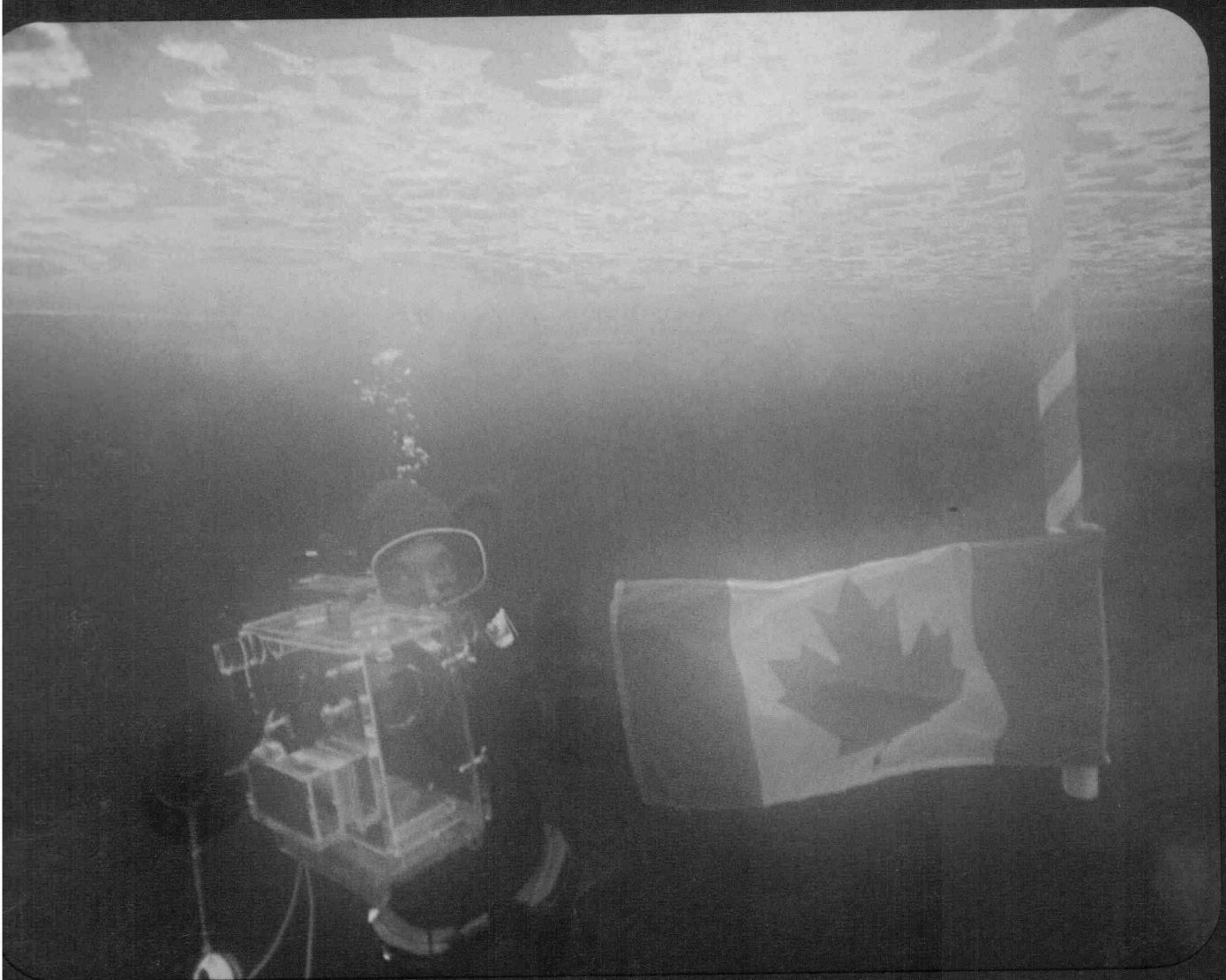


January 1975

Canadian Geographical Journal



Exploring Canada's deepest cave
Changing land-use patterns in the north
Ontario's Great Clay Belt hoax
Polar search, rescue and diving mission
Mining Prairie coal and healing the land
Alberta's remarkable game farm



A farm lad exhibits the bounty of the northern Ontario farmland.

Ontario's Great Clay Belt hoax

Donald E. Pugh

More than 300 miles (480 km) north of Toronto, a scattered patchwork of farms follows the Ontario Northland and Canadian National Railways across undulating land forested by conifers in Ontario's Great Clay Belt. Although numerous prosperous farms dot this, the largest agricultural region of the Ontario Northland Railway, rotting log foundations and overgrown fields mark the gradual decline of settlement.

Between 1900 and 1931 the Cochrane District of the Clay Belt experienced the fastest growth in northern Ontario, doubling in population between 1911 and 1921, and again

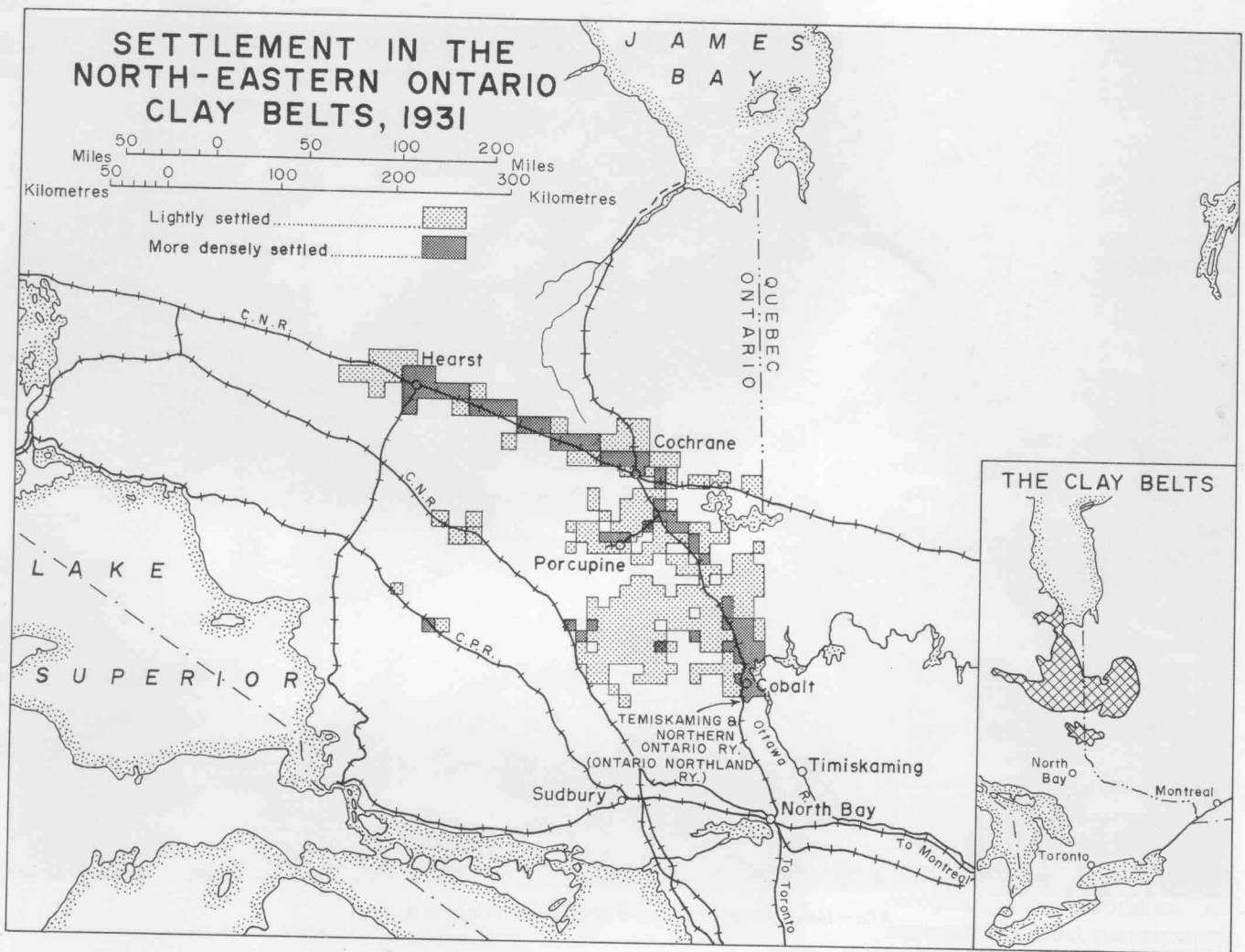
between 1921 and 1931. By 1931, 200 surveyed townships contained 51,186 settlers with 11,911 farms totalling 1,991,937 acres (805,938 hectares).

This rapid settlement soon showed itself to be ill-advised and foolish. Badly drained, leached clay soils, a short growing season with unexpected harsh frosts, and scarcity of nearby markets led to back-breaking

Mr. Pugh, now a teacher of history and geography in the Algoma District of northern Ontario, made a study of why settlers first went to the Clay Belt while working for his M.A. at Carleton University.

labour, heartache, and bankruptcy. Between 1931 and 1961, the number of farms decreased from 11,911 to 5,058, farm population declined from 57,186 to 28,762 and farm acreage declined from 1,991,937 acres to 1,261,158 (805,938 to 510,264 hectares). Migration from the region still continues.

Many early settlers entering the clay belt region were unfortunate victims of a deception which portrayed the region as a promised land, fertile and generous beyond all sane belief. Ontario government departments, including the Department of Crown Lands, Department of Agricul-



A PLAIN TALE OF PLAIN PEOPLE

Pioneer Life in New
Ontario

THE GREAT CLAY BELT

Published by
Temiskaming and Northern Ontario
Railway Commission

Operating
Ontario Government Railway

Hon. W. H. Hearst, Premier

T. & N. O. R. Commissioners

J. L. Englehart, Chairman

D. Murphy A. J. McGee, Sec.-Treas. Geo. W. Lee
Toronto

Front page of a settlement brochure.

ture and the Temiskaming & Northern Ontario Railway Commission, justified their efficiency between 1900 and 1932 by the number of settlers persuaded to enter this northern "bonanza" district. These departments consistently and enthusiastically endorsed the clay belt climate, soils and forest in an avalanche of glowing press releases, settlement brochures, maps, farm photos and touring exhibits and lectures.

Reinforcing this flood of government propaganda were newspapers and periodicals in Toronto and North Bay. At the start of northward-lying railways, such centres obviously stood to benefit from cheaper agricultural produce as well as developing railhead demands for manufactured products. Today it is difficult to comprehend the incredible confidence and exaggeration present in

early settlement literature without reviewing the events of those buoyant 20th century decades.

Part of the enthusiasm for the clay belt may be attributed to the surprise aroused by the unexpected discovery of the region's potential value.

Early fur traders had described the clay belt as a land of bone-freezing temperatures, swarming mosquitoes and dreary, swampy landscapes. The construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway along the rocky Precambrian height of land, an area described by the Hon. Sir William Howard Hearst, Premier of Ontario 1914-1919, as "the most barren and God-forsaken country in the whole northland", reaffirmed in thousands of travellers the notion of endless grey rock, scraggly pine and useless, blackened timber.

The Ontario Department of Agri-

culture asserted in 1897 that the land north of the Great Lakes watershed "has been scarcely touched by the foot of the white man, and then only in rare instances by the hunter and trapper." Yet by that date sufficient positive information concerning the extensive fertile nature of the region's soil had been published by geologists and surveyors to warrant a thorough government investigation.

Desperately searching for a popular campaign issue to revive a sadly moribund Liberal administration in power since 1871, Ontario Premier George Ross gambled. Believing that northern Ontario had sufficient interest to command wide public attention and votes, his government sponsored an aggressive exploration survey of northern Ontario's interior in 1900. The results of the survey focused Ontario's attention northward for the next 30 years.


For the first time the government, press, and public were made aware of the Great Clay Belt resources. The report described 24,500 sq. miles (63,455 sq. km) or 15,680,000 acres (6,340,000 hectares) of well watered, fertile clay loam, drained by rivers capable of generating valuable amounts of hydro-electricity, and covered by an immense tract of precious pulpwood forest.

This report caught the public imagination. To many people it seemed as if a fairy tale had suddenly come true for Ontario. At a time when Canadian attention was beginning to be diverted westward, some fairy godmother had waved a wand to grant the province "an unlimited storehouse of wealth" capable of expansion to an extent "little dreamed of." Surveyors waxed lyrical, predicting luxurious fields of waving golden grain, vast herds of lowing kine, flourishing towns, and great factories and creameries.

Such romantic visions possibly represented a yearning by crowded and slum-ridden Torontonians for a return to the fast-disappearing, simple, self-sufficient life of the yeoman farmer. In addition, Toronto mer-

The Temiskaming & Northern Ontario
RAILWAY
 Province of Ontario Government Railway
SIR JAMES WHITNEY, PREMIER

**SOLID
VESTIBULE
TRAINS**


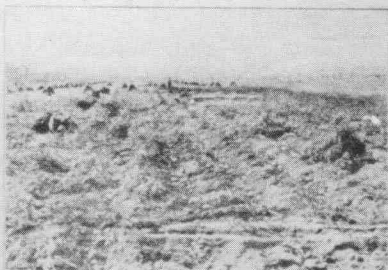


**SOLID
VESTIBULE
TRAINS**

Through Sleeping Cars—Toronto and Montreal to Cobalt, Porcupine and Cochrane
 Through the Finest Agricultural and Mining District in the World

20,000,000 ACRES
of Farming Land Awaits the Settler

The Demonstration Car now touring has opened the eyes of Old Ontario farmers to the great possibilities of the Northland. The Land of Temiskaming

The original of this promotion of northern Ontario was published as a full page newspaper advertisement in the pre-1914 era.

chants wished to resettle urban masses and farmers' sons in the clay belt as a balance for the popular attraction of the booming West.

For these reasons government officials tended to overestimate the clay belt's bounty, its resources and healthful climate. Closer observation and sad experience had yet to demonstrate the region's faults. With all the lavish praise, the problems and difficulties inherent to the region went unnoticed.

Promotion literature carried arguments to ridiculous and comical lengths. The long frigid winter, a

serious disadvantage, was greatly underestimated. The clay belt was renamed "New Ontario" to eliminate the prejudice attached to the word "northern". The government reported that the climate was not really cold but was mild and equable, more healthful than the humid enervating heat of the south. The area, it was frequently pointed out, did not support malaria, ague, or other terrible tropical diseases.

Reports tended to concentrate on the climate's "fine healthy nature", "its invigorating bracing qualities", and its promotion of long life and



A settler's home in Marter, a township in the Timiskaming District, showing a field of barley. Note that the Quebec town of Temiscaming is spelled differently, while there is yet another spelling in the name of the Temiskaming & Northern Ontario Railway

low death rate. It was described as truly "perfect", "sometimes cold but always dry in winter, and long bright sunny days in summer, very warm, with plenty of rain, also cool nights." Such a climate was pleasurable, and conducive, so the *Toronto Globe* explained, to the rearing of strong and healthy children.

Pamphleteers had to admit that summer frosts frequently killed crops, but even these frosts, it was

usually explained, were caused by the forest. As soon as the trees were removed, an earlier spring, longer milder summer and a later autumn would ensue, eliminating frosts forever.

Great enthusiasm was expressed for the clay belt water. Northern springs, fountains of elixir, were described not only as "cold, wholesome and pure", but according to one authority, "they have a medicinal

effect on those subject to rheumatism or disease of the kidneys." In addition, spring water, maintained at an even temperature all year around, was said to render all cattle disease unknown.

Every conceivable advantage of the northern habitat received praise. Even the snow was useful. Its "light flaky nature" packed underfoot to promote profitable teaming and lumbering operations. In addition, it acted as a warm blanket to protect fall and winter crops, while working on the soil, to break it up so that spring plowing could be easily accomplished.

With metaphysical fantasy, the climate was represented as exerting a strange, mystical attraction for those of strong mind and body. According to the myth, northerners produced more energized progressive humans, a race of hardy, self-reliant pioneers. School inspector J.B. MacDougall in a 1910 poem in expressed what it meant to be a "son of the northland."

And build ye a race, toil bred
 sons of the Northland,
 As your stately pines straight
 as your granite hills strong,
 Thew-knit, supple-sinewed,
 soul and body puissant,

In 1912, W. L. D. Lawrence, a Cochrane Methodist minister, wrote a popular Cochrane song praising the effects of winter producing the town's hardy populace.

This town had its birth,
 About three years ago,
 In the cold winter months,
 In some six feet of snow,
 It grew strong and hardy,
 As winter babies grow,
 Though 'twas born in the winter,
 In some six feet of snow.
 Snow! Snow! In the lap of the
 snow,
 It grew strong and hardy,
 though born in the snow.

Few farmers could resist such emotional rhetoric: the growth of a self-reliant Nordic race flourishing in a land of milk and honey.

By 1910 the advertising campaign



Many hopeful settlers saw this Immigration Office opposite Toronto's Union Station as the gateway to a new and prosperous life.

was in full swing. The abundance of arable land could not be overstressed. Great black capital letters splashed across newspaper pages: "Twenty Million Acres of Virgin Soil", "The Greatest Expanse of Fertile Soil in the World." Brochures flooded the province annually, bearing such titles as "Rich Cheap Land, Easy Access, Splendid Local Markets, Fine Climate, Good Water."

As for fertility, New Ontario was the Garden of Eden, "the new Canaan in Ontario", a land where "cattle clover is a weed three feet three inches in height." No soils, it was asserted by touring provincial politicians, were superior. Turnips weighed 35 to 40 lbs (16 to 18 kg), timothy soared to 6 ft. (1.8 m) or more, cabbages reached half that height and radishes grew at least to 2 ft. (.6 m). Vegetational growth, it was sworn, was as fast as mercury. Timothy gained 6 in. (15 cm) in four days, while flowers burst into bloom overnight.

The reason for this fantastic growth, so pamphleteers believed, was the unique soil itself, a deep chocolate clay. Into this vast reservoir, roots could sink immense distances. Assured of moisture, the plants refreshed themselves and annually produced unusually large and fine root crops and vegetables without risk of exhausting the soil.

Writers emphasized the "poor man made good" theme. The government believed that anyone with determination, good health and strength could become a rich, prosperous farmer.

Success stories were told of intrepid pioneers seizing opportunity firmly and making good. In these success tales, illustrated by impressive photographs, the hardy pioneer invariably erected a log cabin the first summer and a beautiful two-storey frame building the second. By the third year a great barn and house surrounded by numerous outbuildings appeared behind a half-mile (.8 km) of fertile fields.

The forest also received its share of glory. Afraid that settlers might



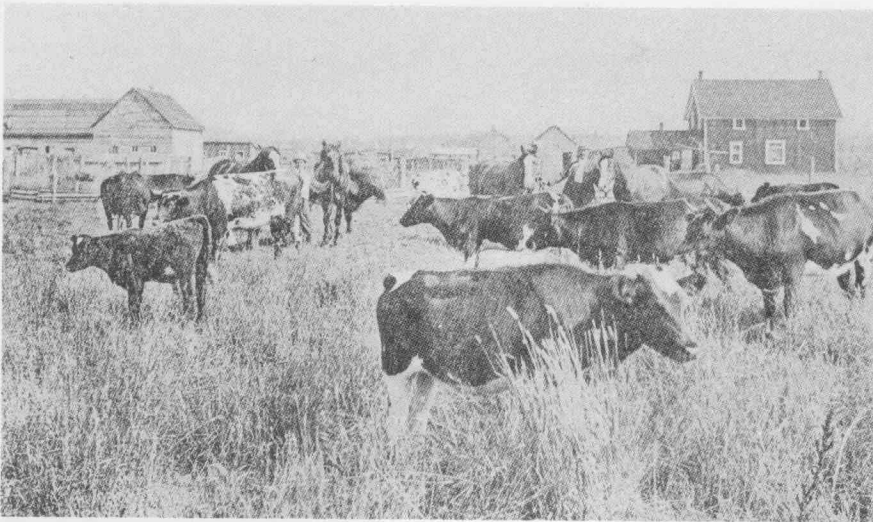
This trench shows the depth of the dark-coloured clay into which roots could "descend for immense distances."

choose the treeless prairie, or remember the massive trunks of southern Ontario, writers concentrated on the different nature of northern trees. They were smaller, pamphlets stated, with roots that were easily removed. They broke the wind, prevented blizzards and sand storms and sheltered the stock. The varied forms of foliage gave relief to both the eye and mind, and so prevented the depression and boredom of the prairie.

Some writers continued to the absurd. Trees provided delightful shaded walks and beautiful scenery. The pine-scented atmosphere stimu-

lated the health, while the green itself, said to be a restful healthy colour, promoted tranquillity and peace of the mind and soul.

Not only were the variety and pleasantness of the clay belt favourably compared with the prairies, virtues of northern Ontario also outshone those of southern Ontario. The open, less crowded northland grew better crops. According to Jacob L. Englehart, president of the Temiskaming & Northern Ontario Railway, pea weevils, blight and other crop diseases were frightened by the very word "north". The clay



Above: healthy cattle owned by A.W. Skinner of Englehart, a photograph used as part of the Ontario Government advertisements. Below: another promotional photo showing the harvesting of rye along the Temiskaming & Northern Ontario Railway.



too took all blue ribbons, yielding two crops of hay in the first sowing as quickly as "old" Ontario could grow one. This phenomenon was said to be due to the longer northern days which gave more sunlight.

The optimism of the clay belt literature before the 1930s was reflected in heightened expectations for the district. The Ontario Department of Agriculture prophesied that the clay belt would become Canada's "agricultural backbone." Other sources variously described the clay belt as "the future of Ontario", the

"pasture land of the continent" and "the best stock land in Canada." Newly-founded northern towns accepted such rhetoric. Cochrane, believing itself the Winnipeg of the north, planned extra wide streets to accommodate the future street cars of a metropolis.

The intensive publicity campaign stimulated numerous enquiries to the government. The Ontario Colonization Branch alone distributed 90,000 maps in 1908 and 100,000 brochures in 1916. Mobile railway and Canadian National Exhibition

exhibits as well as recruiting offices in Liverpool, London, Toronto, and the United States influenced thousands more.

The advertising campaign was highly effective; reality was tragically different. Small clearings, containing a tiny log dwelling, a stable, and a few acres under cultivation with seeds scattered among the stumps provided a frugal living. By 1935 immigration had faltered to a halt.

The Cochrane *Northland Post* ruefully admitted that "it may seem humorous to us today to remember that Cochrane streets were laid wide enough to provide for street car tracks... It must be admitted that progress of recent years has been painfully slow." In the 1930s Ontario Premier Mitchell Hepburn was forced to announce publicly that the provincial government was rapidly going out of the business of colonization for it was "unsound in principle and simply throwing good money after bad."

The rapid, unnecessary and badly planned settlement of the Great Clay Belt was a sad and expensive error. Many young men wasted the best years of their lives futilely struggling with heavy undrained soils requiring expensive machinery and large capital for profitable farming.

Blame for the calamity cannot be placed entirely on the provincial government, in spite of the unfortunate disregard of reports from scientific surveys. The grossly distorted, exaggerated and irresponsible colonization literature merely reflected the spirit of the times. Those lively, buoyant decades of heightened optimism saw the opening and settlement of the West, and the costly construction of two transcontinental railways.

A question remains. If overdone, was the campaign totally senseless? The rolling luxuriant fields lying along the Ontario Northland Railway today indicate that, for some hard-working settlers, Ontario's Great Clay Belt had indeed become their promised land.