

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

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ISBN 978-1-55238-570-8

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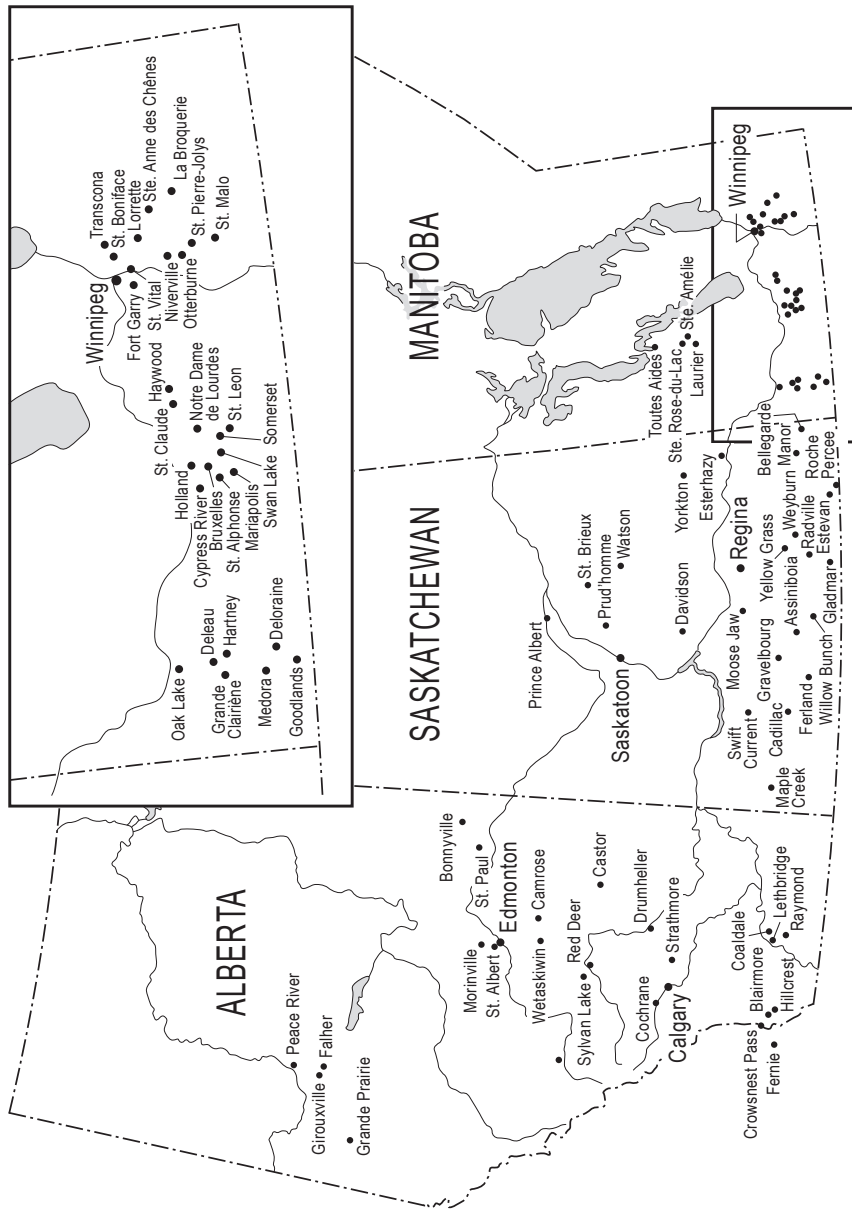
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INTRODUCTION

L'oubli de ses origines ou l'ignorance de ses traditions représente pour toute société un appauvrissement regrettable. Mais une mémoire vivante enracinée solidement dans une histoire pleinement appréciée enrichit notablement la culture d'un peuple. Le rappel de ses expériences historiques établit son identité, clarifie sa vision, et assure la vitalité de ses projets d'avenir.

– Remi J. De Roo, Bishop of Victoria, 1987.

The motivation for writing about the Belgian experience in Western Canada is identified with a number of factors. A project conceived in the cadre of the Generation Series of Canadian ethnic histories, as a collaborative work with Professor André Vermeirre of the Université de Montréal, proved to be stillborn. When I returned to the project, encouraged by some colleagues and diplomats following an international colloquium on the Belgian Presence in Canada at the University of Ottawa in October 1999, I came to realize the deep attachment I had to such an undertaking.

First, I am the child of Belgian immigrants – a Flemish father and a Walloon mother – and all my grandparents came to Saskatchewan after World War I. In fact, at one point I held a Belgian passport that also meant that I was subject to military service in the land of my ancestors. As a young child, I spoke French, Flemish, and a Walloon dialect. According to my extended family, I was somewhat of a Belgian nationalist, although I am uncertain of the nature of such a designation in my pre-school years.

A second influence was the public school where I learned English, the language in which I now write most effectively. That one-room country school, taught by highly skilled and dedicated teachers who could manage eight grades of more than thirty pupils, was designed as more than a place of learning. It was an experiment in acculturation and socialization, intended to “civilize and Christianize” immigrant children, as I learned much later in university. The curriculum, with its varied extra-curricular activities, patriotic exercises and community activities, followed the precepts set out by J.T.M. Anderson (teacher/inspector/Minister of Education/Premier) in his *The Education of the New Canadian* (1919). This process, designed to cleanse me of traits and habits of Belgianness and Catholicism that did not coincide with the anglo-celtic model, failed to take into account the strength of counter-educational forces. My family, for example, did not feel inferior culturally or socially to the dominant group, and in some respects harboured some attitudes of superiority. Thus, an important emotional attachment to my ancestral roots remained while feeling quite integrated into the community. These resurfaced decades later when the present project began to take shape. As the product of an innovative and effective educational program, I came to understand better the immigrant experience in the context of attempts at nation building in the context of a difficult environment, during years of economic instability in a multicultural milieu.

The third influence in the shaping of this book was the physical and socio-economic environment of rural Saskatchewan in the inter-war years. I grew up in years of drought and depression, saw topsoil drift into banks like snow and hordes of grasshoppers obscure the view of the blazing sun. I witnessed at first hand the enormous and discouraging challenges people faced. Some surmounted terrible odds but others turned to internal migration to more attractive regions to begin again. Thus, it was that my father followed the advice of a compatriot in the Red River valley and we moved close to the main centre of Belgian settlement in Western Canada. In Winnipeg, I began my college and university studies that eventually determined my career, and indirectly this study.

Finally, my career as a teacher – at all levels of education ranging from a one-room elementary school, high school, independent boys’ school, university to post-graduate studies – took me from British Columbia to Newfoundland. Throughout this further broadening of my perspectives, I was involved with many ethno cultural issues and projects as well as

relevant historical societies. This enabled me to appreciate the diversity of experiences immigrants faced over time and in different locations. Within each ethnic group, there is a wide range of attitudes and objectives. All this caused me to reflect on my own role within the community when I was invited to sit as a representative on the Canadian Consultative Committee on Multiculturalism, the Manitoba Advisory Committee on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, and the Manitoba delegation to the États-Généraux du Canada Français. There were lessons to be learned as I observed the interaction between ethno cultural groups and their fragments in national, regional, and local contexts.

The conception of this history differs from that of most so-called ethnic histories by beginning with a documented consideration of the process of emigration in its material and psychological aspects, not merely of push/pull factors as related to immigration. Moreover, the major source of information for this segment of Western Canadian history has been the Belgian archives. The settlement process, which is the major thrust of the study, is examined with three contexts in mind. Firstly, there is the question of space. The flow of emigrants was to a distant western region of a huge continent, followed in many cases by an additional westward movement from a St. Boniface / Winnipeg port of entry onto three significantly different prairie steppes to the barrier of the Rockies. Settlement along the Pacific Rim did not reflect the same spatial movement but was one of implantation on Vancouver Island and interior continental valleys. Secondly, there is the element of time. Geographic regions assumed different qualities and importance with the exploitation and development of natural resources, the evolution of the economy, and the social, political, and cultural character of each era. Landscapes in which Belgians settled could appear quite different over time because settlement itself altered the environment, as did climatic fluctuations, the opening to world markets, improved transportation, and other human interventions. Time and space constitute the context of our study. Thirdly, there is the human element, never mechanical and sometimes unpredictable, that remains prominent in the economic, institutional, and socio-intellectual paradigms employed to characterize the settlement process. Individuals and families made decisions that resulted in responses to challenges that we characterize as adaptation, accommodation, integration, and resistance. In the absence of over-arching Belgian ethnic institutions, particular religious and “national” cultural bodies, or internal ethnolinguistic homogeneity, the

role of the individuals and small groups assumed a primary importance in the story we recount.

I am convinced that this personal journey has influenced the manner in which I have approached this project. I owe a great debt to many individuals, institutions and publications. Unlike most ethnic historians, I have decided to identify individuals and events, sometimes of less than national importance, because that is what makes history a living record. A number of personal and family experiences across Western Canada are included, not as a filiopietistic desire to sing the praises of particular pioneers but to illustrate the complexity of the immigrant experience. Some individuals have been honoured publicly, such as a dairy farmer in Saskatoon remembered in the naming of Brevoort Park, but many remain unknown. Men and women identified in this study are not singled out to the exclusion of others because they are pre-eminently notable. They are illustrative of the process of emigration, immigration, settlement, integration, innovation and adaptation. It is necessary to put a human face to what would otherwise be only academic analysis, theoretical speculation and demographic reduction. Biographical details are sometimes useful in revealing the events in the life of an individual or family and especially the meaning attached to these events. The hopes, fears, fantasies, emotions, achievements and discouragements of these individuals, families and communities are their living history. Without doubt, there are others we have failed to identify but research can only uncover a small portion of the historical panorama.

This is a history of an elusive yet identifiable group, initially deemed by politicians to rank among the “preferred,” yet scarcely mentioned in studies of Canadian ethnicity and multiculturalism. What distinguished Belgians from many other newcomers was the perception they were in a “preferred” category because of their attributed resourcefulness and adaptability, their identification with both the English and French socio-cultural communities, and the image of a brave, independent, democratic, civilized Belgium that emerged from foreign occupation during two world wars. Although they are a comparatively small national group in the ethnic mosaic of the West, they were portrayed as successful promoters, planters and pioneers. They promoted market gardening, dairying and the orchard industry. Although Belgium was a small nation, its capitalists were prominent promoters, generous in securing capital in launching and encouraging financial, industrial and commercial enterprises in the

region. They were planters, or early settlers, as were many others, who distinguished themselves in promoting the cultivation of chicory, tobacco and sugar beets and who proved to be accomplished marketgardeners. They were pioneers, as were all first colonists, who prepared the way for others not just as “rude sons of toil” but also men and women of thought. They were true pioneers in mining operations, unionization, education and missionary work. In other words, the measure of their participation in the development of Western Canadian culture, economy and ideology was not dependent on their numerical strength, their political power, or their corporate life. Instead, they participated, contributed and innovated as individuals, as family units, then as workers, community members and Christians. Belgians differed from the larger immigrant groups inasmuch as they were not recruited by important immigration societies and they did not settle in ethnic blocs. Belgian nationality was a diplomatic and political creation of the Great Powers in the early nineteenth century. Belgian identity, however, was rooted since mediaeval times in the independence, commerce, industry and higher learning associated with Bruges, Antwerp, Liege and Louvain. Not surprisingly, Belgian settlement in Western Canada was associated with adaptability and individuality rather than primarily with nationality or ethnicity.

As this account of the settlement and integration of Belgian nationals in Western Canada unfolds, it becomes evident that the Belgian bi-ethnic experience is instructive, even unique, in the context of and in comparison to the experience of a large number of other ethnic groups in the region. Belgians came from a bilingual milieu into a Canadian region where the French language was under siege. Both Flemings and the less numerous Walloons were nominally Catholic, the former generally characterized as conservative agrarians and the latter as more liberal, sometimes anticlerical. The miners were generally radical, socialistic and anticlerical, a source of concern for the Canadian clergy but not for the Belgian authorities that distrusted clerical emigration projects. Flemings were more likely able to speak French than the Walloons to speak Flemish or Dutch. Catholic immigration agents sought out Belgians, especially when recruitment in France brought meagre results. The Walloons recruited by these clerics were culturally Catholic, so they assimilated into the French-Canadian communities in Western Canada where they were settled. Nevertheless, they displayed marked “old country” nonconformist attitudes in what was essentially an ultramontane local environment. Many took up the

cause of Catholic schooling associated with French language rights and they supported the francophone press, radio, drama and literature. Enclosed, or *encadré*, in the defensive francophone community in Western Canada, the Walloons failed to produce significant Walloon institutions. Flemings, on the other hand, generally settled in clusters in anglophone communities, integrated readily into the dominant anglo-celtic host society, but sacrificed neither their Catholicism nor their bilingualism.

We have tried to incorporate relevant concepts and evidence from all the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. It seemed important in this study to focus on the substantive questions concerning migration, integration, social conflict, self-image and group solidarity in a rapidly evolving Canadian pluralistic society. My hope is that the tale I tell is somewhat comprehensible and relevant to the readers, regardless of their own background and perspective.

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