

CHAPTER V.—VITAL STATISTICS.¹

The collection of vital statistics commenced in Canada, as in England, with the registration of baptisms, marriages and burials by the ecclesiastical authorities. These registers, maintained by the priests from the first settlement of the country, have made it possible for the vital statistics of the French colony to be compiled from the year 1610.² In the beginning only one copy of such records was made but in 1678 the Sovereign Council of Quebec ordered that in future such records should be made in duplicate, and that one copy, duly authenticated, should be delivered to the civil authorities. This arrangement was continued after the cession of the country to Great Britain, and was extended to the newly-formed Protestant congregations by an Act of 1795, but the registration among these latter remained seriously defective, both in Lower Canada and in the new province of Upper Canada.

In English-speaking Canada vital statistics were from the commencement incomplete, the pioneer settlers often going out into the wilds far from the authority of government and the ministrations of religion. While a law existed in Upper Canada requiring ministers of religion to deposit duplicates of their registers of baptisms, marriages and deaths with the clerks of the peace for transmission to the Provincial Secretary, this law remained practically a dead letter. Again, the efforts made to secure records of births and deaths at the censuses of 1851 and 1861 produced most unsatisfactory and even ridiculous results, as was pointed out by Dr. J. C. Taché, Secretary of the Board of Registration and Statistics, in a memorial published in the report of the Canadian Minister of Agriculture for 1865. Nevertheless, in spite of the inherent unsoundness of securing, at a point of time in a decennial census, a record of births and deaths occurring over a considerable period of time, this method was persisted in down to 1911, when the obviously untrustworthy character of the results obtained led to the discarding of the data obtained at the inquiry.

The Dominion Government instituted in the early '80's a plan for compiling the annual mortuary statistics of cities of 25,000 population and over, by subsidizing local boards of health to supply the information under special regulations. A beginning was made with the five cities of Montreal, Toronto, Hamilton, Halifax and Saint John. By 1891 the list had grown to 25, at a time when in most of the provinces the only birth and death statistics were those of the municipalities. Upon the organization of provincial bureaus of vital statistics, however, this work was abandoned, though a conference of Dominion and provincial officials, held in 1893, passed a resolution calling upon the provincial and Dominion authorities to co-operate in the work of collecting, compiling and publishing the vital statistics of the Dominion. This resolution had no immediate practical results in securing accurate or comparable vital statistics.

Since Confederation each of the provinces of the Dominion has enacted its own legislation on vital statistics and administered such legislation according to its own individual methods. While the vital statistics of Ontario were published in considerable detail annually from 1871, the arrangements for the collection of data were unsatisfactory. Only in 1906 was the publication of vital statistics begun in

¹ This chapter has been revised by E. S. Macphail, Chief, Demography Branch, Dominion Bureau of Statistics. A list of the publications of this Branch will be found in Chapter XXIX, Section I, under "Population".

² For a summary of the vital statistics of the Roman Catholic population from 1610 to 1883, see the Statistical Year Book of Quebec, 1921, English or French edition, p. 51. For details by years of this movement of population, see Vol. V of the Census of Canada, 1871, pp. 160-265, and Vol. IV of the Census of Canada, 1881, pp. 134-145.