

Key Phases of Finnish Canadian Experience

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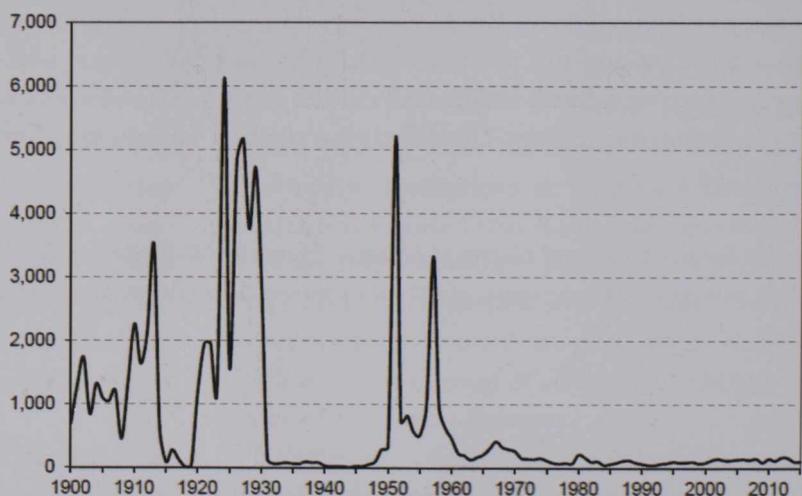
The earliest Finnish contacts with what is now Canada date most probably to the mid-1750s when Pehr Kalm, the renowned scholar and botanist, visited North America. Kalm devoted the first nine months of his three-year trip to Swedish settlements along the Delaware River. These included the colonial New Sweden (Nya Sverige), which had lasted twelve years from 1638 to the early 1650s before being taken over by the Dutch. Kalm explored the colonial establishment, its descendants, and natural resources, then moving on toward Canada. His description of the Niagara Falls in a booklet printed in several languages is the first portrayal of the falls by a European visitor.¹

Large-scale Finnish migration to North America started to gather pace toward the 1860s. While the United States was the primary target, migration to Canada also began during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Some Finns are known to have arrived in the 1870s to work on the canal and railroad construction. Later they were employed in mining and lumbering industries in particular. Finnish immigrant communities and settlements were founded in Ontario, the Prairies, and British Columbia, where many land-hungry Finns also acquired homesteads. The geographical similarities between Finland and some Canadian regions were certainly a part of the attraction.

Special attention must be given to the British Colum-

bian developments in the early years of the twentieth century. A short-lived utopian socialist community called Sointula (Harmony) was launched on Malcolm Island in 1901. The endeavour was led by the socialist agitator and idealist Matti Kurikka from Finland (via Australia, where he had sought to launch another colony of working people). Sointula failed because of internal disputes and a disastrous fire, but the community lent a distinct mark on the whole of Finnish North American history.

Figure 1 below shows the numbers of Finnish immigrants to Canada during the twentieth century. We can detect three major immigrant waves and a more or less continuing migration during the whole of the 1900s. It is evident that migration movements always depend on a range of international and domestic factors such as economic trends, government immigration policies, international conflicts or wars, and local push and pull factors.



Numbers of Finnish immigrants to Canada during the twentieth century.

1. A curious part in Canadian history was played by another Swedish-speaking Finn, Gustaf von Schoultz (1807-1838), who led an armed convoy from the United States to Prescott, Ontario, in an unsuccessful effort to "liberate" Upper Canada from the British rule. He received military training in Sweden, took part in the battle for Polish independence, married a Scottish woman in Italy, moved to the United States in 1836, and started a career as an entrepreneur. He was hanged in Fort Henry, Upper Canada, in December 1838. See Ronald J. Stagg, "Schoultz, Nils von," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 7. (University of Toronto/Université Laval).