

Approaches in the Historical Study of Literacy*

The nineteenth-century city, and most especially the Canadian city, provides a rich arena for quantitative studies of literacy. The key is the availability of sources for such a project - for the manuscript census remains the best starting-point for the systematic study of literacy. Researchers who have used these schedules have ignored the literacy data, often dismissing it without consideration. This has resulted in a lost dimension in their work for these schedules provide the easiest, most direct, and perhaps the best information on the problem. The manuscript census furnishes the researcher with a relatively complete and unbiased roster of the people of a given geographical region, differentiating between those who could and could not read or write. Secondly, it provides a tremendous amount of direct information - demographic and economic - on each head of household as well as the rest of the members. It also serves as a standard measurement, as the same question was asked of each respondent. These schedules are useful for the United States from 1840 and for Canada from 1861, while the Canadian urban census of 1851 permits analysis on the basis of signatures for heads of households.

Special note should be made of the particular utility of the Canadian urban censuses of 1851 and 1861. Both manuscripts were gathered through direct distribution of the schedules to each household. This means that each head of household or his agent (especially in the case of the illiterate) was required to complete the schedule, rather than the more common enumerative process used in the United States, Great Britain, later Canadian censuses, and in rural Canada at this time. Unfortunately, literacy data was collected only on the 1861 census, while one may analyze the literacy of the heads of household in 1851 by assuming that those who could sign their name could read as well, as reading was commonly taught or learned before instruction in writing skills. The Canadian urban census of 1861 becomes in many ways the most propitious document for the systematic study of literacy as it records the answer of an individual to the question of whether or not he or she could read or write. In fact, a check on a random