

# *Nineteenth century Directories as Sources in Canadian Social History*

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1960's social history in Canada has given greater emphasis to what Stelter has termed "sociological history", with its focus on social structure and quantifiable sources rather than the traditional qualitative approach.<sup>1</sup> However, despite the continued growth of these themes, especially within the context of the urban past, some potentially important data sources still remain relatively unexplored and somewhat under utilized. This criticism is especially true with regard to directories which contain much that is of use to the social historian, as well as economic and topographical material. For example, in most directories the lists of inhabitants, with the addresses and occupations, are usually supplemented by various historical descriptions, illustrations, advertisements and maps.

In the few cases that directories have been used as data sources grave doubts have been expressed over their reliability and accuracy.<sup>2</sup> Such opinions have often led to neglect, despite the fact that the information on addresses and occupations may aid in the reconstruction of past social patterns. Often such data is all the more significant given the limitations of some of the early census material. Thus, the 1842 Census of Canada West is impossible to use for detailed work due to its format and poor condition. This means that the Central and Western parts of Southern Ontario are almost without population data for the period prior to 1851, and in such circumstances directories can play a central role. Indeed, directories, together with Clergy Reserve appraisals, have been identified as the two most customary sources of demographic data for Ontario in the 1830's.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, but at a less quantitative level, much of the more miscellaneous material found in directories may be used to give an impression of the community life and public values in the emerging settlements of the nineteenth century.

\* The author is indebted to the British Academy for a grant to undertake research for this article.

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- 1 Stelter, G.A., "The Historian's Approach to Canada's Urban Past," *Social History* 3, 1974, p. 5-47.
  - 2 Wood, J.D., "Simulating pre-census population distribution," *Canadian Geography* 18, 1974, p. 250-64.
  - 3 *Ibid.*

Given the rich potential that directories hold for work in social history it seems strange that they are so often overlooked as sources of information. There are however three possible reasons for this situation. First, until very recently little has been written about the availability of directories, a fact that may have hindered large scale comparative work.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, the full diversity of the contents of directories has never been fully explored. Finally, and of particular importance, few assessments have been made of the reliability of directories, a situation that contrasts with that in the U.S.A.<sup>5</sup> The aims of this paper are to explore each of these three areas with the hope of increasing our understanding of directories as historical sources.

#### THE EVOLUTION OF CANADIAN DIRECTORIES

The earliest known Canadian directory was compiled by Hugh Mackay for Quebec city in 1790, as a means to "help the police enforce law and order . . . , to detect the receptacles of idleness and vice."<sup>6</sup> The work was commissioned by the Legislative Council as part of a Census project in the parish of Quebec. Unfortunately, this early venture into directory publication proved to be a commercial failure and was abandoned after a second edition. It was only in the period after 1816 that further directories were published, with the earlier ones being firmly linked with commercial and urban development, and issued essentially as aids in the economic life of individual cities. (See Figure 1.)

A further reason for producing a directory was to promote the settlement of particular regions, and the frontier nature of much of the country gave a boost to some directory publishers, especially after the mid-nineteenth century. Generally, these were published for districts, provinces or occasionally at a national level. A good example of the latter is the *Canadian Gazetteer*, the earliest directory attempting a national coverage, published in 1846 by William Henry Smith, with the main aim of providing a guide for immigrants.<sup>7</sup> Often in the attempt to "open-up" new areas directory publishers would work with the new railway companies. Such links are clearly visible in the *Grand Trunk Railway Gazetteer, Commercial Advertiser and Business Directory*, 1862-63. This contained lists of traders who lived in the towns situated along the Grand Trunk, Northern Prescott and Ottawa, Port Hope and Lindsay railways in Ontario.

In 1851, the first comprehensive national directories appeared in the form of two rival publications, one by Smith, *The Business Directory of Canada West* and the second by Mackay entitled *The Canada Directory*. Smith's work was issued in ten subscription parts over a twelve month period and gave an alphabetical list of the principal inhabitants in all main settlements. Perhaps of greater significance was Mackay's directory, which canvassed returns from over 550 localities in Upper and Lower Canada (Figure 2). After 1851 a number of national directories appeared at

4 Ryder, D.E., *Checklist of Canadian Directories, 1790-1950* (Ottawa, 1979).

5 Knights, P.R., *The Plain People of Boston, 1830-1860*, (New York, 1971). See appendix A.

6 Mackay, H., *The directory for the city and suburbs of Quebec* (Quebec, 1790).

7 Smith, W.H., *Canadian Gazetteer* (Toronto, 1846).

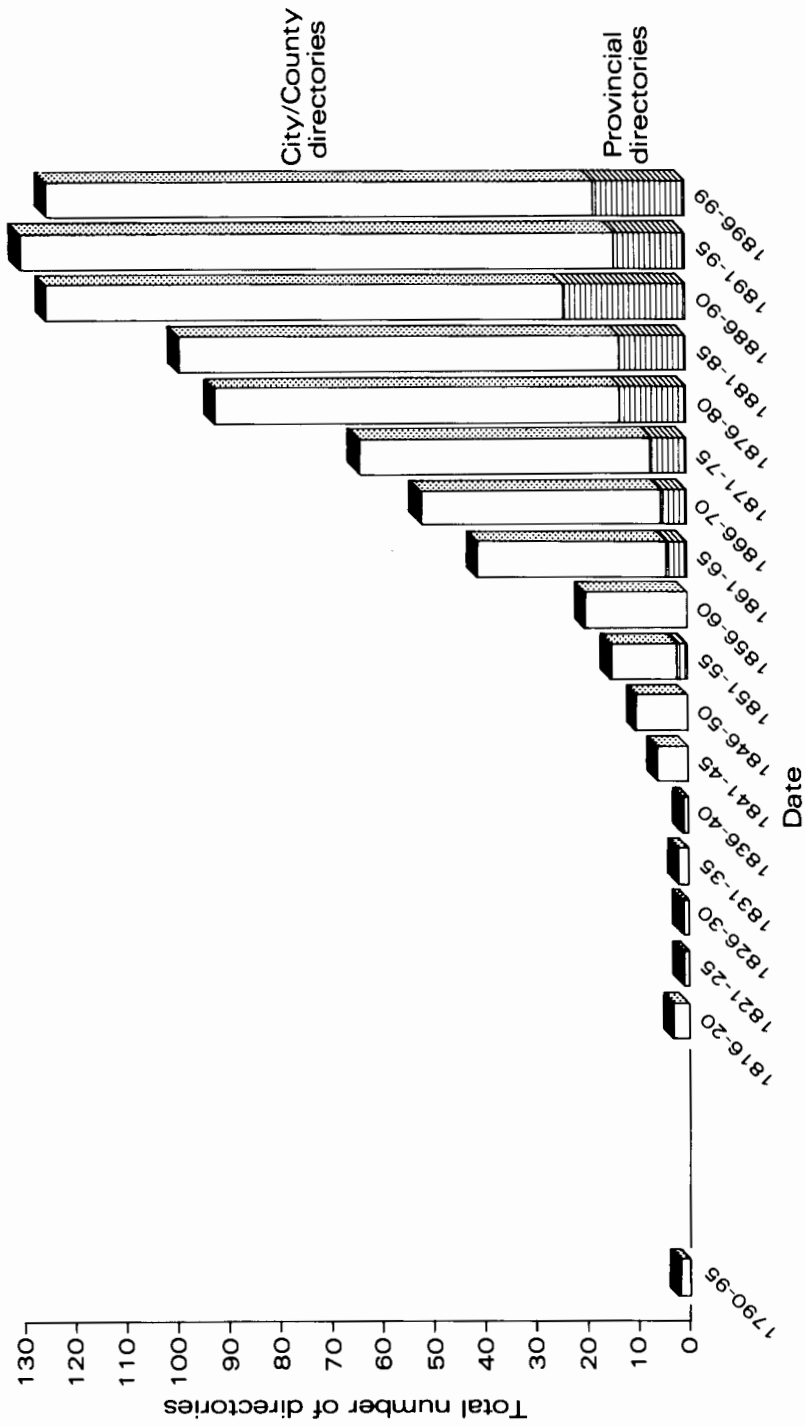


Figure 1. Growth of Canadian Directories up to 1900.

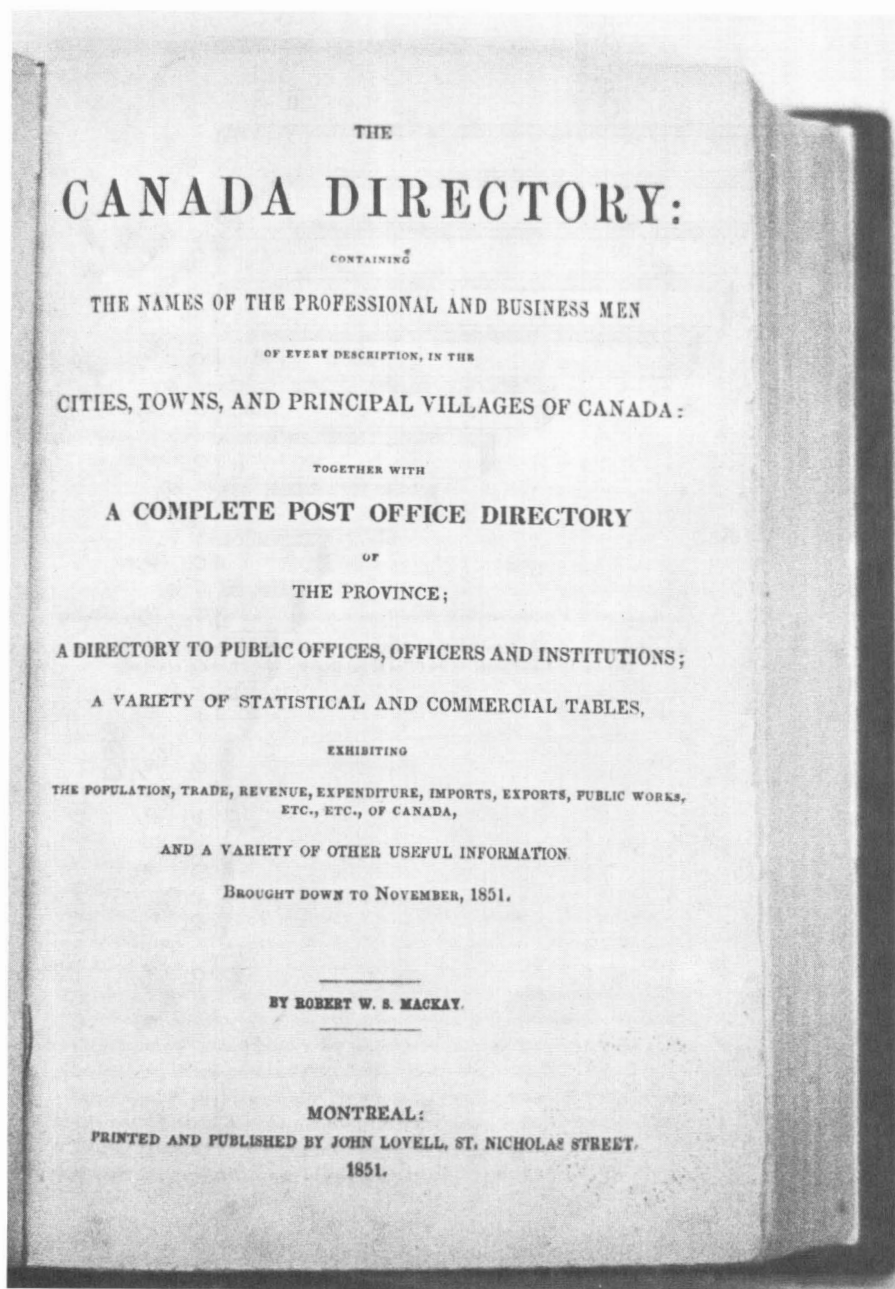


Figure 2. Cover Page of the Canada Directory of 1851.

fairly regular intervals, as appendix 1 illustrates. The availability of such information at a national level provides a rewarding source for those interested in socio-economic changes in different settlement types during the second half of the nineteenth century.

#### THE CONTENTS OF DIRECTORIES

The overall content of directories is related to their specific role, although over time all the common types of directory changed their levels of information and general layout. Mackay's first directory of Quebec in 1790 simply contained an alphabetical list of inhabitants together with their addresses (house numbers did not exist). However, by the early 1830's directories started to give street guides, which listed the names, addresses and occupations of each head of household, according to their specific location within the appropriate street. In addition, they would also present a separate alphabetical list of inhabitants. The next major change came in the form of a classified trades section and this became fairly common by the mid-nineteenth century. Therefore, by this date the better produced city directories contained three main sections: a street guide, an alphabetical list of inhabitants, and a classified trades section.

These changes were however mainly related to city directories, with provincial and county directories evolving slightly differently. Indeed, their publication only became important during the second half of the nineteenth century as population expanded outside the initial colonial settlements (Figure 3). These directories can be subdivided into two groups on the basis of their contents. The first group are those provincial and county directories of a more general nature, which usually contain an alphabetical list of traders and principal inhabitants for each main settlement, and a list of the names of settlers within each township. In the better produced directories each major town also had a classified trades section within the directory. The second type of directory were those issued mainly at a county level and specializing on farming communities, listing the names and addresses of farmers. These rural settlers were located by their concession and lot numbers, as appendix 2 illustrates, and some directories also included maps as additional locational aids (Figure 4).

A number of nineteenth century directories included for reference purposes maps of town plans, the former being of a relatively small scale and used in the provincial and national directories. The larger publishing firms usually had sufficient capital to commission the engraving of their own maps and plans, although many of those produced at a county level tended to be of poor quality as figure 4 illustrates. Furthermore, after 1860 such maps in county directories lost much of their significance in eastern Canada with the publication of the very detailed county land ownership maps.<sup>8</sup> There has been some speculation that perhaps some of the county directories copied lists of names from the land ownership maps, but this was certainly not the case for farmers as virtually no names of farmers are included on the county maps. There would however appear to be considerable scope for

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8 Maddick, H., *Nineteenth Century County Land Ownership Maps of Canada: An Introductory Essay* (Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa, 1976).

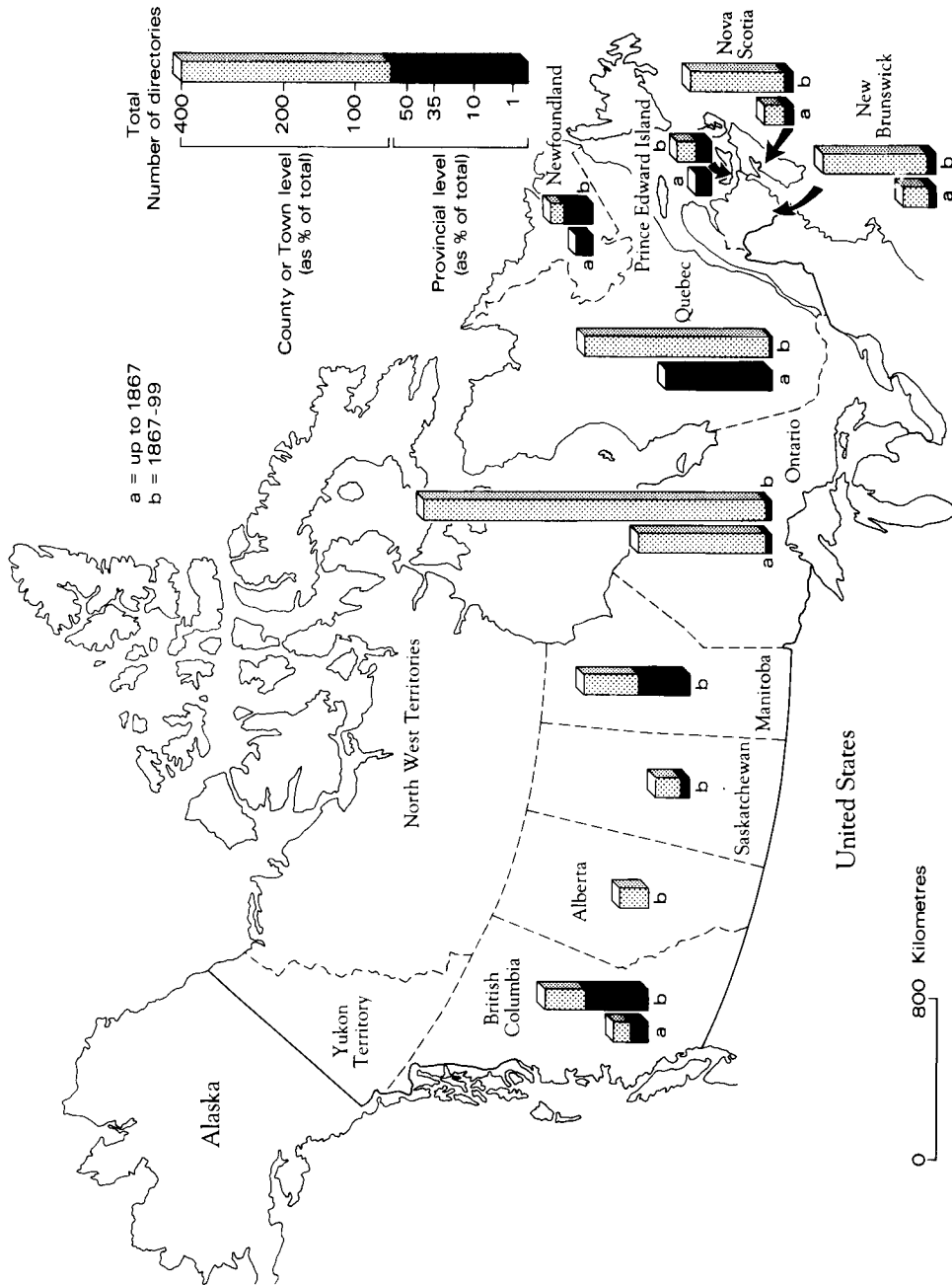


Figure 3. Distribution of Nineteenth century Directories.

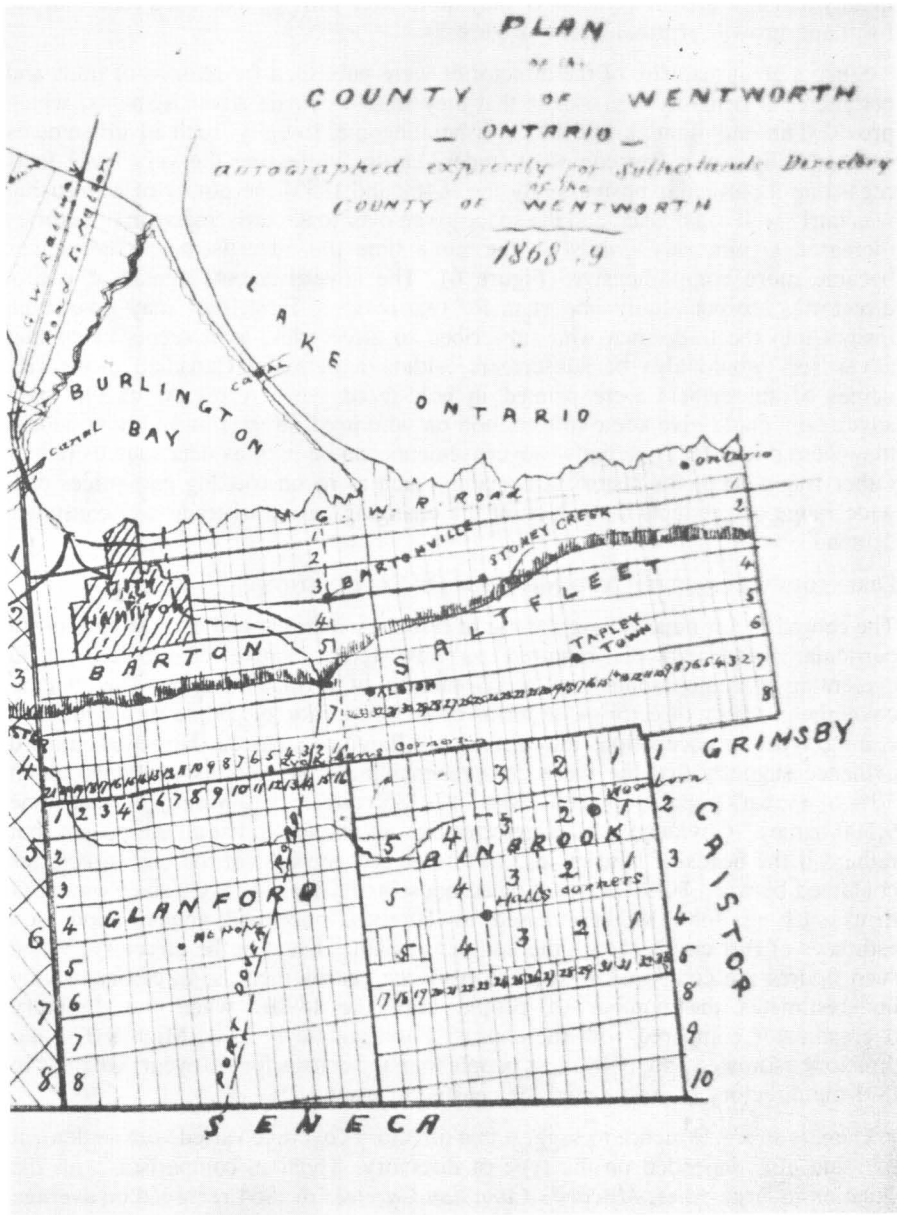


Figure 4. Part of a plan of Wentworth taken from Sutherlands Directory of Wentworth, 1868-9. No scale was shown.

comparing these two data sources and testing out their accuracy. In contrast to the county directories, the ones produced for cities contained town plans of a higher quality and of a greater value since they quite often provide a detailed record of the form and growth of urban areas (Figure 5).

Since a great majority of the directories were published for reasons of trade and commerce it is hardly remarkable that they should contain advertisements, which provided an important part of the publishers income. Initially, such advertisements were nothing more than copies of traders cards, expressing the very basic facts regarding a particular business. By the 1840s and 1850s the power of advertising was fairly well established and the space given over to advertisements in directories increased significantly, whilst at the same time the advertisements themselves became more comprehensive (Figure 6). The advertisements contained within directories are potentially important for two reasons. First, they may give some insight into the tradesmen who subscribed to directories, as it seems likely that advertisers would also be subscribers, although in many Canadian directories names of subscribers were printed in bold-faced type. A review of the main advertisers could give some information on who used directories and how widely they were circulated. Secondly, advertisements can be used as data sources (albeit rather fragmented) for historical research, such as reconstructing past prices of a wide range of products or to look at the changing nature of trade and consumer demand.

#### DIRECTORY RELIABILITY AND METHODS OF COMPILATION

The central factor determining the use of directory material is that of reliability. In particular information is required on how representative directories are in presenting a demographic and social picture of a specific area. The general coverage given by directories, in terms of the proportion of people they contained and the types of occupations they listed, is difficult to measure. However, limited evidence suggests that the more comprehensive city directories contained about 30% of a town's population. Thus, Mackay's 1852 directory of Montreal listed some 9,500 names.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, the directories did not attempt to list all the people, but rather all the heads of households. In this respect the best of the city directories contained between 80-90 per cent of all households. By the 1870's some directory firms such as John Might's, based in Toronto, published annual population estimates of that city based on the number of names listed in the directory. When such figures are compared with those from the census then the directory usually underestimates the number of people until the 1890s, when the directory overestimates compared with the census. For example in 1881, Might's Toronto directory estimated about 10% less people than the census for that year, whereas in 1891 the directory overestimated the census by around 7%.

There is strong evidence to suggest that directory coverage varied with settlement size and also depended on the type of directory. Thus, in comparison with the situation in large cities, *Mitchell's Canadian Gazeteer* of 1864 recorded on average

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9 Mackay's *Montreal Directory for 1852*.



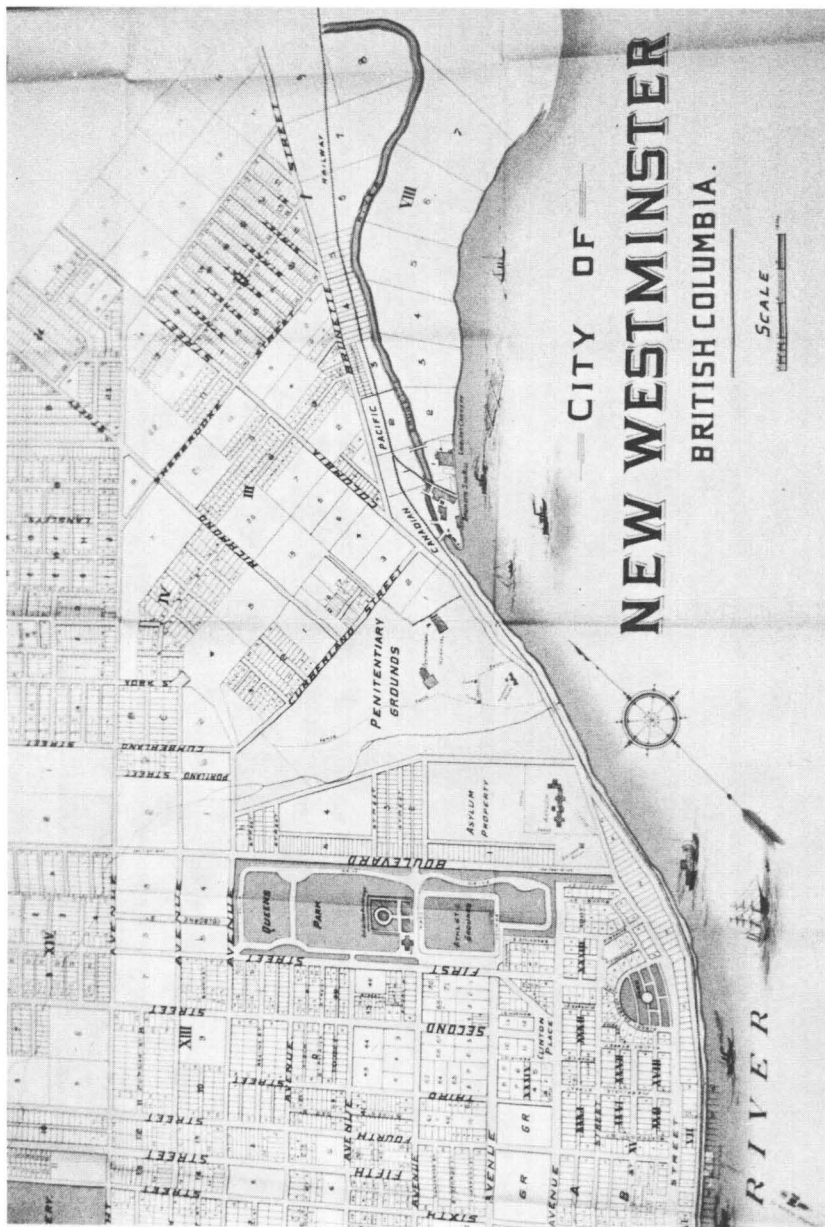


Figure 5. Small part of a plan of New Westminster taken from R. T. Williams British Columbia Directory of 1882-83.

# MUSKOKA LAKES

IN THE "HIGHLANDS OF ONTARIO"  
at an altitude 1000 feet above the Sea level

THE SPORTSMAN'S  
ELYSIUM  
THE  
TOURISTS  
MECCA.

FINEST FISHING,  
BLACK BASS, TROUT,  
AND MASKINONGE.  
HUNTING UNEXCELLED,  
DEER, BEAR, FOX, OTTER  
AND  
PARTRIDGE.

Reached only  
by

**GRAND  
TRUNK  
RAILWAY  
SYSTEM**

OTHER DISTRICTS  
*Georgian Bay,  
Parry Sound,  
Magnetawan River,  
Stony Lake,  
Lake of Bays,  
Haliburton District.*

GRANDEST SCENERY ON THE CONTINENT. Wild Picturesque & Romantic. EXCELLENT HOTELS & FIRST CLASS STEAMBOAT ACCOMMODATIONS.







Write for further Particulars, Literature, Maps  
&c. to any agent of GRAND TRUNK RAILWAY SYSTEM or to

FRANK D. DWYER	273 Broadway, New York
JAS. D. McDONALD	285 Main St. Buffalo
T. WYNN	194 Washington St. Boston
R. M. C. SMITH	417 Walnut St. Cincinnati
R. BUSHBY	19 Main St. Portland, N.Y.
GEO. W. WATSON	84 Woodward Ave. Detroit

CHAS. M. HAYS  
General Manager  
MONTREAL

GEO. B. REEVE  
General Traffic Manager  
MONTREAL

W. E. DAVIS  
Genl. Pass. & Ticket Agt.  
MONTREAL

GEO. T. BELL  
Asst. Genl. Pass. & Ticket Agt.  
MONTREAL

EM. HUGHES  
Asst. Genl. Pass. & Ticket Agt.  
CHICAGO

Figure 6. Details of advertisement placed in Eastern Ontario Gazetteer, 1898-99. The advertisement was part of a campaign to develop the Muskoka Lakes area of Ontario by the Grand Trunk Railway.

only 12% of the population of settlements containing less than a thousand people. This trend gives some insight into the directory compilers motives, that is to record the important people and businessmen of a community. To this end the smallest settlements would receive but scant attention and hence had a relatively low level of coverage. However, it is important to recognise that the national directories prove far less comprehensive for enumerating heads of households than the city directories, even when produced by the same firm. For example, Mitchell's national directory of 1864 contained only 31% of the total households listed in *Mitchell's Toronto Directory* of the same date. Clearly, some detail had to be sacrificed at a national level in order to provide an economically viable publication, which placed the emphasis more on businessmen and traders.

Related to the level of coverage is the question of what types of people were listed in directories in the nineteenth century. The larger scale national and provincial directories are inevitably selective and omit the vast majority of labourers and people from lower social class groupings. However, this problem is less acute in the city and town directories as the following example from nineteenth century Toronto illustrates. From the 1861 Census 100 labourers were selected at random from wards in central Toronto and then these names were checked against *Brown's Toronto Directory of 1861*, with the result that 79 of the labourers could be identified in the directory.

A further problem that produces a bias in the listing of occupations and social groups is the fact that directories only list heads of household. They therefore only give a picture of the socio-economic structure of one sub-group rather than all individuals. Thus, directories would largely ignore the substantial numbers of females employed as domestic servants who lived-in with their employers.

The limited studies that have attempted to assess the reliability of directory material have done so by comparing directories with other sources, such as town assessment rolls or the census. Obvious problems exist here, since such work is based on the availability of some other "reliable" source. This works well enough during the latter part of the nineteenth century, but proves very difficult for earlier decades. It would seem that when directories are potentially most useful, that is in the absence of other sources, their accuracy cannot be determined. Two related courses of action are available to solve this problem. One method involves carrying back in time assumptions made about levels of directory accuracy from the late nineteenth century. This however is a risky business, as both the conditions and the directories themselves may have altered significantly over time. Here the second type of approach may help, since an indication of reliability can be obtained by focussing on the methods of directory compilation. Using such information it may be possible to identify those directories that employed full-time professional agents, who systematically collected and recorded information.

Authorship and methods of compilation underlie directory reliability and accuracy, and yet surprisingly little is known about either. Evidence remains very thin in the published research and in total the few studies that do exist represent just

a small glimpse of the methods used by nineteenth century directory compilers.<sup>10</sup> Most of the available evidence comes from the prefaces of directories, some of which tell of the problems confronting the directory compiler. For example, *Mackay's Montreal Directory* of 1857-58 highlights the problems of soliciting information from working class areas: "It is with the utmost difficulty that anything like accuracy can be obtained among the working classes in the suburbs, the fear of taxation, causing them to give wrong names, and in many instances to withhold them altogether." Results obviously depended on the co-operation of the general public and their willingness to provide information, as was pointed out in the preface of *Brown's Toronto General Directory* of 1861, in which the compiler expressed "great disappointment at the illiberal manner in which very many citizens responded to application for encouragement."

Very occasionally some directories contain details on their methods of data collection, as in *Lovell's Montreal Directory* for 1889-90, in which the compiler gives an insight into the scale of the work over a 12 month period, when it is claimed some 11,625 alterations were made out of a total of 30,273 names. Directory compilation was a task that required not only sufficient working capital to enable full-time agents to be employed, but also a considerable degree of organisation. For example, John Lovell's firm in Montreal had in 1872 "greatly enlarged its premises to carry on book and job printing" and had furnished the factory with "12 steam printing presses employing 200 persons."<sup>11</sup> However, only 12 months prior to this, Lovell had borrowed \$60,000 towards the total cost of \$80,000 required to produce the *Canadian Dominion Directory*. This money had been loaned from a number of "backers" and in particular by the Montreal Telegraph Company. In addition, the railways allowed free passage for Lovell's 40 to 50 agents who were collecting information.<sup>12</sup> Such details give us some idea about the resources that were required to compile a large scale reliable directory in the nineteenth century.

Clearly, the information provided by the contemporary account of such directory publishers cannot, with our present state of knowledge, provide a sufficient basis from which to assess directory reliability. However, within this context scope exists for more work aimed at assessing methods of compilation and directory accuracy. One possible way ahead would be to attempt a detailed study of a few of the larger firms for which some records survive. This would then give a fuller understanding into the methods of data collection and its effects on levels of accuracy for periods when detailed census material is not available.

#### DIRECTORIES AS AIDS IN SOCIAL HISTORY

To some extent the usefulness of directories within the field of social history depends on the availability of other sources of data such as the census of town

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10 Fleming, P.L., "A bibliography of Ontario Directories to 1867," *Ontario Library Review* 59, 1975, p. 98-107.

11 *Lovell's Montreal Directory for 1872*.

12 *Lovell's Canadian Dominion Directory, 1871*.

assessment rolls. Where these other sources exist in a fairly complete form, then directory material may only play a supportive role, although this in itself could be vital. One significant area in which linkages between directories and the census are important concerns the need to locate and map social variables obtained from census data. However, in research on the internal social structure of the nineteenth century city, small area census data has proved difficult to use due to the immense problems of locating information at a household level. For example, most of the 1861 census for Toronto is without full addresses, although some street names have been added in the margins of some of the census schedules.<sup>13</sup> In some notable cases, the existence of town assessment rolls have come to the aid of social historians and provided a viable alternative to the census, as is well demonstrated in Goheen's study of nineteenth century Toronto.<sup>14</sup> Where directories correspond in time with census data then they can be used to fill-in the missing addresses, as appendix 3 illustrates for part of Yonge Street in Toronto for 1861. For the more important streets, directory coverage is almost total, but unfortunately smaller and less important streets are not as well covered, thus introducing problems of spatial bias.

In respect of this type of use it is important that directories allow a high degree of locational accuracy, and whether or not a directory gave addresses depends on the date of its publication and the type of directory. However, within most directories the address coverage for any particular settlement is usually incomplete. This omission of addresses takes the form of missing street numbers rather than the complete absence of a street name. Often the lack of any official street numbering system was the root cause of the problem for early directory compilers. Some attempted to overcome such difficulties by using their own numbering system. Thus, Thomas Gleason in the *Quebec Directory* for 1822 complained of problems with addresses and explained that people should number their houses in accordance with the system given in his directory.

Such problems are also important for work on levels of residential mobility within the nineteenth century city. Directory material is especially significant as it is often available annually or at least over fairly short time intervals, thus allowing the calculating of annual persistence rates at a household level. Apart from the lack of house numbers in the earlier directories a further difficulty is the renumbering of streets in later directories owing to the building on vacant sites and housing redevelopments.

Despite these limitations, directories do compare favourably with other sources, notably census data and town assessment rolls, especially for the mid-nineteenth century. Interestingly, very few Canadian studies have utilized directory material for this type of work, a situation which contrasts with the pioneer work carried out in the U.S.A.. Probably the most detailed research making use of directories in the study of residential mobility is Knight's work on mid-nineteenth century Boston. In this study directories were made the cornerstone of research into social and residential change between 1830 and 1860, and the directory information, coupled

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13 Canada West Census, 1861 Toronto (microfilm C1101-C1110, Public Archives, Ottawa).

14 Goheen, P., *Victorian Toronto 1850-1900* (Chicago, 1970).

with census data, enabled Knight to produce a detailed picture of residential mobility.<sup>15</sup>

From this review, it is clear that as data sources for social historians directories have some problems and question marks associated with their reliability. However, this paper has attempted to show that if the true nature and scale of these problems are recognised, then directories can be useful sources of demographic information for rural areas in the early nineteenth century, and are invaluable as locational aids for detailed work on small area census data. Similarly, directories can add new dimensions to research on residential mobility and other aspects of social change in the nineteenth century city.

It is also evident from existing work on nineteenth century directories that much research still remains to be carried out, especially in relation to the levels of accuracy. Furthermore, we still know relatively little about the changing nature of directory compilation or indeed about the usefulness of different types of directories. Clearly directories offer a potentially fruitful source of information on a variety of topics within the field of social history.

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<sup>15</sup> Knights, *The Plain People of Boston*, p. 5.

#### APPENDIX I CANADIAN NATIONAL DIRECTORIES PUBLISHED BEFORE 1900

<i>Compiler/ publisher</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Date</i>
Smith	Canadian Gazetteer	1846
Smith	Business Directory of Canada West	1851
Mackay/Lovell	Canada Directory	1851
Mackay	Canada Directory (Supplement)	1853
Mackay/Lovell	Canada Directory	1854
Lovell	Canada Directory	1857-58
Tackabury Bros.	Canadian Advertising Directory	1862
Mitchell/Loomis	Grand Trunk Railway Gazetteer	1862-63
Mitchell	Canadian Gazetteer & Business Dir.	1864-65
Mitchell	Canada Classified Directory	1865-66
Lovell	Canadian Dominion Directory	1871
McAlpine	Dominion Business Directory	1873-74
Lovell	Canadian Business Guide	1886
Polk	Dominion of Canada Business Dir.	1890-91
Lovell	Directory of Dominion of Canada	1896-97
Lovell	Canadian Business Guide	1898
Might	Dominion of Canada Classified Dir.	1899
Biggar	Canadian Textile Directory	1899

APPENDIX 2  
 DETAILS FROM COUNTY OF HASTINGS DIRECTORY,  
 HUNGERFORD SECTION, 1865.

*List of Inhabitants*

Coe, Thomas, yeoman, 5th concession, part lot 29  
 Coil, Henry, yeoman, 6th concession, lot 3  
 Colston, Robert, yeoman, 3rd concession, west half lot 4  
 Colter, Andrew, yeoman, 6th concession, part lot 1  
 Colter, James, yeoman, 1st concession, part lot 26  
 Colter, James, jun., yeoman, 1st concession, part lot 16

APPENDIX 3  
 LINKAGES BETWEEN BROWN'S TORONTO DIRECTORY, 1861 AND THE 1861  
 CENSUS FOR PARTS OF YONGE STREET AND BATHURST STREET

1. *Yonge Street*

<i>Census</i>		<i>Directory</i>	
<i>Name</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Address</i>	
John Coombe	druggist	155	
Henry Tasher	sawmaker	153	
John Broom	fancy store	151	woodenware dealers
R. Skinner	grocer	149	
Will. Ashall	watchmaker	147	marine store del.
G. Rahilly	shoemaker	145	
R.S. Williams	music dealer	143	
Murphy	jewellery	141	watchmakers
Thos. B st	hotel keeper	137	
W.J. Shaw	merchant	135	grocer
		133	unoccupied
		131	houses

