

Muslim History of Canada: Pre-Confederation to the First World War

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1. Introduction

Our national history is a work in progress. It is continually updated as each new wave of immigrants puts its stamp on it. From Europe to Asia, immigrants come transforming themselves and the country. Their stories provide themes for our history. Understandably, the history of the European immigrants has been thoroughly researched and recorded. Lately, the role of other communities is beginning to receive attention.

Muslims' commitment to compiling and recording the historic memory of their ancestors has suffered, in part because pressing contemporary issues have overshadowed the accomplishments of those who, more than a century ago, left their native countries to become one of those who were engaged in building a new nation and a new country. Academic writings have tended to treat Canadian Muslim history as a footnote to the American history, mainly because demographically, Canada did not have a large Muslim community until two decades ago. But studying archival material, browsing through the passenger lists of ships arriving in Canadian ports and reading and listening to the stories of Muslim pioneers, brings us again and again to the conclusion that Muslim story in Canada is worth exploring and worth telling.

By highlighting Muslim history as the keynote topic for its launch, the Tessellate Institute has given it a profile, which will serve to attract a vibrant scholarly and popular interest in recording and understanding an important aspect of Canada's past. In today's presentation, I will try to present some facts not known before about Muslim history. Hopefully, this portrayal will arouse further interest and provide enough input for researchers to weave a more coherent story to enhance our understanding of the life and times of our ancestors.

History can be studied from various angles. From several perspectives, including immigration, institutional, cultural and social, Muslim history can be divided into three distinct phases. The pre-Confederation period begins with the arrival of European Muslim pioneers. The issues they faced and the way they negotiated them were different from the succeeding periods. The second phase, spanning the period from the dawn of the 19th century up to the Second World War, is marked by the arrival of the first non-European Muslims. Muslim institutions began to be established and Muslim settlers' relatively low levels of formal schooling were no barrier to their easy integration and engaged with the broader society. Finally, the contemporary or post Second World War period, which saw the influx of highly educated and skilled people from all parts of the world to build the post-war

economy and usher in the knowledge-based economy. This was also a period of negotiating enormous scientific, social and cultural change.

Given the constraints of time but mostly of my own knowledge of Muslim history, my presentation will cover the early period including the pre-Confederation phase up to the first decade of the last century.

2. Pre-Confederation era

Muslim history of Canada dates to 1830s and begins in Upper Canada, which was then a British province. First Muslim settlers arrived from Scotland in the wave of immigration after 1815 in the wake of repeated economic and agricultural crises there. Aboard the ships that carried fleeing Scots were Muslims. Cross-referencing the departure dates of ships from Scotland with records of Scottish Muslims found in Canadian archives, Muslim pioneers would have arrived aboard the ships: Thetis, Dunlop, Amity and Albion.

The first hurdle that stood in the way of the pioneer Muslims to escape the harsh life in Scotland was transatlantic crossing. The voyage across the Atlantic on sailing vessels was quit hazardous. Before the introduction of steamships in the mid-nineteenth century, it was usually a 12-week journey, often accompanied by the rough seas, disease and shortage of food.

Henry and Eliza Hunt were among the lucky ones and the first Muslims to withstand this endurance test. They arrived in the 1840s. Although multiculturalism was to become our national policy much later in 1967, the Hunt family already embodied some of its key characteristics. Henry Hunt was born in England; Eliza Hunt and four of their five children were born in Scotland; and one son was born in Upper Canada

Henry and Eliza Hunt were in all likelihood Gaelic-speaking Highlanders. Typical of Highlanders who placed a very high premium on the fellowship of their countrymen in the new country, Henry and Eliza Hunt settled in Glengarry County – not far from Ottawa -- which was set up by Highlanders as a Gaelic-speaking enclave, like the earlier ones in Cape Breton Island and the Eastern Townships of Quebec.

The familiarity of social and cultural surroundings in Glengarry County cushioned the strain of settling in a new country. Glengarry County also offered the prospects of acquiring and owning a big farm, which must have been a special attraction after the painful experience of congestion and eventual eviction from their farm in Scotland during the clearances and crop failures.

Unlike many Scots who used Canada as a stepping stone for Australia and the United States, Canadian winters could not dampen the spirits of the Hunt family. They came to Canada to make it their home. About four decades after their arrival, in 1881, they still lived in Glengarry County. Their youngest son had taken charge of the family farm, as Henry Hunt was getting along in years and was 84 years old.

The rest of the Scottish Muslim community was from the Lowlands. They were typically skilled workers and were, therefore, more willing than their fellow

countrymen from the Highlands to settle in areas that offered opportunities to gainfully employ their skills.

James and Agnes Love, a young couple, were among them. As a painter, James Love was more interested in settling in an area with an already established community where his services as a painter would be needed. They settled in Wellington County in Ontario, where there were significant Scottish and English communities. James Love must have read or heard about this region while still in Scotland from the accounts of Scots who were sent to Canada by a group of Scots to recommend attractive locations for settlement. These reports were well circulated in Scotland. Wellington County seemed to fit the needs of a young, skilled worker like James Love, who was only in his twenties, was looking for a market for his skills; educational facilities for children when he and his wife started a family; and a good social environment for the young Agnes Love who was in her late teens.

While little is known about how the pioneer Muslims coped with social and cultural challenges of settling in a new country, some observations can be made. Cultural and social differences were probably easy to negotiate because of the very large Scottish presence and influence in Canada. If any adjustments were still required, large Scottish concentrations in which Muslims lived with the fellow Scots would have made them easier.

However, maintaining and transmitting their religious identity to their offspring in the new country was an altogether different matter. Very small population and its dispersion over a large area precluded any Muslim religious, social or cultural gatherings. In the absence of contacts with the people of their own faith, sustaining religious identity depended upon the extent of an individual's determination. In these circumstances, retaining one's religious identity would have been difficult enough; transmitting it to the offspring was even harder. The Hunt family maintained their Islamic faith for about three decades, but by 1871, neither the couple -- Henry and Eliza Hunt -- nor any of their adult offspring identified themselves with Islam.

3. Early twentieth century: 1900-1914

A new era began with dawn of the twentieth century. Muslims arriving in the first decade had to make a new beginning, as their predecessors had left no religious or secular institutions. Even if they had, it is not obvious how relevant the new generation would have found them because of the significant differences with respects to ethnic origins, motive of migration and settlement patterns.

Muslim arriving in this period were the first non-European Muslim settlers in Canada. Most of them were Arabs from the then Ottoman empire and some were from Turkey. They came from the small communities of Lala, Jib Jenine, Marj, Karoun and Kelebias in modern day Lebanon and Syria. These villages were so small that the departure of a dozen people would have seemed like a mini exodus. Few had much formal schooling and hardly anyone knew English. Mahmoud Sied El Haj Ahmed was the first to arrive. He landed in Canada in 1900 at 17 years of age. A year later, Ali Hamdon, Ahmed Awid , Hussein Amery, Ali Terrabain and a few others followed.

Their settlement pattern was influenced by the port of entry and economic opportunities. Steamships carrying Lebanese and Syrian Muslims used to travel from Beirut to Marseilles in France and then to Halifax or Montreal -- or New York to bypass the frozen waters of the St. Lawrence River in the winter. Therefore, significant settlements developed near ports of entry -- in Bible Hill and Bridgewater near Halifax and in Montreal. Other Muslims went inland, with some settling in London but most boarding trains from Montreal en route to Winnipeg, which became the stepping stone to other destinations in the prairies.

The new generation of Muslims, as a rule, was male, single and young, as is typical of adventurers and economic migrants. They were ready to take on whatever challenges the new environment might spring upon them. It did not take them long to decide that Canada was the home and they were going to stay here. Some of them married into Canadian Muslim families but most found life partners among Canadians of other faiths. Among them was the person who later became the first imam of Al-Rashid mosque in Edmonton – the first mosque in North America. Najeeb Ailley (who adopted James as his first name) married Margaret Chapman of Winnipeg in 1917. Few went back to the Middle East to get married. Some never returned even for a visit.

While the Scottish Muslims had left their country pushed by the harsh life, the Lebanese and Syrian Muslims were attracted by the pull of transformative economic events shaping the new country. In 1905, as Alberta and Saskatchewan became provinces, they were open for settlement and development. Eager to populate them, the federal government dispatched its agents to Europe to encourage people to migrate and to arrange their passages and land settlements. However, these privileges were only offered in Europe. The news of these exciting events travelled to Syria and Lebanon through Christian Arabs who had settled in Canada decades before the Muslims.

A number of other motives have been ascribed to Muslim migration, based on anecdotal information, but the role of economic opportunities as the catalyst in their decision to migrate is firmly embedded in facts. First, the largest influx of Muslims to Canada in the first half of the twentieth century occurred in the first decade, coinciding with the opening up of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Second, most of these newcomers bypassed the eastern and central provinces and went to the prairies and British Columbia. Third, those who were destined to the prairies were more suited for the tough life of a frontiersman and an adventurer and for agricultural occupations: almost all of them were in their late teens or early twenties and single; came from agricultural and rural communities; and were farmers or farm owners in their countries of origin.

While the opening up of the prairies was the main attraction, some were lured by adventure and the dream of quick wealth. Hussein Abouchadi and his young nephew, Ali Abouchadi, came expecting to make a quick fortune in the gold rush. It was only when they reached Winnipeg on their way to Edmonton that they learned they were too late to strike it rich in the gold rush and had to wait one hundred years for another opportunity. Obviously, Hussein Abouchadi was not willing to wait for

Ralph Klein's prosperity cheques and returned to Lebanon in 1909. But the young Ali Abouchadi (later known as Alexander Hamilton) stayed on. He did not find gold but he had the Midas touch.

Muslims played a pioneering role in the settlement of the prairies. Many set up homesteads in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Najeeb (James) Ailley, Sied Ameen, and Mohamed Kaziel were among the early homesteaders. Mahmoud Sied el Haj Ahmed (later Mahmoud Saddy) was the most successful rancher. He owned a number of farms in the prairies. His farm in Saskatchewan employed about a dozen harvesters. While Mahmoud looked after the ranch, his wife, Rikia (alias Mary) would prepare meals for the harvesters and deliver them to the farm twice daily in the family's 1929 Model T Ford. Their ranch was a prosperous mix of cattle, horses, and grain as well as vegetables and berries. Ali Hamdon had a successful fur trading post in Fort Chipewyan in northeastern Alberta.

Those who could not afford farms and ranches contributed a resource which was of immense value in the pioneering days of the prairies, namely enterprise and hard work. Traveling on foot, on horseback, by boat and dog sleds, they sold goods from farm to farm and from reserve to reserve, supplying necessities of life to the remotest parts of what was the Canadian western front. One of them, Bedouin Ferran, alias Peter Baker, acquired the nickname 'Arctic Arab' from his customers. The Indians of Fort Rae gave him the honorific of 'Jacobs Orange' because he is said to have introduced oranges to the northern natives.

Their experience in trading and knowledge of the remote and formidable parts of the country proved to be very useful when oil discoveries were made in Alberta. Muslims were among the first business people to open stores in remote areas to supply the needs of oil rig crews. In some places, their stores were the only suppliers of the needs of workers working in the oilfields. Just when the Norman wells oil discovery was made, Bedouin Ferran correctly anticipated that it would lead to movement of people back and forth between population centres and the site of oil discovery, and opened a thriving store in Fort Smith in the Northwest Territories. The strategic location of his store facilitated the supply of labour to the oilfields.

Their hard work, innovative business practices and good client relations were well established. Their reputation seemed to have earned the respect of the business community, including the icon of Canadian business. Years later in 1946, when Hudson's Bay Company would try to enter the Lac La Biche market where it previously had no presence it would go to some length to avoid direct competition with the retail store of Ali Abouchadi (alias Alexander Hamilton). It would buy his business and include in the purchase agreement what is today known as a non-compete clause, effectively preventing him from opening another store within several miles for ten years. Non-compete clause was frequently mentioned in the media in the recent case against Lord Conrad Black. The descendents of the early settlers also distinguished themselves in business. Andy Hamdon of Shaben & Hamdon was recently inducted into the Toy Industry Hall of Fame, and the Imperial Oil profiled Albert Moghrabi of Lac La Biche in the commemorative book marking Alberta's centennial.

Socially and culturally, there were many challenges, encountered in the public service down to children's schools. Many experienced them at the immigration counter as soon as they landed in Canada. Their names were thought to be too different and too difficult for their adopted country and were changed, including the surname. For example, Mahmoud Sied El Haj Ahmed became Mahmoud Saddy. Similar difficulties surfaced in the workplace. When Bedouin Ferran went to work for an educational institution, his employer Anglicized his name to Peter Baker. Rikia's school teachers found Maria and later Mary more suitable in the new country.

The situation was worse further to the west, in British Columbia. The Anglo-Saxons who had earlier called most vigorously for large scale immigration to meet the demand for labour from the lumber industry and from the Canadian Pacific Railway were disappointed that so many of the immigrants were not Anglo-Saxon. These attitudes subsequently led to demands for exclusion of 'Orientals' and restrictions of non-Anglo-Saxon immigration. In 1914, *kamagatu Maru*, which was carrying two dozen Muslims among hundreds of Sikhs was ordered to return to India with the passengers. Most of the Muslim passengers were from Jhallar, a small village in Pakistan, and from Ferozepore (a city in India). Many Muslims saw it as an ominous sign. This anti-Oriental sentiment and declaration of Canadians of Turkish origin as the 'enemy aliens' at the outbreak of the First World War drove many Muslims out. Between 1911 and 1921, Muslim population in Canada dropped by 40 per cent, largely because of the 'exodus' from British Columbia.

In spite of the challenges, the early Muslims adapted themselves remarkably well to the new country. They freely intermarried with other faith communities. In addition to English, some learned Cree and Ukrainian. Although some of them were pacifists and fled conscription in their own country, their sons and sons-in-law served in the Canadian military during the war years. Peter Baker (formerly Bedouin Ferran), who went on to become the first Muslim to hold an elective office, is credited with moving the resolution in the Territorial Council to formally designate Yellowknife as the capital of Northwest Territories.

The women were equally engaged with the mainstream society. Hilwie Hamdon was active in the Liberal Ladies Club. Mary Saddy was a member of the Symphony Society and the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton. Najabey Jazey became a member of the legion in Nova Scotia when her son, Moody, joined the Canadian air force.

4. Concluding remarks

Let me conclude by emphasizing that this presentation is a modest beginning in exploration in Muslim history. I hope it demonstrates, by its inadequacies and its merits, the urgent need for further research into this part of Canadian history.

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