

A Probe Into the Demographic Structure
of Nineteenth Century Red River

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THE HISTORY OF THE
NINETEENTH CENTURY

The history of the nineteenth century is a story of progress and change. It is a story of the rise of the industrial revolution, of the growth of the middle class, and of the expansion of the British Empire. It is a story of the struggle for freedom and democracy, and of the triumph of the human spirit over adversity.

The nineteenth century was a time of great achievement and discovery. It was a time when the world was opened up to new horizons, and when the human mind was freed from the constraints of tradition and dogma. It was a time when the great works of literature and art were created, and when the foundations of modern science and technology were laid.

To the casual observer in 1830 Red River appeared a picturesque rural backwater dotted with church steeples and numerous windmills.¹ The impression would not have been inaccurate. By 1830 the settlement had recovered from the violent struggle between the British and Canadian fur companies and the accompanying desolation, barbarity, and destitution. But the golden decade of the half sedentary, half nomadic life (built around the extended family and the neighborhood) that had become Red River by 1830 lasted only a few years. By 1840 the settlement was faced with a crisis of the land that caused the breakdown and disintegration of the extended family and consequently Red River. Until the rush of Ontarians in the later nineteenth century killed the Red River dream forever, the settlement writhed in a confused agony seeking to perpetuate its myth of that impossible half nomadic, half sedentary existence. The 1849 free trade crisis, the unrest of the 1850s, and the Riel affair were all products of this breakdown. This is not to deny that they were a result as well of the Company's attempt to fossilize its monopoly, and Ontario's effort to extend its empire westward.

The first people to struggle for survival in this isolated, flat, and damnable wilderness were a motley and dispirited crew. The only creditable inhabitants were the Scottish remnants of the Earl of Selkirk's endeavors to create a land speculator's dream in North America and the retired officers of the Northwest and Hudson's Bay Company. The vast majority of the population, the English-speaking half-breeds and the French-speaking half-breeds (the Métis) drifted into Red River between 1822 and 1830 upon the encouragement of the Hudson's Bay Company, which had seriously reduced its need for personnel after union with its rival the North West Company. There were other groups but they were of minor significance and tended to identify with one of the above. The handful of Canadian farmers who came at the invitation of Bishop Provencher in 1818 settled around St. Boniface and identified with the Métis who dominated that area. A few Scandinavians and Irish were also sprinkled throughout Red River -- but they formed no distinct community nor identified themselves as belonging to one and could and did serve as a bridge between the various communities comprising Red River.

Early in the 1830s life arranged itself into a pattern regulated by the seasons, the church, the Company, and the family.² Families settled on varying sized river lots (retired Chief Factors could claim as much as 1,000 acres while the poorer sorts

often squatted on a few acres) with their children and friends about them. These bonds of family and neighborhood became very tight indeed, and tended to reinforce religious and ethnic divisions. The lower settlement between the two Fort Garrys was, for example, Protestant and English, with the English-speaking mixed-bloods tending to live in the proximity of the Lower Fort and Lord Selkirk's Scots closer to the Upper Fort. The French-speaking Catholic mixed-bloods settled at the forks on the Red and Assiniboine and along the south bank of the Assiniboine.

Each of these Red River families was headed by a patriarch whose position in the settlement and in the family was for the most part derived from his previous status with the Company. The average age of the head of a mixed-blood household was 33 in 1832 and 39 in 1843. Among the Scottish families, residing for the most part in Kildonan parish, it was 42 in 1832 and 45 in 1843.³ These figures indicate not only that fewer and fewer new families were being established in the settlement, but that married children were remaining with and under the influence of their fathers. That this was true is indicated by an examination of some of the more prominent families.

Among the principal patriarchs of Red River were William Hemmings Cook, James Bird, and Peter Corrigan. Chief Factor William Hemmings Cook was 53 years of age when he arrived in the settlement in 1820. Short, husky, dark-haired and swarthy-looking, Cook had spent 33 years in the service of the Company before petitioning the London Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1815 to let his family settle somewhere in Rupert's Land. Within a few years of 1820 Cook was settled with Mary Cocking, his third wife whom he had married in the custom of the country, and his children: Samuel, 21; Mary, 20; Jeremiah, 19; Charles, 16; and Lydia, Jenny, Catherine, and Joseph all of indeterminate age. Cook first established his household on a narrow piece of land between the Red and Seine Rivers, but in 1824 moved with his family to Image Plain where he had two five-hundred-acre lots. This was a considerably more congenial area already settled by an increasing number of Cook's fur trade friends.⁴

Chief Factor James Bird also entered the settlement in 1820. He was 46 years old and was accompanied by his second Indian wife, Elizabeth, and his children: a married son, five unmarried adult sons, an unmarried adult daughter, and a son under 15 years of age. At first this entire family lived in his house, one of the largest and most pretentious of the settlement.⁵ Another, Chief Trader Peter Corrigan, a gaunt, tall, and formidable 42-year-old Orkneyman who had served in posts along the Saskatchewan and at Norway House, arrived at Red River in 1822 accompanied by Christy, his Indian wife, and James, their 20-year-old unmarried son.⁶ He established his family on two 125-acre lots above Image Plain near the 1846 site of St. Andrew's church.⁷

The patriarchal pattern was typical of the bulk of the settlers such as Henry Hallet, Humphrey Favel, William Garrioch, and William Flett. Humphrey Favel had been a clerk and retired in the 1820s with his two sons Humphrey Jr. and Thomas. While Humphrey Sr. and Thomas established their household on Image Plain, Humphrey Jr. settled closer to Upper Fort Garry.⁸ Henry Hallet, stationed for a number of years at York as a trader, retired in 1824 with Catherine Dansee,

his half-Indian wife, and their five mixed-blood children: James, 24; Henry Jr., 23; William, 22; Anne, 16; and Elizabeth, 12, on two lots well over 300 acres.⁹ William Garrioch, a trader and second clerk in the Swan River district, arrived in 1825 with six children and settled adjacent to his father-in-law William H. Cook.¹⁰ William Flett, a nondescript servant, settled in 1822 at age 59 with Saskatchewan, his second Indian wife, and with his four children: William, Ann, and Elizabeth (all in their late 20s), and Peter, 10 years old. Flett's eldest children did not live with him, but were married and established their own households.¹¹ This appears to have been the exception rather than the rule.

The great majority of adult men who married in the late 1820s and early 1830s stayed with their fathers. Samuel, son of William Hemmings Cook, lived with his wife in his father's home, as did both the sons of James Bird after their marriages in 1824. The Bird women reinforced the Red River pattern when they accompanied their husbands to the homes of their fathers-in-law.¹² This dependency of adult children upon their fathers must have reinforced and have been reinforced by the hierarchical traditions of the fur trade, and by the clan structure common to many of the Orkney and Scottish born fathers. The increasing prevalence of the extended family is very apparent from the substantial increase in the number of sons over 16 living at home. The extended family was most common amongst the Scottish families. They had .82 sons over 16 at home in 1843, compared to the mixed-bloods who had only .35. In both cases it must be emphasized that this was double the number of 1838.¹³

The late 1830s must have been years of confidence if not always prosperity for the settlement. The farms must have seemed to have hopeful futures. This is apparent by the significant increase in the birth rate from 1832 to 1843. The increase in Kildonan was especially phenomenal and indicated the confidence the Kildonan Scots must have had in their agricultural endeavors. By 1843 the average number of children in a Scottish household was 5.7, significantly up from the 3.4 of 1832. For the mixed-bloods the increase was less, but nevertheless pronounced, from 3.7 to 4.1.¹⁴

That this was so is further indicated in the baptismal records of these years. The James Hallet who married Sally Fidler in 1828 fathered three children between 1828 and 1832.¹⁵ The Henry Hallet who married Catherine Parenteau in 1824 fathered two sons soon afterwards,¹⁶ while the John Inkster who married Mary Sinclair on January 20, 1826 fathered four children from 1829 to 1834.¹⁷ Thomas Favel and his wife added one more to an already large family of nine,¹⁸ and William Flett, a son of James Flett, married in 1830 and had a son two years later,¹⁹

The baptism records indicate that the European and mixed-bloods had virtually similar birth rates. If mixed-blood families were smaller it was because of their staggering rate of infant mortality. Joseph Bird, the eldest son of James Bird, and Betsy his wife, had three children between 1831 and 1836, Emma, born in 1831, died in the spring of 1833; James, born in 1833, died that same year; and Laetitia, born in 1836, died in 1849.²⁰ James Hallet, the son of Henry Hallet Sr., lost two children between 1834 and 1838, while Henry Hallet Jr. lost a child in 1834.²¹ The story of woe is never-ending and examples exist in every family. The tragic

loss of children, very often in the spring with the onslaught of fevers, must have made life endlessly sad.

Had the children of mixed-blood parents died in one year or along with the children of Kildonan-Scot parents, then one could have assumed that the cause had been either famine or epidemic. But this was not the case; deaths did not occur frequently among the Kildonans, the most European of the settlers. For example, Alexander Bannerman and his wife had five children between 1833 and 1844, all of whom lived.²² The high mortality rate amongst the mixed-blood couples suggests that they were not as able to provide a suitable environment for child growth. The food supply for many of the mixed-bloods was uncertain. This cycle of feast to famine must have caused malnutrition.²³ The standard of hygiene was also appallingly low if Alexander Ross, Red River's first historian is to be believed. The mixed-bloods were least likely to have wells and probably drew water from the Red River, into which they had dumped the manure from their barns.²⁴

By 1843 it was apparent that a serious demographic and economic crisis was afflicting the Red River settlement. The result was the collapse of the extended family. This is indicated by the decline in the average age of the head of the mixed-blood households from 39 to 36 years from 1843 to 1849.²⁵ While this may have been due to disease and death from old age, it was in fact probably due to adult children of both the first and second generation finally leaving to establish their own homes. It is interesting to note, however, that the tendency amongst the Scots was the exact opposite. The mean age of the head of the Scots households continued to increase, from 45 in 1843 to 52 in 1849. The Kildonan settlers, in the period of uncertainty that was the late 1830s and early 1840s, seem to have turned even more inward to themselves and to the protection afforded by the security of their families.²⁶

The reasons for the break-up of the mixed-blood extended family are not obscure. Pressures on the second Red River generation increased steadily throughout the late 1830s and early 1840s. Unable to gain a certain livelihood from their father's land and with no opportunity for suitable employment in the Company, they turned instead to the plains to trade in furs, to hunt, or to freight goods to St. Paul. Chief Factor James Sutherland knew the problem well.

I could get him (Sutherland's second son) in the Cos service, but half-breeds as they are called has (sic) no chance there nor are they respected whatever their abilities may be, by a parcel of upstart Scotchmen, who now hold the power and Control in the concern...²⁷

The results were predictable. Some like Joseph Cook, Chief Factor William Hemmings Cook's son, served as a laborer.²⁸ Others were not so patient. Peter Garrioch left the settlement in 1843 to trade furs with the Missouri Fur Company,²⁹ while William Hallet and his brother James³⁰ as well as James Bird's two sons joined the Métis on the plains.³¹

When a second generation son joined the illicit fur trade, he usually severed his relations with his father, who more often than not supported the Company's monopoly. When Peter Garrioch became a free trader, for example, his father refused to have anything more to do with him.³² James Bird was beset by similar anxieties, as his letter to Alexander Christie, in charge of the Upper Fort, indicates:

I have just received your note and beg to say that I have lately heard with sorrow that the members of my family you name are somehow or other employed in an improper and illegal pursuit of furs...my son Phillip behaved so ill to me formerly that I was obliged to turn him out of doors and resolve to have nothing more to do with him - my son Henry has occasionally behaved nearly as ill, and never allowed me to control him longer than I supported him and Frederick is wholly independent of me though I lent him Smith's tools with a view of inducing him to settle down and work his trade.³⁴

But the problem was not entirely with the fur trade's inability to absorb the second generation. By 1835 the choicest land in Red River had been settled. The problem was quite apparent to Chief Peguis of the Netley Creek Indian Settlement near Lake Winnipeg. He emphasized that

There is nowhere else for them to settle upon, this part of the river is thickly inhabited, there is only a little vacant land in the neighbourhood of the Fort; when this is occupied, a new settlement must either be formed behind or upon land called the Indian reserve.³⁵

Certainly the family lots were oversettled. William Cook's land supported five separate families: Samuel Cook's family, Widow Garrioch's family, Joseph Cook's family, Mary Cook's family, and Sarah Cook's family.³⁶ Even though Henry Hallet had only eight chains of land, it supported about 15 people after 1835.³⁷ Under such conditions the Image Plain children of the first and second generation had to turn their attention to the land on the fringes of the settlement or to vocations other than agriculture. William Cook for his part attempted to introduce his son Samuel to carpentry and blacksmithing with some success.³⁸ But whatever livelihood they chose, there was inevitably a disruption in the extended family. While some sons could still live on their father's land or in the same houses as their fathers, the majority of the second generation were finding this an increasing impossibility.

Among the second generation of mixed-blood men who left the family lots in the 1830s to locate elsewhere were men from the Hallet, Bird, Garrioch, Cook, Flett, and Favel families. They moved from the patriarchal lots either to hunt the plains, to work for the Company, to trade, or to farm in the newer districts along the Red River. While his two brothers remained on the family plot of land, William Hallet, a son of Henry Hallet Sr., settled on lot 1388 that his father had received from the Company in the 1820s. Near to the Pembina Plain, it was a great distance from

lots 226 and 227 where the majority of the Hallets lived.³⁹ The Garrioch children also moved from the family lots as did three of the Favel children.⁴⁰

With the disintegration of the extended family the number of children per household also declined, although the total number of children in the settlement did not, and merely levelled off. The number of children in Scottish families declined from 5.7 in 1843 to 4.9 in 1847, while those in Rupert's Land born families declined from 4.1 to about 3.8 children.⁴¹ This decline was in all likelihood not due to disease but rather to a probable decrease in the marriage and birth rates. Four of James Bird's nine sons, Peter Favel, and George Flett, to mention but a few, remained bachelors.⁴² More important, of the men who did marry, few had children. Thomas Favel and his wife remained childless.⁴³ Samuel Favel's first wife died in 1845 without giving birth to any children and the woman he married in 1846 similarly died in 1849 also without offspring.⁴⁴ The John Garrioch who married in 1843 did not father any children until the 1850s⁴⁵ and the Jeremiah Cook who married in 1833 did not have any children until after 1838.⁴⁶ Only Richard Favel and his wife seem the exception with eight children all born during the 1840s.⁴⁷

The 1840s were becoming, then, years of crisis, of disorientation, and disintegration for Red River. Those who knew the relatively more generous and prolific years of the early 1830s, must have despaired at the increasing unpleasantness of their world. For Red River the scapegoats were obvious: the Company and the Church. Red River did not realize that it was in the clutches of an inexorable dilemma which had no solution and for which no scapegoat could be found.

The Company, because of its economic, political, and social dominance, was an obvious target for dissatisfaction.⁴⁸ It was the only employer, the only route by which sons of the first and second generation could acquire the position of respect and wealth held by their fathers. The Company seemed to hold the keys to the door that had shut forever on the golden decade of the 1830s. There seemed no alternative to smashing the Company, for by 1840 the only other legitimate and popular source of prosperity, the land, was closed by overcrowding.⁴⁹ But a wholesale destruction of the Company's monopoly would not have brought back the closeness and the security offered by the extended family and close neighborhoods in the 1830s -- it would offer only anarchy. In fact during the 1850s and 1860s the settlement edged closer and closer to total social and political disintegration.

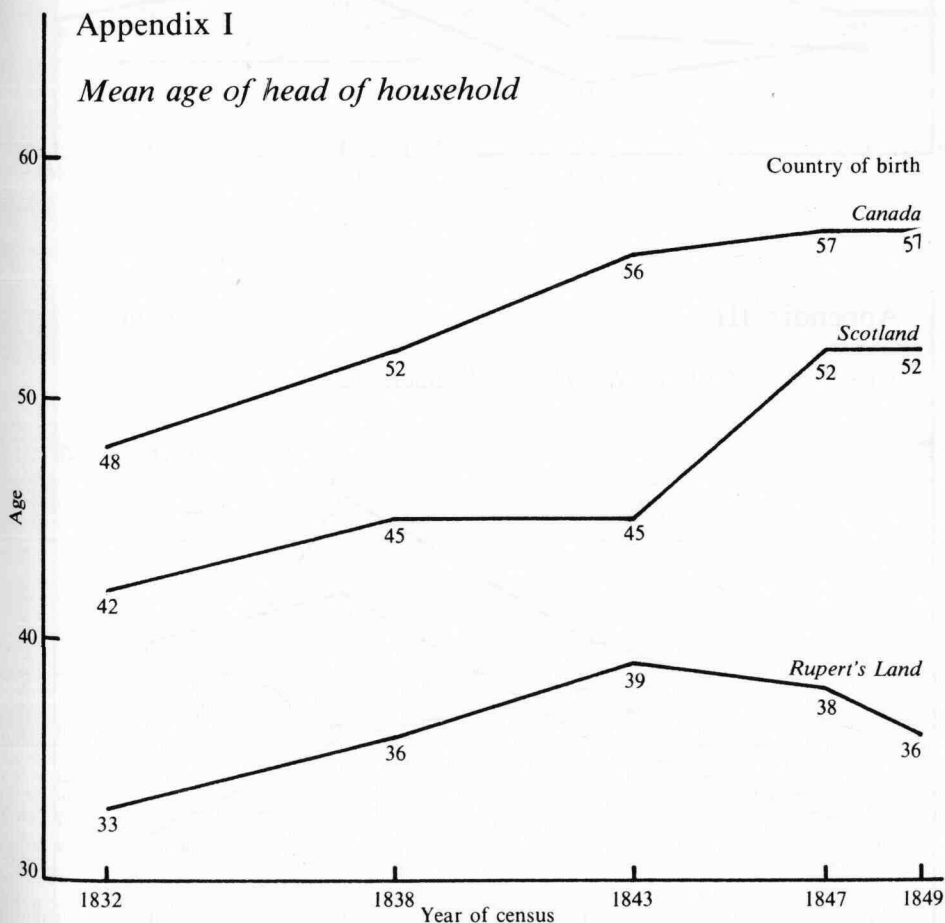
The church was equally responsible for exacerbating the crisis. Both the Catholic and Protestant churches had taught the value of subservience, of hierarchy, and of family; and the Protestants the value of an agricultural existence.⁵⁰ Throughout the 1830s the teachings of the clergy had struck a responsive chord, reinforcing as they did patterns taught by the fur trade and the European traditions of Red River. The church had, in fact, in a few years won an astounding following. By 1840, however, the goals of farm and family set by the church were no longer possible. The failure to achieve these goals must have served again and again to underline the desperateness of the situation. As important were the social pretensions of the clergy, and more important their support of the Company, which meant,

too, that they were unable to empathize with the dilemma of the mixed-bloods.

By 1845, then, the second generation of mixed bloods of the settlement were in a state of confusion. The major points of reference for nineteenth century society, the farm, the state (the Hudson's Bay Company), and the church were in disrepute. Red River would have to seek new reference points, a new identity. In the end they found it not in Red River or the fur trade, but rather in Canada.

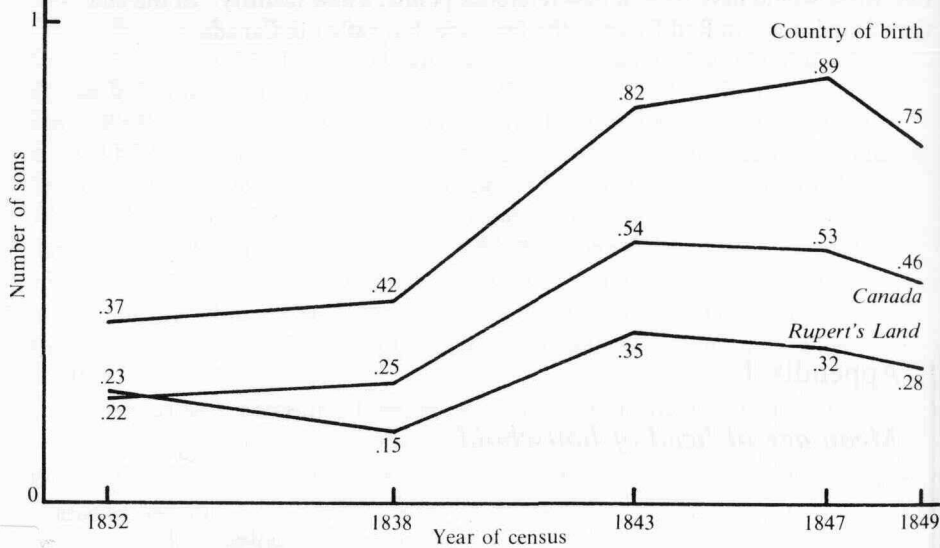
Appendix I

Mean age of head of household



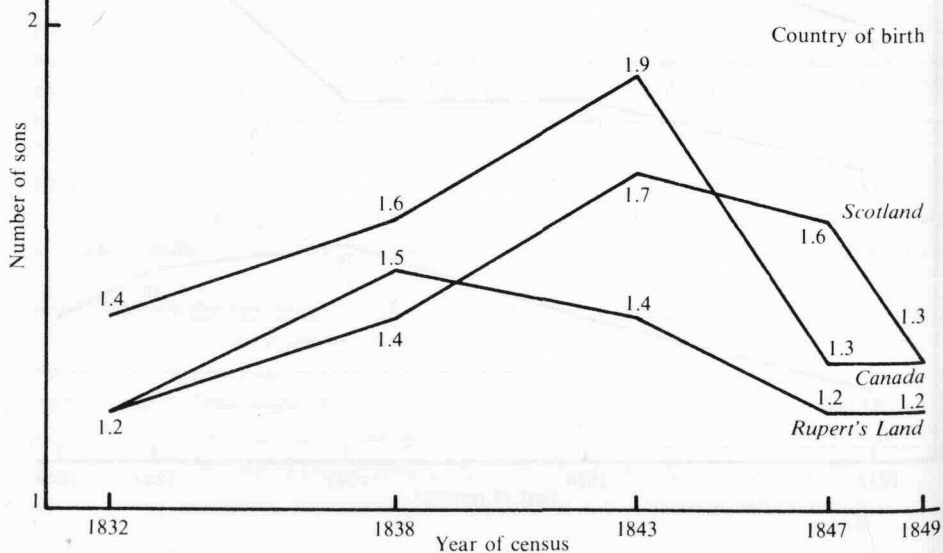
Appendix II

Number of sons over 16 per household

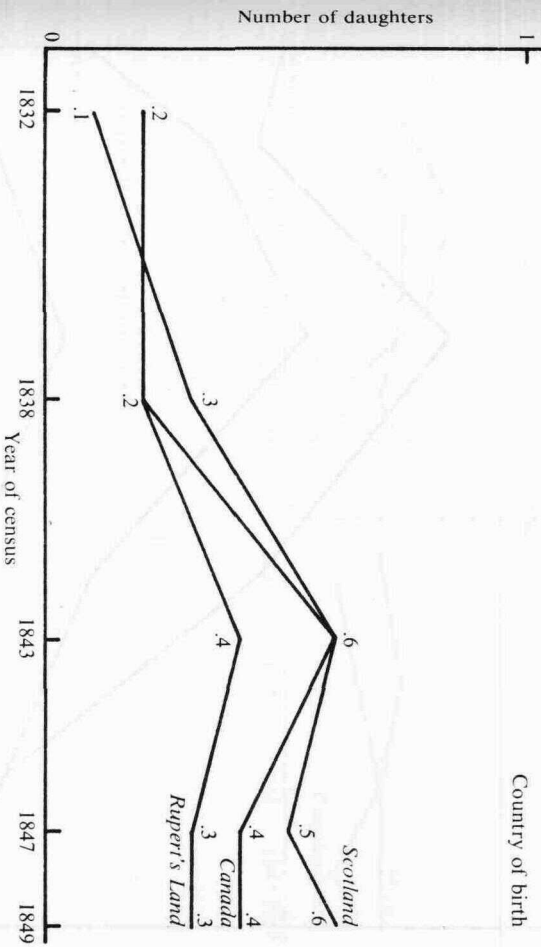


Appendix III

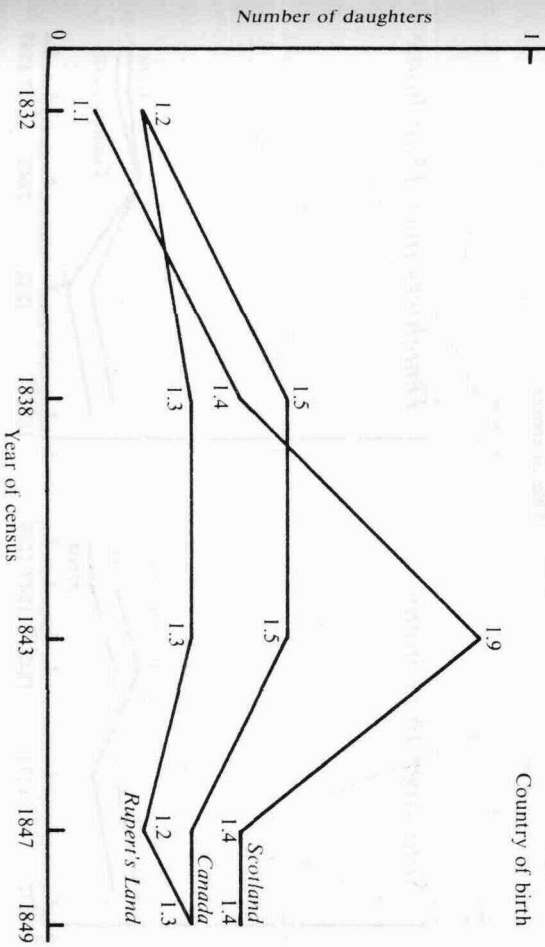
Number of sons under 16 per household



Appendix IV
Number of Daughters above 15 at home

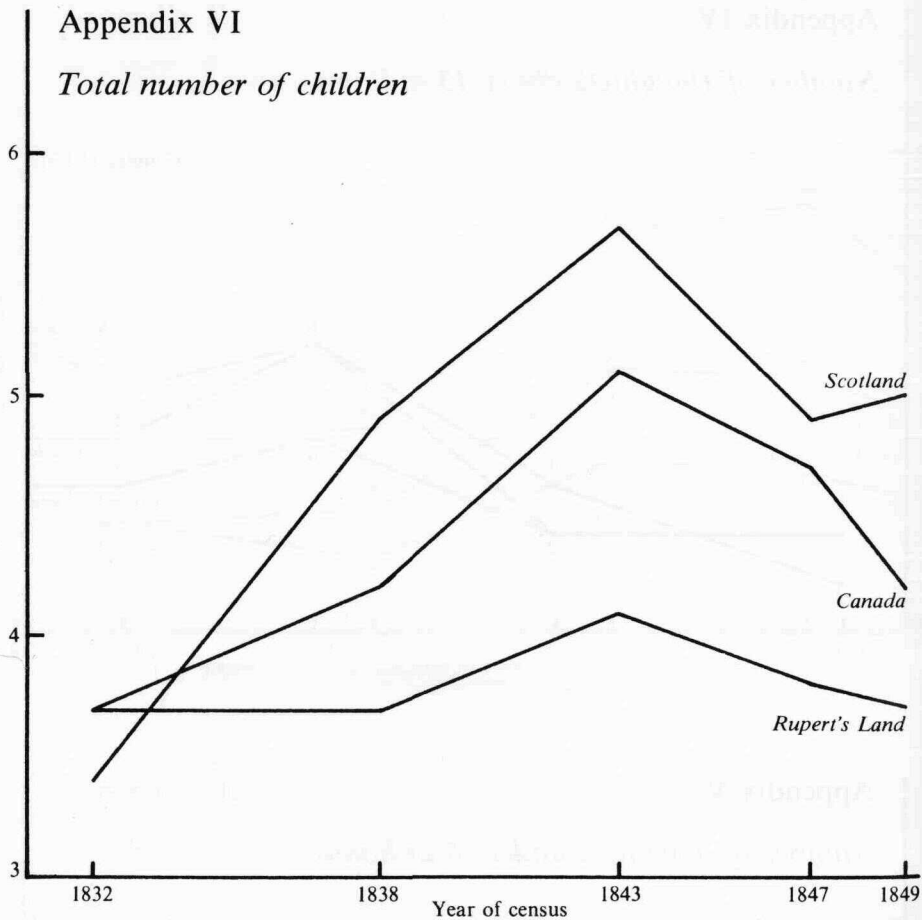


Appendix V
Number of daughters under 15 at home

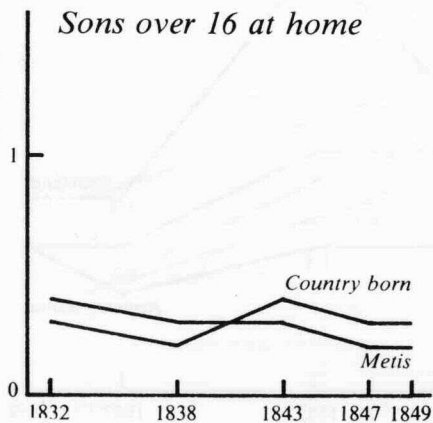


Appendix VI

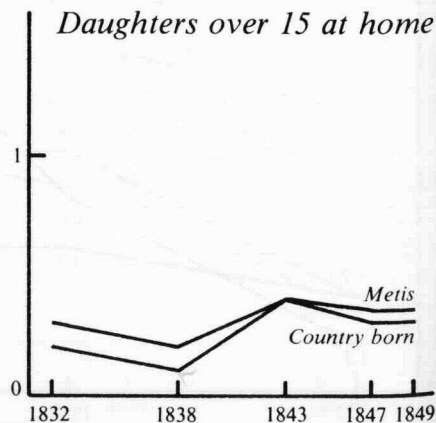
Total number of children



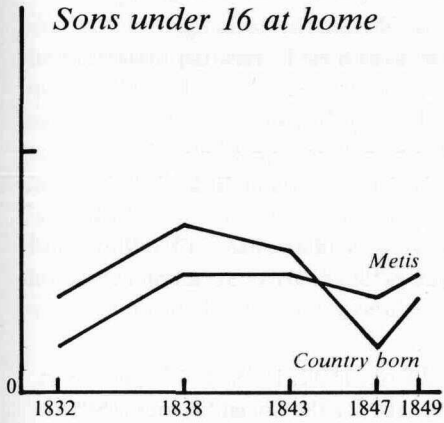
Sons over 16 at home



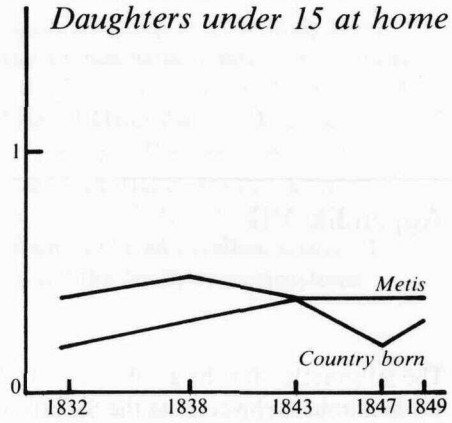
Daughters over 15 at home



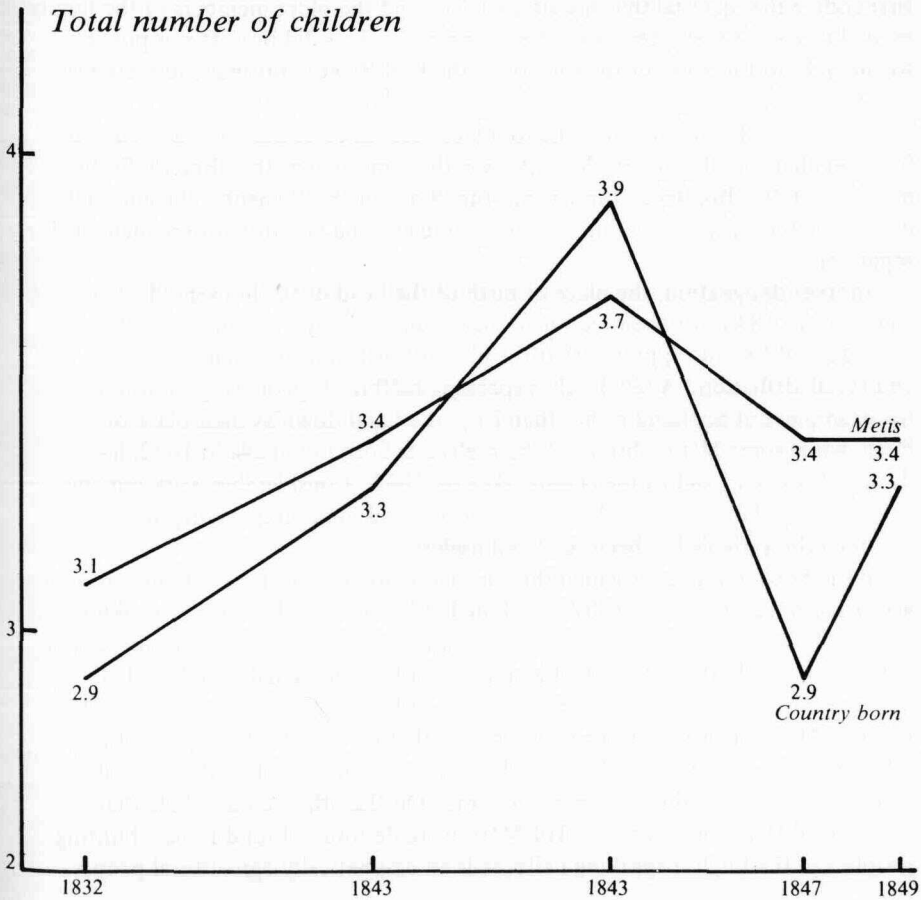
Sons under 16 at home



Daughters under 15 at home



Total number of children



Appendix VII

The information for the graphs was calculated from 1832, 1838, 1847 censuses in the Manitoba archives using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). While the censuses are for the most part reliable, they do have shortcomings. For example, many of the ages of the head of household are missing. Originally this meant a significant prejudice towards an older mean age since it was apparent when first coding the material that the first settlers, and the older members of the family tended to record their ages while the younger members did not. It was possible fortunately to fill many of the gaps from the Red River baptismal and marriage registers.

Geographic designation also changed from census to census. It was assumed however that the "Lower Settlement" was the same area as the "English Settlement," and "St. Boniface" the same as the "Catholic Settlement," since in each census the Swampy Village, the Saulteaux Village, and Grantown were identified separately.

Another designation, the place of birth of the head of the household, also changed. In 1843, for example, the designation "Orkney" was dropped. More important, it became apparent that the place of birth was for many an ethnic and racial affiliation. A few English-speaking halfbreeds of social pretension, for example, put Scotland rather than Rupert's Land down as their place of birth, while some Métis who listed themselves as born in Canada in 1832, indicated Rupert's Land to the census taker by 1843. Considerable work remains to determine the extent to which this occurred and, more important, the extent to which the variable has been rendered useless.

In the SPSS analysis, of which this paper is a preliminary product, an endeavor was made to separate the English-speaking halfbreeds and the French-speaking halfbreeds. This was done by designating all those Protestant, living in the Lower Settlement and born in Rupert's Land, as English-speaking halfbreeds and all those of Catholic faith, living in St. Boniface or Grantown and born in Rupert's Land, as Métis. It is important to emphasize that no statistically supportable difference was found in the demography of the two groups. Family size and composition was for the most part the same. On the other hand, substantial economic differences did exist. The Métis were definitely found to be a hunting people and the English-speaking halfbreeds an emphatically agricultural people.

It has probably struck the reader that although the censuses included both English-speaking halfbreeds and Métis, the specific examples are entirely from the Protestant parishes. This is because many French parish registers were either unavailable or illegible. Consequently only the Protestant baptismal, burial, and marriage registers, all in the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, could be used to reconstruct 22 Red River families selected at random. They included the Gaddy, Cook, Flett, Bird, Bannerman, Sutherland, Garrioch, Hallet, Inkster, Corrigan, Favel, Tait, Cockran, and Ross families. The servants' lists and wills in the Hudson's Bay Company archives were also found to be an excellent source. It should be emphasized that the SPSS analysis and the family reconstructions produced mutually reinforcing results.