Sources for Canadian Shipping History: Statistical Reports of the Department of Marine and Fisheries

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The Canadian Department of Marine and Fisheries established by the statutes of 1868 and 1874[1] was made responsible for the classification and registration of all vessels on the shipping register of the Dominion of Canada. The collection and dissemination of data concerning Canadian shipping which had previously been undertaken by the individual colonies and the British Board of Trade was now centralized in Ottawa.[2] Of the numerous statistical returns concerning shipping and the fisheries published by the Department, this paper is concerned with the *Statements showing the number and tonnage of steamer and sailing vessels built, and those registered . . . in the Dominion of Canada* (hereafter referred to as *Statements*), and the *Lists of Vessels on the Registry Books of Canada* (hereafter referred to as *Lists*). The annual *Statements* first published in the *Sessional Papers* for 1870[3] purport to be returns of vessels newly built and registered in the fiscal year ending 30 June; they are returns of new registries to the Canadian fleet and do not necessarily represent new vessels or net additions. The first *List* published was for 1873 and appeared in 1874. The *Lists* for 1874 and 1877 were published every three years from 1881 until 1901 when they became annual publications. The *Lists* give the official number, name, rig, place built, dimensions, and registered tonnage of every vessel, as well as the names of their managing owner(s), registered in Canada at the end of the calendar year of compilation. The format of the *Lists* has varied: they have listed the vessels either alphabetically for the entire Dominion or alphabetically by province.

Neither the *Statements* nor the *Lists* represented new returns. Individual colonies and the Board of Trade at London had for years

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1 *Statutes of Canada*, 31 Vict. Cap 57, An Act for the Organization of the Department of Marine and Fisheries of Canada, and 37 Vict. Cap 23.

2 For a discussion of the records collected by the Board of Trade and of the history of ship registration see the article by R.C. Jarvis, "Ship Registry 1707-86," and by N. Cox, "The Records of the Registrar-General of Shipping and Seamen," *Maritime History* 2, no. 2 (1972).

3 Printed as part of the tables of Trade and Navigation. The papers from which the statistics used in this paper were drawn are as follows: 1872 number 3; 1873 number 3; 1874 number 5; 1875 number 4; 1876 number 2; 1877 number 1; 1878 number 2; 1879 number 2; 1880 number 1; 1881 number 2; 1882 number 1; 1883 number 2; 1884 number 1; 1885 number 2; 1886 number 1; 1887 number 1; 1888 number 3; 1889 number 1; 1890 number 2.

published returns of vessels added to their Registers.[4] The Board of Trade also began collecting in 1807 "Annual Lists" of vessels registered in every colony.[5] After 1858 these lists were incorporated in the *Mercantile Navy Lists* of the British Empire compiled by the Registrar General of Seamen and Shipping, and published annually in London. However, by standardizing the statistics from each province and by separating Canadian vessels from those of the rest of the Empire published in *Mercantile Navy Lists*, the Department of Marine and Fisheries bequeathed to historians what appears to be an extremely useful set of original data and aggregated statistics.

Nevertheless, the *Lists* and *Statements* published by the Department should not be used without a careful examination of their nature and accuracy. What was a "Port of registry"? What was, in the *Statements,* understood by "Ships built"? Neither the enabling legislation nor the returns themselves gives information on these two points because they were taken to be self-evident. In addition, from what data were the returns compiled and who compiled them? Finally, should the full meaning of the statistics be determined, how accurate can one assume them to be?

Every vessel built and registered in Canada had an "identity" which was recorded on her "Certificate of Registry" or "Register." This document contained such basic information as the official number, name, dimensions and tonnage, rig, and date and place built of the vessel, and the names of the owners and the amounts of their shares. Every vessel was registered at a "Port" and if that port was in the British Empire the vessel was known as a "British registered vessel" and flew the British merchant flag. Thus a vessel on the Canadian registry books during the nineteenth century was a British vessel which had been registered at a port within the Dominion. Legally the place of registration of a vessel had nothing to do with either the place of residence of her owners or with the port out of which she normally sailed. For example, the owners of a vessel registered in Canada might reside in the United Kingdom or in the United States and the vessel might have operated from a port in the United Kingdom rather than from its "registry" port in Canada. A vessel had a port of registry only because it was found administratively necessary within the framework of Imperial registration to designate certain ports as places where British vessels could be registered. It is fair to say, however, that most of the owners of vessels registered in Canada did reside in or near the port where their vessels were registered.

What does the phrase "Port of Registry" mean? It grew out of the English concept of the "Customs Port," meaning a town containing a customs establishment which was responsible for enforcing customs laws for a geographic area which usually embraced a larger stretch of coast than that included in the town itself. As the practice of registered vessels

4   In Great Britain, *Parliamentary Papers*, Annual Statements of Trade and Navigation.
5   Public Record Office, B.T. 162 series.

developed, it was logical to make the customs house the place of registration for that particular area, and to make the customs officials responsible for the registration of vessels. In Canada, the statute of 1874 continued the English system by making the collector of customs responsible for the registration of vessels at those customs ports designated as ports of registry. In Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, for example, the "Registrar of Shipping" was the collector of customs, and the "Port" also included outports such as Tusket, Pubnico and Plymouth. The returns submitted to the Department of Marine and Fisheries were compiled by the port customs authorities from the individual "transcripts" of the certificates of every vessel registered at their port.

Besides issuing a new certificate to a vessel the Registrars were responsible for keeping a record of "transactions" for such changes as in the dimensions and in the ownership and mortgages of a vessel for as long as she remained under the registry of that port. Eventually the register for a vessel was "closed" when her association with the port or, in some cases, her association with a particular set of owners came to an end. It is useful to examine the reasons why registers for a vessel at a particular port were opened and closed. Certificates of Registry were issued under the following circumstances:
— when a vessel was newly built and had never been registered anywhere in the world;
— when a vessel had been previously registered at another port in the British Empire;
— when a vessel was "transferred" to British registry from a foreign flag;
— under certain circumstances, when a vessel already on the registry books of the port had undergone a change in appearance or dimension;
— under certain circumstances, when a vessel already registered at the port had undergone a change of ownership.

The registry of a vessel was "closed" under the following circumstances:
— if the vessel was lost or otherwise destroyed;
— if the vessel was transferred to another port of registry;
— if the vessel was sold to owners who did not re-register her under British colours;
— when the size or appearance of the vessel was changed;
— when the vessel was sold to new owners who continued to register her at the same port;
— when the vessel was broken up;
— when the registrar, after diligent inquiry, could find no evidence that the vessel was any longer in existence.[6]

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6   The circumstances under which vessels already registered in a port might be re-registered are outlined in the Imperial Statute 17/18 Vict. Cap 104 [1854].

The *Statements* and the *Lists* were therefore both based upon the registers of each vessel registered in a Canadian port. The *Statements* of ships newly built and registered were compiled from the certificates of registry granted during the fiscal year of the return, whereas the *Lists* of shipping were based upon the registers of ships in existence at the beginning of the year plus new registers issued during the year and minus registers which were cancelled during that year.

From the preceding discussion it is possible to derive some conclusions regarding the returns as published:
— the returns of ships built do not refer to vessels constructed in the region comprising the port of registry, but only to vessels newly built which are registered for the first time in that port of registry;
— the returns of new registries issued during a fiscal year do not necessarily indicate accessions to the fleet of a particular port or refer to an accession to the total fleet registered in Canada. The returns may include vessels either already on the books of that port but which have changed hands or dimensions, or vessels transferred into that port from *other* Canadian ports of registry. Under these circumstances the vessels are registered *de novo;*
— the *Lists* for the vessels on the registry books do not necessarily imply vessels still in existence or operating under the Canadian registry ports, but rather all vessels whose registers had not yet for any reason been closed. Thus their accuracy as a measurement of the Canadian fleet depends upon the accuracy of the method by which the registrars obtained the information which enabled them to close the registers of individual ships.

There are other problems surrounding the *Statements*. In drawing up the annual returns of vessels built and newly registered, did the registrars subsume the column for vessels built into the total for new registries or were they listed separately? The actual returns give the number and tonnage of vessels built separately from those registered but do not have a column in which both are aggregated. An examination of the returns for the Province of Ontario in 1871 indicates that there was considerable confusion in the minds of the registrars.

Table 1 indicates that for Burwell, Chippawa, Port Hope, and Wallaceburg the numbers in the column of ships built were subsumed into those for ships registered; that for Goderich, Kingston, Picton, and Windsor, they were not subsumed; and that for the other ports the numbers for ships registered probably did include ships built. The returns of vessels built and registered during each fiscal year are thereby rendered useless for comparing ports or even for analysing additions made to the registers of any particular port. That the issuance of a new register did not necessarily entail a net accession to the fleet and that vessels tended to remain as

"ghost ships" on the register long after their active life had come to an
end, as well as the confusion on the part of the registrars who made the
returns, means that neither the *Statements* nor the *Lists* can be used as
guides to the actual size of the Canadian fleet or to the rate of annual
accession to that fleet.

TABLE 1

Statements showing the number and tonnage of steamer
and sailing vessels built, and those registered . . .
in the Province of Ontario for the year ending 30 June 1871[7]

PORT	VESSELS BUILT		VESSELS REGISTERED	
	Number	Tonnage	Number	Tonnage
Burwell	2	182	2	182
Chatham	3	366	2	146
Chippawa	1	31	1	31
Goderich	3	284	2	267
Port Hope	2	236	2	236
Kingston	14	1771	35	2621
Kingsville	nil	nil	1	69
Ottawa	17	1871	22	2324
Picton	1	148	1	34
St. Catharines	7	1694	6	1548
Toronto	4	1125	8	1544
Wallaceburg	1	69	1	69
Windsor	nil	nil	1	29

Fortunately, it is possible to check the accuracy of the published
returns. The transcripts of the registers of every vessel under the British
flag since 1817 have survived, for the local registrars had to send copies to
the Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen in England,[8] and port copies
are available in Canada itself from as far back as 1787. By using the same
data as were available to the registrars, it is possible to reconstruct the
returns and assess their accuracy. Other sources of information also assist
in ascertaining the degree to which the *Lists* correspond to the actual fleet
which was in existence at the time of publication.

In data compiled by the Maritime History Group at the Memorial
University of Newfoundland concerning vessels registered at the Port of
Yarmouth, one can compare the *Statements* of vessels newly registered in
Yarmouth as published in the *Sessional Papers* for the years 1870-89,
against a table of actual net accessions to that port as compiled from the
original registry transcripts (Table 2).

7   Canada, *Sessional Papers* (1872), no. 3.
8   Now at the Public Record Office, London, as series B.T. 107, B.T. 108 and B.T. 110.

TABLE 2

A comparison of accessions to the fleet of Yarmouth
as reported in the Sessional Papers, against the net accessions
to that fleet as compiled from the registry transcripts.

YEAR ENDING 30 JUNE	DEPARTMENT OF MARINE AND FISHERIES		ORIGINAL TRANSCRIPTS	
	Vessels	Tonnage	Vessels	Tonnage
1871	32	12900	25	10096
1872	34	14534	26	11407
1873	22	16299	29	15087
1874	40	23779	36	20154
1875	32	21445	29	19966
1876	9	665	37	20347
1877	11	717	44	11137
1878	5	1031	20	9416
1879	8	2466	31	21105
1880	4	1894	17	9463
1881	3	419	13	10001
1882	15	5851	16	7000
1883	36	10297	36	10327
1884	25	4306	22	1508
1885	19	5653	27	9319
1886	15	4416	21	6213
1887	5	2342	5	2343
1888	10	833	10	757
1889	12	2297	14	2407

Some of the discrepancies are easily explained. For example, in the years between 1876 and 1881 the registrar for some reason did not include vessels newly built in his total for vessels newly registered, whereas between 1871 and 1875, and 1882 and 1889 he did. If his returns of vessels built for the years 1876-81 are added to the total for vessels registered, then the returns for the years 1876-81 appear as in Table 3.

TABLE 3

Comparison of the total accessions by combining vessels
built with vessels registered in the Sessional Papers and
the net accessions compiled from the original registries 1876-1881.

YEAR ENDING 30 JUNE	DEPARTMENT OF MARINE		ORIGINAL REGISTRIES	
	Number	Tonnage	Number	Tonnage
1876	36	19220	37	20347
1877	46	11467	44	11137
1878	21	9536	20	9416
1879	32	21496	31	21105
1880	17	9382	17	9463
1881	14	11275	13	10001

Amended in this way the returns seem reasonably accurate. However, over the entire period 1871-89 the accessions reported in the *Sessional Papers* exceeded the net accessions compiled from the original transcripts in ten of the years, but under-reported actual accessions in another six. Except in the last five years, the returns normally exaggerated the actual accessions to the Yarmouth fleet, because it seems that the Registrar included in his returns vessels registered *de novo*, that is, vessels already registered at the port but which were granted new registers after changes in dimensions or ownership. With adjustments for the non-reporting of ships built and for the inclusion of *de novo* registries in the *Statements*, the accuracy of the returns as regards the number of vessels accessioned seems reasonable. The discrepancies that remain might fairly be ascribed to clerical errors and perhaps registries included in the wrong year of return.

How accurate were the *Statements* regarding the tonnage of new accessions? Here the registrars faced another problem of interpretation. The registry transcripts give both net and gross tonnage, and sometimes a third "registered" tonnage, but we do not know which measure the registrar was supposed to use in his returns. If it is assumed that a registrar used the same measure for compiling the *Statements* as he did when submitting his reports for publication in the *Lists*, the list of Yarmouth vessels published for 1874 can be compared with the tonnages as given in the registries of those vessels (Table 4).

TABLE 4

*A comparison of tonnage figures in Canada shipping lists for 1874,
with those in the vessel registries. Yarmouth, Nova Scotia.*

NAME OF VESSEL	SHIPPING LIST TONNAGE	WHETHER GROSS OR NET IN REGISTRY
Adolphus	1318	Gross
A.E. Dater	45	Gross
A.F. Stoneman	1017	Net
Antoinette	1118	Net
B. Hilton	986	Net
Charlie Baker	1063	Net
Cambridge	1135	Net
Fanchon	597	Gross
George Bell	1136	Neither (1021 net/1776 gross)
Hattie Goudey	938	Neither (821 net/949 gross)
H.A. Parr	1114	Gross
J.C. Robertson	1036	Gross
Lois	852	Net
Lydia	1200	Net
Mary B. Gardner	152	Neither (135 net/160 gross)
Magnolia	998	Net
N.W. Blethen	1092	Gross

NAME OF VESSEL	SHIPPING LIST TONNAGE	WHETHER GROSS OR NET IN REGISTRY
Nelly Crosby	440	Net
Otago	1093	Net
Pleiades	38	Gross
Peter Young	1035	Neither (904 net/1074 gross)
Reformer	998	Net
Sarah	1165	Net

In this twenty-three vessel random sample, twelve were reported in net tonnage, seven in gross, and four in neither. An exact adjustment between the published returns and those compiled from the registries is impossible. The matter is of no small importance since until 1874 the differential between gross and net tonnage could amount to as much as twelve percent. In 1874 a new system of measurement was introduced which reduced the average difference between gross and net tonnage to three to five percent. Unfortunately, few of the vessels measured before that date were ever remeasured with the result that it is difficult to compare pre-1874 registries with those issued afterward. Hence the aggregated returns cannot be compared exactly.

The Maritime History Group conducted a further test to discover how many of the vessels which were listed as being on the registry of Yarmouth as of 31 December 1874 were actually in existence on that date. The *Lists* recorded individually 413 vessels totalling 134,070 tons as being on the register of Yarmouth. A total of 85 vessels with a tonnage of 7,100 were either definitely not in existence or were probably not active by that date. Table 5 is an excerpt from the complete list to demonstrate the form of tabulation.

TABLE 5

Ships mentioned in the list of shipping, 31 December 1874,
which were no longer in existence

OFFICIAL NUMBER	NAME	RIG	GROSS TONNAGE	DATE OF DISPOSAL
34936	*Active*	Schr	16	Gone before 1861
37485	*Active*	Schr	37	Gone before 1861
35684	*Artist*	Schr	29	Sold 1862
37335	*Alva*	Schr	30	Gone before 1861
none	*Arrow*	Schr	33	Gone before 1861
38168	*Argonaut*	Schr	49	1869
37464	*Almira*	Schr	55	Lost 1868
37953	*Bundany*	Schr	47	Gone before 1861
37972	*Bloomer*	Schr	27	Lost 1869
38535	*Brilliant*	Schr	68	Lost 1863

OFFICIAL NUMBER	NAME	RIG	GROSS TONNAGE	DATE OF DISPOSAL
35747	*Blue Nose*	Schr	52	Lost 1865
48241	*Boomerang*	Be	166	Lost 1868
. . . . *[test data omitted]*. . . . .
57109	*Sea Bird*	Schr	21	1869
38247	*Sophia*	Schr	110	1873
51960	*Sirian Star*	Barque	610	1872
37932	*Transit*	Schr	39	Gone before 1861
38005	*Triumph*	Schr	26	Gone before 1861
38072	*Triumph*	Schr	54	Gone before 1861
38229	*Thorn*	Schr	41	1873
38026	*Victoria*	Schr	17	Gone before 1861
38022	*Venus*	Schr	14	Gone before 1861
37927	*Victoria*	Schr	41	Gone before 1861
49525	*Valiant*	Schr	39	1874
37318	*William Wallace*	Schr	80	Gone before 1861

The number of vessels in the complete return is exaggerated by more than twenty percent, although the magnification of the tonnage is much less. The greatest problem in accuracy obviously derives from the small coastal and fishing vessels whose owners failed to notify the authorities of the retirement of their vessels. A large number of these small vessels probably began their decline by being laid up for a season, the owner perhaps thinking of repairing or re-using her the following year. The vessel never had the kind of "sudden death" which occurred when the ship was lost or sold. These vessels remained on the register until the registrar undertook every thirty years or so to weed the registers. At that time, a notation such as "not in existence" was written on the registry which was then cancelled. The clearing-out process, however, had an unfortunate effect upon the annual statistics because it misrepresented the fleet size for the year in which the weeding was done. For example, the list of shipping of a particular port would appear to decline far more dramatically than had actually been the case. Another problem is that the process tended to be cumulative: every year more ships fell out of existence without anyone realising it and the distortion increased until the year in which the registries were weeded. Moreover, the greater the number of small vessels registered in a port, the greater the error in the reports. This may well have affected the comparative importance of ports. Yarmouth, for example, which had a mixture of vessels of all sizes although a high proportion were large vessels, had its numbers exaggerated by about twenty percent in 1874 but the tonnage by only a small amount. On the other hand, Halifax, which registered a large number of small vessels, had a much more inflated total both for number of vessels and total tonnage. It may be that in 1874 the size of Halifax's fleet was exaggerated by anything up to fifty or sixty percent.

Vessels were sometimes erroneously listed on the annual returns even though they had already been struck from the register. Of the eighty-five vessels listed on 31 December 1874 but no longer in existence (represented in part by Table 5), this was true of all vessels for which the date of disposal was known, fifty-two in all. The error arose presumably as a result of the failure of the port authorities to notify Ottawa (or themselves) in the year when the registry was cancelled. It is difficult to imagine how these vessels would finally disappear from the shipping lists. In order to strike them off, the officer would first have to discover that he or his predecessor had failed to do this some years before. He would not discover this merely by glancing through the current year's registries.

The Canadian shipping *Lists* are extremely unreliable guides to ship owning, especially as the comparative importance of Canadian ports was probably not what these statistics would lead us to believe. Insofar as adjusting the position of Canada in world shipping is concerned, these problems were likely inherent in all shipping statistics of the period; if Canadian tonnage and fleet size was over-stated, so too probably was the rest of the world's. It has been shown that the *Statements* are unreliable as a measurement of accessions to the Canadian fleet, and that the *Lists* cannot be used as true indicators of the size of the fleet, its growth and decline. The usefulness of the returns lies mainly in the fact that they help to identify particular vessels which can then be traced, by means of their official numbers, in the original registry transcripts.

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