

## Introduction

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The Canadian City in the 19th Century

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## INTRODUCTION

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Urbanization on a major scale is a 20th century phenomenon in Canada. The proportion of the population which lived in urban places rose from 13% in 1851 to 35% in 1901 and approached 50% only by 1921. These figures are roughly similar to those for the United States but are far lower than those for Great Britain or in that most urbanized of colonies, Australia. Statistics outlining the degree of urbanization, however, may give an overly negative impression about the place of cities and the urban dimension in 19th century Canada. Some of the basic essentials of the urban system in central eastern Canada were established by the middle of the 19th century. By 1851 the nine largest cities--Montreal (with a population of over 50,000), Quebec City, Saint John (including Portland), Toronto, Halifax, Hamilton, Kingston, Ottawa, and London--had developed into dynamic commercial centers and had won metropolitan hegemony over sizeable hinterlands.

The completion of the urban network and the emergence of the modern Canadian city took place in the later portion of the period from 1851 to 1921. In most respects the changes in the system in the first three decades after 1851 were relatively minor adjustments. Toronto replaced Quebec as the second city, and several manufacturing towns in Southern Ontario grew to almost 10,000 in population (Guelph, St. Catharines, Brantford, and Belleville), forming a second tier of cities behind the original nine. The changes in the urban hierarchy were more dramatic and basic after 1881. Perhaps the most significant was the relative growth of the two largest cities. Montreal and Toronto previously had been only marginally larger than those ranked third and fourth, but after 1851 these two began to assume some of the characteristics of primate cities, outdistancing their nearest rivals by three and four times. Equally dramatic was the sudden appearance of the western cities, led by Winnipeg and Vancouver, which mushroomed to third and fourth place by 1921, soon to be closely followed by two other young giants, Calgary and Edmonton. These spectacular developments signalled the relative decline of Quebec and

Kingston in central Canada and of Saint John and Halifax in the Atlantic provinces.

1. Economic growth and metropolitan development

One of the most intriguing questions raised by observers of city growth is cited by Fogelson in his study of Los Angeles: "Why did a town spring up here and why has it grown so big?" The factors involved do not lend themselves to rigid formulation (although social scientists certainly are willing to try) and usually contain a varying mixture of location, initial advantage, dynamic internal leadership, favorable outside government or corporate decisions and a potentially rich hinterland. The relative weight of some of these elements has been illustrated in the rivalry of Montreal and Quebec, Toronto and Kingston, and Vancouver and Victoria. Surprisingly, the relative losers in each case had the initial advantage and two of these had the further benefit of being provincial capitals. The major, if not the determining, factor in each struggle may well have been the size and prosperity of the surrounding hinterland or region.

In accounting for urban growth, historians are also faced with the question of the role played by local initiative compared with that of forces beyond the community's boundaries. Ruben Bellan gives a good deal of the credit for Winnipeg's position in the West to the aggressiveness of its commercial elite, and T.W. Acheson has shown how local leadership in the Atlantic cities faltered in critical periods. And yet, most cities resembled the modern single-enterprise community in that they remained subject to the vagaries of the international market in staples and vulnerable to outside government and corporate decisions beyond their control. International political events stimulated the growth of Montreal's export trade (the Napoleonic Wars) and Toronto's successful competition with Montreal through use of American trade routes (the repeal of the Corn Laws). National political policies on tariffs and railroads strengthened the growth of manufacturing in central cities and supposedly led to a simultaneous weakening of industry in the maritimes. The importance of corporate decisions was particularly apparent in the Canadian Pacific Railway Company's decision to go through Winnipeg and in the

company's creation of a host of communities including Vancouver. One final large scale factor deserves mention: technological change. The conversion from wood and sail to iron and steam undercut a major shipbuilding industry in Quebec City and Saint John. The coming of the railway era was accompanied by a shift from an Atlantic to a continental economy which further accentuated the trend toward central and western urban growth.

In their pursuit of metropolitan status, most cities passed through several economic stages of development--colonial entrepot, commercial town, commercial-manufacturing city, diversified metropolis. Almost all began as colonial entrepots planted far in advance of general settlement for military or strategic purposes or to serve as agents for the exploitation of the staples of a new region. Growth as a commercial town usually depended on an expansion of the import-export function and on the development of inter-regional trade. The larger eastern and central cities were combining commercial and manufacturing functions before the middle of the 19th century. The most successful, Montreal and Toronto, developed a highly varied manufacturing base less exposed to unpredictable economic cycles and technological changes than Quebec's relatively undiversified industry. The economic basis of the modern metropolis appears to rest less on industrial production than on its service industries and its domination of a complex communications network.

## 2. Population

The regional diversity of Canada is reflected in the origin and ethnic composition of the urban population. In the middle of the 19th century, the cities of Upper Canada were dominated by immigrants while the greater portion of the population of Montreal, Quebec, and the maritime cities was born in British North America. On the other hand, while Montreal and Quebec were ethnically and linguistically fragmented, the population of Upper Canadian and maritime cities was more homogeneous in that both native and immigrant were overwhelmingly of British origin. Non-British immigration was relatively insignificant until the 20th century when cities like Winnipeg and

Montreal were the major recipients of a massive influx. There appears to be a correlation between a high proportion of immigrants and dynamic growth on the one hand, and a high proportion of native born and economic stagnation on the other. The relationship may simply be due to the fact that immigration tended to flow toward the healthiest economies.

Most studies of social structure in Canada have emphasized the economic and political elite but several projects are now underway to examine the total population of a community systematically. Michael Katz has found an incredible amount of transiency and a great gulf between rich and poor in his work on Hamilton. His contribution to the "Five Nineteenth-Century Cities" study illustrates the close relationship between a city's economic function and its class structure; his work also demonstrates the necessity of comparisons of this kind between Canadian cities. Peter Goheen's study of Toronto, like that of the Hamilton Project, involves the question of the impact of industrialization on occupational structure. As Goheen has shown, the introduction of the factory led to the degradation of the status of the craftsman, and increased the size of the work unit which made possible the emergence of working class consciousness.

### 3. Social organization

A city's population might give a superficial observer the impression of a great undifferentiated mass, but closer examination would reveal a complex network of group loyalties and institutions. While we have a good deal of descriptive information about particular ethnic, religious, benevolent, cultural and social groups within the cities, the extent to which class, ethnicity, and religion were related to them has not been adequately examined. Did ethnic loyalties, for example, become merged into religious loyalty? Have the churches, in fact, been the most enduring ethnic-cultural institutions? Other questions involve the role of the city in the transfer of institutions, first from Europe, and later in somewhat modified form to the cities on the new frontiers.

All of the major cities achieved a degree of autonomy through charters by the mid-19th century but the scope of local

government activity remained limited during the 19th century. Leadership generally was confined to members of the commercial elite. The system remained essentially non-democratic based on a limited franchise with substantial property qualifications. Movements to reform the system, as Paul Rutherford has argued, tended to represent middle-class anglophones who fought corrupt politicians and powerful utility entrepreneurs. The result in most cities was a revamping of the structure of municipal government and the creation of a network of public institutions to regulate vast areas of urban life.

#### 4. The physical environment

While some cities were originally laid out in a systematic fashion, they usually grew haphazardly in response to thousands of individual decisions. The largest cities were still relatively compact communities by the middle of the 19th century, but areal specialization by functions and residential segregation by class and ethnicity were already present. As in the United States, the great spatial expansion in the late 19th century was motivated by the twin desires to escape the crowded core and to achieve the rural ideal in the suburbs. There is some evidence that the strong casual relationship between suburbanization and slum development which H.J. Dyos has found in British cities also was present in Canadian urban expansion. Unfortunately, we do not have much reliable information on housing patterns. Is it true that Toronto was typified by the one-family house and Montreal by the two-family *maisonnette*? If so, the pattern would be substantially different than that in the larger American cities. We do know, however, that spatial expansion was greatly accelerated by the electrification of the street railway system in the 1890's. Perhaps the most significant social consequence of this process was that division and segregation rather than community became the characteristic feature of urban life.