



The Last Cowboys at the End of the World: The Story of the Gauchos of Patagonia

Nick Reding

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Gaucha conjures up an image as iconic as the word cowboy. But according to historians and anthropologists, their semi-nomadic culture disappeared at the end of the nineteenth century, and no one has seen the gauchos since. Until now.

Twenty-five years ago, the government of Chile began building a road into Chilean Patagonia, one of the least-populated regions in the world. In 1995, when Nick Reding traveled down that still-unfinished road into an unmapped river valley, he found himself in a closed chapter of history: a last, undetected, and unexplored outpost of gauchos so isolated that many of them, some of whom are boys as young as thirteen, still live completely alone with their herds, hours on horseback from the nearest neighbors. In 1998, Nick returned to the valley to witness what happens when time catches up to a people whom history has forgotten.

Reding's account of the ten months he spent in Middle Cisnes, Patagonia, is a riveting, novelistic exploration of the longing for change by a people and a culture that, according to history books and the Chilean government, do not even exist. There's Duck, the alcoholic with whom Reding lives and who takes Reding on long cattle drives, teaching him to ride and work as gauchos have for centuries; Duck's wife, Edith, who is convinced she is reliving the life of her estranged mother, who was, according to legend, wed to the Devil; John of the Cows, a famed cattle thief wanted for murder who takes Reding to the secret place in the mountains where he hides his stolen stock; and Don Tito and Alfredo, two brothers who are unsure of their age and communicate with each other through smoke signals.

In Middle Cisnes, Reding watches a singular—and ultimately murderous—conflict take hold between those who want to trade life in the nineteenth century for life in the twenty-first and those who want to keep living as gauchos have for hundreds of years. What all of them understand is the near impossibility of a journey through a world where everything from the fierce landscape to a ravaging disease conspires against them, a journey whose terminus—the Outside, the only town in central Patagonia's 42,000 square miles—is a place where the gauchos are not only ill-equipped to live, but clearly unwelcome.

The Last Cowboys at the End of the World is a story of regeneration through violence and tragedy. When the people of Middle Cisnes finally try to take their place in the modern world, the results are as horrifying and surprising as they are heroic. In the collision of the gaucho past, our present, and an unknown future, Nick Reding captures a moment in time that we have never before seen and will never see again.

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