

## Social Structure in a Commercial City: Saint-John, 1871

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SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN A COMMERCIAL CITY:  
SAINT JOHN, 1871

The manuscript of the Dominion Census of 1871 remains a largely ignored source in Canadian historiography. Perhaps because Canadian historians have been slow to adapt quantitative methodology to the analysis of social and urban phenomena, our historiography has yet to show the influence of documents like the census and the assessment rolls which have been so much in evidence in recent work in the United States and in western Europe. The study described here represents an attempt to explore the usefulness of the census in examining historical societies.

Data involving the individuals who lived in Saint John, New Brunswick, has been analysed here. The population under study were adult males (over sixteen) and females who owned property, in Saint John proper and in the town of Portland, a suburb of the city. There was no sampling done in the research. The population under examination consists of approximately ten thousand individuals, out of a total population of 41,310. Clearly, the assistance of a computer was required if any systematic analysis was to be attempted. Information from the first schedule of the census, dealing with personal characteristics such as age, religion, ethnicity, and occupation as well as information on property ownership and industrial productivity from later schedules was coded, using either a simple numerical code or real numbers where possible. This was transferred to computer cards and then to tape, after which the computer was asked to perform a series of simple procedures to sort, count, and identify the statistical relationships among the variables. The medium for this request was the program "Statistical Package For The Social Sciences". This is a very flexible and literate program, easily grasped by people with little knowledge of computer science.

The Census Abstract for 1871 sorts and counts data. But in doing so it leaves no means by which the relationships between individual variables can be explored. In a sense, the abstracts distort the original manuscript by tearing the aspects of an individual away from him. The abstract, for instance, will tell us how many people in Saint John were Irish, how many were Roman Catholic, and how many owned homes. But it

does not tell us how many homeowners were Irish Roman Catholics and, by inference, the relationship between home ownership, ethnicity and religion. To discover this we must go back to the source of the data, the census manuscript, and do our own analysis. What follows then is a brief description of the major conclusions and inferences to be drawn from the data in this study.

First, some preliminary notes on the demographic composition of Saint John in 1871. The largest ethnic group in the city were the Irish, most of whom had come in the famine migrations of the 1840's and early 1850's. Those of English origin were the next most numerous, followed by the Scots. There were few other ethnic groups represented. The Roman Catholics comprised the largest religious group, followed by the Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists. The majority of the population was born in New Brunswick, although a sizeable percentage (31%) was born in Ireland. When these variables are analyzed in relation to occupation, a number of patterns emerge. Most striking perhaps is the tendency for Roman Catholicism and to a lesser extent Irish ethnicity and birthplace, to be associated with the largest single occupational group in the city, the common labourers.

In the same sense that the Roman Catholics tended to dominate occupations on the lower end of the status scale, the English, New Brunswick-born Anglicans tended to dominate the high status occupations. In groups like the merchants and the lawyers, this tendency is clearly exhibited.

An analysis of property ownership reinforces the hierarchical relationships suggested by the social status attached to the various occupations. First however, it is worth noting that the ownership of any property was a luxury enjoyed by a rather small elite. More than two-thirds of the population analyzed here owned none of the items recorded by the census-taker. Of these, the three most significant were land owned outside the city, lots within the city, and homes. Each of these groups of property owners was dominated by the English, Anglican elite. The domination was most extreme when considering people who owned land outside the city, less so with town lots, and less again with dwellings. The

exclusion of the Roman Catholics from these propertied groups was so extensive that all Protestant religious groups owned more than their share.

In terms of occupations, the high status groups, the merchants and the lawyers, dominated the ranks of property owners. At the opposite end of the scale, the common labourers comprised an almost entirely property-less mass.

The census also provides returns on the industrial sector of the city. The analysis of these variables is too complex to characterize in a few lines, but a quick overview of the data suggests an industrial base in its early stages of development. The representative industry in Saint John in 1871, apart from shipbuilding, was the small shop or craft-house - perhaps a shoemaker's establishment - with a small capital investment, one or two employees, an annual payroll of a few hundred dollars, and a low product value. The large industrial establishment had not yet driven these small operations from the city's economy. In the terminology favoured by some urban historians, Saint John in 1871 was just beginning to evolve from a commercial to an industrial city. And again, the more extensive and valuable the industry, the more its proprietors tended to be from the same elite group identified in the consideration of property ownership and occupational status.

Of equal importance to the socio-economic hierarchy sketched by the census data is the insight it provides into the way in which the population of Saint John was distributed spatially. Here again, one finds clearly defined patterns. There was a central core where the elite and the poor tended to mix, and a ward so heavily Irish Roman Catholic as to resemble an ethno-religious ghetto. On the farther edges of the city, one finds districts where the demographic composition and patterns of occupational and industrial activity and property ownership are strongly suggestive of middle class suburbs.

This brief outline has not related the complexity of information, both direct and inferential, which is contained in the manuscript census. However, it is hoped that the main utility of the census data has emerged here; that is, the identification of the characteristics of the major

groups within the society, and their relationships one to another, in terms of the variables recorded by the census-taker.

What is not to be found in this document is information on the behaviour of these groups. With the census anchored in one instant in time, this knowledge can only be found through the more traditional historical sources, or by some further analysis of the data that may exist in the form of assessment roles or local documents. The 1861 census for Saint John is not terribly useful and the 1881 federal census remains closed, so the possibilities of adding a time dimension to the study of Saint John is problematic for the moment.

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