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Weaving the Imperial Breadbasket: Nationalism, Empire and the Triumph of Canadian Wheat, 1890-1940

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Résumé de l'article

Le blé canadien a occupé une place éminente dans le marché mondial depuis la fin du XIXe siècle. Idéal pour la panification, le blé riche en protéines qui pousse dans la Prairie canadienne a une forte valeur à l'exportation. Les efforts entrepris pour adapter le blé à l'agriculture canadienne, et la réussite subséquente du blé canadien sur le marché de l'exportation, ont contribué à construire l'idée de la nation canadienne tant au pays qu'à l'étranger. La prééminence du blé canadien représente un témoignage du succès des développements de l'agriculture impériale et des liens tissés par les empires. La création, par la Grande-Bretagne, d'un arrière-pays agricole au sein du Canada, grâce à l'expansion de l'approvisionnement en vivres dans le cadre de l'Empire, a permis à une nouvelle nation d'émerger à partir de la dépendance envers le blé de l'ancien monde. Le blé produit par les fermiers canadiens s'est écoulé autant dans l'empire britannique que dans l'empire français, jouant un rôle crucial dans chacune de ces structures impériales. La divergence des réactions à ces importations démontre l'importance du blé, à la fois en tant que denrée de base et en tant que porteur de signification culturelle.

Weaving the Imperial Breadbasket: Nationalism, Empire and the Triumph of Canadian Wheat, 1890-1940

NICHOLAS TOŠAJ

Abstract

Canadian wheat has occupied a prominent place in the global market since the late 19th century. Ideal for bread-baking, the high-protein wheat grown on the Canadian prairies was a highly valued export. The efforts undertaken to adapt wheat to Canadian agriculture, and the subsequent success of Canada's wheat export market, contributed to building Canadian nationhood both at home and abroad. The prominence of Canadian wheat is a testament to the success of imperial agricultural developments and the connections woven by empires. Britain's creation of an agricultural hinterland within Canada through the expansion of its empire's food supply defined how a new nation emerged through an old-world dependency on wheat. The wheat produced by Canadian farmers flowed into both the British and French empires, filling crucial roles throughout each of these imperial structures. Divergent reactions to these imports speak to wheat's importance both as a staple foodstuff and a bearer of cultural significance.

Résumé

Le blé canadien a occupé une place éminente dans le marché mondial depuis la fin du XIXe siècle. Idéal pour la panification, le blé riche en protéines qui pousse dans la Prairie canadienne a une forte valeur à l'exportation. Les efforts entrepris pour adapter le blé à l'agriculture canadienne, et la réussite subséquente du blé canadien sur le marché de l'exportation, ont contribué à construire l'idée de la nation canadienne tant au pays qu'à l'étranger. La prééminence du blé canadien représente un témoignage du succès des développements de l'agriculture impériale et des liens tissés par les empires. La création, par la Grande-Bretagne, d'un arrière-pays agricole au sein du Canada, grâce à l'expansion de l'approvisionnement en vivres dans le cadre de l'Empire, a permis à une nouvelle nation d'émerger à partir de la dépendance envers le blé de l'an-

cien monde. Le blé produit par les fermiers canadiens s'est écoulé autant dans l'empire britannique que dans l'empire français, jouant un rôle crucial dans chacune de ces structures impériales. La divergence des réactions à ces importations démontre l'importance du blé, à la fois en tant que denrée de base et en tant que porteur de signification culturelle.

“When kindly nature did her part nursing and strengthening our Western prairie soil to its wonderful fertility, when the hardy pioneers of the last century pushed their way in a thin line into the dormant wheat lands and with steady courage scratched the Earth’s surface in the fight for life and subsistence (sic) — then was the foundation laid — then were the first painful efforts made, which to-day sees the name and fame of Canada spread to the ends of the Earth.

Toiling, struggling — gradually overcoming the hardships of a strange land, slowly adjusting themselves to the uncertain temper of the element, experimenting, improving, failing but to recover and try again — but great as were the trials of these early pioneers — and tremendous as were their difficulties and disappointments — victory finally crowned their years of arduous endeavour and to-day their early dreams are realized in the waving acres, the rustling miles of golden grain — Canada’s world renowned Western Hard Spring Wheat.”¹

Wheat has long been associated with the strength and civilization of the West. Rooted in the mythology of the earliest empires and to the eucharist of Christian communion, wheat bread has played a crucial role as a staple to European powers. The golden acres referenced above evoke popular narratives of the taming of the land, which operate hand in hand with traditional pastoral imagery and display wheat as a symbolically perfect crop — one that transcends the bread, cakes, and biscuits in which it is used. The above glowing homage to wheat, penned in the 1923 edition of *The New Purity Flour Cook Book* displays how the

age-old staple has been braided into Canada's national heritage, used to tell a tale of toil and labour, of suffering and ultimately of triumph. Canadian wheat and the role it played in the export market as a fortifier for bread flours is crucial to understanding how bread and wheat became so entrenched in Canada's economy and culture. The place of wheat in the Canadian economy constitutes its own body of established scholarship. As a historian of empire, I hope that this paper can widen our perspective by analyzing how Canadian wheat was conceptualized within the imperial networks that tied the wheat of Canada to the United Kingdom and France.

The period studied herein covers the colonization of the prairies at the end of the nineteenth century and the development of large-scale wheat cultivation destined for export spanning into the 1930s. In conducting archival research for my dissertation on the French Colonial Empire, I acquired sources which pointed home, encouraging me to make use of my archival research to study how Canadian wheat circulated within modern global empires. This research on the French Empire has been supplemented with press coverage on Canadian wheat in the United Kingdom. By combining these sources, I hope to shed light on how wheat from Canada — a burgeoning nation with strong ties to the British Empire — was accepted into the United Kingdom, continuing a pattern of commodity exports to the metropole that began before Confederation. How Canadian wheat was absorbed into the French Empire followed a different route. Whereas Canadian wheat and agricultural innovations were celebrated and readily accepted in the United Kingdom, in the French empire Canadian wheat was more controversial because it was perceived as a rival to French wheat while simultaneously being regarded by many as a necessity for producing good French bread.

Methodology

The foundation of this paper is built in part on prominent works on Canadian wheat such as Vernon C. Fowke's *The National Policy and the Wheat Economy* and Peter A. Russell's *How Agriculture*

Made Canada.² The extensive works of Steven Kaplan on bread and its symbolism have provided important insight into imagery surrounding bread. Despite Kaplan's focus on Early Modern France, much of the symbolism discussed in his works remain relevant to varying degrees when studying wheat bread tradition in European countries and their settler colonies.³ André Magnan's recent book *When Wheat was King* provides insight into the process of Canadian wheat marketing abroad and the role of the wheat board. William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis* remains crucial to understanding how wheat transitioned from a unique local agricultural product to a global commodity, a transition which is relevant in the Canadian context and facilitated the diffusion of Canadian wheat on the global market.⁴ The works of Harriet Friedmann on wheat as a global commodity have helped to shape my understanding of imperial circulation and the wheat economy.⁵ Finally, John Varty's dissertation *Growing Bread: Technoscience, Environment, and Modern Wheat at The Dominion Grain Research Laboratory, Canada, 1912–1960* has been crucial to successfully fleshing out the place of bread and wheat in Canadian policy, particularly in the context of Jim Blanchard's work on wheat in Manitoba.⁶

These works provide the context necessary for a holistic study of varied primary sources. Due to the outward-looking nature of this study, Canadian sources are for the most part secondary with the exception of *The New Purity Flour Cook Book* cited above. The British primary sources consulted were mainly agricultural journals and newspaper articles portraying Canadian Wheat. French sources vary widely and rest primarily on archival sources from Paris, Phnom Penh, Martinique, and Nantes. These archival sources are diverse, spanning from government documents to professional and scientific journals as well as travel writing and dissertations contemporary to the period of study.

Wheat in the West

Wheat has long held a place in the canon of cherished Western staples. The use of agricultural satellite states as breadbaskets as

early as North Africa's exploitation by the Roman Empire have demonstrated how beneficial the exportation of primary foodstuff production can be for imperial expansion.⁷ Within empires and states, bread and the wheat it is made of has been used as a crucial barometer for measuring the abilities of rulers. Riots relating to the lack of this common staple have often preceded the toppling of dynasties. Kaplan provides useful insight into the status of bread, its production, and its consumption. In describing the various permutations which French bread has undergone in the last few centuries, Kaplan has stressed the great value attributed to bread in Western culture.⁸ He asserts that as recently as the French Revolution, it was legitimately believed that without bread starvation was unavoidable.⁹ In *The Making of the English Working Class*, E.P. Thompson stressed the place of bread riots in expressing dissent regarding class inequality.¹⁰ Bread as a staple served as an index upon which to measure wealth, highlighting the disparities between rich and poor, particularly in the insular environment of the industrialized city. The use of bread to measure livelihood and earnings, being associated with wages and life, places it as a central tenet of the Western foodscape.¹¹ Indeed, references to bread in the context of earning one's "daily bread" or *gagner son pain* demonstrate how this staple has worked its way into both the English and French vernacular.

It is therefore no surprise that wheat is one of the most produced grains in the world and continues to dominate a sizeable portion of the global economy. In Europe's second wave of empire wheat circulated across the globe. It was used to bolster the diets of Europeans who feared that adopting diets heavy in native foods would undermine their "Europeanness."¹² In a fast-moving modern economy, relying on imports of a global commodity as a staple food was not without risks. Wheat especially was vulnerable to the vagaries of the market with prices likely to be affected by new agricultural innovations, tariffs, climate conditions, and the shifts experienced by a world in turmoil where wars and economic depressions could easily upset the delicate balance of the world market. However, reliance on the global wheat economy also granted empires the opportunity to make

use of lower production costs outside of colonial metropolises all the while benefiting from centres of production spanning the globe which produced wheat year-round.

In the years preceding mass agriculture in the prairies the British had already relied at times on Canadian wheat imports. The Crimean War had forced the British to turn to non-Russian wheat sources such as those of its Canadian colonies, setting a precedent for large-scale dependence on Canadian wheat. Despite the fickle nature of wheat prices in the period from 1850–1930, the crop was still considered lucrative and prestigious enough to grow in the prairies for export. By the time the prairies established themselves as Canada’s breadbasket, much of Ontario and Québec turned away from wheat production, seeking instead to define themselves through the dairy industry, fruits, and livestock.¹³ While portions of the prairies were turned over for livestock production, as seen with the immense Cochrane ranch, wheat remained a crucial export crop which was significant in meeting the needs of the British Empire (see figures 1 and 2).¹⁴

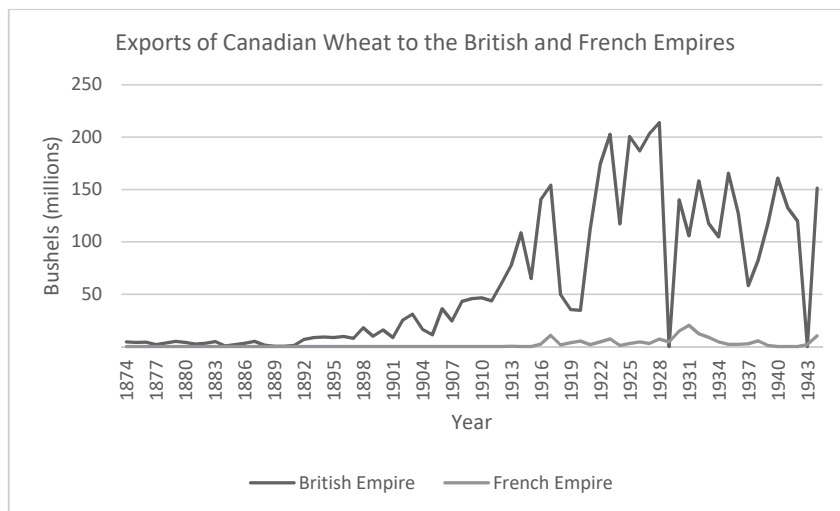


Figure 1: Source: Dominion Board of Statistics – Board of Grain Commissioners for Canada, Courtesy of the Canadian Grain Commission.⁸⁶

WEAVING THE IMPERIAL BREADBASKET: NATIONALISM,
EMPIRE AND THE TRIUMPH OF CANADIAN WHEAT, 1890-1940



Figure 2: Exports of Canadian Wheat to the British Empire over time. Dominion Board of Statistics – Board of Grain Commissioners for Canada, Courtesy of the Canadian Grain Commission.⁸⁷

The modernization of Canadian agriculture allowed it to compete with other wheat producing countries such as the United States, Australia, and Argentina. Aside from sparse population and a harsh climate, Canadian wheat production was constrained by the sheer distance involved in bringing Canadian wheat to market. Varty, for one, states that Argentine wheat traveled an average of 320 km from farms to the country's principal centres of consumption while in Australia the average distance from growing areas to consumption and shipping points totalled 300 km.¹⁵ For Canada, an average of 2440 km distanced centres of consumption within the country from cultivable land in the West.¹⁶ In addition to these hurdles, a similar distance remained before Canadian wheat cleared the inland shipping system entirely.¹⁷ Indeed, the distance wheat travelled to and from ports onward into the global market was one of the most substantial issues plaguing Canadian wheat sales. The distance wheat travels within the country to reach outbound shipping ports remains a significant logistical issue to this day.

Wheat and Empire

Distance combined with the environmental hardships inherent to the Canadian landscape justifies the enthusiasm apparent in the sensationalist ode to wheat that began *The New Purity Flour Cook Book*.¹⁸ The reference to toiling and struggling is no doubt justified, considering the amount of labour it took not only to produce wheat, but to make it travel the thousands of kilometres necessary for it to gain access to foreign markets. Many post-colonial relationships maintain a measure of proximity between colonizer and colony, particularly in the case of settler colonies — the case of Canada is no exception. Post-Confederation ties remained strong between the United Kingdom and Canada; by 1913 some 47 percent of all British foreign investment was within the British Empire.¹⁹ Canada benefitted from the largest portion of this capital outflow by a considerable margin, a benefit which in turn translated into gains for the United Kingdom.²⁰ Indeed, Magnan has highlighted that the United Kingdom was by far the largest outlet for Canadian wheat in the early history of the Canadian wheat economy.²¹

Canada assisted Britain by providing it with an ever-growing source of affordable wheat. In doing so, the colonization of prairie soil with wheat fed into the overall strength of the British Empire. While in 1871 England relied on Russia for 42 percent of its wheat intake, this relationship radically changed. In the years spanning 1933–1939 Britain imported 62 percent of its wheat from the commonwealth, most of which came from Canada.²² Other sources for wheat in this period included the United States (4.7 percent), Argentina (18 percent) with other countries providing the remaining 15.3 percent of imports.²³

The reasons behind this shift were not simply goodwill in regard to the ex-colony, nor was it entirely due to the fall of the tsarist government during World War I. While Great Britain had gradually repealed the Corn Laws in the 1840s, opening their grain market to free trade, tariffs returned in 1932 with the British Wheat Act.²⁴ The British Wheat Act levied high tariffs on imported wheat in attempt to protect local agriculture.²⁵

Exceptions were made, however, for former colonies. Canada for instance was subjected to a far lower levy, one which compounded with low labour costs compensated for the prodigious distances that Canadian wheat travelled to reach the British market.²⁶ In doing so, the British were able to protect their own farmers, many of whom could shift to producing non-cereal crops, all the while benefiting as a whole from the cheap Canadian wheat of good quality. Furthermore, the milling of Canadian grain and its baking into bread upon arrival in the United Kingdom kept much of the specialized labour within the metropole, leaving the less-remunerating large-surface farming to the former colony.²⁷ In doing so, the British empire profited from the low production costs associated with the use of family labour units.²⁸ To quote Magnan: "Cheap imports of grain and meat from settler-states served as 'wage foods' for European working classes, reducing the cost of industrialization and helping to defuse discontent," a situation which allowed the British Empire to benefit from investment in the Canadian West.²⁹

Other countries such as the United States and Russia (later the Soviet Union) grew larger quantities of wheat but consumed a higher proportion of their production.³⁰ The United States averaged production of 789.7 million bushels per year between 1922–1926 and the Soviet Union produced 596 million bushels. Canada averaged 389.7 million bushels, exporting the most between 1920–1950 during which time the country secured its place among the world's top wheat exporters.³¹ In order for Canada to have secured its place in the global export market it first had to find a wheat which grew well in the harsh climate of the prairies and create a marketable reputation for this product. As a country which relied mostly on primary resource exports it was necessary for Canada to secure its share of the global market. Building a reputation for Canadian wheat was crucial to do so.

For France, Canadian wheat filled a different niche. As a wheat producer, and sometimes exporter, France relied on Canadian wheat to supplement its own production based primarily in the metropole and North Africa (see figure 3, next page). Not only did French wheat production vary significantly from year

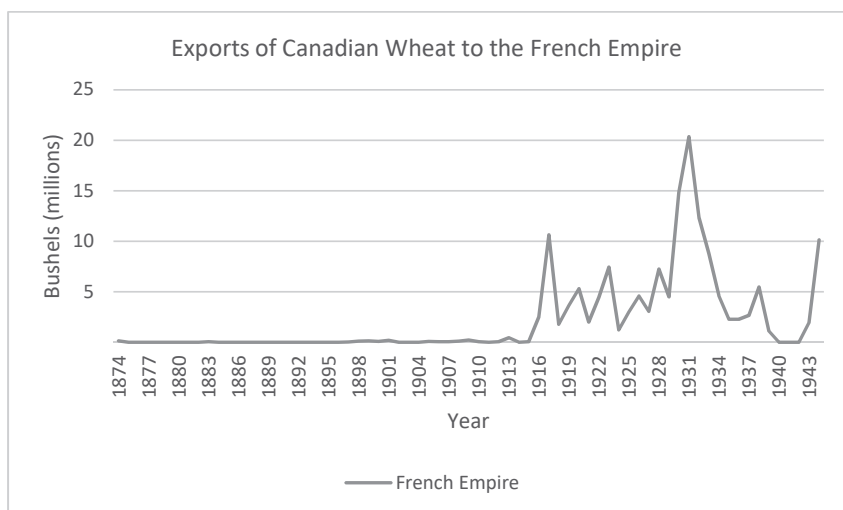


Figure 3: Exports of Canadian wheat to the French Empire over time. Dominion Board of Statistics – Board of Grain Commissioners for Canada, Courtesy of the Canadian Grain Commission.⁸⁸

to year, but French wheat also contained less gluten than Canadian-grown wheat. The low gluten content of French wheat inhibited French bread production, making the dough rise less acutely than bread made with stronger Canadian flour. As such, the French made use of Canadian wheat in the first half of the twentieth century to bolster the protein content of their own flour; by mixing French and Canadian flours together, French bakers were able to produce what many French bakers and scientists deemed to be a better loaf.³²

The archival sources used in this study demonstrate that a French need for bread in both the metropole and the colonies required the empire to lean heavily on British and American wheat and to a lesser extent on wheat-producing countries such as Argentina and Australia. Such examples of imperial interconnectedness are evidence of the need to study imperial systems side by side. The tangles where imperial webs join can provide crucial knowledge necessary for comprehending how empires were able to function and uphold the provisioning networks that allowed them to exist. By studying imperial systems and their

points of contact we dispel any notion that empires exist only in direct competition with each other. This substantiates ideas of “cooperative imperialism” such as those espoused by John Darwin.³³ Without collaboration between rival empires’ bread provisioning needs, deemed to be “of first necessity” by the French government, could not have been met.³⁴

The reciprocity tying Canada to the United Kingdom has been elaborated on in scholarship pertaining to wheat, trade, and empire. A range of factors varying from the economic to the cultural provided a basis for commonwealth symbiosis on the global wheat market. The French reliance on Canadian wheat was founded primarily on affordability, availability, and protein content. Varty’s work on wheat protein has demonstrated the value of gluten when producing quality loaves, value which was reflected in French scientific and baking literature which compared protein levels in various wheat strains.³⁵ While the biology of wheat varieties shifted significantly in this period, French sources show that Canadian wheat remained in high esteem among French bakers and researchers alike.³⁶ Though some Argentine, Australian, American and other foreign wheat did enter France and its empire, a combination of proximity, quality, and cost made Canadian wheat particularly attractive to the French market. Unlike the United Kingdom, France interestingly was a substantial wheat producer which sometimes met all of its own needs in terms of wheat production and even exported surplus production abroad.³⁷ Even in years of French agricultural surplus, Canadian wheat continued to be imported into France because of its *valeur boulangère*.³⁸ The continued importation of Canadian wheat into France was enshrined in the *admission temporaire* policy which allowed foreign wheat to be imported so long as French wheat was exported in its place.³⁹ Policies such as the *admission temporaire* were the product of academic research which consistently placed flour made from Canadian wheat among the most acclaimed baking flours in France, with some writers hailing Manitoba wheat as the best bread wheat on earth.⁴⁰ R. Geoffroy of *l’Université de Nancy* stated that:

L'appellation Manitoba indique une provenance et non une variété spéciale. C'est le blé Marquis, obtenu par croisement du Red Calcutta et du Red Fife, qui forme 90% des variétés de blé poussant dans la province Manitoba, celle-ci ayant donné son nom à tous les blés originaires du Canada; c'est le blé le plus connu et le plus estimé des meuniers, car il est utilisé dans toutes les parties du monde pour donner de la force aux farines faibles.⁴¹

In addition to being reputed for its quality, relative Canadian proximity to Saint-Pierre et Miquelon and the French Antilles made Canadian wheat an obvious choice for provisioning these colonies. Aside from proximity, Canada's growing share of the global export market allowed it to remain comparative as American consumption turned inward. Similarly, the mechanization of prairie agriculture and the climate on the Canadian prairies allowed Canada to produce a more reliable wheat crop than Argentina.

Agricultural Science and the Wheat Economy

This competitive edge has been explored in Varty's work, which demonstrates the steps the Canadian government took to create and market a hardy species of wheat. The desired product was a wheat that could not only flourish in the Canadian climate, but which was easily transportable and excellent for producing bread. Varty stresses that this was made possible by the creation of a government-funded grain research laboratory in Winnipeg in 1913.⁴² This laboratory not only supervised the creation of different strains of hybrid wheat and their testing on experimental farms but also baked thousands of loaves in the hopes of creating an "ideal" Canadian loaf from this "ideal" wheat. The "ideal" loaf was perceived as being one which rose well, kept well, and had an appealing consistency. The wheat should grow well and be easy to cultivate. As Varty explains: "Increasingly, wheat grading boiled down to bread. Exporting nations competed to rational-

ize their 'golden streams' anew, which is to say, at a new level of magnification, and with unprecedented emphasis on uniform shipments 'calibrated' to bread production abroad." This validated a need for a wheat of consistent quality which grew well in the Canadian prairies.⁴³

Thorough experimentation and development yielded the creation of Marquis wheat, a combination of Ukrainian Red Fife and North Indian Hard Red Calcutta.⁴⁴ The combination created a breed which was suitable for the Canadian climate and a global palate. A testament to imperial technoscience, the varietal ripened earlier than its competitors, had strong straw and a high gluten content, and was as appealing to grow as it was to consume.⁴⁵ Marquis wheat's cultivation was further eased by its short stalk which was well adapted to the prairie environment for which it was created. The adaptability and quality of Marquis contributed to its suitability as a symbol of Canadian agriculture.

As Marquis spread across the prairies, the Canadian government was met with a new challenge: the need to market it abroad. By this time, Ottawa had invested a substantial sum in the development of Marquis wheat and its offshoots in the Winnipeg laboratory. Ottawa therefore had no qualms encouraging Canadian wheat to tour the world, presenting it in various shows and fairs, and shipping it to foreign bakers for experimentation.⁴⁶ In 1932 Canada participated in the First International Bread Congress in Rome as well as the International Exhibition of Breadmaking Machinery and Accessories in Bologna.⁴⁷ With its creation in 1935, the Canadian Wheat Board connected prairie farmers more directly to the world markets where they sold their grain, bypassing private merchants and middle men and taking responsibility for the marketing of Canadian Wheat.⁴⁸

Canada's participation in the Italian fairs sought to advertise the suitability of Canadian wheat for bread baking as well as the effectiveness of industrial mixers, in part in the hopes of opening a new export market within Italy. Efforts to market Canadian wheat in Italy were, however, undermined from the start by Mussolini's goals regarding alimentary sovereignty and endeavours to wean the nation off of foreign food sources.⁴⁹

While Canadian marketing attempts succeeded in raising awareness of Canadian wheat in Italy, they were not altogether effective in selling it. Their failure was in part caused by exhibits showcasing English-style bread made industrially with costly mixers, an investment which some Italian bakers could not afford and that most did not care for. Italian bakers had long ago learned to make use of their local flours with the tools at hand.⁵⁰ The reliance on mixers in Canada's presentation was in part tied to the high gluten content of Canadian wheat. Though high gluten content was generally a major selling point due to its ability to increase the quality of bread allowing it to spring higher when it rose, flour with a high gluten content also made dough more difficult to knead. Mixing machines were the proposed solution to this issue, suggested by marketers seeking to make Canadian wheat as appealing and modern-seeming as possible, an attempt which ultimately failed.⁵¹ The failure to sell Canadian wheat in Italy, as Varty mentions, resulted in part from the packaged exportation of Canadian baking culture alongside the wheat they attempted to sell.⁵² Such marketing encouraged the making of "modern" enriched English style loaves, the type of bread tested in the Winnipeg bread lab, with new and expensive mixing machines. The bread lab loaf, espoused as the ideal within Canada and no doubt familiar in the United Kingdom, was far from ideal among other distinct baking cultures, particularly in Italy where they encountered strong nationalism and a concerted effort for the nation to free itself from the global market.

Marquis Wheat and the Building of Nationhood Beyond Canadian Borders

Despite failure in Italy, Marquis and other high-protein Canadian wheats found a niche as an additive to soft European flours, fortifying them to produce a higher rise and a more predictable loaf. Pierre Barbade, in his 1937 study on the mechanical qualities of wheat dough recommended the use of a blend of 70 percent Manitoba wheat cut with 30 percent French wheat.⁵³ Louis Cros, an especially romantic French author writing in Indochina in

1931, commented not only on the prodigious distance which Canadian wheat travelled, but also on the sparse population of the country.⁵⁴ He mentioned that although a significant portion of French, and by extension Indochina's, wheat came from the United States, much also came from Canada, a market which he viewed as having potential. Cros referenced what we might refer to today as *terroir* in a brief sentence referencing the immense growth of Canada's quality wheat production claiming, "we can therefore see that the grains of wheat brought to Canada by the first French colonists have prospered," demonstrating his inability to resist tying the successful wheat crop to his own colonial metropole.⁵⁵ This romantic sentiment and the benevolence expressed by Cros towards the growing Canadian wheat market articulated his desire to connect with a food which could be identified, albeit tenuously, with his nation of origin.

Unfortunately for Cros, by 1931, the period in which he was writing, any Canadian wheat that he was consuming was most probably Marquis wheat and thus had more in common with Ukraine and India than it did with France.⁵⁶ Marquis wheat in itself holds an interesting place in the nation-building narrative of Canada. Hailed to this day by the Canadian government as being "the greatest practical triumph of Canadian agriculture," Marquis wheat won international competitions and set new records in terms of productivity, effectively placing Canada on the map in terms of agricultural developments.⁵⁷ Marquis has been celebrated with the release of multiple commemorative items, such as a 2003 collector's coin (see figure 4) and a Canada post stamp (see figure 5, next page.)

Figure 4: Gold coin commemorating the 100th Anniversary of Marquis Wheat, 1903-2003. Published with permission from The Royal Canadian Mint. Coin image © 2015 Royal Canadian Mint. All rights reserved. / Image de pièce © 2015 Monnaie royale canadienne. Tous droits réservés.



a partnership forged from collaboration between the Canadian National, Ottawa, and the farmers who grew the wheat which, much like the fairs throughout Europe and the sending of samples, sought to boost the reputation of this uniquely Canadian cultivar abroad.

While Marquis appears sporadically in British print sources from its creation onward, there seems to be a concentration of articles published after 1925, with the samples being sent out in 1927, and more articles surfacing until 1931. One such article extolls the virtues of the award-winning wheat field of a soldier-settler in Alberta growing none other than Marquis wheat.⁶² This chronology reveals a suspiciously dense number of articles published in the years running up to the Treaty of Westminster which further established Canada's independence from its metropole. In this case, the distribution and advertisement of Marquis wheat may have been deliberately advertised in an attempt to highlight the nation's growing economic independence. As such, the circulation of Canadian wheat and its importation in substantial quantities to the United Kingdom contributed to the concretizing of the Canadian nation.

Empires of Bread

The British reaction to Marquis occurred on a much larger and more accessible scale than it did in France. Whereas papers pertaining to the Marquis saga were published throughout the United Kingdom, leaving a trail from the creation of the wheat to its mass adoption and finally to the death of its creator, coverage of Marquis wheat in French print media seems to have been limited more specifically to agricultural and commercial journals.⁶³ Indeed in many French sources the wheat of Canada is referred to as Manitoba wheat rather than Marquis, Garnet or another varietal name.⁶⁴ While these varietal names are sometimes used, the preference remains to these types as Canadian, North American, or foreign. Though some sources, including one from 1937, specified that Manitoba wheat was most often Marquis, many French publications fail to differentiate between

the various strains.⁶⁵ Contrary to the British approach to Marquis wheat which was largely one of ebullience, support and pride where the varietal was heralded by name, French writers greeted the news of Marquis' development by acknowledging it, often grudgingly, as a bread flour that could supplement their own less than optimal crops. Unlike the British who treated their wheat as part of a greater colonial inheritance, seeing it as a success of the commonwealth, Canadian wheat was often used by the French as a talking point when discussing French agriculture, milling, baking, or foreign policy.⁶⁶ French writing on this subject tended to refer glowingly to the low-yield high quality wheats of old which were once grown in France.⁶⁷ Though these hallowed strains of wheat did not provide enough wheat to completely feed the country at times at least made for enjoyable loaves. In comparison, the post-Great War wheat was characterized as high-yield but of inferior baking quality.⁶⁸ In his 1935 thesis, civil service intern Jean Plasse criticized French wheat, such as the Vilmorin 13 strand, for their high yield but low quality.⁶⁹ Even during boom years for French wheat cultivation when France was a wheat exporter, rather than an importer, it continued to import Canadian wheat as part of the *admission temporaire* which allowed foreign wheat to be brought into the country by importers so long as an equal or higher amount of French wheat was exported.⁷⁰ As such, Canadian wheat made its name in the French baking world, despite a cultural bias towards French products.

In the French colonies Canadian flour was imported not only for its quality but also for its affordable price and in some cases its proximity. For the colony of Martinique in the French Caribbean, Canadian flour was necessary for upholding a bread-eating culture in a climate that could not easily accommodate wheat production. The reliance on Canadian flour was so strong that even during the Vichy occupation, when Martinique was technically at war with Canada, attempts continued to be made to import Canadian wheat.⁷¹ In French Cambodia, some Chinese bakers made use of Owl and Monkey branded flour milled in British Hong Kong.⁷² Where the wheat used to make this flour

originated from is anyone's guess; considering Hong Kong's climate and the price and availability of commonwealth wheat from Canada and Australia, depending on the season and year, it is not unthinkable that such flours milled in Hong Kong might have been made, at least in part, from Canadian wheat. In the French Moroccan protectorate, the growing of wheat for European-style bread baking was one of the first priorities of colonists as of the occupation in 1912.⁷³ What the French considered to be a suitable bread wheat was contrasted with the hard wheats grown by Moroccan farmers prior to the French occupation.⁷⁴ These types of wheat were used to make various dense local breads and cous-cous but were deemed unsuitable by the French for baking bread conforming to French tradition.⁷⁵ The adaptation of semi-hard bread wheats with high gluten contents were pushed onto the fields of Morocco by European colonists, much as they had been in the Canadian prairies.⁷⁶ North African wheats were deemed similar to Canadian products and seen as potential substitutes for the foreign wheat imports that France relied upon to bolster its local flours.⁷⁷ Indeed, for some French writers the wheat referred to as "Manitoba n.1" was the bar to reach and, hopefully, to exceed. Plasse mentioned that on the London market Manitoba wheat sold for 55 francs per quintal versus the 35 franc per quintal for French wheat.⁷⁸ He optimistically claimed that by competing with Canadian wheat in the London market, Moroccan products could overtake French wheat, earning much needed liquid currency for the protectorate all the while allowing it to climb out of debt.⁷⁹ These goals were supplemented by French attempts to wean themselves off of foreign flours and keep their trade within their own empire.⁸⁰ In 1931 a decree was issued banning imports of foreign flours into Morocco, which had been authorized prior to this period in an attempt to compensate for the Moroccan wheat deemed to be of insufficient quality for making French-style bread.⁸¹ This decree signalled the rising quality of Moroccan wheat and its growing potential to replace Canadian imports within the French Empire. Attempts to implement large-scale cultivation of semi-hard bread wheat similar to Marquis in Morocco were tied to French anxieties over Cana-

dian wheat imports and a reliance on the global market. These wheat-related anxieties speak to the strength of Canadian wheat on the global market, establishing Manitoba wheat as the bar to be reached to remain competitive in the increasingly challenging and depressed commodity market of the 1930s. Even an optimistic Plasse doubted Morocco's ability to replace Manitoba wheat within metropolitan France: "Unfortunately, Morocco cannot pretend to wholly replace the Manitoba (wheats) of Canada as they are of consistent character and of high baking value, its deliveries are too variable." His statement makes clear that the success of Canadian wheat was not only due to the quality of the varietal grown but also to the grading and shipping process used in Canada.⁸²

Where Cros, in Indochina, actively sought out ties to France in Canadian flour, many of his compatriots back home did not share his whimsical view nor his need to connect culturally to Canadian wheat. Documents speaking of the quality of Canadian wheat did not provide the sensationalist heroic narratives that British publications did and Marquis and other varietals did not receive the same kind of mainstream press coverage. In the French empire the importation of foreign, largely Canadian, wheat to fortify French flours was no cause for celebration. Canadian wheat and the *admission temporaire* and other legislation that allowed it to be imported into the country were controversial.⁸³

The lack of such sentiments in Britain stemmed most likely from a similarity of cultures, a sense of imperial belonging, and a willing acknowledgement to Britain's dependence on Canadian wheat. Though trumpeted as a bastion of national pride in Canada, the successful development and cultivation of Marquis and its offshoots could easily be construed of as an overall imperial success on behalf of the British Empire. The ties that continued to exist among the commonwealth countries and the considerable British investments in Canadian agriculture and infrastructure were legitimization enough for such reasoning. Furthermore, the bread consumed in much of Canada in this period more closely resembled the modern British loaf as opposed to the traditional French *miche* or the traditional breads

of other cultures. The experiments conducted by the Winnipeg grain laboratory created results accommodating a common anglo-Canadian and British palate. Such recipes as those found in the *The New Purity Flour Cook Book* reveal a loaf familiar to the English and modern, using added fat and yeast cakes rather than leaner traditional breads made of only of flour, water, salt, and a leavening agent. The marketing of Canadian flour and the recipes contained in Canadian cookbooks produced by millers such as Western Canada Flour Mill's *The New Purity Flour Cook Book* also favour the use of yeast cakes rather than the *levain* (sourdough) which French sources from the period idealized.⁸⁴ While Canadian flour may have made its way to France, the culture, recipes and images so painstakingly associated with wheat by the Canadian government were promptly abandoned whereas in the United Kingdom these concepts remained largely as intended due in part to a shared culture and ideal of bread. As Magnan has written, the idea of using Canadian wheat in British bread has persisted to the point that a recent attempt by bread giant Warburton's to market a 100 percent British loaf made entirely of United Kingdom grown wheat evoked little public interest despite the growth of the locavore movement.⁸⁵

Conclusion

The story of Canadian wheat is one that is loaded with meaning. The spread of the grain and the various permutations undergone by the crop to adapt it to Canada speak to more than a simple nation-building narrative. The prominent place of Canadian wheat in the global market is a testament to the quality of imperial agricultural developments and the strength of empire whereby even as a commonwealth state, rather than a colony, Canadian wheat benefitted from ties to the British Empire. The creation of an agricultural hinterland within Canada through the expansion of Britain's food supply defines how a new nation emerged through an old-world dependency on wheat. Canada shifted from being a settler colony to becoming a colonizer that maintained strong links with its metropole by expanding its

economy through the colonization of the prairies. The strength of Canadian wheat as a global staple allowed Canada to not only bolster its image on the global market but to assert its identity as an independent nation. Development of unique Canadian wheat varieties and the efforts to market them abroad demonstrate how the power of agricultural science in British imperial networks enabled Canada to carve a niche in a network of circulation spanning far beyond the narrow North American and British market. The flow of this wheat into Europe, the French colonies and beyond speaks to the fluidity of commodities whereby the varying absorption of Canadian wheat into different imperial milieus demonstrates the adaptability of wheat as both a commodity and a bearer of cultural significance. The acceptance of Canadian wheat, be it welcomed or grudging, provides us with a medium through which to gain insight into empires and their tangled webs through a tool as seemingly mundane as a loaf of bread.

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