

Eric W. Sager and Peter Baskerville, eds.

Household Counts: Canadian Households and Families in 1901.

University of Toronto Press, 2007, 486 pp.

\$45.00 paper (0802038026), \$85.00 hardcover (0802038603)

Somewhere, perhaps, you will still find a person who thinks sociology can do without history and historians. And somewhere – maybe in the same place – someone thinks the discipline of history is intended mainly to record the great deeds of great men (*sic*) However, the sociologists reading this journal will likely know that good sociology requires good history, and good historical research today is about everyone – about ordinary people as well as the powerful and famous.

The volume under review is an analysis of the 1901 Canadian census by an interdisciplinary group of researchers led by historians Eric Sager and Peter Baskerville of the University of Victoria. The fourteen meaty essays in this book tell us a great deal about life in Canada a century ago.

Moreover, they give a taste of things to come. That is because the group represented in this volume forms the core of an interdisciplinary, inter-university group associated with the ongoing Canadian Census Research Infrastructure (CCRI) project. This project has spent over five years preparing samples of the 1911-1951 Canadian censuses for use by researchers (see www.uottawa.ccri for more information.) Once this CCRI project has been completed within the next few years, sociologists and historians will have access to user samples of all the Canadian censuses from 1871 to 2001. This new CCRI data-set, or “research infrastructure”, will make possible as never before research on what could be called the “hidden history” of Canadian society.

I must confess that I am both suited **and** unsuited to write the present book review, since I have been a member of the CCRI group for the past five years. Thus, I am fully aware of the goals of the census analysis represented by the book under review. I am also a friend of many researchers whose works are included in the present book, since they are CCRI colleagues. For that reason, readers of this review may have to discount some of my enthusiasm. That said, I think this is an important and interesting book, and I encourage sociologists to read it.

To be fair, I will start by mentioning some shortcomings. First, there are limits to what anyone can do with a one-time snapshot of Canadian society, even if that snapshot is of a very large, unbiased sample of Canadian dwellings in 1901. Cross-sectional analysis is always inferior to longitudinal analysis if our purpose is to explain social change — or indeed, any process of cause and effect. The much-larger CCRI data-set, when completed, will suffer the same problem, since it will lack data-linkage between the individuals sampled in successive Censuses. That said, the study of successive cross-sections can still be useful. Some of the essays in this present volume use data from earlier censuses as a comparative backdrop for their interpretation of the 1901 census data. This helps to situate the findings, though it does not entirely solve the problem.

Second, the current volume uses the census data to focus mainly on households and families, though in fairness other topics such as class, religion and language are discussed in some essays. The focus on households and families exploits the 1901 census data in a less thorough way than some readers might wish. On the other hand, that means there is a lot more left to do with these costly and valuable data.

Third, the writing in these contributed essays ranges from fascinating to business-like and even dry: that is to say, there is no unity of voice or topic in this large book. In many places, the book reads

like a research report or working paper, with too little attention given to the needs of readers who need persuading — or even seduction. This suggests that fewer sociologists, historians and even non-academic readers will read this book than would profit by doing so. The editors might consider using the current book as the basis for a shorter, unified book aimed at an academic, student, or popular audience.

These criticisms aside, the book contains a wealth of interesting and useful information. As such it can help to dispel many misconceptions about Canada 100 years ago. First, the book shows clearly that, even a century ago, Canada’s population was extremely diverse. For example, there were already many different types of families and households, contrary to a currently prevailing sociological view that families and households have become progressively more diverse — and complex — over the past century. Likewise, the book reveals a diversity of social categories (e.g., occupations, classes) and identities (e.g., linguistic, racial, ethnic, and religious). In 1901, there were even religious unbelievers on record, despite our tendency to imagine a deeply and uniformly religious society.

Second, many of the so-called social problems we associate with contemporary Canadian society were already evident in an embryonic form. On view already were social issues arising from immigration, geographic mobility, and rural-to-urban migration. Intergenerational conflicts and even single-parent families were not unknown, though typically the absence of a parent was more often due to death than divorce or separation.

Any reader will find essays in this volume that he or she particularly favors, so let me name a few of my favorites. The opening essay, by editors Eric Sager and Peter Baskerville, usefully ties together the various contributions and themes of this book. Moreover, I enjoyed the essay by book editor Peter Baskerville, titled “Giving Birth: Families and the Medical Marketplace in Victoria, British Columbia, 1880-1901.” Essentially about the local market for midwifery services, this essay shows off the author’s elegant thinking and writing. Baskerville is a sociologists’ historian, whose articles, essays and books are always worth close reading.

An essay by historian Chad Gaffield, head of the CCRI Project and currently head of SSHRC, is about the popular debate over census-taking in Canada, and especially over census categorizations of identities such as ethnicity or language group. That census-taking was (and still is) a social construction of reality — and, in this respect, a political and cultural process as well as a process of demographic documentation — has been ably argued in a recent prize-winning book by sociologist Bruce Curtis. Chad Gaffield’s essay makes clear the need to read census “data” in the context of ongoing definitional debates that are often driven by important political, economic and social concerns. The social power of population numbers was as evident in 1901 as it is today.

An essay by York sociologist Gordon Darroch uses data from the 1871 and 1901 census micro-samples to discuss children who lived away from their parental homes. The 19th century pattern of children moving out and boarding out resisted significant change over the thirty-year period under study. This flow of children among families played an important part in supplying labour-power to a society that depended on compliant humans for cheap agricultural work and the satisfaction of middle-class comforts. In short, this was a time when children were still cheaper and more available than the technical devices that would simplify our domestic lives in the 20th century. Darroch’s analysis combines the sociologically familiar techniques of multivariate statistical analysis with a close reading of the source documents we normally associate with the historical analyses of parish records.

In closing, this book provides a valuable introduction to the new, interdisciplinary, multi-method approach of studying historical census data. Readers of this journal will do well to familiarize themselves with the goals and tactics of this enterprise, as it will likely attract many adherents in the coming decades.

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Lorne Tepperman has used historical statistics to study large-scale, long-term social processes such as the individualization of women's lives in 20th century Canada.

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September 2007

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