The Majority of a Minority: Scottish Immigrants in 19th Century Nova Scotia

The Census of Nova Scotia of 1861 was initially written to determine the population of Nova Scotia, and the demographics making it up during 1860-61. In order to do so, the population was split into a multitude of polling districts within each county. Within each district, the population was further divided into distinct groups based on age, sex, marital status, and country of origin. While the collection of this data was pertinent to creating the document, the method in which it was collected proved to be difficult. The polling districts the province was divided into were not uniform in size, which made the population found within each separate district vary drastically. In addition to the discrepancy in polling district size, it had been noted that, “scarcely a session of Legislature passes without the boundaries of some Polling Districts being changed.1” As a result, the polling districts used in this census, as well as the information collected, would have possibly varied from polling districts in both past and future. However, the information in the census proved to be quite insightful into the cultural makeup of pre-confederation Nova Scotia. The breakdown of districts into age, sex, marital status, and country of origin, allowed for an accurate representation of people born in the province, as well as those that had immigrated. Of the immigrant population, the largest portion was made up of Scottish immigrants2, and the Scottish population was climbing steadily.

During the time the census was recorded, it had been reported that the total population of Nova Scotia was 330,8573. Of this number, 10.92% or 36,151 people, were born out of province4. Within this portion of the population, 45% was found to be Scottish5. While the Scottish population of Nova Scotia was spread throughout the province, it had been noted that approximately 70% (11,589 of 16,395) of Scottish immigrants were located in the counties of Pictou (3284), Inverness (2670), Victoria (2048), and Cape Breton (3587) alone6. As for the remaining 4806 Scottish immigrants in Nova Scotia, they settled in another 14 counties, each with its own varying number of Scots7. Within each county, the population was split, as previously mentioned, into polling districts. Each district contained a various number of Scots, demonstrating just how highly branched the community was.

In conjunction with the large numbers of Scottish immigrants in the aforementioned counties, census Enumerators chronicled the religious denominations of many of those living in the province. The Kirk of Scotland accounted for 18,867 individuals in 18518, while the Church of Scotland accounted for 19,063 during 1860-619. These figures support the information within the census pertaining to the Scottish population, as they provide a second source of data. It is also more than likely that the appendix on religious denominations is more accurate than that on the population by country of origin, in regards to the number of Scots in Nova Scotia. Seeing as the census was completed during the later half of the 19th century, one could easily conclude that religion was a crucial aspect in day to day life in the province.

Despite the census being recognized as a government document, not all of the heads of family that were asked to complete the census did so. As a result, it is plausible that incorrect values were recorded, leading to an error in the provided information. This discrepancy can be observed in particular when analyzing the Scottish population. Seeing as only 16,395 Scots were documented as living in Nova Scotia, and 19,063 people identified as members of the Church of Scotland, the discrepancy can easily be attributed to individuals refusing or neglecting to report for the census out of fear of taxation10.

Furthermore, it was not uncommon for government documents from pre-confederation Canada to be heavily influenced by religious views, it is quite evident that the Nova Scotia census of 1861 was prejudiced by the religious views of the author. Unfortunately, the author of the census is unknown, and the only names on the document are those of the members of the Board of Statistics11. From the few names on this document, it can be concluded that the author was of European descent, which greatly influenced the information found within. A glaringly obvious occurrence of this can be located in the appendix where the personal census is recorded in terms of religious denominations. Even though multiple denominations are listed, they only pertain to European immigrants. Any other religions that are practiced outside of European countries and their colonies are classified simply as other12.

Overall, the 1861 Nova Scotia census is valuable in showcasing the composition of the Scottish community by county. This document allows for historians to form conclusive theories about where Scottish immigrants settled, as well as when and why. By using the population breakdown by country of origin and religious denominations, the census displays both the large number of Scottish immigrants in Nova Scotia, and the steady increase in their numbers.

Citations:

1. Unknown, “Report of the Secretary of the Board of Statistics on the Census of Nova Scotia, 1861,” *Unknown,* 1862, 1.

2. Ibid, 11.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid, 114.

8. Ibid, 12.

9. Ibid, 130.

10. Ibid, 6.

11.Ibid, 1.

12. Ibid, 131.