

In Search of Pre-American Ancestors— A New Approach

By ROBERT S. GORDON

PERHAPS the most fundamental links between the people of Europe and North America are the bonds of common ancestry and tradition. The sense of family relationship is nowhere more evident than in genealogical research. The overwhelming majority of Canadians and Americans trace their ancestry to Europe. It is almost axiomatic to say that American family trees have their roots deeply in Europe. The ancient dictum "all roads lead to Rome" may be rephrased to read that most American genealogical searches invariably lead to Europe. But this inquiry was prompted by that nagging question: Where in Europe?

Genealogical sources available to persons tracing their ancestors on the North American Continent are generally adequate. This is particularly true of sources relating to the 19th and 20th century. Canadian census enumerations began early in the 1800's as aggregate returns of population count, gradually changed into returns listing the heads of households, and by 1851 became comprehensive nominal listings of all residents. The returns for Carleton County for that year, for example, show the names of all members of households and their age, sex, occupation, religion, and Province or country of origin. Information was also recorded on size and type of property held. Subsequent enumerations, those for 1861 and decennially thereafter, recorded additional personal and property data, thus providing future genealogists with a wealth of information. Censuses in the United States were conducted in a similar fashion. The first complete enumeration undertaken there, that of 1850, additionally listed the color of skin, literacy, inherent or acquired physical or mental defects, wealth, and court conviction. In that, as in all other census returns, however, no record was made of the specific place of birth, particularly when the birth occurred

The author is head of the Manuscript Division, Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa. His professional specialization is in organizing and describing both manuscript and record holdings.

outside the American Continent. The enumerator was satisfied, indeed required, simply to list the country of origin, such as England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, Austria, or Russia.

The omission turned out to be a serious obstacle to tracing the origin of immigrants to Canada and the United States. Lucky were those who preserved ancestral birth certificates or family Bibles with vital statistics or who maintained links with their trans-Atlantic relations. Those who did not preserve such documents or links had to turn to other sources for vital information, especially to official records of births, marriages, and deaths. In Canada, however, the civil registration of vital statistics did not become general practice until about the middle of the 19th century. Ontario, for example, instituted such registration in 1869. Other Canadian Provinces followed suit at later dates; Prince Edward Island, the smallest of the Provinces began it in 1906. Once again the pattern in the United States was very similar, with the New England States recording the births from the 1850's and the Southern States following some 50 years later. Unfortunately for the genealogist these records do not show parents' places of birth.

Church records, the oldest and most reliable genealogical source, are chiefly preserved in parish or diocesan archives. The earliest extant church records in Canada date from 1621; for English-speaking Canadians the registers for Halifax in Nova Scotia, which date from 1749, are the earliest. Very few parish records in Ontario predate 1779, the start of the British Loyalists' migration from the rebellions of the American Colonies. The newly independent Americans followed the practice originated under British rule. Eastern States including New England and New York have continuous series of church records dating from the middle of the 17th century. The South established religious congregations more gradually, with those in the older Colonies such as Virginia matching the longevity of congregations in New England. The Midwest had few church communities before the War of 1812, and the West and the Pacific coast showed religious life only after the Civil War. There were, of course, small Spanish church colonies in California before that date.

What do church records contain? Genealogically speaking they are not very impressive. In most cases they record only a person's date and place of birth (or baptism), names of children and parents, and residence and occupation of the latter. Again there is no information on parents' places of origin. In our quest for birthplaces of original settlers church records are of marginal value, though some are an exception to the rule. Tombstone inscriptions oc-

casionally show the places of birth. Unfortunately few compilations of these inscriptions exist, and genealogists have yet to develop a taste for visits to cemeteries. Moreover, a tombstone, as opposed to the more perishable wooden tablet or cross, is not an old custom on this continent. The ancient burial grounds of the Acadians in Nova Scotia are virtually unmarked; no original tombstones commemorating the graves of these hapless people have survived. When the villages of Aultsville, Dickinson's Landing, Farran's Point, and Wales were being flooded to make the St. Lawrence River navigable for seagoing vessels, several old burial grounds had to be relocated. Accurate records were made of decaying grave markers, and all tombstones were permanently encased in wall-type settings. In retracing the corroded and moss-covered writings on stone, metal, and wood, researchers uncovered many names of original birthplaces. Such findings are rare, and less imaginative researchers often overlook them.

The quest for ancestors would be hopeless were it not for a great variety of extraneous records, many of them extremely rich in genealogical information. In Canada as in the United States applicants for grants of land, for example, had to justify their entitlement by submitting a variety of personal information. Next to census records land records are still the most popular hunting ground for researchers. The thoroughly indexed Upper and Lower Canada Land Petitions constitute valuable records of the origins of many Canadians. On a larger scale land records include a variety of grants, deeds, mortgages, assessment rolls, tax lists, bounty grants, discharges of settlement duties, and transfers of ownership. Some of these sources have not been indexed; they resemble the proverbial haystack, the needle being the elusive genealogical information. Countless hours have been spent in sifting through the massive collections, and cries of "Eureka!" have resounded loud and clear through the reading rooms of many archival institutions.

On the other hand, immense frustrations must often grip researchers who delve into death notices, probate records, immigration and naturalization records, war service files, and similar official documents. The information they contain is surprisingly meager. This is particularly true of records prepared some 100 years ago. Before that a large quantity of such records simply did not exist because traditional governmental concern with its subjects was limited to administering justice and collecting taxes. Recordkeeping was considered unnecessary, expensive, and bothersome. Immigrants to North America during the 17th and 18th centuries were often unrecorded. Passenger lists were virtually unknown; newspapers

rarely recorded the names of arrivals except for those of a few prominent persons. When the Earl of Selkirk brought his settlers to Prince Edward Island, Baldoon, and the Red River settlement he did not provide an official list of passengers. The various Scottish emigrant societies that sent unemployed Glasgow weavers to Lanark County in Canada did not always know the names of the emigrants. When steerage passengers died aboard ship, as they did in great numbers during the mass migrations of the 1840's, the casualties were reported in aggregate numbers only. Government immigration agents such as A. C. Buchanan did not compile or preserve nominal lists of arrivals. In fact the Government of Canada only has comprehensive immigration records from about 1896, with incomplete records from 1865. Very few of the early records mention the place of origin beyond the port of embarkation. Genealogy was of no concern to governments of the day. Our generation is paying the penalty for the omissions. Though, as previously claimed, most persons in Canada or the United States can establish their lineage back to the arrival of their ancestors on this continent, the problem of connecting the immigrants in America with their geographical origins in Europe has always been difficult.

What then can the researcher who looks to England, Ireland, Austria, or Russia do to obtain information about his ancestors? Even after he has exhausted all available leads, examined the extant records, and consulted other available evidence, he may not be able to answer the key question: Where in Ireland, Scotland, Germany, or Italy did his progenitors originate? I do not know how many researchers ask themselves this question, but I do know there are many who are unable to answer it. Of the approximately 2,000 written genealogical inquiries that the Public Archives of Canada receives every year, many of which contain this question, we are seldom able to provide the specific place of European origin for more than 10. Of the approximately 100 completed genealogies containing family trees that are deposited yearly at the PAC, only a few show an unbroken line of descent from pre-American ancestors.

Can the problem be solved? Is there a way to produce the information? Can a method be devised to identify places of origin that were not recorded in the first place? The answer is a qualified *maybe*. A glimmer of hope has been provided by exponents of the "cliometric" method of research.¹ They contend that evidence may

¹ The cliometric (Clio—Muse of history; metric—a system of measurement) method of historical investigation is based on the assumption that historical events can be measured in precise mathematical terms. It challenges the traditional methodology

be "quantified" from a large sequence of related documents of similar nature by extracting general data from such documents and relating it together to arrive at information not clearly and specifically stated about individuals. It has been proven, for example, that it is possible to establish or reconstruct the original social, religious, linguistic, racial, or economic status of an individual in a community for which large sequences of "quantifiable" records exist. This method has been found particularly appropriate for research on the social and communal structure of groups. Collective characteristics of cohesive numbers of persons normally yield specific characteristics of the individuals under inquiry. This in turn may lead to assumptions of their affinity to other contemporary social strata having similar characteristics. The original such stratum, the subject of this inquiry, may then be identified in relation to specific individuals.

It may, for example, be possible to establish the background of David Vanderhider, who came to Canada with a band of Loyalists who had fought in the American Revolution. The group settled in 1784 around the Bay of Quinte in Upper Canada. By examining available information from pay lists, victualing files, tickets of location, and other records of the period, one may come across names of other members of the group: the Vanalstines, Vanblaricums, Vandeclefts, Vanderwaters, Vandusens, Vankoughnets, and many others. By quantifying that information and other available data, one may relate those names and that of David Vanderhider to the specific geographical location of the group's origin. Similarly, using census records, vital statistics, assessment rolls, voting lists, petitions for land, building permits, and even such sources as school, church, court militia, and business records, quantifiable information can be obtained for research purposes.

The list of Scottish farmers who accompanied John Robertson to Beckwith Township in Lanark County, Upper Canada, included the Carmichaels, Comries, Crams, Dewars, Fergusons, McArthurs, McCallums, McEwans, McFarlanes, and McGregors. By quantifying the names along with other available data it was possible to determine that a pattern of the same names, religion, and occupations occurred at that time in Perthshire, Scotland. It had not been possible to come to that assumption by tracing only one family because some of the more common names occurred all over Scotland, England, and even Ireland. Admittedly the strong association of Highland clans with definite regions facilitates tracing Scottish

of research, particularly in the newer fields of historical inquiry. It may also be applicable to problems of archival, genealogical, demographic, and related sciences.

names, but even in those regions there are such common names as the Smiths, Clarks, Andersons, Kings, Wilsons, Armstrongs, Greens, and Adamses. Like their counterparts in Europe with the names Schmidt, Dubois, Gonzalez, Kowalski, and Ivanoff, such names alone are almost untraceable. Linked and considered with other persons with whom they cohabitated they may indeed be traced to specific locations.

In 1823 and 1825 the Honorable Peter Robinson brought to Upper Canada large numbers of Irish settlers. The early immigrants, particularly those who left on July 8, 1823, aboard the ships *Hebe* and *Stakesby*, were settled chiefly in Pakenham and Ramsay Townships, Lanark County. Using the early census records for the two townships it was possible to establish a pattern of Irish names that strongly resembled that of Cork County, Ireland; indeed the quantification method suggested connections with specific towns and villages in Cork County. The combination of the names Barry, Donahue, Mahoney, Nagle, Numan, Riordan, and Shea could be traced to the town of Mallow. The Buckeys, Healeys, Nagles, and Thompsons appeared in Fermoy; the Bensons, Kennedys, Roches, and Shanahans in Charlesville; and the Ahearns, Greens, Gubbins, Lynches, and Saywards in Castletownroche, all in Cork County.

After his brief filing at cliometrics the genealogist must return to his more traditional research methods. Having located one or more possible places of origin of his ancestors, he can then begin examining all available sources for the areas to find proper documentary evidence. Unless confirmed and corroborated by traditional genealogical records the "quantified ancestor" has no status in the family history. Other important qualifications must be made before cliometrics is presented as an acceptable genealogical research method. Many of the experiments to date should be reexamined. Other tests must be made, and more conclusive results must be obtained. The evidence presented by the method should be viewed with caution and reserve. In genealogical research cliometric findings can only be considered one means of obtaining further leads to additional sources. Quantification results cannot and should not be given the weight of traditional historical evidence based on documentary sources.

Moreover the method is fraught with further dangers. Even if the social group under investigation has the necessary earmarks of homogeneity and a large series of "quantifiable" records are available for study, there has to be sufficient evidence that a proportionately large segment of the group has a common geographical origin. Perhaps the most difficult, arduous, and time-consuming corollary of

the method is the search for authentic, contemporary, demographic information against which the findings can be compared. The researcher must have access to a comprehensive library of statistical and analytical information on population patterns and their various ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, and occupational ramifications. The results of the quantification of Lanark County census records, for example, are meaningless unless they can be related to contemporary, authentic, demographic listings in other parts of the world. Though these listings are not as abundant as one would like, they are nevertheless available in such forms as census records; assessment and tax rolls; voting lists; street directories; church, school, and court records; atlases; and published local histories.

Other obvious difficulties attending the method are changes in names, religion, and occupations. Protestant settlers in predominantly Roman Catholic areas tended to be assimilated into the latter religion through marriage; French-speaking groups often adopted English as a more practicable language of expression; occupations reflected the exigencies of economic necessities. Such changes seriously impair the usefulness of the method. Although the shortcomings of the cliometric method must be taken into account before it is used for genealogical purposes, any method that offers a measure of success should be welcomed by determined researchers who are desperately trying to locate ancestral grounds in Europe.