THE LURE OF THE WEST¹

Ninety-seven years ago a new nation aspiring to stretch from sea to sea purchased for £300,000 a vast continental territory called Rupert's Land. This "great lone land," as Captain Butler aptly dubbed it, lay vacant awaiting the settler and the plough. To develop its agricultural potentialities Canada needed to attract to the "Great North West" hundreds of thousands of people, and so was launched an advertising campaign that continued until World War I. The campaign had a number of facets, but this paper will confine itself to a hasty survey of immigration pamphlets, with some sampling of the statements therein.

A conference on immigration held in Ottawa under the auspices of the Dominion Department of Agriculture in September, 1871, agreed to -

... disseminate such information with reference to the Dominion generally and to Manitoba and the North West Territories in particular as may be deemed necessary for the advancement of immigration.

The emphasis on the West in Canadian advertising remained a permanent government policy.

During the next forty years no less than 300 different immigration pamphlets, not counting revisions and new editions, were published by governments, railway and land companies, cities and villages, with a view to attracting settlers. Some pamphlets were issued in large numbers; English Emigrant's Experiences in Western Canada (1906) in 100,000 copies, for instance, or The Story of Western Canada's Crop (1907) in 300,000 copies. Since immigration brochures were mostly distributed abroad, many of the titles are represented by not more than one to half a dozen copies in Canadian libraries, and some not at all.

A few statistics will give an indication of the volume of literature used to publicize the West. In 1890 half a ton of pamphlets was distributed in Kingston, Ontario. Two years later at an agricultural show in Derby, England, a hundred thousand booklets were handed out. That same year, 1892, Sir Charles Tupper, Canadian High

1. Text of Mr. Peel's address to the members of the Society at the Annual Meeting held in Calgary on June 19, 1966.

Commissioner, stated that in every one of the 25,000 post offices in the British Isles a poster advertising Canada might be found. In the winter of 1903-4 eight thousand American weeklies and farm papers carried advertisements describing the "Wondrous West." In 1906, at the crest of the flood of immigration literature, the Department of the Interior distributed 4,445,310 booklets, leaflets and maps.

I

The campaign to sell the Canadian West to prospective settlers passed through three phases. In the early years to many people the "great North West" was associated with the name Rupert's Land, and that with furs; a land distant, isolated and cold. The first task of the publicists was to dispel this notion. A second obstacle was the difficulty of ingress. The immigrant could travel by boat to Prince Arthur's Landing, and then jolt through Canadian territory over the rough Dawson Road, or alternatively travel by rail in American territory to Minneapolis, and thence by trail northward to Manitoba. Immigrants who chose the somewhat easier American route were subjected to the siren voices of American landagents anxious to find sodbusters for the railway lands of Minnesota and the Dakotas, and it is to be suspected that few immigrants travelling this route ever reached the safety of Manitoba. Eli Tasse in his pamphlet had a special section entitled "Beware of American Agents." One Canadian official recommended that British immigrants Manitoba-bound be shepherded through Minnesota in parties so they could be protected from the seductive offers of land agents.

The first attempt to publicize Manitoba took the form of a novel Dot It Down written by Alexander Begg and relating the experiences of an Ontario family passing through Minnesota to the promised land. The parents hope their daughter's declining health will be improved by the salubrious climate of Manitoba. The boy friend tags along, providing the love interest. But it is too late for the girl; she dies, languidly, in the Victorian fashion. Once she is out of the way the author can go on to extol the qualities of the native Red River stock, for the young man is soon wooing a Manitoba girl who, the reader is led to believe, is as strong as a horse — but of course lady-like and genteel.

The father of our Western immigration pamphlets was Thomas Spence, a colourful frontier type, whose early activities included sending an invitation on behalf of some Indian chiefs to the Prince of Wales to visit Rupert's Land, the founding of the comic-opera Republic of Manitoba at Portage la Prairie, working in the salt mines, editing Louis Riel's newspaper, and finally being appointed clerk of the Legislative Council in the new prairie province. In 1871 he wrote

his first pamphlet, Manitoba and the Great North-West, Its Resources and Advantages to the Emigrant and Capitalist. His later pamphlets were The Saskatchewan Country..., Presented to the World as a New and Inviting Field of Enterprise, etc.; Prairie Lands of Canada; Useful and Practical Hints for the Settler on Canadian Prairie Lands; The Question of the Hour! Where to Emigrate; Canada, the Resources and Future Greatness of her Great Prairie North West Lands. The arguments in his pamphlets went somewhat as follows:- Why shiver with ague in Illinois or Iowa when Manitoba offered a climate where fevers were unknown. In the United States the westward march of settlement had been stopped at the 98th parallel by the "Great American Desert," but to the north in Canadian territory lay a "fertile belt" or crescent. Wheat yields in Manitoba were 25 bushels to the acre as compared to 20 bushels in Minnesota. In his later pamphlets Spence mustered support by quotations from such authorities as Captain Palliser, Bishop Taché, and Lord Milton and Dr. Cheadle.

Some years later a Montreal journalist, writing under the nom de plume Rusticus, charged that many a Manitoba immigrant, attracted thither by Spence's pamphlet, found reality so different from his expectations that he shortly shook the mud of Manitoba from his boots forever. However, in his conclusion, Rusticus conceded that Manitoba was a land of opportunity, but he advised certain types from Eastern Canada to shy clear of the province. The last two classes were the following:

... people of fickle-minded changeable dispositions ... for they will not continue there long enough to fully recover from the first severe attack of "North-West blues" which nearly all new settlers feel after their arrival in the country, ...; Young men whose moral character is not already fully established should avoid Winnipeg as they would a den of rattlesnakes ...; (some young men) after losing their money and morals, and learning a lot of western stories and slang phrases return to tell of their imaginary adventures, and bring evil reports about the whole country, although they saw little more than the banks of the Red River.

The second significant immigration pamphlet was J. Y. Shantz' Narrative of a Journey to Manitoba and the Great North West, which was circulated widely in 1873 and for some years thereafter. The pamphlet was convincing because everyone knew that an Ontario Mennonite would be reliable in reporting on the suitability of Manitoba as a place to settle for co-religionists in Russia. This technique of sending a reliable spy — or spies — to the promised land to observe and report on its productivity made extremely effective publicity, and was much used later.

The Dominion government's first compendium, entitled Province of Manitoba, Information for Intending Emigrants, appeared in 1872. Only a handful of immigration pamphlets appeared during the decade of the 1870's.

II

The campaign to advertise the Canadian West entered its second phase with the completion of the St. Paul and Manitoba Railway to Winnipeg in 1879. Settlers from Eastern Canada could now ship their effects all the way by rail, or across the Lakes to Duluth, and thence by rail. The Canadian Pacific Railway line from Port Arthur reached Winnipeg in 1883, and from that time forward this great company shared with the Dominion's Immigration Branch responsibility for advertising "Manitoba and the great North-West." The railway's pamphlets often showed more imagination and reader appeal than the conservative publications of the government. About this time also a number of newly-incorporated land colonization companies issued brochures describing their lands.

With the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway as a trans-continental line, and even before, many British travellers, journalists, clergymen and agricultural experts visited Western Canada, and on returning to the Old Country lectured or wrote about the West's agricultural potentiality. Some were philanthropically inclined, concerned with economic conditions among the lower classes in Britain. Thus, John Pearce lectured to the Balloon Society of Britain in the Royal Aquarium, not on a gaseous or ethereal topic as one might suppose, or even a piscatorial one, but on Agricultural Depression at Home, and the Resources of the Canadian New North West. A philanthropic group published a pamphlet on A Future for the Deaf and Dumb in the Canadian North West, but Canadian immigration officials discouraged this venture. Quite prominent people visited the Canadian prairies; for example, David Lloyd George, only a few years before he became Chancellor of the Exchequer, toured the West with two Welsh companions and published a short report in Welsh and English.

We found the settlers everywhere pleased with their own immediate district, which was almost invariably described as the best in Canada. We can only recall to mind one settler who was dis-satisfied with his bargain.

The Department of Agriculture in 1879 hit upon the scheme of giving parties of representative tenant farmers from the British Isles an expense-paid tour of Canada and the West in the harvest season, and in return the farmers wrote their impressions. The

visitors were properly impressed with the miles of ripening grain and rows of wheat stooks, the whirr of binders and the hum of threshing outfits. In the first years all reports of a party were published in a single volume, but later it was found more effective to group the reports of the two or three delegates from a region of Britain together. Thus in 1890 the reports of the tenant-farmer delegates were divided into four collections and copies of the four pamphlets distributed in the respective regions from which the delegates came. Some 600,000 copies were distributed, one to every farmer, market gardener and blacksmith in Britain, and in addition to country clergy, solicitors and school teachers.

Similarly, farm parties from Eastern Canada and various American states were given tours of the West. Their reports had titles such as Report of Delegates from the Maritime Provinces; Notes from Kansas and Michigan Delegates Reports; What Vermont Delegates Have to Say about It. The agent in charge of one such party of midwestern Americans had them write up their impressions of the Canadian prairies as they rode back eastward on the C. P. R. When the party was put up for the night in Winnipeg, the agent found printers to work all night setting the reports up in type, and when the party boarded the train the next morning for St. Paul each member was handed his report in leaflet form for distribution to his neighbors back home.

Another convincing type of propaganda was testimonials from the settlers who had been in the West for a few years, long enough to be established as farmers, and who were proud of their achievements. Invariably the letters told of a beginning with a little capital on a homestead and of increases in the settler's flocks and herds, in acreage brought under the plough, and a steady improvement in his prospects. Letters from emigrants to the Canadian West appeared frequently in British provincial newspapers, presumably mostly unsolicited. Canadian immigration officials published collections of letters in pamphlets under such titles as Letters from Settlers, Letters from the Canadian West; Letters from Scandinavian Settlers of Manitoba; True Stories of Success in Farming Told by the Men Themselves.

Quite a number of monographic pamphlets describing the writer's success in farming were published, as for instance Brochure compilée par un colonisateur de neuf ans d'expérience; Report of Six Years' Experience of a Farmer in the Red Deer District; A Scotch Farmer's Success in the Canadian North West as Told by Himself, with Illustrations Made from Photographs Taken on his Farm. The latter pamphlet must have appealed to the acquisitiveness of fellow Scots. The writer, Sandison, within seven years of coming to Brandon was farming 2,500 acres, and in the pictures is shown on horse-

backsuperintending several ploughmen. The pamphlet's distribution in the Old Country resulted in several hundred letters of enquiry to immigration officers. Sandison himself returned from a winter visit to Scotland accompanied by ten Englishmen and nine Scots. A footnote should be appended: a year or two later, after harvesting and marketing a heavy crop, and pocketing the cash, Sandison absconded, leaving colossal debts, and was never seen again by his wife or anyone else from Brandon.

The C. P. R. printed several attractive pamphlets containing in tabulated form replies to questions. Testimony of Actual Settlers, published in 1885, contained the replies of 169 farmers whose concise answers about the soil, yield of various crops, climate, etc., were quoted. Each farmer's name and post office was given so that the reader might verify the truthfulness of the statements. The replies to the three questions "When did you settle," "Capital at commencement," and "Present value of farm" uniformly reflected pride in achievement and unbounded optimism about the future. Fairly typical of the replies is that of Fred Harward who had \$2.50 when he landed at Emerson, Manitoba, in 1881, but who four years later valued his homestead at \$2,500. In response to the question "Are you satisfied with the country, the climate, and the prospects ahead of you?" the majority replied that they were; if they had a complaint, it was about the distance of their farms from the railway.

The compilers of Testimony of Actual Settlers realized that helpmeets of prospective immigrants would have something to say about moving to the "Great North West." The result was another brochure What Women Say of the Canadian West, a pamphlet posing questions of interest to the homemaker on the raising of children, gardens, and poultry. The replies of the women naturally tended to be more diffuse than the terse comments of the men.

One question was "Do you experience any dread of Indians?" a pertinent one since the Frog Lake massacre had occurred only months earlier. Most women said "Not in the least" or something similar. Mrs. W. A. Doyle wrote:

I had a fear of them before coming here, but have found those on our reserve a quite inoffensive lot, and have had them working on the farm several times. They are Presbyterians.

The respondents said there was a great demand for single women in the West as servant girls, but the bachelor homesteaders were so numerous it was impossible to keep girls in domestic service for any length of time. Mrs. M. M. Drury of Rapid City offered this advice to girls emigrating to the frontier:

Let them apply to the minister of whatever denomination they belong to as a precautionary measure. Bring plain comfortable clothing, and sufficient good sense to avoid all romantic ideas of accepting the first offer of marriage on arriving here; also frivolous notions about dress, reading novels, and the like. Set themselves to work steadily to learn the ways of housekeeping in this country, after which they prove bright ornaments to the bachelor farmers' homes.

And finally, under the heading "General advice to newcomers" many women let themselves go. Mrs. F. Robbie, of Birtle, advised:

Keep your eyes open. Live within your means. Take no notice of grumblers. Make ready for winter. Let the children wear woollen underclothing. Take in the Nor'West Farmer, and a weekly newspaper. Settle near a railroad if possible. Go in for mixed farming. Never blame the country for any misfortune you may have. Have a good garden. Exhibit all you can at the fall shows. Determine that the North-West is to be your home.

During the decade of the 1880's in Britain, rivalry was keen between Canadian and American immigration agents. The American railway companies were trying to settle people on their lands in the western plains. One American railway pamphlet, after describing the balmy climate of Montana, said in 1882 that that of Manitoba consisted of "seven months of Arctic winter and five months of cold weather." Furthermore, flooding of the Red River occurred each Spring and these floods "annually desolate Manitoba and keep the people who have been coaxed into it anxious, poor, and sick." Canadian immigration officials promptly came out with a pamphlet entitled A Misrepresentation Exposed, which quoted the testimony of such eminent people as Archbishop Taché, Rev. Dr. George Bryce, and Saskatchewan Taylor to prove that Manitoba was as fine a place to settle as might be found on God's good earth.

Canadian immigration agents were convinced that there was an organized campaign to frighten away prospective immigrants to the North West by the publication of adverse letters and articles in British newspapers. Thus, the Dublin Freeman's Journal in 1885 quoted an article from Harper's Bazaar under the ominous title "Winter in Manitoba." The writer described herself as a settler's wife and claimed that the cold was so intense that a pail of water froze while being carried sixty yards across the barnyard. She said further:

I was surprised when I first found the mustard freeze in my mustard pot which stood one foot from the kitchen stove pipe and two feet above the stove, where there is a blazing fire all day and every day through winter, yet the mustard froze between meals.

Similarly a Belfast newspaper a few years later printed an anonymous letter from "Settler" post-marked Regina. "Settler" described the Regina plains as "bleak, vast open prairie, no mountains, trees, rivers or other large bodies of water." He spoke of the distances from neighbors, schools and churches. Making reference to the claim of the immigration literature that religious freedom prevailed in the West, "Settler" jibed:

"As for religious privileges, every settler almost is his own priest or parson, and his shanty his church or chapel—providing the surroundings have not made him too profane, especially so when he is driving oxen."

Whenever such a letter appeared in a British newspaper Canadian immigration agents shortly had satisfied emigrants corresponding with the editor.

III

The campaign to sell the West to prospective emigrants entered the third phase in the early nineties. This last phase might be said to be marked by more advertising, better format in advertising literature, and spectacular success in bringing people to the Canadian West. A government organizational change no doubt affected the immigration programme. Prior to 1892 immigration was one of the miscellany of non-agricultural matters, such as the gathering of the census, copyrighting of books, the Library of Parliament, etc., which came under the Dominion Department of Agriculture, but in 1893 the Immigration Branch was transferred to the Department of the Interior. Perhaps more important was the appointment in 1896 of an energetic westerner, Clifford Sifton, as Minister of the Interior.

About the same date in the United States the rolling frontier came to an end with the settling of the last arable homestead land. The Canadian West no longer had to compete with the American West for immigrants from Britain and Europe. Furthermore, American farmers, with their long tradition of sending their sons to settle on the free land of the moving frontier now turned their attention to "the last, best West," a happy slogan coined about the turn of the century. The explanation for the so-called "American Invasion" is perhaps set out in the following quotation from an immigration pamphlet, in what is purported to be the folksy dialect of a former Iowa farmer.

The boys was growin' up. Our farm down in Ioway was gett'n small and land there was too high-priced for me to buy more. I wanted to keep the boys with me so I reckoned I'd look around.

I found as good land here as back in the Old State, and for a tenth the price. We're all here now. It was kin'a hard to leave the Stars and Stripes, but, call it what you will, it's all America.

One of my favourite immigration pamphlets is a booklet of coloured cartoons showing those two national figures Uncle Sam and John Bull inspecting Western Canada. And my favourite cartoon in the booklet shows the old gentlemen riding in a buggy along a prairie trail with long-stemmed wheat growing on either side. Uncle Sam says: "They say it's a fine lookin' country, John. But durn it all, you can't see it for the wheat."

Most of the immigration pamphlets to which reference has so far been made were in English, but many of the pamphlets issued by the Dominion Government were also published in French. Some pamphlets were specifically directed at French Canadians, as for instance that of Father Morin, La terre promise aux Canadiens-Français. Still other pamphlets in French were intended to attract settlers from France and Belgium.

In fact, pamphlets appeared in most of the tongues of north and northwestern Europe: Gaelic, Welsh, Flemish, Dutch, German, Bohemian, Danish, Norwegian and Finnish. Prior to 1893 most of the pamphlets intended for distribution in continental Europe were translated and printed in Liverpool, England, under the direction of John Dyke, agent of the Canadian Department of Agriculture. In 1885 he wrote:

... several hundred thousand pamphlets have been judiciously and economically distributed, in such a manner that there are few villages from the Crimea to the North Cape of Norway where the advantages which the Dominion offers to agriculturists ... [are] not known.

The effectiveness of the European agents to whom he entrusted the distribution was later questioned, but certainly Dyke made an effort at wide circulation.

The Ukrainians in the Austro-Hungarian empire discovered the Canadian West in 1894 when Professor Osyp Oleskiw, an agricultural soils expert from Lvov, visited Canada. On his return, the professor published two pamphlets, their translated titles being: "On Emigration" and "On Free Land." Within a few years tens of thousands of settlers from Galicia were pouring into the Canadian West to take up land.

After the turn of the century settlers flocked into the West. Railway lines were extended, and each year a hundred or more new

villages sprang up. With delusions of grandeur, the first businessmen in some of these villages promptly organized an aggressive board of trade and turned out a promotion pamphlet designed to set before the world the great future awaiting those who settled in the shadows of the town's elevators. These Board of Trade pamphlets had titles such as "Lethbridge, South Alberta, the Colorado of Canada," "Athabasca Landing - Gateway to the Last Best West" "Aberdeen - a Profitable Point for the Settler in the Last West," "Rosthern - Where the World's Best Wheat Grows," "Wheat Wealthy Wolseley - the Grain Golden City of the Central West."

The city of Saskatoon, second to none in advertising, issued small booklets called Saskatoonlets, setting out its industrial potentialities. Of the claims made, two stick in my mind: "No old people to hinder progress"; "A magnificent swift river of purest water." The first was true, for the frontier was settled mostly by young people, but as for the second, either the writer hadn't looked over the parapet of any of the city's four bridges, or the Saskatchewan's water was less muddy in those days. The secretary of Saskatoon's Board of Trade, F. McClure Sclanders, carefully nurtured a banana plant in his office, which he said proved the mildness of the climate; and so when winter's cold gripped the Saskatchewan country, newspaper men, having in mind Sclanders' tropical plant, would jocularly refer to Canada's "Banana Belt."

The wildest claims made in any immigration prospectus I have seen appeared in one issued by a company proposing to build a railway. The title page read as follows:

Momentous announcement. Cheaper, greater, better, safer bread supply in sight for the United Kingdom. Ideal homes for colonists without the usual pioneer privations, risks and isolation, all being avoided by unprecedentedly favourable co-operative methods "in the garden" of the Dominion of Canada.

The garden, as shown on the map, was located in the present Northwest Territories south of Great Slave Lake, while the proposed railway was to connect that lake with the head of navigation on the Thelon River. The Company planned to ship grain from "the garden" across Great Slave Lake by boat or barge and then by rail northeast to the Thelon River where it could be loaded aboard ocean grain boats, which would sail down Chesterfield Inlet and south of Baffin Land toward the Atlantic. This prospectus was guilty of the worst kind of deception.

In retrospect, some people attracted to the West by Canada's great advertising campaign recall the literature as painting reality and prospects so rosy as to be misleading. In my opinion most of

the immigration literature, certainly that sponsored by governments and the C. P. R., tried honestly to present conditions, though it must be admitted that the optimism prevalent in the West permeated the writing.

The West today is just a geographical area, but in the decades before World War I it was the land of opportunity. Can you imagine what the words "The West" suggested to the desk-tethered clerk, the factory-weary British workman, the mortgage-burdened Ontario farmer, or the landless Galician peasant? It offered a new chance, a new life, a new freedom. And so perhaps, in eagerly reading the pamphlets describing the West, the prospective emigrant interpreted what he read in terms of his dreams and aspirations.

Finally, I would quote the last page of a pamphlet entitled Homes for Millions, edited by that brilliant, if erratic, Irish journalist, Nicholas Flood Davin, founder of the Regina Leader. He is explaining why cultured people settled on the prairies and the effect the prairies had on the settlers' outlook.

Inert people, without enthusiasm, and with a poor, barren imagination sometimes express surprise that highly-educated men and women who have seen all the Old World has to show should be able, as they say, "to bury themselves in the wilderness" and to "live away from civilization." They little know the beauties of the "wilderness" and we have seen "civilization" enter the North West side by side with the settler. Nor are people whose ambition is satisfied by attending balls and 5 o'clock teas capable of realizing the serious noble pleasure of aiding in the building of a new country, affecting the course of the world around, and effecting something for your fellow men. All the charms that belong to youth, hope, energy, are found in the North West, and the bracing influence of the new free land on mind and character is remarkable. The Ontario farmer is a fine specimen of the yeoman, but three years in the North West raises him higher on the scale of manhood - while a commensurate improvement is noted in all classes and races from Europe who have come amongst us, having the essential qualities of capacity for work, perseverance, sobriety and intelligence.

Such was the lure of the West.

Bruce Peel