



# Prairie Fever: British Aristocrats in the American West 1830-1890

*Peter Pagnamenta*

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## **Prairie Fever: British Aristocrats in the American West 1830-1890** Peter Pagnamenta

From the 1830s onward, a succession of well-born Britons headed west to the great American wilderness to find adventure and fulfillment. They brought their dogs, sporting guns, valets, and all the attitudes and prejudices of their class. *Prairie Fever* explores why the West had such a strong romantic appeal for them at a time when their inherited wealth and passion for sport had no American equivalent.

In fascinating and often comic detail, the author shows how the British behaved—and what the fur traders, hunting guides, and ordinary Americans made of them—as they crossed the country to see the Indians, hunt buffalo, and eventually build cattle empires and buy up vast tracts of the West. But as British blue bloods became American landowners, they found themselves attacked and reviled as “land vultures” and accused of attempting a new colonization. In a final denouement, Congress moved against the foreigners and passed a law to stop them from buying land.

## **Prairie Fever: British Aristocrats in the American West 1830-1890 Details**

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# From Reader Review *Prairie Fever: British Aristocrats in the American West 1830-1890* for online ebook

## Rebecca Huston says

A very enjoyable book on the British adventurers who came west to explore, hunt, cattle ranch, or simply to have a good time. Full of stories, maps and a slim insert of photos. I had never heard of these stories and found them fascinating to read about this part of hidden American history. Four stars overall and recommended.

For the longer review, please go here:

[http://www.epinions.com/review/Peter\\_...](http://www.epinions.com/review/Peter_...)

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## Lauren Albert says

A fun book about the British aristocrats who headed out West in the 19th Century. Some fed on tales such as those of Fenimore Cooper, wanted adventure. Some went for money. Younger sons with no inheritance to support them, came to (hopefully) make their way in the world. Pagnamenta devotes a chapter to each of the driving hopes behind these travels: farming, cattle ranching, travel, hunting, adventure, land investment. He concludes with a section about the souring of American attitudes towards the British visitors (or immigrants) and attempts to prevent their land holding.

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## Kay says

### "What to do with younger sons?"

Primogeniture has much to answer for in British history. The need to find employment for those who would *not* inherit the estate sent thousands of young men darting about the empire -- but not just the empire, it seems. They were also packed off to America.

While admittedly something of a historical sideline, the exodus described in *Prairie Fever* is engagingly told. There are the laughably Wodehousian episodes involving fox hunting and amateur dramatic societies out on the prairie, but there are also striking descriptions of the *rendezvous* of hunters and trappers out in Wyoming and vivid portrayals of aristocrats such as Sir St. George Gore, who viewed the frontier "in purely recreational terms."

Pagnamenta chronicles more than a minor demographic trend, however. The years from 1832 to 1890 witnessed the conversion of a frontier to homesteads and cattle ranches, many accessible by railway. As this happened, much of the romance that initially drew British aristocrats faded but new financial interests took hold. As the 19th century drew to a close, one British visitor was disappointed upon arrival in Indian Territory to find four native Americans playing an affable game of croquet next to the railway platform. She need hardly need to have left home to witness that.

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## **Kate Arcangeli says**

I oddly enjoyed reading this non fiction book by Peter Pagnamenta. I say this because this is not a topic that would normally interest me: hunting. I originally picked it up because I liked the author's name, I had recently named my second son Peter...I know that's odd but sometimes I do this, I am compelled by people's names.

I was unaware of this part of American history but I thought it was especially interesting in light of the popularity of Downton Abbey. I kept picturing Mary and Matthew going on the fox hunt in the beginning of the first season when she falls in love with the Turkish boy. I kept thinking of that scene because it gave me a visual of how important "the hunt" was to the British aristocracy and how it was so much a part of their culture.

I have two little boys (2 years old and 1 years old) and I am firm believer in letting boys be boys. I can understand why so many young men were compelled to hunt in the USA...how exciting would it be to hunt enormous animals thousands of miles from home? I was not raised by hunters, so I am not endorsing hunting here as sport, but I can understand the excitement, especially at that time.

I also loved the chapter about Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show that came to England and I kept chuckling picturing Queen Victoria watching that show! She was so refined and the idea of the Queen watching the complete opposite of refined just made me laugh.

I would recommend this book to one who enjoys reading about American history, especially in relation to the UK, which has been and always will be a huge part of our American culture from our early founding fathers to the mid 18th century aristocrats.

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## **Richard Starks says**

This is a well-researched and well-written book that's an enjoyable and easy read - especially if, like me, you have British roots and now live in the United States. If nothing else, the book underlines the thoughtless greed and bullheaded stupidity of the British aristocracy and its inability to cope with the egalitarianism of the American West. It describes the way the British upper classes bought and slaughtered their way across the prairies ("Saw 50,000 buffalo through the day," one of them says, "and hunted them from morning till night... And so on until the prairie was strewn for miles back with the bodies of the dead bison"). Many of the aristocrats were second sons unlikely to inherit, so, like modern-day bankers, they hoped to get rich while making little or no contribution to the societies that supported them. Even when they made an effort, they were usually hampered by their inability to do much more than quote the classics, ride to hounds, and lean on their servants. Of the Indians they met along the way, one of them says, "Happily, I think, the tribes are dying out from illnesses and epidemics, and this is surely not to be regretted." That pretty much sums up the prevailing attitudes.

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## Connie says

It literally took me years to read this book. I started it on a road trip west to Colorado, Utah and Kansas, which are among the areas discussed in this book. I put it down for long periods of time and picked it up again, periodically, usually while walking on the treadmill. In a nutshell, it tells of the British enthusiasm for the American far west when land was cheap and largely populated with buffalo, wolves, bears and other wildlife. British aristocrats, especially younger sons who did not inherit family estates, bought large swaths of land for sport and profit. Some grew large cattle ranches, others rented property to tenant farmers. But there was a predictable backlash from native Americans who did not appreciate the British setting up serfdoms or estates on American soil. Finally, through mismanagement, bad weather, and American legislation limiting immigrant landowners' rights, the boom ended and most British either sold their interests or settled into more modest lifestyles as farmers or ranchers.

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## Tony says

PRAIRIE FEVER: British Aristocrats in the American West 1830-1890. (2012). Peter Pagnamenta. \*\*\*\*. This is a fascinating and well-written account of an invasion of our American West by hordes of British nobility. There were two main driving forces for these invasions: the problem of what to do with second, and subsequent, sons when the law of primogeniture insured that the eldest son inherited both the estate and the money upon the death of the father, and younger sons were left to fend for themselves or live off the generosity of their eldest brother; second the spirit of adventure – particularly hunting. The author provides the story of these British nobels and their actions in the Great Plains region in a way that allows the reader to understand their motivations and subsequent actions. In addition to the adventurers, we also learn about the groups who came over and established British towns on the Prairie, including Le Mars, IA, Runnymede, KS, and Rugby, TN. Subsequent transplants also explored the potential business opportunities in the area and bought up huge tracts of land then converted to cattle ranches in TX, OK, CO, etc. One of the side benefits of this influx was that the hunters and explorers often engaged artists to travel with them. These artists, including George Catlin and Alfred Jacob Miller, in the end provided a visual history of the Plains Indians and the scenery of the area. I truly enjoyed this work and recommend it to all American history buffs.

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## Sally says

A very good and often entertaining summary of the involvement of the British upper crust in the development of the western United States—a subject most often treated only in the small magazines of western historical societies. This is, I think, the first time the topic has been treated in depth by a British author, so the book has a different perspective than that provided in 1989 by Lawrence Woods in his excellent but long out-of print “British Gentlemen in the Wild West: The Era of the Intensely English Cowboy.” New material from British journals, and quotations from letters and diaries found in British repositories make the presentation fresh, and Pagnamenta also benefited from, as he acknowledges, his access to previously unavailable electronic databases of early western newspapers.

The chapters chronicling the role of early British entrepreneurs and sportsmen in romancing the region to their countrymen and inspiring them to follow in their footsteps are particularly strong, as is the “epilogue” that chronicles the American reaction in the late nineteenth century to what was perceived as a British

attempt to recreate its system of property landlordism in the American West. All in all, a well-written, well-paced, and eminently readable book.

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### **Margaret Sankey says**

Ever since Charlotte Buckland and Oliver Seccombe set up the Crown Vee in Centennial, I've been interested in the European aristocrats who turned up in the 19th century west looking for respectable channels for their limited skills sets and profits on the plains. Now living closer to some of the ranches, like the Chateau De Mores in North Dakota, this is particularly relevant. Pagnamenta begins with the 1830s, when men like Sir William Drummond Stewart headed out with fur trappers and went back to Scotland with enough anecdotes (and some live buffalo) to spin out bad novels and ignite the curiosity of a peerage in search of somewhere to send their extra sons (India and the army being harder and harder to crack once competency-based reforms went into effect) where shooting, blood sports, semi-literacy and bastard-production were social assets and one could live on a semi-annual remittance. Some of the emigres were genuinely interested in the west, or Native People or agriculture, sometimes spurred by the panoramas that toured Britain, or Wild Bill's show. Some of the ventures, like the farm town Runnymede in Iowa, folded in Gilded Age commodities meltdowns and inexperience, while ranches like the fictional Venneford supported the lavish Cheyenne Club in Denver for 30 years before cattle prices, blizzards and resentment of their monopoly of water and acreage drove out all but the best capitalized. The one real complaint about this book is that both maps resolutely locate Boise on the border of Idaho and Oregon, when I am quite sure that it is 50 miles east of that.

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### **Jan Polep says**

Years ago I read Larry McMurtry's "Berrybender Narratives" about a British aristocratic family's fictional 1830's adventures exploring the West...where if things could go radically wrong, they did. Prairie Fever seems tame by comparison. The author describes British planned communities, land grabs, exhibitions, and business empires that wax and wane in connection with the weather, foreign funding, and changing attitudes of American citizens towards the British colonization efforts...which brought on America enactment of the Alien Land Bill of 1887. I totally understand the lure of the wide open spaces, the cleverness of finding meaningful work for 2nd sons, but give me the Berrybenders in a fight against man and nature over the history of a failed attempt at reinstating the British caste system on the great plains.

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### **Rey Dekker says**

...good book, over all...lots of stuff I had no idea about...due to the nature of this beast though there was a lot of Lord This-ing, Duke of That-ing, etc. that got a little tedious and space consuming...but by and large, lots of stuff new to me which is what I expect when I read a historical book...flavour sort of reminded me of David McCullough and that is not a bad thing...anyone interested in Great Plains history or British influences in "the colonies" would find this a good read...now...Time Traveler's Wife...???...dear god, I don't want to SOB...

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## **Miriam Murcutt says**

A well-written, well-researched book about British aristocrats who felt the pull of the American prairies in the mid to late 19th century. First they went there to hunt, killing off thousands of head of bison purely for sport, depriving others who needed the animals for food, clothing and shelter. Then they tried to set up wholly British communities on the prairies and, with a fatal combination of ego and ignorance, chose their spots badly. The majority of the communities failed. Finally, they bought up hundreds of head of cattle and tried - and failed again - to acquire vast tracts of American land for ranches or to manage as absentee landlords (just as they had done in Ireland). By 1890, the British aristocracy had had enough of the America west, and had decided that America was best left to the Americans. They turned their attention to Canada, South Africa, Australia and Siam (now Thailand) for the overseas investment opportunities they were seeking.

This book is full of good writing and really, laugh-out-loud quotations which the author uses to great effect to illustrate the way the 'special relationship' functioned way back then.

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## **Izzie says**

I was disappointed in "Prairie Fever". Maybe I had the wrong expectations when I opened the cover. I thought the book would go into detail about 19th British communities on the prairie, not focus on old news--the slaughter of thousands of buffalo, elk, and bear strictly for amusement. But wait, the photo on the dust jacket showed a community of settlers, and the first two pages of the introduction referred to the towns the British constructed. Unfortunately, this slim volume of 300 pages spent only 50 describing the phenomenon.

I was impressed with the author's objectivity of his subject. He didn't shy away from showing spoiled, clannish, younger sons of the aristocracy bringing British Imperialism to the prairie and Rockies.

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## Caroline says

The British love of all things western has very deep roots, stemming almost from the days of the Revolution itself. There have always been close links between the Old and New World, not least the 'special relationship' of today. Much less well known, however, is the role the British aristocracy played in the settling of the West. A small role, to be sure, but a colourful one.

From the earliest days of western exploration British readers were inspired by the tales of writers such as Fennimore Cooper and Irving, and those with the means viewed the newly opened west as a place for travel, for leisure pursuits. It was considered perfect hunting territory, and many are the stories of British lords and dukes and barons venturing out onto the prairies with enormous trains of mules and wagons conveying all the luxuries one might need. Many determined to purchase their own land and pursue the life of the landed aristocracy on the American plains.

Still later it was seen as a place to solve the problem of landless younger sons, with the creation of a number of British 'colonies' in Kansas, Iowa and elsewhere, where they could pursue the agricultural life without needing to mingle with the 'democratic' Americans. Few of these colonies survived more than a few years, but some foresighted individuals saw that cattle ranching was where the money was to be made, and soon there were enormous cattle ranches owned by some of the most illustrious names in the British peerage, owning up to a supposed 21 million acres.

This was a really fascinating read, an insight into an otherwise familiar era of American history from a truly unusual angle. Whilst I had heard tales of British nobility sporting on the Plains, I had no idea of the length or scope of the British presence. The book is well-written, lacking any kind of bias or judgement one way or the other, and thoroughly entertaining from start to finish. I could hardly put it down - definitely recommended.

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## Steelman says

The book contains at least two factual errors:

1. Lord Aylesworth built his ranch at Big Spring, west of Dallas, not at Silver Spring, south of Dallas.
2. Fort Gibson is in Oklahoma, not Kansas.

Aside from these known issues, I found this book entertaining on the whole. I suspect I would have enjoyed it more if I were more familiar with all the British personalities involved. The author names several dukes and lords and marquises and viscounts with whom I am unfamiliar. But the story well underscores the uneven relationship that Americans and the British have had over the years.

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