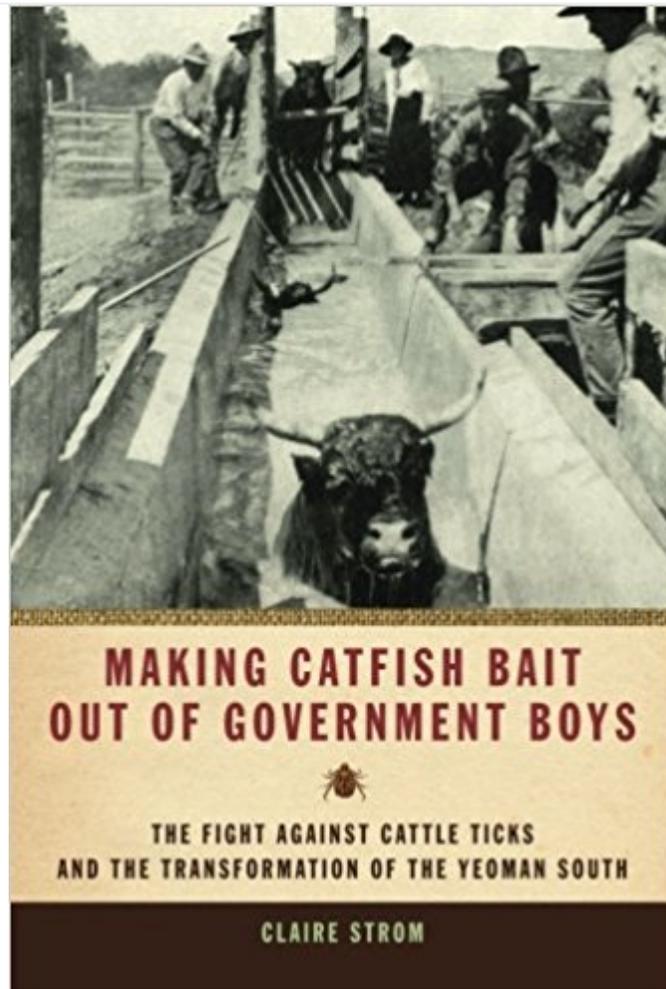


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Making Catfish Bait Out of Government Boys: The Fight Against Cattle Ticks and the Transformation of the Yeoman South



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Reviewed Work(s)

Making Catfish Bait Out of Government Boys: The Fight Against Cattle Ticks and the Transformation of the Yeoman South. By Claire Strom (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009). Pp. xxii + 297. Cloth, \$44.95. Paper, \$24.95.

Beginning in 1906, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), under the charge of its Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI), launched what was to become the highly controversial cattle tick eradication program in the American South. Seeking to eliminate Texas fever or *babesiosis* caused by a protozoa carried by cattle ticks, the BAI initially embarked upon a voluntary program. When few localities responded, however, and as it became clear to agricultural officials that fighting ticks would require a more coherent and sweeping course of action, the BAI began working with state governments to force a mandatory program by law.

Widespread opposition from small-scale yeoman farmers ensued, culminating with episodes of defiance such as dynamiting dipping vats, harassment of agricultural officials, and even several murders. Historian Claire Strom, in *Making Catfish Bait Out of Government Boys: The Fight Against Cattle Ticks and the Transformation of the Yeoman South*, provides the first book on this long-overlooked yet fascinating topic.

Strom's well-written account is a tale of increased federal intervention into southern societies and economies during the early-twentieth century. "Ultimately," she writes, "the story of tick eradication is one that epitomizes the rise of the administrative state in the U.S., the centralization of authority in the federal government, and the loss of grassroots power by the few remaining outlying bastions of southern yeomen" (5). In this era of unshakeable faith in science and experts, government officials and agricultural scientists were certain that they could end this destructive environmental phenomenon and contribute to the progress of southern agriculture. But this effort, which officially lasted until 1944 (although struggles against tick fever persist in places along the Rio Grande today), like a number of other progressive reforms,

often came at a high cost to small farm communities and undermined traditional conceptions of local democracy.

Strom focuses heavily upon tick eradication in Georgia while broadly exploring the program in other southern states (the USDA's quarantine line and the area targeted for eradication roughly followed the line of the old Confederacy and included southern California). She explains that class largely determined how southern farmers responded to mandatory tick eradication, which typically required dipping all cattle in an arsenic solution at central locations every two weeks. While black and white tenant farmers who rarely owned cattle were mostly absent from the debate, large commercial farmers and small yeomen disagreed on the merits of the program. More well-to-do cattle farmers—often plantation elites seeking to diversify in the face of King Cotton's boll weevil troubles—usually came to support and often promoted tick eradication. As Strom notes, wealthier cattlemen attempting to compete with northern and western ranchers in the national beef market were the hardest hit by the South's tick problem; their imported pure-bred cattle were most vulnerable to the deadly and contagious tick fever. For yeomen, however, "tick eradication represented the interference of outside, seemingly arbitrary, and certainly dictatorial forces in the lives of these highly independent people" (55).

Strom emphasizes how federal tick eradication ran counter to yeoman farmers' traditional Jeffersonian political ideals. Furthermore, yeomen's native "scrub" breeds, having developed a degree of immunity to the disease, were rarely affected by tick fever. Seeing no apparent benefits from the program, then, yeomen resented paying dipping taxes and rounding their cattle up for mandatory tick eradication. "Part of yeoman resistance," writes Strom, "was bound up in the environment" (55). In the mountains, piney woods, and marshes where yeoman opposition was strongest, rounding up free-range cattle on such difficult landscapes proved "nearly impossible" (56).

Illuminating the hardships of tick eradication does much for understanding small farmers' resistance to the program, but Strom's insistence that a traditional yeoman culture and economy, characterized by independence and self-sufficiency, lay at the root of their opposition runs the risk of oversimplification. She holds that yeomen raised cattle only for subsistence purposes or local trade and had no stake in the

national cattle market. “Yeomen...embraced a different way of life from the rest of the nation” and despised tick laws that represented an intrusion of New South commercialism, she argues (3). Importantly, Strom overlooks the fact that yeomen relied upon cattle raising as a valuable source of cash income, even in more isolated mountain and swamp communities. Despite the fact that small farmers often sold cattle locally (usually to drovers who then brought them to railroads for shipment to northern or midwestern slaughterhouses), the trends of national markets still touched their lives. Nevertheless, Strom’s account of this largely forgotten story of federal agricultural policy and its reception by southern farmers is a welcome contribution to southern, agricultural, and Progressive Era history.

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