

THE BAD LANDS by Oakley Hall

The Western frontier of Post-bellum days is a potential gold mine for novelistic inspirations. Its turbulent history contains enough material to have fleshed out dozens of fine movies. Yet a surprisingly small number of first rate novels came out of this same rich dust. "The Ox-Bow Incident," "Shane," Hall's own "Warlock," and a handful of others have succeeded in incorporating the events of that rough era into the demanding framework of the novel. "The Bad Lands" lays legitimate claim to join such a select group.

It is the story of those who came west to a plenitude of open land beyond their wildest expectations, to a range where a man's cattle could roam freely so that wherever they chose to graze they would still be on his land.

Within this uncharted territory both mortality and morality are of central importance. Ironic, sometimes paradoxical ideas of fairness and justice in a place the law has not yet come to are skillfully explored in a narrative that is shadowed by the imminence of different kinds of death. These include the dying out of vast buffalo herds due to indifferent wastefulness; the slower dying of the cowboy who is progressively being squeezed out of a way of life by newer methods of working cattle; by the dying of freedom to continue westward as the frontier begins to close.

Heavyweight ideas like these can stampede one's interest in a story quickly, especially when a number of its characters are dressed in iron clothes of rectitude. It is a measure of Hall's considerable talents that he does not falter despite such thematic profundities.

His story begins in 1883. Andrew Livingston, whose character is loosely patterned on that of the young Teddy Roosevelt who lived in South Dakota before returning east to pursue a career in politics, has come to Pyramid Flats to forget the accidental deaths of his wife and child. He soon finds himself between groups of warring ranchers and alongside homesteaders whose agricultural interests conflict with those of the ranchers.

The novel's other main character is a larger-than-life Scottish aristocrat who is consumed with the ambition to build a cattle empire second to none. It is this man's grandiose manner and schemes that energize the plot.

Employing a bedrock prose that is without stylistic affectation, Hall, nevertheless, creates occasional passages of rough-hewn beauty that honor the book's intentions as well. Here is Livingston writing home:

"These long, swift, morning lopes through green grasslands are wonderful times. The sweet air, still with its early-morning touch of chill, and the rapid trot of the tough little horses makes a man's blood teem with the pleasures of being alive. As we climb the steep sides of the butte, out of the mists that still cling in the hollows, the sun flames in the east. Care does not sit heavily upon a rider whose pony's hoofs are dashing through carpets of flowers, and whose shadow is thrown level and long behind him."

Hall also gives us an understanding of how things worked in a frontier town. Edifyingly described are the mechanics of a roundup, the economics involved in running a whorehouse, the interior of an abattoir, and the formation of a vigilante committee with its necessity and inherent dangers fully discussed.

"The Bad Lands" is a misnomer. It is only men who can be bad. Pyramid Flat's entrepreneurs are a meld of bad and good, both dumb and smart, some lucky others not. It is through the universality of Oakley Hall's art that we can recognize them. They are us a century ago.

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