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Frans Schryer, Farming in a Global Economy: A Case Study of Immigrant Farmers in Canada

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Reviewed by Cornelia Butler Flora, Iowa State University

Frans Schryer skillfully presents an intensive, decade-long ethnographic study of the post-World War II migration of Dutch farmers to Canada to reveal much about the migration process, the complexities of Dutch and Canadian institutions and agricultures, rural communities, the role of ethnicity and integration into the global economy. The work is part of the International Studies in Sociology and Social Anthropology series by Brill.

Canadians viewed the Dutch, with their good agricultural educations and strong work ethic, as an ideal source of cheap labor in farming after the Second World War. That reputation, or stereotype, allowed the Dutch to receive permission to come to Canada through an agreement between Canada and the Netherlands. They came as family units and worked hard to acquire their own farms. Family, class, church, and Dutch agricultural education allowed the new migrants to move from workers to highly respected family farmers and generated a positive ethnic stereotype that often served them well as they established new agricultural and religious organizations in Ontario.

Because of a recent visit to the countryside in Holland, where we visited Dutch Reform and Dutch Catholic agricultural communities, and my preconceptions, based on Dutch communities in Iowa, of all Dutch as Calvinists, I found Schryer's discussion of the differences in soil, land reclamation, and economic opportunities as well as religion across Holland as especially insightful in understanding differences in adaptation as they faced quite different agronomic conditions in Canada. There were two farming traditions in the Netherlands at the beginning of the Second World War, a cash crop and cattle agriculture economy on clay soils oriented to the market and a largely self-sufficient set of farmers farming on sand. Farmers from both types of farming experience came to Canada, and both wanted to be market-oriented farmers. Pluriactivity and multiple earners in would-be farm households allowed the accumulation of savings and social and business connections to rent or purchase land and get the initial livestock and machinery needed.

Schryer used a wide variety of local records as well as census data to give an overview of Dutch settlement in Ontario. He supplements those data with life histories and quotations that show the differences among the migrants and how ethnic identity both built community and separated them from their Canadian neighbors. His focus on how they saw themselves and how others saw them, and how that changed over time, shows the importance of cultural capital and social capital in generating the human and financial capital that resulted in success for many – but not all – Dutch migrant farmers.

Schryer points out the intense institutional segregation of Dutch society prior to 1960; each religious group – and those without religious affiliation – has their own school systems, hospitals, labor unions and radio stations. In English, this had been called “pillarization.” The three main pillars were the Roman Catholics, orthodox Calvinists and “mainstream” Calvinists. Each “pillar” inhabited separate worlds, with residential as well as associational segregation. Only in 1972 did the Protestant and Catholic financial cooperatives merge as Rabobank. In Canada, these pillars were maintained, and similar religion-based financial institutions were founded. The degree that the immigrants continued their connections to Holland determined the length of time these separations continued in Canada. The experience of organization for economic and cultural reasons continued in Canada, as did at first the ethnic/religious separation by “pillars” that existed in the Netherlands. The different pillars tended to settle in different areas of Ontario. Careful case studies of these credit unions, region by region, demonstrate how they functioned and build administrative and cooperative capacity among their members. Access to credit was critical in starting and expanding farming operations. Dutch farmers joined existing credit unions and formed their own. Schryer shows how these credit unions, perilously small at first, joined together although by the 1990s, centralization in banking meant that most had folded or merged with mainstream credit institutions.

Changes in the U.S. and Canada, particularly the export of grain to Europe, forced Dutch farmers to change their farming systems – and additional pressure on the land encouraged the Dutch government to undertake more land reclamation. Destruction of infrastructure by the Germans at the end of WWII flooded a lot of land, further encouraging emigration. Many Dutch families reclaimed bog and wetlands in Ontario as they began farming.

Women were critical in the establishment of Dutch farms in Canada, but, despite their hard work, few Dutch women claimed to be farmers. But their frugality and hard work, plus the kin networks they supplied to their husbands and

fathers-in-law, provide the financial and social capital necessary for farming success. Farms were usually financed through the outside work of husbands and sons, often leaving women with the daily responsibilities of the enterprises. The engaging family stories are attentive to issues of gender.

While they were institutionally sophisticated in the Dutch context, they needed to learn to deal with Canadian bankers and the agribusiness establishment. Without collateral, they depended at first on savings and family labor to sow their first crop before the end of their second year. And their propensity toward order meant clearing away of the junk and ordering the landscapes of their newly rented or purchased property. Thus, they became visible to their neighbors through their positive contribution to the general appearance of the countryside. However, there was also jealousy expressed by established Canadian farmers as the newcomers' prosperity increased.

Family cases by period of migration and by region within Ontario demonstrate the different processes of the integration of Dutch migrants. But Schreyer completes the picture by examining how Dutch-Canadian families formed broader networks, which spanned many locality and how they developed their own parallel institutions, Catholic and Dutch Calvinist. This allowed a continuation of endogamy, although for Dutch Catholics, religion was more important than ethnicity in choosing a spouse. Careful family trees that describe who married whom in terms of ethnicity and occupation, plus the children of those unions, gives excellent insight into gradual acculturation as well as continued ethnic identity. For Dutch Catholics, education in Catholic schools was particularly important.

The capacity gained through establishing and running credit unions was utilized in the formation of farmers' organizations, also initially separated by religion. Schryer's careful analysis of these organizations and their changes over time shows how these single function activities led to political involvement of Dutchmen (not women) in local, provincial and even national politics. Dutch immigrant farmers joined with other farmers to fight for marketing boards and supply management in the 1950s and 60s. They took the political leadership in the "feather" (broiler, chicken, egg production and turkey) boards. The Dutch farmers were more inclined than the Canadian born farmers to support supply management. In describing these institutional linkages, he carefully links family histories to political involvement. In the 1950s, mainly Calvinist Dutch immigrant farmers set up farmers associations based on religious principles, the Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario. Some more Dutch immigrant Catholics in the 1980s became

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involved in the Catholic Rural Life Conference, despite its “radical” calls for social justice.

Schreyer uses interesting analytic techniques to move beyond case studies and geographic distributions. He carefully explains the rationale for the choice of variables for mapping the variables to determine the primary components. With these geographic variables, he maps the diversity among Dutch immigrant farmers. Therefore he specifies, rather than generalizes, his findings.

The Netherlands-Canada Settlement Scheme was designed to be a short-term measure to address labor shortages (think of the braceros program in the U.S.). Yet it set in motion a series of events resulting in an influx of Dutch farm families. Coming from positions of relative generational prosperity, they thrived in the globalizing setting of Canadian agriculture, ultimately hiring temporary immigrant workers in their enterprises. He reminds us that even economically-driven immigration selects for individuals determined to work hard and succeed. At a time when ambitious Canadians were exiting farming, the Dutch came from a culture which valued agriculture over industrial work and often bought out the farmers that initially hired them. But he makes clear that because those who came between 1950 and 1980 did so well lies in the agrarian structure and culture of the Netherlands. The Dutch immigrant farmers came from a farming culture that stressed scientific knowledge (they were scornful of the Canadian extension’s lack of knowledge of micro-nutrients), welcomed technological innovation, and was geared to export. The timing of their arrival at a point of industrialization and globalization of Canadian agriculture provided an ideal setting for their Dutch cultural and social assets to provide a relative advantage.