

excerpt from “Now Then, All Together!” Assimilation, the Book, and the Education of New Canadians 1896-1918

Paper Presented to the History of the Book in Canada’s Open Conference for Volume II (1840-1918)

by Paul Hjartarson, Department of English, University of Alberta

■ The Ukrainians who arrived in Canada at the turn of the century came with the belief that they could retain their language and customs. That belief, as Cornelius Jaenen¹ notes, was reinforced both by “the reservation of bloc settlement areas for ethnic groups” (517) and by the subsequent development of bilingual public schools, as Ukrainian immigrants exercised their right under the Manitoba School Act of 1897, which institutionalized the provision for bilingual schools. The Ukrainian settlers’ belief that they could retain their language and customs was further reinforced when the provincial government established the Ruthenian Training School for bilingual Ukrainian teachers in 1905.

When Manitoba commissioned the Ruthenian-English readers, the Ukrainian immigrant community and the government were, in effect, working at cross purposes. The Ukrainian immigrant communities saw bilingual schools as a means of retaining their language and culture. The provincial government and the English majority saw the bilingual schools simply “as a transitional stage leading to unilingual English education” (Barber, *Canadianization*, 287), that is, as a stage in the assimilation of the immigrants. The following statement by a Manitoba school inspector, written in 1906, reflects the majority view:

The great work of the public school in Canada is the formation and development of a high type of national life. This is particularly true in Western Canada, with its heterogeneous population. Here are to be found people of all countries, from the keen, clever American, with highly developed national ideals, equal to but perhaps somewhat antagonistic to our own, to the ignorant peasantry of central and

Eastern Europe and Asia. These incongruous elements have to be assimilated, have to be welded into one harmonious whole if Canada is to attain the position that we, who belong here by right of birth and blood, claim for her. The chief instrument in this process of assimilation is the public school. (Maguire, 31)

In these comments, the peasantry of central and eastern Europe—with the Ukrainians typically viewed as the lowest of the low—are grouped with the “peasants” of Asia. This categorization is telling. In the early decades of this century the federal government used several measures, including a head tax and legislation such as the Chinese Exclusion Act to bar Asian immigrants to Canada; they were considered unassimilable and a threat to the dominion. Like the Chinese, the Ukrainians were, on the one hand, valued for their labour and, on the other, viewed with distrust and fear; unlike the Chinese, however, they were thought to be assimilable. Both the fear and the threat were intensified by the fact that the Ukrainians had entered western Canada under the block settlement plan. Here is J.T. Cressey, the principal of the Ruthenian Training School, essentially a normal school for Ukrainian bilingual teachers, speaking in 1908:

As the Ruthenians and Poles have been placed in large communities by themselves, where, if allowed to grow up in ignorance, they would eventually become a menace to the state, therefore it seems to me that the state must educate these people for its own self-preservation. (Cressey 1908, 107)

By “educate” Cressey means “assimilate.” The locus of that assimilation was to be the public school and the primary instrument was understood as the English language itself. “Teach the children to speak, to read, and to write English,” declares another [Saskatchewan] school inspector in 1913, “—this is our first and great educational commandment. Our second commandment is like unto the first—through the common medium of English, within our schools [to] build up a national character” (cited in Barber, *Canadianization* 283). The government viewed the bilingual Ruthenian-English readers as one step in that process.



PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF MANITOBA

Interior view of the Ruthenian Booksellers and Publishers Ltd. store, 850 Main Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba, from 1911 to 1925
(available online at www.civilization.ca/cmc/exhibitions/hist/phase2/mod3e.shtml)

...Ukrainian immigrants wanted their children taught both English and the children’s mother tongue; what is more, they argued that the students were best taught English by teachers who knew the students’ mother tongue. The reform movement in Canada, however, advanced the view that immigrant children learned English best when only that language was used in schools. This argument is forcefully advanced in Norman F. Black’s *English for the Non-English* published in Regina in 1913, the same year in which *The Manitoba Ruthenian-English Readers* appeared. As you can well imagine, Black’s conclusion that English is best taught to beginners through the exclusive use of that language in the classroom pleased, and was frequently cited by, those who opposed bilingual education and who insisted that the non-English should give up their

foreign ways and learn “to talk Canadian.” The backlash against bilingual education gained even more strength in the following year, that is, in 1914, when Britain, and hence Canada, entered World War I and Ukrainians, along with other central and eastern Europeans, were declared “enemy aliens.” As the war progressed, the movement against bilingual schools became unstoppable: the bilingual program in Manitoba was halted; the Ruthenian Training School was closed; and permanent teaching certificates were limited to British subjects. Increasingly, the Ukrainian press was censored and, in an ironic twist, government authorities required Ukrainian newspapers and journals to publish everything in Ukrainian and in English translation. The success of the Bolshevik revolution further heightened Anglo-Canadian fears. Ukrainian men naturalized after 1902 were deprived of the vote and many Ukrainians, including some teachers, were interned. ■

PAUL HJARTARSON is a Professor of English at the University of Alberta. His writing and teaching focus on Canadian literature and print culture. He is a contributor to volumes II and III of *The History of the Book in Canada/ Histoire du livre et de l’imprimé au Canada* (2005, 2007).

SOURCES:

- Barber, Marilyn. Introduction. *Strangers Within Our Gates; Or Coming Canadians*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972. vii-xxiii.
- Barber, Marilyn. “Canadianization Through the Schools of the Prairie Provinces Before World War I: The Attitudes and Aims of the English-Speaking Majority.” *Ethnic Canadians: Culture and Education*. Ed. Martin L. Kovacs. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1978. 281-94.
- Cressey, J.T. “Ruthenian Training School—J.T. Cressey’s Report.” *Manitoba, Report of the Department of Education*, 1908. 106-07
- “Ruthenian Training School—J.T. Cressey’s Report.” *Manitoba, Report of the Department of Education*, 1909. 114-5.
- Jaenen, Cornelius J. “Ruthenian Schools in Western Canada 1897-1919.” *Pedagogica Historica* 10.3 (1970): 517-41.
- Maguire, T.M. “North Central Inspectoral Division—T.M. Maguire’s Report.” *Manitoba, Report of the Department of Education*, 1906. 29-32.
- The Manitoba Ruthenian-English Readers*. First Reader. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, [1913].
- The Manitoba Ruthenian-English Readers*. Second Reader. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, [1913].

¹ According to Jaenen, by 1914 there were 132 Ruthenian and Polish schools in the province (524).