



More Than Cowboys

Tim Slessor

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So many books about the American West leave out the more intriguing details:

When, in 1803, the young USA doubled its size with the purchase from France of an unexplored vastness called La Louisiane, it was a British bank which lent the Americans most of the \$15 million that they didn't have. So the financial papers for the biggest real-estate deal in history are, to this day, held in a London vault. Not many people know that...

If his ranching uncle-by-marriage had had his way, the teenaged Winston Churchill – a disappointing scholar – might have been sent west to Wyoming to train as a cowboy. Who knows but, in time, he himself might have become a rancher. How then would history have turned out?

Another ranching Englishman played a key role in recruiting a small army of Texas gunmen to “invade” northern Wyoming and kill more than 40 small settlers, men who had too easily been accused of being rustlers. The plan went badly wrong. But the Englishman had slipped away – gone home on holiday...

It seems unlikely that Butch Cassidy was killed in a Bolivian shoot-out. It seems that he returned, under a false name, to live out his days in the West. In 1935, he even submitted a autobiographical script to Hollywood – only to have it rejected as being “too preposterous to be believable”. He died two years later – penniless.

“Royal tourist visits the Colonies” was the local headline. In her VC-10, the Queen had flown into the small town of Sheridan in Wyoming. First, she took an extended walkabout along Main Street and then she holidayed for several days on a friend's ranch in the shadow of the Big Horn Mountain ...

Tim Slessor, a one-time BBC producer, has filmed “out West” for nearly 50 years. In this book, he picks out a selection of fascinating stories that range from the mountain men and their fur trade to the pioneers of the overland trail, from Custer and the disaster at the Little Big Horn to the last stand of the Sioux at Wounded Knee, from the early cow-towns and the railroads to the cattle barons and the emigrant sod-busters.

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