

CHAPTER V.—VITAL STATISTICS.*

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.† The system of registration by the clergy was continued after the cession of the country to the British, and was extended to the newly-formed Protestant congregations of Lower Canada by an Act of 1795, but the registration, particularly of births, among these latter remained seriously defective, both in Lower Canada and in the new province of Upper Canada, the pioneer settlers often going out into the wilds far from the authority of government and the ministrations of religion. An early attempt was made to remedy the situation through the census by including a schedule requesting births and deaths for the preceding year, but the efforts made to secure records of births and deaths at the Censuses of 1851 and 1861 produced most unsatisfactory results. 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 followed down to 1911, when the obviously untrustworthy character of the results led to the discarding of the data obtained at the inquiry.

In English-speaking Canada, the earlier scheme of registration of baptisms, burials, and marriages by the clergy was succeeded after Confederation by Acts for the enforcement of registration of births, marriages, and deaths, with the civil authorities. Such Acts were passed in Nova Scotia in 1864, in Ontario in 1869, in British Columbia in 1872, in Manitoba in 1881, in New Brunswick in 1887, and in Prince Edward Island in 1906. The provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta were not established until 1905 and, until provincial Acts were passed after this date, civil registration in these provinces was governed by ordinances for the Northwest Territories, the first of which was passed in 1888.

The Dominion Government instituted in the early '80's a plan for compiling the annual mortuary statistics of cities of 25,000 population or 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.

* This chapter has been revised by W. R. Tracey, B.A., Chief, Vital Statistics, Dominion Bureau of Statistics. A list of the publications of this Branch will be found in Chapter XXIX, Sec. 1, under "Population".

† 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.