

Perspectives on Finnish Settlement in Canada

(1901–1991)



Oiva Saarinen

Immigration and ethnic diversity constitute important aspects of Canadian life (Wilson 1994, 5). In fact, Canada has been described as being a truly international nation featuring a "cultural mosaic" tradition in contrast to that of the United States which has often been portrayed as a "melting pot" society. Canada today contains over 100 distinct ethnic and cultural communities. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Canadian government has a longstanding tradition of providing a wealth of census data and other forms of information to reflect this multicultural setting. This material provides a useful framework for assessing the special contribution made by Finns to the fashioning of the Canadian ethnic mosaic in the period from 1901 to 1991.

Immigration

The pattern of Finnish immigration to Canada is shown in Figure 1. While the majority of the Finnish immigrants came to Canada directly from Finland, some arrived via the United States or other countries such as Sweden. Finns came to Canada in three major waves.

The first wave, consisting of more than 20 700 migrants, occurred between 1901 and World War I. This migratory move-

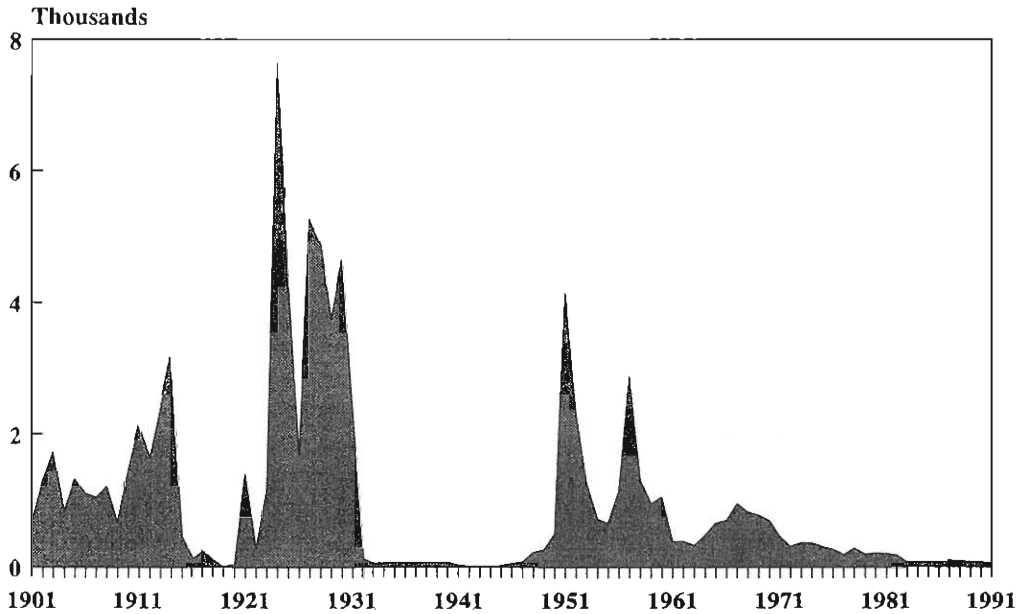
ment, however, was probably larger than the official statistics indicate. For example, Finns were sometimes classified as either Swedes or Russian. As well, the open nature of the border between the United States and Canada created a floating migratory labour force that made it difficult to determine an immigrant's real country of residence.

The second wave, which began in 1921, gained strength in 1924 and continued until 1931. The momentum of the 1920s could be partially attributed to the impact of immigration restrictions to the United States introduced between 1921 and 1924. Some 37 000 Finns arrived in Canada during the period. Many subsequently went to the United States or returned to Finland.

The third peak took place between 1950 and 1960 at which time almost 17 000 Finns came to Canada. The gradual reduction in the Finnish migratory flow after the 1960's was influenced by the introduction of the point system and the abolition of discrimination arising from changes in Canadian immigration policy in the 1960s and 1970s. The growing popularity of Sweden as an alternative destination for the Finns was also important. Overall, the immigration records indicate that more than 87 500 Finnish immigrants came to Canada between 1901–1991. This number constituted approximately 0.8% of the total immigration flow to Canada for the same period.

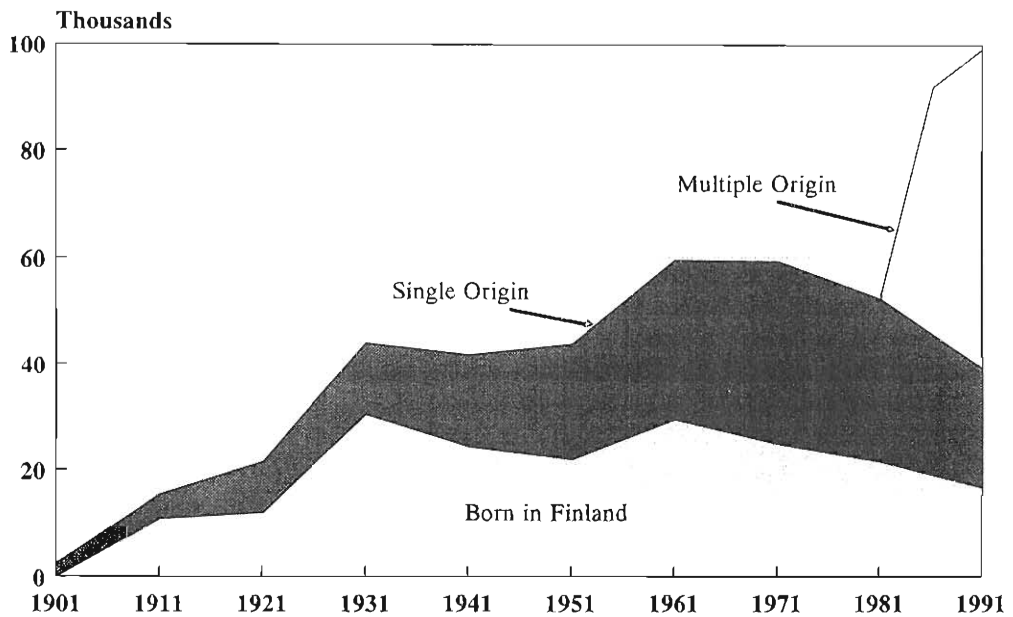
Oiva Saarinen, Associate Professor, Laurentian University, Sudbury, Ontario, Canada

Figure 1. Finnish Immigration to Canada (1901–1991)



Source: Employment (Citizenship) and Immigration Canada

Figure 2. Finns in Canada by Origin and Birthplace (1901–1991)



Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Canada (1901–1991)

The character of Finnish immigration throughout the century has involved other changes as well. For example, whereas women constituted only 30% of the total number of Finns in Canada at the turn of the century, by 1991 this figure had risen to more than 53%. A more contemporary trend related to the migratory flow of the 1980's pertains to the number of non-immigrant Finns with various forms of temporary status. In 1987, for instance, it was estimated that there were more than 900 Finns in Canada with student/employment authorizations or visitor status. Thus, immigration statistics alone can no longer be used to determine the actual number of people of Finnish origin in Canada.

Numbers and Birthplace

The number of people by Finnish single and multiple origins and birthplace in Canada from 1901 to 1991 is illustrated in Figure 2. It should be noted that while the published census data for Canada only records Finns from 1901, a selective review of original census returns for 1871, 1881 and 1891 shows that Finns were present in Canada as early as the 1870's. From 2 502 in 1901 the number of Finns first peaked at 43 745 in 1931 before declining slightly in 1941. The numbers then increased again, culminating in a record high number of 59 436 in 1961. Since then the number of Finns has dropped; by 1991 only 39 230 persons were recorded as having a single form of Finnish ancestry.

The historical interpretation of ethnicity must be tempered somewhat because of the varying definitions of what constitutes "ethnicity" in Canada. Until the 1971 census only the respondent's paternal ancestry was reported and only one origin could be captured. Beginning in the 1981 census both of

these earlier restrictions were removed. One effect of these changes was a reduction in the number of Finns responding in the more familiar "single" origin category; another impact was the introduction of a new group of "multiple" origin respondents with only partial links to Finnish culture.

The results of these changes were striking. In the 1986 census, 44.4% of all the 91 340 Finnish ethnic origin responses (40565) were single; for the 1991 census, 39.6 per cent of the total 99 095 respondents (39 230) gave similar responses. Of the latter total, however, 60.4 per cent (59 865) actually represented individuals with only a partial rather than full attachment to the Finnish ethnic culture. Studies undertaken by Statistics Canada indicate that the older Finnish immigrants tend to give single origin responses whereas the younger non-immigrants favour multiple origins. While it can be inferred that the high level of multiple responses serves as evidence of the dilution of Finnish ethnicity, the counter argument can also be made that it represents the ongoing maintenance of Finnish roots on the part of individuals with varied cultural backgrounds.

The proportion of the Finnish-Canadians whose birthplace is shown as Finland is also illustrated in Figure 2. Prior to World War I, 71 per cent of the Finnish-Canadian population had their birthplaces in Finland; by the 1950s and 1960s, however, this ratio had dropped to around 50 per cent. According to the 1991 Census, 43 per cent of the 39 230 Finns showing a single origin indicated Finland as their birthplace.

Distribution

The distribution of persons of Finnish origin in Canada is shown in Table 1. The

Table 1. Distribution of Finnish Settlement in Canada (1901–1991)

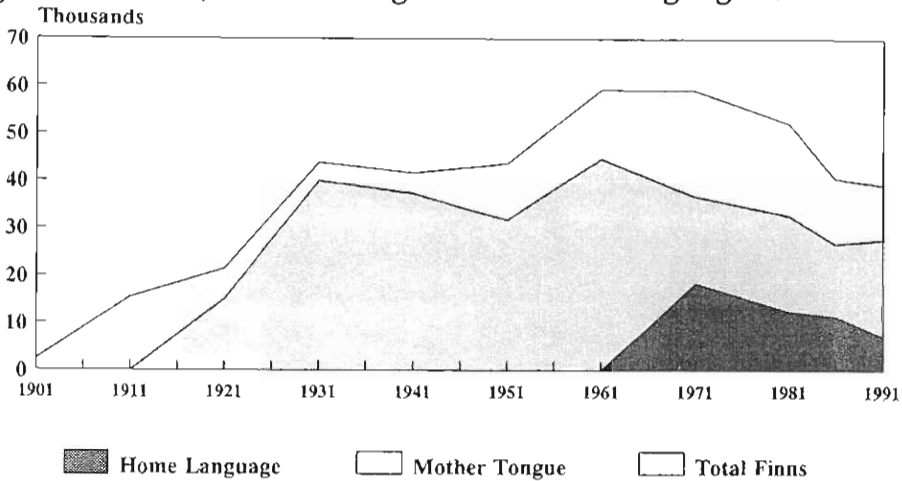
Year	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991
Finnish population										
single origin	2 502	15 497	21 494	43 885	41 683	43 745	59 436	59 215	52 315	39 230
multiple origin										59 865
Newfoundland	-	-	-	-	-	31	36	45	70	15
Prince Edward Island	-	-	1	1	1	7	16	-	10	15
Nova Scotia	-	43	45	99	96	159	254	235	260	120
New Brunswick	-	24	35	135	109	149	165	145	95	100
Quebec	-	216	76	2 973	2 043	1 600	2 277	1 865	1 140	735
Ontario	-	8 619	12 835	27 137	26 827	29 327	39 906	38 515	33 400	25 470
Manitoba	-	1 080	506	1 013	808	821	1 070	1 450	1 060	665
Saskatchewan	-	1 008	1 937	2 313	1 940	1 805	1 891	1 725	1 280	1 045
Alberta	-	1 588	2 926	2 318	3 452	2 958	3 662	3 590	4 130	2 365
British Columbia	-	2 858	3 112	6 858	6 332	6 790	10 037	11 510	10 810	8 620
Yukon Territory	-	61	21	34	55	50	72	95	30	55
Northwest Territory	-	-	-	4	20	48	50	35	40	35

Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Canada 1901–1991

basic settlement pattern was established early in the century when Ontario, the Prairie Provinces (Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba) and British Columbia emerged as the most favoured destinations.

Prior to World War I more than one-half of all the Finnish settlers in Canada could be found in Ontario; by 1991 this proportion had increased to almost 65 per cent. While the Prairies served as the secondary destination until 1921, this position was subsequently taken over by British Columbia. By 1991 one out of very five Finnish-Canadians could be found in British Columbia. The Atlantic Provinces (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland) and the Northern Territories (Yukon and Northwest) were never successful in attracting many of the Finnish immigrants (see, for example, Roinila 1992). In the Province of Quebec, only Montreal managed to attract any significant number of Finns (Laine 1989 7–8).

In the early years of the century, Finnish-Canadians showed a preference for rural areas. In 1921, for example, only one-third could be found in urban settlements. While urbanization rose to 46 per cent by 1931, the majority of the urban Finns (82 per cent) could still be found in the smaller communities of 30 000 or less. Regardless of where they lived, the Finns exhibited a higher than average propensity towards segregation and a lower tendency to become naturalized Canadian citizens (Statistics Canada 1931, 545, 639 and 671). The emergence of the Finns as a urbanized group by 1951, however, indicated that a break from the past isolationist pattern had finally occurred. Since then, there has been an increasing tendency for this ethnic group, like other Canadians, to settle in the larger centres. By 1991, some 25 355 Finns, or 65 per cent of total, could be found in one of Canada's twenty-five metropolitan centres of over 100000 population. Of these centres, the most important were

Figure 3. Finnish, Mother Tongue and Home Language* (1901–1991)

Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Canada (1901–1991)

*Mother tongue for 1921 includes only those over 10 years old

Toronto (with 6 000 single origin Finns), Thunder Bay (5805), Vancouver (4455) and Sudbury (3340).

Mother Tongue and Home Language

The Canadian Census can be used to interpret the Finnish-Canadian population according to its demolinguistic character. Among the types of language data provided are those related to the concepts of mother tongue and home language. Mother tongue refers to the first language learned at home and still understood by an individual at the time of the census. Mother tongue data was first collected in 1921 for Finns over 10 years of age; thereafter, it covered the entire Finnish ethnic group.

Home language, on the other hand, is defined as the language currently spoken, or most often spoken, by an individual at home. Information dealing with home language is available from 1971.

A comparison of mother tongue and home language can be used to assess the

process of language maintenance and transfer. Language maintenance occurs when Finnish is used both as a mother tongue and home language whereas language transfer is said to have taken place when the language most often used at home differs from the mother tongue.

As shown in Figure 3, the retention of Finnish as a mother tongue remained high until World War II; by 1961 the proportion of Finnish Canadians with some knowledge of the language had declined to around 75 per cent. According to the most recent 1991 data, the comparable figure for Finns of single origin is 71 per cent. The use of Finnish as a home language, however, reveals a different pattern. In 1971, only 31 per cent of Finnish-Canadians used the language regularly at home; by 1991, the proportion had dropped to approximately 18 per cent. This data indicates that significant language transfer had already occurred by 1971 and that the trend away from the day-to-day use of the Finnish language continued unabated throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Table 2. Religious Affiliation of Finnish-Canadians (1931–1981)

Year	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981
Total	43 885	41 683	43 745	59 436	59 215	52 315
Affiliation (%)						
Lutheran	87.7	85.5	75.8	70.2	60.3	59.4
United	3.9	5.6	10.3	12.8	12.6	10.9
Roman Catholic	1.3	2.0	3.7	4.9	5.9	4.8
Pentecostal	0.0	0.4	-	1.3	2.2	4.2
Anglican	1.5	2.2	3.8	4.4	4.3	3.3
Presbyterian	2.1	2.0	2.5	1.8	2.1	1.6
Other/ No Preference	3.4	2.1	3.9	4.5	12.4	15.7

Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Canada 1931-1981.

Table 3. Finnish Ethnic Origins By Selected Age Groups

Age	1931 (%)		1991 (% Single Origin)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
-15	10.1	9.9	3.4	3.3
15-24	9.9	10.4	4.4	4.4
25-44	28.0	16.8	14.9	15.3
45-64	8.8	4.7	15.6	17.6
65+	0.8	0.5	8.5	12.6
Total	57.6	42.3	46.8	53.2

Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Canada 1931 and 1991.

Religion

Published information for the religious affiliations of the Finnish-Canadian population is available only for the 1931–1981 censuses. As Table 2 reveals, the majority of Finns have traditionally been strong proponents of the Lutheran faith. This support has ranged from a high of 88 per cent in 1931 to a low of 59 per cent by 1981. The United Church has continually been the second affiliation of choice, with support for it growing from 4 to 11 per cent in the same interval. While of lesser importance, some adherence has been given to the Roman Catholic, Pentecostal and Anglican faiths. An interesting trend has been the growing importance of the Pentecostal Church during the 1960s and 1970s. A growing secularization trend can be discerned as the proportion of Finnish-

Canadians indicating no religious affiliation grew from 3.4 per cent in 1931 to more than 15 per cent by 1981.

Age Groupings

Census data allows for the temporal analysis of the Finnish-Canadian population by genderbased age groupings. Table 3 provides a revealing comparison of this ethnic characteristic for the two census years 1931 and 1991. The age group comparison serves to affirm the male to female transition of the Finnish ethnic grouping discussed above. As well, it can be taken to illustrate the maturation of the Finns from a youthful grouping in 1931 to one that had aged considerably by 1991.

In 1931, 20 per cent of all Finnish-Canadians were 15 years of age or less; however, by 1991, the comparable figure

was less than 7 per cent. In 1931, on the other hand, only 1.3 per cent were 65 years of age or over; this proportion stands in strong contrast to the figure of more than 21 per cent indicated for 1991.

Summary

A number of general observations can be gleaned from the above statistical presentation. First, the driving force behind the emergence of a Finnish ethnic group in Canada came in the form of three major waves of migration associated with the pre-World War I period, the 1920s and 1950s.

Second, these migratory waves over time have featured a gradual gender reorientation from male to female dominance. Third, Finnish settlement in Canada began early in the 1870s, peaked in the 1961–1971 period, and has since declined substantially. Fourth, the majority of Canadians associated with the Finnish ethnic group since 1986 have reported mixed rather than single origins. Fifth, since less than one-half of the single origin Finnish-Canadians now report birthplaces other than Finland, the cultural group has come to reflect a non-immigrant orientation. Sixth, the distribution of the Finns in Canada has remained relatively constant, showing a predisposition for settlement in Ontario, British Columbia and the Prairie Provinces; within this provincial framework, there has been some urban concentration associated with the Toronto, Thunder Bay, Vancouver, and Sudbury metropolitan areas. Seventh, a significant process of language transfer, already under way by 1971, has continued to the present day. Eighth, while the Finnish ethnic group in Canada has continued to favour the Lutheran religion, some alle-

The high proportion of seniors suggests that there will be a significant drop shown in the 1996 Census for the Finnish single origin and mother tongue/home language responses.

giance can also be found with respect to the United, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal and Anglican churches; a growing secularization trend can likewise be ascertained.

Finally, the immigrant Finnish group has now come to feature a high degree of aging. At first glance, the above analysis presents a bleak prospect for the future survival of the Finns as a distinctive ethnic group in Canada. Indeed, as Lindstrom-Best concludes elsewhere, the Finnish population in Canada has now essentially become an indistinguishable part of Canadian society (Lindstrom-Best, 1985, 18). On a more positive note, however, it warrants mention that, in addition to the 39 230 single origin Finns recorded in the 1991 Census, approximately 40 per cent of the other 59 865 Canadians who affirmed multiple links to Finnish culture were 15 years of age or less.

According to one recent government publication, this data can be used to support the contention that the Finns in Canada "may in fact be becoming more aware of their origins than ever before" (Canadian Heritage 1994, 3). This conclusion is pertinent from a policy framework as it suggests that there remains fertile ground both for the ongoing promotion of the Finnish heritage in Canada and for the continued fostering of ethnic linkages with Finland.

Literature

Canadian Heritage, Policy Coordination and Strategic Planning: *Citizenship and Canadian Identity: Ethnic Origins in Canada 1986/1991: A Graphic Overview* (Ottawa, January, 1994)

Laine, Edward W.: *Archival Sources for the Study of Finnish Canadians*, (Ottawa, National Archives of Canada, Ethnocultural Series, 1989)

Lindstrom-Best, Varpu, *The Finns in Canada* (Ottawa, Canadian Historical Association, 1985)

Roinila, Mika: "The Finns of Atlantic Canada," *Terra*, 104:1 (1992, 35–44).

Statistics Canada: *Censuses of Canada 1901–1991* (Ottawa): *Census of Canada 1931*, Vol. XIII, Monographs (Ottawa)

Wilson, J. Donald: "Multiculturalism and Immigration Policy in Canada: the Last Twenty-Five Years," *Siirtolaisuus-Migration*, (1994:2)