Selling the Wondrous West: The Use of Propaganda to Populate Western Canada, 1870-1914

By Jenny Thomson

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Lakeland College

Instructor: Curtis McManus

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Western Canada had become the focus of the government in the years after confederation. The impending westward expansion of the United States mandated necessary action be taken to solidify boundaries, lay railway track, and populate the territory. Propaganda would be the solution to the population issue and the man who would undertake the task would be Sir Clifford Sifton. Sifton ensured Canadian propaganda in its various consequences, was forced into nearly every part of the nation with which Canada was concerned. Within ten years of the initial onslaught, the prairies had become substantially more populated, spirited and ethnically diverse. It was through the extensive use of propaganda, that the Canadian government managed to populate the western prairies, and this can be directly attributed to the regional successes seen today.

Propaganda in Canada during the 19th and 20th Centuries cannot be compared with the negative connotation that surrounds the word in the 21st century. The definition of propaganda according to the Oxford English Dictionary is the systematic dissemination of information, especially in a biased or misleading way, in order to promote a political cause or point of view. The political cause of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was obviously western settlement, but the evident misrepresentation that occurred in the promotion of settlement had a more fervent and enthusiastic intention, rather than a negative connotation.

Nation building was the intention, and the nation builders firmly believed that Canada truly had something to offer. “Alberta’s rugged frontier beckoned the adventurous, who tapped its potential and transformed it into a centre of commerce and culture. That pioneering spirit remains in Alberta, where scientific discoveries, economic booms and creative endeavors are a way of life.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This description is most likely what the nation-building fathers had foreseen when they launched the propaganda push of the 1870s and the even more aggressive push following the depression years of the 1890s. Propaganda today can translate to fraud, but that translation does not transcend the propaganda of early western settlement. What does transcend is the effect of the propaganda push.

John A MacDonald and his government had set course to prepare the West for prospective settlers. The disappearance of the buffalo had made the old nomadic hunter’s way of life obsolete, the forces of law and order had been established with the Mounties, and the network of railways laid, opened the West to the rest of Canada. Despite the Prime Minister’s attempts to encourage western settlement, there were relatively few settlers. This was due partly to the unfavourable publicity which the territory had received with regard to soil, climate and administrative problems.

Prior to 1896, Western Canada was ranchers land. Palliser’s triangle, the northern tip of the American dry belt, had not been a desirable location for settlers or farmers to be “because the land had been deemed useless from an agricultural standpoint and the ranchers held full sway and possession for all time,”[[2]](#footnote-2) as Sydney Fisher, the Canadian minister of Agriculture recalled of the years before the immigration boom. Ranchers realized the land had supported thousands of buffalo for hundreds of years, and recognized that “the land had inherent qualities as a grazing kingdom”.[[3]](#footnote-3) The territory had become ranch land and the ranchers themselves intended to keep it that way.

Despite the rancher’s attempt to maintain large plots of land for grazing, free of settlers, forces worked against them to solidify the momentum of western settlement. By 1870, the expansionist movement now demanded that the Canadian government become actively involved in promoting settlement. The government, as early as 1873, began circulating and distributing official government immigration pamphlets such as *Information for Intending Emigrants*.[[4]](#footnote-4) The enthusiasm was building and the homestead rush had begun to gather momentum. By the late 1880’s the new slogan was “Go West Young Man”.[[5]](#footnote-5) The Canadian Pacific Railway, in 1884 also published pamphlets defending the “fertility of the West, denying that it was unfit for settlement, being arid and alkaline”[[6]](#footnote-6). This was to be the earliest form of western promotion; the earliest form of propaganda to hit the Canadian prairies.

It was the propaganda that would spread like a prairie wild fire leaving in its wake, tall tales of “60 bushels to the acre, 40 pound turnips, and cauliflowers so big that *one* would fill a washtub!”[[7]](#footnote-7) These early attempts at promoting immigration were based on basic techniques of promotion. The pamphlets always began with the “strongest promises of realism and then continued with descriptions of prosperous and contented farmers living amidst slightly unreal fields of golden grain.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The enthusiasm was contagious but the accuracy was questionable. Nonetheless, the new propaganda was exactly what the West needed and it served to counter-balance some of the negative criticism which had previously deterred prairie settlers. John A MacDonald deemed the West the “’Land of Promise’ saying ‘I am told you can come in on the train in the morning and start ploughing in the afternoon’”.[[9]](#footnote-9) John A. MacDonald was building a nation and that nation included settlement of the West.

Despite the Prime Minister’s efforts, substantial settlement would not come to the West for the time being. It seemed that the enthusiastic propaganda push yielded unrealistic expectations. Settlers did continue to go west but only at a trickle. Canada in 1873 counted some 50,000 immigrants at its peak, but many settled in the East or eventually ended up settling south of the border.[[10]](#footnote-10) Canada was gaining European immigrants but again, many continued to the United States. Despite the sobering disappointments for western settlement, “expansionists continued to predict that the great wave of immigration was just around the corner.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

It may have been that the stars were aligned following the depression of the late 1800’s, because into the picture came great opportunity and the man who would be the opportunist. 1896 marked the critical date were circumstances changed. Urbanization and industrialization in Europe had created new opportunities, choice farmland was scarce and expensive in the United States, and overall there was general prosperity following a few decades of drought and depression.[[12]](#footnote-12) 1896 also marked the year in which Clifford Sifton became Minister of the Interior in the federal government. Sifton was a man who understood the “importance of communication and harnessing the interests of the masses.”[[13]](#footnote-13) It was under these pretexts that Sifton announced to Ottawa his clear intentions. “The first thing to do was to settle the empty West with producing farmers; this was also the second, third, fourth and fifth thing to do. Solve the problem of how to get people of the right kind into the West and keep them there.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Sifton understood his task and he went after it with gusto.

It was to be the biggest campaign ad ever and it was intended to lure people westward. The government was going to offer free land to millions and believed settlers would come open armed and bursting with gratitude. Once again however, the optimism was pretentious. Sifton himself understood the challenges of marketing the benefits of moving to a foreign, uninhabited harsh world. Sifton, in retrospect, to the House of Commons in 1906, said, “It was hard to interest in Canada even people who were seeking homes. Canada was unknown to them; the name in those years meant nothing.”[[15]](#footnote-15) But Sifton had a plan.

Sifton instituted a programme that revolved around one simple concept – settlement![[16]](#footnote-16) “If a man would settle on the land and seriously devote himself to the business of production, the whole department of the interior, from the Minister down to the youngest office boy, was at his service.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Sifton was the epitome of perseverance as he set about preparing the West for the great propaganda push. Under Sifton’s command, the Department of the Interior underwent personnel changes, a bureaucratic overhaul and the elimination of restrictive red tape. The revamped system of the Department was done with the intention of “putting the individual John Doe on 160 acres of land, keeping him there, making his conditions of life tolerable, supplying him with railway facilities; and then multiplying the performance a countless number of times”.[[18]](#footnote-18) It was an ambitious plan, but being a “man of unusual energy and drive”[[19]](#footnote-19), Sifton threw open the gates to the Canadian West and handed out keys to anyone whom the Department deemed adequate.

The intended target of the propaganda would be capable farmers, farm labourers, and domestic labourers. They would also be required to be of good character; men anxious to go on the land and equipped by inclination and experience for rural life.[[20]](#footnote-20) With Sifton noting, “Other immigration, while welcome, could take care of itself.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Immigrants arriving in Saint John or Halifax were interrogated by immigration officers wanting to know if they were:

strong, vigorous, delicate, ruddy or pale. The medical form asked, “Is applicant honest? Sober? Industrious? Thrifty? Of good morals? Is wife good housekeeper and tidy?” Canada wanted no “idiots, imbeciles, feeble-minded persons, epileptics, insane persons; persons dumb, blind or otherwise physically defective; persons over 15 years of age who are unable to read; persons guilty of any crime involving moral turpitude; beggars, vagrants and persons liable to become a public charge; persons suffering from chronic alcoholism or the drug habit; persons of physical inferiority whose defect is likely to prevent them making their way in Canada; anarchists, agitators…[[22]](#footnote-22)

Canada was in desperate need of immigrants, but clearly Canada could not open its doors to miscreants and scoundrels. The Department attempted to not put any other pretexts (other than an agrarian background) upon the intended targets, claiming that “If he was a white man, he could come from anywhere in the world and put to work with no questions asked as to his race, his religion, his language or his previous conditions of servitude.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Sifton’s intended audience would be worldwide and although it appeared to be very free of racial tendencies, it was in fact the opposite.

All immigrants were not treated equally, and the Department had a definite audience in mind when it came to the ideal immigrant. Italians, Greeks and Jews were deemed inapt farmers. Central Europeans for a while were known as “Sifton’s dirty Slaves” and his “grand ‘roundup’ of European freaks and hoboes.[[24]](#footnote-24) Ukrainians and Doukhobors, although permitted entry were subject to racial tensions, while Blacks and Orientals were treated as creatures from another planet. “When blacks showed an interest in Canada, the invitation to Paradise was abruptly cancelled. The Department of the Interior tried hard to persuade them the climate was too cold.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Sifton and the Department were molding Canada to fill the needs of what they felt suited the prairies best.

There were specific nations that the propaganda would be targeted towards. Naturally, the British people were felt best suited; both for political and patriotic reasons. If they were feeling adventurous, they often took the advice of the propaganda and set out on a new quest. George Victor Wilkinson of Kilby, Leicestershire, England, left for Canada after being convinced by the Canadian propaganda that circulated his home. “The country was being flooded and bombarded with advertisements advising people to go to Canada where everybody was getting rich and land was free for the immigrant to live on.”[[26]](#footnote-26) With such splendor, how could one truly resist the call of a Canadian adventure. British/Canadian ties required Sifton to engage England in its immigration policy, but England did not have a huge population of farmers. Efforts were directed to Northern England and Scotland and Sifton wrote in a letter to *MacLean’s Magazine April 1st, 1922 “*The result was that we got a steady stream of people from Northern England and from Scotland; and they were the very best settlers ever.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

The United States had also become a target due to their relative location and the various economic issues U.S. farmers were dealing with at the time. Land had become very expensive in the U.S.; “up to $100 an acre in Kansas, $200 in Illinois, and here was Canada offering free land, maturing wheat and a railway to haul people and grain”.[[28]](#footnote-28) Many men were being forced into “tenant or wage labour status if they wished to remain on the soil”[[29]](#footnote-29), and this was not desirable by most.

American historian Karel Bicha suggests that the movement north to Canada was little more than a “novel solution to the serious problems which had plagued western farmers since the mid-1870s, coupled with the more recent realization that the supply of desirable land in the American West was all but exhausted.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Novel solution or not, Sifton saw opportunity and he seized it. The disbursement of propaganda to the United States was vigorous and their efforts were lucrative.

The Department sponsored tours in various years for the National Editorial Association of the United States. There were 600 members of the Association, representing over a thousand papers. They began their tours from Seattle, headed north, and from B.C., they journeyed eastward across the prairies spending time at Banff Springs and Lake Louise at Dominion expense. But the Dominion reaped the rewards, for in return for their courtesies the editors secured the insertion of a three-column illustrated article on the resources of the Canadian West in over six thousand American newspapers at no cost to Canada.[[31]](#footnote-31) This was the kind of beneficial expenditure that made all the propaganda worthwhile.

The full onslaught of the propaganda push was very thorough and no potential immigrant was overlooked. The initial method sent to Britain was letters stating farmers’ contentedness; British farmers in Western Canada detailing their experiences. Sifton wrote of these letters; “the idea was to impress the ordinary farmer. The letters and statements are all *bona fide*; they have been selected from several thousand that were available. Care has been taken, moreover, to see that the statements which have been selected are fair samples, not too favourable.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Pamphlets, posters and various forms of literature were all designed to be “attractive but simply worded and artfully displayed.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Advertisements with unique appeal were placed in nearly every major newspaper around the globe. These advertisements were intended to direct enquires to the numerous agencies that Department had stationed in major centres.

Agent offices were the minions of the Canadian government and they acted as the link for immigration information. The agents operated behind a “barrage of advertising in rural newspapers and farm journals, amply supplemented by literature published by the Department of the Interior.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Advertising was intended to stimulate inquiries from interested farmers. Once there was interest, agents would follow up with lectures, exhibits and personal solicitation. Extensive advertising was begun immediately in 1897 and by 1902 advertisements were appearing regularly in some 7000 papers.”[[35]](#footnote-35) These agents were responsible for the thorough distribution that permeated every corner of agricultural societies.

There was also a push of propaganda into classes and social groups. Atlases were placed in American school rooms, and women’s cultural societies were urged to study about Canada and were provided with an abundant amount of educational literature on the subject. Church organizations and the clergy were sent special literature describing the moral advantages of life on the prairies with a request to ministers to share the virtues of Canadian life with their congregations. Counties were bombarded with literature depicting the advantages of life in western Canada. In addition, “agents made numerous visits to county fairs, state fairs, Grange picnics, and numerous types of local gatherings where they gave illustrated lectures, displayed the grains and grasses which flourished in western Canada, and distributed literature lavishly”.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Religious and ethnic groups were also highly sought after by the Canadian agents who searched feverishly for a willing audience. In communes such as the Mormon, the Amish and the Mennonite, the leaders were targeted. If the leader could be convinced, the community would likely migrate as well. There were also whole ethnic groups that were targeted that included Hungarians, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegians, Swedes, Belgians, and Germans. “A special Scandinavian agency was created with headquarters in St. Paul and societal literature written in Norwegian and Swedish was lavishly dispensed in Scandinavian area”.[[37]](#footnote-37) These areas proved to be very fruitful with many people constituting to the ideal Canadian immigrant.

The great propaganda push by the Department of the Interior had worked. “The dispossessed, the adventurous and the naive poured forth onto Canada’s prairies”.[[38]](#footnote-38) The image if the West had changed from an arctic wasteland to that of a rich agricultural hinterland. The potential of the prairies had been taken to every corner of the world and the propaganda had been very effective. However, it had created a utopia, that ultimately would be unattainable by those who had been disillusioned.[[39]](#footnote-39) In the first decade of the 20th century, the population of Canada soared from 5,000,000 to more than 6,250,000. Alberta’s population had increased by a jaw dropping 550 per cent to nearly 375,000.[[40]](#footnote-40) Sifton’s propaganda had worked and as reward for his successes, he was knighted in 1915 for his contributions in populating the West.

To Sifton, came fame and knighthood, but to the settler’s he had lured, came reality. Despite the alluring images, encouraging reports and the solicitations of the agents, the problems that the settlers found upon arrival to Canada were a far cry from any truth. “There were no roads, no school, no stores, and no means of transportation beyond the railways. People who lived in the middle of nowhere needed to be self-sufficient.”[[41]](#footnote-41) George Wilkinson of Kilby England was sorely disappointed upon his arrival in the port of Halifax.

What a grimy place! The streets were covered with dirty snow, the few shops were in old wooden buildings and there were no people around. From the immigration officers and the pictures they showed us we expected a bright new country, everybody busy making money and waiting with open arms to welcome us and share their prosperity with us.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Life most certainly was not easy for the settlers who arrived to the vastness of the prairies, but few had elsewhere to go. Many of the immigrants had fled military service, grinding poverty or slavery. They fled feudalism and ethnic merging. Most had little or no land and worked in unbearable conditions. “Canada had wanted immigrants as badly as they wanted Canada.”[[43]](#footnote-43) And so together they would make the best of their new situation.

Despite the push and deception of propaganda, ultimately the goal of populating the West had finally been achieved. The prairies, which came to thrive, quickly began contributing to national economic prosperity. (Regional grievances not to be included in the paper!) Townships, divisions of government, and booming diverse societies quickly formed, revolving around a sense of community. The plight of the deceived settler soon gave way to blessings far beyond any that their homelands could have offered. Propaganda can be a repugnant word, negative in every connotation, but in regards to Canada and the western settlement it is unprecedented. Saskatchewan and Alberta are the thriving communities they are today because of the Department of the Interior’s use of propaganda. They flooded the prairies with priceless resources, the homesteader, who “set about his arduous nation-building task of turning the bald-high prairie into waving wheat fields with results not far short of magical.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

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