

Serge Jaumain, ed.: *Les immigrants préférés: les Belges*. Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1999. 196p. ISBN 2-7603-0513-9.

To anyone who is interested in immigration into Canada, Belgian or other, and who can read French, I recommend this work, for it is designed to fill a gap in immigration studies; that is why I am reviewing it in English. The initiative to study the question comes from the other side, so to speak: this volume contains the proceedings of an international colloquium held by the Centre d'études canadiennes at the Free University of Brussels. As the introduction by Serge Jaumain (Free Univ. of Brussels) and Matteo Sanfilippo (Univ. of Tuscia, Viterbo) shows, more has been written about Dutch immigration to Canada, or Belgian immigration to the US. Such neglect is surprising, despite the Belgians' small numbers, seeing that they were classified as preferred immigrants to Canada from the beginning of the regulation of immigration, in a law of 1869.

In a second introductory essay, François Weil (EHESS, Paris) shows how wide this book could cast its net, in another sense: the whole historical study of immigrants is growing more nuanced. Are they economically forced to move, or do they choose to? Are there divisions among them according to region of origin, language, length of time in their new country? How well do they really assimilate? Is the experience of women different? Not all these questions can be answered in one book, of course.

The first part of this volume (there are three parts and three essays per part) concludes with a useful historical overview of Belgian immigration to Canada, written

by Serge Jaumain. The second part begins with Matteo Sanfilippo's account of the echoes in Vatican archives of Belgian settlement in North America. Belgians held a large number of high church offices, out of proportion to their numbers, till towards 1900 complaints arose that they were too rigid in their thinking and didn't understand North Americans. The Vatican also worried that many Belgians were infected with socialist ideas and seldom went to mass. We shall note later on that Canadian officials failed to see this.

Serge Jaumain returns with two images of Canada. The first is derived from impressions of Belgian travellers who wrote newspaper articles or books on their return, in the late 19th century. They found Canada vast and empty, its winters brutal, its cities less industrialized and go-getting than at home; Quebec seemed especially old-fashioned, its people very respectful of religion. The second, somewhat contrasting image comes from the corpus of propaganda brochures and "infomercial" articles published in newspapers from 1867 to 1914 by Canadian and Quebec government and land development agents (and even the priests of Belgian villages in Canada) in order to encourage Belgians to emigrate. Unlike the publications of the Belgian government, designed to help people thinking of emigration, which were accurate and kept up to date, and those of bodies which worked to protect the emigrants from exploitation, such as the Société Saint-Raphaël, the propaganda pamphlets were often copied wholesale from others that were years out of date, and painted a rosy picture: plenty of fertile land, freedom from class barriers, religious tolerance, no military service, and a farming population eager to learn new methods from the

newcomers.

Equally unrealistic was the image of the Belgian immigrant conceived and stubbornly stuck to by Canadian officials, with a description of which Martin Pâquet (Laval) concludes the second part of the book. Belgian immigrants were preferred if they were hardworking farmers who would be glad of lots of land; after 1878, when the St. Lawrence Valley was deemed settled enough, they were especially encouraged to go to the new areas being opened up: the Eastern Townships, the Saguenay and the Gaspé. Alas, they were unused to clearing forests. By 1900 Belgium was also looked to for people with capital to come and start industries, for farm labourers, and for women domestic servants. Male teachers were also being wooed by then, but that women teachers would be useful seems not to have occurred to the authorities, both because women were assumed to be subject to their husbands and because educated professional city people were generally declared to be useless for this young country. Belgians were also supposed to be God-fearing and moral, though surely some officials must have noticed the existence of anticlerical and socialist thinking among Walloons. As long as the old image ruled official thinking, despite all the efforts made to get them to come here, relatively few ever did; yet the authorities long held to what they saw as the scientific and rational basis of their policy.

Cornelius Jaenen (Ottawa) continues Pâquet's story, telling us how in time a greater variety of trades were opened up to Belgians, throughout Canada. Miners went to the Maritimes and the West; they did dangerous work for little pay and were naturally led to organize labour unions. Farmers had to rely for moral support on

their families in the face of disasters aplenty, though there were success stories also - for example, Belgians at one time held the virtual monopoly of the milk and butter trade around Winnipeg, and they irrigated the Okanagan so that fruit farming flourished. Sugar beets did not make money, but growing onions, tomatoes and cucumbers for the pickling plants of southwestern Ontario did. Eventually the usefulness of professional people was recognized and after 1900 Belgians founded applied arts and business colleges in Canada; since 1950 many more have come here to teach at all levels. Since 1968 Belgian businessmen and industrialists have also been welcomed and a good many have come over. In short, the authorities now accept that society evolves.

Anne Morelli (Free Univ. of Brussels), a specialist in emigration from and immigration into Belgium, tells us about something that may not be well known: a considerable number of Italian-Canadians moved to Belgium first, especially after World War II when the Italian economy was bad and Belgian coal mines needed cheap docile labour (the mines were old and could only remain economic that way). However, the pay was minimal and working and housing conditions were appalling, and thousands contacted Canadian authorities (clandestinely, for it was illegal to take steps to quit) and were accepted for immigration.

To conclude the volume, Marc Debuisson (a demographer with the Walloon government) and Nathalie Tousignant (Laval and Louvain) examine census statistics in Belgium and Canada for the past decade. 120,000 Canadians claim Belgian descent, but the variables prevent any meaningful analysis. The authors therefore fall back on immigration statistics over the

years. These show two bursts of Belgian immigrants during depressions in the 1950s, which was also the turning point when Quebec pulled ahead of Ontario as their principal destination - and the period when Flanders ceased to be their principal source; nowadays Wallonia has that distinction (the figure for Brussels is even higher as a proportion of the region's population). These facts have to be set against a steady decline in total numbers since 1961. The changing economic fortunes of the regions, and the fact that today it is mostly people aged between 20 and 35 who emigrate, suggest that emigrants are looking for work - but now they are well educated and the work they want is in the service sector, not resources or manufacturing. And a last conclusion: they are moving westwards across Canada.

Some of these essays are based on primary documents, some on secondary literature, and Martin Pâquet's essay uses equal amounts of both. The difference seems to reflect the double nature of the book itself: it is partly an introduction to the subject and partly more specialized. Always the

documentation is vast, but it is all in extensive footnotes - there is no bibliography gathered at the end of the volume, nor an index. The notes quote names our readers know well, such as Joan Magee, Frans Schryer, Herman Ganzevoort, Will van den Hoonard... (However, Ganzevoort's *The last illusion* and Claire Carbonez' article on the Belgian contribution to Canada, both of which we had the pleasure of publishing in this Journal, alas appeared too late to be included here). We should also say that, inevitably, such a survey is bound to offer a mixture of methods and approaches, casting lights on different parts of its topic but not needs on all of it. None the less, this is a valuable introduction to a question which can interest historians, sociologists and other students of immigration questions, as well as everyone of Belgian descent.

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