

Royden Loewen and Gerald Friesen, *Immigrants in Prairie Cities: Ethnic Diversity in Twentieth-Century Canada*

(University of Toronto Press, 2009), pp. 257

Reviewed by ANDREEA RALUCA TOPOR CONSTANTIN

Ph.D. candidate in Canadian Studies, University of Bucharest, Romania

“A strange place it was, that place where the world began. A place of incredible happenings, splendours and revelations, despairs like multitudinous pits of isolated hells. A place of shadow-spookiness, inhabited by the unknowable dead. A place of jubilation and of mourning, horrible and beautiful. It was, in fact, a small prairie town.” (Laurence 237)

Remembering Margaret Laurence’s essay I cannot help associating *Immigrants in Prairie Cities* with the above quotation, this work presenting the prairie as the sum of all the characteristics above and even more, as a “a story about people meeting people” (5). However, in order to follow a geographical perspective, it should be mentioned that while Laurence’s writing focuses on the small fictional town of Manawaka, the present book concentrates on the largest cities of the region: Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina and Saskatoon, on their incredible ethnic diversity and their numerous immigration waves.

The connection I made between these two works is not at all accidental. *Immigrants in Prairie Cities* touches upon theoretical concepts already associated with Canada: migration and diaspora, “‘new’ vs. ‘old’ Canadians” (176), multiculturalism and cultural diversity, history and nation-in-the-making, and race and ethnicity. Yet it also “draws on a corpus of [original] scholarly research” (5), involving history, geography, legislation, sociology, statistics, literature, memoirs, and pieces of direct immigrant experience extracted from interviews. The histories of two families in particular provide case studies which are analysed in detail: Saul Cherniack’s Russian-Jewish ancestry and Masako Kawata’s Japanese roots. Their stories stand as representative of other communities of Canadian immigrants. Although Laurence is not mentioned among the literary sources of the book, the authors of this study opted for other physical descriptions of the prairie and of the people inhabiting it from works by John Marlyn, Adele Wiseman and Gabrielle Roy, as well as John Tooth’s memoirs.

The book is a useful and exhaustive examination of the particular role of prairie cities “in the making of regional and national history” (3). Structured chronologically, it covers a period of one hundred years, from 1900 to the late 1990s, from the first contacts between immigrants and established Canadians to multicultural contemporary Canada, thus demonstrating that the diversity and liveliness of these cities offered “a distinct variation on the Canadian model of cultural diversity” (3).

Royden Loewen and Gerald Friesen suggest that the two concepts which they approach, “ethnic webs” and “dynamic boundary zones” (4), are mainly evident in

“webs of significance,” that is, in “the manner in which the immigrants made sense of their new worlds as they looked outward from their ethnic communities” (175-76). The first part gives us an overview of the “vital community” (13) placed at the centre of the immigrants’ stories, a community where family dynamics, gender tensions, religious beliefs and ethnic associations offered the immigrant “a staging ground for integration” (32). The above concepts are fully explained in the introduction: the “ethnic web” draws on Clifford Geertz’s idea of culture as “webs of significance” (1973) and the “boundary zone” refers to the imaginary line between settled residents and immigrant groups, thus combining Fredrik Barth’s “social boundary” (1969) and Homi Bhabha’s “third space” (1994).

The second part, covering the period between the 1940s and 1960s, shifts to Alberta and Saskatchewan and explores the changes brought about the discovery of oil, potash and uranium in the region. Furthermore, two distinctive groups of newcomers reached Canada after the Second World War, consisting mainly of “highly educated European refugees . . . and Eastern bloc communism” victims (57), who settled in the smaller but no less important cities of Edmonton, Calgary, Regina and Saskatoon. The authors add to these immigrants the second and third-generation farmers who were pushed to look for jobs in the cities by the terrible events of the 1930s, the drought and the Depression.

From my point of view, the strongest section of the book is chapter four which focuses on the particular aspects of accommodating Jews, Japanese, Icelanders, Germans and Mennonites in Winnipeg. The incredible comparisons between these groups, the variety of sources used to testify statements, and the concision of the analysis, provide an image of a historical period of twenty years in a nutshell.

In the third part, the authors come full circle, bringing us to more recent times and to global and transnational issues. The early 1970s witnessed the first talks on multiculturalism, government-funded aid for ethnic groups and common cultural citizenship for all Canadians, whether ‘old’ or ‘new.’ Again, I was impressed with chapter five, similar in structure to chapter four in its equal consideration of several ethnic minorities, but this time comparing new waves of immigrants from Asia, Africa and the Americas, who chose Calgary and Edmonton as their new residence.

Overall, this study gives the reader a clear insight into what prairie urban society meant across decades. I would like to reiterate that this is an innovative outlook on the prairie, a place commonly perceived as the wilderness, or as a rural, agricultural, undeveloped, strict and unwelcoming region in Canada. Offering a new perspective on the diversity of these five prairie cities constitutes “a noteworthy chapter in the Canadian story of immigration” (175). If we want to summarise the importance of these places it can be said that they are “pluralistic” in nature, marked by “continued [economic]

growth” and continuous immigration waves, but open to “creative exchanges within and amongst the ethnic groups, and between newcomers and established Canadians” (175). Racism was also present in the prairies, as elsewhere in Canada, therefore related issues are not neglected by the authors.

From a scholarly perspective, each chapter constructively concludes with a reiteration of its main concerns. In addition, there are references to a wide range of books in the field which focus on particular groups of immigrants, while the book itself attempts to cover as many communities as possible, for example, African Americans, Britons, Caribbean, Chinese, Dutch, Filipinos, Germans, Icelanders, Italians, Japanese, Jews, Poles, Ukrainians and Vietnamese. Interestingly, recent dissertations, research theses and unpublished manuscripts are also quoted throughout the study, thus demonstrating the thorough investigation of the young research team of post-doctoral and graduate students who assisted the two authors.

Whether interested in the prairies, in a particular ethnic group, or in Canadian immigration policies, or just curious to know what Canada means, *Immigrants in Prairie Cities* will be a useful supplement to both young researchers and experts in the field.

Allow me to conclude this review with somebody else’s thoughts on this book, one of the student research assistants mentioned in the Acknowledgements, Dora Dueck. For a person directly involved in Canadian life and in the creation of the book, another aspect mattered when reading it, its human touch: “I’ve lived in three prairie cities and am the granddaughter of immigrants to the prairies, so it felt more than theoretical to me at many points.”¹

Works cited

- Barth, Fredrik. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Bergen: Waveland Press, 1969.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- Laurence, Margaret. “Where the World Began.” *Heart of A Stranger*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Bantam Ltd, 1980 (1976).

Notes

¹ <<http://doradueck.wordpress.com/2010/03/01/immigrants-in-prairie-cities/>>.