14-WAIMES

The Walloons in south eastern Belgium

Romanic and Teutonic cultures have lived as near neighbours in East Belgium since the area was settled. Today, East Belgium is home to a cluster of language groups such as is seldom found within Europe for such a small region: German as official and quotidian language in the “German-speaking Community of Belgium” (DG = Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft) with distinct dialect groups in north and south; French as official language of the French Community for the majority of citizens and the Walloon dialect as daily medium of communication. The Walloon district of Malmedy, caught between the German-speaking districts of Eupen and St Vith, finds itself in an ambivalent position - as a formal separator, but also as a link. But if one looks further west, then that which unites is more important, since all three form part of the Wallonian Region.

Walloon - a Gallo-Roman idiom with Germanic influences

Walloon distinguishes itself markedly from standard French. Among the Gallo-Roman dialects, it is the one most influenced by Germanic languages. The proportion of its vocabulary with Germanic roots is reckoned at roughly a quarter. Linguists describe Walloon as a Romanic idiom of the Gallo-Roman group known as the “langues d’oïl”. Like French and Romanian, it has evolved from the spoken Latin of the Romans which, unlike its written counterpart, is by no means dead. On account of its marginal status in the Romanic language group and its closeness to Germania, Walloon was able to hold out longer than other similar languages. Maybe its exposed position in the extreme east of the Roman lands helped its survival, along with its absorption of Germanic forms. But today, so says Stany Noël, trained Romanist who works for the “Fondation Rurale de Wallonie” at its Faymonville (Waimes) office, French increasingly dominates Walloon. Walloon is becoming a dialect, mere folklore, something spoken by old people. Today’s youth, who can hardly speak Walloon, have to borrow heavily from French when using the local dialect, until their language has little in common with true Walloon.

From its roots in north-eastern Gaul to the modern everyday dialect

In the 9th century, Walloon became a language distinct from classical Latin. Simultaneously, a linguistic diversification took place in the Gallic territories, Walloon developing in the north east. The term “Walloon” has its root in the Germanic “Wahala”, meaning “foreign”. It appears for the first time in the 16th century. Written Walloon has existed since the 17th century. In the 19th century, academics began to study Walloon. But just as the Walloon language had gained academic recognition, the school system rose in opposition: children were obliged to learn in French only and Walloon was degraded to the domestic dialect of the less educated. Even today, Walloon largely survives as a folk tongue among manual workers and farmers. Yet it also survives in written form: there are poems, plays and songs in Walloon. And to prevent the disappearance of Walloon, various political initiatives have been enacted to reactivate it, some of which have enjoyed a certain amount of success in some circles.

After the resetting of European frontiers in 1815, Prussians and Walloons coexist peacefully

Following the reordering of Europe at the Congress of Vienna, frontiers were adjusted. Belgium was ceded to the Netherlands, but the district of Malmedy became Prussian. The pursuit of cultural identity was encouraged. A little more than 10,000 inhabitants of the “cantons” on Prussia’s western frontier were considered Walloon speakers in 1817/18. In retrospect, the political adjustment of frontiers in 1815, which created this Walloon minority, was experienced by them as something they could work around, something they hardly noticed, unlike the Poles or the inhabitants of Alsace-Lorraine. Indeed, one might say that there was even affection for the Prussian monarchy, particularly in the 1830s and 40s. From the Prussian point of view, a “sense of patriotism” was remarked among these new subjects, as well as a healthy attitude to their neighbours: “Although these Walloons nominally speak French, the broad mass of them are neither French nor Belgian in their attitudes and preferences”. The historian Sebastian Scharte considers that: “The Prussian Walloons were well

aware of their role as a minority, especially when, to put it ironically, the clarifying gaze of Romantic Enlightenment was cast upon them from far-off Berlin."

Walloon is threatened by the emerging nationalism of the 19th century

The unruffled relationship between Walloons and Prussians was about to change drastically in the second half of the 19th century, when Nation and Language were increasingly compelled to overlap. In 1865, Bismarck launched his "Kulturkampf" (Culture War), ordering the Germanisation of schools, churches and administrations, especially in the east of Poland and the south of Denmark. The Prussian "Geschäftssprachengesetz" (commercial language law) of 28th August 1876 laid down German as the sole official language of all Prussian territories and binding for all administrations and civil servants. This was not so much aimed at the 12,000 Walloons, but more intended to reinforce the Germanisation of the discontented German minority areas to the north and east of the German Empire (Denmark, Poland). Yet in 1877, Dr Quirin Esser, a stickler for Prussian culture, began an open feud with the Walloon clerics. In 1889, French was entirely banned from the curriculum. In some Walloon villages, children were only allowed to speak German on the playground. This repressive language legislation by the Prussian officials awoke a spirit of resistance in private circles and especially in the Church, which saw the religious development of schoolchildren endangered. The restrictions had the unlooked for effect of awakening interest in the Walloon dialect. Soon, Walloon initiatives were being launched as counter measures. In 1898, the "Club Wallon" was founded in Malmedy and people also began to increasingly focus their resistance and loyalty around one particular Pastor, who stood up for the Walloon cause.

Parson Pietkin is concerned about the right to use one's mother tongue, not just Walloon

In Sourbrodt, at the junction of what is today the Rue de Tchénas with the Rue de Botrange (the road to the "Signal de Botrange"), a monument was erected after the First World War to Abbé Pietkin. The round medallion shows his profile, crowned with a bronze sculpture of Romulus and Remus, the legendary founders of ancient Rome. Nicolas Pietkin was born in 1849 in Malmedy. After completing secondary school in Neuss, he studied theology and philosophy in Bonn, where he also sat in on lectures at the medical faculty. He was consecrated to the priesthood in Cologne cathedral. In 1879, he returned to East Belgium to become the parish priest of Sourbrodt. In his modest parish house, he was an easily approachable person for everyone's problems. He visited the sick, even when the snow was a metre deep or rain was coming down in sheets, administered final sacraments to the dying, in French, Walloon or German. As pastor in Sourbrodt, he sharply condemned the interdiction of French and was energetic in his opposition to the German School Board, pleading for the retention of the French language in schools and churches. When the suppression of the French language was at its height, Pastor Pietkin gave religious instruction in the mother-tongue of each believer: the Walloon children in Walloon, the Germans in German. He believed that the right to be able to express oneself in one's mother tongue was paramount. In the last analysis, this also meant supporting the same right for his German compatriots. He was nonetheless of the opinion that "la petite patrie wallonne" despite all the controversy since the founding of the empire, clearly belonged to "la grande patrie prussienne". As a catholic priest, he embodied the relationship between the struggle for cultural identity and minority politics, and called for religious instruction to be permitted in French, in which the Walloon dialect was rooted.

Digression - A few lines on the conflict between Walloons and Flemish

Today, about 3.4 million people live in the Walloon Region, of these, 75,200 in the DG. Formally, the Walloon Region was only created by the second Belgian State reform in 1980. In historical terms, the founding of Belgium in 1830 was a key event. Because at that time, the Brussels elite, the cause of the revolution, believed that Belgium should be a French-speaking, or francophone, unified state and the Flemish should be assimilated into it. But soon the Dutch-speaking Flemish began to resist this intention, founding a "Flemish Movement" in the northern half of the country to increase the use of Flemish Dutch in Flanders. Parallel to this, a sense of Flemish nationalism began to develop, grounded in the sense of rancour that, although they were obliged to speak French, this was not

helping them, as their francophone compatriots clearly held a monopoly on the best positions at all levels of influence. In the south, there was initially no correlation, no similar movement to protect the Walloon dialect. In the 19th century, Belgium, thanks to its coal, water and resource-rich south, had developed into the second industrial power in Europe after England. The first sign that there might be a "Walloon Movement" came in 1898 as a reaction to the "Act of Equality" won by the Flemish, which officially created a single state with two official languages. In 1912, after the second Walloon Congress had been held, its president, Jules Destrée wrote a letter to King Albert I bearing the motto "Il n'y a pas de Belges, mais des Wallons et des Flamands" (There are no Belgians, just Walloons and Flemish). This emotional rupture between the two language communities was substantially deepened during and after the two World Wars. To bring some peace to the language wars in Belgium, a language frontier was drawn in 1962/63 between Flanders and Wallonia, with the goal of maintaining the hold of each language on the areas outside the purview of the other language community (particularly in the suburbs of Brussels). In the 1970s and 80s, Wallonia was hard hit by the collapse of the mining, steel and textile industries. An ageing industrial infrastructure, with rising joblessness and mine closures in the Maas valley, as well as in Mons and Charleroi, marked the region's image. The traditional industrial base had, for the most part, vanished and with it the chance of a decent income. Families increasingly turned to the coffers of the social-welfare state to ensure their survival. The Flemish nationalists in the north no longer wanted their functioning new economy to finance this state largesse in the south. The Flemish economy had been growing disproportionately since the middle of the 1960s. The north of Belgium had now overtaken the south in growth and prosperity. The British historian Tony Judt, writing in his much valued book "Postwar: a history of Europe since 1945", saw three factors as being at the root of the conflict between the Flemish and the Walloons: the original division of the land at its creation, the insurmountable language barrier (many Flemish speak French, few Walloons speak Flemish), both heightened by the third factor, an ever-widening economic gap.

Walloon folklore and culture today – two examples: May Night and contemporary theatre "Lu Nut du May" (phonetically: lü nüt dü may)

May Night is one of the most beautiful spring customs in the Walloon areas of East Belgium. In the night of 30th April to 1st May, the young bachelors walk out in groups to sing each one's maiden of choice the May Night Song, "Lu Nut du May". The song lyric was written in 1868 by Malmedy's regional poet Florent Lebierre. 30 years later, his brother Olivier Lebierre wrote the melody. Around 1900, Baroness Von der Heydt, who was the wife of the Landrat of Malmedy at the time, translated the three-verse version of the song, which had been dedicated to her, into German. From 1920 onwards, "Lu Nut du May" spread throughout the area around Malmedy and St Vith; it was particularly part of the brass and woodwind band repertoire. The maidens had no easy night of it. They had to wait up patiently for "their" passing chorus of young men, only to be woken again later to welcome and entertain the tired and usually drunk chorale on their return.

"Cûh'nées"

One old Walloon tradition is "lu cûh'née". From the verb "cûh'ner", or cook, comes a term that has survived till today for a particular dish, simply known as the cûh'née. In Malmedy you "make a cûh'née". In olden days the cûh'née was made during the potato season of September, October and November. The meal, which would be part of a feast, took place out in the potato fields. A fire would be built and as soon as only the glowing ash remained, the potatoes were baked or "burst" in the embers (Walloon: "petter les crompîres"). The cûh'née recipe has changed little over time. The potatoes are prepared and cut in half, salted and peppered. Then a little butter is spread on them. They are then eaten together with marinated herring and onion fried in butter or fresh but finely chopped. With this, either beer or a Liege Pékèt (Sloe gin) is generally drunk. These days, the cûh'née is usually made at home in the family or with friends. It is also alive in traditional feasts and music festivals, eaten wherever choirs or diverse other clubs and associations enjoy a meal together.

“Carnaval des Ombres” / “Shadow Carnival” – regional history
Walloon culture, it is true, is mainly oriented towards traditional customs. But contemporary exceptions do exist. One example is the play “Carnaval des Ombres” / “Shadow Carnival”, which presents the theme of “Zwangssoldaten” (in particular those from Wallonia) after the annexation of East Belgium by Hitler’s Germany. *[The expression “Zwangssoldat” is so regional, that no translation exists for it. But these were young East-Belgian men, compelled after 1940 to serve in the Wehrmacht. Some were Belgian soldiers co-opted into the German army; others were free men until the Nazis drafted them].* After the war, they were treated by the Belgians as collaborators. Even many years later, the entire population of the area, including francophone citizens, were often vilified as “boches” by their neighbours further inland. Author and actor in this one-man show is Serge Demoulin. Born in Weismes, he now lives in Brussels. In the play, he connects the story of the Zwangssoldaten in a tragic-comic vein with autobiographical elements: his grandfather and uncle were drafted onto the eastern front and did not survive the war - the same destiny suffered by 3,400 from a total of 8,000 of their East-Belgian comrades in arms.

Cycling phrases in Walloon
English
Walloon
French

Do you have a room for one night with breakfast?
Av‘ one tchâbe avou lu djuné po one nut‘?
Avez-vous une chambre avec déjeuner pour une nuit?

Do you serve rolls and ham for breakfast?
I n‘a-z-i dès p’tits pâs èt do djâbô po djuner?
Y a-t-il des petits pains et du jambon pour déjeuner?

Where can I safely store my bike?
Pout-z-on wèster lu vélo?
Peut-on ranger le vélo? (le mettre en sécurité?)

Where can I get a repair done?
Wice pout-z-on lèye rèparer one pane?
Où peut on faire réparer une panne?

How many kilometres is it from Faymonville to St Vith?
Cubé du kilomèt’n’a-z-i de Fèmonvèye à Sint Vit?
Combien de kilomètres y a-t-il de Faymonville à Saint Vith?