*The Pattern of Literacy in Quebec, 1745-1899**

by Allan GREER**

I

The field of literacy and elementary education, like many aspects of Quebec history, has been something of a battleground. Still it has not yet received the kind of intensive research that would allow it to progress beyond the level of ideological confrontation. One of the most influential interpretations in the historiography of French-Canadian educational history was that formulated in Lionel Groulx's *L'Enseignement Français au Canada*.[1] Groulx emphasized the consistent leading role of the clergy in furthering elementary education. Thanks to the efforts of the church, supported by the French colonial administration, pre-conquest Canada had a good school system and a relatively high rate of literacy. The British conquest ruined all this by removing state subsidies and restricting clerical recruitment. Educational institutions languished and the colony was plunged into the darkest ignorance with extremely low literacy rates prevailing from the generation of the 1760s until that of the 1830s. During this period, colonial administrators and others proposed various schemes for Protestant or non-denominational school systems, notably the "Royal Institution," but the French-Canadians feared the assimilationist motives behind these proposals (with good reason, Groulx adds) and successfully resisted their implementation. Recovery began with a school law passed in 1829 by the *Patriote*-dominated assembly but the province only received a proper school system when the clergy regained its educational predominance in the 1840s and 1850s. Significantly, the pattern that Groulx describes of original perfection followed by fall and later renaissance of elementary education closely parallels the changing fortunes of the French-Canadian clergy.

Groulx's account of education in New France is was based almost entirely on the work of Amédée Gosselin, an earlier clerical nationalist historian. In a book published in 1911, Gosselin had attempted to overturn the dominant view, supported by Garneau and Salone, that pre-conquest

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[1] Lionel GROULX, *L'enseignement français au Canada*. Vol. I, *Dans le Québec* (Montreal, 1933).

Canada was exceptionally ignorant outside the towns.[2] Without always determining whether institutions mentioned in documents were permanent or transitory, he sought to prove that the colony was well supplied with schools. He also argued that literacy was high on the basis of a pseudo-quantitative examination of parish registers that was valueless even by the statistical standards of the day. Groulx's contribution was in extending the enquiry into the British period and in developing the implications of Gosselin's work by pointing to 1760 as a decisive turning point.[3]

Opponents of this nationalist view include Fernand Ouellet, Jean-Jacques Jolois and Richard Chabot.[4] These scholars argue that the church was a negative influence on elementary education in the second half of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century. The clergy insisted on its right to a monopoly over the field of schooling, they claim, and expended more energy opposing the intervention of the state than in improving levels of popular instruction. The clergy's failure to take advantage of the educational opportunities presented by the legislation modifying the Royal Institution (1818) and allowing the establishment of *écoles de fabrique* (1824) seems to bear this out. According to Ouellet, the limited progress that took place before 1840 was largely due to pressure from the liberal laity responding to changes in the economic and social structures which took place beginning at the turn of the nineteenth century.[5]

Historians of education, regardless of their interpretations, have based their conclusions about literacy levels mainly on the subjective accounts of contemporaries, on fragmentary evidence concerning the number and quality of schools and on *a priori* reasoning.[6] What seems lacking is a study of literacy which would measure the ability of early Quebec society to transmit across the generations at least one basic skill. Literacy is part of elementary education and it deserves treatment

[2] Amédée GOSSELIN, *L'instruction au Canada sous le régime français (1635-1670)* (Québec, 1911).

[3] Cf. Claude GALARNEAU, *La France devant l'opinion canadienne (1760-1815)* (Quebec, 1970), p. 48.

[4] Fernand OUELLET, «L'enseignement primaire: responsabilité des Églises ou de l'État (1801-1836),» *Éléments d'histoire sociale du Bas-Canada* (Montreal, 1972), pp. 259-77; Jean-Jacques JOLOIS, *Joseph-François Perrault (1753-1844) et les origines de l'enseignement laïque au Bas-Canada* (Montreal, 1969); Richard CHABOT, *Le curé de campagne et la contestation locale au Québec (de 1791 aux troubles de 1837-38)* (Montreal, 1975), pp. 45-73.

[5] OUELLET, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

[6] Recent works by Fernand Ouellet, Louise Dechêne and participants in the "programme de recherche en démographie historique» at the University of Montreal have provided more solid information on signature rates from seigneurial records and parish registers but these contributions are not part of any wider study of the phenomenon of literacy. See Louise DECHÊNE, *Habitants et marchands de Montréal au XVII^e siècle* (Paris and Montreal, 1974), pp. 467-69; Fernand OUELLET, "Répartition de la propriété foncière et types d'exploitation agricole dans la seigneurie de Laprairie durant les années 1830," in *Éléments d'histoire sociale du Bas-Canada* (Montreal, 1972), pp. 118-21; Raymond ROY, Yves LANDRY and Hubert CHARBONNEAU, "Quelques comportements des canadiens au XVII^e siècle d'après les registres paroissiaux," *Revue d'histoire de l'amérique française* (hereafter *RHAF*), Vol. 31 (June, 1977): 49-73.

based on direct evidence since it is not simply a reflection of schooling as is often assumed. One of the first scholars to realize this was Léon Gérin, a pioneer Canadian social scientist and perhaps the original sociologist of education.[7] In a series of articles published in 1897-98 on the "natural law" of popular instruction, Gérin insisted that levels of literacy were not simply determined by school legislation and formal institutions.[8] Using census figures on illiteracy for Canadian counties he demonstrated the influence of economy and occupational structure as well as that of ethnic composition. Thus, commercial and industrial cities and the surrounding countryside have high literacy while regions with economies based on primary resource extraction have low literacy. At the same time, the presence of ethnic groups such as the English, whose traditions and family organization stress individualism, influence literacy positively but French-Canadians and other groups with "communal" values influence it negatively. Gérin did not mention religion as a factor related to literacy nor did he consider overseas migration as a literacy-selective process. This is not to detract from his achievement which consists mainly in adopting a structural and global approach to the study of literacy well in advance of his time. Historians might well profit by Gérin's example in examining the factors determining literacy in earlier periods and in perhaps testing some of his specific conclusions in different historical circumstances.

One of the purposes of the present essay is to provide the raw material that will make it possible to explore the relations among education, society and economy for historical periods where literacy data are not readily available. An attempt will be made to resolve the question of the educational consequences of the conquest but more attention will be devoted to problems which have so far been ignored by students of French-Canadian history. The emphasis will be firstly on measuring literacy rates and secondly on evaluating the cultural, social and economic factors influencing literacy. The question of how changing literacy levels affected other phenomena such as popular mentalities and economic development will have to be left open. The richness of historical sources for the study of literacy in early Quebec and the ethnic and religious mosaic of the province's population in the nineteenth century allow such work to address itself to problems such as the definition of literacy and the factors contributing to its growth that go well beyond the boundaries of "provincial history."

The sources exploited for this paper are parish registers, petitions, censuses and a special statistical enquiry conducted at the time of Lord Durham's mission to Canada. They all have limitations, some of them

[7] Guy ROCHER, "La sociologie de l'éducation dans l'œuvre de Léon Gérin," in Pierre BÉLANGER and Guy ROCHER, eds., *École et société au Québec: Éléments d'une sociologie de l'éducation* (Montreal, 1970), pp. 33-50.

[8] Léon GÉRIN, "La loi naturelle du développement de l'instruction populaire: les causes sociales de la répartition des illettrés au Canada», *La science sociale suivant la méthode d'observation*, Vol. 23 (June 1897), pp. 441-79; Vol. 24 (Nov. 1897), pp. 356-90; Vol. 25 (June 1898), pp. 488-522.

severe; they have varying degrees of chronological and geographical coverage; they reflect literacy differently, two of them "directly," two of them "indirectly"; and they define literacy in different ways. Taken together, however, their variety facilitates critical evaluation and, to some extent, the sources cover one another's gaps, providing a more complete and more reliable picture of Quebec literacy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than could be derived from any one of them alone. Coverage over time is nonetheless uneven. The 1837-40 period receives disproportionate attention because of the abundance of relevant documentation. This can be turned to advantage however since the concentration of various types of information makes possible some interesting juxtapositions and comparisons. It should also be pointed out that most of the sources consulted cover only a certain number of parishes and leave many regions blank. Overall provincial literacy levels which were aggregates of widely varying local rates can therefore only be estimated very roughly for the period before 1861. Again, this is not as serious a drawback as it at first appears. It is precisely local literacy levels and their fluctuations which are of greatest interest in examining the relations between literacy and other social phenomena.

II

Parish Registers

In many respects, the best source for literacy studies is the parish register. It contains official records of marriages with, in principle, the signatures of all brides and grooms able to write their names. The proportion of each sex signing is a good indicator of the parish's general level of literacy and has the virtues of being direct — the individual gives proof of his literacy, not simply testimony — and standard, allowing comparisons among widely differing times and places.[9] Almost every inhabitant of a parish eventually appears in these registers except those who never marry, a very small proportion in early French-Canada. Two factors prevent marriage signature rates from reflecting with perfect fidelity the literacy of a given population. First, widows and widowers remarrying are counted more than once, although it seems unlikely that this would seriously falsify the signature rates.[10] Secondly, marriage registers are age-selective since most people marry between the ages of twenty and thirty. Signature rates therefore correspond more closely to the literacy of a particular cohort, roughly the one that received its basic education about 15 years previously, than to the population as a whole. Another problem of course is the uncertainty as to just what the ability to sign one's name reflects in terms of the skills of reading and writing.

[9] R.S. Schofield, "The Measurement of Literacy in Pre-Industrial England," in Jack Goody, ed., *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1968), p. 319.

[10] Since adult mortality was generally lower in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Quebec than in contemporary Europe, widowhood and remarriage were relatively infrequent. My own research on the demography of Sorel indicates that only 10.4% of grooms and 7.4% of brides marrying between 1740 and 1839 had been married previously.

This is a question that will be taken up later in this essay. For the moment, it should be noted that a number of critical evaluations by British and European historians have shown that marriage signature rates are a reliable index of basic literacy.[11]

French Canada has probably the best and most complete set of parish registers of any historical population in the world. Unlike English registers which carry signatures only after 1754, these are, in most cases, useful for literacy studies from the seventeenth century.[12] Because of French-Canada's religious homogeneity the registers also provide exceptionally complete coverage of the province's entire population before 1760 and of its major ethnic component thereafter. The very richness of the source, the dispersed locations of the original registers and the practical difficulties of gaining access to them however make it impossible for a single researcher to obtain more than a small sample of signature rates within a reasonable period of time.

Table 1: RATES OF SIGNATURE FROM MARRIAGE ACTS

Period	*Marriages*	*Men signing*	*Women signing*
		Rivière-du-Loup	
1745-54	37	8.1%	10.8%
1795-99	110	13.6%	10.0%
1840-44	122*	28.7%	25.4%
1845-49	137	32.8%	23.4%
1850-54	107	30.8%	32.7%
1895-99	125	72.8%	74.4%
		Three Rivers	
1745-54	55	49.1%	54.5%
1795-99	57	17.5%	15.8%
1840-44	220	28.2%	20.1%
1850-54	268	33.9%	28.7%
		St-Ours	
1750-60	41*	7.3%	4.9%
1795-99	74	8.1%	5.4%
1840-44	151	9.3%	9.3%
1850-54	130*	18.5%	14.6%
		Boucherville	
1745-55	106	11.3%	16.0%
1785-89	79*	13.9%	16.5%

*Two mutilated acts in Rivière-du-Loup, 1840-44 not counted; two in St. Ours, 1750-60; one in St. Ours, 1850-54; four in Boucherville, 1785-89.

[11] SCHOFIELD, *op. cit.*, pp. 311-25; François FURET and Wladimir SACHS, "La croissance de l'alphabétisation en France (XVIII^e-XIX^e siècle)," *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations*, 29^e année (May-June, 1974): 714-37; Carlo M. CIPOLLA, *Literacy and Development in the West* (London, 1969), p. 78.

[12] Civil legislation required that brides and grooms sign marriage acts and that priests specify those unable to do so from 1667 (Gérard BOUCHARD and André LAROSE, "La réglementation du contenu des actes de baptême, mariage, sépulture, au Québec, des origines à nos jours," *RHAF*, XXX (June, 1976): 81). However, not all *curés* followed this prescription faithfully and only 60% of marriage acts for the last two decades of the seventeenth century contain indications of literacy (Raymond ROY and Hubert CHARBONNEAU, "Le contenu des registres paroissiaux canadiens du XVII^e siècle, *ibid.*, p. 88).

Although the samples presented in Table 1 are too small to allow confident generalizing, they do seem to justify some general remarks. First of all, the signature rates are, in all cases, quite low. Secondly, there seems to be a tendency for literacy to improve throughout the periods each parish was observed. Instead of a dramatic regression between the last generation of the French regime and the first generation born under English rule, there seems to have been a slight improvement. The glaring exception of course is Three Rivers, a parish with special circumstances which will be examined below. Finally, brides signed more frequently than grooms in three of four parishes before 1760 and in late eighteenth-century Boucherville and late nineteenth-century Rivière-du-Loup. This is surprising in view of the notion, accepted in most parts of the world, that "...illiteracy was always and everywhere more wide-spread among women than among men."[13]

St-Ours is a fairly rich agricultural parish in the Richelieu valley but its very low literacy rates reflect the meagreness of its educational facilities until the middle of the nineteenth century. Its first school was founded in 1807. At most, one teacher taught here until about 1830 when government funds became available. Still, in the 1830s when elementary schools multiplied in Lower Canada, the parish had only two schools, both in the village, leaving the rural majority of the population completely unprovided for. However, the local seigneur and *curé* had still managed to raise an important subscription in St-Ours for the support of the new seminary at St-Hyacinthe.[14]

Closer to Montreal, the parish of Boucherville enjoyed a higher rate of literacy, in the eighteenth century at least. A small boys' school was established here in the late seventeenth century and, from the beginning of the following century, the Sœurs de la Congrégation de Nôtre-Dame maintained a girls' school. This last institution was permanent and seems to have given the girls of the parish a better education than their brothers received.[15]

The people of Rivière-du-Loup (now called Louiseville) took a greater interest in elementary education, at least in the nineteenth century. The first school was founded by the local priest in 1806. Six more were established in the various rural sections of the parish in the 1820s, two of these under the auspices of the Royal Institution. Two other schools were built in 1834.[16] The result in 1840-44 was a signature rate among people educated mainly in the late 1820s that surpasses the rates found in St-Ours and Three Rivers.

[13] CIPOLLA, *op. cit.*, p. 56. Amédée Gosselin claims that males were more literate than females everywhere in New France (GOSSELIN, *op. cit.*, p. 148).

[14] [Azarie COUILLARD-DESPRÉ], *Histoire de la seigneurie de St-Ours*. 2 Vols. (Montreal, 1915-1917), Vol. 2, pp. 61-71, 202-04.

[15] [Louis LALANDE], *Une vieille seigneurie: Boucherville: chroniques, portraits et souvenirs* (Montreal, 1890), pp. 155-58, 163-64.

[16] Germain LESAGE, *Histoire de Louiseville 1664-1960* (Louiseville, 1965), pp. 139, 158-59.

In Three Rivers, literacy plummeted between 1745-54 and 1795-99 quite in accordance with the pattern suggested by abbé Groulx. However, several factors seem to have contributed to this fall apart from any supposed disruption of the educational system. For one thing, the marriages celebrated during the earlier period involved a disproportionate number of military officers and other individuals of high social standing, many of them born, and presumably educated, in France. If the conquest affected literacy rates here, it was indirectly through the partial replacement of a French and Catholic elite with a British Protestant (and Jewish) one whose marriages were not recorded in the registers under examination. Perhaps the most important factor however had nothing to do with the change in imperial allegiance. From the late seventeenth century, Three Rivers experienced a relative economic decline so that by the beginning of the nineteenth century it was a very modest regional commercial centre only marginally more important than the surrounding villages. Since literacy is generally much higher in cities than in the country, the fall in Three Rivers' signature rates can be seen partly as a result of the town's decline from urban to semi-rural status.

III

Petitions

The Public Archives of Canada possess a large number of petitions signed by the men of various Lower Canadian communities in the first half of the nineteenth century. They include addresses of congratulations to governors, requests for road grants, protests against alterations of judicial districts and, most importantly, addresses of loyalty from the time of the 1837-38 rebellion. Like parish registers, these petitions give direct evidence as to the literacy of the individuals who attached their names (this cumbersome phrase will be used to refer to men who signed their own names, used a cross or allowed another person to write their names; to avoid confusion, the words "sign" and "signature" will be used only in their narrowest sense). They have the additional advantage of providing information on adults of all ages and not just a small cohort. Moreover, they are much easier to use than parish registers and they make it possible to establish signature rates for relatively large numbers of people throughout the province within the limits of a modest research project. However, petitions as a source for literacy studies also have several negative characteristics which make them perhaps the least satisfactory of the four sources examined in this paper. The fact that only men signed petitions means that signature rates derived from them cover only half the adult population at best. The evidence for and against literacy is not always unambiguous since many names were neither signed nor accompanied by a cross, but rather written in a uniform hand. Presumably these indicate an inability to sign but they could also be the result of sloppiness and haste on the part of the person administering the petition.

The most important weakness of the source is connected to the fact that not all the men in a particular community, and in most cases

less than half, attached their names to it. There may well have been a process of selection based on political convictions, interest in public affairs or residence in the parish centre that could favour groups with higher literacy, thereby artificially inflating the signature rate. This seems to be the unintended implication of the claim that "...all the wealth and respectability of the parish have signed..." found in a covering letter accompanying one petition.[17] Because of these limitations, great caution should be used in accepting petition signature rates as indicators of literacy. They are however, not without value, especially if they are checked with information from other sources. In most cases it can be assumed that a disproportionately large number of literates joined their names to a petition and therefore the rate at least defines a maximum limit to the adult male literacy. Furthermore, this maximum will likely correspond fairly closely to the actual percentage of men able to sign their names in populations with low levels of literacy, especially when a substantial portion of the population is covered by the petition. For example, in a community where 10% of the men could sign their names, the signature rate on a petition would be about 13% if three-quarters of the adult males, including all the literates attached their names to it. Under the same conditions, a petition in a community where 75% of the men could sign would give a signature rate of 100%. This is taking possible distortions to their logical extreme but, in actual practice, it appears that petitions were not so completely literacy-selective. Only two of the parishes whose marriage registers were examined were also covered by petitions for comparable periods. A petition from Rivière-du-Loup in 1840 contains 192 names, 35% of them signatures, while 28.7% of the men marrying between 1840 and 1844 signed the register. In St-Ours, only 9% of the names on an 1837 petition were signatures, and 9.3% of the men signed the register from 1840 to 1844. In both parishes, about 38% of the adult male population were named in the petitions. Although the comparisons are inexact because of the differences in time and age structure of the universes covered by the two sources, they do lend some respectability to petitions as a source for literacy.

Table 2: SIGNATURE RATES FROM PETITIONS

Place	*Date*	*Approx. coverage*	*Names*	*Signatures*
Ste-Anne-de-la-Pérade	1820	100%	473	23%
Quebec	1812	63%	1009	76%
Quebec	1815	82%	1431	76%

Of the great number of pre-rebellion petitions found in the Public Archives collections, only the three shown in Table 2 contain the names of a majority of adult males in the community concerned. The one from Ste-Anne is a request that a bridge be built while the first one from Quebec is an address of congratulations to Governor Prevost on some early

[17] Loyal address of St-Ours, 31 Dec., 1837. Public Archives of Canada (hereafter, PAC), RG4, B37, Vol. 3.

victories in the War of 1812 and the other is an address of farewell to the same governor. The signature rates show that Quebec City had a very high level of male literacy even in the early nineteenth century when literacy seems to have been extremely low in rural Lower Canada.[18]

Much more interesting is a massive petition submitted in 1840 by the residents of the district of Three Rivers protesting the proposed dimenberment of their judicial district.[19] Because of the petition's unusual form, it can be analysed in terms of occupation, residence and ethnicity. Almost all the 3065 names are accompanied by an occupational label and they are organized into sections corresponding to the parishes of Yamachiche, Ste-Anne-de-la-Pérade, Batiscan, Champlain, Gentilly, Bécancour, St-Léon, Rivière-du-Loup and Three Rivers with its immediate vicinity (probably the parishes of Three Rivers, Pointe-du-Lac and Cap-de-la-Madeleine). One parish is unidentifiable. This arrangement makes it possible to contrast rural and urban literacy, although very imperfectly since Three Rivers was quite a small town and its urban nature was, in any case, diluted by the inclusion of large areas of surrounding countryside. Furthermore, the town's population included a substantial anglophone minority whose members can easily be distinguished by their names and the language in which their profession is noted.

Table 3: THREE RIVERS AND VICINITY PETITION, 1840

Occupational group	*Francophones*		*Anglophones*	
	Names	*Signatures* %	*Names*	*Signatures* %
professionals	20	100.0	1	100.0
merchants	19	78.9	15	93.3
artisans	87	16.1	10	90.0
farmers	464	8.2	20	20.0
labourers	106	2.8	6	50.0
miscellaneous	58	51.7	8	100.0
unspecified	74	70.3	60	96.7
total	828	20.8	120	80.8

(unidentifiable: 28 names, 67.9% signatures)

Table 3 shows that the English in Three Rivers were far more literate than the French, with a signature rate almost four times greater. The two linguistic groups were equal in the "professional" category but the anglophones in each of the remaining occupations showed a greater ability to sign than the francophones. The contrast is particularly marked in the artisan and labourer groups, although the small number of English whose vocations could be indentified permits no certain conclusions. In the district as a whole, one finds, not surprisingly, that professionals (doctors, lawyers, notaries, clergymen) and merchants are almost all able to sign (see Table 4). Much further down the scale come artisans followed by farmers (mostly labelled *propriétaire* or *cultivateur* here)

[18] PAC, RG1, E16, Vol. 2-1.
[19] *Ibid.*, Vol. 3-3, no. 46.

and then labourers (*journalier*), the latter with a very low level of literacy. This occupational hierarchy is unremarkable but, in the light of studies conducted elsewhere, one might have expected a greater gap between farmers and artisans.[20] The relatively low signature rate of the district's artisans can best be explained by the fact that these were not industrial producers like weavers oriented towards an urban market. Instead, they were mostly village blacksmiths, carpenters and masons catering to the needs of their rural neighbours and, in many cases, cultivating some land in addition to exercising their trade part-time.[21] This was not the position of the very literate English-speaking artisans who were urban, specialized craftsmen.

Table 4: DISTRICT OF THREE RIVERS PETITION, 1840

Occupational group	*Names*	*Proportion*	*Signatures*
		%	%
	Rural Parishes		
professionals	42	2.0	97.6
merchants	29	1.4	86.2
artisans	97	4.6	33.0
farmers	1,778	85.1	18.8
labourers	33	1.6	6.1
miscellaneous	47	2.2	51.1
unspecified	63	3.0	44.4
total	2,089	99.9	23.3
	Three Rivers and Vicinity		
professionals	21	2.1	100.0
merchants	34	3.5	85.3
artisans	97	9.9	23.7
farmers	484	49.6	8.7
labourers	112	11.5	5.4
miscellaneous	66	6.8	57.6
unspecified	162	16.6	79.6
total	976	100.0	29.5

Three Rivers and its environs had a higher signature rate than the district's rural parishes but this is attributable solely to the ethnic and occupational structure of the town's population. The francophones of Three Rivers were in fact less literate than the residents of the countryside. Moreover, the rural merchants, artisans, farmers and labourers had higher signature rates than their "urban" counterparts. However, a greater proportion of Three Rivers' population belonged to the high-literacy occupational groups. More importantly, more townsmen were part of the "miscellaneous" and "unspecified" categories and these had higher signature rates than their rural equivalents because of differences in the composition of the groups. The "miscellaneous" group includes

[20] See, for example, Emmanuel LEROY LADURIE, *Les paysans de Languedoc.* 2 vols. (Paris, 1966), Vol. 2, pp. 340-47.

[21] Cf. Arcadius KAHAN, "Determinants of the Incidence of Literacy in Rural Nineteenth-Century Russia," in C.A. ANDERSON and M.J. BOWMAN eds., *Education and Economic Development* (London, 1966), pp, 298-302.

a variety of occupations, notably a number of boatmen and militia officers in the country, but mostly students and "gentlemen" in the town. Many men were in the "unspecified" category because they claimed no profession and may well have been rentiers. The size of the miscellaneous and unspecified occupational groups in Three Rivers probably reflects the greater number of wealthy and socially eminent people who lived there. This was still a very modest town however and the fact that farmers in its immediate neighbourhood were less literate than those in the more remote parishes of the district shows that Three Rivers exerted no influence beyond its boundaries in the field of education.

After the outbreak of rebellion in December 1837, a large number of assemblies were convened at the suggestion of the government. "Loyal addresses" were drawn up at these local meetings expressing the people's attachment to the empire and the constitution and they were signed by large numbers of men. The coverage within the 41 parishes and counties whose addresses have been preserved in Ottawa varies greatly: as many as 93% of the men in one community and as few as 11% of the men in another joined their names to the list. These petitions are of course much more political than the ones considered above and it seems likely that committed *Patriotes* would have refused to sign unless they wished to disguise their loyalties. If the literacy of revolutionaries was significantly different from the average, then the signatures rates derived from these petitions would be falsified somewhat.

Table 5: Loyal Addresses and Petitions, 1837-40[22]

Location	*Approx. coverage*	*Names*	*Signatures*
	%		%
L'Assomption	93	892	13
St-Vincent-de-Paul	87	435	5
Les Écureuils	87	104	22
Broughton	82	47	62
Gentilly	74	391	15
Rivière-des-Prairies	69	143	4
Ste-Thérèse-de-Blainville	65	504	10
Ste-Rosalie	64	193	18
St-Charles	62	225	11
St-Laurent (Montreal)	57	359	10
Three Rivers & vicinity	57	976	27
Longue-Pointe	52	116	16
St-Luc	50	137	17
Ste-Rose	49	283	9
Boucherville	46	327	23
Champlain	45	147	30

[22] PAC RG1, E16, Vol. 1-1, Vol. 3-3; PAC, RG4, B37, Vols. 2 and 3; PAC, MG24, A27, Vol. 1. The percentages in the column marked "approx. coverage" are simply the number of names on a petition expressed as a proportion of the adult male population of the appropriate locality. For each community this was estimated by first interpolating the total population from the census figures of 1831 and 1844 (making allowance in a few cases for altered boundaries) and then dividing by four to find the approximate proportion of males aged about 17 or 18 and above.

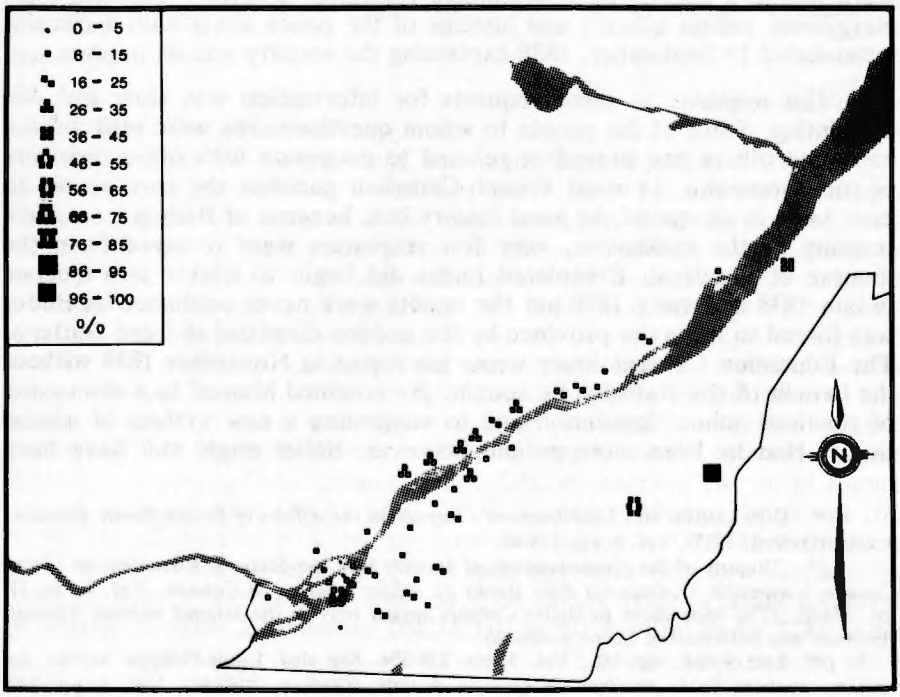
Location	*Approx. coverage*	*Names*	*Signatures*
Baie-du-Febvre	44	334	12
Batiscan	40	88	20
Bécancour	40	312	10
Montmorency County	39	594	20
Cap Santé	39	324	23
St-Ours	38	310	9
Riv-du-Loup (St-Maurice)	38	296	35
St-Césaire	38	339	14
St-Hyacinthe	36	387	15
Ste-Anne-de-la-Pérade	35	219	34
St-Augustin	34	142	8
Nicolet & St-Grégoire	32	488	29
Yamachiche	30	262	32
Yamaska	29	208	13
Kamouraska & St-André	28	377	37
St-David	27	136	24
St-Jean-Baptiste	26	136	24
Saguenay County	26	711	10
Frampton	26	83	100
Montreal (francophones)	26	1281	60
St-Édouard	26	224	4
St-Ambroise	25	132	8
Rigaud	25	163	12
Pointe-aux-Trembles (Mont)	25	66	6
St-Jean (francophones)	24	143	15
St-Henry, St-Anselme, St-Joseph & Pointe-Lévy	23	604	22
Quebec & vicinity	22	1783	44
Laprairie	22	214	32
St-Philippe	22	136	18
St-Léon	18	101	26
St-Thomas	13	107	49
St-Lin	13	65	9
seigneurie Beauharnois	13	425	44
St-Roch	11	75	8

Table 5 displays local signature rates from the loyal addresses together with those found in the parishes where the Three Rivers district petition of 1840 circulated. Not all the rates are equally worthy of confidence. Parishes appear in order according to the proportion of adult males covered by the petition and the value of the signature rates of those with less than 25% coverage is quite dubious. Perhaps the most striking feature of the list is the extremely low literacy of some of the parishes. Cities and places with English majorities (Broughton and Frampton) or a substantial English element (Beauharnois) have the highest rates. Signature rates in most rural French-Canadian areas range between 5 and 35 per cent. The overall average for the 16,543 names in all the petitions is 25.2%. If Montreal and Quebec are excluded, the rural signature rate is 19.5%. The 12,890 men included in the petitions with 25% coverage or better signed at a rate of 22.3%, while rural areas with this coverage had an 18.1% rate. While these are low levels of literacy, there seems to have been a considerable improvement since 1827 when only 10.3% of the 87,000 names on a massive province-wide petition were signed.[23]

[23] GROULX, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 50.

To give some idea of the geographical distribution of literacy, the signature rates in Table 5 were plotted on a map (see Figure 1). It is clear that the regional coverage of the petitions is uneven since the Eastern Townships are almost untouched and the western part of the province has a higher concentration of dots than does the east. Still, two conclusions seem justified. First, although Quebec and Montreal enjoyed very high levels of literacy (by Lower Canadian standards), they exerted no metropolitan influence in this regard since parishes on their very doorsteps had among the lowest signature rates in the province. In Pointe-aux-Trembles and Rivière-des-Prairies, for example, both on the island of Montreal, only 6% and 4% respectively of the men signed loyal addresses. Second, the part of Lower Canada from Lac St-Pierre towards the east was more literate than the western portion of the province. Of course, it was this same western section that was most strongly affected by the rebellions and it may be that political selectivity led to an underestimation of actual literacy. However, there is no reason to believe that, aside from a few leaders, rebels were more likely than others to be able to sign their names. In any case, regional patterns of school attendance as well as the evidence from other literacy sources (see below) seem to corroborate the notion that western Lower Canada was more ignorant than the eastern part of the province.

FIGURE 1. PETITION SIGNATURE RATES, 1837-40.



IV

The Buller Commission

Whatever results it may have had for contemporaries, the rebellion of 1837-38 was one of those events which had the fortunate side effect of producing a rich store of documentary information for future historians. It provoked a flood of loyal addresses but it also brought Lord Durham to the country charged with the tasks of governing Canada and examining the causes of political disaffection. Perhaps Durham assumed that only ignorance could be at the root of opposition to British rule as he showed particular interest in the subject of elementary education in Lower Canada. In July 1838, he appointed Arthur Buller as special Education Commissioner to look into the past organization and financing of schooling and to devise a new system for "the diffusion of knowledge, religion and virtue."[24] Buller however decided to widen the scope of the enquiry to include adult and child literacy. He apparently envisioned a statistical study similar to those undertaken by British parliamentary commissions and scientific societies in the 1830s and 1840s. To carry out his plan, Buller sent to every parish and township in Lower Canada a six-page collection of blank printed tables along with a request for precise local information on schools, teachers, financing, subjects taught, attendance, population structure and literacy. Population and literacy data were to be given for each school district within a parish and a separate form was provided for areas not yet organized into school districts.[25] The forms were sent to a committee of prominent residents, generally including local clergymen, militia officers and justices of the peace along with a circular letter dated 13 September, 1838 explaining the enquiry and its importance.

The response to these requests for information was slow and disappointing. Some of the people to whom questionnaires were sent did not exist and others had moved or refused to cooperate with other members of the committee. In most French-Canadian parishes the *curé* seems to have been in charge of the local inquiry but, because of Bishop Lartigue's hostility to the endeavour, very few responses were received from the diocese of Montreal. Completed forms did begin to trickle into Quebec in late 1838 and early 1839 but the results were never published as Buller was forced to leave the province by the sudden dismissal of Lord Durham. The Education Commissioner wrote his report in November 1838 without the benefit of the statistics he sought. He confined himself to a discussion of previous school legislation and to suggesting a new system of education.[26] Had he been more patient however, Buller might still have been

[24] C.P. Lucas, ed., *Lord Durham's Report on the Affairs of British North America*. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1912), Vol. 3, pp. 238-40.

[25] "Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry into the State of Education in Lower Canada," appendix D, *Imperial Blue Books on affairs relating to Canada*, Vol. X, pt. II, pp. 174-82. (The appendices to Buller's report appear only in the original version although the body was published in Lucas's edition).

[26] Lucas, ed., op. cit., Vol. 3, pp. 238-304. See also, Louis-Philippe Audet, *Le système scolaire de la province de Québec*. 6 vols. (Quebec, 1950-56), Vol. 6, pp. 249-331.

discouraged by the 70 forms that were eventually completed.[27] The geographical coverage of the returns was uneven, many of them were incompletely or carelessly filled in and, partly because of an oversight in the design of the questionnaires, they gave figures that are difficult to interpret.

The numbers contained in the forms submitted to the Education Commission are very raw data which must be checked and refined before they are useable. Some were based on personal enumerations of the entire population while others are simply educated guesses but most seem to have been the precise estimates of people in a position to know all the residents of a particular community. Questions relating to literacy asked the number of boys, girls, men and women "who can read and write sufficiently well for all ordinary purposes" and the numbers "who can read but cannot write." These criteria are slightly ambiguous and the results were no doubt influenced by the respondents' standards. Unlike the sources mentioned above which use signatures, the Buller data contain no "test" of literacy. However, they do have the advantage of providing figures relating to actual literacy skills and not just to the ability to sign, a skill whose implications are not completely certain. In many respects, the Buller inquiry resembles a modern census except that information on literacy comes not from enumerated individuals, but from a knowledgeable observer whose report is presumably more consistent, more objective and less subject to the wishful thinking that tends to flaw the literacy rates of censuses. On the other hand, the Education Commission returns give only total numbers for school districts whereas censuses are personal, so that literacy can be related to other individual characteristics.

Buller asked his informants to specify for each school district the total population broken down by sex, language and religion. He also asked for the total number of children between the ages of five and fifteen similarly broken down. There were blanks for the number of males and females able to read and write and able to read for the five to fifteen and over fifteen age categories. School attendance figures for April 1836 (the last month for which government educational grants were available) and for the present were requested but only the former is of interest since most schools had shut down by 1838. The population figures for the five to fifteen years class provide the denominators for the simple calculation of literacy and school attendance rates. Adult literacy rates cannot be so easily determined however since Buller neglected to ask what proportion of the population was over fifteen. As a first step in analysis then, the male and female population over fifteen was estimated for each community. These are generally close to 50% of the total but there is great local variation resulting from different levels of fertility and migration. Census

[27] Returns have been preserved in the Lower Canada Education collection of the Public Archives of Canada (PAC, RG4, B30, Vols. 108-115). They contain a wealth of information on rural schools (including many which did not receive government aid and did not appear in official records), teachers and pupils. Only the literacy statistics were used for the present study and historians of education might find a great deal of interest in the remaining material.

figures were used to make this estimate and, at the same time, evaluate the quality of the statistics given in each return.

A separate sheet was drawn up for each parish and township and on it were recorded the total figures given in the Buller commission returns for all the sub-sections of the community. The total populations as listed in the 1831 and 1844 censuses were also entered as well as certain figures on population structure from the latter. The number of males and females over fifteen was then estimated on the assumption that the proportion in this age group was about the same in the winter of 1838-39 as it was five and a half years later when the next census was taken. The total number of males listed in the Buller returns was simply multiplied by the number of males over fifteen shown for the same community in the 1844 census divided by the total male population in the same census. The adult female population was estimated in the same way. There were then figures for the male and female population over fifteen and for the number of boys and girls between five and fifteen (the latter figures come directly from the Buller returns). Before calculating literacy rates however it was necessary to check the statistics for plausibility.

First the proportion of children (boys and girls together) five to fifteen years old in the total population of each community according to the Buller returns was calculated. Since the proportion for Lower Canada as a whole was 27% in 1844, percentages lower than 18 or higher than 36 were considered unacceptable (these cut-off points are admittedly arbitrary). Of the 55 communities that were not rejected, 29 had proportions close to the provincial average (24% to 30%).[28] To check both the data presented in the Buller returns and the estimates of adult population, the number of children under five years was calculated by subtracting the adults and the five to fifteen-year-olds from the total population of each parish as given in the Buller returns. According to the 1844 census, 19.24% of the Lower Canadian population fell into this age class. Proportions below 11% and above 28% were therefore rejected. This left 55 communities and again about half, 27 in this case, were near the average (between 16.5% and 22%).[29] These checks on population structure resulted in the rejection of the statistics of nine of the 70 returns submitted to the Education Commission. Another six were discarded for more glaring faults. One, for example, claimed 104 women able to read but gave 95 as its total female population.

The population figures contained in the 55 Buller returns that passed this first test seem to constitute a reasonably accurate census. Since the Buller, inquiry occurred about halfway between the censuses of 1831 and 1844, the total population figures should generally fall between the two census figures, ideally slightly less than halfway between them. In fact, 40 of the 55 returns gave population figures between the two census

[28] Five parishes and townships had proportions between 18% and 24%, 19 were between 30% and 36% and the proportions of two could not be determined.

[29] Sixteen localities were between 11% and 16.4%, 10 were between 22% and 28% and two could not be determined.

populations. Twelve communities had populations higher than that given in the 1844 census or lower than that of the 1831 census. Unlike distortions of population structure, deficiencies in enumeration would not necessarily falsify literacy rates and the statistics for these twelve communities were therefore not rejected at this point. Census data could not be obtained for three communities.

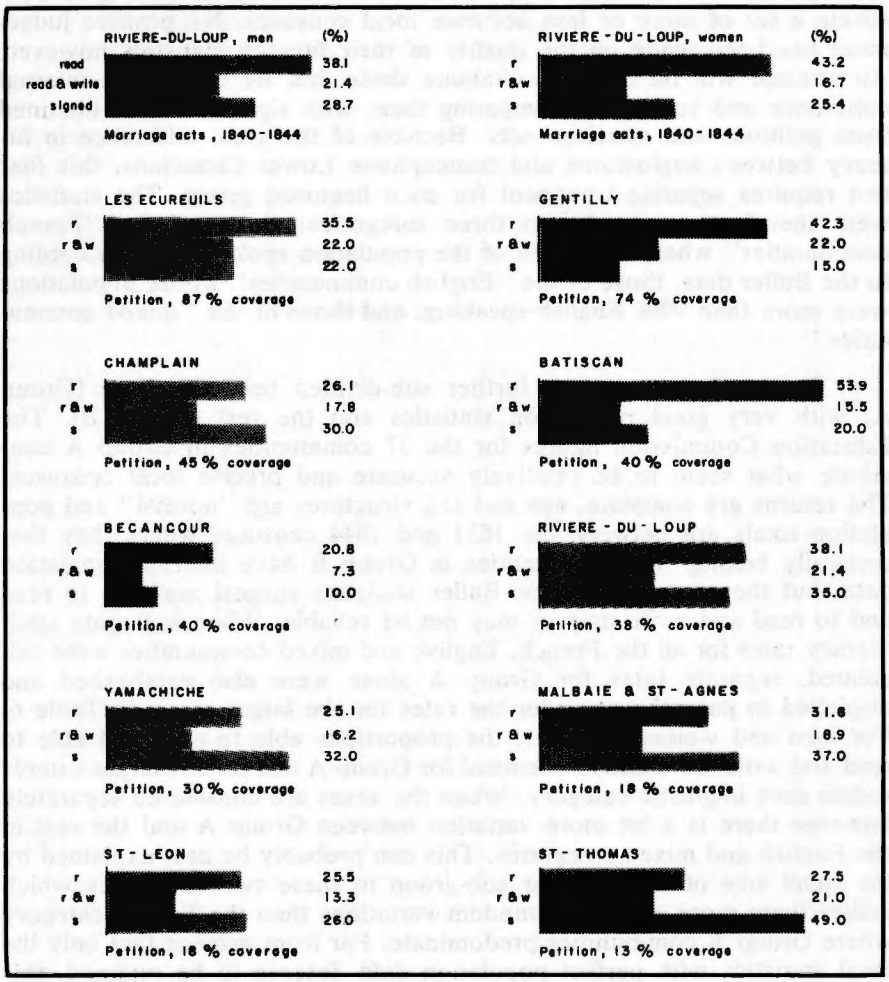
A close examination of the population and age structures of the communities covered by the Education Commissioner's inquiry shows then that 15 of them deserve to be discarded while the remaining 55 constitute a set of more or less accurate local censuses. No positive judgement has been made on the quality of their literacy statistics however. An attempt will be made to evaluate these first by testing for internal coherence and second by comparing them with signature rates obtained from petitions and marriage acts. Because of the great difference in literacy between anglophone and francophone Lower Canadians, this first test requires separate treatment for each linguistic group. The statistics were therefore arranged into three categories: those of the "French communities" where over 90% of the population spoke French according to the Buller data, those of the "English communities" whose populations were more than 90% English-speaking, and those of the "mixed communities."

The local figures were further sub-divided between those (Group A) with very good population statistics and the rest (Group B). The Education Commission figures for the 37 communities in Group A constitute what seem to be relatively accurate and precise local censuses. The returns are complete, age and sex structures are "normal" and population totals are between the 1831 and 1844 censuses where they theoretically belong. The 18 localities in Group B have inferior population data, but the proportions their Buller statistics suggest are able to read and to read and write may or may not be reliable. When aggregate adult literacy rates for all the French, English and mixed communities were calculated, separate rates for Group A alone were also established and displayed in parentheses under the rates for the larger group in Table 6. For men and women together, the proportions able to read and able to read and write were almost identical for Group A and for the larger sample within each linguistic category. When the sexes are considered separately however there is a bit more variation between Group A and the rest in the English and mixed categories. This can probably be best explained by the small size of the superior sub-group in these two categories which makes them more subject to random variations than the French category where Group A communities predominate. Far from proving that only the local statistics with perfect population data deserve to be retained, this test seems to indicate that literacy rates derived from the larger group are substantially the same as and, in the case of the English and mixed categories where they involve a far bigger and statistically more valid sample, probably better than those using Group A only.

Another way of testing the literacy statistics of the Education Commission is to compare local figures with signature rates in the few

cases where they overlap with contemporary petition and parish register data. Such comparisons are also interesting for the light they throw on the crucial problem of the relationship between signatures and literacy skills. It may be logically fallacious to use a single test both to verify one set of data and, at the same time, define the meaning of another but all that is sought here is tentative conclusions, not definitive demonstrations.

FIGURE 2. LITERACY AND SIGNATURE RATES.



For the past decade, students of pre-modern education have generally accepted Roger Schofield's claim that the ability to sign one's name corresponds to a level of achievement mid-way between the ability to read and the ability to write but closer to the ability to read fluently.[30] Recently

[30] SCHOFIELD, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

François Furet and Wladimir Sachs have used nineteenth-century French evidence to suggest that signatures rates correspond quite closely to the proportion of a population able to read and write; in other words, signatures indicate full literacy.[31] The graphs in Figure 2 show the signature rates and proportions able to read and write and to read[32] in the twelve cases where signature statistics for the period 1837-40 could be found for communities included in the Buller sample. The results are inconclusive but they seem to support Furet's and Sach's position. Not surprisingly, the signature rates from Yamachiche, Malbaie and St-Agnès, St-Léon and St-Thomas, where less than one-third of the adult male population was covered by a petition, are higher than both the proportion of men able to read and write and those able to read at least. This simply underlines the limitations of petitions as a literacy source mentioned earlier and confirms what was already suspected to be the bias of low-coverage petitions. In five of the remaining eight parishes, the signature rate is closer to the proportion able to read and write than to that able to read. The signature rate for Les Écureuils where the petition coverage was best corresponds exactly with the proportion of men able to read and write. Most significant however is the evidence from the Rivière-du-Loup marriage acts. Although the group of people married between 1840 and 1844 is by no means equivalent to the population aged over fifteen in 1838-39, women are included and the coverage is more complete than it is for petitions. More important than the fact that the signature rates of both sexes are closer to the proportion able to read and write is the fact that the difference in signature rates between the sexes parallels similar differences in proportions able to read and write but not proportions able to read. In relative terms, more women than men were able to read, more men than women were able to read and write and more men were able to sign their names. Once allowance is made for the signature inflation associated with low-coverage petitions, Figure 2 seems to confirm the value of the Buller literacy rates as well as suggesting that signature rates are closely related to the proportion of a population able to read and write.

When literacy data for all the parishes and townships are lumped together according to language, a striking contrast is evident between the two main linguistic components of Lower Canada's population (see Table 6). English-speaking men and women covered in this sample were about four and one-half times more literate (able to read and write) than francophones of the same sex. The English were also better able to read than the French but the gap was not so wide here, especially among women. The "mixed communities" were in some cases predominantly French, in others predominantly English but the majorities were not overwhelming. Their overall level of literacy was predictably about midway between those of the English and the French communities.

[31] FURET and SACHS, *op. cit.*

[32] The Buller returns give the number of people able to read but not write. These figures (able to read *only*) were simply added to the number able to read *and* write to find the number able to read *at least*.

It should not be assumed that these aggregate rates represent the "average" literacy among anglophone and francophone Lower Canadians in 1838-39. First of all, with the small and very dubiously urban exception of Three Rivers, the communities in this sample are all rural. Secondly, there is no way of knowing whether the communities which submitted returns to the Education Commission had representative literacies. Perhaps the trouble that clergymen and magistrates in these places took in laboriously completing Buller's forms reflects a particularly strong local interest in education. Certainly the geographical distribution of French-Canadian parishes included in this sample (see Figure 12) suggests that the Buller rates exaggerate rural francophone-literacy somewhat. A comparison with Figure 1 shows that the Montreal region, badly underrepresented in this sample, was the area with the lowest petition signature rates. These aggregate statistics probably give a more flattering image than warranted to rural anglophone literacy as well since the very literate populations of the American-settled townships in the southern part of the province (see below) received disproportionate coverage in the Buller sample.

Table 6: ADULT LITERACY, AGGREGATE RATES, 1838-39

	French communities	*English communities*	*Mixed communities*
Men			
number	15,485	3,015	2,741
	(13,327)	(911)	(838)
read & write	15.8%	71.3%	39.0%
	(15.3%)	(66.6%)	(46.8%)
read	30.2%	84.0%	55.9%
	(29.2%)	(77.7%)	(62.6%)
Women			
number	16,456	2,770	2,816
	(14,049)	(768)	(752)
read & write	14.1%	63.0%	34.7%
	(13.4%)	(65.6%)	(33.4%)
read	42.3%	83.0%	58.0%
	(41.9%)	(87.1%)	(54.0%)
Both sexes			
number	31,941	6,305*	5,557
	(27,376)	(1,679)	(1,590)
read & write	14.9%	68.5%	36.8%
	(14.3%)	(66.2%)	(40.4%)
read	36.5%	84.4%	56.9%
	(35.7%)	(82.0%)	(58.5%)

* includes Shefford (sexes not separated)
Rates in parentheses are for communities with highest quality statistics (Group A) only.

Lower Canada's overall literacy in 1838-39 can be very roughly estimated by giving weights to the literacies of the component parts of its population according to the relative size of their populations. To offset the regional bias of the Buller sample, the aggregate rates given in Table 6 were revised downward to give estimates of rural literacy. Buller's figures provide no information on urban literacy but the low rate of Three

Rivers does suggest that Montreal and Quebec were the only educationally urban places in Lower Canada. Sixty per cent is a reasonable estimate of the literacy of these two cities, although the relatively small number of people involved makes this figure less critical than the more firmly-based estimates of rural literacy. Combining these estimates with 1844 census data on the ethnic and rural-urban composition of Lower Canada's population produces the following revised adult literacy (reading and writing) rates:

rural francophones	12%
rural anglophones	60%
overall rural literacy	22%
urban literacy	60%
overall literacy	26%

The proportions of adults able to read for each language shown in Table 6 should also be adjusted downward in similar proportions. Thus 31% of rural French speakers and 75% of rural English speakers and perhaps 70% of the urban population could at least read. Combining these rates according to population proportions produces a figure suggesting that 43% of Lower Canadian adults were able to read. With Montreal and Quebec excluded the rate is about 40%.

Aggregate rates have only limited interest as they mask variations within each of the language categories. The graphs shown in Figures 3 to 8 give a clearer picture of the distribution of literacy rates in the linguistic groupings for each sex and for each literacy skill. Figure 3 shows that the linguistic hierarchy was surprisingly clear-cut. Except for one exceptionally ignorant township (Templeton), more than half the adult population in every English community was able to read and write. On the other hand, no French parish had more than one-quarter of its adults able to read and write. In fact, all the English communities except Templeton were more literate than all the mixed communities which were, in turn, more literate than all the French communities. Equally interesting is the fact that the English group contained a greater range of literacy levels than did the French even though it was made up of a relatively small number of communities. When the sexes are considered separately, the English women are dispersed even more widely, while English men are rather more concentrated in the higher levels. French men and women are both concentrated in the 0 to 25 percent range (see Figures 4 and 5). This reflects the greater stability and homogeneity of the francophone population of Lower Canada as contrasted with the diverse origins of the anglophone population.

FIGURE 3. ADULTS ABLE TO READ AND WRITE.

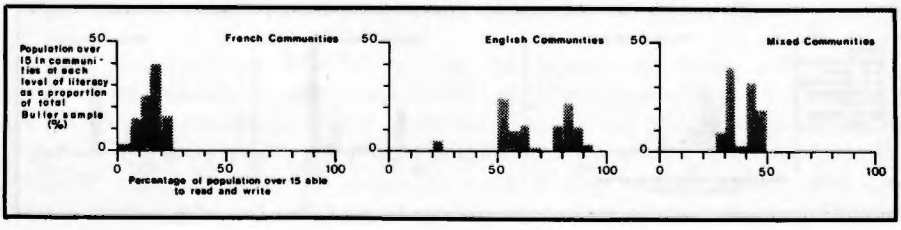


FIGURE 4. MEN ABLE TO READ AND WRITE.

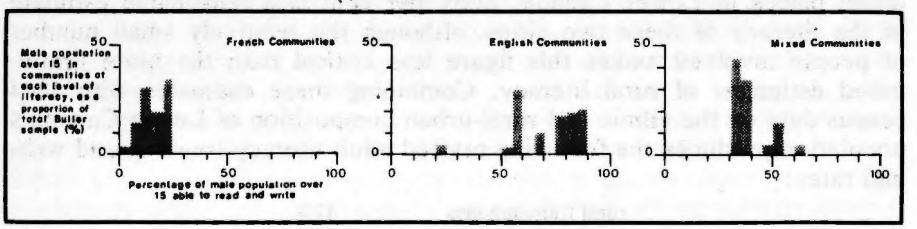


FIGURE 5. WOMEN ABLE TO READ AND WRITE.

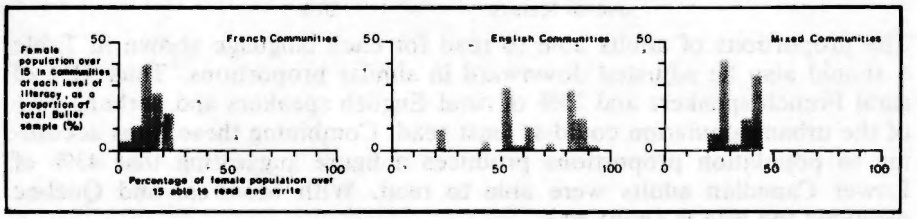


FIGURE 6. ADULTS ABLE TO READ.

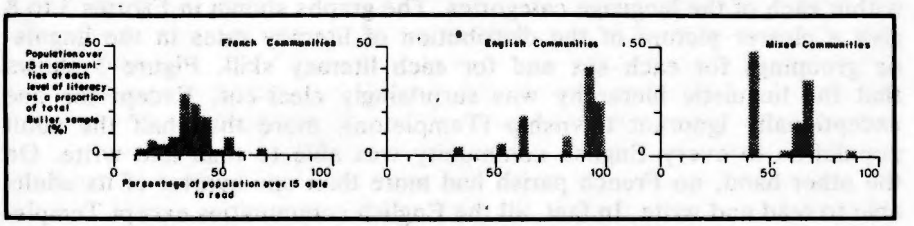


FIGURE 7. MEN ABLE TO READ.

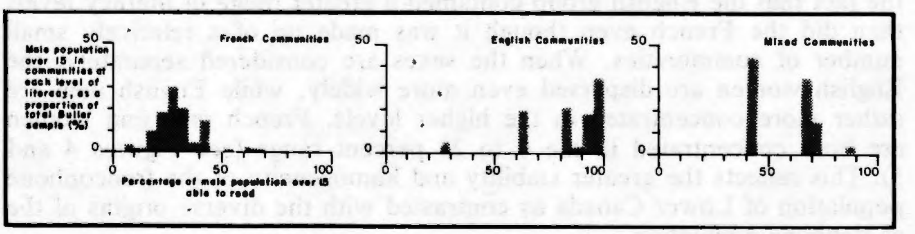
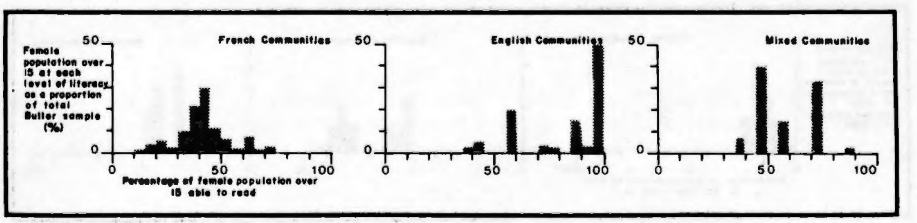


FIGURE 8. WOMEN ABLE TO READ.



In each of the linguistic groups, the overall literacy (ability to read and write) of men is about 12-13% higher than that of women. The range of literacies in both French and English communities is the same for each sex but the males tend to be more concentrated in the upper regions of each range. There are nine French parishes,[33] three English townships[34] and two mixed communities[35] where the women have higher rates than the men. These represent roughly similar proportions of the total number of communities in each language group covered by the Buller inquiry. As far as the late 1830s are concerned, there seems then to be no truth to the claim made by Arthur Buller among others that French-Canadian women were more literate than men.[36] Nevertheless, although French-speaking women were less literate than men and by about the same proportion that anglophone women were less literate than men, the gap between the literacies of the two sexes was much smaller than that found in most European countries.[37]

Perhaps the most important clue to explain the impression that French-Canadian females were better educated than males can be found in Lower Canadian patterns of semi-literacy. In the French communities, women able to read but not write outnumber those able to read as well as write by a proportion of two to one. When literates and semi-literates are added together one finds a much higher proportion of women than men able to read at least in the French sample (see Table 6). In the English and mixed communities the sexes are almost equal when semi-literates are included. In fact, over 50% of the English population covered by this sample lived in communities where virtually all the women could at least read (see Figure 8). Generally, semi-literacy is highest in groups where literacy is lowest and, as a result, the gaps between male and female and between English and French are narrower when the proportions able to read are considered instead of the proportions able to read and write. The exceptionally high rate of semi-literacy among French-Canadian women is nevertheless striking although its causes are for the time being obscure.

It is easier to measure the differences between English and French literacy levels than to explain them. Since there is no logical and direct connection between language and literacy, the roots of the dramatic difference in literacy must be looked for in some of the other factors which separated the English and French elements of Lower Canada's population, namely religion, national traditions, wealth and international migration. The communities considered here are rural (except for Three Rivers) and there is no reason to assume that the English ones would have had a different occupational structure from the French ones. The English-speaking sample was made up mainly of Protestants but the influence of religion can to some extent be isolated by considering the literacy of Catholic

[33] Yamachiche, Point-du-Lac, Ste-Anne-des-Plaines, St-Pierre-les-Becquets, Lotbinière, St-Joseph, St-Thomas, Cap-de-la-Madeleine and Ste-Croix.

[34] Granby, Brompton and Windsor.

[35] Orford and Ascot, and Vaudreuil.

[36] LUCAS, ed., *op. cit.*, Vol. 3, pp. 267-68.

[37] Cf. CIPOLLA, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

anglophones. Of all the English communities covered by the Buller inquiry, only one, Templeton, has a Catholic majority. Only 22.1% of the men and a similar proportion of women in this township were able to read and write. In each of the graphs in Figures 3 to 8, Templeton's literacy rates seem strangely out of place in the anglophone camp and more in line with the levels prevailing in the French parishes. The example of this one small community with a population of 385 of course hardly proves anything about the relationship between religion and literacy. In fact, the evidence from Frampton and Cranbourne, two anglophone Catholic communities whose statistics had to be rejected because of problems of population structure, suggests that literacy levels were much closer to those of the other English-speaking communities.

A more precise way of evaluating the importance of the religions factor is to take the analysis a step further and examine the literacy of Catholic and Protestant school districts. The returns submitted to the Education Commission from Rawdon, Templeton and Buckingham contain figures for territorial sub-divisions, some of which are predominantly Catholic and some predominantly Protestant. The aggregate population of the Catholic districts is 1410 and of the Protestant districts 1705. Table 7 shows the literacy rates of all the Catholic districts and all the Protestant districts of these three townships. For both sexes the Protestants had substantially higher levels of literacy even though they lived in the same townships and presumably shared the same environment, economy and educational facilities as the Catholics. Religion certainly seems to be an important factor connected with literacy then, although it could be that, because almost all the English-speaking Catholics were Irish immigrants, these apparently religious differences in literacy are, at bottom, national.

Table 7: RELIGIOUSLY MIXED COMMUNITIES

	Districts with Catholic majorities	*Districts with Protestant majorities*
	%	%
Men able to read & write[38]	35.3	49.9
Men able to read	46.9	64.9
Women able to read & write	27.9	35.1
Women able to read	43.2	54.7
Adults able to read and write	32.0	42.7
Adults able to read	45.2	60.0

The forms Arthur Buller devised for his inquiry have no place for information on national origins. However, the 1844 census which contains data on birthplaces allows some tentative conclusions about nationality

[38] By "men," "women" and "adults" is meant population over 15 years of age. The base populations for these literacy rates were estimated roughly by dividing the total population of each sex by two.

and literacy. Since the census figures are not divided by ages it is necessary first to substract half the population of each community — roughly the proportion under the age of fifteen — from the figure in the column marked "Canada, of British origin." This is on the assumption that all of the children were born in Canada. It is then possible to compare the national composition of each of the fourteen "English" communities included in our sample. The township with the highest adult literacy, Brompton, had a plurality of Scots in its population but also substantial numbers of English, Americans and British-Canadians. The next communities ranked in terms of adult literacy were Bolton and Hatley where Americans predominated with British-Canadians also present. In fourth place was Shefford with rather more Americans that Irish Protestants. Dudswell was fifth and there British-Canadians were more numerous than Americans. It was followed by Granby with more Irish Protestants than Americans and Kilkenny whose national composition could not be determined. Eighth was Potton, overwhelmingly American, and ninth was Clarendon where Irish Protestants were equally predominant. Irish Protestants, with a few Catholics as well, were the largest element in Leeds, Windsor, Kingsey and Gore, while Templeton, the fourteenth community and the one with the lowest adult literacy, was peopled mainly by Irish Catholics. The main conclusion is that American and Canadian-born anglophones in Lower Canada were generally more literate than Irishmen of both religions. This is not surprising since most of the American settlers came from New England, one of the world's most literate societies in the first half of the nineteenth century.[39] The position of the British-Canadians is quite ambiguous since, in the present sample, only the townships settled by Americans were established early enough to have any substantial element of native-born adults.

In fact, most of the adult English-speaking population of Lower Canada, in the countryside at least, was born outside the province. Perhaps the most important distinction between the francophones and the anglophones in terms of its relation to literacy was neither religious nor national but was instead connected to the fact that one group was native-born and the other was composed mainly of immigrants. It has been claimed that international migration tends to be literacy selective since people aware enough of the greater world and sensitive enough to individual material interests to undertake such a great step are also more likely than others to be able to read.[40] It is generally impossible for the original colonists of a new land to give their children as good an education as they themselves had had and literacy may decline between the immigrants and the first generation of native-born. Certainly this was the case in seventeenth-century Canada where immigrants were much more literate than natives.[41] Literacy may not have declined in the towns,[42] but, in rural Quebec, it

[39] CIPOLLA, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

[40] See, for example, Kenneth A. LOCKRIDGE, *Literacy in Colonial New England: An Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West* (New York, 1974), p. 46.

[41] ROY, LANDRY and CHARBONNEAU, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

[42] DECHÊNE, *op. cit.*, p. 467.

was more than a century and a half before the literacy levels of the original colonists were again reached. Within a few decades of settlement however people born in Upper Canada, colonial New England and Dutch New York were more literate than immigrants.[43] In Lower Canada as well, the regression following original colonization does not appear to have been very severe among English-speaking immigrants. Fortunately, the literacy and school attendance rates for children provided by the Education Commission data allow French-English comparisons with the migration factor excluded.

FIGURE 9. CHILDREN ATTENDING SCHOOL IN APRIL 1836.

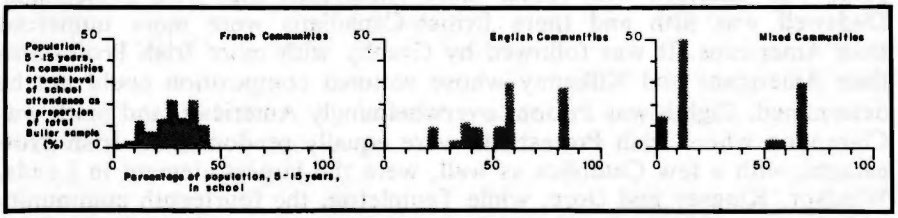


FIGURE 10. CHILDREN ABLE TO READ AND WRITE.

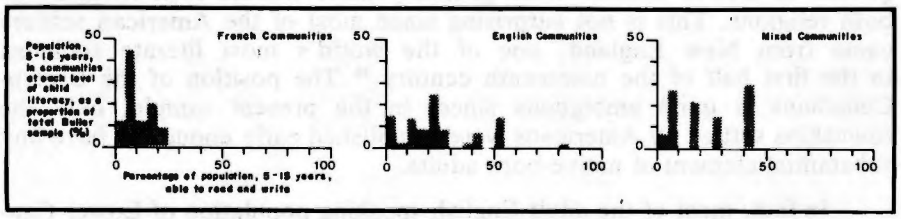
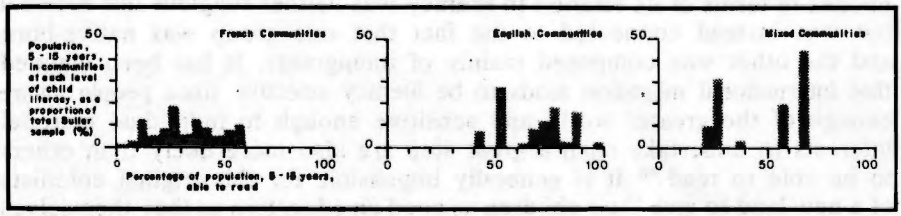


FIGURE 11. CHILDREN ABLE TO READ.



[43] Harvey J. GRAFF, "Literacy and Social Structure in Elgin County, Canada West: 1861," *Histoire sociale-Social History*, VI (April, 1973), p. 34; LOCKRIDGE, op. cit., p. 46; C.A. ANDERSON, "Literacy and Schooling on the Development Threshold: some Historical Cases," in ANDERSON and BOWMAN, eds., *op. cit.*, p. 353.

Table 8 shows that English-speaking boys and girls aged five to fifteen had, on the whole, roughly twice the school attendance and literacy rates of French-speaking children.[44] Local rates varied widely however especially among the anglophone communities (see Figures 9 to 11). There was even a greater proportion of anglophone children in the very lowest category of literacy although the much higher levels of other children of the same language gave the English a convincing lead in the aggregate statistics. More importantly, the gap between English and French literacies was not as wide among children as it was among adults (see Tables 8 and 6). Unfortunately, it is not clear whether this reflects and educational advance from one generation of francophone Lower Canadians to the next or a regression in the second generation of English-Canadians. After all, one cannot simply compare adult rates with children's rates since there is no way of knowing what proportion of the illiterate children will subsequently learn to read and write.

Table 8: CHILD LITERACY, AGGREGATE RATES, 1838-39

	French communities	*English communities*	*Mixed communities*
Boys			
number	8,362	1,991	1,969
in school, 1836	29.3%	56.5%	31.4%
read & write	11.3%	22.4%	21.0%
read	29.9%	66.9%	48.9%
Girls			
number	8,068	1,919	2,044
in school, 1836	24.9%	54.2%	27.0%
read & write	11.0%	23.3%	22.6%
read	33.9%	66.7%	47.2%
Both sexes			
number	16,430	4,243*	4,013
in school, 1836	27.2%	55.4%	29.2%
read & write	11.2%	24.6%	21.8%
read	31.8%	68.5%	48.0%

* includes Shefford (sexes not separated)

In French, English and mixed communities, boys attended school at a slightly higher rate than girls. The aggregate statistics and those for most individual communities show a roughly equivalent proportion of boys and girls able to read and write and able to read only. The only exception is in the francophone parishes where more girls than boys were able to read. Perhaps in this generation, and in the previous one, a disproportionate number of girls learned the most basic of the literacy skills at home.

Local variations in school attendance seem to be closely related to differences in religion. The Buller forms give precise figures for the number of children of each religion present in the community and the number of

[44] In a number of returns, no figures were given for 1836 school attendance. The attendance rates are therefore based on a slightly smaller population (20,562 instead of 24,686) than are the literacy rates.

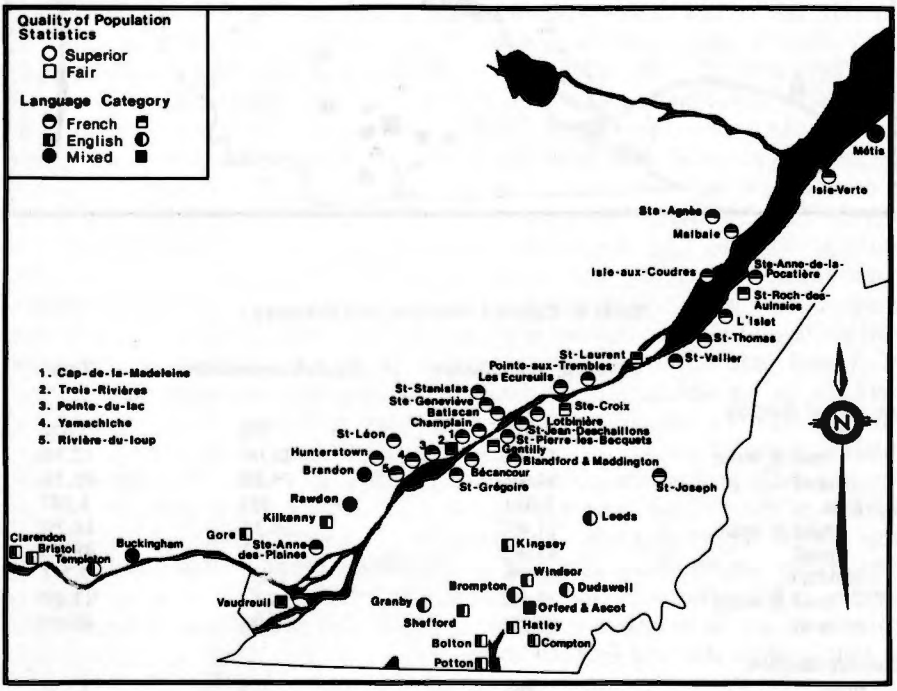
each attending school. In the religiously mixed townships of Rawdon, Templeton and Buckingham, there were 986 children and 45.7% of the 841 English-speaking children were in school in 1836. However, the 482 Protestant children attended at a rate of 50.8% while only 23.1% of the 514 Catholics attended. What cannot be determined with certainty from the evidence at hand is the extent to which these "religious" differences in school attendance result from possible differences in the material resources of Protestant and Catholic parents. It seems unlikely that wealth played an important direct role however as government-aided schools gave free tuition to children from poor families in the 1830s. Moreover, parents of both religions were presumably pioneer-farmers for the most part with an equal need for the labour of their children.

School attendance figures are chiefly of interest as an indication of parental motivation. While they are naturally related closely to child literacy rates, it should not be assumed that schools were the only source of literacy training. The organization of the Buller Commission returns gives us a rare opportunity to isolate, at least partially, the influence of formal institutions of education in the 1830s and to evaluate education outside the schools. Respondents were asked to give literacy figures for each district where presumably a school had been in operation at some time between 1829 and 1836. Twenty parishes and townships in the sample used here contained areas that had never been organized into school districts and therefore never had a school that received government grants (there could still have been schools here which were not given provincial aid but these should have been listed in the returns and none were). Table 9 shows the proportion of children able to read and write and that able to read inside and outside the school districts of these 20 communities. Naturally the rates are much higher in areas where there were schools but nevertheless a certain number of children learned to read and write and a fairly important proportion learned to read in the absence of formal instruction. These skills may have been learned at home or perhaps as an adjunct to religious instruction in catechism classes and Sunday schools. Of course these rates may also have been affected by migration out of school districts towards the fringes of settlement. Where the linguistic groups are considered separately it is clear that the English lead over the French was even greater in areas without schools than it was within school districts. This may be yet another proof of the greater importance anglophones attached to education. On the other hand, it may simply reflect the superior qualifications of the more literate English parents to act as amateur teachers. It could also result from a higher rate of immigration into the English areas.

All that remains is to examine the geographical distribution of literacy in the Buller sample. Partly because this sample contains so few representatives from the Montreal region, it is difficult to distinguish any clear patterns. The only dramatic contrasts are simply between areas of French and English settlement. Truly regional variations are relatively insignificant compared to ethnic differences. In the map displaying adult literacy (Figure 13), one can nevertheless see that the highest levels tend

to be close to the American border. Some of the lowest levels can be found in places such as St-Agnès, St-Stanislas, Blandford and Maddington recently colonized by French-Canadians.[45] There is little geographical coherence in the map of child literacy (Figure 14). More than in the adult map though, there is a fairly consistent pattern of low literacy in the lower St-Lawrence and in the Canadian Shield areas north of the St-Lawrence and along the Ottawa. The river-front parishes of Rivière-du-Loup, Yamachiche, Cap-de-la-Madeleine and Champlain are also quite low, indicating perhaps a relative decline in literacy in St-Maurice and Champlain counties (Figure 15).

FIGURE 12. COMMUNITIES REPRESENTED IN THE BULLER SAMPLE.



[45] Cf. Cole HARRIS, "Of Poverty and Helplessness in Petite-Nation," *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 52 (March, 1971): 43-44.

FIGURE 13. ADULTS ABLE TO READ AND WRITE, 1838-39. GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION.

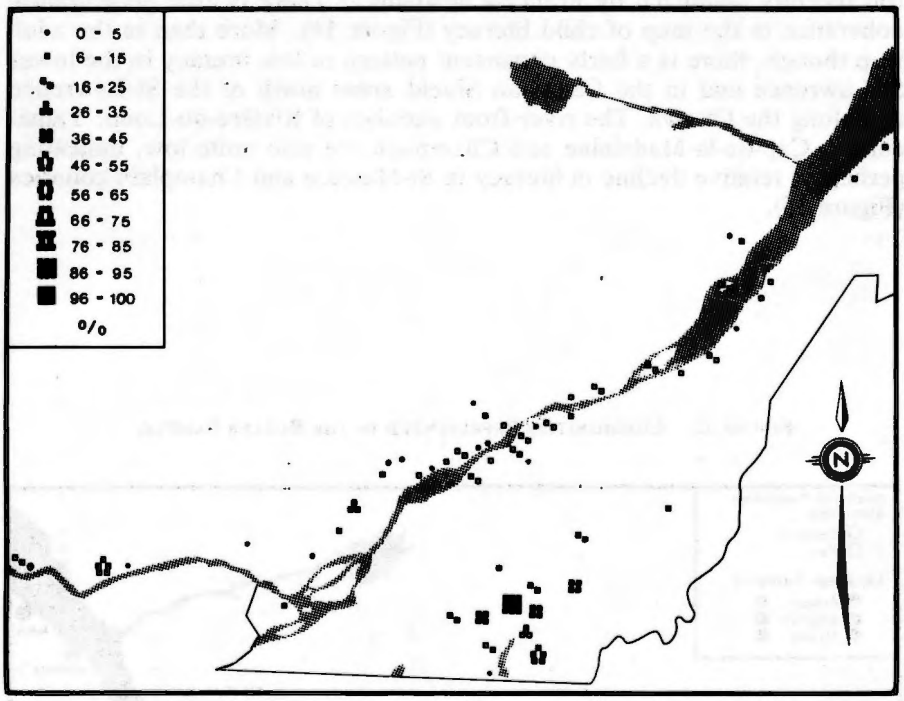
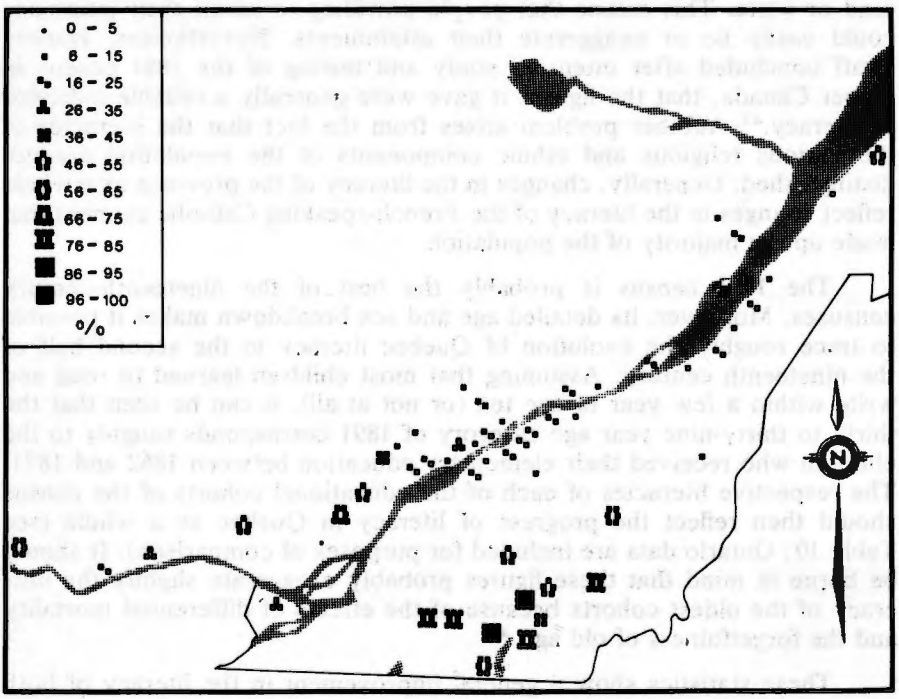


Table 9: CHILD LITERACY AND SCHOOLS

	French communities	*English communities*	*Total*
In school districts			
boys	3,045	579	3,624
read & write	11.7%	18.0%	12.7%
read	34.4%	79.8%	41.7%
girls	3,034	553	3,587
read & write	13.4%	18.3%	14.2%
read	43.0%	78.1%	48.4%
children	6,079	1,132	7,211
read & write	12.5%	18.1%	13.4%
read	38.7%	79.0%	45.0%
Outside districts			
boys	966	226	1,192
read & write	2.5%	4.4%	2.8%
read	10.5%	39.4%	15.9%
girls	962	226	1,188
read & write	1.9%	6.2%	2.7%
read	11.1%	41.1%	16.8%
children	1,928	452	2,380
read & write	2.2%	5.3%	2.8%
read	10.8%	40.3%	16.4%

FIGURE 14. CHILDREN ABLE TO READ AND WRITE, 1838-39. GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION.



V

CENSUSES

Census figures are certainly the most convenient source for a study of literacy. Census coverage is wide, theoretically complete, and the published results give pre-digested totals with base population figures which facilitate the calculation of rates. Like the returns to the Buller Commission, they give information on actual literacy skills. Only the censuses from 1861 on however provide information on literacy and this data is not consistent from one census to the next. The 1891 census gives, for each county, the number of illiterates (unable to read and write) and semi-literates (able to read only), male and female, in ten-year age categories. The 1881 census, on the other hand, has no literacy data while the 1871 census gives figures for adult illiterates and semi-literates with sexes separated but with no age break-down. The 1861 census simply gives the number of male and female illiterates over the age of twenty.[46] The

[46] The English version of the 1861 census uses the ambiguous phrase, "adults unable to read or write," causing Harvey Graff to wonder whether the figures are for illiterates (unable to read *and* unable to write) or semi-literates (unable to read *or* unable to write). See Harvey J. GRAFF, "Towards a Meaning of Literacy: Literacy and Social Structure in Hamilton, Ontario, 1861," *History of Education Quarterly*, Vol. 12 (1972): 411-31. The French forms used for most Lower Canadian returns are much clearer: "individus de plus de 20 ans ne sachant lire ni écrire."

most important limitation to census data on literacy stems from the fact that they were collected simply by asking individuals whether they could read or write. This means that people unwilling to admit their ignorance could easily lie or exaggerate their attainments. Nevertheless, Harvey Graff concluded after intensive study and testing of the 1861 census in Upper Canada, that the figures it gave were generally a reliable indicator of literacy.[47] Another problem arises from the fact that the literacies of the various religious and ethnic components of the population are not distinguished. Generally, changes in the literacy of the province as a whole reflect changes in the literacy of the French-speaking Catholic element that made up the majority of the population.

The 1891 census is probably the best of the nineteenth-century censuses. Moreover, its detailed age and sex breakdown makes it possible to trace roughly the evolution of Quebec literacy in the second half of the nineteenth century. Assuming that most children learned to read and write within a few year of age ten (or not at all), it can be seen that the thirty to thirty-nine year age category of 1891 corresponds roughly to the children who received their elementary education between 1862 and 1871. The respective literacies of each of the educational cohorts of the census should then reflect the progress of literacy in Quebec as a whole (see Table 10; Ontario data are included for purposes of comparison). It should be borne in mind that these figures probably exaggerate slightly the illiteracy of the oldest cohorts because of the effects of differential mortality and the forgetfulness of old age.[48]

These statistics show a general improvement in the literacy of both sexes and both provinces in the second half of the century (keeping in mind the ten to nineteen year cohort had not entirely completed its elementary education). In Quebec, the females surpasssed the males in the 1840s and 1850s, and then increased their lead in literacy substantially toward the end of the century. Ontario females, on the other hand, only went slightly beyond the literacy of their male contemporaries and only late in the century. For every cohort Quebec has a higher proportion of semi-literates (those able to read but not write), but this is normal considering the province's lower level of literacy. Similarly, for each cohort in Ontario, the sex with the higher literacy has the lower proportion of semi-literates. Less predictably, the 1842-61 and 1862-71 female educational cohorts in Quebec have proportionately more semiliterates *and* more literates than the male cohorts. In fact, a greater percentage of Quebec females than males were able to read at least for every cohort covered by the census.

[47] Harvey J. GRAFF, "Towards a Meaning of Literacy...." See also H.J. MAYS and H.F. MANZL, "Literacy and Social Structure in Nineteenth-Century Ontario: An Exercise in Historical Methodology," *Histoire sociale — Social History*, Vol. 7 (Nov., 1974): 331-45 and Harvey J. GRAFF, "What the 1861 Census can tell us about Literacy: a Reply," *Histoire sociale — Social History*, Vol. 8 (Nov., 1975): 337-49

[48] CIPOLLA, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

Table 10: COHORT LITERACY FROM 1891 CENSUS

Age	*Educational cohort*	*Total*	*Read & write* %	*Read only* %	*Read at least* %
			Quebec males		
10-19	1882-91	165,776	73.1	6.5	79.7
20-29	1872-81	119,684	71.1	4.2	75.3
30-39	1862-71	87,257	63.9	4.8	68.7
40-59	1842-61	108,721	58,1	5.3	63.4
60+	pre-1841	51,875	39.1	5.8	44.9
			Quebec females		
10-19	1882-91	163,580	82.5	4.1	86.6
20-29	1872-81	126,427	80.6	4.0	84.6
30-39	1862-71	88,570	72.5	6.2	78.7
40-59	1842-61	108,837	60.1	10.9	71.0
60+	pre-1841	49,959	36.5	15.4	52.0
			Ontario males		
10-19	1882-91	239,540	93.5	1.4	94.9
20-29	1872-81	195,620	94.0	1.0	94.9
30-39	1862-71	135,554	92.1	1.5	93.6
40-59	1842-61	167,797	89.4	2.5	92.0
60+	pre-1841	80,671	83.4	4.1	87.5
			Ontario females		
10-19	1882-91	235,750	94.9	1.0	96.0
20-29	1872-81	204,415	95.5	0.8	96.4
30-39	1862-71	131,637	93.1	1.9	94.9
40-59	1842-61	159,928	87.7	4.4	92.0
60+	pre-1841	70,821	75.2	9.6	84.8

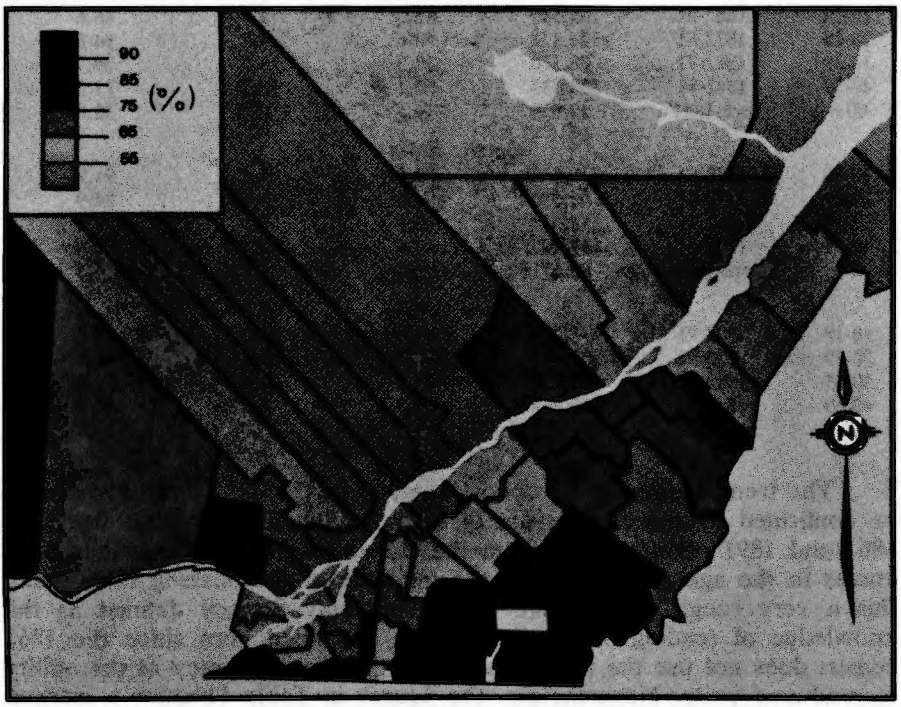
The trend suggested by cohort analysis of the 1891 census seems to be confirmed by the comparison of overall adult literacy rates from the 1861 and 1891 censuses and from the Buller enquiry 1838-39. Inconsistencies in the age groups and in the methods of establishing rates make this a very rough comparison. Moreover, only literacy defined as the knowledge of reading *or* writing can be examined here since the 1861 census does not use the more rigorous definition of literacy as the ability to read *and* write. Nevertheless, the figures in Table 11 show a marked contrast between, on the one hand, the rapid growth in Quebec's overall level of literacy in the 22 years before 1861 and, on the other hand, the very moderate growth, almost all of it in the countryside, of the following thirty years.

Table 11: GROWTH OF ADULT LITERACY (ABILITY TO READ), 1839-1891. (%)

	Rural	*Urban*	*Province*
1839 (over 15 yrs.)	40	70	43
1861 (over 20 yrs.)	61.8	81.8	64.6
1891 (over 20 yrs.)	67.3	82.2	70.4
linear growth, 1839-61			22
linear growth, 1861-91	5.5	0.4	5.8
relative growth, 1839-61			51
relative growth, 1861-91	8.9	0.5	9

Since census data are published for each county in the province, it is possible to examine regional variations in literacy and to trace their evolution in the second half of the nineteenth century. Léon Gérin long ago studied the geography of literacy in Quebec and Figure 16 is adapted from his analysis of the 1891 census.[49] I have also calculated county rates from the 1861 census (Figure 15),[50] and the "linear growth" in each county between the two censuses — that is, simply the percentage of literates in 1861 subtracted from the percentage in 1891 (Figure 17).

FIGURE 15. LITERACY, 1861.



Although literacy increased greatly between the time of the rebellions and 1861, its geographical distribution does not seem to have changed greatly. The general pattern in Figure 15 is similar to that found in the maps constructed from the fragmentary data of the petitions and the Buller Commission (see Figures 1 and 13). The English townships are still the

[49] Léon GÉRIN, *op. cit.*, Vol. 23, pp. 443, 468. Gérin's literacy rates are for the 10 to 19 year cohort only.

[50] The rates for 1891 and those for 1861 are not quite parallel since the former are for one ten-year cohort while the latter are for the entire population over 20. The effect is to exaggerate the progress between the two dates without altering the fact that the two maps reflect the geography of literacy at the middle and at the end of the nineteenth century. The base population used to calculate the literacy rates for 1861 was estimated by multiplying the total population of each county by 0.454, the proportion of the population over 20 in Lower Canada in 1861.

most literate areas while, along the St-Lawrence, the Quebec region has somewhat higher rates than the Montreal region. The cities are much more literate than the countryside but there is no discernable "metropolitan effect" raising the literacy of adjoining counties. On the other hand, the Eastern Township counties of Brome, Stanstead and Compton have higher literacies than Quebec and Montreal.

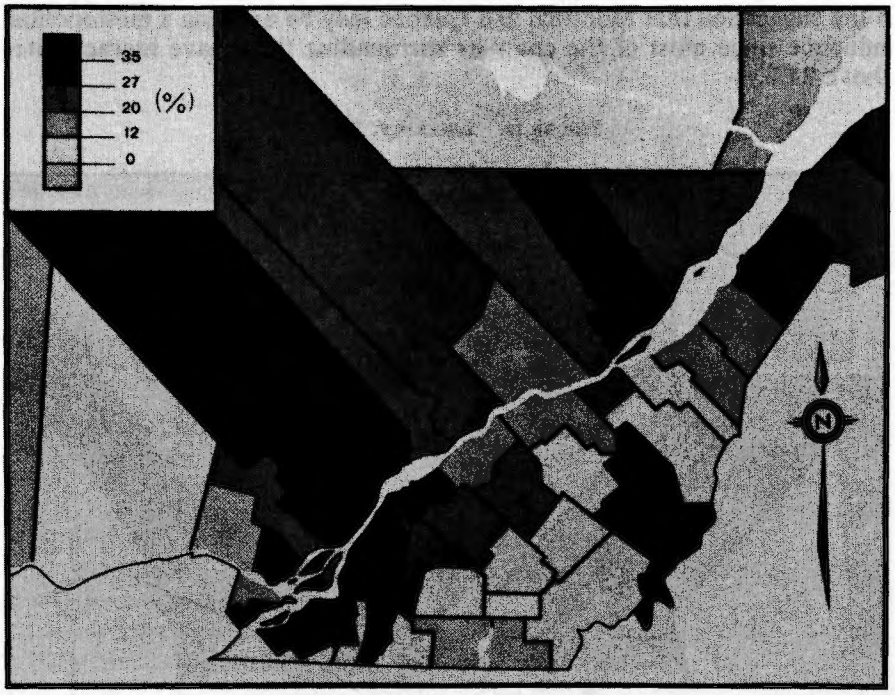
The 1891 map (Figure 16) shows a greatly altered geographical distribution. First of all, there is a greater uniformity than in 1861. In fact, the range between the highest and the lowest literacies (excluding the peripheral Saguenay county whose rates are far below the other counties) is 26.6 percentage points in 1891 and 48.8 in 1861. Secondly, the western part of the province now appears more literate than the east. Thirdly, there is the suggestion that Montreal and Quebec may be exerting a metropolitan influence since most of the counties surrounding them have literacy rates above 85%.

FIGURE 16. LITERACY, 1891.

The extent to which the literacy of each county grew between 1861 and 1891 is shown in Figure 17. The most notable development in this period is a general process of "catching-up". Just as female literacy rates were seen to have increased more rapidly than male, rural literacy improved more than urban literacy. Although the cities were still more literate than the country in 1891, the gap was narrowed. Generally, areas of low

literacy in 1861 — the central part of the north shore of the St-Lawrence for example — made the greatest gains in the following 30 years. Indeed, the Montreal region, and especially the Richelieu valley, made such great progress as to swing the overall balance in favour of the western part of the province. This catch-up process was accentuated by the stagnation of many counties in the Eastern Townships and along the Ottawa River and the actual decline in literacy of four of these, Pontiac, Argenteuil, Brome and Stanstead. This phenomenon is probably the result of an increase in the proportion of francophones in the populations of these counties.

FIGURE 17. LINEAR GROWTH IN LITERACY, 1861-91.



VI

CONCLUSION

Only large-scale studies of massive numbers of signatures in parish registers and notarial archives will produce a definitive picture of the development of literacy in Quebec. Ideally, future studies will link personal data — on wealth and occupation, for example — to an individual's ability or inability to sign. More work on urban populations is especially needed. Meanwhile it seems reasonable to accept a certain number of conclusions based on this intial survey of a variety of documentary sources. First of all, before the mid-nineteenth century, French-Canadian literacy was extremely low, especially in the country. Literacy was relatively high in

Montreal and Quebec but not in the countryside immediately surrounding these urban centres. The literacy of Protestant, English-speaking settlers who arrived in the first half of the nineteenth century and that of their children was quite high, in striking contrast to their francophone neighbours. In rural French-Canadian parishes literacy seems to have progressed at a snails pace from the middle of the eighteenth century until about 1840, with no discernable decline at the time of the conquest. In the 1840s and 1850s, there was a sharp rise in the literacy of the province as a whole, where rural French-Canadians were the majority. Progress was impressive, if less dramatic, through the rest of the century with women and the Montreal region advancing more rapidly and surpassing men and eastern Quebec which had previously enjoyed positions of relative superiority. The gap between urban and rural literacies also narrowed at this time, especially in the vicinity of the big cities where a cultural metropolitan effect seems to have developed.

It might be useful to consider these developments in a wider context. In the middle of the eighteenth century when three rural parishes in New-France had signature rates close to 10%, seventeen country parishes of northern England had aggregate signature rates of 64% for men and 39% for women, while male farmers were 80% literate in New England.[51] In a large sample favouring rural areas, the rates in France were 29% for men and 14% for women in 1686-90 and 47% and 27% respectively a century later.[52] Based on Arthur Buller's statistics of 1838-39, it was estimated that 27% of adult Lower Canadians, 12% of rural francophones and 60% of rural anglophones could read and write. At about the same time, parish register signature rates — which probably exaggerate literacy slightly — were 70% for men and 54% for women in rural Yorkshire, while England as a whole had rates of 67% and 50% for men and women respectively.[53] New England had long ago achieved virtual universal male literacy. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century French-Canadian illiteracy seems to have been more on a level with that prevailing in Italy, Spain and the Balkans.[54] Cohort literacy rates derived from late nineteenth-century censuses (see Table 10) show that progress was much more rapid in Quebec than it was in most countries in the second half of the century.[55] The province probably advanced in this period to the level of European countries with medium illiteracy from the level of those with high illiteracy.

One of the intriguing characteristics of francophone Quebec literacy is the unique relationship between male and female levels. Women seem

[51] W.P. BAKER, *Parish Registers and Illiteracy in East Yorkshire* (York, 1961), Table II, p. 12; LOCKRIDGE, *op. cit.*, Graph 7, p. 40.

[52] Michel FLEURY and Pierre VALMARY, "Les progrès de l'instruction élémentaire de Louis XIV à Napoléon III d'après l'enquête de Louis Maggiolo," *Population*, 12e année (Jan-Mar., 1957), p. 89.

[53] BAKER, *loc. cit.*; R.S. SCHOFIELD, "Dimensions of Illiteracy, 1750-1850," *Explorations in Economic History*, Vol. 10 (1973), p. 444.

[54] CIPOLLA, *op. cit.*, Table 24, p. 115.

[55] Cf. *ibid.*, Table 15, p. 93.

to have had a slightly better ability than men to sign their names in the middle of the eighteenth century and they were certainly more literate than men in the later part of the following century. Given the prejudice against mixing teachers and pupils of opposite sexes, this may be related to the importance of female religious orders in the early period and to the feminization of the lay teaching profession in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the intervening years, their relative position was not quite as good. A slightly lower proportion of women than men could read and write in 1838-39 but more women could read. Even this relative equality however is unusual for a pre-industrial society. In early modern England, France and New England, men were generally more literate than women in a ratio of between two to one and three to two. Why the literacy of females was so high relative to that of males throughout most of Quebec's history and whether this phenomenon is related to some special characteristic of the position of women in French-Canadian society remains a problem for the cultural and social historian to tackle using a more global approach than the one employed here.

Even more interesting is the mixture of important national and religious elements that makes Lower Canada a laboratory for historical literacy studies. The decisive superiority in literacy of anglophones over francophones is of course attributable in large measure to the fact that the former had mostly been educated in foreign countries with high literacies. However, their Canadian-born children were also much more literate than French-speaking children. There is no reason to assume that the basic economies or occupational structures were not the same in the English and French communities covered by the Educational Commission. The vast majority of household heads in these parishes and townships, English as well as French, were farmers. It is possible that the anglophones were wealthier than the French and therefore better able to educate their children. On the other hand, they probably suffered more from the educational handicaps of dispersed and unstable habitat that accompany newly formed settlements. The argument here is that popular attitudes associated with two different cultural and religious traditions were far more important than any material factors.

Bernard Bailyn has suggested that the high literacy of the English colonies in America can best be understood as a result of the special role of schools in American society.[56] Schools, he argues, took on many of the broadly educational and socializing functions assumed in the Old World by such institutions as the extended family, the local community and the church and they were established in great numbers by early colonists anxious to combat the threats to civilization posed by the raw wilderness in which they found themselves. Recently, Kenneth Lockridge has challenged this thesis with the claim that Protestant emphasis on individual Scripture reading was more important than any fear of cultural regression.[57] This second view seems to be substantiated by the experience of

[56] Bernard BAILYN, *Education in the Forming of American Society: Needs and Opportunities for Study* (New York, 1960).

[57] LOCKRIDGE, *op. cit.*

French Canada where, despite the wilderness, schooling outside the cities was neglected for centuries and where more traditional institutions apparently managed to transmit civilization down through the generations. Protestant immigrants, by contrast, quickly set up elementary schools for their children.

It must be remembered that elementary education in pre-Confederation Quebec was very much dependant on local and parental initiative. School Laws, beginning in 1801, simply offered financial assistance to communities which built, staffed and maintained their own institutions. Some have claimed that the anglophones set up more schools under the auspices of the "Royal Institution" from 1818 because the legislation setting up that body was intended to assimilate French-Canadians. In fact, the law allowed sufficient local autonomy that it posed no real threat to anyone's language or religion.[58] By the same token, francophones still did not take advantage of the opportunity to found schools at the rate their English-speaking neighbours did even between 1829 and 1836 when educational funding was controlled by the *Patriote*-dominated assembly. Schooling then was mainly a matter of motivation (and material resources), not of politics, and the English had proportionately more children in school largely because they were more concerned about elementary education. Moreover, the fact that anglophone Catholic school attendance was so low suggests that religion was at the root of this concern.

Protestantism is, after all, a religion of the written word and Protestants, especially evangelicals, have generally given much more unqualified and enthusiastic support than Catholics to the disemination of literacy in keeping with their belief in the importance of individual Bible-reading.[59] The Catholic clergy of Lower Canada, and particularly the *curés* who were very important local leaders in French-Canadian parishes, were more circumspect in their approach to elementary education. While not necessarily opposed to popular literacy as such, the ecclesiastical authorities showed a greater interest, before the 1840s at least, in the professional training of priests. Where they were not completely indifferent to elementary education they tended to show a much greater concern for the type of schooling and for ensuring clerical control.[60] "[*Il*] *vaut mieux qu'ils n'aient pas d'éducation littéraire,*" wrote Bishop Lartigue, "*que de risquer une mauvaise éducation morale.*"[61] Only after school legislation had been passed in the 1840s giving the clergy a pre-eminent role in the

[58] Réal G. BOULIANNE, "The French Canadians and the Schools of the Royal Institution for the Advancement of Learning, 1820-1829," *Histoire sociale — Social History*, Vol. 5 (Nov., 1972): 144-64.

[59] I have tried to show elsewhere that the strength of the Sunday school movement in Upper Canada reflects the passionate and essentially religious interest in literacy of most of the colony's Protestants. See Allan GREER, "The Sunday Schools of Upper Canada," *Ontario History*, Vol. 67 (Sept., 1975): 169-84. Sunday schools seem to have been just as important in the Protestant areas of Lower Canada.

[60] CHABOT, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-73.

[61] Quoted in Fernand OUELLET, *Le Bas-Canada 1791-1840: Changements structuraux et crise* (Ottawa, 1976), p. 267.

elementary school system did the church leaders give effective support to popular education. However, because they involved compulsory taxation, the new school laws encountered stubborn and violent opposition from politicians and from *habitants* who resorted to arson in many instances.[62] Certainly there was a small middle-class liberal section of Lower Canadian society that pressed for educational improvements. For the most part however, the clergy and the rural masses in particular, and Catholic French-Canadian society in general, were relatively indifferent to literacy and elementary education until the middle of the nineteenth century.

The situation was quite different in the second half of the century when illiterates were no longer a majority in the Quebec countryside. By the 1890s, Léon Gérin could link regional variations in literacy to different types of economic and occupational structures and to the "racial" composition of populations. Perhaps his model is valid for the turn of the century but it does not have sufficient historical depth to qualify as a "natural law of instruction." In earlier periods, rural Quebec had a fairly undifferentiated agricultural economy. The major contrasts in literacy were between town and country and between francophone and anglophone. This latter distinction may have been connected to parallel differences in family organization as Gérin suggests, but, as far as literacy is concerned, it seems to have been basically a matter of religious traditions.

Certainly the problem of identifying the factors determining the distribution and evolution of literacy in Quebec cannot be settled in a brief essay like this one whose primary aim is, in any case, to measure rather than to explain. A great deal of research on educational institutions, popular mentalities and social structures is still required. Even more work will be needed to appreciate the results and implications of the historical pattern of Quebec literacy but a few speculative suggestions can be attempted here. The connection is fairly obvious between the high rural illiteracy that prevailed before the mid-nineteenth century and the rich oral tradition of French-Canadian folklore. Many of the fantastic rumours and irrational outbursts that accompanied the insurrections of 1837-38 might also be better understood in the light of the peculiar characteristics of word-of-mouth communications.[63] The rebellions have often been viewed simply as the culmination of a political and constitutional crisis but it is possible to doubt how much direct connection the insurgent *habitants* had with the parliamentary struggles of the previous decades. "Public opinion" must have had a narrow base before the 1840s when only a minority of the population could read and only a relative handful was able to write. Informed political debate must have been the monopoly of a few while the great mass voted on the basis of class deference, local loyalties and ethnic prejudices. Perhaps French-Canadian politics and ideologies of the 1820s and 1830s have a radical flavour mainly because

[62] Thomas CHAPAIS, "La guerre des éteignoirs," *Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, third series, Vol. 22 (1928), section I, pp. 1-6.

[63] OUELLET, *Le Bas-Canada...*, pp. 469-70. Cf. Georges LEFEBVRE, *La Grande Peur de 1789*. 2nd edition (Paris, 1970).

the emergent middle classes captured a leading position almost by default at a time when the clergy was relatively weak and the *habitants* too poorly educated. Later, there was a decided swing towards greater conservatism around the middle of the century. Many historians have explained this as a result of the defeat of radicalism during the rebellions and the growing power of the church. Clerical influence certainly increased, notably in the field of elementary education, but equally important was the rapidly expanding literacy of the rural masses. Perhaps the *habitants*, always profoundly conservative, were now better able to influence the political process thanks to their new-found intellectual skills.

The possible implications of changing levels of popular literacy go well beyond the realm of ideologies and politics. It has often been claimed that illiterate societies are more resistant to change, less open to influences beyond the immediate community than are literate societies. Perhaps the long persistence in Quebec of very high fertility, of an economy based entirely on primary resource extraction and of a technically backward agriculture is related to the illiteracy of the bulk of the population. By the same token, the educational advances of the middle of the nineteenth century may have contributed to the decline in marital fertility which began in the 1860s.[64] In opening up the countryside to the publications of agricultural societies and experts, the spread of rural literacy may also have helped produce the commercialization of agriculture in the second half of the century.[65] If there is any truth to the theory that mass literacy helps to create a trainable work-force with "rational" economic attitudes,[66] then the growth of literacy could be seen as part of the foundation of the subsequent development of industry in Quebec.

[64] Jacques HENRIPIN and Yves PÉRON, "La transition démocratique de la province de Québec," in Hubert CHARBONNEAU, ed., *La Population du Québec: Études rétrospectives* (Montreal, 1973), pp. 23-44.

[65] Jean HAMELIN and Yves ROBY, *Histoire économique du Québec 1851-1896* (Montreal, 1971), pp. 185-205.

[66] CIPOLLA, *op. cit.*, p. 102.