PEOPLING THE PRAIRIES[1]

ABSTRACT

This article explores Canada's approach to racial and cultural difference. Gerald Friesen argues that the diverse character of immigrants, the impact of dedicated individuals in schools and community leadership, the revulsion against racism after the Second World War, and the slow growth of the prairies between the 1920s and the 1950s all played a part in ensuring that the boundary zone between the long-settled and the newcomer has become less contentious, less chilly, and that there is a public pressure to demand tolerance.

A comment by an immigrant to Canada who chose to move back to his South African birthplace provides a theme for this brief note on immigration to western Canada. Having spent seven years in Toronto, the man said that he appreciated the lessons he learned: "you get a different perspective over there [in Canada] and it makes you more efficient over here [in South Africa] dealing with the racial stuff. You are forced to be tolerant over there, whereas here so many things push you the other way."[2] His words – "You are forced to be tolerant over there… dealing with the racial stuff" – jump out. He saw Canada as aggressive in its insistence upon tolerance among peoples of different cultural groups. His experience underlines that Canada's approach to racial and cultural difference hits people between the eyes. How did this approach develop? When did it happen? Can we be sure that something significant and distinctive has actually happened? Can it be exported? These important matters can be illuminated by reference to the peopling of the prairies.

Western Canadian experience is directly relevant to the Canadian multicultural experiment. Between 1900 and the 1970s, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta constituted a cultural patchwork. The public discussions of cross-cultural relations and the mixing of peoples in schools, shops, and games had a profound impact upon ordinary citizens' views. After a generation of conflict and stress, a strikingly plural community emerged. Not that racism or prejudice were erased – far from it – but that the expression of such sentiments in the public sphere became more or less unacceptable. However reluctantly (in the case of some among them), prairie Canadians created a genuinely tolerant community. In turn, the prairie experiment informed the rest of Canada.

Two Concepts: A Prairie Cultural Patchwork and A History of a Boundary

There are three distinct periods of immigration to the prairies in the twentieth century, divided roughly in the 1930s and the 1960s. The first wave, to 1930, was mainly British and European. The second, between 1945 and the late 1960s, duplicated the first because it relied on similar, if not identical, regions of origin. The third, post-1970, was quite different because it recruited newcomers from around the world.

The migration between 1900 and 1930 represented "one of the most pronounced episodes [of immigrant arrivals] experienced by any nation in recorded history."[3] It was composed of a large British fraction, Americans (including mainly British and northern Europeans), and people drawn from all the remaining countries of Europe. Small numbers of immigrants from Asian and African cultures were added for good measure. The British way of life constituted a dominant culture, therefore, but most of the others, who seemed at the time so different, shared with them European and Judaeo-Christian roots. One can think of the prairie community as a patchwork: a variety of fabrics, to be sure, but the pattern and form constituted a recognizable whole.

The history of prairie immigrants has often focused on the ethnic group. It asks whether these distinctive people integrated smoothly, resisted integration emphatically, or fell victim to racist attitudes. It has also focused on the dominant culture: when and why did it stoop to expressions of racism and which groups suffered most? I would like to suggest that it is time to consider another angle. Rather than treating host and newcomer as essential, clearly delimited groups, is it possible to write a history of the boundary between the newcomers and the long-settled. What happened in this zone where dominant culture met new cultures? Did the boundary zone change in character over time? This story is crucial to the emergence of Canada's contemporary philosophy of public tolerance.

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A Winnipeg Illustration of Changes in the Boundary

To illustrate the difference in the character of this boundary zone, I will cite three short passages taken from newspaper stories in Winnipeg's largest newspaper in 1897, 1928, and 1975.

In 1897, city leaders were organizing the celebration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Their greatest difficulty was striking a balance between their enthusiasm for Imperial themes and the contrasting opinions expressed across the river in Saint-Boniface. In the end, the people of Saint-Boniface seceded. They held their own pageant on the day after Winnipeg's event: on the main street of their city, they celebrated the arrival from New France of the first French fur trade expedition in western Canada in 1734. The Winnipeg parade was suitably British and Imperial in tone but it had one wrinkle: some local pranksters added a last float mocking Ukrainian immigrants by displaying a few apparently-drunken men in a jail. The *Free Press* commented that the display "occasioned considerable merriment."[4] Its lack of interest in the newcomers, its casual dismissal of Ukrainians, speaks volumes about the cultural tenor of the age. So, too, does the separate event held by Franco-Manitobans.

Thirty years later, in 1928, a four-day New Canadian Folksong and Handicraft Festival sponsored by the Canadian Pacific Railway and the Winnipeg Handicrafts Guild won praise for its costumes, crafts, exhibits, music and dance. It was described as "the most successful and important musical event to that date in western Canada." On the last night, a three-hour concert's grand finale featured "a massed chorus of 300 voices [singing] 'O Canada' and 'God Save The King,' all wearing unifying red toques, sashes and scarves." However, *Free Press* editorial writer Kennethe Haig's report also contained this sentence: "An opportunity is afforded for those peoples to feel that they are a part of this country."[5] Scottish reserve? A certain degree of coolness? Or just plain condescension? Haig's observation illustrates that the boundary between immigrant and long-established citizen was still quite rigid, the atmosphere of the zone rather chilly.

Forty years later, in 1975, the journalist Val Werier offered a quite different assessment of Winnipeg's important summer cultural event, Folklorama: "the Festival of Nations has finally brought the diverse cultures of Manitoba into their own. In decades past token tribute has been paid to the mosaic makeup of the city, but today these contributions are acknowledged by all. Folklorama has become the most popular attraction in Winnipeg, because of the status achieved by the various racial groups." In earlier days, said Werier, immigrant groups were "looked upon with some distrust and suspicion." Indeed, they customarily "gathered in their own enclaves and settlements. They were different and so aroused some animosity… [Winnipeg has been] blessed with peoples of many cultural backgrounds. They have imparted a cosmopolitan flavour… stimulated and enlivened the arts, broadened the cuisine, enlarged the intellectual climate, and have given colour and character… This has made Folklorama possible."[6]

People's perceptions of a community drawn from many national origins had changed in the course of these three generations. The boundary zone where long-settled citizens met immigrant newcomers had assumed a different character as a result. By 1975, the boundary itself was perceived as more flexible, more permeable, and less divisive, than earlier in the century.

This "surge of egalitarian idealism" in Canada has been attributed to the public's response to the Holocaust, to the example of American federal and state legislation, to reactions against the wartime treatment of such citizens as the Japanese Canadians, to the influence of organized labour, and to the expanding role of the state in society.

Sources of change

The generation stretching from the 1940s through the 1960s saw a radical change in public views of racism and race-based thinking. This "surge of egalitarian idealism" in Canada has been attributed to the public's response to the Holocaust, to the example of American federal and state legislation, to reactions against the wartime treatment of such citizens as the Japanese Canadians, to the influence of organized labour, and to the expanding role of the state in society. Students of the phenomenon have also emphasized the carefully-organized anti-discrimination campaigns waged by "small groups of Anglo-Canadian activists, and especially by key minority groups."[7] The Ontario government's Racial Discrimination Act and the Saskatchewan government's Bill of Rights are cited as important initial steps in the campaign. Certain political parties and politicians waged effective campaigns against racism and stereotyping. Moreover, what academics call immigrants' "agency" – that is, immigrants' acceptance of responsibility to change society themselves – became important in the 1960s. One must remember that a central institution in this integration process was the school. Finally, a striking international social and cultural transition favoured the integration of new immigrants. The changes were so diverse that it might seem unusual to put them under a single rubric. They included city growth, the revolution in communications (including commercial flight, highway and automobile improvements, and television), and changes in the status of women and the politics of families. Such phenomena belong together because of their timing and their implications for the country: newcomers and longer-established Canadians alike experienced these transformations at the same moment.

Conclusion

I would like to suggest four generalizations about the peopling of western Canada:

- first, immigration is a striking aspect of Canada today but it was also a striking aspect of the prairie provinces a century ago;
- second, the global recruitment pool of today's immigrant stream differs from the European pool the prairies drew on a century ago. But today's long-settled prairie residents do not perceive a degree of difference between themselves and the newcomers comparable to the gulf between British Canadians and those from southern and eastern Europe a century ago;
- third: the institutions created in prairie Canada to deal with racism and prejudice, and to educate both long-established resident and newcomer to the needs, outlook, and character of the other have actually enjoyed success;
- fourth: there is a degree of luck and chance in this story. The diverse character of the immigrants, the impact of dedicated individuals in schools and community leadership, the revulsion against racism after the Second World War, the slow growth of the prairies between the 1920s and the 1950s all played a part in ensuring that the boundary zone between the long-settled and the newcomer has become less contentious, less chilly, and that there is a public pressure to demand tolerance and to "deal with the racial stuff."

Notes

[1] Presented to the National conference on Teaching, Learning, and Communicating the History of Canada, Edmonton 28-30 October 2005 "New Frontiers in Our History: 100 Years of Alberta and Saskatchewan in Confederation," in the session entitled "The Peopling of Western Canada"

[2] Stephanie Nolen "Return of the natives" *Globe and Mail* 15 January 2005, F3, citing David van der Merwe, 38, formerly of Mississauga.

[3] Marvin McInnis "Canada's Population in the Twentieth Century" in Michael R Haines and Richard H Steckel eds *A Population History of North America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000) 529-599, p. 534

[4] The 1897 events are discussed in Thomas W Dickens "Winnipeg, Imperialism, and the Queen Victoria Diamond Jubilee Celebration, 1897" (MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1982).

[5] Edith Paterson "Winnipeggers enjoy first 'Folklorama' – 1928" This clipping, taken from a Winnipeg newspaper ca. 1972-4, was part of a clipping file in the papers of the Folk Arts Council of Winnipeg Inc.

[6] Val Werier 'Manitoba mosaic glows at Folklorama' Winnipeg newspaper, August 1975, clipping in Folk Arts Council of Winnipeg papers. Also Gene Telpner in *Winnipeg Tribune* 20 August 1973

[7] Carmela Patrias and Ruth A. Frager "'This is our Country, these are our rights': Minorities and the Origins of Ontario's Human Rights Campaigns" *Canadian Historical Review* 82,1 (March 2001) 1-35; they take the "upsurge" quotation from R. Brian Howe "The Evolution of Human Rights Policy in Ontario" *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 24,4 (1991) 783-802; on the Jewish community's role, see Irving Abella "Jews, Human Rights, and the Making of a New Canada" *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association/Revue de la Société historique du Canada* (2000). In Manitoba, one of the forces undermining ethnic discrimination was the determination of provincial and civic leaders to keep up, economically and socially, with the rest of the continent; Gerald Friesen "Stuart Garson, Harold Innis, and Adult Education in Manitoba" in P. James Giffen *Rural Life: Portraits of the Prairie Town, 1946* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press 2004) 201-277