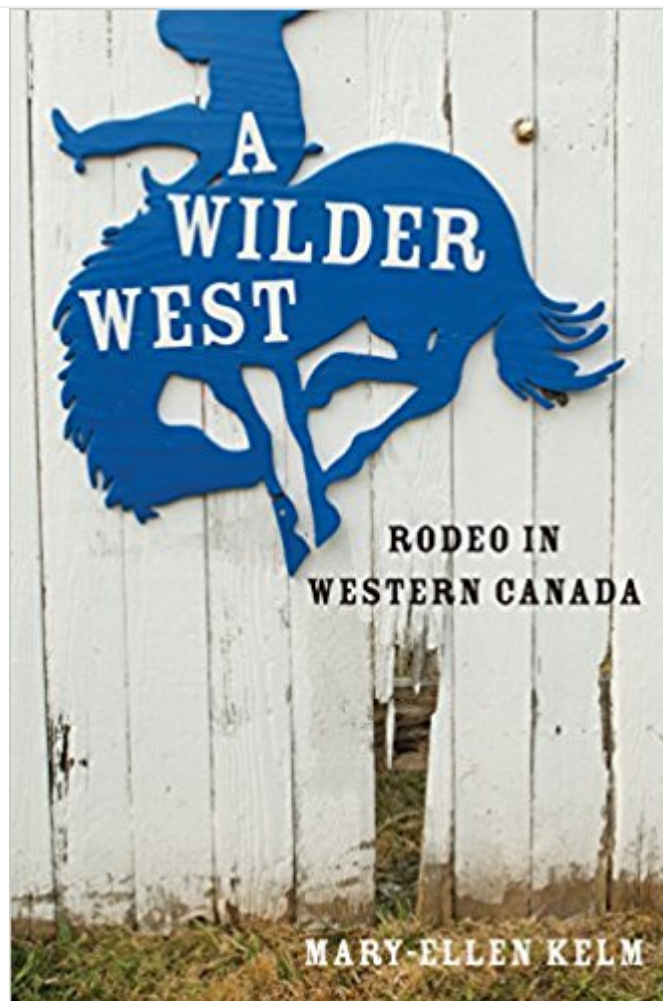


# {essays in history}

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## A Wilder West: Rodeo in Western Canada



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## Reviewed Work(s)

*A Wilder West: Rodeo in Western Canada*. By Mary-Ellen Kelm (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011). Pp 312. Cloth, \$85.00.

This past November, the Canadian Western Agribition, an agricultural market and rodeo held annually in Regina, Saskatchewan, announced that it would feature high school students in some of the rodeo events. Students were elated to learn that they would be given the opportunity to compete on such a large platform. The announcement is significant because it affirms that rodeo is still an immensely important part of Western Canadian culture, especially amongst its youth. For them, rodeo is a part of their heritage that they will be slow to relinquish.

While scholars have written about rodeo intermittently over the last few decades, Mary-Ellen Kelm is the first to provide a comprehensive history of rodeo in Western Canada in *A Wilder West: Rodeo in Western Canada*. Her primary motivation is to counter the longstanding notion that rodeos are just a form of white male dominance over Aboriginals, women, and animals. While this is one invariable aspect of the event, she finds considerable evidence that the expression of rodeos in Western Canada was a complex intermingling of settler and Aboriginal culture that was far from a static narrative of conquest. The Aboriginals of Western Canada also appropriated rodeo and adapted it to make it a part of their culture.

Borrowing from Mary Louise Pratt, Kelm utilizes the concept of the “contact zone” which is defined as the spatial and temporal area where previously separated subjects, in this case settlers and Aboriginals, intersect. The rodeo operated as a contact zone, allowing settlers and Aboriginals to exchange culture, ideas, and identity. Within this zone, towns and communities underwent changes, as did intangible identifiers such as masculinity and femininity. By using rodeo as the central contact zone, Kelm provides a very interesting and nuanced way of examining settler and Aboriginal relations in Western Canada. She argues “the history of rodeo on reserves and in small towns and rural communities offers stories and images that help us move beyond bland dichotomies,

to see ‘us’ and ‘them’ as the very icons of denial in a world that is always already more complicated than that” (235).

The book begins with an examination of the development of Western Canada’s early rodeos. She makes it clear early on that the rodeo was not simply another form of cultural conquest over Aboriginal, Métis and mixed-heritage peoples. She finds evidence that Aboriginals were wilful participants and that their motivations ranged from financial aims to escaping the surveillance of Indian Affairs agents, while some, such as Mike Mountain Horse, had realized that the high profile nature of rodeos could provide them with an outlet to address grievances with the government. For both settler and Aboriginal participants, success in the rodeo also afforded them the opportunity to attain wealth, fame, and status. While these same benefits were not fully extended to Aboriginal women, the popularity of rodeos in the 1930s and a growing affinity for “traditional” Native handicraft gave them the opportunity to generate income. Moreover, women such as Isabella Miller and Joan Perry obtained notoriety as successful rodeo athletes and in turn created a femininity rooted in rodeo that “combined the hardiness of the rodeo cowboy with a dedication to family that did not soften their image” (158).

Following the Second World War, rodeo began transitioning from a community performance to a legitimate sport. The addition of standardized rules, scoring, and the birth of organizations such as the Cowboys Protective Association (later renamed the Canadian Professional Rodeo Association) effectively made participants athletes and no longer simply “cow-pokes.” However, professionalization also had another significant impact in that it “fragmented the contact zone that was small-town rodeo in Western Canada. As many organizers feared, the increasing costs of competition excluded Aboriginal people from many small-town rodeos” (204). While the doors to professional rodeo were not entirely closed to Aboriginal riders, the transition did provide the impetus for establishing more reserve rodeos that often featured Indian-only athletes. The examination of the reserve events reveals that rodeo did not belong to either “cowboys” or “Indians,” but rather was an essential part of both cultures, as settlers and Aboriginals share a rich, albeit different, history of rodeo.

In the end, Kelm’s book makes an important contribution to Canadian history. She successfully demonstrates that Western Canadian settlers

and Aboriginal peoples did not operate in a static fashion or interact solely along the rigid lines of the colonization narrative. The rodeos brought settlers and Aboriginals together and allowed them to mesh in alternative ways and exchange culture.

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