

The Role of Migration for Household Change during Canada's Westward Expansion at the End of the 19th century: The Case of Red River Colony

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INTRODUCTION

The origins of family demography can be traced back to the 1950s around the question of the historical appearance and distribution of family structures, notably nuclear vis-à-vis extended or complex households. Early debates centring on the response of household structure to industrialization and urbanization (see, for instance: Goode, 1963) and the durability of nuclear household formations (Laslett, 1965, 1972, 1983) led to a vast literature about the demographic and economic opportunities to form particular types of households (e.g., Hajnal, 1982; Reher, 1998; Hartman, 2004; Thornton, 2005). The role of migration for family formation was not considered in these studies, however, and migration has only recently been linked to family change (Oris, 2003). Although today it is widely accepted that, “migration systems were rooted in extant demographic regimes and family formation systems” (Moch, 1995:126), the direction, intensity and mechanism of the relationship between migration and family change is still up for debate.

In this paper, we aim to fill this gap by drawing from the case study of the Red River colony in Western Canada during the second half of the 19th century. The colony was founded in 1811, and it is roughly formed by the current boundary between Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Its demographic profile has been shaped by the collision of three concurrent population movements during the second half of the 19th century: international European immigrants coming in search of farming opportunities; flows of North American-born migrants from eastern Canada and the US to Western Canada; and flows of Indigenous peoples¹ being regionally relocated from their native land through forced displacement and treaty-making. Indeed, the 1856 census of the Red River colony enumerated 1,094 families, of which 78% were headed by a “native or half-breed” and less than 20% by a foreign-born (Statistics Canada, 2000). Our research for the corresponding census district of Selkirk in the 1901 census of Manitoba shows that close to 20% of 5,723 households then had an Indigenous head, the corresponding percentage for households with a foreign-born head being 51% (Trudeau-Laurin et al., 2023). These figures demonstrate the faster growth of immigrant-headed households compared to Indigenous-headed households in Manitoba due to massive migrations flow, increasing urbanization, and changing local and regional economies.

Using the genealogy of the first Métis Nation compiled by Sprague and Frye (1990) for the original inhabitants of the Red River Colony and the 100% count for the 1901 census (*The Canadian Peoples Project*), this paper aims to assess the extent structural change, in the form of migration and spatial relocation, impacted household structures in Manitoba in the second half of the 19th century. Specifically, we have two objectives:

1. Reconstruct the life course trajectories of Red River households between 1870 and 1901, by identifying and validating available information on the place of residence, household relationships, and ethnicity found in the genealogy of the first Métis nation and the 1901 census of Manitoba.
2. Assess the role of migration and spatial relocation for observed changes in household living arrangements in Manitoba between 1870 and 1901 through the cross-sectional and longitudinal analysis of the life course trajectories of the Red River households.

¹ ‘Indigenous peoples’ refers to the distinct groups of First Nations, Métis and Inuit who claim to sovereign self-determination, even though ‘Aboriginal’ has been used by the Canadian state since the late 20th century.

BACKGROUND

Brief history of colonization in Manitoba. European settlement begun in 1811, when the Scottish Earl of Selkirk acquired property rights over 300,000 km² of Rupert's Land from the Hudson Bay Company (HBC) with the stipulation "within ten years, to settle within the tract one thousand families" (Morris, 1880:10). Selkirk's settlement would become known as the Red River colony (or Assiniboia), and it remained the main non-native (albeit increasingly Métis) settlement on the Northwest Canadian Prairies for most of the 19th century. Following a treaty between the Earl of Selkirk and five Indian chiefs in 1817, the Red River colony quickly expanded from a total population of 2,390 in 1831 to 6,691 in 1856 (Statistics Canada, 2000). A land surveyor sent to Red River in 1856 reported that, as indicated by the HBC census, the majority of the colony's inhabitants were almost all native and that "the colony was becoming less and less European each decade." (Sprague and Frye, 1990:23). Encouraged by the surveyor's report, the government of Ontario sent hundreds of white settlers starting at the end of 1850 (Morton, 1956, cited in Sprague and Frye, 1990). Because of this massive immigration, in 1860 the council of Assiniboia passed a land ordinance ensuring the occupancy of about 2000 native families (Sprague and Frye, 1990:24), but most Indigenous peoples remained not listed in the HBC's Land Register. When the HBC transferred the West to the Canadian government in 1869, Dominion Land Surveyors were instructed not to list natives and Métis as "occupants." As a result, after 1871 "the original population of Manitoba had no legal basis for retaining their homeland and dispersed west and north under the watchful eye of the national police." (Sprague and Frye, 1990:28). A second wave of dispersal happened after 1885, when a rebellion attempt by the remaining original inhabitants brutally squashed.

Migration and family change in historical perspective. The demographic literature on migration and family change in historical populations is limited (Oris, 2003; Reid, 2021). In Canada, historical studies about migration and family change have focused on the eastern provinces (Gauvreau and Thornton, 2014) and thus do not incorporate ethnic diversity beyond the French-English dichotomy (Boyd, 2015).

Assimilation policies by missionaries and the Canadian government relied on family disruption, notably the removal of children and their forced relocation to residential schools, "in order to minimize and weaken family ties and cultural linkages." (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015: V). The Canadian government's failure to respect treaty obligations, restrictions on Indigenous access to land as well as mobility, and reductions in relief payments jeopardized the well-being of Indigenous families, exposing them to poverty, starvation and disease (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015: I). Yet how Indigenous family structures in Western Canada were impacted by colonization and spatial relocation has not yet been studied at the population level, due to the lack of the necessary microdata and analytical tools.

This is because the main historical source of information on migration, ethnicity and household relationships is the federal census. For the first time in 1901, the census collected data on both ethnicity and household relationships, which was also the first one to ask about the year of arrival for immigrants. Before, information about household structures in Western Canada that includes both migration and ethnicity is scattered among the wealth of different administrative records: the written records of births, marriages, and burials kept by Protestant and Catholic missionaries; the HBC's records of contract labour engagements, indebtedness, and land titles; and surveyors' land grants documentation. Drawing from this vast array of information, Métis historiography has reconstructed family histories in Western Canada primarily via genealogical research (see, for instance, Macdougall, 2014). Demographers have, so far, not taken advantage of these existing data sources. The reason why Manitoba is a particularly interesting case study for demographers interested in migration and family change is that, in addition to an extensive administrative documentation, there are also records from regular census enumerations carried out in Red

River colony beginning when Selkirk acquired property rights from the HBC. The main limitation of these enumerations to study family change is that the reporting was on household aggregate, rather than individuals within households. Of pivotal importance is thus the Archibald census of 1870, carried out shortly after Manitoba joined Confederation, where the unit of enumeration changed to individual household members. Information on family structure from the 1870 census of Manitoba has been compiled by Sprague and Frye (1990) in the genealogy of the first Métis nation, which the proposed project aims to systematically analyze for the first time.

Migration, household relations and ethnicity in historical census data. Since this research exploits historical census data (from the 1870 census of Manitoba and the 1901 federal census of Canada), it is important to understand that, at the end of the 19th century, the census was established as a crucial practice of governing the state (Anderson, 2008:356–357). As Kahnawà: ke Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson observes, “[t]he desire for land produces ‘the problem’ of Indigenous life that is already living on that land” (2014:19). To reckon with this problem, the census served as inventory of Indigenous presence in the West, intended to be used to as an instrument of erasure and assimilation of Indigenous peoples and their families (Taschereau Mamers, 2017). Although, as colonizers and colonized, their positions in the newly established Canadian nation were fundamentally different, the state had the same approach in regard to immigrants and Indigenous peoples, who had to be “absorbed and unified.” (Department of the Secretary of State, 1871).

In 1901, enumerators were instructed to measure racial origin by using the criteria of “colour” (Urquhart and Buckley, 1965:6). While the paternal line continued to be the determining factor for the transmission of identity for Euro-Canadians, an additional instruction in the 1901 census stipulated that “the children begotten of marriages between whites and any one of the other races will be classed as red, black or yellow.” These instructions “brushed aside classifications that signified Métis distinctiveness as a people in favour of a racialized ‘Indian-or-white’ dichotomy.” (Andersen, 2008; 354–355). The vocabulary used by particular tribes to describe family relationships may not have translated well to census English or French, kin and non-kin residents may have been conflated, honour relationships and customary adoptions left unrecognized, and seasonal variations may have gone unobserved (Shoemaker 1991:331; Shoemaker 1992:7; Hamilton, 2007:74–75).

In recent years, historians have used historical census data to uncover and understand how the totalizing effort of the census enterprise intersected with bottom-up resistance to categorical impositions. Historians have identified age under- and over-reporting, early declarations of “Canadian” as a language, and self-identification as “widow” to conceal marital breakdown, thus learning how census respondents adapted their answers to better reflect their own sense of identity. This micro-level detective work has not yet been undertaken for different ethnic groups, especially with respect to family structure. The results of the proposed project will thus make an important contribution to better understand historical censuses as colonial settler instruments.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

We aim to further our understanding of the role of migration for family change through an original linkage of two data sources: the genealogy of the first Métis Nation compiled by Sprague and Frye (1990), and the full-count census data for 1901 recently made available by the CFI-funded project *The Canadian Peoples* (TCP ; thecanadianpeoples.com).

In their book, Sprague and Frye (1990) have compiled all available information about the original inhabitants of the Red River colony in six tables that, taken together, allow tracing the genealogy of individual families and kinship networks from 1818 to 1905. Table 4 in the book of Sprague and Frye

contains information on the households enumerated in the 1870 census of Manitoba, their structure (including the name and ages of their children). The data collected by Sprague and Frye thus represents the oldest account of household structure by migration and ethnicity in Western Canada.

The 1901 census is the first national Canadian census to record, for each household member, information on 1) the relationship to the head of the household; 2) ethnic origin and racial/tribal origin; and 3) year of birth, place of birth (including province, if in Canada), and year of arrival.

To prepare the data for analysis, we began by digitizing all information compiled by Sprague and Frye. We then merged this information with the corresponding records from the 1901 census in the TCP data. Although nominative information from the 1901 census was not available when Sprague and Frye reconstructed the genealogy of the original inhabitants of the Red River colony², information on several Red River households spans until 1905.

To assess the role of migration and spatial relocation for household change in Manitoba between 1870 and 1901, we will proceed in two steps. In the first step of the analysis, we will include all households of the original inhabitants of the Red River colony whether they could be matched to the corresponding 1901 census records or not. We will thus compare cross-sectionally the household living arrangements of Red River households in 1870 (from Sprague and Frye's genealogies) and in 1901 (from the 1901 TCP census data for Manitoba). To do so, we will apply the household configuration approach (Bignami et al., 2023) and we will identify the statistical frequency of all living arrangements found in the population of Red River in 1870 vis-à-vis 1901 by migration and ethnic status.

In the second step of the analysis, we will include only the Red River households that could be found in both the 1870 and 1901 datasets. We will thus analyze longitudinally how the structure of these households changed as the population of Red River got dispersed after Manitoba's annexation to Canada. To interpret the observed changes, we will exploit the complementary information compiled by Sprague and Frye about the Red River households between 1870 and 1905, notably the registration of land patents to the original inhabitants of the Red River colony after 1870.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

We have completed the descriptive analysis of the families inhabiting Red River parishes in 1870 with respect to their ethnic composition, structure, and land ownership status.

One third of the families inhabiting the region were Métis. Most households contained at least one child, with the largest families predominantly residing in the communities designated as French-named parishes. Furthermore, most households were multigenerational: three quarters included married children, while two thirds included unmarried children. With respect to land retention after Manitoba's annexation to Canada, residents of the predominantly English-speaking communities were more successful in maintaining their land tenure.

Regarding residential stability, of the 2,987 families traceable between the 1835 and 1870 censuses, only 77 were found to be residing in the same parish. Additionally, only 69 families successfully relocated to a different parish within the region.

The next phase of the analysis will involve a macro-level analysis of residential mobility, utilizing geographical nodal points and the application of network theory principles.

² *Privacy Act* regulations allow the distribution of nominative census records after a 92-year period (Statistics Canada, 2000).