



Cornelius J. Jaenen, ***Promotors, Planters, and Pioneers: The Course and Context of Belgian Settlement in Western Canada*** (The West Series 4; Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2011, xii + 348 pp., ISBN 978 1 55238 258 5).

Like his subject, the Belgians of West Canada, the author has found plenty of new ground to till. Indeed, this is the most in-depth look at the individual lives of Canadian Belgians available, and supersedes in that regard Dirk Musschoot's *Wij gaan naar Amerika. Vlaamse landverhuizers naar de Nieuwe Wereld 1850-1930* (Tielt 2002). Jaenen's thesis is that Belgians in Canada lacked 'institutional completeness' and 'ethnolinguistic homogeneity' which led to a 'partialized or fragmented ethnicity'. While Jaenen presents an impressive amount of data mined from files of the Belgian National Archives, he leaves many questions unanswered.

To summarize, the author explains that the Canadian Government deemed Belgians a preferred immigrant group, but that they were not heavily recruited, nor did they settle in ethnic blocs. Rather, Belgians in West Canada settled in dispersed agricultural communities, first in the 1880s outside of Winnipeg. At this time, agrarian discontent in Belgium, particularly the collapse of the grain market, led Belgian farmers to seek work elsewhere. Most migrated locally and regionally, especially to France. Belgians came to Canada in three waves: 1) 16,000 immigrants from 1890 to 1914, 2) 14,000 from 1919 to 1939, and 3) 35,000 from 1945 to the 1980s. The few Belgian farmers in the Canadian West worked in dairy, raised sugar beets and wheat. By 1900, they also worked as miners and farmers in Alberta and British Columbia.

The author believes he has taken an uncommon tack by shifting his gaze away from the traditional push-pull factors of migration and towards topics of immigrant life and assimilation in Canada. He would be wise to recognize, however, that historians in the United States and Canada have always been more interested in the latter topics, leaving European scholars to sort out the factors which inspired trans-Atlantic migrations. What remains of the text is the kind of history popular in the first half of the twentieth century – intense descriptions of people and places, noting the successes of the immigrants and their contribution to their communities and nation.

But what does a collection of individual stories tell us about the nature of a group of people? The author does not explain how well the Belgians in West Canada were connected to Belgians in East Canada, in Wisconsin or Detroit, or whether they had any

intercourse with the Dutch Canadians who also settled in similar areas near Winnipeg. Jaenen is more successful when he notes that the Francophone Belgians were often mistaken to be Frenchmen, and that the French in Quebec were keen to see more Catholics join them in the Dominion. Unlike Canada's Anglo-Celtic Protestant majority, the Belgian immigrants played cards and enjoyed carnival games. They were also reluctant to pass laws against alcohol. In short, Belgians formed a minor opposition party, a liberal/socialist Catholic opposition to a conservative, Protestant presence on the plains. Yet, the Belgians in Canada did not have an ethnic press and their binding religious institution was the multi-ethnic Catholic Church, so it remains unclear to what extent Belgians in Canada were indeed a self-aware group with a unique collective identity.

Some clarity on the numerical presence of Belgians in West Canada would be helpful. Although we are given data on the number of Belgians in Canada as a whole, it is unclear how many Belgians were in the western provinces, and what percent of these were Flemish or Walloon (linguistic or cultural division between Belgians – not the political). Again and again we read vague statements that communities had 'a few', or 'some' Belgians, that Belgians were 'scattered throughout the area'(129), that 'numerous Belgians' worked at a certain factory (155), or, somewhat better, that 'at least 100' Belgians lived in the Fraser Valley in the early 1900s (175). Since the Fraser Valley is a rather large place, it would be more useful to know whether the Belgians there formed any kind of community.

The depth of stories and data is impressive and has its merits, especially for historians of the immigrant experience on the Canadian Great Plains. As well, chapters on Manitoba, Alberta, and British Columbia will be interesting for Belgian Canadians there, but scholars might want to know how many Belgians in Canada returned to Belgium, if there was a transnational aspect of their lives, what the rates of language retention were, how women perceived their roles to change in the new world, what the immigrants thought of other ethnic groups, and how second and third generation Belgian Canadians formed their identities. These issues are addressed briefly or not at all.

The main question, however, is whether scattered individuals really comprise a group with a common story, and whether this story can be told in any other manner than a list of people, places, and accomplishments. What made the Belgian Canadians different from their compatriots who remained in patria? After all, the salient fact of Belgian migration to the U.S. and Canada is their non-migration. The currents of trans-Atlantic migration hardly swept any Belgians along as they held firm to their 'standplaatsen'.

Although this book has 866 footnotes, fewer than 10 point to Dutch-language sources, and all of these are secondary works. Granted, the Belgian governmental records which the author consulted are mostly in French, not Dutch, but it seems odd that a history of Belgians in Canada would not reference a single Dutch-language primary source.

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