

Belgian immigrants and language issues on the Canadian prairies

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Initial Belgian settlement on the Canadian Prairies occurred in a period of fundamental demographic, administrative and institutional evolution. This included the creation of the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan in 1905. Belgians had to navigate basic societal changes. Flemings and Walloons first arrived when French was being replaced both officially and in term of actual usage by English. The Flemish arrivals soon opted for English while most Walloons, often recruited by colonizing clergy, settled in and identified with francophone communities. This was reflected in language choices in both schools and parishes. Walloons would retain their French but Flemings within a generation withdrew their support of the Flemish parish in St. Boniface and of Scheppers College in Swan Lake. In general, Belgians lived up to the expectations of immigration officials that they would integrate well into mainstream society.

Key terms: Belgian immigration to Canada; Canadian Prairies; French language; Flemish language; Flemings; Walloons; Oblates; St. Boniface; Scheppers College.

First of all, let us set the stage of the Western Prairies in order to understand the changes in language usage and policy over time, and the context or milieu to which Belgians had to adapt. The first European language to make an impact on the Prairies was French. Originally, the region was part of the jurisdiction of La Mer de l'Ouest with headquarters at Fort Kaministiquia (Thunder Bay) and a scattering of military posts at strategic locations (such as the present sites of Winnipeg, Portage la Prairie, Saskatoon, Edmonton and Calgary), the western extension of New France. All this was ceded to the British Crown in 1763. The Hudson's Bay Company, which traded in the Bay area since 1670, used English to conduct its business, but the few factors in the northern regions who mingled with the Native inhabitants were most likely to speak a Gaelic dialect of the Orkneys. The North-West Company, based in Montreal, used French-Canadian voyageurs and some Iroquois to pursue its fur trade penetration of the West, beginning in the 1780s, in opposition to the HBC monopoly in all lands draining

into Hudson's Bay. Also, Métis, who had originated in the Great Lakes region during the French period, began moving into the Red River area in significant numbers in pursuit of the buffalo hunt. They spoke Michif, a mixture of French and Algonquian, but were able to communicate with the French speakers (Jaenen 2011, 29-60, 202-206).

In 1812, Lord Selkirk established a Scots settlement near the junction of the Red and Assiniboine rivers, across from the Oblate Fathers mission at St. Boniface on the east bank of the Red River. There was now a dual language community – French and English/Gaelic – with a Council of Assiniboia functioning in both languages, although the official records were in English. The Francophones and Métis spread westwards along the Assiniboine river, the shores of Lake Manitoba and eventually the Saskatchewan river. In 1869, Louis Riel led a protest movement of both linguistic groups against a Canadian government takeover from the HBC without consulting the inhabitants – “sold like poor dumb driven cattle”. The negotiations that followed between the provisional local government and the Canadian government led to the Manitoba Act (1870), which created a new province with recognition of English/French bilingualism and dual confessional Catholic and Protestant school systems (Jaenen 1965).

What followed was substantial change which affected the Belgian immigrants who began arriving in the late 1880s. Of course, we must be aware that Belgians were a national group: there was no Belgian language per se, and they did not constitute a uniform ethnic group. Ethnically they were Flemings and Walloons, and linguistically *Vlaams* ('Flemish') or else French with Walloon dialects. The response of each sector of the Belgian community, therefore, could be quite different in a rapidly evolving and changing Western Canadian social and political situation.

The changes that occurred in the West were first of all demographic, then administrative and finally constitutional.

Demographic changes. The composition of the population was altered dramatically by mass immigration and the introduction of ethnic bloc settlements for Icelanders, Mennonites, Ruthenians, and Doukhobors. In 1891 there was a plan for a Belgian bloc settlement but this did not materialize because of government hesitation, insufficient sponsorship and community disinterest. The French Canadians found themselves a minority by 1880, outnumbered by the English immigrants and Ontario-Anglo migrants, and especially the European immigrants.

Administrative changes. Administratively, municipalities replaced the parish system, school districts were organized, and town sites were regularly surveyed as a railway network expanded. This organization brought order but also more centralized control and the dominance of English (Jaenen 1976a).

Constitutional changes. In 1890, Manitoba unilaterally made English the sole official language and soon thereafter dismantled the dual confessional school system, transforming the Protestant schools into the common public schools. For reasons that still seem unclear, the Catholic Church decided to contest the school/religion change rather than the constitutional/language change. French continued to be used in francophone communities but without official sanction or protection. It is in this period that Belgian immigration began in earnest. Flemings and Walloons arriving in St. Boniface, for example, and rural Manitoba, found their Catholic coreligionists engaged in a struggle to obtain remedial legislation from the federal government in what is known as the Manitoba School Question (Jaenen 1978). In 1892, Louis Hacault, an ultra-conservative Catholic journalist, travelling on a free CPR pass with a Belgian fact-finding delegation sponsored by the Société Saint Raphaël pour la Protection des Emigrants, visited troubled Belgian settlements. He unleashed a bitter press campaign against “Godless schools”, “enemies of virtue”, Free Masons, agnostics, etc. The Belgian communities back home, for instance in Brussels, which was 80% Walloon and 20% Flemish at the time, found his arguments well-founded but embarrassingly inopportune. Belgians, although Catholics, were not anxious to be drawn into a language debate. Decades later the unilateral Manitoba constitutional changes were overturned, but significantly not the school legislation (Jaenen 1978).

The North-West Territories, which were officially bilingual with a dual confessional school system like the Quebec model, followed the Manitoba precedent and began altering language and school provisions. In Lethbridge, for example, Father Leonard Van Tighem founded a boarding school in 1889 for various ethno-linguistic students, although opposed by the Anglo-Protestant community leaders, which attracted numerous Protestant pupils, so that, in his words, “the co-called separate school has become more public than the public school” (Eggermont-Molenaar & Callens 2007, 88).

In 1905, a large section of the NWT was reorganized as the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. These governments functioned in English only and established common public schools with provision for Catholic separate schools on the Ontario model. The Department of education in each province imposed a curriculum with a view to assimilating the “immigrant hordes” that was frankly

British imperialist and Anglo-conformist. Nevertheless, in a Walloon community such as Bellegarde the Catholic public school continued to function without interruption, the new legislation notwithstanding. Flemings who came into areas such as Yellow Grass, Davidson, Strathmore, Calgary, or Lethbridge had the choice of sending their children either to an unsubsidized convent or the common public school. Most parents, for financial reasons, chose the public English-language school. Thus we see the assimilation of most Flemings – St. Boniface being an important exception – by the English-speaking milieu.

The settlement pattern of Flemings and Walloons was different. Walloons settled first in francophone St. Boniface and neighbouring rural parishes, and subsequently in parishes created by colonizing priests such as Campeau, Morin, Le Floch, Royer and Gaire in south-western and northern Saskatchewan in particular. The abbé Jean Gaire, for example, created a “chain of parishes” beginning in Grande Clairière in western Manitoba, proceeding to Bellegarde, Cantal, Wauchope and Forget. At the latter village with church and convent there was also a Belgian vice-consulate from 1908 to 1915. In parishes such as Deleau, Willow Bunch, Ferland, and Prud’homme the Walloons were settled with French Canadians, French and Swiss and rapidly became involved in the struggle for the maintenance of French and Catholic instruction, and later in the drive for recognition of French in the media. They employed the Catholic separate school to teach in French – which was not the intent of the legislation. This was a Quebec legacy where many people identified language with religion. The provincial governments of Saskatchewan and Alberta linked language with nationality or citizenship when dealing with immigrants groups. The basic premise was that Canada was a British Dominion, hence the national language was English. French-speaking Canadians were an exception, but this was not always clearly understood or implemented when dealing with New Canadians, including Belgians (Jaumin & Sanfilippo 1996; Mitchell 1915).

This was clearly demonstrated by 1930 in Saskatchewan when J.T.M. Anderson became Premier with the support of the Ku Klux Klan and the Protestant clergy in an anti-immigration and anti-Catholic election campaign. Anderson had been a school principal, school inspector, then Minister of Education before becoming Premier in the Conservative era of drought and depression. He was the author of *The Education of the New Canadian* (1919), a comprehensive program to “civilize and Christianize” the “barbarian hordes” that had populated the West. The comprehensive programme centred on a patriotic British curriculum including civic education, field days, school gardens, community concerts, community work projects, etc. I personally am a product of this all-encompassing anglo-conformist regime... There was a certain contradiction in the attempts to enforce this assimilationist program on Belgians, because

the immigration authorities in implementing the Immigration Act of 1869 deemed Belgians to be among the “preferred” category. This categorization was based on the belief that they were accustomed to monarchical, democratic institutions, and hence were likely to integrate rapidly (Hughey 1983; Jaenen 1976b).

The school was only one institution that contributed to the transformation of the Belgians, especially in the second and third generation, to become “Canadianized”. The Church itself was being transformed from what passed for a “French church” to a very multicultural, polyglot institution. Language of administration, commerce and general communication was a crucial component of everyday life. Flemings became accustomed to buying and selling, participating in school and municipal affairs, community social and recreational activities, and occupational associations such as marketing boards, farmers’ organizations, wheat pools, beef rings, horse breeding associations, threshing gangs, etc. in English. In southern Manitoba communities such as St. Alphonse, Swan Lake, Mariapolis, Somerset, Holland and Deloraine, Flemings were serving as school trustees, municipal councillors, village officials and businessmen within twenty years of arrival – using English as the medium of communication.

The experience of Walloons was different on two counts: first, they were part of a larger francophone community that, while learning English, sought to function as much as possible in French; and second, some belonged to a specific occupational class, such as coalminers in Estevan, Crowsnest, Lethbridge, Drumheller, that involved them in union organization, protests and strikes – along with Italians, Slovaks and Ukrainians, etc., often under Scottish union leaders. At Crowsnest, for example, the management of West Canadian Collieries, a Franco-Belgian company with francophone managers, singled out the Walloons as “reds...with a bad reputation” (Jaenen 2011, 172). What they meant was that the Walloons had a long experience in labour radicalism beginning in Hainaut in the struggle for unionization, the franchise, and free schools. English and French in this case were mediums for syndicalist, even communist expression. Cultural and linguistic concerns were not uppermost issues but English became the common medium when various ethnic groups cooperated either to defend themselves against dangerous working conditions, exploitive company housing and stores, or to obtain better wages and insurance benefits (Jaenen 2011, 194-208).

The Belgian community in St. Boniface was unique in several respects from the point of view of language usage. The majority of Belgians were Flemish speakers but a number also spoke French. They worshipped at the cathedral with francophones; catechism classes and other services were provided by a few Flemish priests in a chapel. In 1911 a few aspired to a distinct Belgian parish but

the majority did not want to assume the financial burden it entailed. By 1917 there were sufficient Flemings successful in local business and dairy farms to resurrect the proposal; as a result, Archbishop Beliveau erected Sacred Heart Belgian parish on “the same territory” as the cathedral parish. It took on a very distinct Flemish character in 1928 when Capuchin monks from Blenheim ON assumed charge and founded a monastery in the “Belgian Town” sector of the city. The Capuchins founded a second monastery in Toutes Aides to serve not only Flemings but also francophones and First Nations in northern Manitoba. The process of integration into the mainstream resulted in catechism in Flemish being abandoned in 1935; sermons in Flemish were abandoned by 1955. As support dwindled, Archbishop Maurice Baudoux, a Belgian desirous of maintaining a Belgian identity, had a consultative assembly chaired by Robert Bockstael consider the future of the Sacred Heart parish. There was no enthusiasm to continue to support the parish, so it was closed down and soon afterwards the Capuchins left Manitoba. The Belgians had become so integrated into the city’s economy and cultural activities that in the 1950s the archbishop, the mayor, the city engineer, the chairman of the school board and the postmaster were all men of Belgian descent serving a French Canadian city. The sizeable Flemish community of market gardeners and dairy farmers in the Greater Winnipeg area attended St. Maurice in Fort Garry, Holy Cross in Norwood and St. Ignatius in south Winnipeg, multi-ethnic parishes using English (Wilson & Wyndels 1976, 49-68; Jaenen 2011, 194-248).

There were few attempts to perpetuate the use of Flemish. In 1905 Louis de Nobelet founded Le Club Belge in a boarding house in Winnipeg, located between the immigration sheds and the bridge leading to St. Boniface, as a social and information centre. In 1906 it relocated near the district commonly known as “Belgian Town” in St. Boniface. Membership grew from 45 charter members to more than two thousand, both Flemings and Walloons. Here newcomers acquired information about employment, available farmland, and contact people throughout the West. Originally formal business was conducted in French but in 1915 it became fully bilingual, reflecting the fact that the majority of its members were Flemings. Its activities expanded to include a mutual aid society, a credit union and a veterans association. When Louis Varlez and Lucien Brunin made their fact-finding tour of Western Canada in 1929 they reported that the library contained “seven-tenths books in Flemish and three-tenths books in French and English” and that members “take very scrupulous care to prevent the language question to arise among them” (Jaenen 2011, 240). In 1939 women were admitted as full members and a scholarship fund was established to promote post-secondary studies. By 1943 all business was conducted in English but at social events all three languages were heard (De Buck 1955).

Ursuline nuns from Thildonck operated a girls' school at Bruxelles that became the public school and they were instrumental in urging the Brothers of Our Lady of Mercy in 1919 to found a Flemish boys' college in Swan Lake. This imposing Scheppers Institute, known as Sacred Heart College, was a residential school with some local day students supposed to teach in French and English on Archbishop Beliveau's instructions. In 1921 the Brothers reorganized the school as an agricultural college and five years later they eliminated agricultural courses and teaching in French to concentrate on the sciences and commerce in Flemish and English with a view to preparing students for provincial standards. The Depression and failing community support resulted in the termination of this venture in 1932 (Obbens n.d., 1-5).

A less well-known fact is that Belgian priests, monks, nuns, and lay workers learned other languages to serve the Canadian community. The more than thirty Belgian Oblates of Mary Immaculate, both Flemings and Walloons, were required to teach First Nations children in residential schools in English only. Both teachers and pupils were required by the Department of Indian Affairs to communicate in English only. Nevertheless, the teachers produced hundreds of books – vocabularies, grammars, service books, devotional readings – in Cree, Dene, Inuktitut, etc. Nor should one forget the dozen or more Redemptorists, mostly Flemish-speakers, who learned Ukrainian and inculcated to the Ruthenian rite to serve these immigrants from their monasteries in Yorkton, Komarno and Ituna. There were also individual priests, such as the abbé Jules Pirot, who served the Hungarians of Kaposvar and Esterhazy, as well as 28 mission stations during the fifty year period from 1904 to 1954, in their mother tongue while writing poetry in his Walloon dialect. Of course, there were numerous parish priests who taught, preached and heard confessions in several languages in order to meet the challenges of multilingualism in the context of large-scale immigration and settlement and of insufficient clergy (De Vocht 2005; Léonard n.d.).

Finally, we may ask: what had Belgians expected when they decided to come to Canada? The Flemish clergy had warned about Protestant anglicising pressures. Therefore, they did not have any expectations of great protection or promotion of the Flemish language. English did seem much easier to learn than French. Walloons recruited by colonizing priests, on the other hand, had expectations of continuing to live in a French milieu. The immigration propaganda, booklets, lectures, exhibits, etc. of the Canadian and Manitoba governments, the railway companies, the steamship companies, the land settlement and colonization companies were all in French and Flemish. But in Canada there were virtually no services in Flemish and not even the Belgian

consuls could speak the language. Therefore, Flemings had to rely on personal contacts and a networking system that favoured chain migration.

My conclusion is that Belgians integrated well, and quite rapidly, into the regional mainstream society. Most Walloons became components of the francophone minorities in the West and provided leaders such as Archbishops Maurice Baudoux and Antoine Hacault in St. Boniface, strong proponents of French language rights and also at the Second Vatican Council of the mass in vernacular languages. Most Flemings became part of the heterogeneous anglophone mainstream, which was composed of many divergent viewpoints but united by a sense of being Canadian, sometimes sharing sentiments of Western alienation, and using English as the medium of communication. Bishop Remi De Roo, born in Manitoba, and appointed to the anglophone diocese of Victoria, which had first been organized by Charles-Jean Seghers of Ghent and Jean-Baptiste Brondel of Bruges, exemplified the progressive views that Flemings generally adopted in the new homeland. In the debate on bilingualism, for example, two Belgians in Swan Lake MB, in the 1970s, argued vociferously outside the local post office, one in favour of official bilingualism, and the other quite opposed, all this in Flemish!

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