

Making the 1891 Census in British Columbia

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Nineteenth-century census records, particularly nominal census schedules containing detailed information about individuals, have provided the foundation for many important historical studies. Little attention has been paid, however, to the enumeration process and to the construction of these schedules on which so much recent historical scholarship depends. The 1891 census of British Columbia offers a useful case study to explain how the Dominion census worked during the late nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century. As well, it reveals themes distinct to British Columbia's history: the tyranny of terrain and the challenge of distance, regionalism and sectional rivalry, alienation from Eastern Canada, anti-Asian sentiment, and ambivalent attitudes towards Aboriginal peoples.

Les documents de recensement du XIX^e siècle, surtout les bulletins de recensement nominatif contenant des renseignements détaillés sur les individus, ont servi de fondement à bon nombre d'études historiques importantes. Mais on s'est peu intéressé au processus de dénombrement et à la construction de ces bulletins sur lesquels repose une si grande partie du savoir historique récent. Le recensement de 1891 de la Colombie-Britannique est une étude de cas utile pour expliquer les rouages du recensement fédéral à la fin du XIX^e siècle et au début du XX^e siècle. Il permet également de dégager des thèmes propres à l'histoire de la Colombie-Britannique : la tyrannie du terrain et le défi de la distance, le régionalisme et la rivalité sectorielle, l'aliénation de l'Est du Canada, l'intolérance envers les Asiatiques et l'ambivalence à l'égard des peuples autochtones.

CENSUS RECORDS OCCUPY a prominent place in the repertoire of documentary evidence available to social historians in Canada. Nineteenth-century census records have provided the foundation for many important historical studies published over the last few decades, and today several major research projects, using data from the 1901 census of Canada, are underway. As Kris Inwood and Richard Reid noted recently, census-based

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historical studies are not only increasing in number, they are also becoming increasingly sophisticated. Assisted by new computer technologies and informed by methodologies from a broad array of academic disciplines, historians are now deploying census data to help answer complex questions “that deal with class, wealth, gender, occupation, political behaviour, and social structures”.¹

In the majority of cases, the demographic data used by historians is derived from the nominal census schedules that were created as part of the decennial censuses undertaken between 1861 and 1901.² Nominal census schedules contain detailed information on the names, ages, origins, religions, occupations, and family structures of the people. These records constitute an extraordinarily rich quarry of historical information. As Inwood and Reid also noted in their recent survey, however, scholarly efforts to interpret the data may have been hampered by an “astonishing lack of information about the workings of the census itself”.³ Indeed, despite extensive scholarly interest in the field of census research, very little attention has been paid to the enumeration process and to the construction of the nominal census schedules. Almost none has been paid to the history of the records on which so much recent historical scholarship depends.⁴

A study of the 1891 census in British Columbia may help to explain how the Dominion census actually worked during the late nineteenth and early part of this century. The 1891 census of British Columbia offers a useful historical case study for a number of reasons. First of all, the enumeration

1 Kris Inwood and Richard Reid, “Introduction: The Use of Census Manuscript Data for Historical Research”, *Histoire sociale / Social History*, vol. 28, no. 56 (November 1995), p. 320. Many of the essays in this issue of *Histoire sociale / Social History* deal with the use of census manuscript data in historical enquiries.

2 Nominal schedules created for the decennial censuses of 1901 and earlier are available on microfilm from the National Archives of Canada. At the time of writing, the Canadian government agency responsible for the census, Statistics Canada, has declared that the 1901 census would be the last census made available in manuscript form to researchers. Nominal schedules for the 1911 census and all subsequent censuses are to remain closed because of concerns over confidentiality. *ACA [Association of Canadian Archivists] Bulletin*, vol. 22 (July 1998), pp. 28–29.

3 Inwood and Reid, “Introduction: The Use of Census Manuscript Data for Historical Research”, p. 304.

4 A notable exception is Robert M. Galois, “Mapping the British Columbia Census, 1881”, *ACML [Association of Canadian Map Librarians] Bulletin*, vol. 47 (1983), pp. 26–36. Other notable exceptions are David P. Gagan’s research note, “Enumerator’s Instructions for the Census of Canada 1852 and 1861,” *Histoire sociale / Social History*, vol. 8, no. 16 (November 1974), pp. 355–365; Alan A. Brookes, “‘Doing the Best I Can’: The Taking of the 1861 New Brunswick Census”, *Histoire sociale / Social History*, vol. 17, no. 33 (May 1976), pp. 70–91. The historical design and deployment of census data is also the subject of two recent studies by Bruce Curtis, “On the Local Construction of Statistical Knowledge: Making Up the 1861 Census of the Canadas”, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 7, no. 4 (1994), pp. 416–431, and “Expert Knowledge and the Social Imaginary: The Case of the Montreal Check Census”, *Histoire sociale / Social History*, vol. 28, no. 56 (November 1995), pp. 313–330.

process is well documented. Correspondence between census officials in Ottawa and British Columbia has been preserved and key administrative records have survived. As well, standard census practices were followed in British Columbia: the procedures and apparatus used to enumerate the people in that province were the same as those used to count and classify the population in other parts of the country.⁵ Furthermore, the organizational structures developed by the federal government and used in British Columbia during the 1891 census were similar to those used across Canada in the decennial censuses of 1871, 1881, and 1901.

While the 1891 census of British Columbia offers evidence of larger processes, it also reveals preoccupations and concerns that were distinct to Canada's most westerly province. Many of the standard themes of British Columbia's history — notably the tyranny of terrain and the challenge of distance, regionalism and sectional rivalry, alienation from Eastern Canada, anti-Asian sentiment, and ambivalent attitudes towards aboriginal peoples — were hallmarks of the census of 1891.⁶

The primary purpose of the census in Canada is to determine parliamentary representation according to the formula set down in the *British North America Act*. These constitutional objectives are acknowledged in the first federal *Census Act* of 1870 and in the revised statutes of 1879 and 1886. The census is also the basis for determining federal *per capita* grants to the provinces. It is not simply an apportionment instrument, however; it is also a tool used to assess economic growth, regional development, and a variety of other social and economic indicators. As the official *Census Manual* for 1891 explained, “[T]he science of government ... presupposes a general knowledge of the wants and capabilities, the defects and advantages,

5 Recent census-based studies which focus on British Columbia include Jean Barman, “The West Beyond the West: The Demography of Settlement in British Columbia”, *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes*, vol. 25 (Fall 1990), pp. 5–18; Peter Baskerville and Eric W. Sager, “Locating the Unemployed in Urban British Columbia: Evidence from the 1891 Census”, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, pp. 38–55; Peter Baskerville, “ ‘She Has Already Hinted at Board’: Enterprising Urban Women in British Columbia, 1863–1896”, *Histoire sociale / Social History*, vol. 26, no. 52 (November 1993), pp. 205–227; John Douglas Belshaw, “Cradle to Grave: An Examination of Demographic Behavior on Two British Columbian Frontiers”, *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* (1994), pp. 41–63; Allen Seager and Adele Perry, “Mining the Connections: Structure and Experience in a Nineteenth Century Coalfield,” *Histoire sociale / Social History*, vol. 30, no. 59 (May 1997), pp. 55–76; Robert Galois and Cole Harris, “Recalibrating Society: The Population Geography of British Columbia in 1881”, *The Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe canadien*, vol. 38 (1994), pp. 37–53.

6 These historical themes are discussed in Alan Smith, “The Writing of British Columbia History”, *BC Studies*, no. 45 (Spring 1980) and Robin Fisher, “Matters for Reflection: *BC Studies* and British Columbia History”, *BC Studies*, no. 100 (Winter 1993–94). These themes are also featured in two recent historical surveys: Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991); Hugh J. M. Johnston, ed., *The Pacific Province: A History of British Columbia* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1996).

numerically presented, of the population and the country.”⁷ To facilitate that science, a questionnaire consisting of nine schedules was deployed in 1891. The schedules related to population, agriculture production, manufacturing, investments, natural resources (forestry, fisheries, and mining), and shipping. Of the schedules, only Schedule 1 — “Nominal Return of the Living” — has survived in manuscript form.⁸

Like the decennial census that preceded it, the 1891 Census was an “imperial census”, inasmuch as the Dominion was enumerated simultaneously with Britain and other parts of the Empire. In 1881 the Registrar-General in London, England, determined that April 4 would be the reference point for the censuses in all of Her Majesty’s possessions; accordingly, enumerators were supposed to record the state of the population as it existed on that particular day. In some parts of the Empire, early spring is a good time for enumerating people and property (“O to be in England, now that April’s there,” as the poet Browning said), but much of Canada is still covered with snow at that time of year and, as might be expected, travel was often difficult. The “hard sledding” which characterized census-taking in many parts of Canada may help to explain why isolated communities were often underenumerated.⁹ Logistic difficulties imposed by the imperial schedule also added to the expense of enumeration. Although these concerns were raised by federal bureaucrats after the Second Dominion Census (1881), the Parliament of Canada nevertheless agreed to another imperial census in 1891. The target date for the Third Dominion census was Monday, April 6, 1891.¹⁰

Unlike the British census, the Canadian census was a *de jure* count, rather than a *de facto* count.¹¹ That is to say, people were counted where they would normally have resided, rather than where they were actually found when met by enumerators. The *de jure* process was adopted in order to

7 Canada, Department of Agriculture (Census Branch), *Manual containing “The Census Act,” and The Instructions to Officers Employed in the Taking of the Third Census of Canada (1891)* (hereafter *Census Manual*), p.1.

8 The 1891 census consisted of the following schedules: No. 1 — Nominal Return of the Living; No. 2 — Nominal Return of Deaths within the last twelve months, and Public Institutions; No. 3 — Return of Real Estate, Orchard Products, Nurseries, Vineyards, and Market Gardens; No. 4 — Return of Forest Products; No. 5 — Live Stock, Animal Products, Home-made Fabrics, Furs and Labour; No. 6 — Industrial Establishments; No. 7 — Return of Products of the Forest; No. 8 — Shipping and Mining; No. 9 — Return of Fisheries.

9 Galois and Harris, “Recalibrating Society”, p. 37.

10 “Results of a Census”, *Statistical Yearbook of Canada* (1896), pp. 154–155; E. J. Toker, “How a Census is Taken”, *Canadian Magazine*, vol. 16 (March 1901), p. 429; Statistics Canada, *1991 Census Handbook* (1992), p. 9.

11 For details on census-taking in Great Britain, see Michael Drake, “The Census, 1801–1891” in E. A. Wrigley, ed., *Nineteenth Century Society: Essays in the Use of Quantitative Methods for the Study of Social Data* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Richard Lawton, ed., *The Census and Social Structure: An Interpretive Guide to Nineteenth Century Censuses for England and Wales* (London: Frank Cass, 1978).

compensate for the seasonal increase in the population of Montreal and to allocate seasonal workers such as loggers and fishers to their usual or “official” residences — to households in established communities rather than transient camps. The process was well intentioned and was generally adjudged a success in the United States where it was also followed. Inevitably, though, it resulted in duplication and omissions.

The census was administered by the Department of Agriculture, under the direction of the deputy minister, John Lowe.¹² Since a permanent census office did not exist, Lowe had to establish an enumeration bureaucracy before the count could get underway. Early in 1891 support staff were seconded from several government departments and a Census Branch, managed by George Johnson, the government’s chief statistician, was created. The actual process of enumeration, however, was in the hands of a hierarchy of non-governmental officials.

The hierarchy consisted of fourteen Chief Census Officers (four each for Ontario and Quebec and one each for the other provinces and the Northwest Territories), 241 Census Commissioners (also known as “County Commissioners” in Eastern Canada), and approximately 4,300 enumerators. Nearly all census-takers were political appointees, to some extent. Few were better connected than George Sargison, a 64-year-old accountant in Victoria who was appointed Chief Census Officer for British Columbia. Sargison was married to the sister of Frank (afterwards Sir Francis) Stillman Barnard, Conservative Member of Parliament for Cariboo. He was also related by marriage to John Andrew Mara, the Conservative MP for Yale. By order-in-council, he was appointed chief census officer for a five-month period commencing January 23, 1891, with a stipend of \$605 plus expenses.¹³

In February 1891 Sargison and the other chief census officers gathered in Ottawa where they spent two weeks undergoing intense instruction from George Johnson. They were taught how to compile census data and how to interpret the 226 questions contained in the nine census schedules for 1891. British Columbia’s chief census officer was an apt pupil, and his training as an accountant was useful when it came to statistical computations and summaries. He also proved to be a good manager who was capable of inspiring the efforts and, when necessary, containing the egos and inclinations of strong-willed deputies. Patronage and nepotism notwith-

12 The census was administered by the Department of Agriculture until 1912, when it became the responsibility of the Department of Trade and Commerce. The Dominion Bureau of Statistics took over the census after it was created in 1918, but a permanent census office was not established until 1931. See M. C. Urquhart, “Three Builders of Canada’s Statistical System”, *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 68 (September 1987), pp. 415–430.

13 Canada, *Sessional Papers* (1893), Auditor-General’s Report, 1891–92, p. B–130.

standing, a more capable and conscientious official than George Sargison is difficult to imagine.¹⁴

Sargison's nominal subordinates — the eight census commissioners allocated for British Columbia — were appointed on the recommendation of government MPs. The commissioners were responsible for overseeing the enumeration of the large census districts in the province. They included R. E. Gosnell, one of two commissioners placed in charge of the vast New Westminster District, and Captain John Martley, a prominent rancher from Pavilion, who was responsible for a portion of the extensive Cariboo District. Enumerators were also recommended by local MPs, although these appointments were dependent on the approval of the census commissioners who directed them. The bluff Captain Martley of the Cariboo, for example, refused to accept several enumerators assigned to him, including one fellow whom he adjudged to be “physically, mentally, and morally unfit” to take the census.¹⁵

Sargison's first task on returning to Victoria was to assemble his census commissioners and provide them with the same instruction he had received from Johnson in Ottawa. No sooner had they gathered, however, than they threatened to resign *en masse* over the matter of their wages and travelling expenses. Under the schedule of payment established by the Department of Agriculture, enumerators were to be paid 3¢ for every living person they recorded, 3¢ for every death they noted, 15¢ for every farm enumerated, and 20¢ for every industrial establishment inventoried. County commissioners, in turn, were to be paid \$4 for every 100 families enumerated in their districts. But, as Sargison explained in one of many messages sent to John Carling, Minister of Agriculture, conditions in British Columbia were different from those in Eastern Canada. In the Pacific province, the population was relatively small, the cost of living was high, and competent men simply would not accept payment based on “eastern figures”.¹⁶ The *British Columbia Commercial Journal* made the same point, but expressed it more bluntly, in an editorial concerning the census. “It seems a very hard thing to induce the authorities at Ottawa to believe that matters here are altogether different from those in Ontario and Quebec,” the *Journal* stated. “People here do not care to merely exist, and they cannot live on the insignificant sums that are acceptable in the east.”¹⁷

14 Sargison (1827–1900) was born in Yorkshire and immigrated to Canada as a young man. He left Montreal during the Cariboo Gold Rush and worked as an accountant for F. J. Barnard's British Columbia Express Company in Barkerville, B.C. He married Barnard's daughter, Margaret. Her brother Frank (Conservative MP for the Cariboo, 1889–1896, and subsequently lieutenant-governor of British Columbia) was thus Sargison's brother-in-law. Sargison was also connected to J. A. Mara, Conservative MP for Yale (1886–1896), who was married to F. J. Barnard's other daughter, Alice. Details of the family are to be found in the British Columbia Archives and Records Service, Victoria, B.C. (hereafter BCARS), “Vertical Files”.

15 BCARS, Martley Family Papers, Add. MSS. 1340, reel A2, Martley to John Lowe, April 10, 1891.

16 BCARS, Add. MSS. 2454, George Sargison Letterbook, March 18, 1891, p. 105.

17 *British Columbia Commercial Journal*, April 7, 1891, p. 9.

The disgruntled census commissioners for British Columbia also criticized the “per capita principle of payment” in a petition sent to the Agriculture minister. The current system of remuneration, they said, was unrealistic and discriminatory:

The population outside of the cities [in British Columbia] is sparse and widely separated, being scattered over a very wide area, the exterior of the country is rugged and communication difficult, often hazardous and altogether subject to many inconveniences.

It will, therefore, be seen that enumerators and those under whose supervision they act cannot possibly earn living wages working on the per capita principle, and those who would be obliged to work the hardest and endure the greatest hardships would receive the least pay, whereas the opposite of this should obtain if any discrimination were to be made.

There is scarcely any part of British Columbia to which the Eastern mode [of payment] would apply, but more particularly may reference be made to the Interior parts and all along the coast as far north as it extends.

Post settlements, ranches, logging and mining camps, Indian reserves, etc. are at rare and long intervals, necessitating travel on foot, on horseback, by canoe and other slow and laborious methods. Even in the districts which are comparatively speaking more populous and accessible, facilities for travel are limited and settlers considerably removed from each other.

Eventually, after a protracted exchange of letters and telegrams and just a few days before enumeration was to commence, the minister agreed to a revised schedule of payments for British Columbia census-takers. Commissioners there were to receive \$4 a day plus travelling expenses, while enumerators were to be paid \$3 and travelling expenses “for every day of proved effective service”.¹⁸

The commissioners having agreed to terms, Sargison set about instructing them and issuing them with supplies for themselves and their enumerators. Supplies included large leather portfolios to encase the census schedules, sheaves of questionnaires, and copies of the *Census Manual*. He also had to determine the boundaries of the enumeration areas. Generally speaking, census districts corresponded to federal electoral districts, as determined in the federal *Redistribution Act* of 1882. Thus British Columbia was divided into large districts numbered one through five. Within the districts, subdivisions and subdistricts were mapped out, and in most instances these

18 BCARS, George Sargison Letterbook, Petition from Messrs. Martley, Bennett *et. al.* to Carling, March 23, 1891, pp. 108–109. The British Columbia commissioners initially demanded \$7.50 per day and travelling expenses. They agreed to accept the reduced rate of \$4, on condition that they would be provided with advance funds for travel expenses. J. J. Austin, originally appointed as Census Commissioner for Victoria, would not accept the terms and resigned just a few days before the census began on April 6. He was replaced by John Lovell.

coincided with polling divisions, but a number of adjustments had to be made for the census of 1891. For example, District No. 1 (Cariboo) was divided at the 52nd parallel and split between Captain Martley and another commissioner, John Stevenson. District No. 5 (Yale) was divided into areas that cut across established polling divisions, because of the railway and mining camps which had recently sprung into existence. District No. 2 (New Westminster District), which stretched from the American border and covered the entire coastline north to Alaska, including the Queen Charlotte Islands as well as the Stikine, Skeena, and Cassiar districts, was the largest census district in the British Empire.¹⁹ Enumeration areas in that district had to be substantially redrawn and reorganized to accommodate the new city of Vancouver. Adjustments had also to be made for the city of Victoria, which annexed the district of Victoria West just before the census got underway, and for the clusters of mining communities which had grown up around Nanaimo.

Once census divisions and subdivisions had been determined, enumerators had to be sworn in (starting with the census of 1881, enumerators were sworn to maintain the confidentiality of their returns) and instructed. In Britain, men of a “clerkly disposition” were considered to be ideal candidates,²⁰ but in British Columbia the census required more rugged, more versatile types. The best enumerators were those with local knowledge. Of the 90 enumerators deployed in British Columbia, most were representative of their regions — hence the miners and ranchers who were employed as enumerators in Yale and the Cariboo, the farmers in the agricultural districts of New Westminster and Vancouver Island, the bookkeepers and clerks in Victoria and Vancouver city, the packers and traders in Cassiar and the Queen Charlottes.²¹

Enumerating urban areas like Victoria was relatively straightforward. Outlying districts, however, were more challenging. As the Census Office afterwards acknowledged, the experiences of many enumerators in British Columbia were straight out of the *Boy's Own Paper*: “Dangers threatening life and limb, impending starvation, narrow escapes by land and by sea, encounters with suspicious Indians and wild animals” were not uncommon.²² Ronald Green, enumerator for Coast Districts “B” and “C” (comprising canneries and native communities on the Queen Charlotte Island and on the mainland at Metlakatla, Bella Coola, and environs) was twice capsized in a chartered steamer. “The captain stated we might consider it as

19 District No. 2 (New Westminster) embraced an area of 204,050 square miles.

20 Muriel Nissel, *People Count: A History of the General Registry Office* (London: HMSO, 1987), p. 27.

21 The names and occupations of enumerators are listed in the finding aid I wrote several years ago for the Provincial Archives of British Columbia (as it was then known). See the BCARS finding aid to GR 288, Canada, Census Office, British Columbia Portions of the 1891 Census, pp. 9–24.

22 *Statistical Year-Book of Canada for 1895*, p. 157.

two of the narrowest escapes for our lives possible,” he noted in his diary. Later, while leaving a house in an Indian village he was enumerating, a rotten step gave way and he fell, badly injuring his leg. To Green’s chagrin, the chief of the village demanded payment for repairs to the broken step. “I had to pay him,” Green recorded. “I should like to know who will pay *me* for my broken shins.”²³ No one did. Nor, despite his many representations and appeals, was Captain Martley compensated for injuries he received carrying out the census. He suffered a badly broken arm when his horse stumbled and rolled over him while he was crossing Pavilion Mountain en route to confer with one of his enumerators.²⁴

Fred Greer, meanwhile, endured “clouds” of mosquitoes and blackflies as he and a companion battled their way up the Skeena River. As the following entries from his diary show, enumerating the Cassiar district was not an easy task:

10th [July]. Started to work at 7 o’clock, and worked steadily all day till 9 to-night, registering upwards of 200, and travelled up the river by canoe about 25 miles.

11th–14th. Travelling, except on Sunday; the Indians [guides] declining to work on that day.

15th. Still on our trip. This has been the hardest day’s work as yet, as the further up the river we get the stronger is the current. We made three portages this day with our provisions and blankets, then hauling the canoe up the river with a line....

7th [August]. We have had a hard trail all day, being very hilly and rocky. The heat must have registered 100 degrees.

12th. Our journey back to the “forks” [of the Skeena river] — very hot weather. My eyes are scalded with the heat and perspiration, feet sore, clothes and shoes torn.

31st. ...We are out of provisions, having nothing but rice and what we can shoot along the trail....

Greer was in the field for over five months, from June 6 until November 11. He limped back to Vancouver, having sprained his ankle at Fort Simpson while awaiting a steamer, with 2,420 names in his portfolio.²⁵ He was of course traversing some of the roughest terrain in the province, but even well-cultivated districts could be demanding on enumerators. Eric Duncan,

23 BCARS, Add. MSS. 2453, Rowland [*sic*] Edward Green diary, entries for July 6 and 21, 1891.

24 BCARS, George Sargison Letterbook, Martley to Sargison, June 5, 1891. Months after the accident, Martley reported that his left arm was still “useless”. “I must go to Victoria for surgical assistance: I am unable to work on my farm, and I have lost my shooting as I cannot put a rifle to my shoulder.” In vain, he asked the Department of Agriculture for some compensation. BCARS, Add. MSS. 1340, Martley to John Lowe, October 6, 1891.

25 Canada, Department of Agriculture, *Census of Canada, 1891, Bulletin No. 5* (1892), pp. 6–10.

who took the census between Union Bay and Campbell River on Vancouver Island, noted afterwards that it had taken him a week to cover this relatively small area, since he had had to do it all on foot: "A horse would have been an encumbrance, as I had to cross fences everywhere and hunt out people in the fields."²⁶

For the most part, the populace seems to have been relatively cooperative, although on the Mainland some enumerators found it difficult to persuade the Native people to participate. On the Naas River, Greer noted, "Every Indian wants to know what this work is for, and some even want pay for using their names." At one village, he recorded, "I had to pay the Indians here tobacco to tell me names of their children and friends who were absent hunting or picking berries." At another, he had to placate suspicious elders who "supposed our mission was to find out how many of them there were, and then the Government would do away with them to get their land". On the northern coast, Ronald Green had difficulty "enlisting" Chinese cannery workers who suspected that the census had something to do with the federal government's head tax. Chinese residents in Victoria were also suspicious of the government's motives. To allay their fears and encourage their participation, Sargison hired a Chinese interpreter to accompany enumerators in Victoria's Chinese quarter. Enumerators also encountered resistance among the white merchants in Vancouver and Victoria, who balked at reporting their investments and real estate holdings. Even so, there were very few prosecutions for non-compliance in the province.²⁷

During the count, George Sargison was in close contact with his census commissioners, clarifying their questions and explaining procedures. He had to explain the difference between the "floating population" (transients) and "the population afloat" (people residing on fishing boats or harbour craft and passengers on visiting steamships) to the Nanaimo commissioners. He had to explain to Gosnell in Vancouver that the city's new office blocks, however grandiose, had still to be recorded as "uninhabited" buildings. Sargison also had to deal with a query from the census commissioner in Kamloops, who asked how prostitutes were to be recorded.

Technically, the question was an easy one. The *Census Manual* provided clear instructions as to how occupations were to be entered, and it enjoined enumerators not to use indefinite terms. "You cannot be too explicit in stating occupations," the *Manual* declared (p. 14). To drive home the point to enumerators, five pages of examples were provided on how to classify occupations, including the following:

Apprentice.— Too indefinite. State kind of business, as carpenter's apprentice, painter's apprentice, machinist's apprentice, &c.

26 Eric Duncan, *Fifty-seven Years in the Comox Valley* (Courtenay, B.C.: Comox Argus Co. Ltd., 1934), p. 42. I am grateful to Richard Mackie for this reference.

27 *Census Bulletin No. 5*, pp. 7–8; BCARS, Add. MSS. 2453, Green diary, July 8, 1891; BCARS, Add. MSS. 367, Sargison diary, p. 108.

Clerk.— Too indefinite. State kind of business, as clerk in grocery store; clerk, gas company; clerk, post office; clerk, woolen mill, &c. Distinguish carefully between clerks, bookkeepers and salesmen.

Engineer.— Too indefinite. State whether a locomotive or railway engineer, stationary engineer, steamboat engineer, civil engineer, &c. as the case may be.

Musician.— Indefinite. State whether a professional vocalist or instrumentalist, and, if the latter, what musical instrument, as pianist, violinist, &c.

Teacher.— Distinguish professors, tutors, governess, and teachers. State whether in college; Latin, high, normal, grammar, or primary schools; academy, seminary, &c. State whether public, or private family. Specify branches taught, as languages, music, painting, dancing, &c.

Given that the *Census Manual* was so definite on the matter of using specific, unambiguous terms when recording occupations, the term “prostitute” might have been deployed but the word was evidently offensive. Instead, various euphemisms, including the word “lady”, were considered. Ultimately the term “dressmaker” was selected.

Of course, not all dressmakers were prostitutes and not all prostitutes were recorded as dressmakers. However, as Sargison noted in one of his letters, “dressmaker” was commonly used as an occupational disguise among prostitutes in the West.²⁸ Moreover, internal evidence from the 1891 British Columbia census suggests that this euphemism was employed by enumerators in several towns and cities in the province. A statistical analysis of Nanaimo, a mining town on Vancouver Island dominated by unmarried males, reveals an inordinate number of unmarried female dressmakers between the ages of 18 and 35 in 1891.²⁹ Likewise, an analysis of the nominal census schedules for Victoria shows a relatively large number of young, unmarried “dressmakers” among the residents of the city’s “red light district” in 1891. The use of this euphemism can also be confirmed by comparing contemporary police records with nominal census schedules of suspected brothels. In Victoria, several women who were enumerated as “dressmakers” and who resided in buildings identified as brothels appear in Victoria City police registers as “known prostitutes”.³⁰ More research is

28 BCARS, George Sargison Letterbook, Sargison to Bennett, June 10, 1891, p. 176.

29 My statistical analysis of Nanaimo is part of a larger study based on the 1891 census of Vancouver Island. The study has not yet been published, but the data has been transferred to an electronic format (using MS Access software) and is available in computer labs and the library at Malaspina University College in Nanaimo. I am grateful to Christine Meutzner of the Nanaimo Community Archives who helped to build the database and to my colleague, Ron Aplan, for assisting with statistical queries.

30 Information regarding prostitutes in Victoria is derived from the 1891 Vancouver Island census database and from records held by the Victoria City Police Archives. I am grateful to Linda Eversole for sharing with me her research findings on prostitutes in Victoria. For a general introduction to the topic, see C. L. Hansen-Brett, “Ladies in Scarlet: An Historical Overview of Prostitution in Victoria, British Columbia, 1870–1939”, *British Columbia Historical News*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1986), pp. 21–26.

needed, however, to ascertain whether the euphemism “dressmaker” was used elsewhere in Canada and indeed to determine whether other euphemisms were used in the census to describe criminal or non-respectable occupations.

In any event, by the end of July 1891 most of British Columbia, dress-makers and all, had been enumerated. Once the field work was completed, enumerators sent their portfolios to their district commissioners who checked the schedules for glaring errors and did rough summaries of the data. The schedules were then sent directly to the Census Branch in Ottawa, where George Johnson and a small army of clerks carried out detailed tabulations. For this census, Johnson used a remarkable new electrical tabulating machine which the government had leased from the American computing wizard, Herman Hollerith.³¹ The machine enabled Johnson to tabulate data accurately and quickly. Consequently the government was able to publish its first *Census Bulletin* containing summaries of Schedule 1 data in August 1891. The *Bulletin* indicated that the City of Victoria had a population of 16,841 (up from 5,925 in 1881). The City of Vancouver, which had not existed in 1881, was returned officially with a population of 13,685.

Almost immediately, both cities began sniping at each other over the question of which city had grown at a more spectacular rate and which was likely to grow fastest in the future. Indeed, over the next few months the *Vancouver World*, the *Vancouver Advertiser*, the *Victoria Daily Colonist*, and the *Victoria Times* exchanged insults, almost daily, as to which city was more prosperous, more prominent, more racially pure. The *World*, for example, discounted the fact that the total population of Victoria was larger than Vancouver’s on the grounds that the Mainland city had a “whiter” population.³²

The fact is that the [census] returns will declare that there are more white people to-day in Vancouver than in Victoria. The Chinese swell up Victoria’s showing, but they are a class who cannot properly be termed citizens and, anyway, we would much prefer that they should remain on the other side of the Gulf [of Georgia]. Our Mongolian quarter is a very limited one, and our population is almost entirely composed of the bread-winners and the capital-makers.

The *Victoria Colonist*, in reply, claimed that ignorant census clerks in Ottawa had erroneously credited returns from the Vancouver electoral

31 The Census Branch leased ten of Hollerith’s machines at a cost of approximately \$3,000. See Public Accounts in Canada, *Sessional Papers* (No. 1), 1893. On Hollerith’s work with the U.S. census in 1890, see Margo Anderson, *The American Census: A Social History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 102–107; Keith S. Reid-Green, “The History of Census Tabulation”, *Scientific American*, vol. 260 (February 1989), pp. 98–103.

32 *Vancouver World*, July 29, 1891; *Victoria Daily Colonist*, July 31, 1891.

district (from Vancouver Island, north of Victoria) to the terminal city and that that city's population was in fact much smaller than the *Census Bulletin* stated. The *Colonist* also published a series of leading articles claiming that many people had been overlooked by federal enumerators in Victoria and demanded that a recount be taken.

Quite possibly Victoria was underenumerated because John Lovell, the census commissioner for the city, was incompetent. Repeatedly, he ignored established procedures and refused to cooperate with Sargison and with the other census commissioners. Sargison was clearly exasperated with Lovell's attitude. "Am disappointed at [Lovell's] disinclination to go through the course like his colleagues.... Urged on Lovell the importance of uniformity of headings of schedules. He has a strong tendency to adopt methods of his own.... Lovell's actions extraordinary, and another illustration of his indisposition to be guided by other than his own principles of action" are typical entries in Sargison's diary.³³ What is more, several of Lovell's enumerators appear to have been transients who had little or no knowledge of the city.³⁴

Certainly many Victoria businessmen were convinced that the census was incomplete and, responding to demands from the *Daily Colonist*, Victoria City Council commissioned a separate civic census. The civic census was organized by business directory publishers R. T. Williams and P. T. Hebler and was taken over a three-day period, from September 23 to 25, by a team of 25 enumerators. Victoria City Council was delighted with the results. The civic census showed that Victoria's total population was 22,981. Even more gratifying to its sponsors, the Williams and Hebler count indicated that Victoria had 6,140 more "white" residents and 341 fewer Chinese than shown on the federal census.³⁵ Not to be outdone, in October 1891 Vancouver City Council sanctioned a civic census of its own. The Vancouver census was carried out by realtors R. G. Mackay and S. J. Emanuels, and the results were no less gratifying to civic boosters there. According to this count, Vancouver's actual population was 18,260, of whom 17,327 were Caucasians.³⁶

The Dominion Census Office refused to recognize the unofficial censuses of either city, Victoria or Vancouver, although this did not deter R. T. Williams from publishing the results of his Victoria census in *Williams'*

33 BCARS, Sargison diary, April 7, 17, and 28, 1891.

34 Despite his incompetence as a census commissioner, John Babcock Lovell (1831–1915) subsequently served as an alderman and school trustee in Victoria. Several of the enumerators he employed cannot be located on voters lists, city directories, or census schedules, and so are presumed to have been transients.

35 Victoria *Daily Colonist*, September 9 and October 15, 1891. A copy of the civic census is catalogued at BCARS as Add. MSS. 1908 (microfilm reel A1356).

36 City of Vancouver Archives, City Clerk's Records, RG2, A.1, vol. 5, pp. 4039–4040. According to this census, only 840 Chinese, 66 Native Indians, and 27 "coloreds" resided in Vancouver.

Illustrated Official British Columbia City Directory for 1892.³⁷ A year later, the Dominion government also refused to accept charges made by British Columbia's premier, Theodore Davie, that the province had been "grossly underenumerated" and that consequently British Columbia had been deprived of approximately \$15,000 in *per capita* grants. Ironically, the briefing notes used by the premier in advancing the provincial case were prepared by R. E. Gosnell, the former census commissioner.³⁸ According to Gosnell's arithmetic, the population of the province was closer to 110,000 and not 98,173 as the Census Branch had reported. In arguing the point, the Premier's Office claimed that enumerators had neglected to survey parts of the province and that they had overlooked a large number of Native Indians. The provincial government further asserted that, contrary to general opinion, the Native population of the province was robustly increasing in size. There was no little irony here, since the provincial government had argued consistently, whenever questions of aboriginal land claims and larger reserves were raised, that its Native population was declining steadily and would soon be negligible.³⁹

George Johnson, the federal government's chief statistician, conceded that a remote area of the province (south of the Cassiar district) had not been visited by enumerators, but he emphasized that it had been omitted from the count because of instructions from Commissioner Gosnell who had explained at the time (July 4, 1891): "[S]o little is known concerning it [the remote area] that I did not feel justified in making the Census Department an exploratory medium." In a closely argued memorandum, Johnson also refuted Victoria's claim there were thousands of "missing" persons on the Pacific slope. In January 1894 British Columbia's official population of 98,173 was reconfirmed and, as far as Ottawa was concerned, that was the end of the matter.⁴⁰

37 John Lowe and the Department of Agriculture already had considerable experience with disgruntled civic boosters who were dissatisfied with the Dominion census returns. Twenty years earlier, following the 1871 census, Montreal City Council had organized its check census, which Lowe dismissed as "clap-trap". See Curtis, "Expert Knowledge and the Social Imaginary", pp. 323–327.

38 Gosnell, a political opportunist, secured an appointment as legislative librarian and private secretary to the premier in 1893. For details on his career and personality, see Terry Eastwood, "R. E. Gosnell, E. O. S. Scholefield and the Founding of the Provincial Archives of British Columbia, 1894–1919", *BC Studies*, no. 54 (Summer 1982), pp. 38–62.

39 Davie's government also used the census as an excuse for delaying a bill to redistribute seats in the provincial legislative assembly. The government claimed that "imperfect census returns, which failed to include several Indian tribes not visited by enumerators, necessitated the postponement of action [on the redistribution bill]". As Martin Robin observed in *Rush for Spoils: The Company Province, 1871–1933* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972), p. 65, this was "a strange argument, since the Indians had no votes or representation" in the provincial legislature. I am grateful to an anonymous outside reader for this reference. On the larger question of Native lands and provincial government intransigence, see Paul Tennant, *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849–1989* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990).

40 BCARS, British Columbia Attorney General, GR 429, #658/93, R. E. Gosnell to Theodore Davie, April 21, 1893; #69/94, John S. Thompson (federal Minister of Justice) to Davie, January 8, 1894,

George Sargison described census-taking in British Columbia as “a Herculean task”,⁴¹ and so it was. In 1891 British Columbia was Canada’s largest province. It embraced an area of 382,000 square miles and its population was widely dispersed. Enumerators in British Columbia had to overcome immense logistical difficulties and, as their diaries attest, they had to endure considerable physical hardships. With the possible exception of some of the Victoria enumerators, the census-takers seem to have been conscientious, methodical, and reasonably efficient. Captain Martley, one of the census commissioners for the Cariboo District and a hard taskmaster with subordinates, acknowledged this point in commending the enumerator in Lac La Hache, whose schedules were “written up in a cabin crowded with children, in an Indian camp with a log for a table”. “He has performed his work conscientiously, industriously, and with as much accuracy and neatness as can fairly be expected under these adverse conditions,” Martley said in a report to Sargison. “I have seen worse work turned out from an office table.”⁴²

Without doubt, Captain Martley and his colleagues undercounted the population, but by contemporary standards their work was acceptable. The number of census families in the province increased from 1881 by the same percentage as the overall population and the number of inhabitions apparently increased by a proportionate amount. According to the Dominion Census Office, these and other statistical tests were evidence of the “substantial accuracy” of the returns for British Columbia.⁴³ All things considered, the exercise was also relatively inexpensive. The overall *per capita* cost of the 1891 Dominion census, including British Columbia, was only 6¢ per person, a figure that compares favourably with the 18¢ *per capita* cost of the 1890 U.S. census.⁴⁴

What, then, is the historical value of the 1891 census of British Columbia? Does it provide more than an aggregate count of the people on the Pacific slope and adjacent islands? It does. As Margo Anderson has observed in her admirable social history of the American census, national censuses are “never irrelevant to social policy debates”.⁴⁵ In the 1891 census of British Columbia we can see evidence of several contemporary

enclosing memo dated September 25, 1893, re: “Census of British Columbia”. See also British Columbia *Sessional Papers*, 1892, “Correspondence — Census of 1891”.

41 BCARS, George Sargison Letterbook, p. 152.

42 BCARS, Add. MSS. 1340.

43 Canada, Department of Agriculture, *Census of Canada, 1891, Bulletin No. 5* (1892), p. 5. Traditionally, British Columbia has the highest undercoverage rates in our national censuses. In the 1991 and 1996 censuses, Statistics Canada estimated an undercoverage rate of 2% to 3% for British Columbia.

44 Canada, *Sessional Papers*, 1893, Auditor-General's Report, 1891–1892, p. B-130; Anderson, *The American Census*, p. 242.

45 Anderson, *The American Census*, p. 240.

debates and concerns. Some of these were related to federal-provincial disputes over fiscal matters; others involved jurisdictional disputes over Chinese immigration and Native lands policies. As well, we can see something of the province's fractious character, which was evident in the metropolitan rivalries and political sectionalism of the period, in this census.⁴⁶

The 1891 census also provides evidence of some other processes and activities. Records generated in the course of this "solemn inquest of the nation" provide us with a glimpse of how the bureaucratic machinery of state actually worked during the late nineteenth century.⁴⁷ Moreover, the records provide us with a glimpse of the inner workings of the administrative apparatus of the Empire. As Thomas Richards has remarked, the British Empire was united "not by force but by information". The "bureaucrats of Empire" depended on vast amounts of information to carry out a wide range of national and imperial policies, and so from all over the globe they collected information. "They surveyed and they mapped. They took censuses, produced statistics."⁴⁸ In 1891 the province of British Columbia — along with every other jurisdiction in the British Empire — designated Monday, April 6, as the reference point for its census. The enumeration of British Columbia can thus be regarded as part of a much broader global exercise of information-gathering for the imperial archive.

Clearly, that exercise was complicated and contentious. The information that resulted from it was reasonably accurate, but the quality of the information nevertheless depended on the abilities of individual enumerators and on the interpretations of census commissioners. The classification of "dressmakers" is but one example of the inconsistencies and idiosyncracies that characterized the enumeration process. The 1891 census of British Columbia may, therefore, serve as a useful case study by drawing attention to the nuanced nature of the nominal census schedules. This study may also help to underscore the value of that sometimes marginalized scholarly discipline, the history of the record. As we move towards larger and more elaborate data bases to facilitate increasingly complex and sophisticated

46 Although sectionalism had its roots in the colonial period, in competition between Victoria and New Westminster, it intensified greatly after the CPR decided to locate its western terminus at Burrard Inlet on the Mainland, rather than at Esquimalt on Vancouver Island. When the railway rolled into the new city of Vancouver in 1886, sectional rivalries became acute. In the early 1890s the glowering rivalry between Victoria and Vancouver was further exacerbated by debates over locating and constructing British Columbia's new parliament buildings, by controversies about altering the ratio of Island and Mainland seats in the legislature, by conflicting municipal health policies during a smallpox epidemic, and, of course, by the Dominion census.

47 The official *Statistical Year-Book of Canada for 1895* (p. 156) used this lofty phrase to describe the 1891 census.

48 Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 3.

historical enquiries, we need to be mindful of the integrity of our building blocks. Before embarking on studies that depend on nominal census records, we need to have an understanding of why and how those records were originally created. Only then can we deploy our census-based micro data with any degree of confidence.