

Review

Cornelius J. Jaenen:

Promoters, Planters, and Pioneers. The Course and Context of Belgian Settlement in Western Canada.

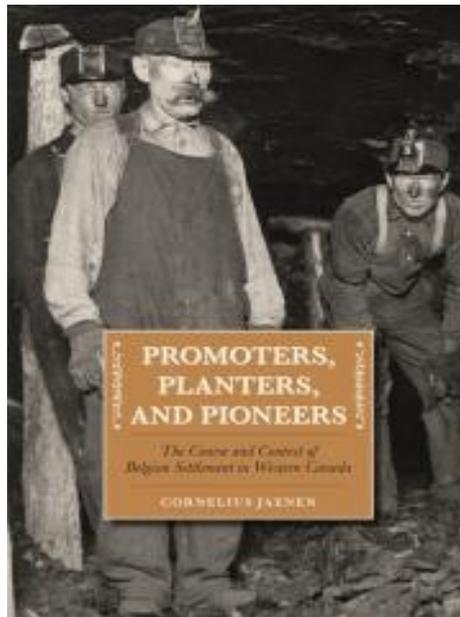
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Reviewed by Tanja Collet



Cornelius Jaenen's *Promoters, Planters, and Pioneers. The Course and Context of Belgian Settlement in Western Canada* is a meticulously researched historical account of the Belgian immigrant experience in Western Canada. The author, emeritus professor in the Department of History at the University of Ottawa and the son of Flemish and Walloon immigrant parents whose ancestors had settled in western Canada, easily positions himself with this comprehensive study as the leading Canadian historian of the Belgian immigrant community. This scholarly work is indeed unique in that it emanates from Canadian academic circles, which have produced relatively little so far on the Belgian contributions to the Canadian social, economic, political and cultural enterprise. It distinguishes itself both by its scope and depth of analysis from other works on the topic, often

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undertaken by the descendants of Flemish and Walloon immigrants who became their communities' historians. With respect to western Canada, one such work comes to mind: James B. Wyndels' and Keith Wilson's *The Belgians in Manitoba*, published in 1976 and undertaken to mark the 75th anniversary of the founding of St. Boniface's *Le Club Belge*.

Rich in detail, *Promoters, Planters, and Pioneers. The Course and Context of Belgian Settlement in Western Canada* is based on an abundance of data gleaned by the author from a wide variety of sources, all listed in an impressive trilingual (English, French and Dutch) bibliography of nearly thirty pages long. They include: (a) Canadian and Belgian archival sources and other government publications; (b) local, community and family histories; (c) scholarly publications on Belgium and western Canada, on patterns of Belgian immigration and on Canadian immigration policies; as well as (d) a number of theses and dissertations. The book is divided in nine chapters, which trace the Belgian immigrant experience from the recruitment of immigrants in Flanders and Wallonia to their settlement as farmers, labourers or miners in the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia to their integration in the Canadian socioeconomic and political fabric. To complete the analysis, one chapter is dedicated to the economic and military ties that bind Belgium and Canada. It provides an overview of the extent of Belgium's commercial interests and investments in western Canada from the late nineteenth century onwards, particularly by Antwerp and Brussels investment firms, such as the Frédéric Jacobs group, in areas such as resource exploitation, mining operations and commercial agriculture. It examines furthermore a number of historical events, that led to a strong military bond between both nations, but also influenced to a considerable degree the image of Belgium in the Canadian imagination, most notably Germany's violation of Belgium's neutrality at the onset of World War I and the plight of the Belgian civilian population in this and the Second World War. Both conflicts led not surprisingly to new waves of Belgian emigration, as illustrated by the numbers in Table 4 (271).

The book describes in detail the recruitment activities of government agents, such as Désiré Tréau de Coeli, a prosperous Belgian living in Hull (Québec) at the time of his appointment, steamship and railway companies (particularly the Canadian Pacific Railway), return men, colonizing priests and land speculators. It details the reactions of the Belgian authorities to some of these activities, which were not always above par, and the government's concerns for the well-being of its citizens. At least eight fact-finding missions were carried out in western Canada by Belgian officials to assess the requirements for successful settlement by Flemish or Walloon emigrants. This careful attitude was typical of a small nation of which the government "never encouraged emigration" in spite of challenging economic conditions, but instead

enacted “regulations to protect the individuals and families who chose to venture abroad from dangerous and unsanitary travel conditions, over-zealous recruiting agents and misleading contractual arrangements” (26). Canada, on the other hand, saw Belgium as a “preferred nation” from which one could recruit hard-working, resourceful and frugal immigrants who would fairly easily integrate into Canada’s mainstream society. Indeed, as former citizens of a duo-ethnic monarchy, Belgians promoted in their new homeland “the monarchical, liberal democratic, Christian and bilingual character” (265), which dominated its society. It is worthwhile noting in this regard, that Belgian immigrants, specifically from French-speaking Wallonia, were often recruited by colonizing clergy to increase the French Catholic presence in the West. The “chain of Francophone parishes” (99), envisaged and founded by the abbé Jean Gaire and stretching from Bellegarde, Wauchope and Forget in Saskatchewan to Red Deer and Rocky Mountain House in Alberta, is a case in point.

The book provides a detailed overview of Belgian settlements in chiefly rural but also urban settings in all four of the western provinces. In Manitoba, St. Boniface and its environs became, around the turn of the 20th century, the main hub of Belgian emigration to western Canada. East St. Boniface quickly acquired the nickname of *Belgian Town*, though it never developed into a true ethnic ghetto, and it is here that the community founded a few ethnically distinctive institutions, such as *Le Club Belge* and the *Sacred Heart* Flemish parish. The immigrants’ main sectors of economic activity in all of the provinces were mainly rural agricultural (homesteading; dairy farms; market gardening; sugar beet culture; fruit growing and horse raising) but there was also some business entrepreneurship (mainly general stores, and local hotels, that in many ways replaced the Flemish and Walloon tradition of the *café* as the chief place for social gatherings). Provinces such as British Columbia and Alberta also attracted a fair amount of Belgian miners to their collieries, mostly from the Walloon provinces of southern Belgium, such as Hainaut. These immigrants distinguished themselves from their rural or urban counterparts in at least two important ways: they were engaged in left-wing social activism and were, in spite of their Catholic background, often anticlerical. In western Canada, their affinity with the socialist movement, which predated their emigration, led them to actively participate in the union movement and in socialistic collective actions such as strikes, in their sector’s fight for better work conditions. Finally, in British Columbia, Belgian capital investments and land development projects played a major role in the “initial planning and development of the Okanagan fruit-growing industry” (181). The families that settled there, however, were never numerous enough to form a cohesive community (181).

Throughout its history in western Canada, the Belgian community never developed institutional completeness, a fact that greatly facilitated the

community's integration into mainstream society. While in St. Boniface, Walloon and Flemish immigrants alike blended into the local Francophone community (64), elsewhere Flemish immigrants mainly identified with the more heterogeneous Anglophone majority and Walloon immigrants with the more homogeneous French-Canadian minority (264). The language retention patterns of both groups are consequently quite different, with only the Walloon immigrants and their descendants, who often self-identify as "Francophone Canadians of Belgian origin" (264), having succeeded in preserving their mother tongue. Flemish immigrants and their descendants, on the other hand, have largely abandoned their mother tongue but may, in spite of their prevalent use of English, still self-identify as Flemish on government forms, such as census questionnaires. Their ethnicity, as Jaenen puts it, has become "affective" (264) in nature.

The book's impressive amount of detailed information may make the reader feel overwhelmed at times. However, the many references to Belgian immigrant families and the towns, villages and hamlets in which they settled are of great value for any historian interested in Belgian immigration or the construction of the West as well as for any community member looking for information about their ancestors. Consequently, this book is an invaluable resource for scholars and community members alike.