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### Book Review: Fighting under the British Banner. The Swiss Regiments de Watteville and de Meuron on the Fronts of the Niagara and Montreal

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**Antoine de Courten. *Canada 1812–1814. Fighting under the British Banner. The Swiss Regiments de Watteville and de Meuron on the Fronts of the Niagara and Montreal* (Victoria, British Columbia: Trafford, 2009).**

\_\_\_\_\_. *Un Journal de l'expédition de Lord Selkirk à la Rivière Rouge.—A Diary of Lord Selkirk's Expedition on the Banks of the Red River 1816–1817* (Victoria, British Columbia: Trafford, 2011).

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Swiss Emigration to the Red River Settlement in 1821 and Its Subsequent Exodus to the United States* (Victoria, British Columbia, 2013).

Author Antoine de Courten is a retired Swiss Army Colonel and a descendant of Louis de Watteville (1776–1836) who in 1801 commanded the regiment de Watteville that was originally raised by his uncle Frédéric-François de Watteville (1753–1838) and in British service. As de Courten explains, he spends part of his leisure time exploring the family archives and making his findings available in print. His aim is, as he declares in the volume *Un Journal* (p. 118), not to pursue scientific research “in terms of literature, ethnology, or history” but to feature “historical persons and events in a simple, readable, and agreeable” form (p.118), and also to be “as rigorously accurate as possible” (as he states on the book’s back cover). These works are therefore not based on a critical use of sources that considers their biases and possibly self-serving goals, nor do they offer consistent historical interpretation of the data in dialogue with contrasting views. The three volumes are rather each a *Lesebuch*, a book of readings, that offers a window to the past by presenting narratives of people who experienced them or which were composed by writers close to the events and their actors. Lists of individuals and other appendices as well as some illustrations enrich the texts.

As to content, the book titled *Canada 1812-1814* first offers the history of the de Watteville and de Meuron regiments in six chapters relating to the Niagara battleground in the British defense against the invading United States troops intending to annex Canada. Then the book focuses on source materials relating to the de Watteville regiment. These include accounts of British raids on Oswego, a large part

of Louis de Watteville's diary, a facsimile and translation of the regiment's manual, a list of officers, and a list of soldiers remaining in 1818 in the military Rideau settlement that evolved into the town of Perth. Before being transferred to Canada in 1814, the de Watteville regiment had served in the Mediterranean in the Napoleonic wars, in 1806 in Calabria, Italy. It was "Swiss" mainly as to the owner, but its officer and rank and file composition was diverse: In 1809 it was 53 percent West European, that is, German, Italian, Dutch, Belgian Greek, and French; 28 percent East European, that is, Polish, Hungarian, and Russian; and only 19 percent, that is 156 men, were reported as having been of Swiss origin. The de Watteville regiment is simply one example that demonstrates that military service was mainly a *profession* in Western culture—like that of builders of palaces and churches from Canton Ticino traveling from Spain to Russia—until the American and French revolutions after which military service was gradually transformed into a duty owed to the nation state. Regiments were formed and sold by the proprietors for income and their service bought by establishments such as the Dutch East India Company or by governments such as those of France or Great Britain in their fierce competition for empire. Military units were ordered to serve where needed for defense or expansion of territory. The de Meuron regiment, for instance, was established in 1781 and was on duty on four continents: It first served the Dutch East India Company at the Cape of Good Hope, then in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and in India, and in 1795 was transferred to the British. After having fought in 1700 against Tipu Sultan in Seringapatam the regiment was deployed in the Mediterranean, finally transferred to Canada in 1813. At the regiment's dissolution in 1816 several members remained in Canada (as did soldiers of the de Meuron regiment).

Antoine de Courten's second book *Un Journal de l'expédition de Lord Selkirk à la Rivière Rouge* offers first a French, then an English version of the same documents, in his words "as a deliberate federalist act with a wink to our Canadian friends" (p. 118). The versions in French and in English have each the same three parts. A first quotes extensively from chapter 18 of Guy de Meuron, titled *Le Régiment Meuron*, published in Lausanne in 1982 (Le Forum Historique/Editons d'en Bas), a rather tedious if informative text. A second part offers the diary of Frédéric de Graffenried/Friedrich von Graffenried (1792–1871), the account of his years in military service in Canada from 1813–1818,

edited by his daughter as based on his diary and notes. He was born 25 June 1792 in Canton Bern, married in 1820 to Maria Caroline Mutach (1801–1852), and died 21 July 1871. He had joined the de Meuron regiment that was transferred to Canada in 1813. The story involves the attempts of Scottish Lord Selkirk (1771–1820) to secure British dominance centered in the region of today's Winnipeg. It was an invasion country. The diary illustrates three main themes: The rivalry of the fur trading rival Hudson Bay and Northwest Companies ruthlessly destroying wildlife for furs and severely damaging the economic base of the indigenous peoples; Lord Selkirk's attempts of securing the area for white settlement that was violently opposed by the Northwest Company; and, finally, the varied response of the indigenous peoples who suffered much destruction and were used against each other by the invaders from Europe. The von Graffenried's account—he returned home and arrived in Bern on the last day of 1818—is followed by the *Account of the Transactions at Fort William, on Lake Superior, in August 1816* by his fellow officer Gaspard Adolphe Fauche, like von Graffenried a lieutenant in de Meuron regiment, partly in defense of its activities against accusations of the North West Company. While the volume's documents make informative reading, it is at times not easy geographically to follow moves.

The third volume on Swiss emigration to the Red River contains first the account of N. Rudolph Wyss. It is a tale of his journey and stay in the Selkirk settlement in the environs of today's Winnipeg and of his return to Switzerland. He had been induced to leave for North America by the exaggerated descriptions and generous promises made by Captain Rudolph de May of the Regiment de Meuron who was in the service of Scot Thomas Dundas, Earl of Selkirk. De May had returned from Canada to Switzerland in 1820 and eventually gained some 180 emigrants for the colony. Wyss was determined to succeed, but the harsh climate, the short summers without fall, the failure of promised provisions to arrive, near famine conditions, and grasshopper plagues made him return to Switzerland. His detailed and balanced account is remarkable.

Next the book reprints the concise sketch about the "Red River Colony" of Augustus Louis Chetlain (1824–1914) who was born in St. Louis of Red River Swiss immigrants and in the American Civil War served as a Union Brevet Major General. His sketch first appeared in

volume 58 of *Harper's Monthly Magazine* in December 1878 as an extension of an article in the *Chicago Tribune*; it was also published in French in the *Musée Neuchâtelois* (33 (1896): 7–12, and 38–44. Chetlain shows that after two Scottish groups the Swiss settlers were the third contingent to arrive in Assiniboia, the Earl of Selkirk's proprietary domain partly situated in today's Manitoba. His land grant reached from the Lake of the Woods and Winnipeg River some 200 miles west and from Lake Winnipeg to the border of the United States. A note of the aged Red River immigrant Zélie C. Grisard follows Chetlain's report and attests its accuracy.

A third part of the volume contains ten appendices that include "Selkirk's Contract with the Swiss Settlers," a list of Scottish and one of Swiss settlers, and nine biographical entries from the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*.

The three volumes are valuable in that they present source material that provides insight into a generally little known aspect of Swiss emigration history and the conquest of lands that became Canada. The books are meant for the general reader and not for the scholar. The introductory texts of the author are therefore not critical essays and the entries of the bibliographical lists somewhat arbitrary. Historical interpretation is largely absent and cursory. Reasons for emigration, for instance, are minimally given and simply repeat secondary sources that give a simplistic crisis view. There is no attempt to place Swiss immigrants going to the Red River into the continental conquest by Europeans and their descendants, fought out between the nations states of Spain, France, and Great Britain on the one hand, and the neo-European nations of the United States and British Canada on the other. Also the indigenous world emerges largely as cruelly violent except in N. Rudolph Wyss' *Reise eines Schweizers nach dem rothen Flusse*, a remarkably fair description of the indigenous people. In sum, de Courten's books make valuable primary sources available that are mostly not in easy reach, but more as "raw" materials than as critically edited documents embedded in historical understanding.

*Leo Schelbert*