

THE CANADIAN FAMILIES PROJECT

The Canadian Families Project is an interdisciplinary project funded by a Major Collaborative Research Initiative (MCRI) grant from SSHRC and by five participating universities (Victoria, York, Ottawa, Sherbrooke and Concordia). The original team, a majority of whom are historians, includes Peter Baskerville, Annalee Golz, Lynne Marks, Larry McCann, Ian MacPherson, and Eric Sager (all at the University of Victoria, the host institution); Bettina Bradbury and Gordon Darroch (York University); Chad Gaffield (Ottawa); Peter Gossage (Sherbrooke); and Danielle Gauvreau (Concordia). The Project has awarded three post-doctoral fellowships, to Annalee Golz (now in the Department of Women's Studies at the University of Victoria), Lisa Dillon and Ken Sylvester. Since 1996 thirty graduate students have worked with us on theses relating to Project themes, and many of these students were also employed as Project research assistants.

As a collaboration among humanists and social scientists, the Project benefits from the synergy and creative frictions of different methods and approaches, applied to a widening range of historical sources. "Lhut," the old war-time barracks that is our UVic home, has witnessed discussions of discourse analysis, loglinear regression, chaos theory and geographical occupations listed in historical censuses. In the first two years, however, the more technical discussion of data entry procedures took priority. Any discussion of family and household in Canada lacks the vast empirical foundation afforded to U.S. historians by the IPUMS - the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series created from national samples of historical and more recent censuses, and now available via the Internet. Canadian historians cannot gain access to post-1901 census schedules, even for the purpose of creating computerized samples in which individual privacy is fully protected. A national sample of the 1901 census of Canada is an important beginning: it allows intensive analysis of families and households at the turn of the century, and an opportunity for comparisons with existing samples of Canadian censuses, especially the 1871 national sample and Statistics Canada's post-1971 public use samples.

Completed in January 1998, our database contains all information on 50,943 dwellings and 265,286 individuals from Schedules 1 and 2 of the 1901 census. This database will become a "public use sample," available to other users through the Internet at the end of the Canadian Families Project in 2001. The Project has also entered several "oversamples" from the census, including all individuals in Amherst and Kentville, Nova Scotia; Dunnville and Berlin, Ontario; and Nelson, Revelstoke and Victoria, British Columbia. The Project held a workshop in Victoria in May, 1998, at which the team presented a series of papers on the strengths and weaknesses of the census and of the completed national sample.

With the addition of new post-doctoral fellows the research agenda has expanded and so have the creative inter-actions among us. We began with a series of inter-related themes: discourses of family and nation (Golz); class, ethnicity and region (Darroch); fertility decline (Gauvreau and Gossage); gender and single parenthood (Bradbury); language, education and family (Gaffield); religion and family (Marks); families in rural Canada (MacPherson); the urban social geography of families (McCann); the family economy and living standards (Sager and Baskerville). Within the purview of team members now falls the subject of ageing and living arrangements of the elderly, as Lisa Dillon expands her doctoral research to make use of the 1901 Canadian census. Ken Sylvester has studied the social and economic development of Montcalm, a francophone community on the prairies, and is broadening his focus to include ethnicity, household composition and responses to market change between the 1890s and 1930s.

A comparison of the original grant application with the Project's recent mid-term Report to SSHRC reveals significant additions to the work of the founding co-investigators. Intrigued by the fluid application of definitions of family and marital status in the 1901 census, Annalee Golz and her research assistants have located, and entered into a computer file, all persons in the 1901 census who stated that they were divorced. They found more divorced people in the manuscript census than were reported in the published census volumes, and many more self-declared divorces in Quebec than they expected. Lynne Marks and her assistants are locating all persons in British Columbia in the 1901 census who said, in response to the question about religion, that they were agnostic, atheist, or non-believer. Peter Baskerville's recent work, appearing in a number of conference papers, now embraces self-employed women, lodgers and boarding house keepers, and property ownership. His work tends to confirm that long-term comparisons between 1901 and more recent census and Statistics Canada data are possible, with careful attention to changes of meaning and definition. He has found, for instance, that among those in the labour force self-employment was more common for men a century ago, and much more common for women in 1901 than today.

Work on the Canadian censuses has allowed us to develop connections with historians outside Canada who use similar sources, and in 1998 three members of our team (Dillon, Baskerville and Gaffield) were awarded a Research Development Initiative grant from SSHRC to begin work on the integration of census databases internationally. A workshop is being planned for the spring of 1999 at the new Institute of Canadian Studies at the University of Ottawa.

From the beginning the Project has attended to the spatial dimensions of family and household. In addition to pioneering new ways of mapping census boundaries in 1901 (original maps appear to have been lost), Larry McCann and his team of graduate students have embarked on studies of suburbanization, the residential location of families in the urban environment, the family economy and industrialization, and the intersection of family discourse with debates over urban planning in the early twentieth century.

The census is one of many windows into families and households. Our research assistants continue to explore the cultural and social contexts of family experience through a wide range of sources: newspapers, legal records, religious periodicals, and government documents. Sharing research and ideas among a team gives each participant access to deeper resources than they could ever expect when working alone. The pool of resources will yield not only conference papers and scholarly publications, but also printed and electronic works for wider audiences.

The Project carries useful lessons for historians that we happily share (and it surprises me that since our Project began no historian in Canada has sought my advice about how we prepared a successful application to SSHRC's MCRI program). One lesson is that the MCRI, while it remains a small part of the agency's overall budgets, offers opportunities for inter-disciplinary collaboration which can benefit both faculty and students (at both undergraduate and graduate levels) and the discipline of history as a whole.

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