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Comparative Study of Street Directories and Census Returns for 1871

Social and urban historians are increasingly aware of the need to develop new methods of examining large populations. The literature shows the ingenuity with which these problems are being solved. Municipal, parish and census records, which have previously been ignored because their use was impractical, can now be processed with ease and efficiency. The historian must still select from the available sources the one that is most suitable for his particular purpose.

In a study by this author,[1] city directories were used to compare the occupational status of the Irish, French Canadian and general population of Montreal in the nineteenth century. City directories contain valuable material, but they have certain disadvantages. The census returns were an alternative source. This study compares the city directory and the census returns for 1871 in order to assess their relative usefulness in studying occupations of the Irish in Montreal.

W.S. MacKay compiled his first directory for Montreal in 1842, and new editions appeared in 1843, 1854 and 1855. After 1861 the directory was published annually, and John Lovell took over editorship in 1867. The directories list names, addresses and occupations of heads of households. Decisions on the ethnic origin of subjects have to be made on a subjective basis.

At first glance the census returns offered more information. The first schedule of the returns is available on microfilm for 1825, 1842, 1851, 1861 and 1871. In addition to names, ages and occupations, the returns include ethnic origin and religious affiliation. In the 1842 returns, ethnic origin and religious affiliation are entered by household rather than by individual. The returns for St. Anne's, East, West and Centre wards are missing for 1851. As a high proportion of Irish resided in St. Anne's, any data based on the 1851 returns would be seriously distorted. This source could be used to full advantage only for 1861 and 1871 in a study which extended to the 1890's.

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1. D.S. Cross, "The Irish in Montreal, 1867-1896", unpublished M.A. thesis, McGill, 1969.

It was clear that the directories did not include all heads of households. To discover whether the street directories adequately represent the actual population, the following questions must be asked. What proportion of heads of households listed in the census returns were included in the directory? Were all occupational groups equally represented in the directory? Thirdly, were the significant differences in the occupational groupings of the Irish sample drawn from the census returns and the directories, bearing in mind the subjective judgements that were involved in using the latter.

To answer the first of these questions, a stratified random sample of 500 heads of households was drawn from the 1871 census returns. The sample was drawn to represent the general population density within each of the nine Montreal wards. The name, occupation and ethnic origin of each individual sampled was noted. This sample group will now be referred to as "heads of household C (for Census)". Each name found in "heads of household C" was looked up in the directory for 1871. An individual was assumed to have been found in the directory when the full name and occupation was the same as that recorded from the census. Where only the name was the same and the occupation was different, it was assumed that the individual was excluded from the directory. The names and occupations of those who were found in both the census return and the directory were recorded and will be referred to as "heads of household CD (for Census and Directory)". Using this method, it was found that "heads of household CD" contained 58.27 per cent of the names in "heads of household C". An additional 3 per cent could be added to the above figure to account for a number of ambiguous cases.

To discover whether occupational status was a significant factor in determining if a name would be found in the directory, the individuals in "heads of household C" were grouped separately in the following categories: unskilled; semi- and skilled; proprietors; commercial employees; professionals; services; manufacturers and "others". The proportion in each sub-group in "heads of households C" was calculated. The percentage of each sub-group in "heads of households C" that occurred in "heads of households CD" was also calculated. These values can be found in Table 1. These data were tested by the chi square technique which indicated that a higher proportion of proprietors occurred in the "heads of households CD" sample.

To determine if a sample from the directory would produce significantly different occupational groupings than a sample drawn from the census, two additional samples were drawn. The first, to be known as "Irish C", consisted of 500 Irish heads of households taken from the 1871 census returns, and the second, "Irish D", consisted of a similar group drawn from the directory. The samples "Irish C" and "Irish D" were tabulated under the same occupational categories. The values found appear in Table 2. This table was submitted to chi square analysis, and no significant differences were found. The differences which are seen in the table could easily have occurred by chance.

In answer to the first question, it has been shown that only about 60% of individuals found in the sample from the census returns are included in the directory for 1871.[2] It is unlikely that the true value would be lower than the one observed. The observed value would have been higher if a less severe restriction had been employed - if only names had been used for the criterion of inclusion more individuals would have been tabulated.

Proprietors were over represented in the sample "heads of households CD". It had been anticipated that this might occur, because the advertising potential of the directories would encourage proprietors to seek inclusion for business reasons. It is possible that as a group they were less likely to change occupation between the enumeration for the census and that for the directory. This explanation is ruled out, because the same could be said for the professionals, yet they as a group did not differ significantly from the expected proportion.

It can be concluded from the above that the street directories are a valid source for the study of Irish occupations. Data based on the directories will not differ significantly from data based on the census returns except in the instance of proprietors.

D.S. Cross and J.G. Dudley

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2. Peter R. Knights, "City Directories as Aids to Ante-Bellum Urban Studies: A Research Note", Historical Methods Newsletter Vol. II, no. 4, 1969. In examining the Boston directories for 1830 and 1840, Knight found a higher level of inclusivity at 68.0% and 68.5%.

Table 1. Proportions of occupational sub-groups occurring in sample from census returns and the percentage of each sub-group also included in the directory, 1871.

Occupational grouping	"Heads of household C"*	"Heads of household CD"*
Unskilled	22.1	54.8
Skilled and semi-skilled	39.4	51.7
Proprietors	19.6	80.4
Commercial employees	7.5	56.4
Professionals	6.9	63.9
Services	2.5	69.2
Manufacturers	.8	50.0
'Other'	1.2	16.7

* "Heads of household C" - sample of 520 drawn from census returns 1871. "Heads of household CD" - proportion of "Heads of household C" also found in Montreal Street Directory, 1871.

Table 2. The proportions by occupational sub-groups for samples from Irish populations in the street directory and census returns, 1871.

Occupational grouping	"Irish D"*	"Irish C"*
Unskilled	28.2	25.8
Skilled and semi-skilled	23.8	28.2
Proprietors	30.6	23.6
Commercial employees	7.2	12.0
Professionals	2.8	4.4
Services	3.8	3.8
Manufacturers	1.6	1.0
'Other'	2.0	1.2

* "Irish C" - sample of 500 drawn from census returns, 1871.
"Irish D" - sample of 500 drawn from the Montreal Street Directory, 1871.