

ALICE HANSON JONES. — *Wealth of a Nation To Be: The American Colonies on the Eve of the Revolution*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980. Pp. xxxvi, 494.

There is no doubt that *Wealth of a Nation To Be* is a book to be reckoned with. Some critics will reckon it a good book — a milestone in the “statistical dark age” of American economic history; and others a bad book — a millstone in the tradition of the “new economic history” of early America. I hold to the second view.

The attractions of this statistician’s handbook and its model for inquiry into “national wealth” and “national income” in the American colonies on the eve of Independence have not escaped me. The appeal, of course, lies in the technically elegant account of how colonial wealth — or, more precisely, of how the aggregate and per capita, non-human private wealth of the 2.35 million free people, excluding Indians, who inhabited the American colonies in 1774 — can be derived by applying modern statistical and sampling methods to late eighteenth-century probate records; in the seemingly endless explanations of sophisticated calculations which, because they are difficult and deceptive, need all the explaining they can get; and in the enormous amount of data collected into hundreds of tables and figures that litter the text. Material of this nature takes up better than half of the book. The rest represents an effort to play with the data and to bring it to bear upon issues of social structure and of wealth distribution. But here the probate sample is too small to do justice to the topics, and the discussion slips from the sophisticated to the simplistic. Generalizations tend to be sophomoric, comparisons misleading and conclusions banal. In the end, it is this contrast between technique and history that prevents an ambitious study of early American wealth patterns, with its undoubtedly useful model for teasing national wealth and income figures out of probate records, from assuming any great importance in the historical literature.

The preliminary to this book should not be missed. In her preface, Alice Hanson Jones explains the origins of the work and reveals a great deal about herself — her high spirits, courage, tenacity and impressive credentials as a statistician and an economic historian in pursuit of a lifelong interest in the well-being of the “common man”. Not marriage, motherhood, the Great Depression, a sojourn with the Bureau of Labor Statistics, World War II or serious illness, it seems, could deter Jones from finishing, some thirty-five years later, a dissertation, begun in 1934 as a study of the “standard of living in the northern American colonies, ca. 1770”, on the subject of the “Wealth Estimates for the American Middle Colonies, 1774” (pp. x, xi). The slight but significant shift in the technical, spatial and temporal parameters of the dissertation occurred when, in 1964, Jones chanced to take a handful of published probate records to her dissertation adviser, Robert W. Fogel, then a professor of economics at the University of Chicago. “His eyes glistening”, Fogel asked, “Where are these things?” and, “Why couldn’t you take a cluster sample of counties, take a subsample of inventories from these counties for a certain date or dates, and why couldn’t you made [*sic*] a wealth estimate?” (pp. xi, xii).

Why not, indeed. Four years later, the job done and dissertation in hand, she again sought out Fogel who this time, doubtless with eyes still shining, urged, “Go on and do it for all thirteen colonies” (p. xii). The rest, as they say, is history — the history of a small handicraft industry of workers and advisers, headed by Jones, which over the next dozen years produced a three-volume work, *American Colonial Wealth: Documents and Methods*, published in 1977 by Arno Press; a second, revised edition of the same work, published in 1978 under a new title, *American Colonial Wealth*; several articles; and, finally, the present study, *Wealth of a Nation To Be*.

This intriguing preface is immediately followed by a puzzling "Map of the Thirteen Colonies" (p. xvii). The map places New York between New England and the Middle Colonies, thereby challenging a convention, based upon spatial, administrative and economic considerations, dating back to at least the eighteenth century. The map offers no reason for this special view of reality. Actually, the key to the map turns up pages later in the course of a lengthy discussion of method that introduces *Wealth of a Nation To Be* and that is obligatory upon practitioners of the "new economic history". New York seems to have been "a case of failure of inventories to survive" (p. xxxiv). Despite a thoroughgoing search, all that Jones could find for the entire province of New York were twenty-three inventories for estates probated between 1773 and 1775. This was twenty-seven cases shy of the fifty which, according to her own sampling design, she needed to represent the colony's 40,000 or so "living white 'wealth-holders'" (p. xxxiv). In addition, the twenty-three surviving inventories revealed wealth levels unusually high compared with the results obtained in the other Middle Colonies and in New England. Jones seemed out of luck; but appearances can be deceptive. The solution was to "create a New York hybrid wealth pattern" — a pattern which made use of the twenty-three surviving inventories "but with a weight of only 10 percent, combined with the pattern for the other middle colonies, given a weight of 60 percent, and that of New England, given a weight of 30 percent" (p. xxxv).

Ergo the mystifying map. "When I refer to the 'middle colonies,' without initial capital letters", Jones explains, "I mean only New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware, without the New York hybrid. When I speak of the 'Middle Colonies' in capital letters, I mean the combination of these colonies plus the New York hybrid pattern" (p. xxxv). In sum, the "Map of the Thirteen Colonies" turns out, after all, to be a map not of the real world but of a statistical world of Jones' contriving. It is symbolic of one of the central problems of the book. So is the author's handling of another matter that arises out of the New York hybrid. Why did Jones assign a weight of only ten percent? Why not five, or twenty-five, or some other number? The text refers us to a lengthy explanatory footnote. The footnote refers us to another lengthy explanatory footnote — which refers us to *American Colonial Wealth*, either edition, sections V, VI.C. and VI.D.

Obviously going down this particular rabbit hole with Alice is a complicated business, one requiring much time and effort on the reader's part. It also requires some faith that the author's tangle of educated guesses, refined assumptions and "controlled compromises", here as everywhere in the book, is plausible (p. xxii). Having stayed with this particular problem of the ten-percent weighting long enough to get to the bottom of it, I must say I find the figure colourable — which, of course, is not the same thing as finding it accurate or the only, or even the best, possible compromise figure.

If all this sounds carping, it only makes more emphatic a point Jones herself concedes in passing. Enormous "practical difficulties" confronted the author in her attempt to use the records of some of the dead to reveal the wealth of all of the living. New data and different assumptions, she reminds us, could alter her findings, and with this distinct possibility in mind, she "deposited the computer tape of my sample observations at the University of Michigan; deposited my files of decedent data at the Newberry Library, and detailed my methods more fully in *American Colonial Wealth*" (p. xxiii).

However significant, questions about the plausibility of the assumptions and guesses underlying the analysis of early American wealth, which come up over and over again in this study, are nonetheless peripheral to the author's larger concern in the "Note on Method" — namely, the possibility of using a modern statistical technique, the "small unbiased sample", no less than of coming up with such a

sample from the surviving probate records, to allow legitimate inferences about colonial wealth. In fact, Jones takes up this issue again and again — not only in the beginning of the book in her “Note on Method” but also at the end of the book in her discussion of “Techniques Followed and Data Limitations”, and then only to refer the reader to the even more detailed accounts in her earlier works.

The author’s obvious anxiety about these matters made me nervous, and, as a layman, I was not comforted by being told that Jones’ sampling techniques were akin to those favoured by the Gallup pollsters. Consequently, I turned the book over to a colleague who is a statistician for a technical opinion. He assured me that Jones’ methods are, indeed, unexceptional, and that, after allowing for unusual difficulties in obtaining, interpreting and weighting probate records, the author probably did arrive at an unbiased sample. This is, of course, Jones’ own view of what she and her statistical advisers achieved. In any event, the matter remains for the experts to wrangle over. For practical purposes, one may easily concede the point. But what do Jones’ calculations mean for the study of early American history?

The first couple of chapters of *Wealth of a Nation To Be* offer little more than a glossary of the basic terms used throughout the study and some potted summaries of familiar facts about the colonial economy. Chapter one, “Measures of Wealth”, defines, in non-technical language, wealth, national wealth, capital, human capital, income, property, net worth, total physical wealth, total non-human physical wealth, gross portable wealth, portable physical wealth, and non-human portable physical wealth. These are the categories for which probate inventories are squeezed to provide information. In addition, the chapter briefly discusses eighteenth-century probate procedures and the possible money values of some of the more common items to be found in inventories. These values — expressed both in pounds sterling, based upon 1774 exchange rates, and in dollars of 1976 purchasing power — are based upon long-term price indexes, which, as Jones admits, raises “philosophical questions”, and, in any event, the values have little meaning given the incommensurability of the eighteenth- and twentieth-century economies (pp. 8, 9). Chapter two, “Human and Land Resources”, contains half-a-dozen pages of textbook clichés concerning population, land ownership and use, regional specialization, urbanization and land tenancy. More useful are the dozen pages that attempt to identify, locate and number the people defined as wealth-holders: viz., “all free adult males; a small proportion of free adult females; all free black men; and a small proportion of free black women in New England and the Middle Colonies” (p. 33). Excluded, by definition of the author, are free black women in the south, children and youths twenty and under, married women, slaves and Indians.

Chapters three, four and five, “Aggregate and Per Capita Private Physical Wealth for Thirteen Colonies and Three Regions”, “Structure of Physical Wealth in Thirteen Colonies and Three Regions”, and “Net Worth, Financial Assets and Liabilities”, offer substantive discussions. Chapter three addresses the central issue of the book: What were the national wealth and income figures for the colonies on the eve of Independence? It goes on to answer a number of related questions: Of what did wealth consist? What were the differences in wealth and income among people living in New England, the Middle Colonies and the Southern Colonies? How do the colonial figures compare with those of England and other European countries around the same time, or with some undeveloped countries today? Responding to these queries, Jones presents figures for, and briefly comments upon, physical human wealth, non-human physical wealth, non-human wealth per adult, non-human wealth per free capita and per free adult, and non-human wealth per free man and free wealth-holder. And “for the purposes of a very swift comparison of colonial incomes with other times and places”, Jones calcu-

lates the per capita colonial yearly income in 1774 at \$512 in 1976 dollars (or \$580 in 1978 dollars, etc.). This amount is compared with national income figures for some other countries today, for Gregory King's England and for the colonies at several points in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In these discussions, assumptions are all, and in one striking example of the genre, headed "My Interpretation", the author piles assumption upon assumption to arrive at "Nonhuman Wealth Per Capita" for the years 1650, 1700, 1725, 1750 and 1774 measured in both pounds sterling and in 1976 dollars (pp. 77, 78)!

Chapter four begins with a lengthy examination of the physical, non-financial wealth of the colonists broken down according to specified characteristics of wealth-holders — i.e. location by section, age, sex, occupation, wealth, class, testacy — and kinds of physical assets held — human and non-human capital, non-human capital by portability, by purpose, by industry, etc. The chapter ends with a remarkable exercise in incommensurability — five pages comparing wealth two centuries apart; that is, comparing the structure of physical wealth of the colonies in 1774 with that of the U.S. in 1973. The conclusion deserves to be quoted: "All in all, the two-century comparison shows us a much larger present-day population with much more sophisticated land uses and structures, and technologically more elaborated producers' and consumers' goods that permit a wide range of lifestyles" (p. 126). C. Wright Mills called this kind of historical analysis "abstracted empiricism", and to her credit Jones, too, wonders whether her findings that the "average American" today is actually twelve times better off than his "average colonist" forebear" has much meaning outside the statistical world of her own making (p. 126). On the other hand, she does not wonder that "Americans had many more creature comforts in 1973 than had the colonists, and held a larger portion of their wealth in this form. This has been the great achievement", she reminds us, "of our competitive, relatively free enterprise economy" (p. 124). I do not know what Mills would have made of this remark; but I do know what Marx would say.

Chapter five does for the colonists' financial assets and liabilities what chapters three and four do for their physical assets. The discussion does not inspire confidence. Thus, generalizations sink to the level of: "Farmers often had notes or book debts due them and in turn owed such debts to others. A farmer might sell a spare cow or hog or some bushels of rye to a neighbor, but in turn owe him for some milling, or he might have lent his son-in-law money to buy land or slaves" (p. 131). This is absurd — even as supposition. Where and when does Jones think that farmer might have lived who raised rye and might have lent money to his son-in-law to buy slaves? In the south? Rye! In the north? Slaves! And the "general conclusion" drawn by the author will come as no surprise to anyone with even a textbook knowledge of American history: "Despite the seeming handicaps of absence of banking institutions, shortage of coins, and varying local paper currency, the colonists proved very enterprising" (p. 153).

Chapters six through eight tackle the question of the unequal distribution of wealth in America both in 1774 and "compared with other times and places" (p. 258). The kindest thing one can say about these discussions is that they are futile. Put simply, the small sample used in the present study may suffice for calculating national wealth and income but it only masks the significant social and regional — not sectional — differences in inequality of wealth that colonial historians seek to understand. Alice Jones knows as much when she confesses: "Our sample is too small to test, within New England, the hypothesis of Jackson Turner Main that inequality was greatest in urban places and greater in areas of commercial farming than in ones that produced only for subsistence" (p. 184).

In chapter nine, Jones sums up her study and draws her conclusions. "What is the upshot of our investigation", she asks. "I conclude", she goes on, "that the level of living attained on the eve of the American Revolution by typical free colonists, even the 'poor' ones, was substantial. It included sufficient food and drink, including meat, cider, and often strong liquors, candles and sometimes oil lamps for lighting" (p. 340). Perhaps the author will allow those of us who deny that her "typical free colonists" ever lived — except, of course, in the imaginings of the abstracted and fantastic world of statisticians — to concur that there is something inspiring and uplifting in the view that in early America "the level of living, even of the 'poor', was usually sufficient for vigorous activity" (p. 341).

Joseph A. ERNST,
York University.

* * *

P.-A. LINTEAU, RENÉ DUROCHER and J.-C. ROBERT, *Histoire du Québec contemporain: de la Confédération à la crise (1867-1929)*. Ville Saint-Laurent, Québec: Les Éditions du Boréal Express, 1979. Pp. 660.

This mammoth volume is a long overdue breath of fresh air in the study of the history of Quebec. Examining only the period 1867-1929, the authors have drawn together the findings of much contemporary research to dispel some of the hoary myths that have dominated too many previous textbooks. For students outside Quebec this work is a welcome and valuable correction to the narrow distortions that riddle Mason Wade's *The French Canadians 1760-1967*.

Histoire du Québec contemporain is broad in scope, almost too broad, focussing on the economic and social development of the province with some discussion of cultural, literary and artistic achievements during the period. The dominant concerns of the authors are with population growth and distribution, economic change through industrialization, urbanization, education, the labour and women's movements, and the changing role of the provincial government in a society that is itself being rapidly altered in nature. The central theme of this book is a consideration of the process and dynamic of social and economic transformation in the first phase of industrialization.

In this regard, *Histoire du Québec contemporain* provides a cogent picture of the arrival of industrial technology in the province in the last third of the nineteenth century. Quebec did not enter the so-called modern industrial age in 1960, as some would have it, but faced the crisis of industrial and urban growth at the same time as Ontario with about the same consequences and problems. The authors rightly stress that timing was the crucial factor. Quebec moved from artisan craft production to large-scale industrial factory production abruptly. The technology and necessary capital came from outside while the local, predominantly French, population provided the requisite pool of unskilled or semi-skilled labour vital to the success of early capitalist ventures. Once the process had begun, it was difficult if not impossible to reverse or even slow its relentless progress. Well before the turn of the twentieth century the economy of Quebec was being transformed by industrialization, but in such a way as to result in economic control and expertise resting with non-French Canadians aided and abetted by provincial politicians, who at best thought they were bringing prosperity to the province and at worst saw an opportunity to ensure their personal fortunes by providing a political climate