

*The History of Naming Cows*

by Mitch Spray

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Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

Mitch Spray's *The History of Naming Cows*, divided into three sections, "Dreaming Home," "Animal Husbandry," and "New Land," is a modest collection of poems about farming and farm family life in Saskatchewan. As the title poem suggests, there are many references to cows and to raising cattle. Other topics include gardening, tilling fields, picking stones, haying and baling hay, getting wood, butchering, stooking, and breaking new land. Topics cluster around life-and-death risks such as spontaneous combustion in wet hay or calving problems – the protruding "Four Inches of Tongue" or the prolapsed uterus or a "calf way too big" in "At the Vet's" (65). The stories of family life include sibling rivalry and competition with strong male role models – "couldn't let you outwork me" ("Out Shoveling," 53). The sons are "blind to the regret / behind his sun beaten face" ("Sons," 16). Brothers protect the women or the parents from too much knowledge – "things Mom, Dad didn't know until too late" ("A Christmas Story," 90).

Spray seems to steer deliberately away from any interpretation or commentary, choosing instead to record only the bare-bones facts of birthing, husbanding, nurturing, and then selling or killing and eating the animals in one's care. The style itself is a statement, reminiscent of Robert Frost's use of detail. Farm children learn early the realities of life and death. They know we humans are not outside or above, but rather are a part of those natural cycles of eating and being eaten (by a bear, for example) or perhaps consumed (for example, by fire). Nor is there time or tolerance for sentimentality when an animal's time has come.

Meaning is transmitted with literary devices: in allusions to Helios and sacrificing a bull to curry the favour of the gods ("From the Tractor Seat") and the father as "descending from the cross" ("Sons"); in the symbolism of object and action and grouping, and binder twine buried with the grandfather's cremated remains ("The Need for Scotch"); in the transformations abandoned buildings go through, salvage finding a second life, the unusable razed by cleansing flames, revealing new sightlines ("Salvaged"). And with metaphor: a tractor is an "aging behemoth" ("The Versatile Eight Hundred," 70). The book's subsections emphasize that the poems are also about economic and social change. Although "Dreaming Home" may imply nostalgia, what the poems note are the differences, the "twenty-thousand cubed feet of feed" ("My Hills," 10), suggesting that the old way, small herd with pasture, has been replaced by a feedlot. And because today, "new land" being broken is most likely old pasture land no longer needed for cattle, or old farmsteads abandoned as the fields are conglomerated into the larger farms worked by fewer farmers.

Because I lived my first seventeen years on a Manitoba farm, most of the details in the poems are familiar to me. We too had sloughs, dugouts, rubber boots, garter snakes, spider webs, lilacs, gardens, homemade bread, canned peaches (but you sterilize the jars before you fill them). We had toques, snow forts, pond hockey, Herefords, Holsteins, and we knew of Charolais. We had manure piles, alfalfa, mangers, augers, power-take-offs, heifers, steers, cows, hubcap dog dishes, wood panelling, and shiplap. We didn't have bears, but today the wild is reclaiming territory abandoned to fewer people. And the bulls we had were borrowed or rented or replaced by the AI (artificial insemination) man, whose name, I kid you not, was Mr. Turnbull.

Some details I stumbled over were Welsh Blacks and Gelbvieh (“The History of Naming Cows,” 43; “In the Dead of Winter,” 60), seemingly new species of purebred cattle. And “box iron bale trailer crossbeam” (“Time with Grandpa,” 24) and “I climb the box iron fence” (“At the Vet’s,” 65) seem to refer to metal chutes for sorting cattle, a kind of portable fencing. Skurr is explained in context as “a knobby pseudo horn” (“The Bull’s Skurr,” 37).

Although we did not have quads or ATVs or mechanical stone pickers, other details seem not to have changed in the fifty years since my father nodded off while cultivating or my brothers complained about shovelling barley. And the interactions, the hunting accidents that could have been so much worse, the hiding of mistakes, the competition and one-upmanship between fathers and sons and between brothers must be universal.

I chose this collection because of its title, which seemed to promise a return to a happy past for me, a celebration of an industry that feeds the eighty percent of Canadians likely unaware of and uninterested in it. Because I love cows, and Joe Fafard. And because in my family too, the naming of cows was a ritual, part of my father’s accounting system. In order to keep track of which cows came from where, he named his cows after the wives and daughters of the neighbours from whom he bought them (unfortunately, it took me longer than it should have to realize that it was unwise to discuss our herd amongst the neighbours!).

In the words of one of our western bards, Ian Tyson, you’ve got to “Get her all down before she goes. / You gotta get her all down / ’cause she’s bound to go.” The poet, like the painter being lauded in this verse, proclaims “this is what I saw/see, this is what I know, this is what I love.” This matters. *The History of Naming Cows* is about the role of art and the artist in culture and identity. 🐄

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