



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

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CONCLUSION

This study is based in good measure on the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels and family biographies in local and district jubilee histories. The experiences of Belgian promoters, planters, and pioneers in Western Canada indicates that both ethnic behaviour and national culture affected their implantation as an immigrant group and eventually conditioned their integration into the evolving mainstream society of the region. They came as investors and participants in a developing economy and settled as planters on the vast stretches of open prairie and verdant river valleys, veritable pioneers in the creation of a new West. They promoted four agricultural pursuits – dairying, market gardening, sugar-beet culture, fruit-growing – with distinction in Manitoba, Alberta, and British Columbia. Aside from a few radical union leaders who sought refuge in North America, these immigrants were not the destitute, dispossessed, or persecuted. The majority were agriculturalists, labourers and miners in search of better economic conditions. They were recruited by land speculators, immigration agents, steamship companies, railway companies, employment agencies, “return men,” and colonizing clergy. It was common, during the first wave of immigration before 1914, for sojourners to remain as pioneers.

Belgians were protected by their home government in matters of recruitment procedures and emigration provisions and in the fulfillment of contractual obligations on the part of steamship lines, colonization companies and Canadian employers. Fact-finding missions from Belgium followed up on conditions of settlement and corroborated consular reports. Irregularities and fraud in emigration/immigration were of great concern

to Belgian authorities. Canada never launched a massive campaign to attract Belgians as it did in the British Isles. Nevertheless, Belgium was thought to be in the “preferred” category in Canadian immigration legislation and regulation.

In spite of an assimilationist Anglo-conformist ideology in Western Canada throughout the period to 1940, Belgians were able to accommodate readily to a social milieu whose base over time became less that of a common descent, common ancestral traditions, or common religion. Politically, Flemings and Walloons had come from a duo-ethnic nation that idealistically upheld equality under political union and that believed the solution of problems rested with the attitude of the majority, but also with a consideration of the aspirations of the weaker partner. Flemings identified especially with the heterogeneous Anglophone community in the West, while most Walloons identified with the Francophone minority.

Both Belgian immigrant communities brought to the new environment their own cultural practices and values, some of which were “national,” others predominantly ethnic Flemish or Walloon, and others occupational or class. Thus, there appeared to be a common work ethic, sense of social justice, and desire to participate in civic affairs. On the other hand, there were political and religious differences between agriculturalists, miners and investors. Integration into the complex mainstream, itself in continuous progression, was facilitated by the fact Belgians lacked institutional completeness, the structure of organizations to provide most of the services they required. Also, there was no great social distance, or marked cultural differences, between them and the predominant Anglophone and Francophone communities. Although they did retain some sense of historic identity and a level of popular culture within their own group, they did not politicize these group concerns and differences. The Belgian experience, therefore, falls into a category of partialized or fragmented ethnicity because some aspects of an individual’s life remained within the confines of ancestral expectations while other segments followed the mainstream culture. Some Flemings appear to be taking on an affective ethnicity in response to rising manifestations of Flemish nationalism in Belgium. This explains the self-identification as “Flemish” in recent multiple-origin census returns, although at the same time English is indicated as the home language. On the other hand, many Walloons have retained their mother tongue and they usually identify themselves as Francophone Canadians of Belgian origin.

Although Canadian immigration officials perceived Belgians as belonging to the “preferred” class, or readily assimilable, and able to contribute immediately to the regional economy, these immigrants did retain a sense of their own identity. This sentiment of ancestral identity was rooted in a number of factors. Locality of origin in Belgium, such as Halanzy, Wingene, or Lommel, was transmitted through chain migration to new communities in Western Canada. Family networks and community intermarriage were important factors in maintaining a sense of belongingness. The Catholic church was usually an influential social centre and communication with the homeland aided in sustaining a degree of differentiation from the multiethnic neighbourhood. Although there were no official Belgian bloc settlements, there were concentrations of planters in rural communities and urban enclaves that were reinforced by continuing immigration and religious patronage. In the first two generations, the experience of pioneers and planters was situational, with some significant differences between predominantly Flemish and Walloon concentrations of population. Walloons almost invariably became integrated into the Francophone community, whereas Flemings, except in the first generation in St. Boniface, adopted many Anglophone host society views and customs. Still, in St. Alphonse and Swan Lake a Flemish flavour persisted and Bellegarde retained an unmistakably Walloon quality.

In the various communities where Belgians settled, they were in contact with a host society, or mainstream, that was itself situational and evolving over time. They came to a southern Manitoba that was markedly Anglophone western Ontarian, a Saskatchewan that was quite multicultural and polyglot, a southern Alberta that was predominantly American, and British Columbia that was characteristically British. They acculturated to a variety of sub-host cultures, in other words, that in turn were modified by a continuing stream of diverse immigrants. Belgians, unlike some immigrant groups, promoted the monarchical, liberal democratic, Christian and bilingual character of society. They presented no formal claims for distinctive political, economic or socio-cultural institutions. On the contrary, the paucity of their ethnic parishes, schools and associations was a factor in the rapid integration of the bi-ethnic community. The only institutions of consequence were the Club Belge, the Belgian Sacred Heart parish in St. Boniface, and Scheppers Institute in Swan Lake.

Family histories provide evidence of the role of family, mentors and age peers in the process of socialization. In the first two generations in Canada the family, especially a farm family, implanted values of personal responsibility, conformity, and group solidarity and a work ethic. Children and adolescents shared these values with their age group, while the teachers and the clergy as mentors reinforced their traditional values. In the more complex social environment of towns and cities, parental influence was somewhat weakened, the peer group was more diverse, and mentors came from a variety of recreational, social and professional groups. By the third generation, non-personal influences, such as radio, movies, television and the automobile, influenced the thinking of all persons, young and old, rural and urban. School, leisure and recreational activities developed friendships across ethnocultural backgrounds. Adults through widening contacts in farm and business organizations, labour unions and professional associations experienced a cross-fertilization of ideas and values. Marriages that were contracted originally within the Belgian community, in the second generation included the wider Catholic community, and thereafter the entire community, indicating that Belgians were susceptible to formal socialization. Social relationships resulted in integration and social inclusion, justifying the “preferred” immigration status. Both Flemings and Walloons valued individual achievement and personal growth and, in the initial stages of implantation, they wanted to succeed occupationally and financially. Nevertheless, in general, Flemish farmers and Walloon coalminers did not have high educational expectations for their children. The school systems provided a comprehensive education to all and Catholic-oriented schools provided insulation from competing values and mores. There were occasions when boundary maintenance was required, such as during Mormon social pressure on youth in southern Alberta, pressure to join new political parties, and from informal agents of social control such as religious leaders, prohibitionists and suffragettes. Walloon communities sometimes resisted the rigourist theology of the hierarchy and clergy concerning marriage, schooling, recreation and tithing. The Flemish family tradition of pooling the income of all its members survived for several decades.

Rural restructuring, marked first by the creation of larger administrative units, then the disappearance of railway branch lines, grain elevators and smaller villages, disrupted homogeneous settlement patterns. New service centres offered new trades and business and

professional opportunities for the sons and daughters of the third and fourth generation Belgian-Canadians. Employment in the early collieries was replaced by opportunities in the petroleum and potash industries. These mutations implied accelerated integration and increased challenges to self-identity.

The story of Belgian life in Western Canada illustrates the major eras and developments of the region. From the image of an untamed wilderness to the granary of the world, Belgians participated in the wheat economy. They excelled in the cultivation of sugar beets, vegetables and small fruits, the operation of dairy farms, and the raising of fine horses. They mined coal from the Souris valley to Vancouver Island, organized unions and battled the bosses, even when they were compatriots. They endured the challenges of war, drought and depression. The financiers of Antwerp and Brussels invested heavily in land, resource exploitation, construction and industrial development, while farmers, labourers, small business men, housewives and miners toiled, raised their families, and participated in the affairs of their local communities. Missionaries, priests, nuns, teachers, and professional people helped to sustain the popular image of Belgians as industrious, frugal and successful. Others distinguished themselves in the arts, music and literature. Two world wars, in which Canadian troops alongside Belgians fought valiantly, confirmed the moral fibre of the Belgian people and further endeared them to the Canadian public. These are the observations that emerge from the generational record of family histories. The archival record confirms that while Belgian authorities were wise to interest themselves in the fate of their emigrants, they were gratified that they integrated well as pioneers in Western Canada, promoted industry and commerce, and generally succeeded as model planters.

