

IMMIGRANT GONE TO HEAVEN: DUTCH POLDER TO CANADA'S FRONTIERS

Kees Vermeer, 2021. FriesenPress. 258 pp. Available in paperback and hardcover.

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During his career as an ornithologist, Kees Vermeer published dozens of research papers on the ecology and conservation of birds such as auklets, storm-petrels, puffins, and gulls. A quarter-century into his retirement, Vermeer discovered a new subject to write about — himself.

Part of Vermeer's fascination with the Glaucous-winged Gulls he studied on B.C.'s Mandarte Island as part of his Master's research is that they are like humans in that they form long-term pair bonds and family bonds and share in the rearing of young. *Immigrant Gone to Heaven* reveals a man who is somewhat like a bird, migrating great distances, seeking out remote places that many would find inhospitable, and doing so without any apparent fear.

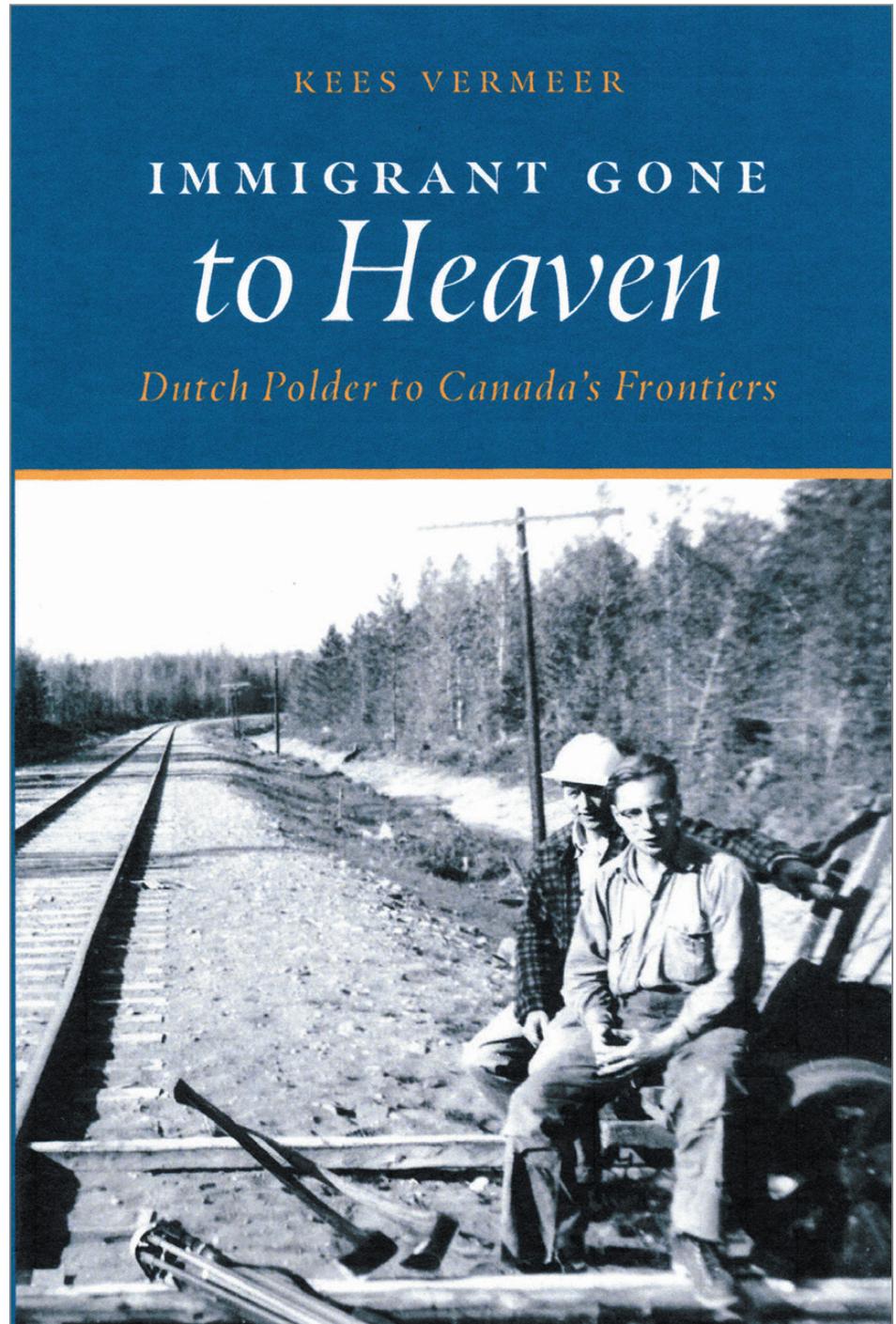
In a sense, *Immigrant Gone to Heaven* is three biographies in one, reflecting on Vermeer's life through three specific lenses. The first two parts of the book follow Vermeer on his titular journey from the Dutch Polder to Canada's Frontiers, first as immigrant and then as ornithologist. The third contains reminiscences of his childhood and the Nazi occupation of his homeland during the Second World War.

Part I: Life as an Immigrant, begins in 1953 in the Biesbosch region of the Netherlands, as a young Vermeer decides to immigrate to Canada. Departing from his homeland with little more than the clothes on his back, he takes a dizzying variety of

often unpleasant jobs to make his way to British Columbia and earn an education. Part I culminates in Vermeer receiving his PhD in Zoology from the University of Alberta, and marrying his wife Rebecca in 1967

and 1968, respectively.

Part II: Life as an Ornithologist, has a broader scope, following Vermeer throughout his life as a naturalist and scientist from childhood nest-finding trips to the polder throughout his



lengthy career with the Canadian Wildlife Service. Along the way, his travels take him everywhere from B.C.'s rocky Triangle Island, where he helped to establish a research station, to Suriname where he studied the effects of pesticides on birds and rice fields.

This part of the book also contains case studies regarding topics as varied as the effects of climate change, pesticides and habitat

loss on the ecology of several bird species. These stories are told from the first-person perspective and provide a glimpse into life in the field, in addition to the valuable research itself.

Interestingly, Vermeer decided to close his story by going back to the beginning. Part III: Reminisces of Youth and World War II contains stories of everyday family life under Nazi occupation. Vermeer was only

10 years old when the Germans invaded the Netherlands, but he was wise beyond his years. For a time, the Vermeer family was forced to share their home with a German tank crew, and one of the more impactful moments of the book is Vermeer's pity for them when the few broken survivors march back through town from the front lines.

The book's coda is a series of tributes to Kees, initially published in 1995, that provide testament to his lasting influence and legacy in Canadian ornithology.

Throughout *Immigrant Gone to Heaven* Vermeer paints remarkably detailed pictures of the people, places, and events in his life. As a reader, it's not hard to imagine yourself on the windswept Pacific islands or in the small home in the Netherlands. Vermeer's memory is prodigious, and it's easy to forget that he was in his late 80s when he wrote these words. Excellent photos, often in colour, of family, wildlife, and important places help to illustrate the story as well.

Vermeer is a gifted storyteller, and his book is packed with entertaining, thought-provoking, and educational stories, all sprinkled liberally with his dry sense of humour. Before it was fleshed out into a full autobiography, *Immigrant Gone to Heaven* began as a series of short stories Vermeer wrote for his family in the Netherlands. It's fortunate it didn't stay limited to personal correspondence, since Vermeer's tales of trans-Atlantic immigration, ornithological field research and wartime survival are sure to engage and entertain a diverse audience. 🐦



"Immigrant Gone to Heaven is a remarkable book. It grips the reader from the moment the author joins an Emigration Training Centre in the Biesbosch region of the Netherlands with the goal of moving to Canada. We follow his experiences as he lands in Canada and works his way up from farm-hand to obtaining a doctorate in Zoology. The section of the book detailing his explorations in ornithology are as fascinating as the stories of immigration and the memories of World War II. The book takes the reader on a riveting journey of exploration in many facets of social history and science as viewed through the lens of an inquisitive and always optimistic upbeat man. I strongly recommend this book to anyone interested in learning more about World War II, immigration, bird behavior or even just in how a life's journey can unfold with all its unexpected twists and turns."

—Tom Bijvoet, Publisher, *DUTCH the Magazine* – *Maandblad de krant*

"Brimming with charming personal anecdotes and fascinating ornithological research in equal measure, Kees Vermeer's *Immigrant Gone to Heaven* paints a vivid picture of an adventurous and fearless life. Vermeer's curiosity and insight into the natural world are evident from his descriptions of childhood nest-hunting in the Dutch polder, to his pioneering work with seabirds on British Columbia's windswept Triangle Island. His stories of everyday life under Nazi occupation are enthralling in their own right. Naturalists, scientists and history buffs alike will enjoy this book."

—Annie McLeod, Editor of *Nature Saskatchewan's Blue Jay*.