Newfoundland's Frontier Demographic Experience: The World We Have Not Lost

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IF WE CONSIDER history as a record of those who write, then we forget a large part of our past, since we consider only a small literate minority whose life was often played on a national and international scale. The majority of people, however, until our father's or grandfather's generation, were either illiterate or else rarely committed the stories of their lives to paper for posterity. Theirs was an oral culture in which life was largely a family or local affair.

There has been much written by professional and amateur historians alike about the famous and their contributions to politics, society and culture, but this provides only a partial and often inaccurate view of the world. For the period prior to the modern census, especially in the pre-industrial and colonial past, amazingly little is known about the ordinary people whose lives were in fact the substance of our past. It has become apparent to academics in the last twenty or so years that if we are to learn anything significant about the economy, society and population of this world we have lost we are going to have to depend upon case histories of small areas. Only at this scale can the lives of ordinary people in all their complexities be uncovered.

Newfoundland and Labrador, like so much of the New World, was largely peopled by ordinary men and women whose lives have been left undocumented. Here, as Peter Laslett claimed for the Old World, the demographic and social history of the common man can, by painstaking research in parish registers and any surviving family records, be pieced together to rediscover the world we have lost. Moreover, in the New World,

NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES 1, 2 (1985)
0823-1737

and especially in relatively isolated parts of rural Newfoundland and Labrador, the pre-industrial past is not lost; it is well within living memory. What follows is the demographic story of how one population came to one maritime frontier of North America—the Strait of Belle Isle, lying between the northern tip of Newfoundland and the south coast of Labrador—and how it established itself and grew.

The principal sources of information were the parish registers of baptisms, marriages and burials for the area. Here virtually the entire population presents itself for review from as early as 1848. The registers are neither published nor collected in one spot, although today copies of a large number have been deposited in the Provincial Archives in St. John's. The registers in which the vital events of the population of the Strait of Belle Isle were recorded are scattered all over, although luckily some sixty per cent of the population of the two shores, living in forty-eight separate communities, were Anglicans belonging to the single parish or mission whose records have been kept in the area (initially at Forteau and subsequently at Flower's Cove) continuously since 1848. The remaining Roman Catholic populations of the Labrador side were searched out in the parish registers of Harbour Grace and Blanc Sablon for the period prior to the creation of the local parish of West St. Modeste in 1920, while the United Church populations were recorded in Carbonear until a local mission was established at Red Bay in 1878.

A pattern is discernible in the population growth in the Strait of Belle Isle over the first century of settlement, between 1840 and 1940 (Fig. 1). Although deaths are under-registered[1] the five-year running means of births, marriages and deaths indicate that there were four major phases in the demographic development of the area. The first occurred between 1840 and 1880. Births and marriages rose at a significantly faster rate than deaths, and the population grew rapidly as a result (2.5% per year), although considerable short-term fluctuations, especially in births, interrupt this trend. The second phase occurred in the two decades after 1880. Births and marriages remained almost static and possibly even declined, while deaths continued to increase; population growth dropped off to about 1% a year. In the third period, between 1900 and 1920, population growth again increased (1.65% per year), largely as a result of an increase in births. Deaths also increased, and marriages fell off and appear to have fluctuated wildly. Finally in the 1920-1940 period, births and deaths dropped off, though with considerable fluctuations, and population growth slowed down.

Developments in the nineteenth century—what I have called the "early-expanding" and "reassessment" stages of the frontier—are the special concern of this essay. As I shall suggest later these phases can be correlated with the opening up and settling of the frontier prior to 1880 and the closing off

of the frontier to further immigration after 1880 respectively.

In contrast with the homogeneity of the social and economic fabric of modern times brought about by the overwhelming importance of national and international forces, in that world we have lost, most people were rural.

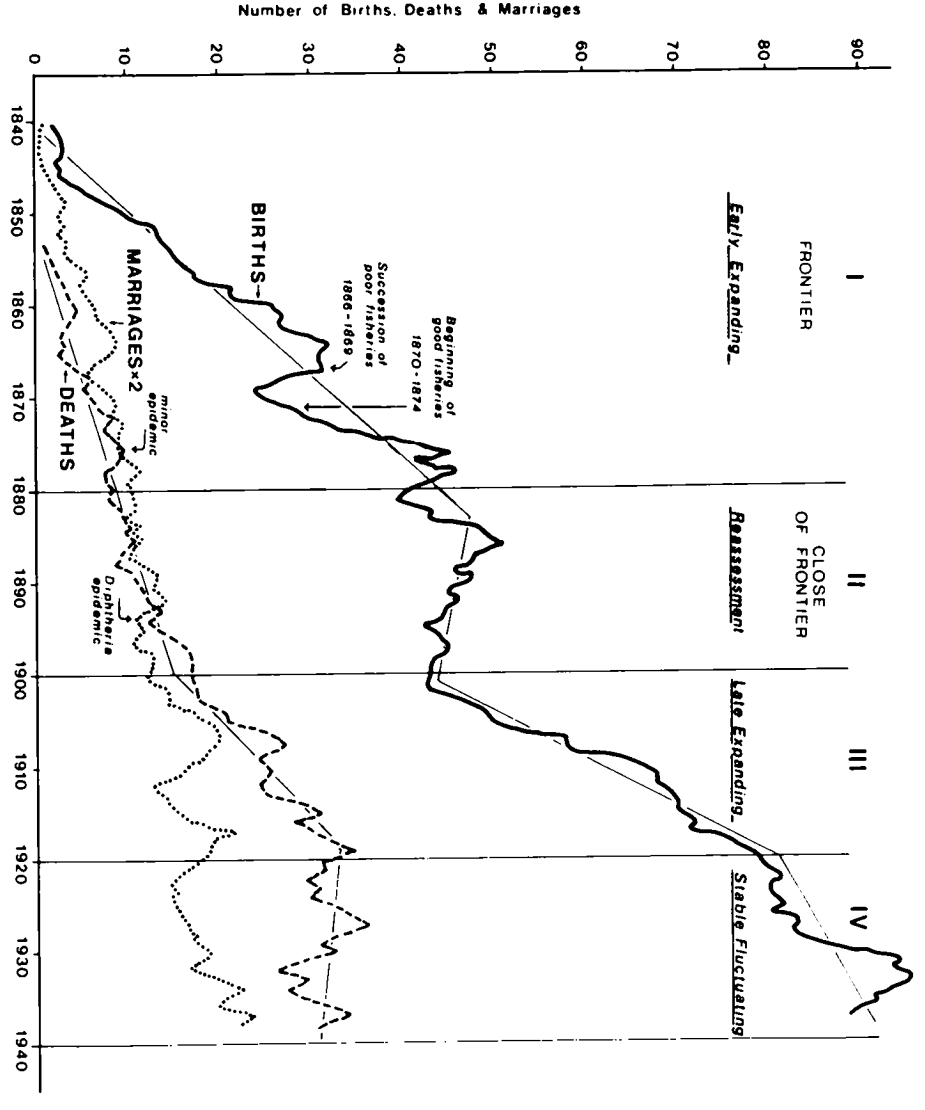


Fig. 1. Population Growth in the Strait of Belle Isle, 1840-1940: 5-year Running Means of Births, Marriages and Deaths.

The family was the centre of economic and social organization in town and country alike, and the cycles of life were tied to local forces such as harvest failures and outbreaks of diseases. This is not to deny the importance of national or international socio-economic forces but to recognize that these forces play only a subordinate role compared with immediate local influences. In the world we have lost, everything physical was on a human scale, everything temporal was tied to the human life span and nearly every activity was limited to what could be organized within a family or the lifetime of its head.

For this reason the family is an appropriate object of study for any examination of pre-industrial and colonial society or economy. It is the basic demographic unit in that all births, marriages and deaths take on meaning in the family context. It is also, as I have suggested, the basic unit of economic and social organization. Similarly, the demography of the family links together many aspects of community life. Its study, therefore, is an excellent point of departure for the study of social change. By the same token, "family reconstitution"[2]—bringing together into a family context information contained within parish registers of births, marriages and deaths of individuals—is a valuable means of allowing us to reconstruct the demographic history of this northern, maritime, New World frontier, and through it of examining the social and economic context of settlement.

In addition to the dates of births, marriages and deaths of almost the entire population the parish registers include information on the place of residence at the time of each vital event, the occupation of the individuals concerned and whether they could sign their name. Hence the records can be used not only to reconstruct the precise demographic history of a whole community but also to provide information on such things as whence the first settlers came and when, patterns of migration within the parish, kinship patterns of residence and marriage, as well as the occupational structure, social mobility and literacy of the population.

These family demographic records were corroborated with and expanded upon by scattered information from family bibles and gravestones as well as by a wealth of oral evidence gleaned from detailed interviews and long informal conversations with about thirty of the oldest residents and more structured interviews on particular topics with all residents over the age of fifty in three of the settlements. These interviews provide the much needed flesh to the bare statistical skeleton contained within the parish registers. Similarly local censuses and annual fisheries reports supply qualitative and quantitative background information, especially on economic conditions, which is useful in the interpretation of the demographic record.

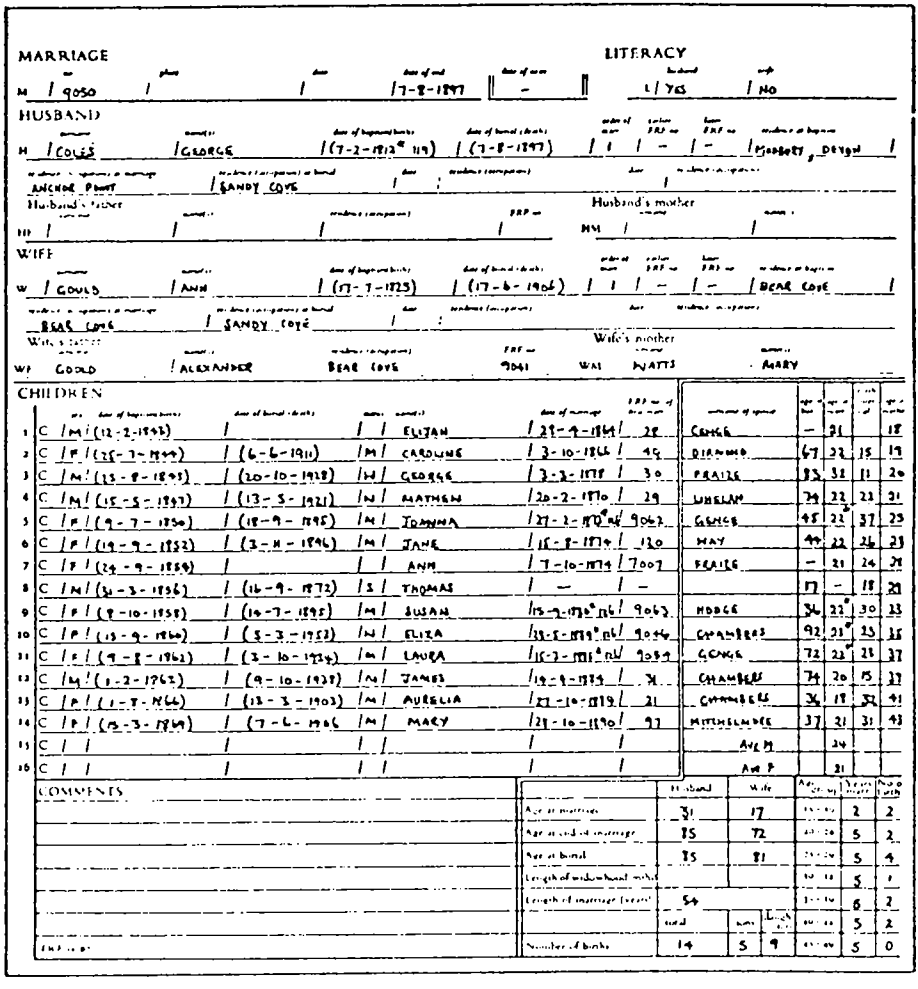
To illustrate the wealth of data on ordinary people that can be gleaned from parish registers and related family documents and to demonstrate the technique of family reconstitution, I have selected profiles of the families of

three male settlers of the Strait area, George Coles (1812-1897), John Barney (1821-1908), and Thomas Linstead (1835-1913) (Figs. 2, 3, 4). George Coles came from southwest England, probably as a "youngster" with one of the fishing establishments on the Labrador shore, and settled on the Newfoundland shore of the Strait of Belle Isle in Sandy Cove when he married at a relatively late age (31) one of the fourteen daughters of a near-by planter, the only woman on the coast. She was only seventeen. The shortage of females appears to have seriously retarded permanent settlement, as it must have in many "male-dominated" frontiers. Coles was literate in that he could sign his name, while his second-generation wife could not. George and Ann Coles had fourteen children—five boys and nine girls born, on average, twenty-two months apart. Mortality in this family unit was relatively low, only Thomas dying before his twentieth birthday, and both parents surviving into their eighties. The children tended to marry relatively early, the sons around twenty-four and the daughters at twenty-one.

John Barney and Thomas Linstead settled in the same community on the Labrador shore. Like George Coles, both came from southwest England, and they were both apprenticed to merchants of Jersey firms—one as cook, the other as carpenter. Unlike Coles on the Newfoundland side, however, Barney and Linstead married two of the women from Conception Bay, Newfoundland, who came annually to this shore as cooks for the merchant establishments. These women were older at the time of marriage—twenty-two and twenty-six. John and Eliza Barney had nine children, the first born exactly nine months after they married, the remainder following at about twenty-seven month intervals. Again mortality was relatively low, all issue surviving childhood; however three of the four daughters subsequently died in childbirth—a very characteristic feature of pre-industrial populations and particularly widespread on the Labrador. It is also interesting that two of the wives of their sons, like Eliza Barney herself, came from Spaniard's Bay, Newfoundland, illustrating (because of the annual summer voyages north) a strong continuing link between these two communities. Thomas and Eliza Linstead had only seven children but the intervals between them were very similar to the Barneys, except between the fifth and the sixth child, where there was almost twice the normal spacing—forty-eight months. Such a break might well suggest a child who escaped registration, having died very young, and can be used as an estimation of under-registration. It is also typical that the first child died the day she was born, and later that the mother and two children all died in the same year—a year of a severe diphtheria epidemic. This last information is not in the registers but was gleaned from headstones. The mother's father was a summer "stationer" in Red Bay, a community twenty-five miles to the east, and it is interesting to note, in light of the marriage patterns of the Barney children, that the only two Linstead children to marry chose residents of Red Bay.

Fig. 2.

Family Reconstitution Form: Coles, Newfoundland Shore.

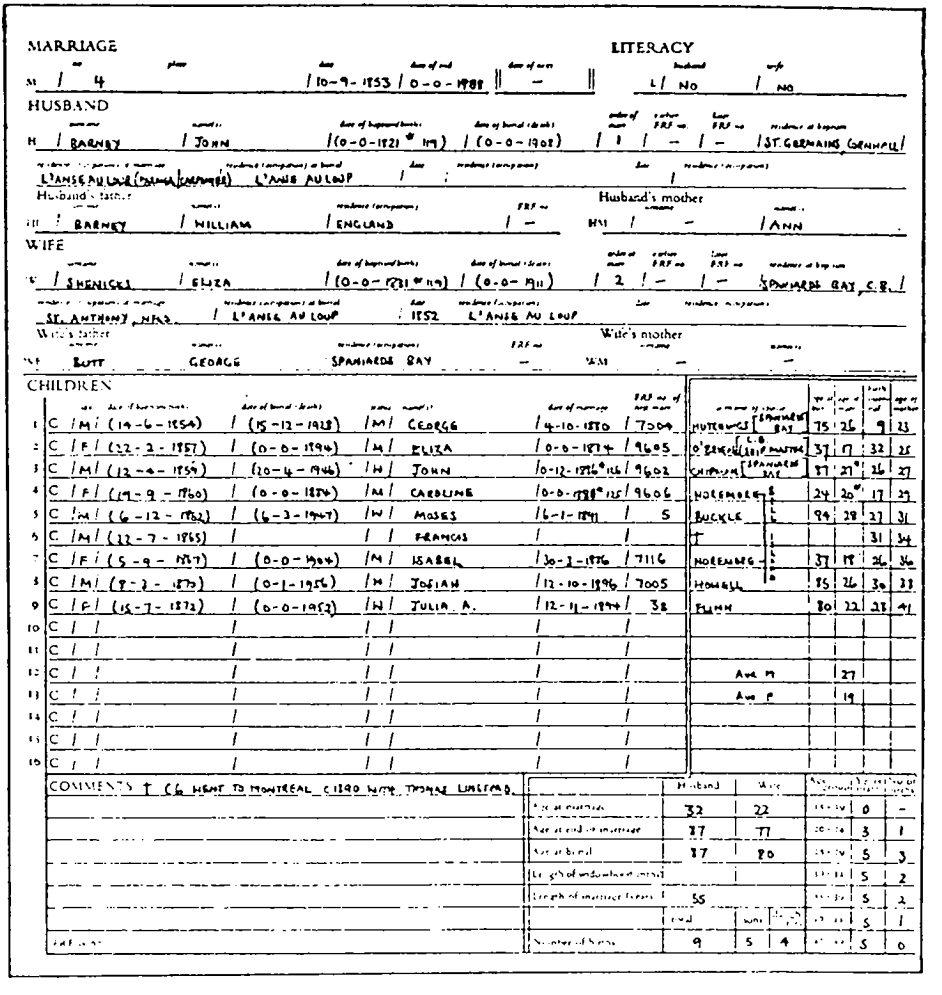


Little is known about Francis Barney and Robert Linstead from the record. But from oral evidence we know that these two went to Montreal as young single men during the depression around 1890.

Such data on their own are obviously idiosyncratic; when used as building blocks to reconstitute whole parishes, villages or sets of villages, as in England, however, they can reveal in great detail and with extreme accuracy the demographic structure and trends of a region (see Wrigley "Family

Fig. 3.

Family Reconstitution Form: Barney, Labrador Shore.

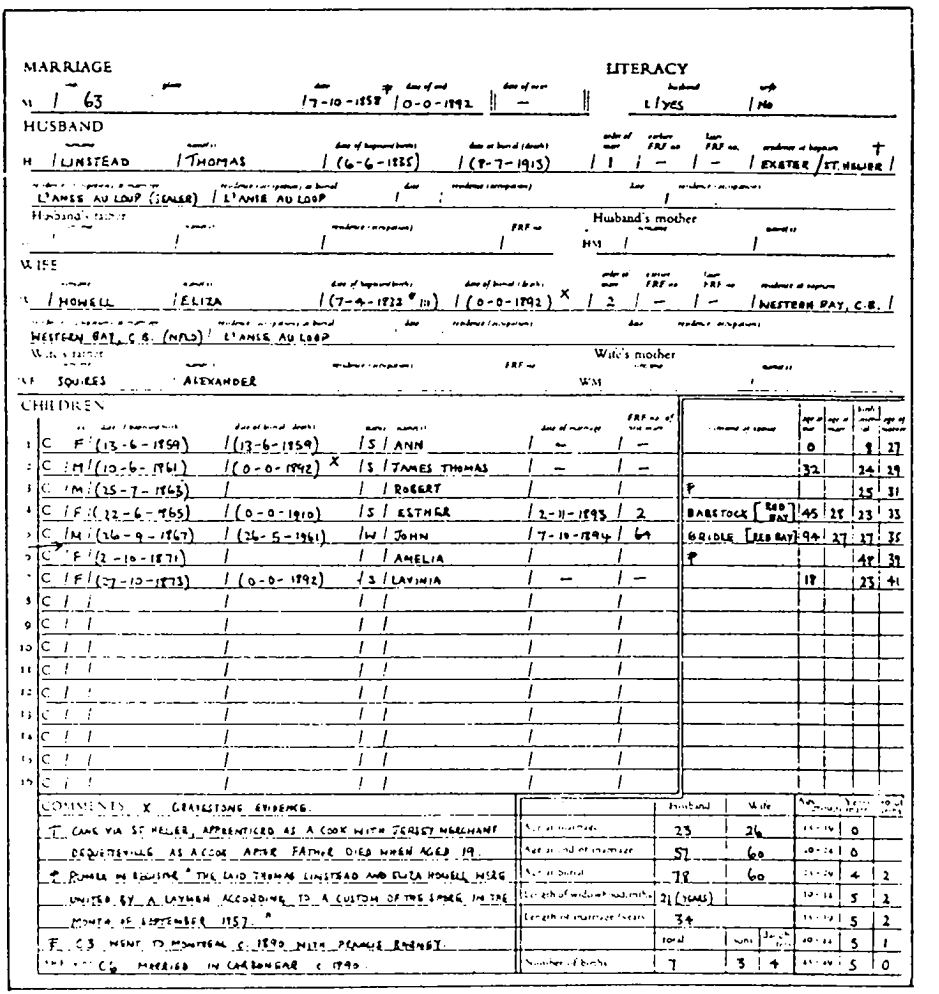


Reconstitution").[3] Together with other sources they allow us to form a detailed picture of how the demographic characteristics are related to many aspects of the economic and social life of colonial frontier Newfoundland.

Through family reconstitution it is possible to identify the date of arrival of the first settlers in localities on the two shores of the Strait of Belle Isle from the date they first appear on the register, usually at the time of marriage.[4] Although many potential settlers may have arrived in the area for the

Fig. 4.

Family Reconstitution Form: Linstead, Labrador Shore.



MARRIAGE

M / 63 / 17-10-1858 / 0-0-1892 / — / LITERACY husband: L / yes / wife: / No

HUSBAND

H / LINSTEAD / THOMAS / (6-6-1835) / (8-7-1913) / 1 / — / — / EXETER / ST. HELIER

L'ANSE AU LOUP (SEALER) / L'ANSE AU LOUP / Husband's mother / HM

WIFE

W / HOWELL / ELIZA / (7-4-1838 in) / (0-0-1892) X / 2 / — / — / WESTERN BAY, C.B.

WESTERN BAY, C.B. (NFLD) / L'ANSE AU LOUP / Wife's mother / WM

SQUIRES / ALEXANDER

CHILDREN

1	C	F	(13-6-1859)	(13-6-1859)	S	ANN	—	—			0		8	27
2	C	M	(10-6-1861)	(0-0-1892) X	S	JAMES THOMAS	—	—			32		24	29
3	C	M	(25-7-1865)			ROBERT				P			25	31
4	C	F	(22-6-1865)	(0-0-1910)	S	ESTHER	2-11-1893	2		BARETOCK [RED BAY]	45	28	23	33
5	C	M	(26-9-1867)	(26-5-1961)	W	JOHN	7-10-1894	69		GRIDLE [RED BAY]	94	27	27	35
6	C	F	(2-10-1871)			AMELIA				P			49	39
7	C	F	(27-10-1873)	(0-0-1892)	S	LAVINIA	—	—			18		23	41
8	C													
9	C													
10	C													
11	C													
12	C													
13	C													
14	C													
15	C													

COMMENTS: X GRAVESTONE EVIDENCE.

T. CAME VIA ST HELIER, APPRENTICED AS A COOK WITH JERSEY MERCHANT DESPOTTEVILLE AS A COOK AFTER FATHER DIED WHEN AGED 19.

* POWER IN ENGLAND * THE SAID THOMAS LINSTEAD AND ELIZA HOWELL WERE UNITED BY A LAYMAN ACCORDING TO A CUSTOM OF THE SPACE IN THE MONTH OF SEPTEMBER 1857 *

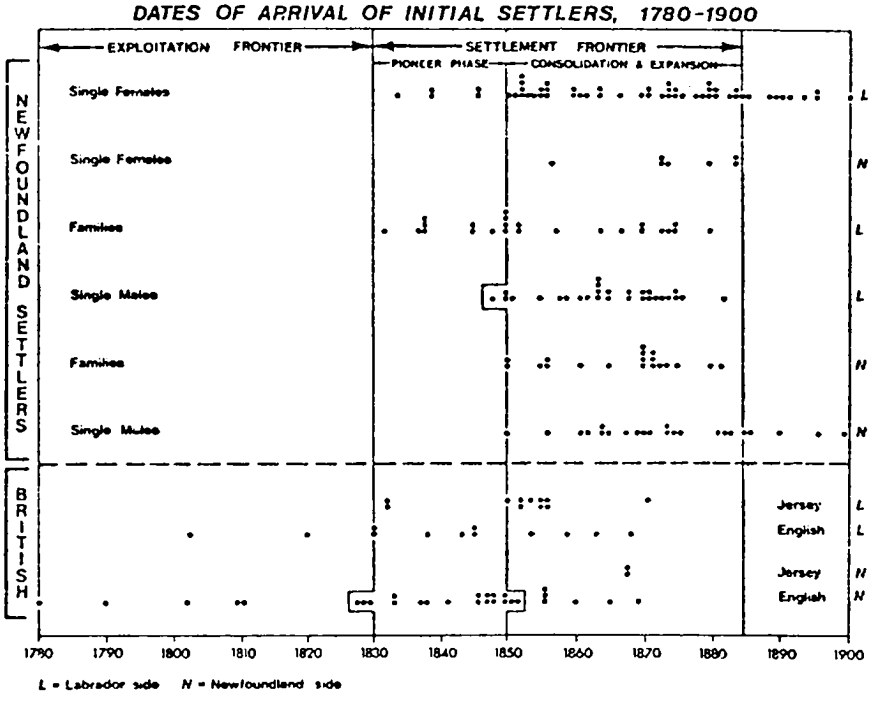
F. C.S. MENT TO MONTREAL C. 1890 WITH PEARCE ENNET.

C6 MARRIED IN CARBONEAR C 1900

	Husband	Wife			
Age at marriage	23	26		0	
Age at end of marriage	57	60		0	
Age at burial	78	60		4	2
Length of widowhood (widow/er)	21 (YEARS)			5	3
Length of marriage (years)	34			5	2
	total	sons	daughters	5	1
Number of births	7	3	4	5	0

first time long before this recorded date, they did not become settlers, for our purposes, until they either married, bore children or had their deaths recorded in the area. By plotting these dates, along with the place of origin and marital status of settlers (Fig. 5), it is possible to identify three phases in the establishment of permanent settlement of the Strait of Belle Isle which confirm and amplify the phases identified from the basic demographic data and displayed in Figure 1.

Fig. 5.

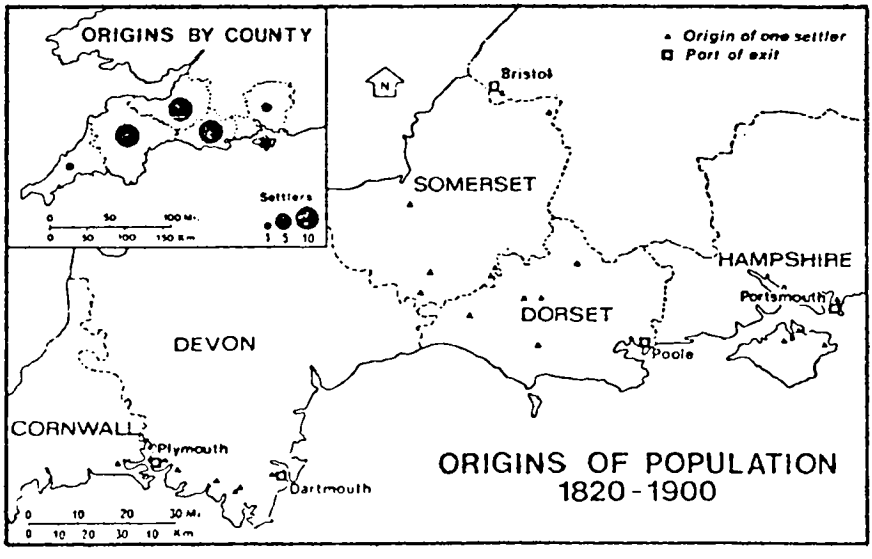


The first phase lasted until 1830 and was composed solely of single males of British origin. There was no immigration of women, and there were no indigenous females. The population, therefore, replaced itself entirely from without. Two of these men found wives from an adjacent area of Newfoundland. The daughters of one of these unions were of crucial importance in the next phase. During the following twenty years immigration and settlement rapidly increased and took on new characteristics. The majority of people arriving were still single men from Britain, but on the Labrador shore they were joined by a few families from Conception Bay, Newfoundland, some of whom also brought with them single girls in service. On this shore the daughters and the servant girls provided an ample supply of wives for these British males. (On the Newfoundland shore, by contrast, the only females were the daughters of the one family on this coast. Permanent settlement here, therefore, was seriously retarded.) This period between 1830 and 1850 is the true pioneer phase, since it was this group of settlers who made the first demographic (and also economic) commitment to the area. Finally between 1850 and 1880, immigration from Britain dwindled and was replaced by a large influx of settlers from the older settlements

along the east coast of the island. This immigration was highly channelled in that most places drew their settlers from only one or two communities in Newfoundland, and the customary sources varied from place to place. Once again differences are evident on the two shores. In this pioneer period, single male immigrants on the Newfoundland shore relied exclusively upon resident females or the daughters of in-migrating families for spouses, while on the Labrador shore single women were plentiful. After 1880 all immigration of males or families came to a complete halt.

It is also possible to identify from these records, as well as from information contained on gravestones, the county of origin in Britain of forty-three of a total of fifty-seven immigrants, and the precise village of origin for twenty-three. With the exception of three Scotsmen the British settlers came exclusively from Jersey and southwest England, especially Dorset, Devon and Somerset. Figure 6 shows the places of origin of these first permanent settlers.

Fig. 6.



The most striking characteristic of these settlers is that almost all came from inland areas, especially those near the border of Somerset and Dorset. This implies that most of the settlers did not come from seafaring backgrounds. Why these people entered the Newfoundland cod-fishery can only be understood in the context of the social and economic conditions of these rural areas. One of the most persistent folk traditions surrounding these original settlers was that they almost "all had a trade." This is supported by occupations recorded in death registers and on gravestones such

as butchers, carpenters, coopers, blacksmiths, tinsmiths, locksmiths, tailors and cooks. It may be that in some cases these were the trades of fathers, since most of the settlers were recruited as boys, or it could be that merchants apprenticed these young males (often straight from the poorhouses) to teach them particular trades. In any case, the majority of first settlers were rural artisans, not farm labourers. It is probable that rural artisans were more readily made redundant through industrialization than were farm workers. Moreover the area along the Somerset-Dorset border was an important centre of the old pre-industrial woollen trade. Joseph Bird of Sturminster Newton, an important fish merchant in the Strait from 1810 to 1870 and directly responsible for recruiting many of these settlers, was involved in the woollen trade prior to his interest in the Newfoundland fish trade. This seems to have been true of Jersey interests also.

For the remainder the pattern can be largely explained in terms of the drawing power of the various ports involved in the Newfoundland trade: Plymouth and Dartmouth in the earlier years, Poole and Portsmouth in the later period. Merchants located in these ports are known to have had establishments in the Strait area. These firms recruited shoremen from Britain until around 1870. However, from the 1850s they began to move their firms to the New World—either to St. John's or localities in outer Conception or Trinity Bays, or to Gaspé. Gradually fishermen and later shoremen were obtained increasingly from these areas and especially the overpopulated Magdalen Islands. However, only the Newfoundland-based shore crews settled.

Perhaps the most useful and certainly the most widespread application of family reconstitution techniques is in the analysis of the fertility and mortality characteristics of pre-census populations. They have been used here to reconstruct the demographic experience of the pioneer population in the Strait of Belle Isle during and immediately following the brief pioneer phase of settlement. Was frontier life as harsh and treacherous as folk myth would have us believe, and what was the impact of the New World experience on social attitudes, social structure and economic opportunity? From a strictly demographic point of view the list of unanswered or partially answered questions is enormous: what were the chances of surviving in colonial Newfoundland—better or worse than in the Old World? Did greater availability of land and economic activity there bring about significant changes in social mores surrounding marriage and childbearing? In order to answer these questions it is necessary to know a little about the demography of the pre-industrial West. It is the intention here, therefore, simply to summarize the pertinent evidence of the Old World antecedents as it relates to this account of settlement in the Strait.

Mortality in pre-industrial Europe was characterized by periodic crises interspersed with periods of average mortality. The major killers were

epidemics and pandemics affecting especially infants, children and mothers. These crises were not always related to availability of food, either directly through harvest failures or indirectly through high food prices, but instead to random changes in the prevalence of disease.[5] Death rates hovered between twenty and thirty per thousand of the total population, with cyclical crises being separated by long periods when the death rate was considerably below the birth rate. Mortality was much higher in urban areas than in the surrounding countryside. Crowding, combined with poor sanitation, hygiene, sewerage and diet conditions promoted a much greater incidence and spread of disease. Moreover periodic plagues and smallpox imported from overseas had particularly severe effects in port towns and large commercial centres such as London.[6]

Much more important for an understanding of New World demography, fertility in Western European society was drastically curtailed through celibacy and the postponement of marriage among a significant proportion of women. From about the sixteenth century males and females usually remained single until their late twenties or early thirties, wives were often older then their husbands and as many as 12 to 17 per cent of women were still single at forty-nine (Hajnal). Scholars are much less certain as to whether pre-industrial populations deliberately limited the size of families. Birth control within marriage seems to have been practiced among the aristocracy of Geneva as early as the seventeenth century and among the ordinary people of Colyton, Devon, in the eighteenth century.[7] But the bulk of evidence suggests that such practices were not widespread nor universal where they did exist, and that most likely until the late nineteenth century the large majority of people did not deliberately control fertility within marriage (see Coale and Knodel).

One of the most fascinating features emerging from the increasing number of historical demographic studies of pre-industrial Western Europe is that, while there are important similarities in the demography of nations in the pre-industrial West, especially in overall marriage patterns, there are also striking variations within one area and wide fluctuations over time. Variations seem to be particularly apparent in the age at marriage and proportions marrying, and these seem to have been linked most convincingly to differences in inheritance patterns, family structure, economic base and wealth.[8]

In light of the evidence presented here on fertility and mortality levels in the Old World we can now examine such questions as whether life in the New World in general and the Strait of Belle Isle in particular was harsher than the places from which these settlers came, and whether the radically different established institutions and economic opportunities faced by these pioneers were sufficient to alter the social mores surrounding marriage and childbearing. Table 1A summarizes the demographic history of this pioneer

TABLE 1A

THE COLONIAL FRONTIER DEMOGRAPHIC EXPERIENCE

Overall Characteristics and International Comparisons

Location	Date	Age at First Marriage (Years) M	F	Completed Family Size	Birth Interval (excluding penultimate & ult.)	Total Marital Fertility	Life Expectancy at Birth
New World							
Strait of	1850-1879	26.0	22.1	8.1	22.6	10.47	45.0
Belle Isle	1880-1909	25.9	21.6	5.5	23.4	8.07	42.0
Quebec (a)	1600-1699	27.7	22.0	7.1	23.6	10.20	47.5
	1700-1799	26.8	21.9	7.0			
New England	Pre-1691	27.4	22.0(b)	7.6(b)	27.7(c)		50.0(c)
Hingham (b)	1691-1715	28.4	24.7	4.6	24.1	7.83(c)	
Ipswich (c)	1716-1780	25.9	23.4	6.8		10.62(b)	
Old World							
Colyton,	1560-1646	27.2	27.0	6.4	27.5	10.73	43.0
Devon (d)	1647-1719	27.7	29.6	4.2	31.4	7.57	37.0
	1720-1769	25.7	26.8	4.4	29.1	9.05	42.0

Total Marital Fertility—The sum of the age specific marital fertility rates X 5

Sources: (a) Charbonneau (1975: 158, 195, 203, 210)
(b) Smith (1972: 169, 174, 175)
(c) Norton (1971: 445, 444, 441)
(d) Wrigley (1966: 86, 93, 87, plus pers. comm.)

TABLE 1B

Age at Marriage Among the Pioneer Generation

	Labrador Shore						*Newfoundland Shore*					
	Males			Females			Males			Females		
	No.	Age	S.D.	No.	Age	S.D.	No.	Age	S.D.	No.	Age	S.D.
English born, single on arrival— spouse	13	28.2	3.54	11	22.1	4.55	17	30.1	5.84	20	19.3	2.61
E. Coast, Nfld. born, married on arrival	18	34.5	10.35	15	26.1	5.67		n.d.			n.d.	
E. Coast, Nfld. born, single on arrival	19	27.5	3.24	20	23.0	3.70	5	26.3	7.83		—	
Indigenous Second Generation	25	26.9	6.09	29	20.8	3.78	36	24.2	3.93	37	19.1	3.03

population during and immediately following its brief frontier phase, and shows how it compares with similar phases in colonial New England and Quebec and with the Old World counties from which most of these settlers came (Demos, Greven, Smith "Demographic History," Charbonneau).

Adult mortality seems to have been somewhat lower in the New World than the Old, with the Strait of Belle Isle exhibiting levels somewhat higher than those evident in rural Quebec and New England, especially among women of childbearing age. Only 70 per cent of women who lived to the age of twenty could expect to survive until their fortieth birthday. Moreover, to the extent that the data can be relied on, child mortality also seems to have been high in the Strait. Completed family size, on the other hand, was much higher in the New World than in the Old World: the average New World completed family was composed of between seven and eight children compared with four to six in the Old World. Most of this difference in family size seems to be explained by the fact that women married for the first time as much as five to eight years earlier in the New World than in the Old World. At the same time relatively few women remained unmarried and widows remarried quickly. The evidence concerning marital fertility is much more contradictory. New England populations showed little or no difference in birth interval or age-specific fertility rates from those of the Old World, but the birth interval among the first generation of mothers in the Strait was shorter and age-specific marital fertility higher than in either the Old World or other parts of the New World—perhaps offsetting higher infant and child mortality.

Evidence from the Strait of Belle Isle, therefore, would on the surface support New England and Quebec studies (Smith, Greven, Norton, Charbonneau) that the crucial diagnostic feature of the New World frontier demographic experience was universally low age at marriage among women, along with some improvement in the chances of survival especially for women and children. However, the data also point to considerable variation in the colonial demographic experience. There seems to have been a marked difference between the Strait area and New England.

How can we interpret both the widespread differences in demography between New and Old World and the smaller but still significant differences among colonial New World patterns? Improved life chances supported by reduced birth spacing, where that exists, seem to suggest the removal of positive Malthusian checks, although the bias of New World family reconstitution studies towards isolated New England and Quebec communities begs the question that lower mortality might not have been as universal as once suspected. Indeed it would seem that maritime communities like those along the Strait of Belle Isle were more vulnerable to the importation of infectious diseases from outside than isolated inland communities, as indeed Vinovskis has shown for New England.

The fact that the major difference in fertility between the New and the Old World can be attributed to early age at first marriage would on the surface support the idea that traditional economic constraints on early marriage were removed in the New World. The "European pattern" of late marriage and celibacy has been associated with the fact that in Europe marriage required the prior establishment of an economic basis for the support of the couple and the prospective children (see Hajnal and Sklar). In the New World land was certainly in plentiful supply and inheritance, therefore, presumably not an obstacle to early marriage. Why then is it that early marriage in the New World was found exclusively among women? Men, who usually transmitted property and who usually had the responsibility of providing for the family, continued to marry in Quebec and New England as late as twenty-six or twenty-seven, much as they had in Europe. The evidence from agricultural Quebec and New England suggests then that either men were more conservative than women, or that inheritance was no easier in the New World than in the Old. D. Scott Smith's analysis of parental power and marriage patterns in Hingham, Massachusetts, suggests that men were indeed very conservative, fathers were for the most part unwilling to allow their sons to inherit or even move out while they themselves were still alive, and this according to Smith affected the man's age at first marriage until the mid or late eighteenth century ("Parental Power and Marriage Patterns").

There is much evidence to suggest, however, that on the frontier the age at first marriage was affected very profoundly by the imbalance between the sexes. The large discrepancy in age at first marriage between men and women in the New World—women being much younger than men at marriage—could be the result of the great shortage of women on the frontier. This is demonstrated very clearly in Table 1 B in the relative ages at first marriage of men and women on the Newfoundland shore of the Strait of Belle Isle, where the shortage of women was particularly acute: the average age at first marriage among the first English-born male immigrants was 30.1 compared with only 19.3 for their spouses; furthermore, the difference in age at marriage is most pronounced on the Newfoundland shore.

Age at first marriage in the Strait of Belle Isle, however, was on average at least one year lower than elsewhere in the New World despite the severe imbalance between the sexes, and among second-generation males it was lower still—twenty-five. Certainly oral evidence suggests that parental control over marrying and setting up a new home was not a factor in delaying marriage in Newfoundland in the mid-nineteenth century. However perhaps the marine rather than the land base of the economy, with its associated different patterns of inheritance, combined with the extended nature of the household—the economic unit not the family unit—might also have played significant roles in creating a radically different pattern there from those

described elsewhere in the New World.

Fishing, unlike farming, is a common property resource to which there is little restriction on access or entry. Moreover in earlier times it was customary in the Strait of Belle Isle for several nuclear families, each living in a separate house, to work as a single economic unit. They fished together and had a single account with the merchant. The father held the purse strings and gave supplies to his married sons and "all ate out of the same barrel of flour."[9] Oral tradition maintains that there was a strong motivation to marry early in order to gain social independence and subsequent economic independence by starting to accumulate the necessary capital equipment to set up "on one's own account." At the same time there was no problem of inheritance since a son continued to fish with his father and brothers on a co-operative share basis until his own sons were old enough to fish. Only at this point did division of land and fishing gear occur. Even then, gear could be relatively easily divided among sons, and a boat could be built at little cost over a winter. Only when waterfront space or fishing berths were at a premium did inheritance and hence marriage become economically constrained.

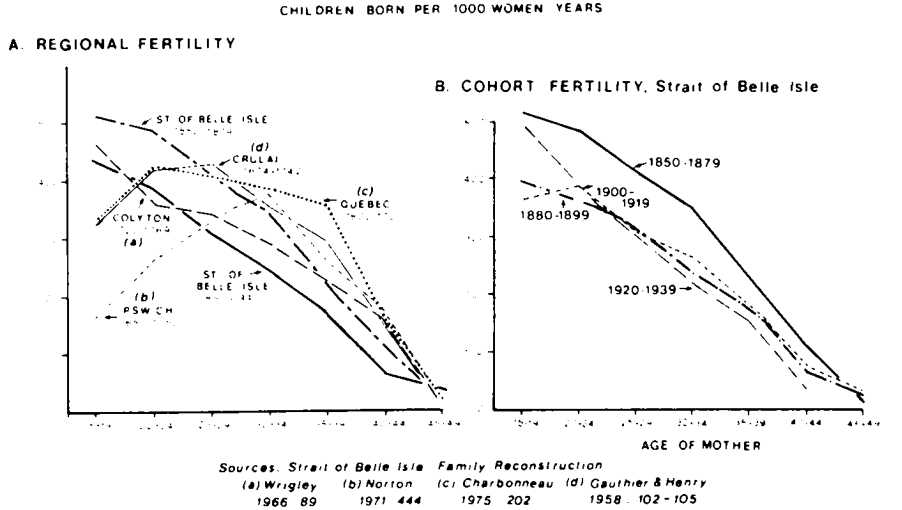
Once couples had married, fertility appears to have been high in both the Old and New Worlds. In early New England the birth interval was at least as great as in Colyton, Devon, but the Strait seems to have been slightly unusual, with an average birth interval four to six months shorter than elsewhere in the New World. However, this appears to have been true only during the first thirty years of settlement, and even then it is dubious whether overall fertility was greater than elsewhere. Age-specific marital fertility (Table 2) clearly fell rapidly in the 1880s after the frontier closed, and remained relatively stable thereafter. After 1880, therefore, fertility in the Strait was very similar to the levels obtaining in pre-industrial Devon. It also appears that even in the frontier phase fertility was no higher overall than elsewhere in the New World. Instead, while teenagers showed low levels of fertility in Quebec and New England, fertility was much higher in the latter compared with the Strait in the later years of life. Furthermore, the mother's average age at birth of the last child was only thirty-seven in the Strait, compared with forty in Devon and forty-three in New England.

One final point evident in both Tables 1 and 2 is the distinct change in demography following the close of the frontier after 1880. The frontier period in the Strait was associated with a low mean and a very low median age at marriage especially among women; relatively low adult mortality; and high levels of fertility, attributable to a particularly short mean interval between births. Similar characteristic features associated with frontier populations have been identified for the United States (Smith "Demographic History," Leet, Lefferts, and McInnis).

TABLE 2

PIONEER AND POST PIONEER DEMOGRAPHIC EXPERIENCE IN THE STRAIT OF BELLE ISLE

		Cohorts	
		1850-1879	1880-1909 (1880-1899)
Age at First Marriage:	Mean: Males	26.0	25.9
	Females	22.1	21.6
	Median: Males	22.6	24.0
	Females	19.0	19.7
Completed Family Size:		8.1	5.5
Birth Spacing:	All births	27.93	26.10
	Families with at least 5 birth events, excluding penultimate and ultimate births	22.6	23.4
Cumulative family size after 30 years of marriage, women of all marriage ages:		7.1	6.0 (5.6)
Total marital fertility:		10.47	8.07



Sources. Strait of Belle Isle Family Reconstruction
(a) Wrigley 1966 89 (b) Norton 1971 444 (c) Charbonneau 1975 202 (d) Gauthier & Henry 1958 102-105

In all cases this frontier phase passed quickly. In Massachusetts the end was clearly marked by a rise in the woman's age at marriage, along with a decline in the family size and a decrease in real fertility. At the same time there appears to have been a near-universal increase in mortality. In the Strait, likewise, family size dropped drastically after 1880 (8.1 to 5.5), but there the rise in age at marriage among women was much less obvious, only being noticeable in the median figure, which rose by almost one year. What seems to have been more important was an increase in mortality, especially among children and among women of childbearing age, and an increase in the mean birth interval of 1.5 months.

Thus it would seem that factors, such as the abundant availability of land and shortages of labour, which favoured significantly earlier marriage and high fertility among the first settlers in the Strait of Belle Isle as in the New World in general, equally prompted delays in marriage and curtailment on fertility when such opportunities were no longer as abundant. It would also seem that far from there being a radical difference between the New and Old World demography, such changes as did occur were conservative rather than innovative. That is, the first settlers chose traditional rather than new demographic responses to new economic conditions. The possible exception is the long-term and persistent effect of the shortage of women in the early colonial New World (especially compared with an excess in Old World rural areas) drastically lowering the age at marriage among women and resulting in turn in significantly higher birth rates.

In North America, and particularly on its newer peripheries, the world we thought lost is not really lost at all. In Europe, the Old World was mythologized as a result of a kind of history that looked at Great Men and the results of their labours, leaving us with a vague notion of a large mass of suffering peasantry who remained faceless. North America has had an equivalent myth. The New World *we* have lost is the frontier of Daniel Boone and Wild Bill Hickock, of Jolliet, La Salle, and La Vérendrye and his sons, behind whom stands another faceless mass of stalwart men and women: "homesteaders" and pioneers seeking a return to a simpler and freer existence within the hardships of an alien land. As Laslett and others have given a face to the common man in the Old World, we can now likewise gain recognition for him in the New.

Notes

[1]All historical demographic studies of New England have pointed to an under-registration of deaths in the order of 40% to 80%. See the reports of Norton, Lockridge and Cassedy.

[2]This technique was pioneered by Louis Henry and can be traced in Henry; Henry and Fleury; and Gauthier and Henry. He defined his method in *Le Manuel de démographie historique* in 1956, and this was updated and expanded in Fleury and Henry (1965). Family reconstitution was developed and applied to English parish registers in the following year in Wrigley, "Family Reconstitution."

[3]Other chapters in Wrigley's *An Introduction to English Historical Demography* discuss further techniques of historical analysis using parish registers and manuscript censuses and provide interesting discussions of local history. A more recent discussion of family reconstitution techniques is Wrigley, "Some Problems of Family Reconstitution Using English Parish Register Material: The Example of Colyton."

[4]This process of immigration and initial settlement is examined in detail in Thornton, "The Demographic and Mercantile Bases of Initial Permanent Settlement in the Strait of Belle Isle."

[5]The classic family reconstitution study of demographic crises is Goubert. For more recent work on this topic, although not using the reconstitution technique, see the studies of Drake (1962) and Appleby.

[6]In pre-industrial London periodic plague and other diseases made for a net loss of population, which was made up for by massive in-migration from the surrounding countryside. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries London absorbed the total natural increase from these rural areas (Wrigley, *Population and History*). This differential increased in the nineteenth century (Woods).

[7]Henry, *Anciennes familles genevoises*, and Wrigley, "Family Limitation in Pre-Industrial England," 91-98.

[8]Berkner and Mendels; Sklar; Brox; and Drake, *Population and Society in Norway* and "Age at Marriage in the Pre-Industrial West."

[9]For a detailed discussion of family and inheritance on the Newfoundland side of the Strait of Belle Isle, see Firestone. Greven found a similar form of extended household structure among the early colonists in Andover, Massachusetts, which he calls a "modified extended family."

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