

EUROPEAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE FICTION OF ROBERT STEAD

by
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Robert Stead was born in Ontario in 1880 and moved to the prairies at the age of two. He became a popular Western novelist whose readers were predominantly Americans; in fact, his best novel, *Grain* (New York, 1926), was serialized in an American farm paper, and his New York publishers went so far as to ask him to set his fiction in the States rather than Canada in order to boost his sales further.¹ Stead did not comply. Although not a great artist he was an honest and conscientious writer whose aim was to record the settlement of the Prairie Provinces. As a result, his name and appeal have outlasted the short-lived popular success of his novels.² This is largely so because, as Desmond Pacey argues, they "give us a basically accurate picture of prairie life during the first two decades of the twentieth century."³

Stead's reputation as a social realist has led me to assume that immigrant characters would be part of his picture of the West, particularly, since as a publicity agent, first for the CPR and later for the Dominion Department of Immigration and Colonization,⁴ he had to deal with large numbers of foreigners. The relative absence of foreign characters in Stead's novels is therefore surprising and suggests that he wanted to avoid the widely disputed problems of "strangers within our gates" and "enemy aliens" in his fiction. Although he emphasized individuals' attempts to start a new life, he preferred these individuals to

¹*Stead Papers*, Public Archives of Canada, Vol. I, Folders 1 and 4

²Edward McCourt, *The Canadian West in Fiction* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1949), p. 82.

³Desmond Pacey, "Fiction, 1920-1940," in *Literary History of Canada*, gen. ed., Carl F. Klinck (Reprinted with corrections; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 677.

⁴*Stead Papers*, Vol. XII, Folder 45.

come from eastern Canada. This migration, incidentally, comes close in spirit and fact to immigration from abroad, once the settlers are on their own in the wilderness.

In order to try to explain his preference, one must, above all, realize Stead's devotion to the British Empire and British Canada. His sympathies become most evident in some of his verse, as in stanzas three and four of the poem "A Colonial":

Only a Colonial!

Only a man who has bridged the deep,
And stained the map a British hue,
Who builds an Empire while ye sleep
And deeds the ownership to you.
'Tis the Viking blood which gave you birth
That has driven him to the ends of earth.

Only a Colonial!

Wherever the flag that ye think is great
Is flown to the farthest winds that blow,
Wherever the colonists ye berate
In their blind faith-vision onward go,
Ye may find ye hearts that are British still
In your self-conceit do ye count them nil?⁵

Consequently he usually chose the easiest way open to him as a serious novelist rather than a propagandist of the West: he avoided multicultural conflicts.

His two novels, *The Homesteaders* (Toronto, 1916) and *Neighbours* (Toronto, 1922), do however, include some treatment of immigrants. The first touches on immigration from abroad, and the second deals with foreigners from a number of European countries in addition to Canadians from the East. *The Homesteaders* takes place partly in the fictional town of Plainville, Manitoba, which is also the setting of his masterpiece *Grain*, and partly further west, in the Alberta foothills. *Neighbours* is set in Saskatchewan, north of Regina. In these novels Stead has given us a cross-section of pioneering in all three Prairie Provinces between the 1880's and the First World War. Read together the novels convey a geographic and social panorama of the settlement of the West. Yet there is no comparably extensive cross-section of Western characters. Except in *Neighbours*, the author mainly describes the social developments within the framework of single families: the Harrises from the Eastern Townships in *The Homesteaders*; and the Stakes from Ontario in *Grain*. Only *Neighbours*

⁵Robert Stead, *Songs of the Prairie* (New York: Platt and Fleck, 1912), p. 82.

focusses on a variety of characters including a Russian, a Swedish and a Scottish family, who reflect a growing multi-ethnic West.

The central characters in *The Homesteaders*, the school teacher, John Harris, and his wife, are of "the breed that had not feared, a generation back, to cross the seas and carve a province and a future from the forest." (*HS*, p. 9) They are Canadians of Scottish origin whose venture is very much in the tradition of the pioneers of the earlier American West, except that these were not so much Scottish as English, German and Scandinavian. Life on the Plainville frontier consisted of "hard, persistent work — of loneliness, privation, and hardship. But it was also a life of courage, of health, of resourcefulness, of a wild, exhilarating freedom found only in God's open spaces." (*HS*, p. 58) There is not yet the romance of prosperity which accompanied the popular vision of the Canadian West as the heart land of "Canada's Century." The emphasis on isolation, open spaces and freedom conveys a romantic attitude towards individual man's harmony with himself and with nature, which in North America we usually associate with life in the American West and the Canadian North. The Harris are what the Canadian Imperialists of the turn of this century dreamed of as the Canadian of the future; the type who was considered the product of the northern climate and geography and who "came to symbolize energy, strength, self-reliance, health, and purity."⁶

The Harris's limited contact with immigrants occurs on the immigrant train. However, there is no explicit allusion to passengers other than English-speaking ones:

The train was full. Every seat was taken; aisles were crowded with standing passengers who stumbled over bundles and valises with every pitch in the uncertain road-bed; women fought bravely with memories too recent to be healed, and children crowded in lusty abandon or shrieked as they fell between the slippery seats. The men were making acquaintances; the communities from which they came were sufficiently interwoven to link up relationships with little difficulty, and already they were exchanging anecdotes in high hilarity or discussing plans and prospects with that mutual sympathy which so quickly arises under strange conditions. (*HS*, p. 11)

The fact that large numbers of continental Europeans did not pour into the West until the 1890's explains their absence on this train of 1882. The first Ukrainians, for instance, did not arrive in Winnipeg until 1891.⁷ The

⁶Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 129.

⁷Paul Yuzyk, *Ukrainian Canadians* (Toronto: Ukrainian Canadian Business and Professional Federations, 1967), p. 9.

only concrete reference to non-English-speaking settlers in *The Homesteaders* appears in connection with the wagon route from Winnipeg to the pioneer homesteads:

. . . they entered on the very next day a district having some pretence of settlement, where it was sometimes possible to secure shelter for the women and children under hospitable Mennonite roofs. The peculiar housekeeping principles of this class of settlers, however, which involved the lodging of cattle and horses in the same building with the human members of the family, discouraged too great intimacy with them, and for the most part the newcomers preferred the shelter of their own tent. (*HS*, p. 36)

Stead's comments do not discriminate against these foreigners. He accepts them as friendly people with ways of their own. Thus they strike Harris and the other newcomers as merely one of the oddities of the West rather than as aliens.

For the remainder of the novel we witness the building of Harris's farm from a one-room sod hut to a prosperous establishment. Yet the arrival of money transforms the courageous "northern type" into a gross materialist who resembles the stereotyped American businessman-farmer: "The pioneer days had passed away, and civilization and prosperity were rampant in the land" (*HS*, p. 79). In this confrontation between a pastoral environment and a sprawling urbanization which attracts the younger generations, the role of immigrant characters appears to have become irrelevant. Even the farmhands are all Canadians.

Twenty-two years after the Harris's journey two couples of brothers and sisters, Jack and Jean Lane, and Frank and Marjorie Hall, board an immigrant train in Ontario. They are the central characters of *Neighbours*. Their fellow-occupants of the colonist cars of 1904 are no longer just English-speaking passengers because masses of European immigrants were settling in the West as a result of an economic boom from about 1896 to 1914, which in turn had triggered the new and forceful Government and CPR immigration policies.⁸

There were many women and children [on the train], and the degree in the social scale seemed to range from those with a considerable culture and a penchant for cleanliness to those who apparently interpreted the latter term with the greatest liberality. Several languages were spoken. Half-dressed men lolled in their berths, exposing swarthy arms and slabs of hairy chests, and

⁸James B. Hedges, *The Building of the Canadian West* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), p. 127.

slatternly women shuffled along the aisle, in imminent danger of tripping on their trailing skirts and disrobing themselves. Children whined or babbled, and, after the general disturbance of breakfast-making was over, raced up and down the aisle, occasionally tripping over a projecting foot or a suit-case, and raising a lusty but short-lived outcry. (*NB*, p. 27)

The conditions on this train are different from those on the earlier one. Both trains are crowded, yet unlike the English-speaking settlers, who travelled together in an agreeable friendly atmosphere, the foreigners do not share the former's appearances of culture and cleanliness so that their ride is a mess. Although all foreigners appear inferior to Anglo-Saxons and Celts, Stead avoids ethnic discrimination. He distinguishes only between social classes, and offers a good many sympathetic remarks on the immigrants' quaintness:

Some of the passengers understood only the barest essentials of English, and were plainly confused over the values of a strange currency. Whenever the conductor came through the car demanding tickets, which seemed to be unnecessarily often, they received him with panicky excitement or sullen stolidity. Our little party, although inexperienced in the customs of travel, had the great advantage, which the native-born never fully appreciates, of being in its own country. We were citizens of it, and we had a well-developed Anglo-Saxon pride in what that meant. We understood the language, the currency, and the customs of the people. (*NB*, p. 27-28)

It is important to see that Stead does not emphasize any feelings of British superiority; he stresses the feeling of being in one's own country, which gives Frank Hall and his companions both comfort and security in their venture. This comfort will disappear, however, on the frontier. To be without established communities, institutions and public officials is a new experience; being in one's own country loses much of its importance.

In the neighbourhood of the Hall and Lane homesteads we find a Scottish family, two English families, a Swedish family, a Russian and an American family: "They were a wonderful company, typical foundation stones of a nation; foundation work the quality of which shall be tested through all the years to come" (*NB*, p. 228). Earlier reservations about foreigners have given way to an enthusiastic acceptance of a multi-ethnic Canadian West, in the hope that it will form a stable new society. The transition from reservation to acceptance has come rapidly and naturally. Because of their isolation and loneliness, especially during winter, the settlers frequently call upon each other and friendly relations exist

amongst all of them. However, in an earlier manuscript version of the novel forebodings of a rapid rise of a non-English-speaking population soon to outnumber Canadians and Britishers overshadow the settlers' harmony. In the published version Stead abandoned those passages together with his development of the traditional panacea against foreign ways of life, the public school.⁹

Although Stead no longer belabours the issue of Canadianization, he, not surprisingly, depicts a certain Anglicizing of his Canadian characters. An English remittance man, nick-named Spoof, who interferes in the planned marriage between Frank and Jean, is Stead's agent. — The Englishman's name is of course very suggestive since in Canada the term remittance man was used to ridicule an unemployed or unemployable younger son of an upper-class English family, who had made a nuisance of himself and was sent to live in the "Colonies" on remittances sent from home. — The original idea of the Lanes and Halls had been that Frank would marry Jean, and Jack would marry Marjorie. The wedding of the last two presents no problems. Frank, however, seems to have lost Jean to Spoof. Unlike Frank, Jean is a very sensitive and vaguely artistic person. She is consequently impressed by the Englishman's education and refinement, his "tales of art treasures and music and theatres all alight with life and beauty; tales of grave-stones marking the great of a nation with a history reaching back into the early obscurity of Western civilization." (*NB*, p. 101) The abundance of books and art objects in his shack is so unexpected and attractive that it is a matter of course for Jean to fall in love with him. Yet he rejects her since, surprisingly, he proves to be the runaway husband of the English "widow" who moves into the neighbourhood. Spoof rejoins his wife and Jean finally marries Frank.

Unfortunately this chain of events is not at all meant to be the parody it may appear. While Jean is courting with Spoof, Frank is trying most diligently to emulate Spoof in order to win her back. He reads poetry and other literature so that he may become more appreciative in the wilderness, of the aesthetic aspects of life, an appreciation in which Jean finds him lacking. In her eyes he is too much of a pioneer farmer, interested in working the land but little else. The conflict between materialism and art is a serious one in this novel even though Stead handles it awkwardly:

With joy I noted, suddenly, that I had forced my boundaries far beyond the corner stakes of [lot] Fourteen, beyond even the prairies, the continent, the times in which we live. My mind, from sluggishly hibernating for the winter, became a dynamo of activity. (*NB*, p. 292-93)

⁹*Stead Papers*, Vol. III, Folder 15.

Yet it is not only the suddenness of Frank's insights but also their conciliatory effect on Jean which the reader finds difficult to believe, especially when Jean finally accepts Frank because they read Byron's "She Walks in Beauty" together!

It is regrettable that such an important aspect as the conflict between the material and cultural growth of a new society is treated in a contrived, melodramatic fashion in order to give the story a happy ending. At the same time it is interesting that Byron's poem underlines Stead's Byronic attitude towards the West, a mixture of melancholy and aristocratic individualism opposed to the blind optimism of many bourgeois romances of the Canadian prairies.

The Englishman, Spoof, thus acts as an educator of pioneer minds, as a counterbalance to the dangers of the pursuit of economic prosperity. Yet he provides not only cultural insights, but also entertainment in his role of remittance man. On one side, he is the typically exaggerated greenhorn in the West, where anyone with culture is silly, except ladies:

"My plowing," Spoof explained, "has gone better since I discarded my compass. The bullocks never took kindly to the compass. No doubt it was a foolish notion of mine that a furrow should run either east and west or north and south, seeing that the whole farm has to be plowed anyway. I now let them veer and tack as they please, and we are making considerable headway." (*NB*, p. 95)

On the other side, he himself has a strong sense of humour which he uses to his advantage:

"The Governor, dear old chap, thinks this country is rather a bit off the map. I have promised to shoot him a polar bear for Christmas, and he's quite looking forward to it. He writes to know if I find the native labour satisfactory, and can my man mix a decent whisky and soda. I must set his mind at rest. I let him think I run quite an establishment, you understand; he sends a cheque now and again, which, of course, bears a relationship to the position I am supposed to occupy in local society." (*NB*, p. 94)

Nevertheless, here is more evidence of the author's pro-British attitudes. Spoof is a likable character, both as a greenhorn and as a homesteader. Most important, however, is his English culture:

"... we need some of you people from the Old Land to mix with ours," said Jean. "We need something to link our future with our past — to give us balance, poise."

"Poise is the word, I think," Spoof commented. "New countries

have energy, ambition, enthusiasm, courage, optimism — all wonderful qualities — but they are likely to need poise.” (NB, p. 102)

This vision of a pastoral idyll blending European tradition and New World promises forms only a small part of *The Homesteaders* and *Grain*, each of which covers twenty years instead of *Neighbours'* one year. Prosperity and greed in *The Homesteaders*, and urbanization and a loss of established social and moral values in *Grain* threaten to destroy all harmony and “poise.” With the exception of the idyllic *Neighbours* the absence of European characters suggests the irrelevance of the term “immigrant” in Stead’s fiction. The people who move to the West from the Canadian East and Europe are all, in a sense, immigrants to him. Thus the foreignness of European families in *Neighbours* neither belittles their roles as pioneers nor invites ethnic comparisons. While the novel still shows Stead’s British sympathies, it also implies the notion that existing cultural differences will disappear as a result of the new life in the West, a notion which further explains the author’s dislike of ethnic conflicts. Indeed the only traces of discrimination are of a humorous nature: Alton is the remittance man’s real name, yet everybody calls him Spoofo, because he had been a conceited English immigrant upon his arrival, and the Russian family is simply known as the “Sneezits,” (NB, p. 164), since their Russian name is too difficult to pronounce.

The use of humour and the relative absence of the theme of immigration in Stead’s novels are a direct result of his choice of frontier settings in which he can concentrate on the experiences of a few characters building a new society. Unlike Ralph Connor and Nellie McClung he avoids setting his work in cities such as Winnipeg, where the presence of large numbers of often destitute foreigners would all too easily have marred visions of social harmony.

Neighbours, however, is not a trite novel which merely idealizes the prairies of Canadian immigration propaganda pamphlets and tries to make foreigners acceptable. Stead integrates his immigrant characters into a view of the West which emphasizes the conflict between the individualistic and aristocratic values of frontier life and the dangers of materialism. Like his much more famous contemporary, the German immigrant novelist F. P. Grove, whom he resembles in his idealistic and thematic approach to the West, he deems a highly intellectual and artistic culture necessary to give the new country “poise” as a defence against industrial and commercial exploitation. Whereas in America material values have sadly dominated, in Canada the conflict between Europe and the New World appears still undecided; neither “Spoofoing” nor “Yanking,” so to say, has won here.

Although *Neighbours* is the only novel in which Stead develops European immigrants’ roles in that conflict, he clearly accepts their

cultural importance in the West's and Canada's economic boom at the turn of the century; and in 1923 he even goes so far as to warn us that, "If Canada is to have a soul; if it is to be guided by that enduring process which distinguishes the permanent from the transient, it must have a literature. It may be English-Canadian, French-Canadian, Scandinavian-Canadian, Slav-Canadian. . ."¹⁰ This underlines his desire to be a Canadian writer rather than an American bestselling author. It also is a final explanation of his apparent reluctance to single out characters of a particular immigrant group: he has accepted them all as Canadian.

¹⁰*Stead Papers*, Vol. X, Folder 39, from a 1923 letter to W. T. Allison.