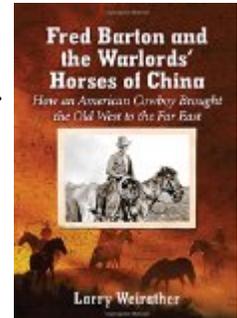


**Larry Weirather.** *Fred Barton and the Warlords' Horses of China: How an American Cowboy Brought the Old West to the Far East.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2015. vii + 226 pp. \$39.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-9913-7.



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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Simply in terms of popular appeal, a book title that combines American cowboys with Chinese warlords would seem to be a publisher's dream come true. The story behind this title is the biography of a real American cowboy, Fred Barton, who, with extraordinary entrepreneurial drive, parlayed his knowledge of horses into business ventures, developing horse ranches first in czarist Russia and then in warlord China in the early twentieth century. The author clearly targets his book at a popular audience, with a narrative that is anecdotally rather than analytically driven. His pursuit of interesting anecdotes however, often leads the author far afield from his subject. Indeed, no doubt the result of insufficient sources, the story of Barton himself often fades into the background. Although many readers will still find the result an enjoyable read, others may feel disappointed that the book is never able to fill out more fully the life story of this fascinating character.

The author, Larry Weirather, is a retired English

professor who has written a number of nonfiction books for popular audiences on topics ranging from the emergence of Pan American Airways "clipper ships" as American cultural icons in the 1930s to the history and modern transformation of the logging industry along the upper Mississippi. This book is actually an expansion of an earlier and similarly titled book by the author: *Warlord Cowboys in China: The Fred Barton Story of the World's Greatest Horse Drive* (2009). The author argues that a new book was justified as a result of new information he received on Barton, largely stimulated by the publication of the first book. The gaps and unresolved inconsistencies that remain in this account, however, suggest that this new information was still insufficient for the fuller story the author may have intended to present.

The book is largely organized around the main periods of Barton's life. Writing even a basic biography for Barton is clearly hindered, though, not only by the thinness of what might be normally

considered primary documentation but also by Barton's own creative telling and retelling of his own life story over time. By his own account, Barton's father was a cavalry officer in Montana where Barton was born (under the name Fred Kottmeier Jr.) in 1888 or 1889. Weirather notes, though, that this birth story conflicts with records that show that his father was actually employed continuously as a salesman for a company in New York City from at least 1886 to 1920. This is but one example of the inconsistencies that Weirather rather valiantly if not totally successfully tries to sort out in Barton's life story. In any case, after attending a school in a New Jersey military academy, Barton "returned" to his birthplace, Miles City, Montana, in 1905, where he did in fact become a skilled "cowboy." Readers may be surprised to learn that in the early twentieth century, Miles City had actually emerged as a major center in the international horse trade. This was the context for a chance meeting in 1911 between Barton and a Russian horse buyer that would lead to an offer for Barton to travel to Russia to help establish a horse-breeding ranch for the Russian army. Barton thus set out for Russia to meet with Russian officials about this scheme, and to scout for potential ranch sites in eastern Siberia. When the Russian ranch plan eventually fell through, Barton moved on to a position as a salesman for the British-American Tobacco Company based in Shanghai from 1912 to 1926, while also working on the side as an intelligence informant for the American embassy in Beijing.

Contacts Barton made with Chinese commanders during his earlier Russian venture ultimately led to a new proposal in 1917 to establish a horse-breeding ranch for the Chinese warlord Yan Xishan in China's Shanxi Province. To start up this venture, Barton used his Russian contacts to purchase over three thousand horses in eastern Siberian, and hired a group of cowboys, furloughed from service in American military forces guarding American interests in China, to drive

these horses to Shanxi. Barton would continue to manage this ranch for his warlord boss until 1937, when Shanxi was overrun by Japanese troops at the beginning of China's War of Resistance against Japan. The book ends with two chapters covering Barton's life in Los Angeles after 1937, until his death in 1967, which highlight a new turn in his career as an expert about, and the founder of a museum on, the American cowboy experience, which included much hobnobbing with Hollywood stars and directors feeding the American public's appetite for cowboy movies. Nonetheless, the heart of the book is focused on the period of Barton's life in Russia and China, including four chapters covering the horse drive that led to the establishment of the Shanxi ranch.

The main problem with this book, as suggested above, is how little of the narrative actually deals with Barton's own life. In many cases, incidents in Barton's life mainly serve as a thin structure on which to hang long contextual descriptions and digressions, ranging over longer periods of history and involving people only peripherally related, if at all, to Barton or his ventures. For example, excluding such peripheral descriptions, the four chapters on Barton's horse drive could have easily fit into one. Likewise, the author's suggestion that Barton worked for US intelligence in China provides the basis for a chapter on US military forces and US intelligence operations in China. Barton, however, appears very little in this chapter, except in Weirather's suggestion that Barton's intelligence connections may have played a role in getting the military furloughs for the cowboys he needed for his horse drive. The topic also provides the author with an excuse for a long aside detailing the adventures of Leon Shulman Gaspard, an American painter and a "self-professed" international spy, who visited China in the same period when Barton was active in his ranch, but with no hint that the two men ever interacted.

In the end, it is disconcerting to realize that these

digressions, often fascinating in their own right, are probably more responsible for the book's appeal than Barton's own story, which remains only thinly described in many places. For example, although Barton's Shanxi horse ranch is, or should be, a key element in the story, we learn very little from this book about how the ranch operated or what role specifically Barton played in its operation (especially when Barton began to spend long periods of time in Los Angeles even before the Japanese invasion forced the ranch's closure). It is very hard to blame Weirather for these omissions, since, one imagines, if there were more fascinating stories to tell about Barton himself he would have told them. Clearly the sources available simply did not allow for a more detailed account.

This is a book obviously written for a mass audience rather than for historians. Indeed, Weirather's own inexperience in the historical literature often results in inaccuracies or reliance on long-abandoned narratives of Chinese history. In some cases, the errors are petty (for example, misdating the birth of Morris "Two-Gun" Cohen, an international adventurer who attached himself to the Chinese revolutionary Sun Yat-sen, so it seems he was training the Chinese in Canada in preparation for the anti-Manchu 1911 Revolution when he was only fourteen years old). More serious lapses occur in such cases as when Weirather repeats biased Western accounts of warlord battles as bloodless rituals (meant to demean Chinese fighting ability), whereas more recent research has shown these battles to have been hard-fought conflicts that resulted in massive casualties.

Another major flaw in the book is that it is seriously under-footnoted compared to normal historical standards. One of the challenges Weirather faced, as noted above, was sorting out the inconsistencies in Barton's life story, but he also points out and tries to work through discrepancies in the anecdotal evidence concerning other people and events he describes. In most cases, however, the

footnoting is inadequate to understand the specific sources of the competing views or data presented. This may be a hazard of writing for a popular press that always seeks to keep notes to a minimum, but it is a disservice to scholars who might want to follow up on Weirather's sources.

In the end, the book has no pretensions of being other than a good read. No major historical issues are addressed; no theoretical questions are raised. Nonetheless, professional historians reading this work might find themselves struck by insights to be gained from Weirather's anecdotal narrative. Should historians not take notice of the connections that tied rodeos in Miles City to the global trade in horses, and its role, in turn, in facilitating international conflict? On another level, Barton's personal history, along with the other stories of American adventurers, entrepreneurs, and grifters that float through Weirather's narrative, shows how, from fairly early on, emerging globalization gave individuals, from all places and in all walks of life, the ability and opportunities to remake themselves and rewrite their own life stories.

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