5.11: Culture and Adaptation

“There is,” writes the historical sociologist Gillian Crease, “no common standard immigrant experience in Canada.”[1] The gradations of adaptability, acceptance, material success, biological well-being, and cultural fulfillment are severe. Male immigrants who arrived in cities intent on working in the expanding industrial economy of the post-1945 period generally found far more opportunities to become integrated, to be immersed in the language of the locals, and to develop networks of friends and colleagues who might — in some measure — substitute for the loss of community from abroad, than did female immigrants. It was not unusual in these years to find immigrant households (particularly in suburban Canada) in which the father/patriarch spoke at least passable — sometimes heavily inflected — English, the children spoke with the flattest Canadian accents and were functional in one or more ancestral language, while the stay-at-home mother/matriarch remained effectively unilingual. The immigrant experience was thus gendered and also impacted by age. Some immigrant groups struggled more than others to adapt.

Take, for example, immigrants from the British Isles. Like all other newcomers they gravitated toward neighbourhoods in which recognizable institutions and languages could be found. That these were not considered “ethnic enclaves” speaks to the position of British culture in English-Canada as the reference or cultural context group. To be sure, there were class lines that structured the experience of British immigrants: In Vancouver the working-class newcomers planted themselves in East and South Vancouver where housing was affordable and where they had close access to the docks and industries where so many of them found employment; middle-class British immigrants settled in Kerrisdale and Dunbar, effectively ghettos of more plummy English and Scots accents. The landscape of denominationalism was often the clearest sign of these divisions and concentrations: well-to-do High Anglican and Presbyterian congregations to the west, Methodist, Baptist, and — after 1925 — United Church chapels to the east. Distinctions could be seen, too, in the use of recreational space: cricket ovals and rugby grounds to the west; soccer pitches (and baseball diamonds, too) to the east. In the struggle to determine how best to use the newly-created Stanley Park at the turn of the century, as historian Robert A. J. McDonald has shown, English working-class requests for a large stadium and an amusement park (all accessed by transit of some kind) were pushed aside in favour of a cricket oval, a yacht club, and contemplative

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For White, English-speaking immigrants from Britain or the United States, the acculturation process involved some challenges but comparatively few. In the West, as historical geographer John Lehr has argued, Anglophones were, …settling a territory that, in many important respects, maintained the basic societal framework of their points of origin. They encountered familiar elements of law and administration; the creed of the ruling majority was Protestant; and English was the de jure, if not the de facto, language of all in the newly settled west.

This was true of all parts of Canada outside of Quebec (less Montreal and the Eastern Townships), not just the settler West. Anglophone settlers constituted a replenishing of the context group, the mainstream civilization whose values and expectations were so dominant as to be invisible. Newcomers from England might complain that they had trouble overcoming the barrier of accents — Canadians strained to pierce their regional tones and the English struggled to understand Canadians — but as one English immigrant in the post-1945 period described the process,

For the first week I found people incomprehensible. We were talking the same language, and I couldn't understand what they were saying. It took about a week to get into the rhythm of the language…. So that was a bit of a shock.

A whole week to break the codes of language, idiom, and tone. For non-English speaking immigrants these could take years to crack. For them, the challenges of adaptation were much greater.

Some had a greater incentive to adapt than others. Germans, for example, constituted significant numbers in the Canadian population from the 1890s on, but the two World Wars obliged the German Canadians to develop strategies to reduce their differentness. One approach was to simply keep a low profile. In 1971 the census showed that Vancouver — better known for the large size of its Asian community than for its German diaspora — was 7% Chinese but 8% German. The German language was spoken in more Canadian homes in 1961 and 1971 than any language other than English and French. Finding a German enclave, however, was next to impossible and the institutions that signalled an ethnic presence — church, community hall, specialty stores — were often very discrete.

In sharp contrast, Eastern Europeans and South Asians who arrived in large groups were often able to establish whole communities that sustained older cultural practices and strategies of mutual support (like language, shared parenting, and religion). Indeed, the church, temple, synagogue, or gurdwara often did much more than offer a spiritual anchor to newcomers in urban and rural areas: in the case of the gurdwara, it served as a political forum and a site of strategizing.
to influence policy-makers. A foreign-language press sprang up in many centres which both served the immigrant community and mitigated the need to assimilate into the mainstream. In particularly stark cases, like that of the Chinese community in British Columbia, ghettoization ensured that all the services needed by the community could be found within a few city blocks, the ancestral language was preserved, educational institutions arose that passed the culture on to new generations, churches and temples could be built and filled, and the need to venture out into the non-ethnic world was reduced. These institutions were social and economic hubs, capable of facilitating individual and/or group entry into the mainstream society and economy or preserving — in the face of assaults — the values and relationships that the immigrant group most treasured.

This remarkable and rich accomplishment, of course, invited further resentment of outsiders who used the term “clannish” to describe any ethnic enclave. Indeed, assaults from the Canadian host community would come in many forms.

**Key Points**

- Adapting to the host society and its expectations was a contextual, community, and personal experience and not a singular process.
- Even British immigrants developed strategies and institutions to enable their acceptance into the mainstream society.

**Attributions**