Book Reviews

Alison R. Marshall


The immigrants who came to settle the wide, open plains of the Canadian Prairies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are commonly associated with the descriptor “stalwart peasants in sheepskin coats” famously coined by Clifford Sifton, Canada’s minister of the interior from 1896 to 1905. Similarly, the settlement of Chinese and Japanese in Canada is usually associated with the urban west, in the cities and smaller communities of coastal British Columbia. Allison Marshall’s impressive and accessible book, The Way of the Bachelor, turns our attention to urban Manitoba and the Chinese immigrants who made places in that province their home. In particular, Marshall focuses on the “bachelors” – in this case, men who immigrated to Canada while leaving behind their wives and children. Moreover, she explores their private lives and their friendships with other Chinese settlers and with non-Chinese. The result is a deeply personal book that is as insightful as it is engaging.

Marshall explores how Chinese immigrants in Manitoba negotiated their integration via religion and everyday religious practices by way of the example of Sun Yat-sen, Nationalist leader of early Republican China, the establishment of homosocial friendships, and food pathways as a means of connecting with the broader community. These commonplace, almost routine acts, enabled these male Chinese immigrants to retain their traditional customs while connecting with their new environs and their neighbors. Marshall examines this process of adaptation through the lens of efficacy (ling), which she explains as the “dominant idea in Chinese religion” (p. 3). According to Marshall, efficacy is helpful in understanding the changing religious and cultural practices of Chinese settlers in Manitoba. Interactions with traditional deities, for example, were viewed as unsuitable for the purposes of adaptation to life in Manitoba. Marshall highlights the example of Guangong (also known as Guandi) who was a god “associated with war, loyalty, righteousness, Chinese triads, and Daoism” (p. 4), a god to which one may have traditionally appealed but not exactly a deity that would provide assistance in their new home. As a
result, Sun Yat-sen came to embody for these bachelors an example to emulate and to whom one might appeal in time of need. Sun Yat-sen and the associated Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) offices became representations of religious devotion (in the case of the former) and sites of worship (in the case of the latter) in the absence of efficacious divine agents and places of worship on the Prairies. By adopting ‘Chinese-Canadian’ practices these settlers were also negotiating their new identity in Manitoba. These processes, which Marshall outlines in chapters 1 and 5, are among the most innovative of the book and are sure to change the focus of the current historiography away from state-minority group relations toward individual and cultural/religious interactions as a means of integration and identity formation.

As these Chinese bachelors developed their new lives in Manitoba, they did so in both public and private ways. Marshall highlights how in public, Chinese men might ally or identify themselves nominally with a Christian religion, yet retain devotions to established religious beliefs in private. This public/private divide is further explored with foodways as the subject of chapters 4 and 5 and business, using laundries as the example, in chapter 2. At the Chinese restaurants that would come to occupy the Prairies, Chinese restaurateurs offered up traditional meals to those of their own ethnicity and Canadianized versions to their non-Chinese customers. In the process, as Chinese-owned-and-operated businesses grew in number in Manitoba, barriers between Chinese and non-Chinese were broken down by the introduction and reception of the ‘new’ foods offered on the menu. This private, Chinese-owned business offered the non-Chinese public a way to experience global culture. It also offered the bachelors a way to gain acceptance in the dominant society. But as Marshall notes, while the local Chinese restaurateur was seen as a respected businessman “extolled for his kindness and success,” he was on another level “kept at a distance” (p. 86).

Marshall’s book is also notable for her use of an ethno-historical approach and specifically with the use of extensive interviews with community members. The tone is conversational but not dismissive; it is respectful, although perhaps to a fault. Marshall indicates that her absence of a focus on “race” was deliberate because her informants (now friends as she notes) wanted her to “emphasize what was constructive about their experiences on the Prairies” (p. 171). The decision not to interrogate this aspect of the integration process is rather unfortunate given that the author provides a good summary of historical racism directed toward Asians in her introductory chapter, and at various points throughout the book. It is the specific manifestation of racism that her research subjects would have endured that is absent here. A researcher must be careful not to give up too much authority in the process of collecting and