

Appendix B

Literacy and the Census¹

Despite their common contemporary use (both in the nineteenth century and today), manuscript censuses have not been employed by historians in the study of literacy, nor have scholars researching other questions from this source often inquired into its literacy data. This is most unfortunate, for there are a number of reasons for accepting census information regarding literacy and illiteracy; it is, I believe, a very valuable source, especially for the nineteenth century. This is particularly true of the 1861 Canadian census, the document on which Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are based. This use requires some explanation and comment.

Of the many sources employed in the historical study of literacy (outside Scandinavia), the census has potentially the broadest coverage (see Appendix A). Surveying, in theory at least, all persons resident in the Canadas, the 1861 census distributed printed schedules to each household in the cities, which inquired into the literacy of each person aged 20 years or more, collecting data for the analysis of adult literacy. At a time of educational reform and expansion, these returns provided the first systematic and direct information on the educational level of this population; they asked the respondent to indicate "persons over 20 who cannot read or write" on an individual level. Thus, the manuscripts provide a basis, first, for the estimation of adult literacy rates, and, second, for the study of variations in the social distribution of literacy and its value. The census, in addition to wider coverage than many other sources, also supplies a greater amount of information on

¹ This brief note is based upon my "What the 1861 census can tell us about literacy," *Histoire sociale*, 8 (1975), 337-349. Readers wishing an extended discussion of these issues should consult that article.

each individual (e.g., occupation, age, sex, marital status, birthplace, religion, family status). Important in themselves, these data also facilitate linkage with other sources, such as wealth reports. For literacy study in mid-nineteenth-century Canada (and probably elsewhere), the census manuscripts hold the greatest potential in coverage, representativeness, and versatility—certainly more than the alternatives of wills, deeds, certificates, etc. The census category also forms one definition of literacy; it is flexible and broadly comparable among the population and with other sources. The procedure and the definition strongly suggest that the authorities were cognizant of the high levels of literacy and acted accordingly. The definition, while ambiguous in not separating reading from writing, specifies a minimum level of attainment, allowing readers to respond as well as those who held other abilities. Here as elsewhere, reading was taught before writing; that skill provides the foundation for a definition of literacy and a presumption of its presence.

A number of factors point to the imprudence of the all too frequent and abrupt dismissal of these censuses for literacy research. These include external evidence, the practice of urban enumeration, and the internal patterns.

1. Explicit legal sanctions against giving false information were printed on each form. It is doubtful that the fine of \$8–\$20 was strictly enforced, but these sums were not insubstantial to many. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, we can not assume that the threat of penalty carried no weight.

2. The press and pulpit conducted campaigns for public acceptance and compliance with the census. These included the review of the schedule and its instructions, and exhortations to comply honestly. Interest in the census was promoted and a climate of opinion in its support was created by leaders.

3. A presumed stigma of admitted illiteracy need not have compromised the accuracy of the data, as some have argued. As Webb found in England, and all students have seen, “a good many people would admit to illiteracy.” Illiterate gentlemen and wealthy individuals, some with high status occupations, are located regularly in historical research.

4. The enumeration procedure complicated easy hiding of illiteracy. An illiterate head of household was unable to complete his or her own schedule; another party would have to substitute, with the awareness of the first person’s inability. A second party, whether enumerator, neighbor, or coresident, could have little or no reason to obscure the fact of illiteracy or to perjure him or herself, especially since his or her own signature would often go on the form. Urban enumeration procedures

(as distinct from rural ones, which brought an enumerator with his book from door to door) encouraged rather than deterred the admission of illiteracy.

5. Some underenumeration must be expected with any source like the census, as we find today. The lesser amount of residential segregation and more common mixing of class and ethnic groups, however, may have allowed coverage to be more complete. Regardless, we must recognize that rates of literacy derived from historical sources must be considered approximate. Further, in the analysis presented here, the individual, and not rates, forms the more important unit of analysis; with this emphasis, the problem of underenumeration is less acute: the census differentiates the literate and illiterate, and provides their characteristics.

6. The census is a collection of reports of and by individuals in response to a series of questions, in which literacy was included. Research on literacy in widely varied places has discovered high levels of accuracy: in the Philippines, Columbia, Bangladesh, for example.² Agreement not unusually ranges up to and above 90%; exaggeration is slight.

7. A census requires a conscious act of the individual in responding to the inquiry, an evaluation and assessment. To signify literacy in 1861 required leaving a column empty, a statement as direct as the completion of any other category and a measure of conscious intent (the literacy column fell in the middle of the schedule too). The individual creates a record of his or her literacy ability, whether the column is marked or left unmarked.

8. Internal evidence provides a check on the accuracy of this self-reported data. In some cases, especially those involving the literacy of the head of household who was to sign the form, self-reports may be compared with the presence or absence of a signature. The correlation, though, is not a simple and direct one; it nevertheless may be interpreted consistently with the validity of the measure. In Hamilton, Kingston, and London, 40, 70, and 60% of heads, respectively, admitting illiteracy made their mark. For others, there is no such simple check. However, many readers would not be able to sign; the absence of a mark on the schedule of an illiterate does not affect that status; other markers could be readers. (Research by K. A. Lockridge and R. S. Schofield supports

² J. E. deYoung and C. L. Hunt, "Communication Channels and Functional Literacy in the Philippine Barrio," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 22 (1966), 69-70; E. M. Rogers and W. Herzog, "Functional Literacy among Columbian Peasants," *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 14 (1966), 194; Alex Inkeles *et al.*, "Some Social Psychological Effects and Non-effects of Literacy in a New Nation," *ibid.*, 16 (1967), 2; Inkeles and D. H. Smith, *Becoming Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 254.

this pattern and its interpretation.) An obsession with signatures or marks alone is unwarranted, and further, it would force a test of literacy employed with other, signatory types of sources that is not wholly appropriate to the census' measure. Thus, unsigned schedules and those signed by another individual (often an enumerator) are equally consistent with the interpretation of self-reported testaments of accuracy. The admission of literacy or illiteracy carries a greater evidential and interpretive weight than other indications—none of which is contradictory or inconsistent with the procedures of census-taking.

9. The results of the tabulations of individual illiterates provide strong additional evidence that the admission and indication of illiteracy was very far from random or spotty. Literacy rates were quite similar among all the cities of Ontario, and rates varied by age, sex, ethnicity, and occupation and wealth, as familiarity with the historical background would predict. Regional patterns are consistent, too. The meaning of these patterns forms the matter of Part One; nonetheless, the presence of these patterns lends support to the census' credibility and validity.

The census' evidence on literacy and illiteracy, it must be stressed, while important and valid, is not directly equatable with the status measured by a signature (perhaps the most common of historical measures used thus far by researchers). Its standard for comparison is the person's own evaluation of his or her literacy skills; that from a signature is no more comparable from person to person. Both sources (and all others) require interpretation as to what ability they in fact represent; each provides a direct test, but we must note that the ability to read varies widely. Those researchers working from signatory documents (marriage registers, wills, deeds, etc.) must assume that some fluency in reading accompanied, or preceded, the ability to sign a name; those using the census base their studies on an individual's statement of a personal assessment of the possession of an ability to read or write, a usable level. This measure of literacy therefore has an important evaluative and practical aspect, and it relates to the ability to use literacy in daily life and work in nineteenth-century places. Problems of comparability among sources undoubtedly remain, and comparisons must be conducted cautiously.

The census, finally, does suffer from problems. Most important are those of underenumeration and of the short span of its present availability to researchers. Other sources also present their complications. Deeds and wills, for example, provide an increasingly unrepresentative sample, with population growth, stratification, landlessness, and the infrequent appearance of women narrowing and limiting their repre-

sentativeness. Both are biased in the direction of wealth, and probably in ethnicity and occupation too. Wills, of course, suffer from the bias of age, which may well lower significantly the signature rates, although the extent of this remains to be estimated accurately. For Ontario, and elsewhere, in this period, neither of these sources provides the amount of information, the representativeness, or the coverage that the census does. Even marriage registers, the most popular source to date are restricted to those legally marrying, perhaps 80% of the population.

Census reports of literacy and illiteracy from the 1861 urban manuscripts provide an important and valid measure. They share with all other indices some advantages and some disadvantages, and, as with all measures, their meaning and utility must be interpreted and understood before the data are exploited. In representation and coverage, census data is far more broadly based than any other measure available to historians of nineteenth-century Canada and probably for the United States as well. I hope that this use of the census will stimulate others to follow suit.