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Rethinking the Settling of the West

When scholars began writing about the history of immigration to Canada, the “settling of the West” was viewed as key to the formation and development of Canada as a nation. Historians conceptualized the West as a place of ethnic enclaves—a culturally diverse yet static place where hardy immigrants weathered the cold and struggled with the landscape. This traditional framework has been increasingly challenged by scholars who have embraced postmodern cultural analysis to demonstrate that the cultural narrative of ethnic groups is not one dimensional as social reality and social identity is ambiguous and always in transition. [1] This cultural turn has resulted in histories of memory, meaning, and people’s awareness of themselves as individuals and as members of a particular group.

Recent work by Frances Swyripa demonstrates this shift. In *Storied Landscapes*, Swyripa examines ethnic and religious differences of European settler communities and “their visual impact on the landscape” (p. 4). Swyripa’s comparative study explores identity formation and group consciousness among Ukrainians, Mennonites, Icelanders, and Doukhobors who settled the agricultural lands of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. She also presents limited analysis of Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Polish, Romanian, Jewish, American Mormon, Finnish, Hungarian, German Catholic, and English settlers. Focusing on pioneer times to the present, Swyripa demonstrates that traditions were invented by ethno-religious groups who created a landscape of “imagined communities” based on “shared language, borders, faith, race/ethnicity, historical memory, current events and symbols” (p. 8). The formation of a sense of identity and belonging among immigrant settlers and their descendants was shaped by several factors, including: the sense of physical and emotional attachment to the land, the specific ethno-religious group experience, and the history ethno-religious groups shared with other westerners. The author also argues that a sense of belonging was influenced by internal and external factors: the “prairie society at large, the Canadian nation, group members in the rest of Canada, and the homeland and its diaspora” (p. 4).

Swyripa asserts that an examination of ethno-religious identity is important to the story of prairie and national identity as the identity of ethno-religious groups defined the West as a region. Furthermore, the West influenced how ethno-religious groups constructed their identity. This symbiotic relationship is fundamental to Swyripa’s work and demonstrates that relationships exist between the hinterland and the metropolis. Ultimately, Swyripa aims to show that that “the traditional prairie West” is a “valid framework for understanding the construction and expression of ethno-religious identity, past and present” (p. 8).

Swyripa’s work is organized into eight chapters. In chapter 1, the author examines migration push and pulls factors, settlement patterns, and host society at-
titudes. She demonstrates that ethno-religious “imagined communities” were diverse–immigration cohorts varied in size and settlement patterns as well as relations with the homeland and the diaspora varied among groups. Swyripa argues that the nature of initial immigration and the original settlement experience affected group identity. Chapter 2 explores how immigrants formed relationships with the land through place naming and “Christianization of the landscape” (p. 5). By naming meeting places and by building cemeteries and churches, naming them after saints, and erecting crosses and shrines in the countryside, ethno-religious groups claimed, defined, and ordered the land. Swyripa contends that through naming churches, shrines, and cemeteries, they expressed collective identity and shared experience, demonstrating the beginning of grassroots regional identity formation among ethno-religious groups.

Chapter 3 examines the evolution of collective identity grounded in landscape among successive generations. Descendants focused on founding stories, anniversaries, and landmark events that emphasized the pioneering and province building of their forebears. Swyripa demonstrates that founding stories were key to the formation of identity consciousness among descendants as they focused on settling the land, progress, achievement, hardship, and sacrifice. In the following two chapters, she assess the national and international impact of ethno-religious identity. Swyripa argues that certain groups incorporated the prairie narrative into the national experience while others saw the prairie experience as marginal as they focused on their national origins and maintaining ties with the diaspora. This multilayered national identity gave ethno-religious groups the confidence to express their patriotism and identity, particularly during centennial celebrations. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 examine how descendants internalized the pioneer prairie settlement experience and celebrated symbols of prairie ethnicity by creating “sacred ground” (p. 219). Descendants erected cairns and monuments, renamed maps, and celebrated at commemorative landmarks, including arrival sites, pioneer shrines, and cemeteries–these physical settings were integral to individual and ethno-religious group identity. Swyripa argues that commemorative celebrations did not focus on factual history but on heritage which was subjective and expressed an “imagined past” (p. 9). This was a negotiated and contested process as debates emerged about “old-world icons and new ones drawn from life in Canada, between grand heroic motifs and more humble domestic objects, between artifacts and themes representing the present and the future and those frozen in the past, and between rural proprietorship and urban appropriation” (p. 160). Swyripa persuasively demonstrates that through commemoration of place and material culture, descendants made “claims to nation building” (p. 191). In the conclusion, the author admits that her monograph “is an unfinished project” as the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada is now defining and commemorating important sites, events, and individuals—the implications of this on ethno-religious identity and how outsiders perceive “the ethno-religious imprint” on the prairies is unknown (p. 247).

Swyripa’s work is a much-needed contribution to the historiography of ethno-religious groups on the prairies as her work demonstrates the implications of ethno-religious identity which undercuts the argument that pioneers shared universal and unifying characteristics. Furthermore, Swyripa also disputes the frontier thesis of individualism, showing that the contributions of pioneers have to be examined through the lens of ethnicity and religion–two inseparable categories of analysis. Furthermore, the author proves that the landscape–material and imagined–produced stories that were multilayered, at times contested, and shaped and claimed by ethno-religious groups. Moreover, Swyripa persuasively demonstrates that identity formation was (and is) underpinned by myths, symbols, traditions, and landmarks, and that expressions of identity are complicated; settlers saw themselves as part of ethno-religious groups, westerners, prairie dwellers, Canadians, and members of diaspora communities.

The book, however, does have some weaknesses. First, Swyripa fails to explore how the settlement of white Europeans displaced existing Aboriginal and Métis agricultural communities on the prairies.[2] Furthermore, Swyripa falls into a celebratory narrative that ignores experiences of injustice and inequality–most notably, the author neglects to examine the implications of the internment of Ukrainians and other Austro-Hungarian nationalists during World War I. Harmonious relations, the author contends, were a result of demographic realities–enclaves and bloc settlements, she argues, “cushioned [immigrants] against prejudice and discrimination” (p. 29). Simultaneously, however, Swyripa states that foreigners and immigrants “alienated and alarmed Canadian migrants, who resolved to secure their patrimony through assimilation of the newcomers.” This reaction by white Anglo-Canadians is not developed further as the author asserts that host society attitudes “automatically made the newcomers participants and encouraged a sense of place and belonging” (p. 7).
The monograph would also have benefited from additional analysis of the role of ethno-religious women in identity formation on the prairies. Although Swyripa demonstrates that Ukrainian women, for example, reproduced folk art, many questions remain unanswered. What role did women play in the preservation of ethnocultural identity? Was religiosity expressed equally among men and women or were women the primary producers (and reproducers) of the religious experience? Was pioneer commemoration initiated by men or women or the entire "imagined community"?

Swyripa’s work also needs additional analysis of the ideological divisions among ethno-religious groups. Although the author argues that religious divisions left an imprint on the landscape (Ukrainians, for example, had rival churches, halls, and cemeteries because they were Catholic or Orthodox), more analysis is needed on the political divisions among European settlers. Swyripa’s analysis is limited; she notes that communism flourished among Ukrainians; however, she argues that communists were "outside the mainstream of community life" and were not part of “dominant group narratives” (p. 106). Did communists (and socialists) cast a shadow on community living? If so, how? As historians have demonstrated, Ukrainians and Finns, in particular, were key players in the formation of first-wave socialism in Canada.[3] Socialism existed not only in urban centers and resource-based communities, but also in rural areas where men and women gathered at Socialist Halls and Labour Temples.

Lastly, Swyripa could have incorporated multiculturalism as public policy into the analysis, particularly in her discussion of ethno-religious identity among descendants. Were expressions of national collective identity promoted and fostered by the state (multiculturalism programs) or was it the prairie experience in isolation which enlightened the collective identity and influenced national narratives of ethno-religious groups? What role did the federal government play in commemoration? Perhaps these are questions others can explore. Nevertheless, Swyripa’s book is a welcome addition to the growing literature on the history of identity formation and historical memory. Those interested in cultural and public history will find Storied Landscapes a worthwhile read.

Notes


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