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Timothy Baycroft, *Culture, Identity, and Nationalism: French Flanders in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Suffolk, U.K. and Rochester, N.Y.: The Boydell Press for the Royal Historical Society, 2004. x + 233 pp. Maps, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 (cl). ISBN 0-86193-269-2.

Review by Stephen L. Harp, University of Akron.

In this book, Timothy Baycroft surveys the integration of French Flanders into the French state from the French Revolution to the present. Known usually as the Westhoek until the twentieth century, this northwestern-most section of the department of the Nord comprised approximately 150,000–230,000 Flemish-speaking souls in the nineteenth century and as many as 150,000 in 1940 (“The exact number of Flemish-speakers in France at any given moment is difficult to ascertain, since language was deliberately excluded as a criterion in any French census” [p. 21].) Bordered by Belgium, the North Sea, and the French department of Pas-de-Calais, the Westhoek never witnessed the strong regionalist movements of Brittany or Alsace or the Flemish federalist movement of neighboring Belgium. Baycroft’s objective is to explain why.

Baycroft begins the introduction with a very serviceable overview of works on nationalism, on national identity, and on regionalism and nation building in France. In the first chapter, which will give readers a flashback to the *annaliste* introductions many of us cut our teeth on, Baycroft describes the Westhoek in intricate detail. With superb maps, Baycroft lays out where most Flemish speakers were and how their numbers began to shrink precipitously only after the Second World War. He then describes Flemish customs and culture, including not only an account of the “overwhelming Catholicism of the region” (p. 36) and regional literary traditions, but also the prevalence of *moules-frites* and beer (p. 42). Although readers familiar with northern as well as southern French cuisine will not accept Baycroft’s assumption that use of butter rather than oil distinguishes cuisine in the Westhoek from that of France generally (p. 42), this section is a detailed and interesting survey of cultural practices in the Westhoek in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Baycroft then organizes the book into a series of topical chapters, each of which traces the evolution of the national integration of Westhoek since the Revolution. In chapter two, Baycroft begins with local politics, analyzing election results, the backgrounds of mayors, and the place of Flemish in local politics. In general, it becomes clear that local officials in the Westhoek remained on the political right, either legitimist or, by the 1890s, Christian Democratic. In the process, Baycroft notes that while a regional political movement never really gathered steam, local politicians very effectively deployed their fluency in Flemish as an *atout* until after World War II.

In the third chapter, Baycroft analyzes the ways that structural economic changes had a bearing on the development of identities in French Flanders. An area of small farms cultivated intensely, the Westhoek was an important producer of grains and sugar beets. The relatively high population density also made the Westhoek an important place for early cottage industry before it shared in the rapid industrial development of the Nord in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ports, canals, and several railway connections ensured that the Westhoek participated in the economic growth tied to the industrialization of neighboring Belgium and northern France. In this chapter, as in many others, Baycroft offers interesting historical nuggets that will come as a surprise to some historians of modern France. For example, Baycroft notes that there was a much higher degree of intermarriage between French Flemish and Belgians in the late nineteenth century than in the 1970s. Similarly, there was

much greater movement of workers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than there was after World War II. And in one of the best sections of the book, Baycroft describes the extent to which first tariffs, then control of cross-border migration led, by the Second World War, to a local consciousness of the Franco-Belgian border that had not existed in the nineteenth century. The real divide, however, seems to have been the Second World War: "In summary it can be said that up until the time of the Second World War a great deal of cross-border contact was preserved between the two Flemish communities, and that it declined sharply thereafter" (p. 75). Above all, Baycroft credits what Michael Billig has called "banal nationalism" with the assimilation of French Flanders (p. 85).^[1] That is, it was not an overt ideology of nationalism that reinforced the Westhoek's place in the French state but rather the norms of the postal service, national systems of licensure, and "the vocabulary developed to describe diplomas, jobs, laws, or customs," that mattered (p. 85). National radio, television, cinema, newspapers, and sports leagues get, according to Baycroft, much credit too. So, despite the much-trumpeted European integration of postwar years, French national identity in the Westhoek became more intense, and more taken for granted as "natural," after World War II.

In the fourth chapter, Baycroft outlines French republican politics of national integration as manifested in the Westhoek. Along with a brief description of republican festivals and the role of military service, educational policy understandably gets pride of place. Although one could argue that Baycroft's inclusion of Victor Duruy's educational changes during the Second Empire reveals something rather broader about the politics of national assimilation than just specifically republican politics, Baycroft is not wrong in his focus on republican expectations for linguistic uniformity in late nineteenth and twentieth-century France.

Baycroft then focuses on the important role of the Catholic Church, particularly the local clergy's efforts to preserve catechism instruction in Flemish. Here Baycroft provides a very detailed account of the struggle between educational authorities on the one hand, and the local priests and their bishops on the other. Nothing about the conflict will seem new to most historians, though Baycroft does offer many specific and even entertaining examples of the passive resistance of the clergy in avoiding the demands of the Ministry of Public Instruction. Despite Baycroft's focus on the *longue durée*, he underplays the extent to which local clergy were no doubt being quite consistent over time in their demands that catechism instruction be in the child's native language. Here Baycroft should have seen David Bell's work.^[2] In this same chapter, Baycroft recounts the growth of Christian Democracy in the region, which, he states, never performed the integrative function Caroline Ford attributes to it in Brittany,^[3] largely because of the strength of social Catholicism in nearby industrial cities.

In a very short chapter on the labor movement (pp. 139-46), Baycroft argues that despite the potential for a greater regional cooperation with socialists in nearby Belgium, socialists in the Westhoek never really managed to deploy regional or ethnic identities to build support for their cause. Instead, by focusing solely on promoting a working-class identity, socialists in the Westhoek participated—consciously or not—in the integration of French Flanders into the French state.

In chapter seven, Baycroft examines what he calls local interest groups. He shows that despite the absence of French censorship, the local press was overwhelmingly French-language and that Flemish publications were not destined for a mass audience. Flemish societies promoting the preservation of the Flemish language, history and culture focused on the upper and middle-classes. And the most important of these, the Comité Flamand de France, published in French, "which apparently was also the principal language of their meetings" (p. 152). The group, and others like it, expressly avoided political activity, calls for *l'autonomisme*, or even real pressure on the government to allow more Flemish in the schools. Here too Baycroft finds a factor leading to Flemish integration; even regional cultural groups never really took on the French assimilationist model. Similarly, another of the interest groups, the close-knit factory-owning *patronat*, never adopted a "specific viewpoint with respect to Flemish identity" (p. 175).

Baycroft includes, finally, an eighth chapter in which he traces the development of the Belgian Flemish movement, contrasting its “successes” with what he perceives to be the failures of the French Flemish movement. This provides a good overview that serves to put changes in the Westhoek in comparative perspective. Baycroft concentrates on a primary difference: whereas the middle-class elites in the Westhoek had always been educated in French, Belgian Flemish had, in the crucial period 1815-1830 when what became Belgium was under Dutch control, been educated in Dutch and retained an idea that Flemish could and should be equal to French in the newly created Belgium after 1830. So whereas Flemish as a language slowly died on the vine in French Flanders, it actually gained clout in Belgium.

In general, Baycroft is arguing that Eugen Weber was largely correct in his combining of economic modernization, political mobilization, and national assimilation, but that in French Flanders the key period was not 1870-1914 but instead the years after 1945.[4] It is here unfortunate that Baycroft seems unaware of the works on political mobilization of French regions before 1870, as they would nuance his thesis.[5] Reading through Baycroft’s evidence, one could easily argue that a national political mobilization of French Flanders did indeed occur before 1870, even though it was in Flemish rather than in French. Similarly, if one accepts the notion of economic modernization, the economic changes in the Westhoek were clearly well underway before 1870. It was only the Flemish language and related cultural practices that hung on until after World War II. Baycroft clearly sees this book as updating and adapting Weber’s timeline, and he asserts much more local agency in the changes. However, its contribution might have been made clearer had Baycroft also set the book in the context of other works on French political mobilization and economic modernization.

This book has a host of strengths. Baycroft’s primary source base is broad and deep. He uses an array of Flemish and French newspapers from the Nord and Belgium, as well as the many contemporary publications about the region. For politics and education, his archival sources are vast. This book is in many ways the kind of serious social history that most historians of France were writing thirty years ago. The tables are detailed and, for the most part, quite clear. And Baycroft offers a great abundance of detail straight-up. While many readers will be irritated about what he is taking for granted—by not probing the perspectives of his sources as deeply as he might—he still offers a great deal of useful information.

In a couple of sections, the book is particularly strong and will actually resonate with cultural as well as social historians. For example, at the end of chapter seven, taking a cue from Jean-François Chanet, Baycroft very carefully shows the ways that regional identity can both be opposed to national identity and folded into it.[6] And he very deftly reveals how the notion of the region changes over time. The Westhoek increasingly became known as French Flanders, a national appropriation of the region if there ever was one. As significantly, Baycroft traces the development of the region of Nord-Pas-de-Calais, a postwar fusing of the departments that did not have the historic basis of other regions, such as Alsace or Burgundy. Interestingly, it was the festivals and food of the Westhoek, only a small part of Nord-Pas-de-Calais that came to represent the regional particularity of the entire Nord-Pas-de-Calais, once more subtly reinforcing the place of the Westhoek in the French cultural as well as political landscape. And while Baycroft doesn’t discuss tourism per se, clearly he shows the cultural packaging of French regions, often for French and international tourists, into diverse parts of a single French whole.

The book has a few oversights. On *l'autonomisme* (or lack of it) and politics in the early twentieth century, Baycroft might have considered Alsace, as it would have put in relief many of the developments in the Westhoek. Similarly, Baycroft appears to be repeating French Flemish claims that the Westhoek was unique in being administered as German provinces during the Second World War, a situation shared by the Alsatians despite other differences in their experiences. Even a handful of secondary sources, starting with Sam Goodfellow’s book on interwar Alsatian politics, would have placed the presumed particularities of the situation in French Flanders into comparative perspective.[7]

Above all, the press should really have done a better job of helping the author to edit this book. Ideas are laid out much as a descriptive list without the reader knowing why s/he should remain attentive. A good editor would have helped to reorganize material within chapters and perhaps among them. Without that, the book reads like a series of descriptions of things the reader presumably needs to know rather than as the slow unfolding of the thesis. After wading through much detail, only at the end of each chapter does the reader usually get a sense of how the information can be seen to advance the thesis. This causes the book to read like a dissertation rather than as a monograph. That is unfortunate, because this book contains, in a single volume, much very useful information about the development of French Flanders over the long haul of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a topic that deserves a wider readership. Scholars interested in nationalism, nation building, and regionalism need, in any case, to read this well-researched and interesting book.

NOTES

[1] Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 85.

[2] David A. Bell, *Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); idem, "Lingua Populi, Lingua Dei: Language, Religion, and the Origins of French Revolutionary Nationalism," *American Historical Review*, vol. 100 (December 1995): 1403-37.

[3] Caroline Ford, *Creating the Nation in Provincial France: Religion and Political Identity in Brittany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[4] Eugen Weber, *Peasants Into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Palo Alto, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1976).

[5] Ted W. Margadant, *French Peasants in Revolt: The Insurrection of 1851* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); John M. Merriman, *The Agony of the Republic: The Repression of the Left in Revolutionary France, 1848-1851* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); Peter McPhee, *The Politics of Rural Life: Political Mobilization in the French Countryside, 1846-1852* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[6] Jean-François Chanet, *L'école républicaine et les petites patries* (Paris: Aubier, 1996).

[7] Samuel H. Goodfellow, *Between the Swastika and the Cross of Lorraine: Fascisms in Interwar Alsace* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1999).

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