

PROMOTERS, PLANTERS, AND PIONEERS: THE COURSE AND CONTEXT OF BELGIAN SETTLEMENT IN WESTERN CANADA

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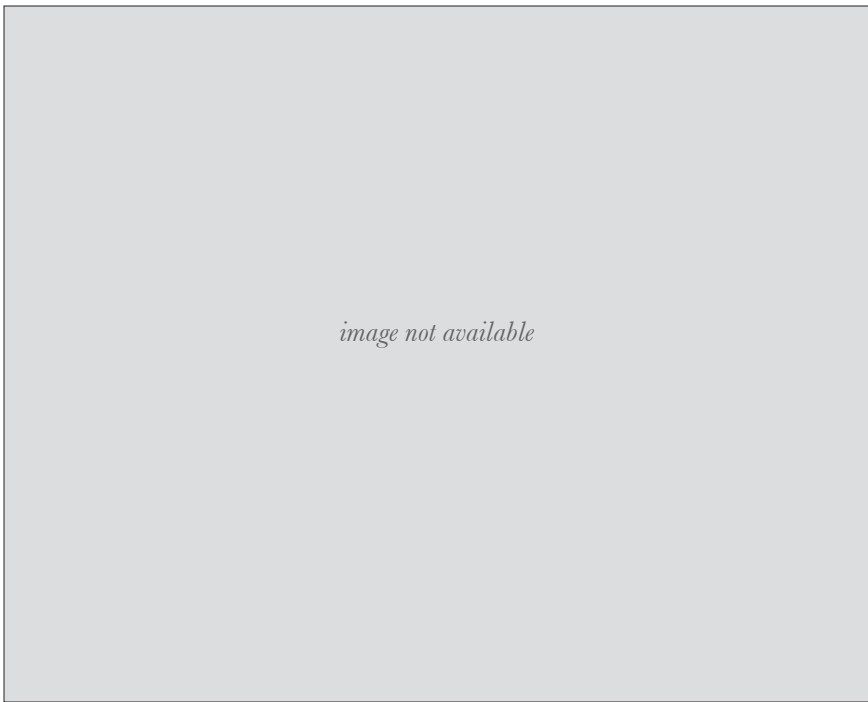


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View of a Trapper's Cabin, Kananaskis, AB, 1911. (Glenbow NA-2158)
Reception of a Belgian official investigating immigration conditions.

THE VIEW FROM BELGIUM

Belgian emigration to Canada has been unobtrusive and somewhat inconspicuous in terms of world migratory movements. The concept of emigration for Belgians usually meant relocating, either temporarily or long-term, in a neighbouring European region, especially in northern France and the Paris region. Furthermore, in the decade preceding the outbreak of World War I, and in the period from the 1920s to the 1970s, immigrants settling in Belgium exceeded nationals who emigrated.¹ Emigration to Canada depended not only on local economic and social conditions in Belgium but also on the image of Canada, if any, in official and popular sectors. Investors, commercial entrepreneurs, speculators, missionaries and professional people were more likely to have some knowledge of opportunities and conditions in Canada than were farmers, artisans and labourers. When confronted with attractive prospects for a better standard of living emanating from a variety of foreign propaganda approaches, there remained the dual problems of choosing the best foreign venture and of weighing the impact of leaving one's familiar milieu.

Belgians had a discouraging experience with colonization companies. The classic example was the Santo-Tomas project in Guatemala in 1845–50. All government assistance to expatriation thereafter ceased. In 1856 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced an official policy: "The policy of the government is to leave complete freedom to emigration, not to promote it, and not to protect it." The Senate repeated the same approach in 1889: "The attitude of the government must be passive, in the sense that the government must neither desire nor encourage emigration.... It is necessary that each one be free to act as he wishes."²

Canada as a desirable place to settle had to compete with a number of seemingly more attractive localities. This foreign attraction resulted in several emigration experiences, referred to in Belgium as “emigration fevers.”³ The most important waves of emigration were directed to Wisconsin, U.S.A. (1855–56), Brazil (1885), and Argentina (1888–89). In the 1880s, Flemish immigrants settled in Moline and Rock Island, Illinois, and around Detroit, Michigan. Walloons from Hainaut went to the mines and industrial centres of Pennsylvania. One must not exaggerate the impact of these waves. Tiny Luxembourg, with a population 5 per cent that of Belgium, sent almost as many emigrants to the United States in the late nineteenth century as did Belgium. In other words, Belgians were not as enthusiastic about emigration as many western Europeans, notably the Scandinavians, Dutch and Swiss. If there was no great enthusiasm for a future in the United States, there would be even less for prospects in Canada. Jules Leclercq, in comparing life in Canada and the United States, found Canadians to be less energetic, less enterprising and less confident of success than Americans.⁴ Forty years later, Henri de Man, who saw Canada too anchored to the past⁵ expressed the same sentiment.

How overcome the proverbial parochialism of the common people, their inexperience with and distrust of rupturing ties with their traditional community? The provincial governor of Luxembourg opined:

In general, the Luxembourggeois does not emigrate because he is content with his lot. When he does leave to go far away, it is not usually to find a means of making a living but motivated by the desire to make a fortune. Even then, he rarely leaves his native soil without the thought of coming back.⁶

In the Flanders region the sentiments were no different from those in Wallonia because the inhabitants had “a parochial attitude pushed to the extreme, so that they would abandon their native soil only at the last extremity.” Gustaaf Vekeman, who had left Flanders for Canada, found it difficult to convince his compatriots to follow his example:

All who listened to me [lecturing] were Flemings, like me, and the Flemish, almost without exception, are not ripe for emigration. This is beginning, however, and it will go well in a few years from now, that is to say when it will be too late....

Give the small farmer or Flemish labourer the strict necessities, that is to say somewhat better than dry bread, and for nothing in the world will he leave his native village or the unhealthy rowhouse he lives in – along with other families – in some dead-end street of a large city. What!? No longer see his neighbour Jean-Pierre and his neighbour Theresa, no longer play his game of lawn-bowling, no longer drink his pint of old beer at the corner cabaret, no longer compete in pole archery, no longer attend the village kermesse!⁷

Octave Laurent tried to reassure his compatriots in 1894 that a trip to the Niagara region and Ottawa was for his generation no longer a voyage of exploration but it was a holiday trip.⁸ There were no sponsored projects. Canada would need to project an alluring image. Belgian authorities were concerned about the welfare of those who elected to emigrate. The government set standards for port facilities, steamship accommodation, and recruitment procedures. It also intervened to protect emigrants from fraud and irregularities. Moreover, it sent fact-finding missions to Western Canada to verify settlement conditions and corroborate consular reports. The assumption of responsibility for the welfare of Belgians abroad included diplomatic intervention and repatriation provisions.

Image of Canada

What was the image of Canada at the popular level and at the elitist level of administrators, clergy and professional classes? Was it the undeveloped northern frontier of the United States, a wilderness inhabited mostly by warlike Indians and dangerous animals? The more informed had reason to worry about agricultural prospects on the semi-arid prairies and the extent of Indian and Métis unrest. The Flemish parish priests and the episcopacy, like their Dutch Catholic counterparts, were generally unenthusiastic about emigration to Canada, regarding it as a danger to the survival of the faith in a perceivable hostile and aggressive materialistic Protestant environment. In other words, apart from Catholic Quebec, the Canadian provinces and territories gave the impression of being similar to the United States, although economic prospects appeared much better in the American republic than in Canada.

Early reports indicated that Western Canada might be attractive to agriculturalists, especially as settlement began beyond the Red River valley in the 1880s. Colonizing clergy were anxious to maintain a strong francophone Catholic presence in the West but few Belgians emigrated for religious reasons. Georges Kaiser in *Au Canada* (1887) indicated that undue clerical influence as seen in Quebec did not promote the same progress seen among the anglophone population. Eugène Goblet d'Alviella, Octave Laurent and Léon Brabant held similar views.⁹ In the end, economic prospects would prove more important factors in emigration than cultural and religious considerations. This may well explain why more Flemings than Walloons came to Western Canada before World War II.

Consul E. H. Edouard Sève, visiting the United States and Canada in 1868, cautioned that farmers should come to Canada only if they possessed at least 5,000 francs (a substantial amount) and a "strong dose of energy and perseverance." As for day labourers, skilled workers and clerks there was little opportunity for them. He warned that it was easy to be misled by seemingly high wages, but the cost of living was very high, working conditions differed from those in Europe, and many jobs were seasonal because of the severe winters. As for business opportunities, it would be wise to come to study conditions before making any permanent plans.¹⁰

A widely read travel book published in Paris in 1888 evoked the emptiness of the Canadian West. It was still a land inhabited only by a few Indians and Métis, wild game, a scattering of small farms along a solitary railway line:

Always more grass taking on a green colour and in this grass posts pounded in by the surveyors at the borders of the concessions. Without this indicator no one would suspect that civilized man has profaned the ancient sanctuary of the buffalo and elk.¹¹

Georges Kaiser had little sympathy for the First Nations, finding them extremely ugly and lazy.¹² Consul Ketels thought they posed a serious impediment to the development of the country. Moreover, he thought Chinese immigrant labourers constituted an 'invasion' of people belonging to 'another race, another civilization, another ideal' that posed a danger to civil order. He believed that the railways that recruited these immigrants would come to regret their efforts.¹³

Louis Strauss thought Manitoba's climate closely resembled that of Belgium. Therefore, it was an attractive place to settle.¹⁴ Baron Hulot conceded that in Belgium an hectare produced eighteen hectolitres of wheat, while in Manitoba in 1882 an hectare produced twenty-eight hectolitres. However, the numerous disadvantages included early fall frosts, severe winters, occasional grasshopper plagues, prairies fires, the lack of building materials, the high cost of machinery, and the high wages of hired help. His was not an encouraging inventory.¹⁵

On the other hand, there were some positive opinions. By 1911, an anonymous and entertaining traveller, who had learned about opportunities in Canada at the International Exposition in Brussels in 1910, visited an old friend in Boissevain, Manitoba. In this somewhat fanciful work based on an actual trip, he stated:

... in Canada there are gold mines awaiting only men of goodwill to dip into their treasures.... Here one can buy farmland at very modest prices; these are splendid opportunities for farmers who have a little capital and who possess some scientific knowledge.¹⁶

In addition to this vision of fields of 'prairie gold' there was the prospect of finding real gold. Three articles in *Le Bien Public* extolled the mineral resources of the country, indicating interesting possibilities for prospectors.¹⁷

The agricultural potential of the West was reaffirmed by a Belgian farmer who came to Forget then went on to file a homestead in Willow Bunch:

If I may give advice to Belgian farmers, this is what I would say: instead of farming for the benefit of a landowner, instead of simply existing during your lifetime, working hard and paying high rent, would it not be better for you to come to Canada and become a landowner yourself, earning more money and experiencing less hardship than in the old country?¹⁸

Willow Bunch in southwestern Saskatchewan was recommendable as a promising place to settle because three railways were soon to service the region, the soil was fertile, and there were still homesteads available in a

region where French was the dominant language of the many Belgian, French and French Canadian settlers.

Nevertheless, O. De Meulenaere, warned that the immigration brochures and pamphlets with testimonials sent to Belgium were a form of propaganda designed to populate a largely uninhabited expanse of a 'new nation' still in its formative stage.¹⁹

Push factors

Of great weight in the decision to migrate were the push factors in Belgium, deprived immediately after its independence in 1830 of markets in the southern Netherlands and the Dutch colonies. In spite of the important economic boost afforded by an extensive program of railroad and canal construction, the government set up a commission in 1843 to examine the condition of the working classes. The report was most disconcerting as it documented widespread poverty, rising alcoholism and rampant child labour.²⁰ During the next decade, conditions worsened as a typhus epidemic struck, and a shortage of basic staples resulted from a blight that destroyed about 90 per cent of the potato crop and rust that damaged half the rye crop. Massive imports of grain from Russia and the United States intended to meet the crisis resulted in a collapse of domestic prices so that by 1880 peasants refused to sow their fields. Small tenant farmers, who comprised 72 per cent of the all farmers, found it difficult to survive on their small holdings.²¹ Between 1880 and 1890 the number of people engaged in agriculture decreased by 258,493 and not all of these could be absorbed by industry, commerce, or the liberal professions within the realm.²² G. Lennox addressed the concerns of agricultural failure and soil depletion in Flanders in pamphlets prepared in 1885–86, in order to underscore the supposedly ideal conditions in the Prairies and British Columbia.²³

Victor Van Tighem wrote to his brother, Leonard, at Coalbanks [Lethbridge]:

Dear brother, the situation in Belgium is even more miserable than it was and the persecution is slowly on the increase. We expect much from the coming elections, but not without fear, because many people have neither religion nor morals left. Corruption is widespread....²⁴

In addition to desperate economic conditions, Van Tighem referred to ‘persecution’ in Flanders from liberal politicians who had suppressed many Catholic elementary schools, including the institution operated by his Van Dale congregation in Kortryk. The Van Humbeek Act, 1879, instituted one official state school in each commune, appointed state-licensed teachers, and cut off grants to church-supported ‘free schools.’²⁵ His worst fears were unfounded because the Catholic Party won the election in 1884. It would appear that he, and probably most of his compatriots, ignored the fact that in Western Canada the Catholic Church was waging a losing battle for linguistic and school privileges.

Furthermore, there was a crisis in the textile industry and social unrest in the Walloon mining sector. Mechanization in the textile industry, especially lace-making, resulted in high unemployment rates in several cities.²⁶ Added to this was the fact that the population increased by 76.1 per cent between 1830 and 1900. Nevertheless, during the nineteenth century most Belgians who migrated went no farther than northern France.²⁷

Why did Belgians who sought a better standard of living or some occupational advantage think of “America” as limited largely to the United States? Lack of communication with Canada was a factor. Foreign affairs were handled through Great Britain, and Belgian consular officials were attached to the embassy in London. Canadians dealt with Belgium through the High Commission in London. Direct steamship connection was limited. In 1883–84, two vessels registered as Belgian from Antwerp foundered on the way to a Canadian port. All the transatlantic steamship companies had an agent in Antwerp but most used Liverpool as their port of departure. It was only in 1904 that the Canadian Pacific Steamship Lines began sailing out of Antwerp for Canada.

The consul in Quebec reported in 1885 that a contingent of eighty-five persons had arrived in Winnipeg, a small contingent compared to the thousands coming from Eastern Europe. There was also the problem of opposition to non-agricultural immigration:

Work having become scarce, Canadian artisans and skilled labourers do not look kindly on immigrants from Europe who arrive to compete with them; they want to prevent the competition of all European labour just like they want to place hurdles on Chinese immigration in British Columbia.²⁸

Shipping was restricted also because of the lack of significant trade. An 1882 consular report remarked that Belgian exports to Canada consisted largely of gin and window glass.

These difficulties were further highlighted in 1891 when Paul Watelet, immigration agent in Charleroi for the Canadian government, came to Canada. A sum of 20,000 francs was designated for the repatriation of Belgian nationals who, wishing to return to Belgium, had insufficient funds to do so. In 1905 the caution money for repatriation of individuals was doubled to 40,000 francs.²⁹ The contingent of emigrants that arrived in 1893 had actually been destined for South America, but the agent for Brazil and Argentina for some undisclosed reason diverted this “illegal operation” to Canada.³⁰

Port authorities in Antwerp, point of departure for central and eastern Europeans bound for America, kept emigration statistics, but these are not always reliable in tracing the final destination of those departing. Belgians emigrated in greater numbers than official statistics would seem to indicate. Some left from other ports, especially the wealthier classes, professionals and missionaries. For the period 1901 to 1912, departures from Antwerp were 68 per cent Flemish and 25 per cent Walloons. Canada was listed as the final destination of 12 per cent of those leaving Hainaut and West Flanders and 5 per cent from East Flanders, according to the most reliable calculations. Manitoba accounted for 84 per cent of those from the Flemish regions and 57 per cent from Hainaut.³¹

The First World War was followed by deepening crises in Belgium which stimulated a second wave of emigration to Canada. In the post-war decades there was large-scale unemployment, inflation, lockouts and strikes in industry, and the problems associated with rebuilding devastated regions. There was also a volatile political situation embittered by ethnic and regional strife and right-wing agitation. Emigration resumed in 1919 with the departure of 649 war brides. The desperate situation of some individuals seeking to emigrate is evident in private advertisements placed in journals such as *Belgique-Canada*.³² By 1929, it was clear that Canada was no longer an ideal destination. The Canadian Pacific Railway underscored the depression and drought in Western Canada by announcing that it would no longer engage in the recruitment of farmers. The Belgian government responded by forbidding departures of all agricultural workers and farmhands to Canada.³³

The post-World War II emigration was in many ways the most important in terms of numbers but not in terms of creating identifiable communities. Economic, social and linguistic conditions were very different from those prevailing at the beginning of the century. The Flemish population surpassed the Walloons and their regions were quickly becoming the prosperous centres of the new industries, whereas the coal, steel and glass industries of Wallonia were in chaos. There was continuous political instability of successive coalition governments, ethno-linguistic confrontations, labour unrest, and the loss of the Congo in 1960 with its attendant financial repercussions. From 1945 to 1967, 55 per cent of Belgian emigrants were francophones from the old manufacturing centres of Brussels, Liège and the Borinage region of Hainaut. Between 1945 and 1975, 38,500 left for Canada. The provincial Agricultural Committee of West Flanders investigated prospects in Western Canada and concluded that it was still a favourable region to send farmers. Nevertheless, the typical emigrants, especially by the 1990s, were individuals rather than families, young, single, well-educated, urban and more often Walloon than Flemish. One survey for 1991–95 found that almost a quarter of the emigrants were twenty or younger, 28 per cent were university graduates, and the majority came from the urban areas of Brussels and Liège.³⁴

Government Regulation

In 1843, the Belgian railways began offering free baggage allowances to Antwerp for German emigrants bound for North America. In 1857 consular agents abroad were asked to inform the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels of economic prospects in their jurisdictions. In 1872, Walter Warnotte prepared a report for the Ministry on emigration services, or lack thereof, at the port of Antwerp compared to the situations in Le Havre, Bremen and Hamburg. In 1873 the government appointed a Commissioner for Emigration, responsible to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, not only to monitor conditions but also in conjunction with the Governor of the province of Antwerp to stimulate European emigration in general through the port of Antwerp. After the failure of several colonization schemes in Ethiopia, Tunisia and Guatemala, authorities closely scrutinized the activities of foreign immigration agencies, steamship lines, manufacturers, and freelance recruiters.

This approach coincided with a period of agricultural crisis in Flanders, and there was much discussion about emigration as a safety valve. The clergy opposed all emigration on religious and nationalistic grounds. Internal migration was still preferred over transatlantic migration. In 1874 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs still recommended agents in the emigration services “to abstain carefully from encouraging the emigration of Belgians to transatlantic countries.”³⁵

A fierce political debate ensued in 1886 as the proponents of free trade and extensive out-migration challenged the conservatives who based their hopes for better economic conditions on internal public works projects. Encouraged by early favourable reports from Belgian settlers in Manitoba, the *Journal de Bruxelles* proclaimed:

If our workers emigrated in greater numbers, the salaries of those who would remain would increase and our trade would increase in intensity. Each emigrant is a commercial agent abroad. In fact, if it were possible, we would even advise the Government to favour not only the emigration of workers, but also of merchants and industrialists.³⁶

Another right-wing newspaper advised the government to “search out somewhere, far away, a territory where we could deport all our rogues.”³⁷ It was not a view that received enthusiastic support in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It published its own brochure in 1888 outlining the policy of the Beernaert cabinet:

... of course it is not the intention of the Government to promote the emigration of Belgians. On the other hand, the Government fulfills its duty to protect its nationals by enlightening them concerning the resources offered by countries open to colonization.³⁸

Information offices opened in each province verified and adjusted solicitations of navigation companies and recruiting agents, but these produced few positive results:

As for the information concerning the economic situation of the countries and the resources which they offer, the emigrants

apparently trust the information supplied by recruiting agents of companies, since they scarcely, if ever, show themselves in my office to find out anything. This service, by all accounts, has not been working at all in 1890.³⁹

Mobility was marked at both the beginning and end by train stations, docks, immigrant sheds, quarantine and health inspection sites. They fulfilled a certain functional arrangement, but the new train station opened in Antwerp in 1905 was a veritable architectural cathedral. Through Antwerp passed thousands of emigrants seeking a new life abroad, the result of an experiment in May 1835 when the first train on the continent steamed from Brussels to Mechelen. Railways introduced modernity with industrialization and factories. They also brought emigrants from Central and Eastern Europe directly from Cologne to Antwerp, the terminus of the railway but also the point of departure of the steamships.⁴⁰

Information derived from various sources convinced the Belgian government to place the protection of emigrants above the commercial interests of the shipping companies. The Royal Decree of 1876 touched all aspects of ocean passages. It stipulated the surface area required for each passenger, the minimum size of the bunk beds, the minimum weekly rations and the store of food aboard. Each ship had to be equipped with a sick bay and ships carrying more than 125 passengers had to have a doctor aboard. Penalties were provided for infringements and non-compliance.⁴¹ Article 17 defined who was an *emigrant*: “Will be deemed an emigrant any passenger who does not eat at the table of the captain or officers and who pays the price of his passage, meals included, the sum of less than 30 francs per week on a sailing vessel and less than 50 francs on a steamship”.⁴² First class passengers were not classified as ‘emigrants’ under this regulation and were not included in the enumeration.

In 1884, an information service for prospective emigrants was organized. Agents were required, according to the Circular of 27 December 1884, to fill out questionnaires concerning the possible countries of emigration indicating “the standard of living, climate and produce, categories of jobs available, and chances of success and the future for emigrants.”⁴³ But it was not until 1890 that an emigration service office was established in Antwerp under the direction of Eugène Venesoen. His commission was to supervise the activities of both shipping companies and emigration agents. Legislation ensued regulating safety equipment and ventilation on

board vessels (1891), fixing the rates for ocean fares (1892), inspection of water supplies (1895), and forbidding the acceptance of offers of free passages (1897).⁴⁴ Officials drafted a formal list of all the registered agents and sub-agents. In 1894 there were no fewer than ninety-one registered names, including Hacault of Uccle, Bruneau of Marcinelle, Watelet of Charleroi and Destrée of Namur for emigrants destined for Western Canada. By 1894 the only steamship company that had not conformed to the ministerial regulations regarding the registration of sub-agents was the Red Star Line.⁴⁵

These regulations remained substantially unchanged until an update in February 1924. The rules stipulated more clearly that all agents had to be certified by their home government – in this case, the government of Canada. Moreover, no one could undertake the transport of emigrants without the consent of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels. In August 1926, the Belgian commissioner of emigration in Antwerp decided to interview all emigrants destined for Canada to be certain they had not been recruited illegally, or deceived by false promises. Canadian agents sometimes interpreted this as an attempt to control the flux of emigrants. By 1928 the Commissioner reported on “the difficult settlement and existence of our farmers in most Canadian regions.” He singled out the Canadian Pacific Railway and the steamship companies for “scandalously exaggerating in their publicity the rapid and lasting advantages that Canadian soil offers for agriculture.”⁴⁶ Belgian authorities were concerned not only about emigration but also about the welfare of its nationals who settled abroad.

Irregularities and Fraud

To protect emigrants from false promises and fraud both at the recruitment end in Belgium and at the employment end in Canada, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a special commission in Antwerp in 1873. The Ministry also created a special information bureau at the Musée Commercial de l'Etat in Brussels with eight provincial branches in Antwerp, Arlon, Bruges, Ghent, Hasselt, Liège, Mons, and Namur. It did not promote emigration. Rather, the objective was “to acquit itself strictly of the duty of protection which behooves it when it permits citizens to inform themselves on the resources offered by different countries open to colonization.”⁴⁷ In 1905, the Ministry published a pamphlet titled *Emigration Canada*, to keep readers informed of the situation abroad.

Problems did occur with individuals and companies: agents, sub-agents, overzealous self-styled recruiters, swindlers and circumventors. Some may have been well-intentioned, but they operated outside normal channels and in violation of emigration regulations. In 1897, for example, one Charles Van Brabant, a farmer in St. Alphonse, wrote articles for newspapers in Ghent urging people to use his services to acquire land in Manitoba. He posed as an official agent for the Manitoba government, asserting that there were over five hundred Belgian farm families around St. Alphonse, when in fact there were about fifty. The clergy called his bluff when the Société Saint-Raphaël said that he had no ties with them. The provincial governor of Antwerp further confused matters when he said he had received at least seventeen letters from Van Brabant, posing as local land agent, in which he recounted the hardships experienced by many farmers in Manitoba. The case was closed when the would-be agent allegedly served a jail term for theft.⁴⁸

Organizations were as liable as individuals to violate proper procedures. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs contacted the Canadian immigration agent, Tréau de Coeli, to protest that large posters had been printed and small handbills distributed with the headline “Why remain slaves in your country when you can be free and independent?” Tréau de Coeli distanced himself from this offensive approach by affirming that either return men, “farmer delegates,” or sub-agents of transportation companies with Liberal party connections, who were paid one hundred dollars a month and expenses, were responsible. Agents and sub-agents had their own problems. The paper *Le Canada* reported that when workers reached Western Canada they often found that the companies that had hired them failed to honour their contract terms, even renegeing on agreed wages to be paid.⁴⁹

Just how common such misrepresentations were can be gauged from the thick files of Belgian Ministry of Justice investigations turned over to Foreign Affairs in Brussels. The motivation in two cases, for example, remains unclear. An agent’s activities in Charleroi were contested by a large firm for whom he had previously worked when he was accredited by another company. Another agent who had successfully helped sixty-one immigrants between 1904 and 1907 suddenly found his license renewal application denied in 1908 on grounds of unspecified “bad behaviour.”⁵⁰ Clarence de Sola in Montreal complained that the consulate “has been crowded with indigent Belgians seeking employment, many of them in

a state of starvation.” He added that many were immigrants “induced to come here by alluring promises held out to them by Steamship and Immigration agents.”⁵¹ There does appear to have been some consistency in judicial pursuit. An applicant in La Louvière was refused a licence to work for the firm of Fédor Berns in 1905 because previously he had been “in the employ of several emigration firms and had been dismissed by them for incorrect actions.” Another agent convicted of illicit emigration work in 1907 was identified and denied a licence when he reapplied in 1913. Yet another was apprehended when one of his clients deserted and he tried to sue him.⁵²

The appointment of agents was limited also. In 1914, a public servant at Passchendaele was told he could not be licensed as an agent for Red Star Line because of his government position. An individual from Montignies-sur-Sambre was informed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that he could be accredited only as a company and he would have to provide 40,000 francs security. This drew an outraged response:

Lex and lex, all Belgians are equal before the law, consequently all the agencies which I have cited in my letter of 25 February last, did they deposit the said caution-money?

In 1920, a Belgian employed as a translator at the American embassy in Brussels, who used his position to recruit emigrants, asked for an “open license” to carry on recruitment. He was told he would have to act through an accredited firm.⁵³

Pursuits for alleged fraudulent practices increased in the 1920s. In 1924, the firm Aimé Gyselbrecht & Frères of Ghent, which circulated information for the Union Ticket Office, Red Star Line, White Star Line, Canadian Pacific Steamships and United States Line, was subject to questioning about one of its agents:

The continuous acceptance by them of travellers brought by this person, without his being provided with their regular authorization confirmed by you [Foreign Affairs], constitutes a transgression of Article 14 of the Regulation of 25 February 1924, formerly Article 16 of the Regulation of 2 December 1905.

In the papers seized by Justice officials was found a telegram from a M. Martin in Redvers, Saskatchewan, requesting that men be sent out, this in contravention of emigration regulations.⁵⁴

The lines of communication were sometimes complex. A licensed agent of Cunard Lines hired sub-agents to help him recruit. Although this was not a direct infringement of any law or regulation, he was dismissed in 1926 on the orders of a provincial governor. The following year, an agent of Canadian Pacific Railways was dismissed for recruiting in another agent's territory. The railway company's activities were thwarted in another area when its candidate was refused permission "as long as he remains a tavern-keeper." More serious was the dismissal of another of their agents for delivering "in return for handsome payment, false work contracts for Canada." The White Star Line was no more fortunate when its agent in Ghent for emigrants bound for Canada was tried and convicted of infraction of the regulations and swindling.⁵⁵ The Belgian Ministries of Justice and Foreign Affairs were vigilant in their efforts to protect their nationals.

Another scam that came to light was the creation of clubs and companies to promote clandestine emigration. In 1919, a Société Belge de Colonisation tried to lure Belgians in Western Canada to sunny Florida. The consul in Calgary personally knew of two settlers who had been deceived and had returned penniless. He warned a prospective client: "Inform yourself first of all if this society is really Belgian. Then, who are the people heading up this company. It is not sufficient for an organization to have a Belgian name but to be assured it is also necessary that the directors be not only honourable people but also people with first hand knowledge of the country and have business experience."⁵⁶ In 1926 it became known that Italian, Polish and other nationals in Belgium had paid sums of up to two hundred francs "on the false promise of acquiring jobs as miners or farm workers in Canada on two year contracts" through the good offices of the Teaching Club of one Oscar Van Slype. The Canadian Immigration Office in Antwerp informed the authorities that it had no relations with this club or its owner. Van Slype was convicted in Brussels in May 1927 of having defrauded at least 737 persons.⁵⁷ At the same time, two directors of the Belgian Express International Travel Office were arrested on charges of arranging the fraudulent entry of emigrants from Canada into the United States. They avoided conviction on the legal technicality that "they had not sent persons to a transatlantic country in

second and third class who settled without hope of returning.”⁵⁸ It was reaffirmed that emigration officials did not exercise any control over first class passengers.

Letters of inquiry about attractive job offers in Canada circulated by the Butterfly Publicity Company came from several Walloon towns. The *Journal de Charleroi* carried several of its public announcements, indicating that the costs for a passport and ocean passage would be paid by writing to Charles Linder in Montreal. A circular letter boasted:

We have the pleasure of announcing that you have been chosen to come to work in Canada ... in Canada, French is spoken, life is beautiful, cost of living is cheap, salaries are high. the hours of work are short. – *Yves Perrin, Director Charles Duval, President*

In 1929 the Commissioner for Emigration in Antwerp advised the Minister of Foreign Affairs that “it is important to put an end to these shifty transactions of the said swindler.” But one of the agents of the Butterfly Publicity scheme, Albert Desterbecq, was not completely deterred from his ‘despicable ways.’ In April 1932 he was convicted of false representation and illegally sending eleven workers to Canada.⁵⁹

Reputable companies could also become caught up in emigration scandals. Several sub-agents of the Red Star Line were suspected of organizing a fraudulent emigration from Canada into the United States. The Commissioner for Emigration in Antwerp was advised that it was necessary to “show ourselves very prudent in our dealings with the American authorities” for some unstated reason. However, Canadian companies were not immune to criticism:

On the other hand, I was able to conclude that the majority of Belgians who left fraudulently for the United States of America were carriers of cards of introduction from the CNR. You will want in future to show yourself particularly severe towards emigrants carrying the said cards which it seems to me are too readily provided. You must draw to the attention of the Red Star Line the responsibility it bears in this matter, the CNR not being authorized to sign on and transport emigrants in Belgium.

The issue had developed in 1924 out of allegations concerning the operations of a company operated by Van den Abeele and the suit Louis Van Ouidenhoven brought in its defence against the Commissioner of Emigration. By 1927 the investigation focussed on Maurice Wallecan of the Red Star Line. None of these proceedings did much to enhance the image of Canadian recruiters.⁶⁰

Société Saint-Raphaël

In 1888 a group of Catholic lay persons organized the Société Belge de l'Archange Raphaël, based on the German *Raphaëls-Verein*,⁶¹ to direct devout emigrants to established parishes in North and South America. Count Frédéric Louis Walbott de Bassenheim, as secretary, was a leading architect of this project for Catholic *encadrement* of emigrants. He wrote to the rector of St. Boniface College to have a local representative named for Western Canada.⁶² Father Allard, the Grand Vicar of the archdiocese, informed T. A. Bernier, mayor of St. Boniface and Superintendent of Catholic public schools in Manitoba, who was seeking support for the schooling of the deaf and dumb, that there was a Belgian society “whose objective is to direct a current of Catholic emigration our way.” Bernier speculated about the possibility of combining his project with the Belgian outreach.

It seems to me that the matter is not impossible, and if this meeting of forces took place would it not become easy to open new parishes in order to occupy new zones, where we could develop our community? Would it not be possible to offer as a first nucleus for these new colonies this orphanage which might at the same time be an agricultural and industrial institution to which we would join an establishment for the deaf and dumb.⁶³

Negotiations were slow so, in the meantime, Taché had Bernier appointed on a federal mission to Europe. His appointment to the Senate followed shortly thereafter.

The Société Saint-Raphaël asked for and received complete access to the port of Antwerp for its agents who booked emigrants into reputable hotels and assisted them with their transport and baggage. However, it did not provide travel loans or recruit colonists or clergy. As a charitable

association, the Société Saint-Raphaël was exempt from government regulations governing emigration. Its task was limited to “enlightening the emigrant, protecting him and furnishing him with all the information it disposed of and which could be useful in his settling abroad.” The response to the Red Star Line accusation that the society competed with it in the emigration business, was that the society acted “as a committee of vigilance ... inspired solely by charity.”⁶⁴ There is some evidence that the society was so thorough in warning about the difficulties, deceptions and hardships that might be encountered that as many as three-quarters of those seeking information were discouraged from emigrating.⁶⁵

Another aspect of the society’s work was emigrant reception in Montreal. Father Léon Jean Dehon, founder of the order of the Priests of the Sacred Heart, opened a committee for the assistance of Belgian emigrants in Montreal in April 1896. The Société Saint-Raphaël took charge of this work. This followed the visit to Manitoba by Louis Hacaault in 1892, sponsored by the society to which he reported. An information booklet was prepared for distribution.⁶⁶ An office was opened in Le Havre. Father Frédéric D’Heurter acted as agent in Liverpool and was in contact with the agents of the German Raphaëls-Verein in Hamburg, Bremen, Rotterdam and Amsterdam.

Ferdinand Van Bruyssel informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the society was not the proper vehicle for the diffusion of information to emigrants:

It acts in conjunction with the clergy whose tendencies in the recruiting of colonists as also in the manner of regrouping them at their destination deviates completely from the rules that should inspire public agencies.⁶⁷

In the 1920s the Belgian branch of the Société Saint-Raphaël was re-organized by the congregation of Josephites of Grammont under the patronage of Cardinal Mercier and Bishop Seghers of Ghent. By this time, official government agencies had taken over most of the supervision of emigration. Future criticisms would not be directed so much at clerical intervention as to civic inequities. Unlike the French, Belgians abroad could not vote and they did not receive their pensions abroad. Moreover, the children of emigrants were called up for military service and if they did not respond they were deemed deserters.⁶⁸

Fact-Finding Missions

There were agencies in Belgium interested in the economic prospects for emigrants.⁶⁹ The initial fact-finders were the consular staff, part of an overseas network reporting back to Brussels on social and economic prospects for investment, trade and settlement.⁷⁰ Jesse Joseph, who had commercial connections in London and who had participated in a committee exploring the economic prospects of the St. Lawrence waterway, became honorary consul at Montreal on 14 November 1850.⁷¹ At the time, the British Government conducted the external affairs of the British North American colonies. The consul in Montreal reported in 1856:

The emigrants who are factory workers can find a job upon arrival and work is also abundant during the summer months. Bricklayers, brickmakers, carpenters, smiths, painters, tin-smiths, gas workers, farmers, etc. are in demand as is also the case for most professions....

Emigrants arriving by way of the St. Lawrence River are not exposed to the problems, deceptions and the misleading information so common at New York and along the inland routes leading from that port to the West.⁷²

In September 1885, the Belgian government named Ferdinand Van Bruyssel its chief of mission, with the title of consul general, to promote economic ties with Canada.⁷³ The network of consulates spread into Western Canada thereafter with the initial offices opening in Calgary in 1888 and Vancouver in 1897. Consuls were appointed at Winnipeg in 1901, at Prince Albert in 1906, and Regina and Edmonton in 1908. To promote settlement in southern Saskatchewan, a consular office operated at Forget from 1908 to 1915, when it was transferred to Manor, where it functioned until 1921.

On the basis of consular reports, the Belgian government constantly warned prospective emigrants of the hardships, deceptions, financial costs and uncertain future they might face in leaving their homeland.

In 1887 the *Société d'immigration française* sent its secretary, August Bodard, accompanied by Georges Kaiser, a Belgian engineer and Professor of Industrial Geography at the University of Louvain, on an investigative tour of Western Canada. Bodard stated that the objective of his society

was to change the demography of the region so that Manitoba would once again become “a great French-speaking country.” He projected a bloc settlement of four hundred Belgian families near La Broquerie, east of the fertile Red River valley. Kaiser, who published his impressions in *Au Canada* (Bruxelles, 1897), found the soil conditions fertile and winters not too terrifying, but he observed that there were natural disasters such as droughts and early and late frosts to contend with from time to time. He expressed his complete faith in Bodard’s project, especially his devotion “to the Catholic faith and the colonisation of Manitoba by immigrants of Latin race.” In Belgium, meanwhile, Paul Watelet of Charleroi, who was the delegate of the company, expressed serious doubts that two hundred settlers could be recruited.⁷⁴ Watelet, who was under investigation for using letterheads suggesting he was paid by the Canadian government and steamship companies to recruit immigrants, personally accompanied five groups of emigrants as far as Liverpool. In 1891 he gave up his position with the *Société d’immigration française* and left for the United States.⁷⁵

Francophone Catholic immigration was also an objective of Archbishop Taché of St. Boniface. He attempted to interest the Countess de Bruges de Gerpinnes, without success, to sponsor a bloc settlement. When he contacted the Société Saint-Rapâël in Bruges, Count Louis Walbott de Bassenheim, its secretary, informed the archdiocese that such a project would require as sponsor a priest fluent in both Flemish and French.⁷⁶ Shortly thereafter, Quebec’s famed colonizing priest, the abbé Antoine Labelle, visited Belgium and met with members of the society and also with a conservative Catholic journalist of the *Courrier de Bruxelles*, Louis Hacault. Labelle convinced Hacault to visit Western Canada. Hacault was favourably impressed by the small Belgian communities already implanted in southern Manitoba; also he was deeply moved by the apparent need for Catholic francophone settlers in the province to redress in some measure the religiolinguistic imbalance. In 1892 he brought his family to the farming community of Bruxelles in the hill country of southern Manitoba reminiscent of the Belgian Ardennes. Here he took up his pen in defence of francophone Catholic rights and aspirations. His *Notes de Voyage au Canada en 1890* became a powerful propaganda piece and was widely distributed in his homeland. He made an attempt through another pamphlet to interest the Count Walbott de Bassenheim to launch a colonization project.⁷⁷

In 1897 the consul general in Montreal decided to visit the Belgian settlements in southern Manitoba to report first hand on their progress and on the prospects for future immigrants. His report laid particular stress on soil conditions.

In general, the soil in Manitoba is of unusual fertility.... It is, moreover, very easy to cultivate; serious colonists at Bruxelles and St. Alphonse have declared to me that a man alone can seed and harvest 50 acres of land without undue labour. He will only require help during about ten days at harvest time.⁷⁸

This information, combined with the fact that homesteads were still available, would be attractive to Flemish farmers on their small tenant holdings which could barely support their usually large families.

When Archbishop Langevin of St. Boniface attended the general chapter of the Oblates in Belgium in 1898, he met a certain Abbé C. Delouche who was in touch with businessmen interested in emigration and agricultural settlement. In fact, it was a group of Antwerp financiers, headed by a certain J. Wégimont, who organized a *Compagnie d'exploitations coloniales et industrielles* in February 1899 to explore further possibilities in Western Canada. They planned to buy up tracts of land in Manitoba on which to settle farmers who could there "preserve their faith and find at all times and everywhere an assured support to sustain their material and spiritual needs."⁷⁹ Archbishop Langevin made the necessary overtures to the Minister of the Interior in Ottawa and to officials of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company in Montreal, while Abbé Delouche devoted himself to a reception centre for emigrants in transit through Antwerp and the publication of *L'Oeuvre des Emigrants à Anvers. Projet. Rapport* (1901).⁸⁰

In 1900 a contingent headed by Louis Bareel, an agricultural engineer, accompanied by R. A. Demmé, who had spent fifteen years in Canada, visited the West with a view to assessing prospects for the *Société agricole et industrielle du Manitoba* being organized in Antwerp by the aforementioned group of financiers. The Oblate missionaries were to act as recruiting agents, the cardinal-archbishop of Malines gave the scheme his blessing, and state approval was assured by the conservative Catholic Minister of State, Auguste Beernaert. However, the consul general warned that the plan was doomed to failure so long as the clergy were involved because, in the context of appeals for federal remedial legislation in the

Manitoba School Question, the investors “had less chance than ever of obtaining Canadian government subsidies because for a long time religious corporations had mounted a systematic opposition to the government.”⁸¹

The Commissioner for Immigration in Winnipeg assigned Léon Roy as guide and interpreter for this group and convinced them to tour the northern parklands as far as Prince Albert and Edmonton in the North-West Territories. Roy later reported that the scouts had been impressed but they also appeared to have interests other than settlement in mind.

They found all the Belgian settlers very prosperous and I had the assurance from them that they would strongly recommend this country to their people as a proper place for immigration. They also told me that it was the intention to form a strong syndicate who would invest money in land in order to encourage cheese and butter-making and to facilitate generally the progress of settlers.⁸²

The Bareel group did report favourably on its return to Europe and Tréau de Coeli, the Canadian immigration agent in Antwerp, was convinced that some emigration to Argentina and Brazil at the time would be diverted to Western Canada. However, the Antwerp businessmen for whom Bareel had been acting were more interested in land speculation than in a colonization project.⁸³

Our most important informant, however, was the Vice-Consul in Ottawa, E. Robert De Vos, who had also joined the expedition, gathered his own information, not just about agriculture but also on mining and investment possibilities. He interviewed settlers and the consular agents A.J.H. Dubuc in Winnipeg, J. M. Whitehead in Vancouver, and T. R. Smith in Victoria. In a detailed closely written 149-page manuscript report, De Vos made some pertinent financial observations:

One can conclude from the preceding remarks that in Canada it is as possible for those who possess nothing as well as for those who have brought some capital to succeed. It is generally said that the settlers who did not have the means to buy a farm immediately and who had to gather up dollar by dollar the necessary amount to this end were those who succeeded best. This does not imply evidently that money by its nature prevented

success, but simply proves that the person who did not possess it upon arrival, had to pass through a hard period of preparation before being able to think of establishing himself, and that by working for someone else he familiarized himself with the usages and customs and the characteristics of the country and consequently had the advantage of investing his own money only after he had learned in what manner one could produce the best results.

A good deal depends on how one uses one's money. The settler usually finds advantage, if the sum is more or less substantial, to deposit it in a bank and start off quite modestly. In that case life will be a little less comfortable than when he starts in a big way, but the first two years must be considered as a transition period, an apprenticeship, which often occurs at the settler's expense and in which the latter risks seeing all his small fortune founder if he does not proceed with calm and prudence.⁸⁴

It is evident that the consul general was impressed by the De Vos report. He wrote:

Our compatriots who desire to emigrate to Canada will find numerous practical and useful pieces of information on colonization [settlement] as organized in the Dominion, on the location and respective value of different agricultural regions in the west, on their crops, cattle raising, industries, etc.⁸⁵

All vice-consuls were asked henceforth to send regular reports on agriculture, mining, business and investment prospects on a regular basis.

In 1904, R. A. Demmé accompanied three bankers – Joseph Brunner of Brussels, E. Jacobs of Antwerp and P. G. West representing several French banks – on an inspection tour of the West in the interests of a newly organized *Syndicat d'études canadien*. They were favourably impressed by the fact that relatively poor emigrants “have managed to become owners of large farms” and “appear prosperous.” It was significant that one of the bankers represented the Antwerp investment firm *Maison Frederik Jacobs et Fils*, that would become an important player in future developments. The syndicate entered into negotiations with the Canadian government for the acquisition of 200,000 acres along the

Alberta-Saskatchewan territorial boundary. The project never matured when it became clear that officials in Ottawa expected the Belgians to establish “model farms for practical instruction in agricultural procedures and to organize in Belgium and France propaganda centres to make known the great advantages of these vast and fertile regions,” to build churches and schools, and even to recruit “medical doctors who speak French.”⁸⁶ The syndicate proceeded to organize the Alberta Company which bought up 130,000 acres of land and then turned its attention to mortgaging and industrial investment.⁸⁷

In the 1920s the Belgian authorities again became curious about actual economic prospects and the situation of its emigrants as demands for workers for the sugar beet industry, dairying and market gardening increased. In 1929, on the eve of the stock market crash and the Great Depression that followed, the Minister of Foreign Affairs entrusted Louis Varlez, professor at the University of Ghent and former head of the Service des Migrations at the International Labour Office, and his nephew Lucien Brunin with the mission of “visiting certain Belgian centres and studying the conditions of immigration and colonization in Canada.”⁸⁸ In the West their expenses were paid by the provincial governments, all of which had an interest in attracting qualified immigrants with some capital, and the Canadian Pacific Railway Company, much troubled by allegations of false representations made to potential immigrants. Their report added little new information but served to reassure the authorities in Brussels. A typical section read:

The Belgian farmer who emigrates to Canada usually knows what region of the country interests him, and where he wants to settle. This is because the propaganda service of the Canadian government, like that of the Canadian Pacific and other companies with land for sale, is very well organized. In Europe, the emigrant will usually have received a descriptive atlas of the various Canadian provinces indicating their special crops, life-style, climate and opportunities. The only reproach that can be levelled at this abundant and basically useful literature is that it depicts only the bright side of things and by well-turned phrases stirs the imagination of the rather unsophisticated and unprepared reader. But the Belgian emigrant, especially the Flemish peasant, is usually not satisfied with such mere vague

promises. He will come only if he has precise information from a brother, a relative, or another inhabitant from the same village. Only then will he decide to leave and usually with the intention of settling near the place where his friend has established himself successfully. The result is that one encounters veritable Belgian centres in Canada, and it is in these areas that our compatriots experience the best success. The emigrant who does not know where to go to settle will find, moreover, a whole group of organizations ready to provide him with information concerning the region's potential and the properties that are available.⁸⁹

It was all that could be expected from a carefully orchestrated tour of the chief centres with Belgian settlers. They had no opportunity to visit the more isolated farmsteads, prairie villages, coal mines, bush camps, and ranches. The Great Depression and the terrible drought that soon ravaged the prairies made for little optimism and, as one family reported to the consul, "if it wasn't for the Atlantic, we'd come crawling back to Belgium on our knees."⁹⁰

Belgian consulates in the major centres remained sources of information and direction for prospective emigrants. Two examples taken from the consular files for Calgary are illuminating. A Belgian doctor in China, who wanted to know what his chances of success were in Western Canada in 1917 was told that there did not appear to be any shortage of medical practitioners in the major cities, although a skilful surgeon could always expect to be well remunerated. Then the consul added an encouraging note: "A Belgian doctor would have a better chance than another because he would have the sympathy and confidence of the public, but he evidently would have to justify this sympathy and this confidence. It is quite necessary to speak English perfectly."⁹¹ On the other hand, a teacher with a wife and children who desired to leave Belgium in 1919 was not encouraged to emigrate, even if the salaries were supposedly better in Canada. He was told that farmers and labourers had good chances of success but teachers needed to keep two facts in mind. Firstly, "the cost of living, even in normal times, is considerably more expensive." Secondly, a good command of English is indispensable.⁹² Such advice could lead to successful implantation and to averting disappointment, even disaster.

Overview

In the late nineteenth century, Belgians received mixed messages concerning emigration to Canada. The usual push factors stimulating individual and family migration existed prior to 1914 and in the decade immediately following World War I, especially in Flanders. In the post-World War II years, young urban professional Walloons found Canada attractive but not the rural western regions. Government policy never encouraged emigration but regulations were enacted to protect the individuals and families who chose to venture abroad from dangerous and unsanitary travel conditions, over-zealous recruiting agents and misleading contractual arrangements. Even so, the authorities found it necessary to control advertising, clandestine operations and fraudulent schemes. The Société Saint-Raphaël sought to direct and protect emigrants in the port cities but the Belgian government preferred secular agencies to religious organizations. In addition to the consular service that reported to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels through the embassy in London, eight fact-finding missions visited Western Canada to ascertain the prospects for further emigration and the requisites for successful settlement, also to assess the extent of integration of Belgian nationals in a new environment.

