

Report of the Annual Meeting

Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

The Blending of Traditions in Western Canadian Settlement

G. W. Simpson

Volume 23, Number 1, 1944

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300257ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/300257ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (print)

1712-9095 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Simpson, G. W. (1944). The Blending of Traditions in Western Canadian Settlement. *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada*, 23(1), 46–52. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300257ar>

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1944

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

THE BLENDING OF TRADITIONS IN WESTERN CANADIAN SETTLEMENT

By G. W. SIMPSON
The University of Saskatchewan

WHEN Adam first began to delve, land settlement became an important feature of the story of the human race and the theme has never lost its importance as a basic historical study. Until comparatively recent times the overwhelming majority of mankind was rooted in the soil and even in these days of industrial mobility the "good earth" is the mother-nourisher of nations.

In connection with land settlement a good deal of attention has been directed toward systems of tenure and conditions of ownership. This is undoubtedly a fascinating study which shows that tenure is one of the great regulating instruments of social control. That is not, however, the aspect with which this paper deals. The theme is rather the process of transplanting whereby people in the settlement of new lands bring with them cultural and political traditions which, planted in a new soil, along with the life already growing there, establish a new social and political ecology.

Settlement in Western Canada had much in common with settlement elsewhere in our country, but one of the unique features was the fact that a larger proportion of the settlers was non-British and non-French in origin. According to the census of 1941 approximately 40 per cent of the population in Manitoba, 41 per cent in Alberta, and 47 per cent in Saskatchewan are other than British and French in "racial" origin. This is one of those basic facts which students and writers of Canadian history will be compelled increasingly to assess. Since the development in terms of history is extremely recent, it is not surprising that this feature of settlement has not yet found its proper place in Canadian historiography. As an example of the comparative recentness of this development may be cited the fact that only two years ago all across Western Canada celebrations took place marking the fiftieth anniversary of the coming of the first Ukrainian settlers with their families to Western Canada.¹ On February 14, 1893, Franko Yatsiv, the first Canadian of Ukrainian origin, was born in Winnipeg.² Incidentally Franko was the name of a brilliant contemporary Ukrainian poet and novelist.

There is no need to recall to this gathering the immigration movement from the European continent which began in a trickle in the nineties and swelled to such proportions in the years preceding the first Great War. Justice has been done to the significance of this movement in relation to the economic developments of the period. The building of railways could not have proceeded so swiftly without a rapidly expanding supply of free labour. The prairie lands could not have been made so immediately productive had the number of farmers from Eastern Canada, the United

¹V. A. Czumer, *Spomini pro perezhivannya pershikh ukrayinskikh perecelen siv v Kanadi, 1892-1942* [Recollections of the Experiences of the First Ukrainian Settlers in Canada] *Knizhka tsya napicana z nahodi 50-litnoyi richmilsy poyavi pershikh ukrayinskikh kolonistiv v Kanadi* (Edmonton, 1943), 183. This book was written on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the coming of the first Ukrainian colonists to Canada.

²*Ibid.*, 183.

States, and Great Britain not been greatly augmented by an agricultural population from Europe. The building of towns and villages in Western Canada under boom conditions could not have proceeded at such break-neck speed had there not been available labour to build, and agricultural population to support this expansion. But the immigration from Europe brought to Canada not simply labourers, farmers, and artisans but it brought to this land people with cultural traditions, historical backgrounds, and maturely developed attitudes of mind which have added new elements to our national life. What is the significance of this fact for Canadian historiography?

It is the primary responsibility of Canadian historians to write the history of the Canadian people. To do this properly it is necessary to go back beyond the period when the people settled in Canada. Thus a good deal of attention has properly been devoted to the detailed cultural and institutional history of the British people prior to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Similarly space has been given in Canadian history-writing to the France of the seventeenth century and the Gallo-Roman culture preceding that period. But if a chapter has been devoted in Canadian history, as Canadian history, to British background, and a paragraph to early France, hardly more than a footnote has as yet been added to explain the detailed background of that element which has been added to our nation within the present generation. The main facts of European history are, of course, fairly well known and alluded to in Canadian history, but what remains to be done is a close study of the community life from which European Canadians have come. We need to have a proper appreciation of the cultural factors in Europe which conditioned their lives and outlook, and a full understanding of the political attitudes which have been shaped by the experience of generations. The traditions of our Canadian people now reach back to the Vistula, the Dnieper, and Constantinople, as well as to the Thames, the Seine, and Rome.

Historians of institutions like to stress the fact that systems of law, religion, government, and education when once established form a sort of compulsive mould which tends inevitably to fashion and shape the human material which falls within its reach. This is true to a very considerable extent. Nevertheless, in the shaping process the institution itself may undergo various changes of form and spirit, though not necessarily for the better or the worse. In Canada the basic institutions of the country had been firmly established by the time the large European immigration began. The vitality of these established institutions, and the traditions supporting them, becomes a subject of special interest when these institutions and traditions are found in contact with other traditions and institutions. A blending process begins. This is a process already going on in Western Canada. Its definitive history cannot yet be told. An interim glance at what is going on may, however, be of interest.

Forty miles east of Saskatoon lies the Ukrainian Canadian settlement of Meacham.³ To the east are English and Scandinavian settlers, to the

³For the details regarding the Meacham settlement I am indebted to the generous help of W. Burianyk of Saskatoon who gathered the material on the spot with the assistance of friends and relatives in the district. Mr. Burianyk lived in the settlement and taught school there. He is a veteran of the first World War and two members of his family are in the present war. An enthusiastic and public-spirited Canadian, he includes history among his many interests.

south English, and to the west and north French-speaking farmers. The Ukrainian settlement began with the arrival in 1905 of Izydor Nowosad with his family of three sons and four daughters. They came from the village of Bobiatyn in the district of Sokal which lies on the Bug River in north-eastern Galicia. In the following year eight settlers took up land in the same neighbourhood. Six of these were from two villages in the district of Horodenka and two from the same village in the Kolomeya district, both districts being in East Galicia. A larger group of settlers came in 1907. Of the twenty families fourteen were from Horodenka, three from Kolomeya, and three from other parts of East Galicia. There were no new settlers in 1908 but a still larger wave came in 1909. A large proportion of these were from Horodenka though groups from villages in other districts also arrived. By 1910 the Meacham Ukrainian area was fairly solidly settled. A small number of settlers came in during the period 1909 to 1917, for the most part buying out the holdings of the few English-speaking and Scandinavian settlers who found themselves in the midst of the Ukrainians.

The settling of the Ukrainian immigrants together was not the result of any government policy or any colonization scheme. It took place in a most natural and spontaneous fashion. The land was available for all comers. Because of the closely integrated village life in the homeland of Galicia, family relations were as endlessly ramified as in Burke's Peerage. When one family emigrated it tended to bring related families along. In addition to family connection there were close neighbourhood ties which were re-established amidst the great social loneliness and desolation of the New World. The ties originating in the old land were supplemented by ties of comradeship formed amidst the general insecurity and uncertainty of the new land. Men from various districts in the old country worked together in Canada on railways, in lumber camps, or in mines, usually as seasonal labour. They kept in contact with one another, informing each other where and when land was available.

The first few years were years of heavy pioneer toil. Seasonal labour outside the settlement brought in the cash returns for the early development of the homesteads. Small houses with thatched roofs and packed earth floors, resembling cottages in the old land, were the first dwellings. Some of these are still standing, being now used as chicken houses and granaries. Oxen were used for farm work and transport. Before the railway reached Meacham in 1912 supplies had to be brought in from distant railway points. Wheat was ground in Rosthern and Hague, seventy and fifty miles away. The round trip by oxen to these points took from twelve to sixteen days. Gradually tolerable economic adjustment was achieved and the settlers got their economic rooting in the country.

In economic adjustment the Ukrainian immigrants adopted the methods of farming imposed by the general agricultural conditions of the country. The methods employed in this district are now practically indistinguishable from those followed in other districts. In cultural matters the inheritance from the old land is more evident, as one would expect.

On February 7, 1910, a meeting was called in the district to discuss the establishment of a "Chytalnia" or Reading Society. As a result the Society was formed. The inspiration and model for this step came directly from the old country which was witnessing a veritable intellectual renaissance.

sance among the Ukrainian people.⁴ This movement had expressed itself in the formation of reading groups, the establishment of libraries and reading rooms, and the circulation of papers and periodicals. The movement in Galicia was the Ukrainian counterpart of movements elsewhere in Central Europe which expressed the rising national consciousness and intellectual ferment extending itself to the masses.

The little society in Meacham was named after Dr. Teophil Okunevsky, a barrister in Horodenka, Galicia, who had given much of his time and money toward raising the status of the peasant masses in his own country and was at that time a member of the Austrian parliament.⁵ Incidentally, when Dr. Okunevsky learned of the Canadian Society he sent to it eighty books from his own library. The members of the society were assessed one dollar a year for a library fund from which additional books were purchased every year, some from the Ukrainian Bookstore in Winnipeg, some from the United States, and some directly from the old country. The Society also subscribed to four Ukrainian papers, two published in Canada, one in the United States, and one from the motherland. Thus the settlers ensured themselves against intellectual starvation in the new land. On Sundays and holidays the members gathered in designated homes for communal reading and discussion of press articles and books. At the present time the Reading Society has a library of over a thousand volumes, together with a children's library containing some three hundred titles. Here we have a good example of the projection of a European movement into a Canadian community.

Hardly had the Reading Society become established when a public school was put into operation by the Department of Education, and a course of studies based originally largely on the school system and experience of Eastern Canada was presented. Late in 1911 the schoolhouse was built. It was known as the Sichynsky school and the school district still bears the name. The name was given in honour of a young Ukrainian nationalist who had achieved considerable notoriety in Galicia in 1908. The school now became the centre of active community life. Concerts, plays, and socials were held in the schoolhouse. Any financial surpluses in connection with these were used for the enlargement of the library.

It was the school which now became the main institution for the blending of traditions. In the regular hours the pupils were instructed in English and were taught the traditional skills and subjects of a Canadian education. After school hours classes were held for the teaching of the Ukrainian language. From time to time classes were held in the evening for the teaching of English to the adults. Canadian sports such as football, baseball, and softball were enthusiastically adopted by the young people. At the school concerts and community gatherings beautiful Ukrainian music and Ukrainian plays were found side by side with entertainment of British and Canadian origin. The teachers themselves were the keystone in the bridge between the two cultures. They carried out a most exacting programme.

In 1912 the first Church was built and services were held at intervals

⁴D. Doroshenko, *History of the Ukraine* (Edmonton, 1939), chaps. XXVII, XXVIII. M. Hrushevsky, *History of the Ukraine* (New Haven, 1941), chaps. XXII, XXIII.

⁵*Ukrayinska zahalna entsiklopediya* [Ukrainian General Encyclopedia] (Lviv, 1933), II, 915.

of one or two months. Up till that year the people were without regular religious ministrations. In the first years the people would gather on important church holidays in one of the larger houses to sing religious songs and recall with poignancy the services and festivals of the old land where the church had played the dominant part in organizing the emotional life of the community. On rare occasions a Greek-Catholic priest had visited the settlement. Now that the church was established the religious life of the community became better organized. The church was under the jurisdiction of the Greek-Catholic bishop newly arrived in Canada.⁶ Seven years later a split occurred among the members over the question of transferring the right to the church property from the congregation to the bishop. Other factors were also involved. The result was that the majority of the congregation opposed the move. At the same time great events in Europe were casting their shadows even as far as the prairies of Western Canada. The move to establish a separate Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the Ukraine was paralleled by a move to set up an autocephalic Ukrainian Orthodox Church in America. The portion of the congregation which had opposed the Greek-Catholic bishop presently joined the newly-established Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church in Canada. The transition from one church allegiance to another could not but revive historic memories, memories not untinged with bitterness. The bitterness has, one is glad to note, been somewhat assuaged, but this re-enactment in Canada of age-old ecclesiastical controversy will be of considerable interest to the future historian of the Canadian people.

By the time of the World War (1914-18) the first generation of children were now growing up in Canada. Their elementary education was being provided for in their home localities. The settlers in various Ukrainian-Canadian communities now became concerned regarding possibilities for higher education. A great deal of serious discussion took place as to what could be done to establish facilities which would assist their children on the road to technical and professional training. Some even suggested the possibility of establishing a Ukrainian College. In the end it was decided to establish a residential institute in Saskatoon to which students might come who wished to attend the University, Collegiate Institute, or Normal School. At the Institute, groups would be organized for instruction in Ukrainian music, drama, history, and language. A general supervision would give them sympathetic guidance which would be needed in a somewhat strange environment. At the same time the students would be pursuing the same courses of study that other Canadians followed in the educational institutions of the city. The Institute which was established in 1917 was called the Peter Mohyla Institute. Peter Mohyla was the seventeenth-century scholar who initiated a valuable educational renaissance in the Ukraine through the establishment of the Kiev Academy.

The settlers at Meacham bought over five thousand dollars worth of non-profit shares in this Institute besides giving more than three thousand dollars in annual donations since. Some sixty-two boys and girls

⁶The establishment of the first Greek-Catholic Church in Canada in 1901 and the subsequent setting up of the general ecclesiastical administration of the Greek-Catholic Church in Canada is told in the Jubilee Almanac, published by the Administration of the Parish of St. Vladimir and Olga Church in Winnipeg in 1936, and written by the Parish head, Dr. V. Kushner—*Yuvileyny almanach ukrayinskoyi hreko-katolitskoyi tserkvi Sv. Volodimira i Olhi v Vinnipeg*, 30.

from their locality have lived in the Institute while attending the University, Collegiate Institute, or Normal School. Thus the blending process begun in the public school was carried a step further.

The same year that the Meacham community assisted in the establishment of the Peter Mohyla Institute in Saskatoon, they considered the possibility of enlarging the facilities for communal activity in the settlement. The Reading Society took the initiative, having the idea of building a spacious Community Hall. It was to be called the Ukrainian National Home and named after Michael Hrushevsky. At this very time Hrushevsky was President of the Ukrainian Rada which was actually in control of the eastern Ukraine. Greater as a scholar than as a statesman, he is known for his seven-volume *History of the Ukraine* in addition to his five-volume *History of Ukrainian Literature*.⁷ Some four hundred dollars were collected. As this was insufficient the members decided to set up a sort of co-operative selling agency, supplying flour, coal, groceries, tobacco, fence posts, and even some lines of clothing. All profits were to be allocated to the Community Hall fund. By 1925 the accumulated profits from trading, together with funds raised in other ways, amounted to twenty-three hundred dollars. An expert carpenter was hired to supervise the building of the Hall. All the labour was furnished free by the members. Thus a splendid Community Hall worth five thousand dollars was erected without incurring any debt. It is now the social and educational centre of the community. Meetings of all sorts take place there. Matters of immediate public interest are freely discussed concerning all subjects from agricultural welfare and local politics to questions of international affairs. From time to time distinguished visitors, Ukrainian professors, publicists, and artists from the old country and the United States have spoken, sung or played in this hall. Here too the blending of traditions takes place.

I have before me a list of seventy-seven pioneer families who settled in the Meacham district from 1905 to 1917. Before me is also a list of sixty-eight volunteers from the same district who have served or are serving in that greatest of all blending institutions, the Canadian Armed Services. Twenty-two are in the Royal Canadian Air Force, forty-four in the Army, and two in the Navy. There is something profoundly moving as one reads names taken at random such as Nowosad, Bily, Mochoruk, Lazarowich, Bodnarchuk, Kozak, and Korol and finds them on the list of pioneers as well as on the Wartime Roll of Honour. No one can question the gallantry and bravery of Ukrainians, Poles, Greeks, and Serbs fighting now in their own lands or can question the tradition of heroism in their history. As I write now, one of the fighting fronts lies exactly across the Sokal and Horodenka districts from which the fathers of these Meacham Canadian soldiers came. Here in Canada we have nothing to fear from the blending of that tradition with the tradition of French and British pioneers.

DISCUSSION

Father Maheux asked if the religious differences amongst Ukrainians had been an obstacle to their communal life. *Professor Simpson* replied that there is still bitterness evident in some communities but not in this one.

⁷For Hrushevsky's place in Russian historiography, see A. G. Mazur, *An Outline of Modern Russian Historiography* (Berkeley, 1939), 75-8.

Professor Lower stated that he used to fear the Balkanization of Western Canada, but the effect of the stopping of immigration by Mr. Bennett in 1930 has been marked. The various elements have had a chance to become stabilized. He has noticed how well Ukrainian-Canadian students have been fitting themselves in. Unfortunately they still sometimes have difficulty in obtaining employment on account of their non-English names. It is to be hoped that racial prejudice of this sort is disappearing. The Ukrainians are most anxious to take their places as *Canadians* and no longer expect to make "a third community in Canada."

Professor Sage thought it would be a good idea if the Canadian Historical Association would get behind a series of such studies which would give a picture of conditions among all groups.

Professor Trotter thought that the diverse cultural strains in the West were no greater than those which went into the early Maritime settlement.

Professor Simpson, in answer to queries about books on Ukrainian background, said that such accounts scarcely exist in English. He also pointed out that at present the Ukrainians are tending to leave the rural regions in large numbers for the cities where they are entering business and industrial life. They are getting control of business life in their rural settlements as well.

Professor Long asked about the comparison of Ukrainian influence in the United States and in Canada. *Professor Simpson* replied that they came to the United States earlier, and went directly into industrial and mining areas; whereas in Canada they went first to agricultural areas.

Professor Brown commented upon the hostility towards the efforts of these people to keep some of their background. This is not justified as their efforts do not keep them from entering Canadian life. He agreed with *Professor Lower* that such people wish to make a compromise. Hostility has delayed assimilation. He cited his own personal experience as a teacher in a one-room school in a Doukhobor settlement where he lived in a dirt-floor house. He said that the Doukhobors that are extremists are a very small minority. In his community, after the split, those who remained were farmers who were adjusting themselves rapidly to Canadian life. He cited the blending process with respect to cooking. In one family the husband, who knew English better, read recipes from a Canadian cookbook to his wife. Canada should not proceed to standardize all its elements but should accept a pattern of variety, and should abet such efforts as are described in this paper.