



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

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*Communist leader Tim Buck arriving at Nordegg mine, 1935. (Glenbow NA-2635)*  
*Many Belgian coal miners turned to Communist organizers to improve their working conditions.*

## CHAPTER VI: THE MINING FRONTIER AND PACIFIC RIM

As Belgians moved onto the third prairie level, the foothills of the Rockies, and British Columbia, they became aware of opportunities in mining, notably the collieries. In the Far West, activity began as a coastal intrusion moving inland along the Fraser riverine entrance. The Fraser gold rush attracted European attention after 1858 but coal-mining on Vancouver Island, which flourished from 1876 to 1910 attracted Walloon workers with experience in its extraction. Western Canada, perceived in certain quarters as a land of unbounded resources, was likely to possess rich mineral deposits waiting to be discovered. In 1882, the Dominion government began selling coal rights in districts believed to be likely centres of a future coal industry. This interest in coal was based on the need for anthracite coal by the railway companies for their steam locomotives and the demand for bituminous coal for domestic heating. Exploration tended "to confirm the opinion that the coal fields of the North-West may be regarded as practically inexhaustable."<sup>1</sup> The important mining areas that attracted Belgian workers and some investors were Turtle Mountain, Estevan, Crowsnest Pass, Lethbridge, Nordegg and Drumheller. In all these areas, as throughout North America, between 1880 and 1910, mining technology changed with the introduction of undercutting machinery and the extensive use of blasting. The degree of experience and training previously demanded of workers was less important and the supply of unskilled immigrant labour grew. In these circumstances, management tended to downgrade safety precautions.<sup>2</sup> In addition to

the dangers associated with mining, there were the hardships of life in isolated company towns, the loneliness and alienation of foreign workers in a strange new land. The proliferation of taverns and brothels in mining communities were symptoms of a serious social dislocation. Even a respectable company such as the CPR proposed on one occasion to relocate the brothels of Cranbrook as a service to the community.<sup>3</sup>

The experiences in the various mining communities were intimately related to industrial unions and socialist organizations, as had been the case in Belgium. By the end of the nineteenth century, there were attempts in Western Canada to build a broad-based working-class movement by the Western Federation of Miners. But the combined power of the mining companies and the provincial and Dominion governments thwarted their efforts. The mainstream churches also tended to support management and the established order.<sup>4</sup> Mining was arduous work in unpleasant and unsafe conditions. Manual labour with hand tools was the chief means of production. Wages were based on contract coal tonnage. Management came mainly from Great Britain but Belgian skilled workers, especially engineers, were in great demand.<sup>5</sup> Seniority was virtually unknown as employees were hired and fired at will, child labour was not uncommon, mines operated erratically in response to demands for coal, and maiming and fatal accidents were all too prevalent. The immigrant workers were in a difficult position as they sometimes could not communicate with management, so were afraid of losing their jobs and therefore often deferred to their bosses. Often isolated because of their mother tongue, their traditions, their race and religion, they avoided confrontations with management as much as possible. Confrontations could lead to dismissal, to eviction from company housing, or even deportation as “criminals.” That confrontations did occur was in itself a testimonial to the abysmal working conditions to which they were subjected.<sup>6</sup>

On Vancouver Island early settlement was more urban-oriented than rural-based. The first Belgians that arrived on Vancouver Island were missionaries from the Oregon Territory, many recruited through the American College in Louvain.<sup>7</sup> The Sisters of Ste. Anne, who came from Quebec, opened a girls’ school, and the Oblate missionaries started a mission at Esquimalt. In 1863 St. Louis College was founded for the education of the boys in the small colony. As early as 1858, the Francophone population seemed sufficiently numerous to induce Count Paul de Garro to launch the newspaper *Le Courrier de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*. He abandoned

the project after nine issues, realizing there were few subscribers and advertisers. In 1890 Belgians became involved in the development of the agricultural potential of the Okanagan valley which developed into the most prosperous fruit-growing area in Western Canada.<sup>8</sup>

### *Klondike Gold Rush*

Reports of gold deposits in the Yukon reached Ottawa in 1886. A decade later, the discovery of gold at Bonanza Creek incited the Dominion government to put in place regulations that imposed “a tradition of authority, of rules and regulations established from outside” the immediate community.<sup>9</sup> An order-in-council of 18 January 1898 entitled any person over eighteen years of age to stake creek or bench claims after obtaining a free miner’s certificate, to fish, hunt and cut timber for actual necessities of food and shelter. The Belgian community in St. Boniface became particularly interested in the Klondike and a number of men planned to proceed by way of Edmonton because it was the closest place to the Yukon by railroad. The longer “water route” down the Mackenzie was more practical than the shorter all-Canadian “overland route.”<sup>10</sup> Edmonton became the important supply centre for groups setting off for the gold fields. Lodging and information were available at the Roman Catholic mission at St. Albert. In the summer of 1898, Adolphe, Camille and Alphonse Van Wallegghem of St. Boniface and Hector Buydens of Swan Lake set off for Edmonton, proceeded to Athabasca Landing on a gumbo mud road, down the Athabasca and Slave rivers by paddle-wheel to Great Slave Lake, then down the Mackenzie river to Fort McPherson. The three Van Wallegghem brothers worked for mining operators placer mining, and once they had enough money and nuggets, they descended the Yukon river to Skagway. From there they took shipping to Seattle and were back in St. Boniface in the autumn of 1900, much wiser and a little richer.<sup>11</sup>

Several Belgians decided that in addition to looking for gold they could profit by bringing up a herd of cattle to the Klondike. Edouard Fearon of Maple Creek drove a large herd of beef cattle over the Whitehorse Pass to Dawson City. A local historian noted: “Fresh beef was in the nature of a God-send to a mining community and they gladly paid a dollar a pound for Mr. Fearon’s beef, which seemed to have dropped mysteriously from the clouds.”<sup>12</sup> The most spectacular cattle drive was undertaken by Charles and Peter Bossuyt, accompanied by Jules Van Wallegghem, Jules

Turenne and M. Lafrance. They left St. Boniface on 2 June 1898 with 150 head of cattle, four hundred sheep and fifty ponies. Charles Bossuyt had invested heavily to buy these animals for the venture, a move that greatly disappointed the abbé Willems because Bossuyt was no longer able to pay off the debt of the parish of St. Alphonse.<sup>13</sup> Among their many adventures was the purchase of a sawmill at Rapide-des-Cinq-Doigts so they could build barges to proceed with their cargoes. The party of twenty-two individuals arrived at destination on 23 October 1898, a trip that had taken five months. Charles Bossuyt and his daughter Marie, known locally as “Klondike Eva,” ran a store but this business went bankrupt when many of the gold seekers were unable to pay the large bills they accumulated. He then became a butcher, remained in Dawson City, and appears to have gambled away much of his earnings.<sup>14</sup>

By the summer of 1899, the area had been virtually panned out and only a few still found the gold they sought. Still the lure of the Klondike stirred the Belgian community in St. Boniface. Florent Boone, Jules Decraene and Constant Defort decided to try their luck but they returned by the following year, quite disappointed that they had gone down too late.<sup>15</sup> They had also failed to consider that “supplies and all that is required [for success] are very expensive.”<sup>16</sup> The day of the individual miner and the romance of great fortunes was short-lived and was making way for a new era of large-scale mining, dredge-working and hydraulicing. The few Belgians involved in the Klondike Gold Rush were unaware of its wider repercussions, such as alleged “gross immorality” in Dawson City,<sup>17</sup> the ruin of many adventurers “misled into a vast wilderness,”<sup>18</sup> and complaints about “the aboriginal population who were mistreated, robbed and insulted.”<sup>19</sup>

### *Vancouver Island Collieries*

Three factors led to the arrival of a contingent of Belgian miners from Hainaut province in 1888 to the coal mines of Vancouver Island. Firstly, there were serious economic and political crises in Belgium. The region experienced a severe economic depression after 1875 marked by industrial shutdowns, unemployment, and a rising cost of living. In 1886, when violence erupted in the Charleroi region and desperate men and women pillaged the chateaux of the mine owners, cruel repression followed, leaving the best alternative for many miners from Roux, Couillet and

Jumet to pursue an offer from the Knights of Labour to seek employment abroad in Pennsylvania, Nova Scotia, or British Columbia. François Carpent, one of the leaders of the workingmen's union accused in the "Grand Complot," went to see Paul Watelet in Thuin to arrange for emigration to Canada.<sup>20</sup> The second factor was the demand on Vancouver Island for experienced mine workers. Coal was first mined on the island in 1836 to supply coastal steamers. Among the miners employed by the Hudson's Bay Company was a Scotsman named Robert Dunsmuir who, upon discovering a rich seam near Nanaimo in the 1850s, established his own mine and eventually built the company town of Wellington. Initially, workers might not have found the conditions in the Dunsmuir mines as bad as those from which they came. They would later change their opinion. Thirdly, there was a favourable image projected in Belgium of conditions in the Vancouver Island mines. Baron Etienne Hulot vaunted the mineral wealth of mainland British Columbia and the coal resources of Vancouver Island. In a travel book he wrote:

These coal deposits are the largest in the two Americas. Nanaimo, centre of the operations, situated across from New Westminster, will soon have the monopoly of coal sales on the Pacific coast.<sup>21</sup>

Hulot saw the advantage of monopolized control from the viewpoint of the employer, not the fear of the employees that it might encourage exploitation of the work force. Paul Watelet, immigration agent for the Bureau Central Canadien in Thuin, promised a group of workers whom he would accompany to Canada that they could expect a remuneration five or six times the amount paid in the Hainaut mines.<sup>22</sup> Watelet corresponded frequently with John Jessop, the federal government immigration agent in Victoria, where the official report was that the "labour market has been highly satisfactory for the greater part of the year. From midsummer to December every man able and willing to work had the opportunity to do so."<sup>23</sup>

Despite some negative comments and some troubling events, a flow of Belgian miners continued. Upon learning that Paul Watelet was bringing out more workers, Henri Devaux wrote from the mining town of Wellington to several Belgian newspapers warning that miners ought to beware of agents who "promise more butter than bread" because he

and his sons, like several compatriots, had spent two costly weeks without work upon arrival and subsequently had worked only sporadically. Four Belgians had just returned from job hunting in the Rockies where there was little permanent work available. Those thinking of emigrating “would do better to write to a friend in America rather than inquire of an agent.” They should be aware of expensive ocean passage and railway fares because the Dunsmuir collieries were “not disposed to send tickets, either free or to be refunded after arrival and getting to work.” The immigration officer in Victoria regretted this intransigence because Belgians were “a desirable class of people, sober, steady, industrious and moral.”<sup>24</sup>

In January 1899, an explosion at No. 5 pit of the Wellington mine killed seventy-seven miners, including four Belgian explosive experts. Robert Dunsmuir, as president of the provincial Executive Council, had successfully opposed in the provincial legislature amendments to the Mines Regulation Act that would have required monthly inspection. The coroner’s inquest blamed careless miners for the explosion and the miners in turn blamed the Chinese workers, who were at the very bottom of the wage scale.<sup>25</sup> A group of 150 Belgian workers decided at this point to organize their own Republican League, not to fight for better working conditions in Canada, but to support the Parti Socialiste-Républicain in Hainaut in opposition to the cooperative movement sponsored by the Parti Ouvrier Belge. They pledged they would:

... take a steamship and go directly to take up the struggle for the General Strike which will extend throughout Belgium by the exploited against the exploiters.<sup>26</sup>

A certain Joseph Geulette testified that compatriots had been forced to leave Belgium because they “were always hunted down like wild animals by Leopold II and his tax collectors.”

All these exiles because of miserable conditions swore to me that Belgian soil would never sully their feet before the time came for the Socialist Republicans to chase away the supporters of the tax collectors and before the coming of Universal Suffrage which will emancipate the People and provide us with the reforms necessary to resolve the great social problem.<sup>27</sup>



The anticlerical character of the movement was also indicated by the observation that instead of the “superstitions of a future life” direct political action in the present time was required. Nevertheless, at first, Belgian miners were not perceived by immigration officials as labour agitators and anticlerical syndicalists.

The opening of the Comox mine under Dunsmuir management would “ensure employment for all the Belgian miners” because of the favourable reports concerning “their work, care and economy in the use of explosives being one of their characteristics.” The 1889 report by John Jessop in Victoria was that they were doing “reasonably well.”

The best proof that they are contented with their prospects is that on the recommendation of those already in the collieries, many of their friends and relations are constantly arriving. Coming in small parties these miners, if steady, industrious and experienced, will find no difficulty in obtaining work in the Union colliery all through the incoming year.<sup>28</sup>

Not many months elapsed before Belgian miners became aware that many of the adverse working conditions experienced in southern Belgium also existed in British Columbia. A lockout at Wellington in January 1889 moved workers to form a Miners’ and Mine Labourers’ Protective Association in February to press for conditions similar to those enjoyed by many organized American miners. Following the death of Robert Dunsmuir in April, his widow Joan Dunsmuir, as sole owner of the company, now managed by son James, took a determined stand against union activity. On 17 May 1890, six hundred Nanaimo workers were joined by Wellington workers in a solidarity parade to win an eight-hour day. The work stoppage was countered by a lockout. On 30 May, eviction orders were issued, on Mrs. Dunsmuir’s orders, to families that lived in company cottages. The *Victoria Colonist* painted the picture of wild-eyed “foreign revolutionaries” ready to upset the established order and supported the plan to hire strike-breakers, or “scabs,” as replacement workers. By early August, fifty armed militiamen were sent in from Victoria because “a very excitable lot of men are the Belgians and there are very few constables.”<sup>29</sup> The lockout continued fifteen months until in November 1891 the workers felt obliged to accept work on Dunsmuir’s terms. Several Belgians, testifying before the British Columbia Legislative

Assembly's Select Committee on the Wellington strike, enumerated many serious grievances. Labour historian David Bercuson has contextualized the growing labour radicalism at this juncture:

Their struggle with the boss did not begin with the morning whistle and end when the shift was over, because the entire area was company property. They lived with the company every hour of the day and night. They were grouped together to face a common enemy above ground and kept close together to face the common danger of gas, coal dust, rockfalls, below ground. They were isolated in their lives, in their work and in their too often violent deaths.<sup>30</sup>

When James Dunsmuir became premier in 1900, the only labour response was political action. Five local socialist organizations were consolidated in 1902 into the Socialist Party of British Columbia. The following year, it succeeded in having two members elected to the legislature from the mining districts of Vancouver Island. Disgruntled miners organized a cell of the Western Federation of Miners, an American union based in Denver, that called strikes at the Extension mine at Ladysmith and at the Union mine near Comox. Dunsmuir closed the Extension mine and evicted miners from company housing. William Lyon Mackenzie King, as editor of the *Labour Gazette*, portrayed Dunsmuir as a “selfish millionaire who has become something of a tyrannical autocrat” bent on making “serfs of a lot of free men.” King was appointed secretary of the Royal Commission to Inquire into Industrial Disputes in the Province of British Columbia. The commissioners singled out Belgians as active organizers of protest marches and unionization drives.<sup>31</sup>

The Socialist Party members were re-elected to the legislature in 1904 and held the balance of power in the assembly, so they were able to extract amendments to the Coal Mines Regulations Act and to secure an eight-hour work day for the miners.<sup>32</sup> Dunsmuir remained firm in his views but the workers and their sympathizers saw themselves as “underpaid decent clean-faced miners” opposed by “villainous, bloodless owners.”<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, the honorary Belgian consul in Victoria, T. Smith, observed blandly that the Belgians in the province “are nearly all working in the collieries of Nanaimo: they are good workers and satisfy their bosses.” Most of his report consisted in comments on the extensive imports from

Belgium – cement, as used in the key bridge across the Fraser at New Westminster, iron and steel products for the railways in particular, and glass for general use. He noted that in addition to miners a few other specialized workers were immigrating, and they needed to be alerted to the fact that when coming on contract non-fulfillment of the conditions of employment on their part could result in imprisonment in Canada.<sup>34</sup> The report failed to describe the experience of the Belgian miners who by this time had decided to participate in the formation of a Syndicalist League of North America, whose objective was to set aside political organization in favour of “getting inside the labour movement” and employing the union to achieve a working-class “revolution.”

There was plenty of strike action as the miners fought the “coal barons” in Nanaimo, Ladysmith and Extension mines from September 1912 to 19 August 1914. The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), which had entered British Columbia in 1906 during a strike at an Ashcroft mine, backed the Vancouver Island miners and provided them with strike pay. Protest marches resulted in the provincial government sending in a thousand militiamen in the summer of 1913 “to restore order.” Numerous arrests followed and Belgians became active in the organization of a Miners Liberation League to seek the release of imprisoned workers, following what they described as a “state invasion” of working-class people by violent strike-breakers hired by the capitalists. It was a re-play of the violence of the 1880s in Hainaut province in their collective memory. The outbreak of World War I and the cessation of strike pay briefly ended the confrontations.<sup>35</sup> On 6 February 1915, the South Wellington colliery, where numerous Belgians worked, was suddenly deluged by water from an adjacent abandoned and flooded mine, drowning nineteen men. Six days before the disaster, a mine inspector had been assured that the abandoned mine was at least two hundred metres distant when in fact it was only a metre or so distant.<sup>36</sup> By 1919, most of the Belgian workers had left. Only fifty-four remained in mining along with four explosive experts who were likely employed by the coal mines.<sup>37</sup> Strikes resumed in the 1920s and workers won the right of collective bargaining but the employers refused to collect union dues for the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada, an affiliate of the Communist Party of Canada.<sup>38</sup>

We know little about the daily lives of these Belgian miners. Those who first came were described as “bachelor immigrants.” They appear to have been employed especially as engineers in charge of blasting and as

experienced workers in timbering the tunnels and hewing the coal. They were better paid than the drivers, pushers and cleaners. When families came they were housed by the company so that accommodations could become an instrument of control. Miners had to purchase their own lamps, work boots, and even explosive powder. Insurance against accidents was obtainable from the Ancient Order of Foresters but was very costly. There is no record of any women working in these coal mines, as was the case in Belgium at the time.<sup>39</sup> But coal miners' wives played an important role in supplementing family income through gardening and frugal management of the home. A cow, a few chickens and pigs could be raised on a five-acre lot.<sup>40</sup>

In Nanaimo, families saw the economic advantage of mining as an occupation in which boys would contribute to family income by working alongside a father. In 1877, education officials reported poor school attendance, truancy and lack of candidates for the high school entrance examination.

At an early age boys are able to earn in the mines (at employment requiring neither strength nor skill) almost as much wages as are given to adults in the Atlantic region. There is thus an inducement for parents to send their boys to work as soon as they are legally entitled to do so.<sup>41</sup>

Ten years earlier, the situation at Wellington had been linked directly to the instability and volatility of working conditions in the community.

Family difficulties, arising out of the unfortunate colliery strike and disputes, have seriously retarded school progress in the district during the year. The result has been a very large amount of irregularity, a low average, and little or no advancement among the pupils.<sup>42</sup>

In Vancouver Island mining communities there seemed little to be gained from schooling beyond basic literacy. From young adolescence, boys often worked alongside a father or neighbour. During a Legislative Inquiry in 1891, such a case was reported. Edmund Wilmer at Wellington admitted he employed an under-age son in the mine where he worked, but he denied cheating the boy of his wages. "After paying him \$2.50, I was

always making \$3 or \$4 myself – after paying the boy company wages.” Of course, the money may simply have gone into the family income, as was customary for both this occupational group and Belgian family practice at the time.<sup>43</sup> These miners were not very occupationally or socially mobile in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

### *Small Prairie Mines*

The fact that rich gold lodes were discovered in northern Ontario, and reportedly at a later date in the Duck Mountains of Manitoba and near Edmonton, stimulated the search for the shiny yellow metal but only poor quality, dusty lignite was found that served as a domestic fuel and became known popularly as “Souris coal.”<sup>44</sup> A certain Mr. Voden began extracting coal on his homestead in the Turtle Mountains of southwestern Manitoba in 1885 by sinking a vertical shaft twelve metres deep into lignite seams. Settlers could obtain mining permits to extract coal on their property in return for the payment to the government of ten cents per ton of lignite, twenty-five cents per ton for bituminous coal, and twenty cents per ton for anthracite.<sup>45</sup> The Manitoba Coal Company, formed in 1889 to develop regional mines, ceased operations after three years because no commercial quantities were discovered. Consul De Vos reported that Souris coal sold for \$3.75 a ton in Winnipeg, while the Estevan coal sold in Regina for \$3.50 a ton. Grain elevator operators in each village usually operated a coal shed where farmers and villagers could buy this coal.<sup>46</sup> In the 1930s, there was a second wave of excitement as modest mines were started in the Deloraine area. The Deloraine Coal Company, the Turtle Mountain Coal Company and the Goodlands Coal Company all aroused the hopes of the Belgian farmers in the area.

A contingent of nineteen Belgian miners, dissatisfied with their contracts in the Maritime provinces, headed for a mine operated by the Anthracite Coal Company west of Calgary. Consul General Van Bruyssel stopped them in Winnipeg because the company had closed down operations following a dispute between American and Canadian shareholders, leaving 250 men unemployed. He obtained reduced railway fares through the Canadian immigration authorities so the group could continue to the Vancouver Island mines.<sup>47</sup> By June 1892, the Anthracite Coal Company mine was back in operation and requested Van Bruyssel to recruit fifty experienced miners, but he warned recruits to sign contracts

guaranteeing their return fare in case of work stoppages. Another contingent of Belgian miners from New Brunswick that arrived in Calgary refused the work offered them by the Canadian Pacific Railway Company because of the inadequate housing provided. Consul Rouleau in Calgary did what he could to resolve the dispute. Foreign Affairs in Brussels was informed of the situation:

We had first offered them, following my approach to the Deputy Minister of the Interior in Ottawa, work in the mines of Canmore, Alberta, and they refused. They have been fed up to the present time by Mr. Rouleau [Consul in Calgary] and Mr. Pirmez, one of our ranching compatriots near Calgary.<sup>48</sup>

Coal-mining started around Willow Bunch, Coronach and Bengough in the 1870s, in the Estevan field, which included Bienfait and Roche Percée, in the early 1890s, and in the 1930s, strip mining was introduced at the Radville field, located between the Estevan and Willow Bunch fields. All these mines, over a hundred in number by 1940, found seasonal markets for home use. Mining companies tried to do most of their entry development work in the summer and the main extraction in the winter when some farmers sought seasonal employment. All of these areas had a sprinkling of Belgian settlers whose biographies indicate an interest in the coal deposits for their domestic purposes.<sup>49</sup>

Prairie mines began operation on a small scale and in a period when unions were scarcely organized. Miners worked ten-hour days in mine tunnels with barely room to stand, enduring frequent roof cave-ins because of rotting timbers, inadequate ventilation, and sometimes almost a half metre of water. The daily wage was only \$1.60 with no pay for such compulsory labour as laying track, timbering, clearing roof falls and pumping water. Company housing was very sub-standard. When miners went on strike at Bienfait to win recognition for the Mine Workers' Union of Canada, they decided to demonstrate their grievances in a parade to nearby Estevan. The mayor banned the demonstration, without informing the miners, and called on the RCMP to support the local police. On 29 September 1931, remembered as "Black Thursday," the mounted police with revolvers drawn broke up the parade and a riot ensued. The melee left three strikers dead and eleven injured, and five policemen injured. Wounded miners were refused treatment at the local hospital. Public opinion

in general attributed the violence to inexperienced police and unfounded official fear of a Communist coup. The Belgians were particularly cowed by the fact that Louis Revay, a compatriot, was convicted of unlawful assembly and was ordered deported to his homeland.<sup>50</sup> The Estevan “riot” did result in the companies involved agreeing to an eight-hour day and no unpaid labour. The miners did not win the right at this time to organize unions.

The dangers inherent in these early operations and the inadequate legislation governing them were prevalent across Western Canada. The Alberta Royal Commission on Coal Mining in 1935 asserted that since 1896 at least one thousand small mines had been opened “with little if any plant and practically no capital expenditure, often worked nothing more than a “gopher hole,” usually paid poor wages, and was generally in areas without taxes and royalties.”<sup>51</sup> The Canadian Block Coal Company, constituted in 1921 with a capital investment of a million Belgian francs for concessions obtained through an unnamed Belgian mining director residing in Calgary, left no trace in the official Belgian publication, *Annexes du Moniteur Belge*, after 1925.<sup>52</sup> There was little compensation for the families of victims of mine accidents. When Oscar Devolder was killed in a mine explosion at Fernie in August 1916, for example, the Belgian consul indicated he had no compensation fund and the company should be held responsible. When Arthur Vandorp was awarded inadequate compensation by the Western Collieries Limited for an accident at the Bellevue mine, the consul advised him to hire a lawyer if he believed he could obtain more.<sup>53</sup> A single miner who died intestate would have his property assigned to the province. When the widow of a miner killed at work asked the consulate for funds to be repatriated, there was little disposition to pay her travel expenses. It was suggested that she might be deported by Canadian authorities, at their expense, as an “undesirable” immigrant.<sup>54</sup>

### *Crowsnest Pass Collieries*

The oldest coal-bearing strata in Western Canada is the Kootenay-Blairmore assemblage, the Crowsnest Pass area, straddling the British Columbia-Alberta border. The first mines belonging to the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company were opened in Coal Creek (Fernie), Michel, Morrissey and Corbin to replace Lethbridge coal for railway locomotives.<sup>55</sup>

Coleman and Blairmore quickly became typical one-industry towns.<sup>56</sup> Belgians became involved after J.J. Fleutot and C.R. Remy, who operated Gold Fields Limited of British Columbia, bought prospective coal mines at Gold Lake, Grassy Mountain, and Frenchman's Camp (Lille). In April 1903, they founded the West Canadian Collieries Limited, backed by French and Belgian investors, absorbing the holdings of Gold Fields Limited in the new company, assuming that the enterprise would attract Francophone immigrants. The Bryson Creek and Bellevue properties were also acquired and B. Charbonnier was named superintendent of operations. Jean Menard was appointed manager. There was every indication that this would be an ideal work environment for Belgian miners and their families. A second European company, the Canadian Coal Consolidated Limited, with its headquarters in Paris, acquired the Hillcrest mine, and by 1911 there were at least four hundred Belgian and French miners in the Crow's Nest region. Their numbers declined in proportion to the number of Italians, Slovaks, and Slavs after World War I, but they remained highly respected, in spite of their socialist convictions, because they responded "patriotically" to the call to arms in 1914.<sup>57</sup>

The first confrontation with management took place in June 1905, when the West Canadian Collieries dismissed sixteen men who were members of the United Mines Workers of America union. A police report stated:

It was required that the men so discharged should immediately quit and deliver up possession of the premises occupied by them and should leave the Village. I am instructed that this order was effectually carried through the instrumentality of the Royal North West Mounted Police who were called for the purpose.<sup>58</sup>

The police claimed they had not forced the miners to leave town but there had been "an effort to use men in uniform with all the semblance of the authority of the law, to awe those against whom proceedings have been undertaken."<sup>59</sup> This was a useful tactic to use against foreign workers who feared police repression and possible deportation. Even the Belgians felt insecure when dealing with authoritarian officials, although the company did function in French at the top level.<sup>60</sup>



The region was plagued by a number of serious mining accidents in which Belgians were victims. In 1902, an explosion at the Coal Creek Mines at Fernie claimed 102 lives, and a slide at Turtle Mountain buried part of the town of Frank and the entrance to its mine and killed seventy-six people. On 9 December 1910, an explosion tore through the West Canadian Collieries mine at Bellevue and claimed twenty-one lives and in the investigation that followed nothing was said about the non-compliance with safety standards, so the explosion was treated as an unavoidable accident.<sup>61</sup> The worst mining disaster followed on 19 June 1914 when 189 miners succumbed to methane gas in the Hillcrest Coal & Coke mine.

As the bodies of the men, many of them unrecognizable, were brought to the surface, they were taken to the wash house where volunteer miners washed them, searched for their check numbers and wrapped them in white cotton sheets.<sup>62</sup>

A minimum compensation was offered the 130 widows and about four hundred orphans.

Family histories reveal why Belgians came to the Crowsnest Pass, how they managed to sustain their families, and how they either succeeded or failed to meet formidable challenges. The Boutry family, for example, came in order to escape seemingly intolerable conditions in the mining districts of Wallonia. Nestor Boutry and seven siblings at age seven started to pick up coal in buckets after school hours by age twelve he had to herd the family landlord's cattle for fifteen hours daily and at fifteen started to work in the coal mine. His wife came from a mining family and she too had sorted coal nuggets as a child and then learned to sew, knit and crochet like her mother, when not herding the goats, to supplement family income. A Canadian immigration agent painted an almost paradisiacal picture of life in Alberta and convinced them to emigrate. They arrived in Calgary, as their neighbours recalled, with no place to stay except the railway station:

Food was scarce, the immigrants were hungry, they were also very cold in this new climate, babies cried for lack of milk. When the Boutrys found themselves expecting another child and Rosa already very ill from the voyage and suffering from cold and hunger, Nestor Boutry took the matter to the officials

and demanded they return his wife and Nestor, Jr. to their homeland, where she could at least have food and shelter and medical care.

Immigration officials offered no assistance but fortunately Boutry found work in a mine at Morrissey, B.C., where his family joined him. They opened a boarding house for single men in Fernie which was destroyed in the fire that wiped out the business section of the town in 1904. They moved to Bellevue, where Nestor worked in the mine and his wife ran a boarding house. When fire once again destroyed their home, they moved into a farm in the country and augmented their mine wages by selling produce, poultry and vegetables at the local market. A sand and gravel pit on their property induced them to begin a business supplying construction sites. This grew into such a profitable business that Boutry gave it his entire attention.<sup>63</sup>

Charles and Marie Bonne came to work for the West Canadian Collieries in Blairmore in 1909. Company records indicate that the Bonnes did influence a number of families to join them, but they left the mine in 1912 to take up a homestead at Willow Valley. They eventually operated the Bellevue Transfer which proved less dangerous and more remunerative than working in the coal mines.<sup>64</sup> Antonio Cornil, who was not a miner, was among those influenced to emigrate. He recalled the unusual event that changed his course in life:

I was having a game of pool with some friends when a lady came in with a letter from her husband in Canada. She was showing this letter to her brother and was preparing to join her husband the following month. Her husband told her how big and rich and nice this country was, with plenty of game and abounding with fish, and that also for \$10.00 you could buy a section of land from the government, providing you were willing to make the required improvements. He had also stated miners were making from ten to twelve dollars a day. To a young guy this seemed to be a very good opportunity, and it did not take us long to decide what to do. We were going to join Mrs. Bonne and her two children on her trip to Canada. There were three of us plus her brother.<sup>65</sup>

Social networks could be as effective as formal recruiting agencies in attracting immigrants to western mining communities.

Not all individuals and families came directly from Belgium. A significant number had been recruited by the Imperial Coal Company for the Beersville mine in New Brunswick and by the Dominion Coal Company for its mines in Cape Breton. In 1909–10 there was a particularly bitter strike in Nova Scotia that induced the Lothier, Koentges, Lang, Maufort, Fauville and Lardinois families to seek employment in Alberta. As in Nova Scotia, miners' wives sought whenever possible to operate a boarding house for single men. This not only provided additional income for families such as the Mauforts but also created a sort of ethnic foyer where traditional food and pastimes could be enjoyed with compatriots.<sup>66</sup> François Spillers, who had worked in the mines in Belgium since the age of nine when his father died and he became the chief breadwinner, came to the Crowsnest Pass during a harvest excursion from Nova Scotia in 1921.<sup>67</sup> Frank Soulet, when interviewed about his experiences, indicated that he had come with a large party of Belgians to Nova Scotia, then had moved on to Pennsylvania for a few years, before coming to the Crowsnest area in 1920. He had started working underground at the age of twelve, although Belgian legislation had set fourteen as the minimum age. He had come to Alberta because he heard the pay scale was much higher and he cherished the hope of being able to retire very comfortably in his homeland. The West Canadian Collieries were perceived as a sympathetic European company with some French-speaking managers: however Soulet soon found there was a "slack time" of twenty-seven months with no benefits whatever. He became a zealous organizer for the One Big Union (OBU) in 1919 because it organized workers along industrial lines which he thought was a more effective way to advance workers' interests. Soulet had been raised Catholic but when his father was virtually excommunicated for taking up socialist activities the entire family broke with the church. He denounced clerical support of the capitalists and, in 1932, mortgaged his home to raise bail money for some of his neighbours who were imprisoned during a bitter strike. He concluded before retirement (not in Belgium as he had once dreamed) that regular work was no more assured in Canada than elsewhere in mining and that Alberta mines were probably the most dangerous anywhere.<sup>68</sup>

Several cases illustrate the hardship and suffering some families faced. At the Hillcrest mine, Joseph Labourier exchanged a few working

days with Alphonse Heusdens, so he could meet his wife who was coming from Belgium. Heusdens was killed in one of the most disastrous mine explosions at that time. The community rallied around the widow and her son, and Labourier took young Louis Heusdens under his wing, taught him carpentry, a trade which he pursued later with success at the Kimberley mine.<sup>69</sup> The Oscar Capron family came to the Crownest mines in 1913 and the following year they fetched a younger son who had been left in Belgium. He arrived at the time of the Hillcrest mine disaster which had taken the life of Alphonse Heusdens and 188 others. It was an emotional introduction to a new land and the dangers inherent in mining life:

Among those who passed for a final tour was Fernand Capron, a 12 year old boy who had just arrived from Belgium only the day before. As his father guided him between the rows of coffins with their grieving attendants, Fernand heard him say: "Son, take note of this and never go down in the mines"<sup>70</sup>

Young Fernand became an accomplished violinist, did his military service in Belgium in 1923, took up farming with a cousin Victor Capron in the Peace River country, then returned to Blairmore in 1940 to operate a general store, gas bar and rental cabin agency. He never forgot the Hillcrest mine disaster.<sup>71</sup>

Four petitions for compensation and relief that came to the attention of the provincial attorney general's office illustrate the depth of despair of some families and the bureaucratic hurdles they encountered. Juliette Vandeuren applied for compensation for herself and five children under twelve years of age, under the provisions of the Workmen's Compensation Act, after her husband Felix Vandeuren was "killed by a fall of rock from the roof of Number 4 mine" at Coleman on 31 January 1910. Five months later, the International Coal & Coke Company admitted some liability and assigned \$1800 to the court, which invested half the sum "as the court directs for the benefit of the said applicant" but final payment was made only in July 1916.<sup>72</sup> The widow and four children of Charles Germain were awarded the usual \$1,800 but the solicitor had to show "that she is of a provident nature," while a local merchant swore that she was "a person of good moral character and a fit and proper person to be entrusted with monies the Court may deem proper to place with her." A first payment came only one full year after her husband's death. It was a long seven-year

struggle to obtain full payment of the compensation award.<sup>73</sup> The third case was that of Victorine Lobert, widow of Auguste J.-B. Lobert, who waited four months to receive an initial payment of \$600 from the customary \$1,800 award. She returned with her three small children to Belgium, where she had a small debt to repay, and found that her monthly payments were suspended. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels intervened in 1920 and the consul in Edmonton wrote to the courts. The reply stated that the full amount had been paid in January 1919 but failed to provide any evidence.<sup>74</sup> This case was unique inasmuch as a compatriot, A. Decoux, had been charged with homicide, in spite of the fact that an inquiry had rendered “a verdict of acquittal of all responsibility” in the death of Lobert. The consul general protested the apparent unwarranted imprisonment of a Belgian national, reminiscent of an official protest six years earlier.<sup>75</sup> The local of the United Mine Workers of America placed the cause of the accident on “loose methods of working” and insisted the company should install safety blocks and “rectify the signalling apparatus and grading of the tracks which the jury proved utterly defective and inadequate to the general safety of the men employed in that part of the mine.”<sup>76</sup>

The union also took up the case of Leonie Luleux of Coleman, who asked for compensation for injury and “suffocation which caused death” of her husband, a low-wage earner at the International Coal and Coke Company mine. The \$1,800 award was to be paid to a local merchant in \$25 monthly payments. To meet her essential needs she took in laundry, but when rheumatism struck in 1919, she was unable to work and had to borrow \$105 from a compatriot to buy warm clothing. The court met her immediate need from the fund, but nothing more. The Belgian consulate refused a return fare to Belgium, where she had aged parents, because she had been born in France. In September 1920 she again asked for more money to buy winter clothing for her children: “it is hard for a woman alone with two children to live with 25 dollars a month. I do some washing but this can’t provide for all we need.”<sup>77</sup> It was not an easy period for the working class. The unions did the little they could to obtain better working conditions. Yet, the companies cannot be accused of making no provisions for their workers’ families in times of tragedy.

## *Lethbridge Area Collieries*

Lethbridge grew out of Coal Banks, where the North Western Coal and Navigation Company was organized in 1882 and miners were brought from Pennsylvania by Sir Alexander Galt to provide cheap labour.<sup>78</sup> Father Leonard Van Tighem, a Belgian Oblate, began coming from Fort Macleod in 1884 to say mass at Coal Bank for the “foreigners,” migrant workers from the Pennsylvania mines, who were little respected by the small elite of the growing community. Léon Cabeaux, a leader of the general strike in Hainaut in 1887, found guilty by an assizes court in Mons of conspiracy in “a revolutionary plot against constituted authority” arrived in Lethbridge the following year. Not one of Van Tighem’s faithful parishioners, he continued to urge his compatriots in Belgium to come join him in Lethbridge because “in Canada we Belgians, English and French form one great chain of action and when we say stop working, everything stops.” This version of concerted action across ethnic lines against oppressive management illustrated his militancy: “better to be shot than languish to death,” as he said. He described a virtual utopian situation in which there were allegedly few social distinctions because “priests, lawyers and magistrates are at the same level as the common people, hunting and fishing are open to all, and workers are free, hire on and leave a job as they wish.” The reality was quite different from these first impressions Cabeaux gave of working conditions in Alberta collieries.<sup>79</sup>

Father Van Tighem’s diary reveals the instability and precarious reality of life at Lethbridge in the 1890s. He observed that by 1892 miners worked only two or three days per week. On 6 March 1892, a notice was published announcing a temporary closure, which occurred on the 15th of the month. Van Tighem was certain that all the unmarried men would be discharged. “This is a very hard blow for our little town, as over three hundred miners will quit Lethbridge.” However, by the end of January 1893, an extremely cold period, the miners were doing well again “as they work day and night and cannot take out coal enough to satisfy demands.”<sup>80</sup> Later the situation was quite different again: “Our mines are closed for several days. The new Superintendent Simpson tries to cut the wages of the poor miners, but these, most justly, refuse to go to work, so the miners are on strike. Many are leaving the place....” By 5 March, work had not resumed and the company held to its decision to reduce wages

by 17 per cent. About four hundred miners, mostly Slovaks, left, and on 15 March about a hundred men had no option but to return to work at the reduced wage. Van Tighem noted: "Of course, this we may call a forced action, as many have no money nor the means to leave town."<sup>81</sup> In 1897, the Western Federation of Miners from Montana organized the Lethbridge miners and called a protest strike against the wage cuts. Van Tighem recorded on 10 August that "many grievances must be removed before they return to their labour." Yet twenty days later he wrote that "the miners are resuming their work in the mines, no advance in wages was granted by the company." The result of this union action was that the provincial government and police put sufficient pressure on the WFM to induce them to leave Alberta.<sup>82</sup>

In 1903, the United Mines Workers of America began reorganizing the Lethbridge miners. By 1906, the miners were on strike once again therefore the Alberta Railway and Irrigation Company enlisted the support of the police who were unable to understand what the "foreign" workers said, much less comprehend the reason for going on strike when they were paid at least five times the wages of policemen. The police were housed and fed by the company and swore in "special constables" from among company employees. When the company tried to bring in scab workers, confrontation escalated. Louis Albert, a Belgian miner in desperate financial need, who decided to continue working, was attacked and wounded near the village of Stafford by angry strikers for being a "scab," was rescued by the RNWMP and was taken to the safety of the mine.<sup>83</sup> Van Tighem commented, "these are very bad times for our town," but eventually after nine months, "our strike is over, and most of the men will return to work ... there is an increase of wages in favour of the miners."<sup>84</sup> Union workers appealed to Ottawa to intervene to prevent further violence.<sup>85</sup> W.L. Mackenzie King was sent in as a federal mediator and he helped draft the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act (Lemieux Act) which forbade strikes or lockouts in mines and public utilities until the dispute had been investigated by a tripartite board of arbitration representing labour, capital, and government. This compulsory cooling-off period deprived unionized workers of their most effective weapon, the surprise strike, while giving management time to recruit strike-breakers.<sup>86</sup>

## *Drumheller Valley Collieries*

The first test holes for the commercial recovery of coal in the Badlands of the Drumheller valley were sunk in 1911. Eight years later, the Calgary *Eye-Opener* editorialized in 1919 that Rosedale featured an ideal hostel for single workers:

The Rosedale Camp is one of the best equipped for the workers' comfort, with large dining hall, clean kitchens and good grub, comfortable sleeping quarters, shower baths and recreation hall, where day and night schools are held, as most of the miners during the First World War were from Europe.<sup>87</sup>

But the experience of the Vaast family portrayed a very different situation from this idyllic presentation. The family had come first to Glace Bay, Nova Scotia in 1918 where the father and three sons were killed in mine explosions. The widow with a surviving son and daughter came to the “western frontier” of Drumheller, where young Leo at just twelve years of age started working carrying timbers down into the Hy-Grade mine. To earn extra cash he also ran errands for the “painted ladies” in the town which was renowned for its gambling, drinking and prostitution. When he turned sixteen, he dug sewer ditches for the hospital but soon turned to working fifty-two hours a week underground. When mines started closing down during the Depression, he took up trucking. It was a hard immigrant experience – disaster, internal migration, resourcefulness, recovery.<sup>88</sup>

The most important immigration of miners into the area occurred after World War I. Sylvain and Louise Pans, for example, were encouraged by Canadian soldiers to emigrate, and so they came to Drumheller where there was employment in the collieries. Three years of dangerous work convinced Sylvain Pans that a job with Canadian National Railways was preferable.<sup>89</sup> In 1919, the One Big Union was organized in Calgary which Belgians in particular found attractive. Miners at Drumheller went on strike in May 1919 demanding recognition of the OBU as their legal bargaining agent. War veterans returning home from Europe were looking for jobs and had been passed over by the mining companies that preferred experienced foreign workers such as Belgians. Thirteen mining companies decided to hire war veterans as “protectors of mining property,” plied them with liquor, armed them with crowbars, pick handles and brass



knuckles, and sent them out in company cars to round up the strikers and bring them into work.<sup>90</sup> Violence began in the early morning hours of 9 August:

Early Monday morning a cavalcade of cars swept along the dusty valley bottom roads to the miners' shacks strung out along the south side of the Red Deer River. The cars stopped quickly, veterans jumped from seats and running-boards and ran towards the cabins. Miners, awaked by the whoops and yells, ran for the thick brush that grew to the rear of the scattered shacks. As the attackers drew near the huts, miners threw rocks, firewood – anything handy – and stopped the charge. Both sides stood their ground as missiles and shouts filled the air. Then slowly the pursuers began to retreat to their cars. The miners followed and chased the veterans back towards the cars until gunfire began to echo through the valley. More cars were coming to reinforce the attackers. The miners quickly turned in panic and ran into the hills.<sup>91</sup>

By June 1921 all the mines had rejected the OBU, the scabs were released and the skilled “foreigners” were rehired. The alliance of mining companies and provincial authorities had carried the day.

But industrial peace had not been restored to the valley and its twelve thousand miners because the OBU and UMWA fought, literally with bricks, stones and clubs, to represent the mine workers. The OBU also fell into disfavour in February 1924 when the executive became more occupied with sexual scandals, including charges of bigamy, and backroom discussions of heterosexual and homosexual activities of working-class men.<sup>92</sup> The provincial police, when called in, patrolled with machine guns mounted on the fenders of their cars. The Canadian Block Coal Company, whose offices were in Calgary, was Belgian-financed. Its manager was a Belgian, and it had contracts with two rival unions. The majority called a strike and set up pickets night and day at all mine entrances to dissuade a minority that chose to continue working. Strikers gathered around wood fires at night and in a violent confrontation Lambert Renners hit a constable with a rock, was wounded himself by a shot fired by the police, and was arrested. The case in provincial court turned on whether picketing, or “watching and besetting,” was legal. Renners lost

at the provincial level so the union made it a test case by appealing to the Supreme Court of Canada. Renners lost the appeal, the court using evidence from police files to conclude that the miners had assembled on company property and “their attendance there by day and night, the fires, the shouting, their reception of the police, their threats” were proof of “not only of a nuisance, but also of unlawful assembly.” Renners at least escaped deportation to Belgium.<sup>93</sup> Another Belgian who had a difficult role in this situation was Emile Leblanc, provincially appointed mine inspector. He had come to Crowsnest Pass in 1905, worked as a coal mine surveyor for the White Ash and Regal mines, then assumed the operation of the Bay mine at Taber in 1912, and finally during the Depression moved to Wayne to take over inspection duties in the Drumheller region.<sup>94</sup>

### *Nordegg Coal Basin*

In 1906 the German Development Company and Martin Cohen Nordegg hired the banker Eugene de Wassermann to find European capital to develop an open pit coal mine at Ribbon Lake in the Kananaskis valley. Wassermann favoured a more northerly development about 170 kilometres west of Red Deer known as the Brazeau Colliery. Nordegg befriended Sir Wilfrid Laurier and Messrs Mackenzie and Mann, the railway promoters. In 1908, fifty mining engineers from Belgium, Germany, Great Britain and the United States were invited at Dominion government expense to a conference and tour of mining sites under the auspices of the Canadian Mining Institute. From this group a certain Professor Henri Potonié was invited by the German Development Company to visit claims staked at Nordegg [Brazeau Colliery] and Kananaskis.<sup>95</sup>

Martin Nordegg developed the rich coal-producing area, later known as the Nordegg Coal Basin, beginning in 1911. The necessary capital was raised in Europe to work the coal seams and to build a company town of over four hundred homes for more than a thousand workers on the payroll. In 1911 the Banque d'Outremer and the Banque de Commerce d'Anvers lent \$4 million to the Canadian Northern Western Railway to build a 285 kilometres branch line joining the Brazeau property and the Canadian Northern Railway network at Red Deer.<sup>96</sup> The company town reflected a kind of caste system, or social hierarchy, as miners and managers lived in different sectors. The families of managers lived in five large elegant houses and enjoyed special privileges, including reserved front seats at

the theatre. The Big Horn Trading Company, the company store, had a monopoly and employees were expected to shop there.

The operations were financed in good measure from Brussels and according to Nordegg owed much to the engineer, Ernest Gheur:

In Toronto I opened an office in a building where Mackenzie Mann and Company and the Canadian Northern Railways were located. I started with a fairly large staff, working out the future construction and mining activity while waiting for the Belgian coal-mining engineer E. Gheur, whom I had engaged on the recommendations of the Société Générale of Brussels. When he arrived, I found that his knowledge of Belgian coalfields enabled him to adapt himself quickly to Canadian conditions in the West.<sup>97</sup>

Gheur had come to a Stellarton, Nova Scotiamine in 1910 with his family and when hired by Nordegg began to plan mining operations and the layout of the townsite. This occupied him from 1912 to 1917, his family having joined him at Red Deer in 1913.

Although Nordegg initially considered Gheur a “greenhorn” on matters relating to the Canadian West generally, he had absolute confidence in his expertise in laying out mining operations.<sup>98</sup> He even organized the construction crews laying railway track from Red Deer into eight companies of fifty men each. In a letter to his wife, when she was preparing to join him in Canada, he wrote concerning the mine:

The extraction will take place along the flank of a ridge by way of tunnels along the two seams, without it being necessary to foresee shafts or slopes for the time being. I estimate we will be able to recover 1100 tons a day in 1914, without any great expense for setting up operations.<sup>99</sup>

The concession included several benches each capable of even greater production. Gheur found the deposit rich although the coal was not in his estimation of truly superior quality.

In 1917, Gheur planned another mining operation at Lac Brûlé. Unfortunately, he died from the effects of a fall in a mine before launching this project. The Nordegg mine continued to prosper. In addition to

finance and engineering skill, Belgium contributed a few miners. The Alberta Royal Commission on Coal reported in 1925 that 5.5 per cent of the Brazeau miners were of Belgian or French origin.<sup>100</sup> In 1937, the Brazeau Collieries started making briquettes and very quickly became the largest manufacturer of briquettes in Canada. The only major mine disaster occurred on 31 October 1941, when an explosion claimed twenty-nine lives. On the whole, the Nordegg venture was a success. As far as Belgian immigrants were concerned, by the 1940s mining was no longer an attractive or viable occupation. The nature of the local economy had evolved as had the nature of immigration. An era had come to an end.

### *Labour Radicalism*

Two different Belgian responses to labour relations reached Canada. In Quebec, a disciplined Catholic syndicalist organization prevailed as introduced by the abbé Arthur Robert (who studied at the University of Louvain and founded the school of social sciences at Laval University) and abbé Eugène Lapointe (who studied at the Catholic university in Brussels). This attempt to promote labour peace and social harmony had had some success at factories at Sérainq and Val St-Lambert. In the Maritimes and Western Canada, a left-wing socialistic collective action took root resembling the manifestations seen in the Borinage and Liège regions. Joseph Schmetz, an organizer for the Part Ouvrier Belge, left war-ravaged Belgium in 1919 with his family for Toronto, where he hoped to establish a comprehensive network of trade unions, co-operatives, fraternal societies, *mutuelles* and schools. This objective was not realized in Western Canada because Belgian workers were too small a minority within the union movement and the fragmented socialist parties to establish a comprehensive network of working-class institutions. The Belgian immigrant workers in many cases were secular, anticlerical and unrefined.<sup>101</sup> They also felt an affinity with the socialist movement.<sup>102</sup> George Vissac, manager of the West Canadian Collieries, singled out Belgians as “reds ... people with a fairly bad reputation.” The UMWA at the 1917 district convention felt it necessary to adopt a motion specifically refuting the “calumny” that Belgians were largely to blame for the labour turmoil. Nevertheless, the Belgian-Italian Co-operative Society in Blairmore was branded throughout the 1920s a communist organization.<sup>103</sup> As supporters of

workers' rights and reform observed: "it was the communists who led most struggles for jobs, for relief, against wage cuts."<sup>104</sup>

Religious sanction had little effect on anticlerical workers. From an "establishment" viewpoint, another way to deal with radicals, allegedly communists, was to deport them on a variety of charges. Deportation had been provided for in a statute of 1910 on grounds of moral and political unsuitability. It specified that "any person other than a Canadian citizen" (although such a category did not exist constitutionally at the time) who "shall by word or act create or attempt to create riot or public disorder" was to be "considered and classed as an undesirable immigrant."<sup>105</sup> So it was that Gustave Henry, who had come to the Cape Breton mines in 1912, moved to Fernie, B.C. in 1917, and ended up at Lethbridge, was ordered deported to Belgium in September 1925. The Minister of Justice issued a deportation order on the grounds that Gustave Henry had been imprisoned in Lethbridge for minor theft, and as an alien under the terms of the Immigration Act he was subject to deportation for criminal activity. His union activities were public knowledge but the order for his deportation was based on a minor criminal infraction. Upon investigation it was found that his claim that he had been a resident of Canada for more than five years excluded him from deportation on the basis claimed. The provincial attorney-general's office countermanded the federal deportation order after the Superior Court of Alberta ruled in Gustave Henry's favour.<sup>106</sup>

Father Neville Anderson, who was pastor at Drumheller from 1934 to 1946, left his impressions of the aftermath of the labour troubles. He wrote: "It was true that there were many among the foreign population who were careless in religious practice. The Belgians and the French (from France) were the least responsive, being generally anticlerical."<sup>107</sup> His views were representative not only of the Catholic clergy but also of many Anglo-Saxons. A Protestant leader proclaimed: "I believe if we were rid of these aliens we would be rid of strikes and all disturbances between capital and labour."<sup>108</sup> Premier John Oliver of British Columbia denounced labour agitators in 1919 in the familiar official language of the period: "Engineered by a handful of agitators there is under way throughout Canada a deliberate attempt to overthrow constitutional government and substitute therefor a dictatorship. I am convinced that the Bolsheviks are behind all this turmoil."<sup>109</sup>

Did Belgian miners share in a common working-class culture that transcended ethnic, religious and political differences? It is evident that

they did co-operate with workers of other ethnic groups, notably the Italians, Slovaks and Ukrainians, to secure better working conditions. It is also worth noting that these groups all shared a Catholic background and were often anticlerical, yet their union leaders were almost without exception Anglo-Saxon Protestants. The Walloon miners had a radical socialist European background, comfortable with political action, and so they were not averse to identifying with radical movements in Canada that promoted their interests and welfare. Unlike Finns and Ukrainians, however, they had no desire to establish locals based on language and ethnicity.<sup>110</sup> A. Moeller, president of the Académie Royale de Belgique, believed that “the great differences in origin, language and character of the workers” in Canada did not promote the emergence of the same class consciousness as existed in European countries. In other words, he distinguished between union solidarity, political action and class consciousness.<sup>111</sup>

Most Belgian observers believed that a working-class consciousness was slow to develop in Canada for a number of reasons. Firstly, industrial centres were few and scattered. Secondly, workers were divided by language, customs and country of origin. Also, agriculture was valued above mining in Western Canada. Finally, there was no effective labour party in Parliament or the provincial legislatures.<sup>112</sup> The Belgian socialist periodical *L'Avenir social* observed in 1902 that “the socialist movement in Canada is still in an embryonic state.” Yet, in 1903, it observed with satisfaction that two Labour candidates had been elected to the British Columbia legislature.<sup>113</sup> On the other hand, Henri de Man visited Winnipeg in 1920 and concluded that the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 had marked “a turning point in the Canadian labour movement” and the constitution of a working class with class power, “a characteristic manifestation of the class struggle in its simplest and most brutal form.” He added that Belgians had not noted this change because they did not have access to unbiased accounts of the events of 1919, and their chief source of information was newspapers unfavourable to the strikers.<sup>114</sup>

Finally, it is noteworthy that Belgium provided Quebec with a model of labour relations and Catholic social action that was not transferred to Western Canada. This religiously oriented social action introduced by a few clerical intellectuals who studied in Belgium was founded on the doctrine of compassion and obligation to serve the oppressed as well as a fear of the masses, especially when they banded together to obtain redress

of grievances. For French Canadian nationalists of the Henri Bourassa school, the Belgians seemed to provide an ideal program because it appeared the Catholics had wrested control of union activities from the socialists and “anarchists.” Also, they had maintained a distinctive “national” character in the face of pressures from Dutch, French and German unions and had succeeded in continuing to function on a bilingual basis. On the other hand, as we have seen, it was attitudes and actions of Belgian miners and workers harbouring the left-wing ideology so manifest in the Borinage and Liège regions of Belgium that surfaced in Western Canada. The social question in Quebec was bound up with avoiding social conflicts within the ethnocultural community, whereas in the West conflicts brought ethnic groups together in pursuit of collective interests.<sup>115</sup>

### *Agricultural Settlement*

In 1902, the Settlers’ Association of British Columbia published a calendar advertising farms for sale.<sup>116</sup> The few Belgians known to have come at the time appear to have been more attracted to employment in the lumber mills and associated forestry jobs around Maillardville and Gibson’s Landing. Albert Borle, for example, who immigrated in 1897, prepared log booms at Gibson’s Landing for a number of years before settling into farming.<sup>117</sup> Although Vancouver was a good deep seaport, especially after the CPR line was extended to Granville, its commercial activity developed after the completion of the Panama Canal in 1914. Later, the activities of the Consul Léon Dupuis in using the Hudson Bay Railway, completed in 1929, made Vancouver a focal point of Belgian investment and trade.

The triangular Fraser Delta lowland rapidly attracted attention for dairy farming and market gardening. By the early 1900s, at least one hundred Flemish immigrants had settled in the area, improved by draining and dyking.<sup>118</sup> As early as 1891, dairying was common in the lower flood plain of the Fraser valley and southeastern Vancouver Island. The farms produced fluid milk, butter, and sometimes cheese, for the Vancouver and Victoria communities.<sup>119</sup> In 1913, the Fraser Valley Milk Producers Association (FVMPA) was formed as the bargaining agent and by 1920 it had become a large vertically integrated milk processing firm.<sup>120</sup> Some Flemish independent producers continued to supply fluid milk to the urban market. These farms around Langley and Surrey were of a modest

size, normally two to three dozen Holsteins per herd, and relied heavily on home-grown hay and silage. Little by little, the FVMPA controlled both production and manufacturing.<sup>121</sup> By the 1920s, large herds and barns were not uncommon, milking machines were introduced and this type of farming was becoming capital-intensive and market-oriented. In 1929, the Dairy Products Sales Act made it difficult to sell unpasteurized milk, so small producers not part of the FVMPA could not afford the cans and the sanitary equipment needed to deal with a creamery. Customers in Vancouver were sympathetic to the plight of the small producers because they preferred raw milk. By this time, few women remained engaged in dairying.<sup>122</sup> Some Belgian farmers survived because as the consul in Vancouver reported in 1932: "Several Belgian farmers are settled in this vicinity. Most are prosperous according to information obtained from the colonization agent of the Canadian National Railway."<sup>123</sup> The Dutch took over a number of dairy operations after 1945. This resulted in further mechanization, improved crop practices and feeding methods.<sup>124</sup> Many of the original Flemish family dairies passed into immigrant hands as sons and grandsons were more attracted to urban occupations and professions. In 1965 a research project on innovation in dairy farming in the region found that, although the Flemings were difficult to distinguish from the Dutch, the Belgian-origin dairymen tended to use more unpaid family labour and to not participate actively in adult education courses. None of the Flemish farms were large, land was used intensively, and many farmers did not adopt such innovations as heated water tanks, hay conditioners and dryers, or bulk storage for concentrate feed.<sup>125</sup>

In Flanders, farmers had engaged in intensive land use therefore market gardening could also be associated with a modest dairy farm. From the outset, the Flemish farmers in the Lower Fraser Valley were in competition with the established Chinese market gardeners in the growing of cabbage, asparagus, cauliflower, celery, beans and peas. Proximity to the Vancouver market and to the railway link to the Prairies were important assets because vegetables and small fruits are perishable. The advent of refrigerated railway cars and trucks made shipping to distant markets feasible. Canneries took up some of the production as well. Around Maple Ridge, the Belgians were in competition with the Japanese fruit growers specializing in strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, cranberries and loganberries.<sup>126</sup> As with dairying, Belgian families engaged in market gardening and small fruit farming tended, in the second and third



generation, to turn to urban-centred occupations. Thus the Antonio Cloets opened the Stafford House nursing home in Vancouver and the Jozef Van Houtteghems purchased the Queen's Park convalescent home in New Westminster. Consul Léon Dupuis retired to Salt Spring Island where he tended his garden and vineyard, serving his own produce and wines to visitors who were so fortunate as to listen to his accounts of Belgian commercial enterprises in Western Canada emanating from his Vancouver office.<sup>127</sup>

### *Okanagan Valley Fruit Growing*

Boosterism and patriotic sentiment were important stimuli in the development of the Okanagan Valley orchard industry.<sup>128</sup> An association between occupation and cultural intelligence was expressed by Lord Grey, who believed “families of refinement, culture, and distinction” colonized the best landscapes. In his words, “fruit farming in British Columbia has acquired the distinction of being a beautiful art” where “qualities of mind are necessary ... which are not so essential to success in wheat growing or ordinary mixed farming.” In this view, the province would enjoy a superiority that was at once ethnic, cultural and economic.<sup>129</sup> Belgians were traditionally interested in fruit growing but it was capitalistic ventures that emerged from land development schemes that drew attention to the commercial potential of the central interior drybelt valley around Lake Okanagan.<sup>130</sup> In 1890, when the Shuswap and Okanagan Railway Company opened the valley to more intensive settlement, George Grant Murray interested eight Belgian investors in forming the Okanagan Land and Development Company Limited.<sup>131</sup>

In 1897, the Belgo-Canadian Fruit Lands Company was registered with a capital of \$300,000 and headquarters in Antwerp. The Van de Put-Heirman Company was a major shareholder, while Raoul de Grelle became director of operations at Vernon and Fernand De Jardin was the over-all *administrateur-délégué*. More than half the shares were held by Belgian companies and slightly more than a quarter by members of the British aristocracy. The propaganda directed at investors and settlers by the Belgians was particularly optimistic. One booklet proclaimed:

Fruit farming has acquired the distinction of being a beautiful art as well as a most profitable industry.... Fruit farming in

the Dry Belt of British Columbia is the best paying investment in the world. Those who take up fruit farming in the British Columbia Dry Belt area ... are men of the better class, people of education and refinement.<sup>132</sup>

The pattern of development was one of exploitation by limited liability companies, usually launched by local entrepreneurs such as the De Jardin family and financed in Europe, that bought up dry benchlands, installed modest irrigation works, subdivided the land into ten to twenty acres lots, and promoted these orchards abroad. In general, these investments were seen as worthwhile.<sup>133</sup>

In 1908, the Belgo-Canadian Fruit Lands Company decided to undertake the development of its land holdings itself by initiating a program of planting hundreds of fruit trees. The developers of its Vernon properties, which were devoted to sheep-raising as well as orchards, included Ludovic De Decker, Baron Pierre Verhaegen, Baron Edmond Van Eetvelde, Charles de Burlet and Maurice Cook.<sup>134</sup> They were also connected with the *Compagnie Immobilière et Agricole du Canada* (Land and Agriculture Company of Canada) that had invested some of its profits from land sales in Saskatchewan to buy up lots in Vernon and import 1800 head of sheep for ranching operations. In Kelowna the Havenith, Jacobs and Louwens families were among the pioneer fruit growers.<sup>135</sup> By this time, 27 per cent of the capital was subscribed by members of the Belgian nobility through the head office in Antwerp.<sup>136</sup>

The Belgo-Canadian Fruit Lands Company embarked on a very expensive irrigation project which included a six-mile-long main flume, to supply as much as possible of its high range land. In 1912, a subsidiary irrigation company, the Black Mountain Water Company, assumed the construction. When the first phase of the project was completed, shares were allotted to the *Compagnie Immobilière et Agricole du Canada*, which had been organized in 1897 by the Frédéric Jacobs Company and other Antwerp investors.<sup>137</sup> The majority of these shares were owned by Fernand De Jardin, Baron Edmond Van Eetvelde and Louis Van De Put. Within a year it was able to dispose of more than a thousand acres of irrigated lands.<sup>138</sup>

By April 1913, the Belgo-Canadian Fruit Lands Company approached the *Caisse Hypothécaire Anversoise* to underwrite part of its expansion plans. When the Antwerp firm hesitated, the *Compagnie Immobilière et*

Agricole du Canada came to its assistance. In fact, there was considerable overlap both in directors and shareholders of the two companies.<sup>139</sup> André Gouzée, for example, representing the Frédéric Jacobs group of Antwerp in Western Canada, was the secretary of the Alberta Company, a director of the Compagnie Immobilière et Agricole du Canada, manager of the Société Hypothécaire du Canada, president of the Société Foncière Belgo-Canadienne, and board member of the Crédit Générale du Canada from his office in Winnipeg.

The Compagnie Immobilière et Agricole du Canada [Land and Agriculture Company of Canada], backed by its Belgian investors, purchased 3,500 acres of the historic Cornelius O'Keefe ranch around Swan Lake, extending from Vernon to Okanagan Lake. A local resident was appointed manager "to attract settlers for different uses of the land." The White Valley Irrigation & Power Company was contracted to extend an existing canal to Okanagan Lake, thus irrigating seven thousand more acres of company land.<sup>140</sup> During World War I, the big boom seemed to collapse largely because of the failing irrigation systems. Promoters had overestimated the available water supply. Secondly, they had underestimated the water requirements of the land. Finally, they also had underestimated the capacity and desirability of their irrigation system. The provincial government intervened in 1919 with the Southern Okanagan Lands project.<sup>141</sup>

The Compagnie Immobilière et Agricole du Canada had organized a subsidiary known as the Belgian Orchard Syndicate in 1908. This syndicate bought two hundred acres from the parent company, planted seventeen thousand fruit trees, mostly apples, on ten-acre blocks outside the northeastern limits of the town of Vernon. A fifty-six-acre plot, for example, was ploughed and planted in trees under company management and when the owner arrived early the following spring he took over the operation of his orchard. The company would plant, irrigate, prune and spray an absentee landlord's orchard for the actual cost plus an additional 20 per cent service charge.<sup>142</sup> J. de la Chevasnerie, for example, negotiated in Antwerp for his property, which the Belgian Orchard Syndicate looked after for five years until he arrived to settle on his property.<sup>143</sup> The Belgian Orchard Syndicate operated its own packing house but when it burned down in 1930 it was decided not to rebuild. Arthur De Jardin eventually became the sole owner of the syndicate, which he operated from his L & A Ranch. It was the only project in the region that attracted a sizeable

number of Belgian settlers, as a report sent to the St. Raphaël Society indicated:

Around Vernon live some sixty Belgians, most of whom bought land from the Belgian company, the Land and Agriculture Company of Canada, which has its headquarters in Antwerp. Among these Belgians are the son of Baron Van Eetvelde de Moll, Mr. Verhaegen, former Belgian consul to the Philippines, Mr. De Decker, formerly an engineer in Egypt, and several others of the most distinguished Belgian families. All have established orchards and are very interested in the region.<sup>144</sup>

The Belgian Orchard Syndicate eventually owned twelve thousand acres, of which two-thirds were devoted to fruit and vegetable production. In 1932, the consul in Vancouver gave a glowing report of its success in marketing annually at least forty thousand boxes of apples. He also noted that the Belgian growers had diversified somewhat their operations:

They harvest also a considerable quantity of pears, peaches, plums, also tomatoes and onions. In the same vein I have been informed about the presence of several Belgian growers around Enderby and Armstrong where they cultivate especially celery. They seem to succeed very well. A number of compatriots mostly farmers have settled in this part of the province.<sup>145</sup>

Diversification was encouraged not only because of an expanding market demand but also because of increasing costs of fruit production as packing houses, brokers, railways, jobbers and retailers all required remuneration. The Belgian Orchard Syndicate continued to manage its holdings until 1942, at which time World War II seriously interrupted its marketing strategy, so it sold its property.

Another related venture capitalized in Belgium in 1909 was the Belgo-Canadian Land Company. This company purchased 9,400 acres belonging to the Ideal Fruit Company located twelve kilometres east of Kelowna on the north side of Moose Creek. Company schemes were huge undertakings laid out by engineers such as Charles A. Stoess of the Belgo-Canadian Land Company to build large storage dams and control mechanisms to meter the flow of water from the reservoirs.<sup>146</sup> The

construction of a dam, irrigation flumes and ditches to make six thousand acres saleable to prospective fruit growers was carried out by workers hired mostly in Italy. This venture did not have Belgian immigration as its objective, its purpose being largely speculative investment. It also had stiff competition from the Central Okanagan Land and Orchard Company, whose principal booster was J.W. Jones of Grenfell, Saskatchewan who arranged excursions for prospective buyers. After World War I, as immigration did not resume its pre-war proportions, the company sold its interests, as did the major Belgian real estate companies in Vancouver and Edmonton, enabling them to make a profit through currency exchange rates and to repatriate their funds for reinvestment at home.<sup>147</sup> The Vernon Orchard Company, an investment project launched and directed from Belgium as early as 1910, operated a modest tract (256 acres) east of Swan Lake until March 1930. In addition to members of the Jacobs Group based in Antwerp, the banking firm of Henri Devilder of Lille was involved. Some of the Belgians in the Vernon area may have settled on the company's tract but there is no evidence of any active recruitment of immigrants by the Vernon Orchard Company.<sup>148</sup>

Belgian capital and enterprising developers such as André Gouzée, Arthur De Jardin, Louis Van de Put and Raoul de Grelle, who were associated with the Antwerp-based Jacobs Group, played a major role in the initial planning and development of the Okanagan fruit-growing industry. World War I was followed by a reduction in interest and investment, as well as by the decline of the myth of western expansion. The investments capital that originated in good measure from land speculation was not accompanied by commensurate immigration. The Varlez-Brunin Report indicated two problems: a "lifestyle not adapted to the hard labour" and the prohibitive cost of transportation.<sup>149</sup> The Belgian families around Vernon in the northern section of the Okanagan Valley were never sufficiently numerous to form a cohesive community with its own ethnic, cultural and religious institutions.