Literacy and Social Structure in Nineteenth Century Ontario: An Exercise in Historical Methodology

by H. J. MAYS* and H. F. MANZL

Peter Laslett, the British social historian, suggested recently that one of the most compelling tasks facing the historian of social structure is "the discovery of how great a proportion of the population could read and write at any point in time."[1] Not only is literacy a necessary part of the process of political socialization and participation, it also may be related, as Lawrence Stone suggests, to social stratification, employment opportunities, religion, theories of social control, demographic and family patterns, and economic organization.[2] In short, as either a dependent or independent variable, literacy may provide an important key to a better understanding of historical societies.

Research in the area of literacy has increased in both intensity and diversity during the past decade. The work of Carlo Cipolla, Lawrence Stone, Roger Schofield, Kenneth Lockridge, and R. K. Webb attests to a growing recognition in Britain and the United States of the importance of literacy studies.[3] In Canada the only systematic studies of literacy rates that have been published recently are those of H. J. Graff.[4]

Almost thirty years ago A.R.M. Lower suggested that, by 1867 "most people outside Quebec were more or less literate."[5] This statement seemed to satisfy most Canadian historians until Graff began his work. Indeed, the word "literacy" does not even appear in the index of G. P. de T.

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1 Peter LASLETT, *The World We Have Lost* (London: 1971), 207.

2 Lawrence STONE, "Literacy and Education in England, 1640-1900," *Past and Present*, XLII (1969), *passim*.

3 Carlo CIPOLLA, *Literacy and Development in the West* (Hammondsworth: 1969); STONE, *op. cit.*; R. SCHOFIELD, "The Measurement of Literacy in Pre-Industrial England," *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. Jack GOODY (Cambridge: 1969), 311-25; R. K. KEBB, "Working Class Readers in Early Victorian England," *English Historical Review*, LXV (1950), 333-51, and "Literacy among the Working Classes in Nineteenth Century Scotland," *Scottish Historical Review*, XXXIII (1954), 100-114.

4 H. J. GRAFF, "Towards a Meaning of Literacy: Literacy and Social Structure in Hamilton, Ontario 1861" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Toronto, 1971); "Towards a Meaning of Literacy," *History of Education Quarterly*, XII (Fall, 1972), 411-31; "Notes on Methods for Studying Literacy from the Manuscript Census," *Historical Methods Newsletter*, V (1971); "Approaches in the Historical Study of Literacy," *Urban History Review*, No. 3 (1972); "Literacy and Social Stucture in Elgin County, Canada West: 1861," *Histoire sociale—Social History*. VI (April, 1973), 25-47.

5 A. R. M. LOWER, *Colony to Nation* (Toronto: 1946), 343.

Glazebrook's *Life in Ontario: a Social History*. To be fair, Glazebrook devotes considerable space to educational theory and practice, but nowhere does he suggest what it meant to be literate or illiterate, or for that matter how many people were literate. These questions are more within the province of the "new" social history which attempts to bring inter-disciplinary techniques, more particularly quantitative methods, to bear upon historical problems.

In literacy studies this has meant that historians have sought sources that can be readily quantified and which will enable them to verify hypotheses about the extent and importance of literacy. Roger Schofield has utilized marriage register signatures as a basis for ascertaining the ability to read and write.[6] Kenneth Lockridge is seeking literacy data in probated wills. A third approach is taken by Graff who makes use of the Canadian manuscript census returns for 1861 and 1871. Graff began his work by studying Hamilton, Ontario, an urban area, and has expanded his research into the countryside with a recent study of Elgin County.[7] The importance of his research lies not only in the seminal work he has done in the field of literacy study in Canada, but also in the forceful argument he puts forward for studying literacy by means of the census schedule. Graff maintains that the census offers an easier and far more accurate method of ascertaining literacy than relying upon more traditional sources.[8]

This new research, therefore, provides the historian with not only new insights into the importance of literacy, but also with a variety of sources from which future researchers may choose. The choice of the "best" source will depend upon the availability of data, its applicability to the problem (validity), and its reliability.

To test a source's applicability a number of methods have been developed by historians of literacy. Perhaps the most important of these are the three criteria which Roger Schofield suggests determine the utility of a document for literacy research. First, the data should be "applicable throughout the country to people of a wide range of ages and economic and social conditions and over a long period of time."[9] It should also be "a standard as a measure from one person to the next, from one group to the next, and from one historical period to the next."[10] Finally, a measure of

[6] Graff, "Literacy and Social Stucture in Elgin County," *op. cit.*, 28.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] SCHOFIELD, *op. cit.*, 318.

[10] *Ibid.*, 319. Schofield argues that statistical reports are generally unsatisfactory sources for comparative purposes because they are "measurements of people's opinions of their literary abilities, as expressed to strangers, and not direct evidence of those abilities." The use of such reports, therefore, introduces several other variables which serve to cloud the issue.

literacy should not only be universal and standard, but also direct, that is to say, by signature. Yet even if all of these criteria are fulfilled, a source may not be suitable as a measure of literacy since it may be inherently unreliable.

It is not the intention of this paper to attempt to add to the literature on the meaning or extent of literacy. Rather it attempts to raise methodological questions, to criticize sources and to provide evidence to support our contention that the manuscript census has some very serious limitations for the study of literacy, particularly in nineteenth century rural Ontario, and that a direct test for literacy is the only valid approach to the problem. In this sense the paper is part of the ongoing discussion of the utility of census returns for historical study.[11] Our argument, in brief, is that despite the interdisciplinary methods which must be utilized to exploit census data, traditional historiographic methods should be brought to bear to test the validity and reliability of historical sources, including census returns. When these methods are applied the limitations of certain columns on the census become evident.

For the historian of literacy the focus on the 1861 manuscript census is upon columns 25M and 26F for rural Ontario and in urban areas upon the same columns and the signature of the householder. In cities and incorporated towns, each householder was required to complete and sign a printed schedule which was later collected by an enumerator.[12] In the case of an illiterate householder, a neighbour or the enumerator could complete the form and the head of household could make his mark, usually an "X". In addition to recording his own literacy and attesting to it by signing the form, the householder was obligated by law to record the literacy of all other persons over twenty years of age who were also members of the household. This record was to be made by checking columns 25M and 26F on the same line as the name of the illiterate appeared.

The information pertaining to the literacy of the householder seems to fit Schofield's three criteria for the validity of a source for literacy. The case for this validity is enhanced by Stone, Webb, and Schofield's argument that traditionally English people have learned to read before learning to write.[13] Webb's argument that social stigma was not an important factor

[11] See for example, Margaret WALSH, "The Census as an Accurate Source of Information: The Value of Mid-Nineteenth Century Manufacturing Returns," *Historical Methods Newsletter* (Sept., 1970), 3-13, and "The Value of Mid-Nineteenth Century Manufacturing Returns: The Printed Census and the Manuscript Census Complitations Comparted," *Historical Methods Newsletter* (December, 1970), 43-51; Peter R. KNIGHTS, "A Method for Estimating Census Underenumeration," *Historical Methods Newsletter*, III (Dec., 1969), 5-8, and "Accuracy of Age Reporting in the Federal MS Census of 1850 and 1860," *Historical Methods Newsletter*, IV (June, 1971), 79-83.

[12] *Consd. Stats. of Canada 1859*, 22 Vic., cap. 33, s. 16-18.

[13] The arguments presented here are essentially those used by Graff to support his contention that the 1861 manuscript census of Hamilton is an accurate source of literacy. See GRAFF, "Towards a Meaning of Literacy," *Hist. of Ed. Q.*, XII (1972), 418-20.

in deterring people from making their mark suggests that the census also may be a reliable source. Moreover, Graff's finding that, "there were well-to-do and, indeed, rich Hamiltonians who would admit to illiteracy," tend to support this conclusion.[14] For an urban area in nineteenth century Ontario, therefore, it should be possible to obtain a measure of the minimum level of literacy by merely counting signatures on the census. The validity and reliability of the data is supported by theory and previous research. At the same time, however, efforts should be made to link other records to the census to ensure the accuracy of the data.

To limit the study to the signatures on the schedules, however, means that the historian is forced to deal with a sample of the population over twenty years of age. From this sample he must extrapolate to the larger population. This is the same shortcoming found in wills, marriage registers or jail records when they are used as sources for literacy studies. From another point of view, however, it might be argued that these householders may be a more representative group than those found on the other records. That is to say, there is a better chance that they represent a random sample of the whole population, at least in some of their major characteristics.

There is a tempting potential alternative on the 1861 and 1871 manuscript censuses. Columns 25M and 26F on the 1861 census and columns 18 and 19 on the 1871 census presumably contain a record of all the illiterates in the population who were over twenty years of age. By making use of these two columns an exploration of levels of urban literacy could be expanded to include the whole adult population. If these columns could be utilized it would also permit the historian to move out into the countryside where the census was taken by an enumerator and not filled in by a householder. The potential rewards are enormous but the risks in using these columns may be greater.

To make use of 25M and 26F forces the researcher to make a number of compromises. He must sacrifice some precision since the two columns generate their own definition of literacy, "cannot read or write." The historian has no way of knowing how this imprecise phrase was interpreted by householders or enumerators in 1861. Was it taken to mean "cannot read or write" or "cannot read and/or write?" Several compromises must, also be made with Schofield's three criteria. This definition does not apply over a long period of time. In 1871 the census had columns labelled "cannot read" and "cannot write." In addition to the changing definition, the test for literacy for a large portion of the population becomes a tick mark on the census return. On balance, the advantages to be gained from utilizing these columns may out-weigh the necessity for compromise. The final decision must depend upon some measure of the

[14] *Ibid.*, 419.

reliability of the columns as a measure of the levels of literacy within the population. *A priori* reasoning suggests that there must be a certain degree of underenumeration of illiterates. Nevertheless, so long as this underenumeration remains within a tolerable limit of perhaps ten per cent the sources should be acceptable. If, on the other hand, the degree of underenumeration is much higher than ten per cent or in the event that it cannot be estimated, the utility of the census must be called into question.

The need to test rigorously the literacy columns on the census was first suggested by the wide discrepancies that appeared in the data collected from the census returns and other record groups being utilized by the Peel County History Project.[15] It seemed obvious that if we were to test the manuscript census' utility as a source for literacy studies, we should begin with the urban census where we could test the internal consistency of the records by comparing signatures and the literacy columns.

In a general sense, several arguments may be advanced in support of the accuracy of the data found on columns 25/26 of the census. In the first place there were the legal sanctions against giving false information. The direction on the householders' return declared that, "any false return of all or any matters specified in any such schedule shall hereby incur a penalty of not less than EIGHT, nor more than TWENTY DOLLARS."[16] Four days before the schedules were distributed the *Hamilton Weekly Spectator* called for compliance and accuracy in completing the census schedule.[17] Officials of the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches added their voices to the plea for accuracy. It can also be suggested, in the case of an illiterate's schedule, that a stranger, or even a neighbour would be unlikely to perjure himself for the benefit of the illiterate. Finally, there is Webb and Graff's argument that the fear of social stigma did not prevent men from admitting to their illiteracy. Taken together these arguments seem to present a fairly strong *prima facie* case for utilizing columns 25M and 26F in literacy studies.

From a different point of view, however, it can be suggested that these arguments are examples of external criticism for which there are other equally plausible interpretation that would suggest that the reporting of these columns may be suspect. The legal sanctions found in 1861 were also in force when the 1852 census was taken.[18] Despite these sanctions *The First Report of the Census of the Canadas* concluded, "that a

[15] For a description of the Peel County History Project see, D. GAGAN and H. MAYS, "Historical Demography and Canadian Social History: Families and Land in Peel County, Ontario," *Canadian Historical Review*, LIV (March, 1973), 27-47.

[16] 22 Vic. cap. 33, s. 16(4).

[17] *The Hamilton Weekly Spectator*, January 5, 6 and 10, 1861.

[18] 14 & 15 Vic. cap. 49, s. 11.

very general feeling was found to prevail throughout the colony, that the census had some direct or indirect reference to taxation — and in this belief the enumerators were frequently received most ungraciously, and the information sought was, not only partially, but, in some cases, altogether withheld."[19] The efforts of newpapers and the clergy to secure accuracy can be perceived as a recognition of the failure of legal sanctioning in 1852. More important, although the concern for accuracy expressed by the *Hamilton Weekly Spectator* appears to have been genuine, the province-wide interest in accuracy was directed more towards assuring a true count of the inhabitants of Canada West and of each of the religious denominations.[20] The controversy surrounding "Rep by Pop" and the jealously guarded claims of the denominations for their own numerical strength were reflected in the call for accuracy. Whether or not the conscientious enumeration of every inhabitant and the recording of his religious affiliation spilled over to columns 25/26 is a matter for speculation only. Moreover, while detailed instructions were given to enumerators concerning birthplace, occupation, religion and place of residence, columns 25/26 were perceived as requiring "no comment."[21]

By themselves these arguments do not establish a case for either accepting or rejecting columns 25/26. But when they are supplemented by internal criticism of the documents based upon a recording of the consistency with which a man was recorded as an illiterate in columns 25/26 and also made his mark it becomes apparent that the literacy columns on the 1861 census were not completed with care.[22]

A detailed examination of the census returns for all illiterate, or suspected illiterate householders living in St. Patrick's, St. George's and St. Andrew's Wards in Halmilton in 1861 suggests that there was often little agreement between the information recorded in columns 25/26 and the signatures of the heads of household (Table I). Many who had their schedules filled in for them by someone else and who made their mark on the return were not recorded as illiterate on 25M or 26F. In St. Patrick's Ward John Scully, an Irish labourer, signed with "his mark" but his wife

[19] "Report of the Registrar of Statistics," *Census of Canada, 1851*, Vol. I (Quebec: 1853), iv.

[20] Toronto *Globe*, January 10, 1861.

[21] "Instructions for Enumerators," *Hamilton Weekly Spectator*, January 6, 1961.

[22] Cf. GRAFF, "Elgin County", *op. cit.*, 28, and SCHOFIELD, *op. cit.*, 319. Unless otherwise indicated the data for the following pages was obtained from Public Archives of Canada, MSS, Census of Hamilton, 1861 (microfilm); Public Archives of Canada, MSS, Census of Peel County, 1861 (microfilm); PAO, Copy Books of Deeds, Chinguacousy Township, Vol. VIII (microfilm); PAO, Records of the Surrogate Court (microfilm) A similar study was carried out utilizing the 1871 manuscript census for which the pattern of underenumeration reported in these notes was repeated. Those results do not appear here since the definition of literacy for purposes of the census changed between 1861 and 1871.

was the only member of the family who was considered illiterate. Peter Coleman of St. George's Ward apparently an illiterate since someone else filled in the census schedule to which he added his mark, but once again only a female member of the family was described an being illiterate. Sometimes, as in the case of John Clittan, a "broker" from the United States, the reverse was true. Clittan filled out his own form and apparently signed it (there was no counter signature in the form of a mark). Nevertheless, he was considered illiterate in column 25.

Table I

A COMPARISON OF COLUMNS 25M AND 25F WITH HOUSEHOLDER'S SIGNATURES ON THE 1861 MANUSCRIPT CENSUS.
HAMILTON, ONTARIO

	St. Andrew's Ward		*St. George's Ward*		*St. Patrick's Ward*	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Illiterate 25/26 made his/her mark	22	25.28	13	24.05	9	3.95
Illiterate 25/26 schedule signed.	9	10.35	11	20.35	7	3.07
Literate 25/26 made his/her mark	19	21.84	6	11.10	6	2.63
Literate 25/26 schedule unsigned	29	33.34	8	14.80	37	16.23
Illiterate 25/26 schedule unsigned	8	9.2	7	12.95	58	25.44
Illiterate 25/26 signed by 3d party			5	9.25	33	14.47
Literate 25/26 signed by 3d party			4	7.40	35	15.36
Signed & "X" at bottom of page no indication of mark; illit. 25/26					28	12.28
Signed & "X" at bottom of page no indication of mark; literate 25/26					15	6.58

(N=369)

In the three wards examined, all but 369 householders (approximately 15%) appear to have actually signed their own returns *and* recorded themselves as literate in columns 25/26. Only 44 householders made their mark and were also recorded as illiterate in the appropriate column. The returns of 325 others (88% of the 369 householders) gave evidence of the

anomalies that seem to plague the literacy columns of both the urban and rural manuscript census. Slightly more than 50% (166) of these returns listed the householder as illiterate, but that illiteracy was not confirmed by a mark (Table II). Some appear to have signed their own schedule (16.3%). Slightly more than two-fifths (43.98%) returned the schedule unsigned. Thirty-eight (22.9%) had their returns filled out by someone else and were recorded as illiterates but did not make their mark. In St. George's Ward another anomaly appeared. Among the suspect returns were 43 schedules that had not only been signed, but also had an "X" either below or beside the signature. The customary phrase "His/Her Mark" did not accompany the signatures. Nor is there any evidence to suggest whether the "X" was inscribed at the time the document was signed or at some later date. Of the 43 schedules, 28 had the householder listed as an illiterate, the other 15 suggested that the householder was literate.

Table II

ILLITERATE HOUSEHOLDERS ON COLUMNS 25/26
WHO DID NOT MAKE THEIR "MARK"
HAMILTON 1861

	N	%
Signed own schedule	27	16.26
Returned schedule unsigned	73	43.98
Schedule filled in by someone else/no mark	38	22.89
Possible mark*	28	16.87

(n=166)

*St. George's Ward

Table III

HOUSEHOLDERS LISTED AS LITERATE ON COLUMNS 25/26
WHOSE SIGNATURES DO NOT CONFIRM LITERACY
HAMILTON 1861

	N	%
Made their mark	31	19.5
Returned schedule unsigned	74	46.55
Did not fill out own return	39	24.53
Signed but "X" at bottom of page*	15	9.44

(n=159)

*St. George's Ward.

The remaining 159 schedules all recorded the householder as literate in columns 25/26 (Table III). Yet, in 31 cases (19.5% the "literate" householder attested to the accuracy of his return by making his mark.

Almost fifty per cent (74) returned their schedules unsigned and another one-quarter (24.5%) had their schedules filled in by someone else.

Such irregularities apparently were not confined to St. Andrew, St. Patrick and St. George's Wards. In St. Mary's Ward a forty-six-year old woman had her return completed by William H. Mills, but she was recorded as literate. At the Royal Hotel in St. Edward's Ward a number of the occupants were identified by the Hotelkeeper as "transients." Nevertheless he attempted to fill in as much information on these men as possible. The surviving record indicates that he was unable to ascertain their religious affiliation and the column indicating their religion was therefore left blank. The literacy column was also left blank, but it remains a matter of conjecture, the hotel register notwithstanding, whether these transients actually belong among the ranks of the literate population as the blank column would suggest.

Much of this evidence of numerous inconsistencies and irregularities in columns 25/26 can be explained away relatively easily. It may well be that a fairly large proportion of the illiterate householders in Halmilton, or the enumerators or neighbours who filled out the schedules for them, believed that by making their mark, or by returning the census unsigned they were attesting to their *own* illiteracy, and that columns 25/26 were to be used to indicate the literacy of the *other* members of the household. But there is no direct evidence to support such a hypothesis. Moreover, even if it could be verified, it would only serve to add yet another argument against using columns 25/26. The fact that these columns provide an imprecise definition of literacy suggested the necessity of compromise with Schofield's criteria. If they were also open to interpretation as to whether it was necessary to even complete them, they do not constitute a standard measure of literacy from one person to the next.

If, on the other hand, the irregularities are simply the result of the haphazard manner in which some householders filled out their returns, it might well be asked: How accurate is the data for other members of the household who are over twenty years of age? Yet even this need not necessarily invalidate Graff's conclusion that over 90% of the "adult" population of Hamilton was "literate" in 1861.[23] Clearly contemporaries believed that literacy levels in Victorian Ontario were very high and the number of apparently correctly completed schedules in Hamilton seems to confirm this hypothesis. The preponderance of evidence does suggest, however, that there may be great risks involved in treating illiteracy as a clearly defined phenomenon whose symptoms, causes and effects can be delineated best using the 1861 manuscript census data.

[23] GRAFF, "Towards a Meaning of Literacy," *op. cit.*, 420.

In Hamilton in 1861 Graff found 357 illiterate householders.[24] Our examination of only *three* of Hamilton's five wards uncovered only forty-four *confirmed* illiterates and 325 questionable returns. If this pattern was repeated in the other two wards, the yield would be less than one hundred confirmed illiterates and five hundred questionable returns. The disagreement between Graff's figures and ours may seem insignificant in view of the fact that there were 3,513 households in Hamilton in 1861, but it takes on a new perspective when examined from the point of view of the illiterate population. Any discussion of the meaning of literacy is also by implication a discussion of the meaning of illiteracy, and an illiterate population whose parameters cannot be defined with some precision provides a questionable base from which to make substantive statements about literacy.

If the urban census returns contain apparent inconsistencies and contradictions, the rural census poses an even more vexing problem. In the rural townships and village there is no opportunity to observe the consistency with which literacy was recorded and schedules were signed. In rural areas the census was taken by an enumerator and not filled in by a householder. There may have been advantages to this system, however. In a rural census district only one man interpreted the meaning of a potentially ambiguous column on the schedule. If a mistake was made, it was often made consistently. In the case of the literacy columns (25M/26F), this could mean that the column was virtually ignored by an enumerator who was forced to move from one farm to another through one of the worst winters in more than a decade and to record as many as seventy different pieces of information for each household.[25]

The first hint that there might be large scale underenumeration on the rural census came when the 1861 and 1871 censuses were coded for Peel County in general and Brampton in particular. What emerged from a pilot study of Brampton was a startlingly high level of literacy. Some ethnic groups such as the Scottish, American and Upper Canadians approached one hundred per cent literacy. Even the Irish who had emigrated from a country whose literacy rate has been estimated at barely 60%, were nearly 80% literate.[26] For a town of some three hundred households that had not yet attained the status of a regional center this seemed unusually high. Of course, it was quite possible, even probable, that Brampton was not a random sample of the larger population, yet its overall literacy level appeared to approach Peel County as a whole.

[24] GRAFF, "Towards a Meaning of Literacy," thesis, *op. cit.*, 45.

[25] PROVINCE OF CANADA, *Sessional Papers, 1861*, No. 23.

[26] CIPOLLA, *op. cit.*, 89-90.

Contradicting these high literacy levels was the evidence found in land records, mortgages and probated wills. Taken together these records suggested that illiterates may have been significantly underenumerated on the 1861 census. For example, literacy rates derived from the 1861 published *Census of Canada* suggest that Peel ranked sixth among the provinces forty-three counties with a literacy rate of 96.41%. More importantly, thirty-four of the counties reported literacy rates in excess of 90%. Broadly speaking then, Peel could be described as representative of many of the counties of Ontario. Moreover, its geographical position and settlement history would suggest a comparatively high literacy rate.

It has been suggested elsewhere that there are simply not enough extant Wills or other types of records to test adequately the literacy columns on the rural census.[27] Nevertheless, a significant portion of those people who made their mark or were listed as illiterate on land and mortgage records, probated wills, jail returns, and marriage registers, and who were known to be resident in the county at the time of the census should appear on the schedule as illiterates. The linking of these and other records to the census returns should provide at least a very rough *minimum* approximation of how many illiterates were missed by the enumerator.

To test the hypothesis that there was significant underenumeration of illiterates in Peel, mortgage records and the records of the Surrogate Court were linked to the manuscript census.[28] Land records contained in the Copy Books of Deeds contain routinely-generated records of mortgage and land transactions as well as transcriptions of wills containing provisions relating to the transfer of land titles. In one sense these records are less than a satisfying source since they represent transcriptions of the essence of original documents rather than the documents themselves. Nevertheless, they represent, especially in the case of mortgages, transactions that were carried out within the framework of the Canadian legal system. A signature was required from each of the contracting parties. To signify that the transactions had been completed, two types of phraseology were employed. In the case where both parties could read and were able to sign the agreement, a mortgage was "signed, sealed and delivered in the presence of a witness."[29] In the event that either the purchaser or vendor was unable to read and sign the document it was noted that the contract had been "signed, sealed and delivered in the presence of and having first been read over and explained."[30]

[27] GRAFF, "Elgin County," *op. cit.*, 29.

[28] The higher percentage of links for Toronto Gore Township reflects the fact that more variables were available for linkage purposes. In every case where there was a doubt as to the identity of an individual, the potential link was discarded. Therefore, the results presented here represent a *minimum* level of underenumeration for the people who appear on each of these record groups.

[29] PAO, Copy Books of Deeds, Chinguacousy Township, Vol. VIII, 1865-1867.

[30] *Ibid.*

In the case of Stuart and Alice Aikens, for example, the husband signed and the wife made her mark ("X") in the appropriate space. It was noted also that the document had been "signed, sealed and delivered in the presence of the same being read over to the said Alice Aikens who seemed to understand the same.[31] Such transactions thus involved far more rigorous circumstances that those attending the completion of a census schedule. Similarly exacting legal requirements surrounded the probate of estates in the Surrogate Court after 1867. The Surrogate Court Records contain, in addition to the original will of the testator, the dispositions of witnesses and executors/rixes, applications for Letters of Administrations where a man died intestate, and the depositions of individuals who supplies surety bonds. Here again it was a matter of legal and financial necessity that the signature of a testator or deponent was properly identified, and a testament made to its authenticity.

An examination of more than five hundred Peel County wills and applications for Letters of Administration that passed through the Surrogate Court between 1867 and 1878 revealed a basic pattern. In cases where the will was actually signed, two witnesses swore that they had seen the testator affix his signature to the will. In those cases where the testator made his mark, it was almost invariably noted that, "the said will was read over and explained to the said Testator before he executed the same and that he appeared fully to understand and comprehend the same."[32] In only four cases is there evidence to support the contention that a mark did not necessarily indicate an illiterate, but even in these cases the mark was carefully explained. In 1873 Thomas Ward swore that Robert Ward had been "weak in body and unable to write his name and made his mark...after the [will] had been read over to him which he appeared to understand."[33] Any irregularity whatsoever required an explanation. An almost unrecognizable signature where a man was known to be literate could conceivably have provided grounds for challenging a will. These stringent requirements were carried over to all other types of records preserved by the Surrogate Court.

The document found in the Copy Books of Deeds and the records of the Surrogate Court seem to fulfil Schofield's criteria for a source for literacy. They are certainly a standard measure from one person to the next. The fact that both the land and probate records are biased towards the more wealthy segments of society, those who owned land or who possessed sufficient real property and/or personalty to have an estate, is not a significant factor. It may be significant if there is a high positive cor-

[31] *Ibid.*, 459, Instrument No. 14887.

[32] PAO, Records of the Surrogate Court, Peel County Wills, #414.

[33] *Ibid.*, #288. Other "exceptions" that prove the rule are found in Wills #342, #348, #351, #369.

relation between economic status and literacy. That is to say, these records may also be biased towards the most literate segment of society. In either event, however, those people who appear as illiterates on these records should also be recorded as illiterates on the census. Without knowing the extent to which the records are biased, they cannot be used to estimate literacy rates for the whole population, nor can they provide precise indications of the level of underenumeration. But they can provide some indication of a *minimum* approximation of underenumeration.

Once it was determined that the record groups could be used to identify illiterates with a degree of certainty, records were gathered and linked to the manuscript census. The first of these exercises involved recording all of the transactions made by illiterate landowners in Chinguacousy Township who mortgaged their land during the years 1865-7. These records were then linked to the 1861 census on the basis of the names of the husband and wife, the husband's occupation, and the lot and concession number of the land involved. Of the twenty illiterates recorded in the *Copy Book of Deeds* who were located on the 1861 census, only five were recorded on the census as illiterates. The other fifteen (75%) were listed as literate.

Table IV

ROUGH RATES OF LITERACY FOR PEEL COUNTY FROM THE CENSUS OF 1861

	Peel County	*Toronto Gore Township*
Population over 20 years of age	15,061	773
Literates	14,470	742
Illiterates	591	31
Literacy (%)	96.1	96.0

A similar pattern was revealed in Toronto Gore Township where the surrogate court records provided the basis for testing the hypothesis. Toronto Gore's literacy rate in 1861 was 96.0%, almost identical to the rest of the County (Table IV). Yet, of twenty-one testators or their spouses who were listed as being illiterate on probated wills between 1867 and 1898 twenty (95.2%) appeared as literates on the 1861 census (Table V). Since there were only 31 illiterates listed for the entire township, this suggests an underenumeration of almost thirty-five per cent. In 1861, census district II enumerated by M. E. Brougham contained no illiterates. In actual fact eleven of the twenty-one illiterates linked to the 1861 census were residents of District II. The evidence suggests that, for whatever his reason, Brougham either deliberately or accidently failed to complete columns 25/26.

Table V

ILLITERATE TESTATORS

	Peel County 1867-78	*Toronto Gore Township* 1867-98
Illiterate Testators	79	29
Located on 1861 census	35	21
Illiterates located (%)	44.3	72.4
No. listed as literates on census	33	20
Listed as Literate (%)	94.3	95.2

On a broader scale the same kind of pattern was repeated at the County level. Between 1867 and 1878 slightly more than five hundred wills of Peel County residents passed through the Office of the Clerk of the Surrogate Court. In the surviving records the illiteracy of 135 persons who were testators, witnesses, executors, or surviving spouses is recorded. Of these 135 persons seventy-nine were testators (Table V), and these were the most easily linked to the census returns. In all, 47 documented illiterates, including thirty-five testators, were finally located on the 1861 census of Peel. Of these, *only three* were also listed as illiterate on the census.

The purpose of these remarks has been to show: first, that there is no reason to suppose that columns 25M and 26F were completed with any special attention to accuracy especially in Ontario's rural counties in 1861; second, that while in an urban area it is possible to attempt to corroborate the evidence contained in these columns by cross-referencing the information therein with a signature, in a rural area such corroboration is impossible; third, that literacy evidence in the form of land records and wills suggests that there was a substantial degree of underenumeration in the countryside; and finally, that even though the real numbers of illiterates discussed here are very small in comparison to the populations of either Hamilton or Peel County (less than 10% of the householders), because of that very smallness, the addition of even a handful of additional illiterates may have considerable *statistical* significance for any meaningful discussion of the consequences of literacy.

Columns 25M and 26F best described as "default" columns. Of the more than sixty columns on the 1861 census, only literacy and school attendance do not require a conscious effort on the part of the enumerator to create a historical record. If column 25 contained a mark a-man was illiterate, if it did not, a man not *presumed* to be literate, he was, by definition, literate. To use the literacy column, therefore, is to flirt with the danger of using an argument from silence. If Peel County is in any way

representative of the rest of the province, one cannot help but conclude that although the census may provide a fruitful supplement to the aggregation of more literary sources, at the present stage of literacy research in Canada its real worth cannot be truly evaluated. For the present the better course to follow seems to be to rely upon Schofield's criteria and, despite their shortcomings, to continue to work with literary documents.