

The French Background of Immigrants to Canada before 1700

Cole Harris

Volume 16, numéro 38, 1972

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/021058ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/021058ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département de géographie de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0007-9766 (imprimé)

1708-8968 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cette note

Harris, C. (1972). The French Background of Immigrants to Canada before 1700. *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, 16(38), 313-324.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/021058ar>

NOTES

THE FRENCH BACKGROUND OF IMMIGRANTS TO CANADA BEFORE 1700

Any appreciation of the human landscape and society of Canada during the French regime depends on some understanding of changes in the immigrants' way of life after their Atlantic crossing. Presumably there was change — it is hard to conceive of such displacement without it — but the nature and scale of change as well as the reasons for it are still subjects for a good deal of conjecture. To a great extent this uncertainty reflects our ignorance of the French roots of immigrants to Canada for, other than in the most general terms, we have not been able to say where immigrants had come from in France, whether their backgrounds had been rural or urban, what social and economic strata of French society they represented and in what proportion, and in what social and economic condition they arrived in Canada. Without such data, any discussion of social change is exceedingly difficult. Certainly, information about French origins is elusive. The contract drawn up when a man signed on as an *engagé* or as a soldier seldom gives his place of origin in France, his occupation, or his father's. When information is obtained about a few individuals, its representative value is always in question. The only way to obtain the quantitative data that are needed may be to search, immigrant by immigrant, through the relevant notarial records on both sides of the Atlantic. If a contract of indenture drawn up in La Rochelle indicates the approximate date at which an emigrant embarked for Canada and the period and wages for which he had contracted to work, a Canadian marriage contract a few years later may give his place of birth, and perhaps also his father's occupation. But to search in this way through the records pertinent to the some 10 000 immigrants to Canada during the French regime could well take a lifetime.

In an attempt to correct the many inaccuracies in Mgr. Cyprien Tanguay's *Dictionnaire généalogique des familles canadiennes*¹, Father Archange Godbout, O.F.M., began such a study. The published results of Father Godbout's work appear in five volumes of the *Rapport de l'Archiviste de la Province de Québec*², and cover immigrants with a surname beginning with A

¹ 7 vols., Montréal, Eusèbe Sénécal, 1870.

² 1951-1952 and 1952-1953, pp. 449-544 ; 1953-1954 and 1954-1955, pp. 445-536 ; 1955-1956 and 1956-1957, pp. 379-489 ; 1957-1958 and 1958-1959, pp. 383-440 ; 1959-1960, pp. 277-354.

or BA through BOU who arrived in Canada before 1700, in all 454 people³. Drawing on the nominal censuses, parish records, cadastral maps, and local histories and biographies, but principally on the notarial deeds, Father Godbout has outlined, where possible, the salient events in the life of each immigrant. In some cases his outline is extremely sketchy — perhaps he has found only that a given settler was in Canada by 1694 a date for which there is a notarial deed that refers to him — but Father Godbout has found some mention of the place of birth or of residence in France of the great majority of immigrants he has studied. From these data the regional distribution in France of immigrants to Canada may be mapped and the percentage of immigrants from rural or urban backgrounds ascertained. In some cases there is information about the occupation in France of the immigrant or of his father. Usually it is possible to determine whether the immigrant came alone or with relatives. This short paper assembles these data in quantitative or cartographic form and, in conclusion, suggests some of their implications for an understanding of early Canada.

Father Godbout's list of 454 people comprises approximately 8% of the immigrants to Canada before 1700⁴. Were it a random sample, information derived from it could be accepted with a small margin of error, but immigrants with surnames beginning with A or B cannot be considered to be a random sample if the proportion of A and B surnames varied regionally in 17th century France. Some indication that this was not the case is the fact that there is not a significant difference between the distribution of A surnames on the one hand and of B surnames on the other. If this is a biased sample, A and B surnames have the same bias, which seems unlikely. A check of contemporary telephone books does not reveal an unusual percentage of A and B surnames in those parts of France from which most immigrants came⁵. In short, there is no evidence of bias in Father Godbout's sample.

³ More precisely, Father Godbout's material contains information about people who founded Canadian families. Therefore, a man who spent several years in the colony and returned to France without leaving Canadian offspring is not considered, whereas three Indian women who married French speaking men and settled in the colony are included. His list also contains a good deal of information about first and, in some cases, about second generation Canadian descendents of immigrants, but these people are not treated in my analysis. The total of 454 people comprises 451 people who crossed the Atlantic to Canada (whether as adults or as children) plus three Indian women.

⁴ Approximately 10 000 immigrants are thought to have come to Canada during the French regime, between 5 000 and 6 000 of them probably arriving before 1700. The surnames of more than 8% of contemporary Frenchmen or French Canadians begin A or BA through BOU, which may indicate that Father Godbout missed some immigrants, or that fewer immigrants came to Canada than is commonly supposed.

⁵ Listings were checked for Amiens, Bordeaux, Caen, Dieppe, La Rochelle, Lyon, Marseille, Paris, Poitiers, Rouen, and Tours. Except in the case of Marseille where 16% and of Tours and Rouen where 11% of the listings came before the end of the BOU's, all were in the 13-14% range.

The place of origin

All but ten of the 454 immigrants were born in France. Of those who were not, three were Indians (see note 3), three were English, two were Swiss, one was German, and one Flemish. There is information about the place of origin within France of 414 of the 444 French born. Usually this information is very specific — an urban parish or a village that, with the aid of a gazetteer and the contemporary topographic sheets, can be located exactly—but in some cases Father Godbout has determined only that the immigrant came from « the diocese of Poitiers » or, perhaps, only that he came from Poitou. In most cases this information is based on a parish record of baptism, or on an immigrant's recollection before some Canadian notary that he was born in such and such a place of such and such parents. Sometimes there is information about the immigrant's place of residence in France (which may or may not be his place of birth) and about his port of embarkation. In the figures that follow, the port of embarkation has been disregarded unless there is good evidence that it was also the emigrant's residence. Whenever there is information only about place of birth or about place of residence then this location, whichever it is, is assumed to be the place of origin. In a few cases it can be established that an immigrant lived for some time immediately prior to his departure in a place that was not his place of birth. In these cases the place of origin is considered to be the place of residence. However, the most common information is about place of birth, and for some three quarters of the immigrants for whom a place of origin can be assigned it is, in fact, their place of birth.

Figure 1

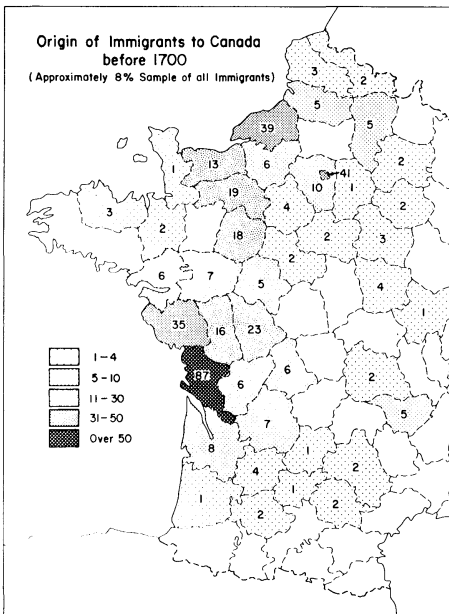
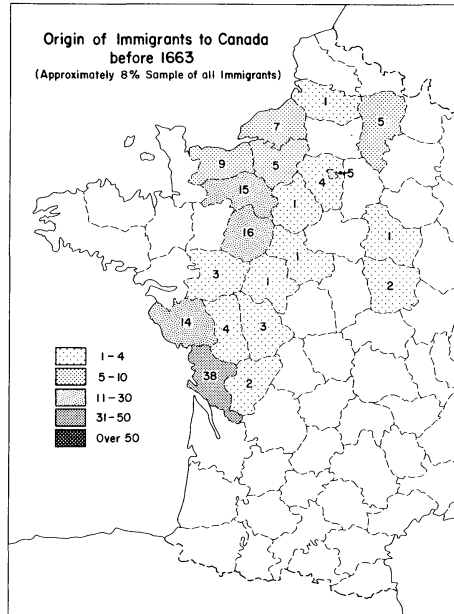


Figure 2

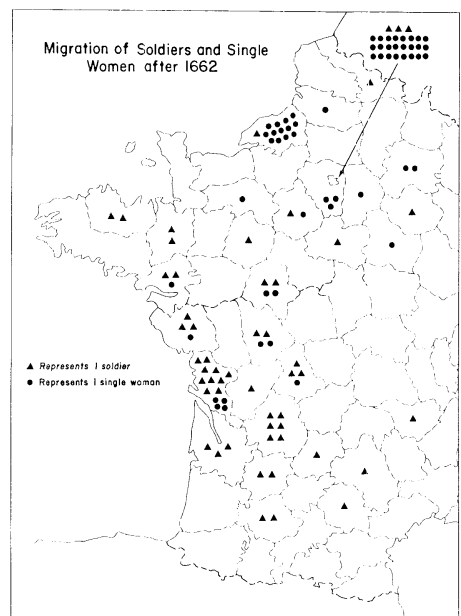
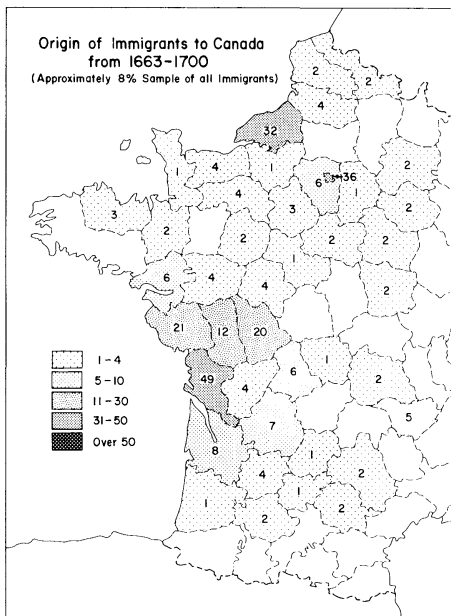


These data are mapped by departments on Figure 1. Just over half of the immigrants came from south of the Loire River with easily the greatest concentration of them from around the port of La Rochelle in the old provinces of Aunis, Poitou and Saintonge. A good many came from the valley of the lower Seine between Paris and Le Havre, some others from central Normandy and Maine (now the departments of Calvados, Orne and Sarthe). The rest were scattered through west-central France. Very few came from Brittany or the Massif Central, even fewer from the far south, and none from east of the Rhône.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of immigrants who arrived in Canada before the introduction of royal government (1663), and Figure 3 shows those who came thereafter. The colonists sent by the Crown (Figure 3) were drawn from a much wider area of France than were those who came out during the years in which Canada was administered by the Company of New France. Paris, which contributed few settlers before 1663, and the southwest which, in this sample, contributed none, both show up as important sources of immigrants after 1663. Norman immigrants before 1663 were likely to have come from the present departments of Calvados and Orne, but after 1663 to have come from the lower Seine (especially from the department of Seine-Inférieure). Some of these differences between the regional pattern of French emigration to Canada before and after 1663 are explained by Figure 4 which shows the place of origin of soldiers and of single women,

Figure 3

Figure 4



both substantial components of the immigrant stream after 1663. Most of the single women came from poor houses in Paris, and many were Parisians by birth. Clearly, the soldiers who settled in Canada were drawn from a much wider part of France than were the engagés who contracted to work in the colony.

In all but sixty-five cases, the rural or urban origin of immigrants also can be determined. When an immigrant came from a sizeable city — Paris, Bordeaux, or Tours, for example — there is no question about his urban background. Similarly a place that is today a village almost certainly was not more than a village late in the 17th century, whereas places that are today towns or small cities may have been either rural or urban three hundred years ago. In these latter cases Robert de Hessel's *Dictionnaire Universel de la France*⁶, has been used to distinguish between the two. If de Hessel describes a place as a city (*ville*) it is so considered in this study; if he describes it as a village, a *bourg*, or does not mention it, it is considered to be rural.

Table I gives the number and percentage of urban and rural immigrants in several groups of settlers. In each group the proportion of immigrants from an urban background is far higher than the urban proportion of the French population at the time (under 10%). Although the number of immigrants whose origins are unknown leaves the matter somewhat in doubt, it is likely that considerably more than half of the immigrants had come from towns. As might be expected, the urban proportion was particularly high among female immigrants, and partly for this reason the strength of urban over rural migration was most pronounced in the early years of royal government when several contingents of women were sent to the colony.

Table I *Urban-Rural Background*

<i>Immigrants</i>	<i>urban</i>		<i>rural</i>		<i>unknown</i>	
	<i>no.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>no.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>no.</i>	<i>%</i>
Total	206	45.6	180	40.0	65	14.4
Arriving before 1663	63	45.3	63	45.3	13	9.4
Arriving after 1662	143	45.8	117	37.5	52	16.7
Male	136	40.4	150	44.5	51	15.1
Female	70	61.4	30	26.3	14	12.3

⁶ 6 vols., Paris, 1771. This is an early and somewhat discursive form of gazetteer, giving a good deal of information about all but the smallest centers in France. Even more useful in this regard might have been l'ABBÉ d'EXPILLY, *Dictionnaire géographique, historique et politique des Gaules et de la France*, Paris, 1762-1770; or MARIN SAUGRAIN et DES THUILERIES, *Dictionnaire universel de la France ancienne et moderne et de la nouvelle France*, Paris, 1726; but neither was available. I am confident, however, that in all but perhaps one or two cases a designation of rural or urban based on de Hessel is not misleading.

Figure 5

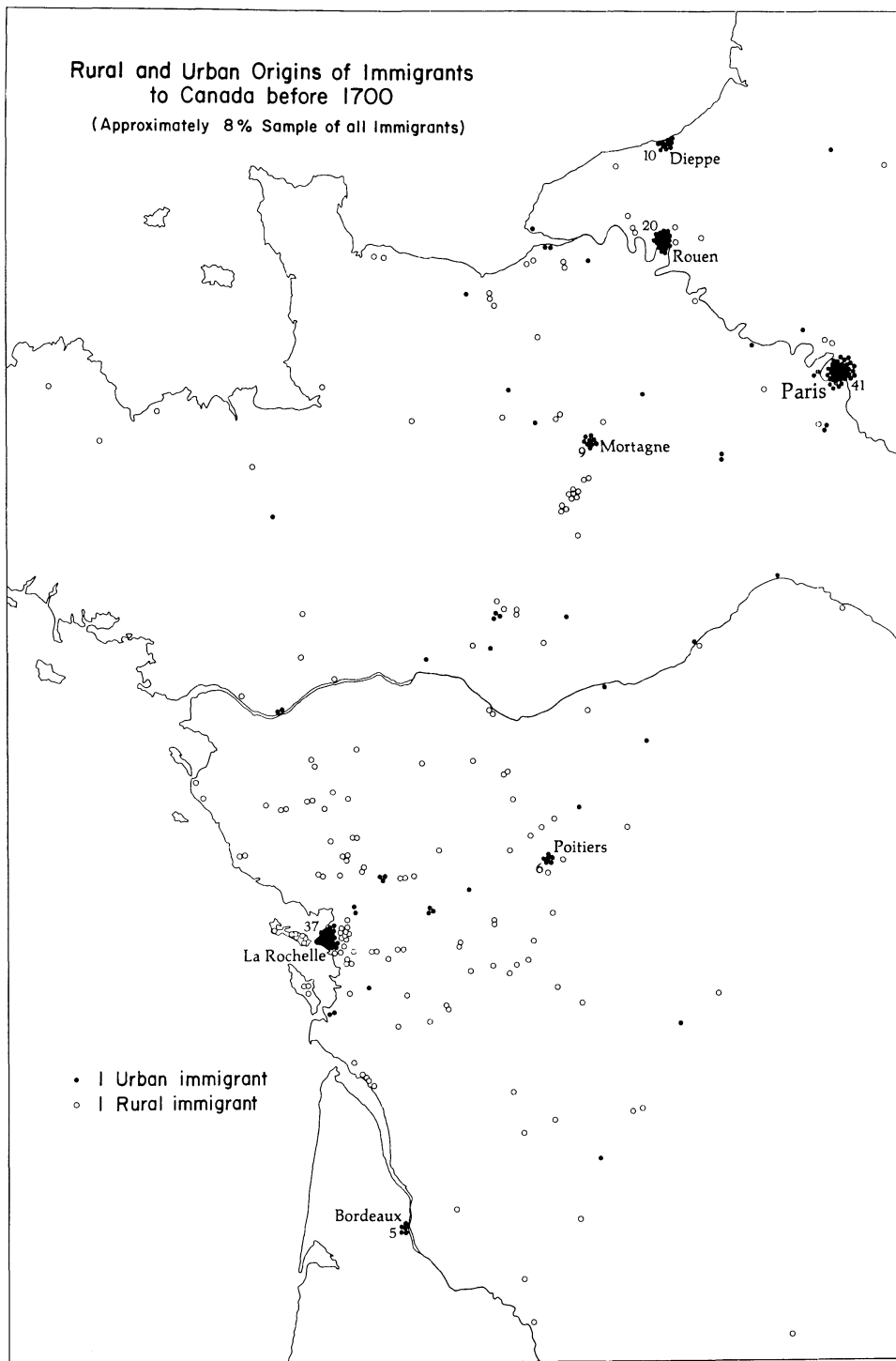


Figure 5 shows the exact point of origin in west-central France of more than three-quarters of the immigrants in Father Godbout's list. More than 20% of all immigrants had come from three cities, Paris (41), La Rochelle (35), and Rouen (20), but all the other cities indicated on Figure 5 had contributed to this sample. Generally, urban immigrants were likely to come from north and rural immigrants from south of the Loire. Many rural immigrants came from villages within a few miles of La Rochelle, but the concentration of rural migration that focussed on La Rochelle also extended well to the east and north of the port.

Economic and Social Background

Father Godbout's list contain almost no information about the economic background of the women who came to Canada, but there is such information about approximately one third of the men. In some cases Father Godbout has found the occupation of the immigrant's father, in others the occupation in France of the immigrant himself, and in a few cases the occupations of both father and immigrant. When there is no direct information about an immigrant's occupation in France it may occasionally be inferred from his activities in Canada. If, for example, a man is described within a year or two of his coming to Canada as a « maître charpentier » he had undoubtedly learned his trade in France. On the other hand, a man described at Québec as a domestic or as a day labourer may or may not have been so employed in France. Still, by combining several sources of information, data can be obtained on the occupational background of 112 male immigrants. This is a small sample, some 3% of the male immigrants to Canada in the 17th century, it is probably not a random sample of the 330 male immigrants described by Father Godbout, and findings based on it should be treated cautiously.

Table II groups the 112 immigrants by occupational category, and compares their occupational background with that of a much larger sample of troops in the French army in 1737⁷. There is reason to assume that male immigrants to Canada and recruits to the ranks of the French army were drawn from much the same occupational strata: many immigrants were soldiers, and the larger number who came as engagés may have been recruited in much the same way as soldiers, and may have viewed the army or the colonies as almost equivalent choices. In a general way the figures in Table II do bear out this assumption, although there were important differences between the backgrounds of troops and immigrants that perhaps cannot be explained by the inadequacy of the Canadian sample, and that appear to shed light on the character of early Canadian immigration.

⁷ CORVISIER, André (1964), *L'Armée française de la fin du XVII^e siècle au ministère de Choiseul*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, vol. 1, pp. 468-469.

Table II *Occupational Background of Immigrants and Soldiers*

Occupation	Immigrants to Canada		Troops in French Army, 1737	
	no.	%	Soldier %	Father of soldier %
military ⁸	1	0.9	—	1.2
noble	2	1.8	1.3	3.8
royal officers and agents	4	3.6	.6	3.6
intellectuals	—	—	1.0	.7
medicine	4	3.6	3.0	1.7
commerce	18	16.1	7.6	13.0
artisans	59	52.5	50.7	35.9
agriculture	18	16.1	34.6	39.2
servants	—	—	1.0	.7
others	6	5.4	.2	.2

Most important of these is the small representation of men of agricultural backgrounds among the Canadian immigrants. Whereas more than a third of the recruits for the French army came from agricultural pursuits, fewer than a fifth of the immigrants were in this category. Of those immigrants whose backgrounds were agricultural, thirteen were *laboueurs* or the sons of *laboueurs* (a word designating a small rural landholder in most parts of France but an agricultural worker in others), four were millers, and one, a *journalier* may have been employed as an agricultural day labourer. Missing altogether are the *manouvriers* and *vignerons* who comprised a substantial percentage of the agricultural category in the figures for the French army. Perhaps immigrants hesitated to mention that they came from these unpretentious backgrounds, but the designation *laboureur* did impart some status, and if status were a consideration, few immigrants would have hesitated to use it. One of them described his father as *laboureur* and *honorable homme*. Another possible source of error stems from the fact that a French agricultural background cannot be inferred from the Canadian activities of an immigrant. A man described as a skilled artisan within a year or two of his arrival in Canada had been an artisan in France, whereas a man established on a farm lot shortly after coming to Canada may or may not have farmed in France.

The fact remains that only approximately half of the immigrants to Canada as opposed to some two-thirds of the recruits for the army had come from rural backgrounds ⁹. Just over half of the rural recruits for the French

⁸ The occupational background of an immigrant who came to Canada as a soldier is not considered to have been military unless there is evidence that his father was a soldier before him.

⁹ CORVISIER, *Ibid.*, pp. 387-410.

army had been employed in agriculture. If it be assumed that immigrants from rural backgrounds were as likely to have been engaged in agriculture as soldiers from rural backgrounds, then about a quarter of the immigrants to Canada had come from agricultural vocations. This estimate should probably be considered the most likely figure, although the possibility remains that the percentage of immigrants from agricultural backgrounds was as low as is indicated in Table II.

The high percentage of artisans among the immigrants may be explained partly by the bias mentioned above, but it also reflects the urban roots of many immigrants. Although some fifty percent of the immigrants would have described themselves as artisans, it is not always clear what this designation means. Many of the immigrants were adolescents hardly old enough to have practiced a trade, others may have been unemployed or, perhaps more accurately, may have been day labourers whose descriptions of themselves as carpenters or masons were decidedly optimistic. The considerable block of immigrants from commercial backgrounds fits into two groups: most appear to have been the sons of shopkeepers, but six were the sons of *bourgeois* who appear to have been involved in commerce at a considerably larger scale. Most of the sons of these men, judging by Father Godbout's sample, came to Canada as army officers.

Table II indicates that most broad categories of French society were represented among 17th century immigrants to Canada. But a man whose background was in trade or in agriculture, in the nobility or the bourgeoisie, may have been comfortably off or destitute when he arrived in Canada. Emigration may have been an adventure, an economic opportunity or necessity, or an escape from a deteriorating social situation. It may have involved people whom force of circumstances — a father's early death, for example — had already dislocated from their economic or social strata in France. If this were the case, the immigrant's common economic and social vulnerability may have been more important than their different occupational backgrounds, but this case remained to be demonstrated. Father Godbout's material does little to clarify the matter. Many of the girls sent out to marry brought dowries of one to three hundred livres¹⁰. A few men came out to investigate the colony before sending for their families, a practice not unknown in early New England,¹¹ and some immigrants crossed the Atlantic three times.

The Condition of Crossing

There is no indication in Father Godbout's materials that extended families or kin groups emigrated to Canada, but there are many indications

¹⁰ The king also contributed a dowry of 50 livres, but there is evidence in Father Godbout's materials that at least a third of the girls who came with the intention of marrying in Canada brought a larger sum with them.

¹¹ For example, see C.S. POWELL. *Puritan Village, The Formation of a New England Town*, Chapter 1.

Such immigrants were not destitute, but there is no way of determining the extent to which they were representative. Five women in the sample had come to Canada as widows. The fathers of at least seventy-four immigrants (16% of the sample) appear to have died when their children were young.¹² of the migration of nuclear families. Migration is considered to be of this latter type if at least one member of the immigrant's immediate family — a spouse, child, parent, or sibling — crossed the Atlantic with him, or if an immigrant joined or was subsequently joined by such a relative in Canada.

In general, most immigrants to Canada before 1700 came alone (see Table III), although there was a striking difference in this respect between those coming before and after the beginning of royal government. Although the Company of New France did not bring nearly as many settlers as stipulated in its contract, and lost its charter for this failure, the settlers it did bring appear to have been of superior quality. Most arrived in families and it was in these early years that some men crossed the Atlantic to scout out the colony before sending for or returning to fetch their wives and children. Migration during the proprietary years was not of indigent people, but primarily of artisans with a little capital and solid skills. The immigrants sent to Canada after 1662 usually came alone, and almost never returned to France.

Table III Individual and Family Immigration

	<i>Immigrants arriving alone</i>		<i>Immigrants arriving with family</i>		<i>unknown</i>	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Immigrants before 1663	48	34.8	83	60.1	7	5.1
Immigrants after 1662	258	82.4	39	12.5	16	5.1
Total	306	67.8	122	27.1	23	5.1

They reflected an official decision to colonize and a broadside approach to colonization that brought out a larger percentage of immigrants who were destitute, unskilled, and of little immediate use to the colony.¹³

There is indication that some unrelated immigrants had known each other before they crossed the Atlantic. Settlers who came from near Mortagne,

¹² Perhaps there were more, but Father Godbout's material is incomplete in this respect. Frequently it is impossible to determine how long before the immigrant's voyage to Canada his father had died.

¹³ In Canada Intendants frequently complained about the quality of immigrants sent by the crown, describing them as young, sickly, and unskilled, and occasionally suggesting that Swiss immigrants should be sent instead.

for example, appear to have been drawn to Canada by the Boucher family. The many soldiers in the Carignan Salières regiment who came from the Dorgogne suggest that recruitment for this regiment was of the seigneurial type,¹⁴ with officers drawing men from their own region or seigneurie. Then too, it can be assumed that some colonists, especially some of those who came from villages around La Rochelle, decided to emigrate because they knew people from their own village who were established in Canada.

Conclusion

The principal results of this examination of Father Godbout's genealogical material may be briefly summarized :

1) More than half of the immigrants to Canada in the 17th century came from south of the Loire River particularly from the old provinces of Aunis and Poitou.

2) Approximately half of the immigrants came from cities, particularly from cities north of the Loire.

3) Artisans comprised some half of the immigrants, whereas agricultural people probably were not more than one quarter and may have been less than one fifth of the total.

4) As a rule, immigrants before 1663 came in families, while those arriving thereafter came without relatives.

Some implications of these findings for an understanding of the geography of French settlement in early Canada may be briefly stated. If Acadians and Canadians came from similar parts of France,¹⁵ then antecedents for the dykes that enclosed the marshes of the Bay of Fundy may well lie in the ill-drained coastal plain of Aunis and Poitou. Similarly, the roots of the vernacular house of the lower St. Lawrence may lie less in Normandy, as has usually been supposed, than in the hinterland of La Rochelle. The high rate of land sale among settlers in Canada is almost certainly associated with their lack of agricultural experience ; immigrants who had never wielded an axe or worked the land settled down to farm only as a last resort. The absence in Canada of open field agriculture and the rarity of collective agricultural practices and of villages, may have to do with the weakness of the immigrants' agricultural tradition. The importance of the towns throughout

¹⁴ CORVISIER, *Ibid.*, pp. 159-178.

¹⁵ See CLARK, A.H. (1968), *Acadia*. Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 397-400 for a discussion of the background of the Acadians. Clark notes that Geneviève MASSIGNON in *Les Parlers français d'Acadie* (enquête linguistique), 2 vols., Paris, 1962, argues that a substantial percentage of the Acadians came from northeastern Poitou, a conclusion which accords generally with the results of this analysis of Father Godbout's genealogical data.

the French regime may be seen partly as an outgrowth of the heavily urban character of Canadian immigration. These and other implications of Father Godbout's material will need to be explored in any synthesis of early Canadian landscape and society.

Cole HARRIS

Department of Geography

The University of British Columbia

Vancouver