor takes off in fine dramatic style, fairly prefiguring the Lone Ranger's hi-yo exit:

The herd slowed up an' stood in a mass
 Uv blackness lit by the lightnin' eye;
 An' the mustang cowered as *sumthin'* swept
 Clus tew his wet flank in passin' by.
 "Good night tew ye, pard!" "Good night!" sez I,
 Straining my sight on the empty air;
 The har riz rustlin' up on my head,
 Now thet I hed the time tew scare.

The mustang flinched till his saddle girth
 Scraped on the dust uv the tremblin' ground;—
 Thar cum a laugh, the crack uv a whip,
 A whine like the cry uv a well-pleased hound,
 The noise uv a hoss thet reared an' sprang
 At the touch uv a spur—them all wus still
 But the sound uv the thunder dyin' down
 On the stony breast uv the highest hill.

In the final verse, the narrator declares that he'll never forget this experience. I guess not.



Just as popular culture workers tend to prefer obviously dramatic situations (*i.e.*, shootemups), over other human interactions, so academic workers notoriously gravitate to cultural items *about which there is a lot to say*, preferably obscure enough that each writer can be the first to say it. Thus it's a truism that Robert Herrick, A.E. Housman, and Alden Nowlen have small roles in the academic literary industry, unlike James Joyce (who notoriously *threw stuff in* for the professors) or T.S. Eliot (who once primed the pump with his own footnotes, some of which he later declared to be red herrings). Publish or perish! "Old Spookses' Pass" hasn't garnered the attention of "Malcolm's Katie," in part because it can't generate the same amount of verbiage. A poem as strange as the latter can produce a lot of articles, some of them worth reading.

None of this is necessarily bad, except that most people only encounter poetry in school and may not have the chance to discover there certain species and examples of literature which might be valuable to them. And, to tell you the truth, I'm not sure that it's a good idea to teach members of a supposedly educated society that literature should be valued to the degree to which *they* don't get it. At any rate, "Spookses'" is not as devoid of interest as it might seem. For one thing, let's consider Crawford's treatment of the stampede.

Most cowboy fiction, film, song (at least since the turn of the previous century), and poetry has followed the lead of Owen Wister's novel, *The Virginian*, leaving the cows out of the story. Of course, for human beings, *drama* is generally going to be the action of people; besides, most western fiction is in fact encomium (if not apologia) for an imagined tradition, and most tellers of these tales would just as soon leave out what Jane Tompkins has called the "river of blood," the cruelty upon which the cowboy adventure (*industry!*) was predicated.⁴

The most dramatic of the events cowboys really faced was the stampede; it was also the most dangerous and tedious. As you read the descriptions which follow, consider the time involved, and the likelihood that the rider is working on an inadequate amount of sleep and has no opportunity for a piss break, let alone coffee. It's easy to understand why filmmakers have generally avoided this event, given the difficulty of filming it, never mind ideology. Humane considerations aside, cattle are still expensive and as susceptible to damage in a fake stampede as in a real one. The Howard Hawks epic, *Red River*, perhaps the only classic western movie to consider cowboys and ranchers primarily as people who worked with cows, managed to make John Wayne's herd look like it might well contain 10,000 head and included a stampede that was often cinematically convincing—not, unfortunately, from all angles, particularly when it presented Wayne, co-star Montgomery Clift, or the various character actors screaming on horses in front of what was obviously a screen with cattle projected on it.

To understand what was actually involved in this job, viewers or readers need to understand the strategy cowboys would employ during this disaster. Fay E. Ward, who "was active as a cowboy for forty years from Alberta, Canada, to the Mexico border," left a complete account of the industrial activities of

cowboys, including detailed explanations of what was involved in herding generally and during stampedes. Although Crawford's use of dialect may seem the Victorian equivalent of the spaghetti western, her account of the job of turning a stampede is supported by Ward.

The way to stop a stampeding herd is to circle 'em and try to throw the leaders back into the drags. For example, if the rider on the right-hand side of the running herd is closer to the leaders than the rider on the left side, the rider on the left side should fall back and let the riders on the right side bend the leaders to the left. If the riders on one side don't fall back and let the other riders on the opposite side bend the leaders, the cattle will be laned and will run straight ahead and will not stop until they are exhausted.

Such an uncontrolled run would require the cowboys to work longer and take more risks. It also means the cows themselves would be endangered, and even if they were not lost, injured, or killed in the stampede, their fat would be worn off, the meat rendered less valuable.

Again, cowboys are and were industrial workers; horses might be considered co-workers (though "tools" might be more accurate—Tompkins also writes a chapter on the role of horses in the western), but cattle are definitely *product*. Cowboy poets and painters are sometimes sentimental about the relationship between cowboys and cows, especially calves during blizzards; however, a cowboy bringing in a dogie is not performing an act of kindness, but protecting an investment.

The rider in the lead generally uses his slicker, or rope, to turn the leaders, waving it over his head or whipping them over the head with it. Sometimes a rider fires his six-shooter down beside the heads of the leaders and that is often effective in making the cattle turn. The riders behind the point man should fall in close behind him and crowd in alongside the cattle to help circle them. When the leaders have been bent back into the herd, the herd will be thrown into a mill and it will take some time to get 'em simmered down. The riders spread out in order to give 'em plenty of room to widen out and rest. (28-29)⁵

Compare Crawford:

'Twas kind of scareful tew watch the herd,
Es the plungin' leaders squirm'd an' shrank—
Es I heerd the flick of the unseen lash
Hiss on the side of a steamin' flank.
Guess the feller was smart at the work!
We work'd them leaders round, ontill
They overtook the tail of the herd,
An' the hull of the crowd begun tew "mill."

Round spun the herd in a great black wheel,
Slower an' slower—ye've seen beneath
A biggish torrent a whirlpool spin,

Its waters black es the face uv Death?
'Peared sort uv like thet, the "millin'" herd.
We kept by the leaders—*him* an' me—
Neck by neck, an' he sung a tune
About a young gal named Betsey Lee.

Jine in the chorus? Wal, yas, I did.
He sung like a reg'lar mockin'-bird,
An' us cowboys allus sing out tew calm
The scare, ef we can, uv a runnin' herd.
Slower an' slower wheeled round the "mill";
The maddest old steer uv a leader slowed;
Slower and slower sounded the hoofs
Uv the hoss that *him* in frunt uv me rode.

Fainter an' fainter growed that thar song
Uv Betsey Lee an' her har uv gold;
Fainter an' fainter grew the sound
Uv the unseen hoofs on the tore-up mould.
The leadin' steer, thet cuss uv a Joe,
Stopped an' shook off the foam an' the sweat,
With a stamp an' a beller; the run wus done—
Wus glad uv it tew, yer free tew bet!

Of course, not all writers have avoided the workaday cowboy world.⁶ Andy Adams, a cowboy who wrote his own novel about the traildriving days, *The Log of a Cowboy*, presented a harrowing account of a stampede that began when a night-herder's horse fell in a prairie dog hole. (Cattle could be spooked by lightning, by strange noises, and a variety of other unusual events. Some veteran cowboys claimed that the custom of singing on night herd was either to mask untoward sounds or to reassure the cattle of the herder's presence. Not all such veterans agree about the purpose or efficacy, and, not surprisingly, there has been a great deal of humor about the quality of such singing!)⁷

The coworkers of Adams's narrator do not agree with Ward that the best method to deal with a stampede is to force the cattle into a circle. "Running is not a natural gait with cattle, and if we could only hold them together and prevent splitting up, in time they would tire..." (43). Against the judgement of the hands, Adams's foreman insists that they attempt to turn the herd. "A dozen men, however, can cover but a small space, and we soon realized that we had turned only a few hundred head, for the momentum of the main body bore steadily ahead" (44).

The cowboys twice try unsuccessfully to turn the cattle, riding on the leaders and firing their pistols; on the third attempt, "Suddenly in the dark we encountered a mesquite thicket into which the lead cattle tore with a crashing of brush and a rattle of horns that sent a chill up and down my spine. But there was no time to hesitate, for our horses were in the thicket, and with the herd closing in on us there was no alternative but to go through it, every man for himself" (45). The narrator lets go of his reins and unheroically holds onto the pommel and cantle of his saddle as they race through the vicious thicket. The mesquite serves more to scatter the cattle than to slow them down, so the punchers' work is still incomplete. The narrator has also lost

contact with all but one of his co-workers. These two men circle a portion of the herd (for which the narrator finds swinging his raincoat more useful than shooting his pistol), and while the cattle mill, they have time for a brief conversation: "I've worn leggins for the last ten years," said Stallings to me, as we took an inventory of our disfigurements, 'and for about ten seconds in forcing that mesquite thicket was the only time I ever drew interest on my investment. They're a heap like a six-shooter—wear them all your life and never have any use for them'" (48).

Adams is of course being somewhat disingenuous here; his novel has its share of gunplay, and we've already seen his punchers firing their pistols to try to turn the herd. Nevertheless, the point is well made. (The capitalist metaphor is also worth noting. Although the cowboy may be imagined to be "close to nature," I've already noted that his very existence is due to his role in the industrial world.)

These two cowboys eventually connect with their fellows and the rest of the herd and return to camp at two o'clock in the afternoon, 12-13 hours after the event had begun. The final pair of punchers they locate "...cursed me roundly for not bringing them a canteen of water, though they were well aware that in an emergency like the present, the foreman would never give a thought to anything but the recovery of the herd. Our comfort was nothing; men were cheap, but cattle cost money" (52).

James Emmitt McCauley offered a nonfiction account of a stampede in a couple of paragraphs of a short memoir; his account may be terse, but he can be evocative.⁸ He was night-herding, when it began to rain about 9:00 in the evening:

The thunder began to roar. And all at once the steers got on their feet and in less time than it takes to tell it they was gone. The night was as dark as ink, only for the lightning. My horse was on his job, so he stayed with the cattle. Then I realized that the much talked of stampeding herd of longhorn steers was now a reality. Every time it would lighten [*sic*] and a loud clap of thunder follow they would change their course, and in a short time I found the herd had split or divided, but into how many bunches I didn't know. (5-6)

He managed to hold 300 head together but knew there were more steers scattered across the prairie. After the rain had passed, he made the mistake of shooting his pistol, to see if he could attract any fellow punchers. "Now I had more trouble than if I had a let things alone. After chasing them for an hour, I guess, I got them stopped, but I didn't shoot any more." He was not relieved until 10:00 the next morning. "I was so hungry and tired I didn't know what to do" (6). McCauley was 16 years old at the time. Like Crawford's cowboy he was all alone; he would certainly have appreciated a spectral assistant.

Folklore and popular culture are full of such ghostly visitors, notably the Mexican *La Llorona* and the ubiquitous *Vanishing Hitchhiker*, which express a variety of concerns, from guilt to the belief that the dead maintain an attachment to the earth or their loved ones. Literary types know of the ambiguous figure from T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land"—

Who is that third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you.

—as well as from his Biblical and historical sources. "The Waste Land" was written after Crawford's time, of course, but she knew her Bible, and the portion of St. Luke (24:13-31) Eliot cites as a reference to this episode relates Jesus' appearance, unrecognized, before a few of his disciples shortly after his resurrection. Towards the end of this appearance, Jesus offers them a benediction, but first he tests their firmness with questioning, and it is only after he vanishes that they recognize who has been among them. Eliot links this ambiguity to the mirage companion perceived by an Antarctic explorer—"The Waste Land" is, after all, a poem about religious doubt. Fundamentalists (who don't cotton to doubt) perhaps used Luke as the source for a parable of someone at the end of life, to whom Jesus points out their footprints, side by side through the sands of life, showing that Jesus was always present. But the deceased notices where there is only one set of prints. "That's where I carried you."

Not all spectral visitors are helpful, however. The cowboy song canon offers "The Walker of the Snow," for instance, which was reprinted in facsimile from an unnamed source in the local history from Crossfield, Alberta. (Wilf Carter country!) The reason for the poem's presence was not given, though it may have been used for recitations at local affairs and someone on the history book committee had a fondness for it. The facsimile credited it to Charles Dawson Shanley, who does not appear in the Library of Congress catalogue. (Does anyone know more about him or the poem?) The Shadow-hunter is a vampire, and of course vampires and wendigos were popular figures in both the centuries we've just completed, probably because we have so many—not at all *undead*, I'm afraid—in our society.

But Crawford's invisible puncher is a saviour—a physical saviour, not a spiritual one, perhaps, but a saviour nonetheless. The narrator does not identify him with Jesus, but like Jesus, he seems to offer his temporal support in earnest of the spiritual mercy which he promises on the larger scale.

We've got to labor an' strain an' snort
Along thet road the He's planned an' made;
Don't matter a mite He's cut His line
Tew run over a 'tarnal tough up-grade;
An' if some poor sinner ain't built tew hold
Es big a head of steam es the next,
An' keeps slippin' an' slidin' 'way down hill,
Why, He don't make out thet He's awful vex'd.

Fur He knows He made him thet thar way,
Sumwhars tew fit in His own great plan;
An' He ain't the Bein' tew pour His wrath
On the head of thet slimsy an' slippery man,
An' He says tew the feller, "Look here, my son,
You're the worst hard case that ever I see.
But be thet it takes ye a million y'ars,
Ye never can stop till ye git tew ME!"

because it treats the cowboy as a real person, a man with a job, a human capable of questioning the universe in which he finds himself, as well as the religious and social prejudices of his society. Who knows? It might even stretch some buckaroo synapses to good effect.

Whatever role Isabella Valancy Crawford may be awarded

¹ But it can be read on the internet, which I encourage readers to do:

<<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/rp/poems/crawf6c.html>> You might wish to look at other Crawford poems while you're there—"The Helot," perhaps, or "Gisli the Chieftain." Whatever you do, don't fail to dig "The Lily Bed," the powerfully sensual lyric from "Hugh and Ion." Read it to your sweetheart.

² Long poems featuring cowboys are not common, as might be expected. An interesting comparison might be made between Crawford's OSP and *And as I rode out on the morning*, a 60 page poem by Buck Ramsey, a cowboy who spent the last few years of his life in a wheelchair after "... a horse tougher than me ended all that." Ramsey was later widely respected as a cowboy poet and singer. If Crawford is assuming a colloquialism which is not entirely hers in "Spookses'", Ramsey aspires to a surprising level of formality: his adopted for his poem the stanza Aleksandr Pushkin devised for Eugene Onegin. It's worth noting also that country singer Red Steagall tells us on the jacket blurb that he met Ramsey at college. This shouldn't surprise us. Fred Hoepfner reminds us that Carl T. Sprague, who recorded cowboy songs extensively during the 20s and 30s, went to Texas A&M, ultimately doing graduate work. And Harry Stephens, who composed/compiled the lovely "Night-Herding Song," dedicated it on his Library of Congress field recording to "my old college professor," John Lomax.

³ I cannot find such a song title in any of my sources for cowboy songs. The obvious candidate is "Sweet Betsy from Pike," but I don't remember any versions in which her "her har of gold" is featured, or even mentioned. It certainly does have a chorus in which the narrator might have joined in, however.

⁴ Tompkins uses the John Wayne/Montgomery Clift western *Red River* to illustrate many of her comments about the role of cattle in westerns; it's one of the few films in which cattle have any presence at all. Even then, the herd is "... photographed so that we almost never see their faces; as the camera shows them to us, they are a living stream, lowing, cumbersome, potentially dangerous but ultimately docile..." (116). *Red River* may question "... the hero's excess in driving relentlessly

in sophisticated culture, "Old Spookses' Pass" may be considered with the best of popular culture and as such deserves to be read and discussed. Given that Canadians are currently being invited to forsake the ways of compassion, to prefer punishment over rehabilitation and *laissez-faire* over social commitment, its theme is particularly timely.

Notes

toward his goal but never makes the connection between that drive and the drive of cattle.... A river of living beings whose death is the uncounted cost of success.... *Red River* ends with the prospect of a gigantic river of blood, but that river is kept off-screen because it has no place in the consciousness of filmmakers or of the society they cater to" (117). "...[T]o recognize the suffering of animals would be to undermine the terms in which heroism is conceived. For if deliberately inflicting pain on sentient beings reflects a callous, unmerciful approach to life, then perhaps the hero's mortification of himself is not so admirable as we've been encouraged to believe" (119).

Crawford, of course, doesn't deal with these insights, but I do want to encourage readers to pursue Tompkins, who's written the most perceptive book on western literature and film I've ever read. (And, by the way, she doesn't let herself, as an academic, off the hook any more than she lets John Wayne off.)

⁵ Teddy Blue Abbott disagreed about the value of gunplay in these circumstances. "I have read stories telling how, in trying to turn a herd during a night run, the cowboys would shoot their six-shooters in front of the cattle. That is like a cowboy with a gun on each hip; it is all fiction; it would only make them run harder..." (198).

⁶ Two of the most famous cowboy songs deal with young hands killed during stampedes: Jack Thorp's "Little Joe, the Wrangler" and D.J. O'Malley's "When The Work's All Done This Fall."

⁷ Teddy Blue offered yet another reason and strategy for the use of singing. After a dreadful stampede incident, when one of their fellows was discovered to have been underneath the herd as they milled, Abbott's companions instituted the custom of singing during nightherding and stampede turning, so that they know who was on duty. If you could not hear your partner's voice, "... you stopped trying to mill them, and let them run in a straight direction to get away from him" (198).

⁸ McCauley wrote his own autobiography later in life, using a pencil and paper, not necessarily expecting to be published. It's not surprising that he didn't waste words.

Sources

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