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# THE FAMILY: SOME ASPECTS OF A NEGLECTED APPROACH TO CANADIAN HISTORICAL STUDIES*

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The announcement in 1967 that a Cartwright was to succeed a Taschereau in the chief justiceship of Canada pointed up an important and often overlooked phenomenon: we may be a nation that possesses long democratic traditions, we may have had any European aristocratic outlooks modified by a frontier environment, and we may pride ourselves on our social mobility, yet we still have an aristocracy of families whose roots go back to the earliest times of our nation. A Taschereau was a member of the Superior Council of New France; a Cartwright came up to Upper Canada with the Loyalists, today their descendents are still to be found in the most influential Canadian circles. The appointment thus exemplifies one of the most neglected and often deprecated, aspects of Canadian history: the role of the family in the evolution of the country.

Speaking to this Association at Vancouver in 1965, Professor G. Alan Wilson asserted that it was time we took a look at the "Forgotten Men of Canadian History".[1] Today I would like to recommend that we go one further and attempt to tie these secondary figures together and, wherever possible, relate them to their more important kinsmen. By doing this we can begin to discover the place of the family in Canadian history and its part in passing along traditions and ideas, as well as its involvement in both political and economic power.

Such a complex, unexplored theme opens many possible lines of investigation. This paper will simply make a few suggestions regarding approaches that seem to me to be particularly promising for the historian of the family in Canada, including sources of both data and ideas and a selection of directions for research. Two of the greatest problems of the family historian, continuity and mobility, will receive special attention as will the importance of family occupations.

One question that might well be asked at the outset is what the relation of family history to genealogy? Certainly the endless, dreary collection of family statistics, without any attempt to reconstruct the lives of the people involved, is not likely to be of very great interest

to an historian. On the other hand the work of the genealogist can easily be brushed aside far too quickly by the historian, for it can save him an immence amount of time in his digging for obscure data. For instance, anyone who has worked on nineteenth century Ontario history and attempted to reconstruct the activities of its leading families soon comes to bless the efforts of E. M. Chadwick in his *Ontario Families*.[2] Similarily, for the historian of Lower Canada, or Quebec, where genealogy has been developed to a far greater extent than in English speaking Canada, the work of *La Société Généalogique Canadienne-Française* and the articles in *Le Bulletin des Recherches Historiques* and Tanguay's *Dictionnaire*[3] are of immense value.

That such compilations as Chadwick and Tanguay have their errors goes without saying, but so does any pioneer work dealing with so much minute detail. In such cases the compiler is all too frequently damned for his failings rather than thanked for his contributions.

A further source of information is provided by the biographical dictionaries. Since Henry J. Morgan prepared his pioneer *Sketches of Celebrated Canadians* in 1862 a considerable number of these have made their appearance, often produced on a geographical or ethnic basis, but the first really satisfactory work was what is now the Macmillan *Dictionary of Canadian Biography,* written by William Stewart Wallace in 1926. The frequent appearance of several members of one family, which is so apparent in Wallace, is now becoming ever more obvious as the volumes of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* published. The happy fact that the *Dictionary* is able to include notes on people, who, even though they were not of the first rank, still played a prominent role in Canadian history, will in the end make it a far more valuable reference than its British, French, or American equivalents. Being a thinly-populated country can have its definite advantages!

Another source of assistance to the family historian is the parallel work that is being done in other countries which possess closely related histories. Looking at the other English speaking countries, we can find several excellent sources of ideas, although comparatively little has as yet been written. In England Sir Lewis Namier and more recently J. E. Neale[4], have discussed the value of family history in political studies. There are also some prevocative social examinations, such as Peter Laslett's *The World We Have Lost*.[5] Further, Great Britain provides the researcher on the Canadian family with a wealth of background material. This varies from the *Handbook of British Chrono-*

*logy*[6] and such collective works as the *Dictionary of National Biography,* and Frederick Boase's *Modern English Biography*[7] to contemporary sources like Burk's and Debrett's peerages, Kelly's handbooks of the landed gentry and the various editions of *Who's Who.*

In the United States the researcher can find further sources of ideas and again a wealth of resource materials. Professor Carl Bridenbaugh, in his presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1962, commented on the need for family histories.[8] Edward N. Saveth has more recently discussed the problem of American family history in an article that should be read by any researcher on the Canadian family,[9] and Bernard Bailyn has commented on the rising interest in this field.[10] Again however, as they point out, the surface remains virtually unscratched. Background sources vary from Lorenzo Sabine's old study of the Loyalists [11] to the biographies in the *Cyclopaedia of American Biography* and the *Dictionary of American Biography.*

With so little work done on family history it is not surprising that there is as yet very little material that draws comparisons between similar countries, or traces a family from one country to another. Sabine's work might be regarded as a study in the latter category and it is to be hoped that the planned work on the Loyalists in connection with the bicentennial of the American Revolution will produce some new analyses. In the field of parallel family developments Sir Ronald Syme has drawn a comparison of colonial elites[12] and G. C. Bolton, more pertinently to Canada, has discussed colonial gentry.[13] The possibilities for further such studies are virtually unlimited.

The historian of the family in Canada can thus find several challenging approaches and a wealth of background material, by examining the work done in this field in other countries. For Canada itself, what lines of attack seem to be particularly promising? Family history can be defined in many ways: to one end of the scale is elitism, at the other there is the more general demographic overview, where types, and races and occupations are examined as much as individual groupings. Looking at the less affluent, nevertheless, for the poor, the farmer, the labourer, the wanderer, there is a lack of primary material which can be used to reconstruct what might be called the "personality" of the family. Worse, continuity is difficult to trace. And even when adequate sources can be found, such a study often tells us very little; themes such as "the smut is on the wheat and the boils are on Bessy" seem to repeat endlessly.

Further, when the historian tries to work in this field of family history, he is badly hampered by the fact that so little work has as yet been done by sociologists in the study of the Canadian family. John Porter's monumental *The Vertical Mosaic*,[14] published in 1965, opens by stating that he wishes to examine "the hitherto unexplored subjects of social class and power in Canadian history." These subjects still remain virtually unexplored. Part of the reason for this is the lack of Canadian sociologists and a strong tendency in that discipline to concentrate research on imported themes. Yet there are other problems. One is a sad lack of earlier statistical information available for the student. Not only was the census taken at irregular intervals before 1851, but also there are problems caused by changing categories, lost records, illiterate census takers and dubious totals. Above all the detailed breakdowns of the censuses after 1871 — when it might be hoped that they are more accurate — are unavailable to historians.

For these reasons I feel that in Canada, for the moment at least, family history can be most fruitfully approached by the historian at a level where he can have some hope of reconstructing families as groups of individuals, not as a series of incomplete statistics. This may well mean compiling the history of the elite and the upper middle classes, however, it is these very groups who were responsible for the decision making activities which built up our nation throughout its peaceful non-revolutionary development. Their study may well be argued as being true family history, as contrasted with historical sociology or demography. At the same time any principles which can be derived from such a study, or methods of detection which can be evolved, can be put to use in the examination of the less influential classes at a later date.

In considering the difficulties facing the family historian possibly the greatest problem is establishing continuity. Although we like to think of ourselves as a young nation we have now a history that stretches back some three hundred and fifty years and family linkages can spread over an extended chronological period. Establishing continuity even in the most prominent families can present many difficulties, especially considering North American mobility which will be discussed separately. A similarity of names and places of residence may indicate relationship, but finding the missing links can present major problems. Legal records often seem to be little used by historians and their types and availability vary from place to place. Also, the compulsory registry of vital statistics is of surprisingly recent date in most provinces. What

is badly needed is some sort of detailed handbook analyzing the types of legal records and stating clearly what exists at the various registeries.[15]

Coupled with continuity is the question of non-continuity, or what happens to families: do they just disappear, or do we lose track of them through incomplete research? Why is it that some families seem to spring up from virtually nowhere and then disappear from prominence just as quickly? At times the "shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in three generations" syndrome seems to operate as an almost inexorable law. We must be careful to establish that this is what really has occurred and that we are not just losing track of the descendents. Whatever the case, the study of the decline of families is as important as the examination of their rise and is a much more neglected topic.

Complicating the problem of decline is the difficulty of tracking down the daughters of a family, discovering when they were married and how these marriages connected several family groups together; for a family can often appear to die out while its interests are actually carried on by the descendents of the female line. This problem is associated with the difficulty of tracing the inheritance of wealth. The Street fortune, quite possibly the largest in early Ontario, was dissipated with the death of Thomas Clark Street in 1872, and disappeared through various female lines.

The questions involved in dealing with continuity naturally vary from one region and period to another. With the vast amount of genealogical research done on the families of French Canada it is not surprising that some of the best examples of the inheritance of wealth and tradition are to be found there. The fact that the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* is now working on the third and last volume necessary to cover the French régime is also an aid, as is the excellent record keeping of the major judiciary archives. Some of these, such as that of Montreal with its indices stretching virtually back to the founding of the city, provide unrivalled source material. Conversly, however, some of the judiciary archives leave a great deal to be desired and lines of search can thus easily peter out if the family moves away from the main centers.

Still, the number of families that have made major contributions over a long period gives us considerable data for an examination. The Taschereaus will be mentioned in some detail later, but the repetition of such names as Langevin, Taché, or de Salaberry in Canadian history demonstrates the continuity of the leading families in the nineteenth

century, in much the same manner as the *Dictionary* shows it in the seventeenth and eighteenth. One family, the Babys, even played a very important part in both Upper and Lower Canada during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The fur traders form another important Quebec group who bridged the gap between the two founding races and spread their activities across the country. Although only few of them were French, others married into French families. Jules-Maurice Quesnel stands as a good example of the French fur trader, son of one of the leading eighteenth century French literary figures, he played a role in western exploration and then had a second career in the commercial development of Montreal, where his activities were paralleled by those of his lawyer brother, Frédéric-Auguste Quesnel. The Ermatingers are another example of a dynasty who began as fur traders and later developed quite wide and diversified interests, not only in the West and at Montreal, but also at St. Thomas, Ontario, where they were long one of the leading families.

In the English speaking colonies the very names applied to the oligarchies — Family Compact, Halifax Clique — demonstrated that from the first their opponents saw a family connection. Yet little has been done to trace their inbreeding and thus establish in how far they actually formed a family unit. Lord Durham felt that there was little family connection in the Compact, but even a cursory survey of Chadwick will indicate that such was far from the case. Further, to understand their interconnections fully, it will be necessary not only to look at the elites which appeared in the colonial capitals, but also to examine the little local oligarchies which sprang up in the hamlets along the frontiers.

Once the establishment of an elite in the colonies had taken place the discussion of continuity presents other problems. Some of the early families have remained prominent up to the present day, the Taschereaus and Cartwrights are obvious examples, but other equally important lines have died out. The family historians will have to try to establish the cause: lack of fertility, or intelligence, failure to adjust to new economic conditions, refusal to intermarry with the *nouveau riche*. There are many possibilities.

Certainly the Family Compact, to take one example, did not disappear as some old texts would have us believe. William Allan was the richest man in Toronto, his son George William Allen was the virtual "squire" of the city until his death in 1901. At a local level the Clenchs

of the Niagara peninsula pride themselves in the fact that they held office in that area from 1794 to 1923.

The whole question of establishing continuity is closely coupled with the problem of mobility. This is particularly obvious in a nation that has constantly spread westward, while at the same time keeping its connections both with the United Kingdom and the United States to the south. The interconnections are true, at least to an extent, for all classes. That the Loyalists brought a tradition of pioneer localism and democracy to the northern colonies has often been noted; that there were Loyalist and pre-Loyalist connections with the leading families of the old colonies has been more easily overlooked. The Morrises and De Lanceys of New York had offshoots on the Council of Nova Scotia; a branch of the Robinsons of Virginia and New York played a leading role in Upper Canada. Naturally as time passed with the constant migration back and forth this cross-border picture became more complex rather than simpler, and more and more families came to have branches on both sides of the border.

Running counter to this north-south interchange was another important type of family connection that grew up through the nineteenth century, that is the trans-Atlantic groupings. There were naturally connections between the settlers who came out and their kindsmen who remained in Britain; but as the century wore on various types of families developed which were trans-Atlantic in character, composed of people who travelled back and forth across the Atlantic and sometimes seem to have been unsure on which side of the water their sympathy lay. Such relationships arose from a variety of causes: blood, attitude, commercial or military connection. But whatever their origin, they involved some important groups of people who helped to keep the ties with the Old Country very strong.

The first major examples of what might be called the trans-Atlantic family, or the North Atlantic triangle family, came with the Loyalists, who could flee either to British North America or to Great Britain and often still had relatives in the old colonies. In such a situation interesting interconnections could readily develop. A good example is to be found in the already mentioned Robinsons. Young John Beverley Robinson received the solicitor generalship of Upper Canada when his cousin, Sir Frederick Philipse Robinson, was appointed to the provisional lieutenant-governorship of that colony.

Commerce was equally important in establishing inter-continental connections, for as the colonies evolved English commercial houses sometimes sent out a younger member of the clan to build up a Canadian branch. The firm of Isaac and Peter Buchanan of Glasgow and Hamilton is a good example of this type arrangement. Commercial exegencies could conversely result in the wealthy man from the colonies moving to England to further consolidate his business interests: Sir Samuel Cunard and Sir John Rose are good examples.

Military connections across the Atlantic, in fact all over the world, provide a most important aspect of family mobility. The various British garrisons played a lead role in this process. Stationed in a garrison town of the North American colonies, be it Halifax, Quebec, Kingston, Toronto or London, the young officer of good lineage naturally looked to the local gentry for a wife, and sometimes for an increase in income. In London, Ontario, John Harris, Treasurer of the London District and a leader of the local squirocracy, saw four daughters marry British officers. Further, there was also the desire of the Canadians to "adopt" any British general who could be remotely called Canadian, such as Sir William Fenwick Williams, the Confederation period governor of Nova Scotia, who was born in Annapolis.

In addition many sons of established Canadian families joined the British Forces, such as Sir John Beverley Robinson's son Sir Charles W. Robinson, or William Baby, the son of James Baby, Inspector General of Upper Canada, both of whom became British generals. Then too sons of some of the newer settlers tended to join the British services. Alexander R. Dunn, son of the emigrant Receiver General of Upper Canada, John Henry Dunn, won a Victoria Cross in the charge of the Light Brigade.

The would-be aristocratic British attitudes of some of the leading established Canadian families, who could not seem to make up their minds whether they were British of colonials, also led to close connections with England. This could be seen in the constant travelling back and forth, or in a desire to retire "home". This type of looking to England is a factor in the disappearance of certain of the Canadian titles.

When considering the geographic spread of families, westward mobility is a third factor of importance. The frequent transfer of families to new areas affected the wealthy as well as the settler. At times a young man could be deliberately sent west to expand the family business, just as the young Englishman was similarily sent to Canada.

The Killams of British Columbia and the Killams of Nova Scotia are examples; William Allan, the financier of the Family Compact, and his son George William may have been Torontonians, but in the next generation George William II became the Canadian representative of the Hudson's Bay Company at Winnipeg and spent his last years at Vancouver. The Galts provide yet another example of this phenomenon.

With all these ramifications losing track of a family is very easy, especially as the trans-border, trans-Atlantic and westward moving tendencies can all occur in the same group. One example may be worth citing to show some of the complexities of the North American experience. Dr. Josiah Goodhue (1759-1829), a prominent medical figure in Vermont, had four sons: Charles Frederick emigrated to Lower Canada, where he was a member of the Legislative for Sherbrooke, and then moved on to the American midwest; Dr. William Sewel went to Georgia, where he also became a member of the Legislature; Dr. Josiah Cosmore practised medicine in St. Thomas, Upper Canada, before moving on to Chicago, where he was elected to the first city council, and George Jervis settled in London, Upper Canada, where he became the richest man and a member of the Legislative Council. Three of George Jervis' daughters carried on this pattern of mobility, marrying respectively the manager of the Bank of Montreal at New York; the general manager of Molson's Bank at Montreal; and a British Colonel of the Royal Engineers. The last became the mother of the commander-in-chief of the British Home Fleet during World War II. Altogether a fine example of the complications that can arise from both mobility and continuity.

Our final point, the study of the family as an occupational group, has interested historians at least since Sir Lewis Namier demonstrated the political roles of some English families forty years ago. In Canada there has been as yet little work in this field, but there are some very promising areas for research, not only in pclitics, but also in Business, the churches and the legal profession.

On of the difficulties of such a study lies in the fact that all too frequently the work that has been done to date has largely examined the family only in one aspect in its activities, but it is only in the overall picture can their full importance be estimated. For instance the Baldwins are synonomous with politics, yet that family included an admiral, a leading businessman, a bishop and the curator of an art gallery. For the present, however, it may be sufficient merely to try and sort out the leading families in their major occupation and I would like to suggest

that here one of the most promising fields is the family in business, an equally neglected branch of historical studies.

This whole question of the family and business provides particularly important field for investigation, related as it is to the question of the evolution of wealth and the problem of decreasing possibilities for upward mobility as the social structure of the country has evolved. Tracing the family as a factor in business growth, however, has all too often been limited to those merchants or manufacturing dynasties who were willing to sponsor euologies of their achievements. Most major communities possess some family companies who have had this type of biography written, and some families, such as the Eatons, have gone out of their way to have one history prepared after another. Most of these have at least two basic weaknesses. The first is the already noted problem that they are usually the history of a business and thus concentrate on the activities of the family in that business, with little attention being paid to their involvement in other fields. The second, naturally, is that being at the root eulogies they are normally completely uncritical. Thus the less desirable aspects of the family activities are simply missing. That this is a popular and profitable form of business history writing is certainly shown by the careers of such authors as Merrill Denison.

Such works also cause a problem because they give an unbalanced picture, for the stories of those families that have disappeared may be just as important as those of the families which have produced innumerable descendents. The Molsons are famous not only for their product, but also for the history that they have had written up by Denison; *The Barley and the Stream*. Virtually forgotten, however, are their rivals for the early navigational trade of the St. Lawrence, the Torrances, yet they played a very important role in nineteenth century Montreal.

One facet of this aspect of family history is the question of the role of a family, or an interlocking group of families, in the growth of corporations. Many of the major corporations that we tend to regard as non-familial have often been, at least in part, governed by a major family group. To take an example let us use the just-mentioned Torrances and the Bank of Montreal. When the Bank of Montreal was established in 1817 among the original shareholders was Thomas Torrance, who became a director a year later and held that office until his death in 1826. His brother, John, succeeded him on the board

and remained a member until he retired in 1857. Meanwhile, in 1853, a third Torrance, David, who was a nephew of both, as well as a son-in-law of John, had also been elected to the board. He went on to become president from 1873 until his death in 1876. Among the directors who elected him president was a new appointee, Sir Alexander T. Galt, who had also married a daughter — in fact successively two daughters — of John Torrance. He in turn remained a director until 1880. The Torrance family is not alone, for the bank includes three Porteuses and no less than seven Molsons on its list of directors.

This brings in certain interesting complications on the role of intermarriage, and interlocking directorates, in both family and corporate development. It also brings in the question of the corporation itself as a sort of pseudo-family with its interconnections going out to other corporate bodies. To remain with the Bank of Montreal the role of the corporation in its inter-relations with the Canadian Pacific Railway, the Hudson's Bay Company and the Royal Trust Company would be of major interest. The same could easily be said of other corporations, without even tying in the fascinating chain of clubs in which their directors intermingle across the nation.

Such are then some of the factors that complicate the study of the family in Canada and make it so difficult for us to present a picture of the importance of hereditary ability, inheritance of wealth, or the effects of mobility on the Canadian family. In conclusion, to take just one example of family importance, it may be well to return to one of the families mentioned at the outset and look at the contribution of just one line. Thomas-Jacques Taschereau (1680-1749) was a member of the Superior Council of New France; one of his grandsons, John-Thomas (1779-1832), a Member of the Legislative Assembly and later judge of the Court of the King's Bench, married Marie Panet (1788-1866), daughter of another distinguished family. From that union were descended the first Canadian cardinal, a chief justice of the Court of the King's Bench at Quebec, a Chief Justice of Canada, a second member of the Canadian Supreme Court, a premier of Quebec and a World War II general. An impressive collection which well demonstrates the potential of the study of family history in Canada. Although it is research in the microcosm it can show us a great deal about the continuity of our traditions as well as the mobility of our people.

## NOTES

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15 There are some useful compendiums along these lines, but something specific is needed for Canada, for both primary and secondary sources. A work that should not be neglected by the researcher in family history is Milton Rubincam, editor, *Genealogical Research: Methods and Sources,* (Washington, 1960), a publication of the American Society of Genealogists which includes a section on Canada. Both Canada and the United States have published genealogical guides in the Public Archives of Canada, *Tracing Your Ancestors in Canada,* (Ottawa, 1966) a 31 page pamphlet and the United States National Archives, *Guide to Genealogical Records in the National Archives* (Washington, 1964), by Meredith B. Colkett Jr. and Frank E. Bridges. For a source on biographical collections there is Robert B. Slocum, *Biographical Dictionaries and Related Works* (Detroit, 1967).