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Emigration from Canada to the United States in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

To many people living in the United States, Canada barely registers on their mental radar screens. If they think about Canada at all, they most likely imagine it as a mere geographic entity—a huge chunk of frigid continent stretching from coast to coast and up to the Arctic Circle, responsible for much of our bad weather. If they think further, they might associate Canada with universal health care or with the constant bickering between French and Anglo Canadians. They might have learned that Canada provided a haven for African Americans escaping slavery and for antiwar Americans escaping service in the draft during the Vietnam era. They might even know the names of some famous Canadians: celebrities and rock stars like Avril Lavigne, Jim Carrey, Mike Myers, and the late newscaster Peter Jennings.

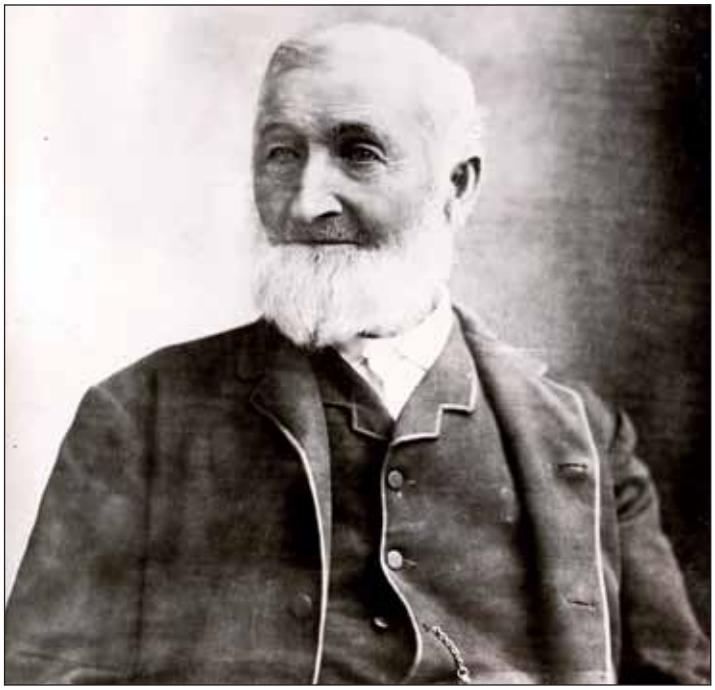
But few would think that throughout the nineteenth century, Canada was a constant source of population and workforce for the United States. In fact, Canadian day-laborers, small farmers, and tradesmen began to cross the border in large numbers as the American economy experienced its industrial take-off in the antebellum era, participating as well in the agricultural frontier west of the Ohio Valley. With the unprecedented industrial expansion that followed the American Civil War, Canadian men and women—often along with their families—headed south over the 49th parallel in ever increasing numbers, bringing their labor power to virtually all sectors of the U.S. economy. By the end of the nineteenth century, the number of Canadian-born living in the United States was equal to 22 percent of Canada's total population and those who throughout the century had moved and settled permanently in the United States were estimated at nearly 1.8 million.

Canadian migrants travel from Manitoba to the United States by ox train, 1873. (Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada)

Their number would continue to rise during the twentieth century, reaching the 2.8 million mark by 1940 and making Canada by far the leading source of immigrants within the Western Hemisphere (1). During the post-World War II era, Canada emerged again as a leading donor, in some years ranking first among the various countries of immigration. To be sure, Canada's overall contribution did not equal that of leading donor countries such as Germany, Italy, or Ireland; yet, unlike those countries whose migrating populations chose—besides the United States—a variety of other destinations across the globe, virtually the whole of Canada's out-migration took place across the border and into the U.S. This almost uninterrupted population flow, along with the high rate of permanent settlement, make Canadian emigration to the United States a key dimension of the demographic and economic development of the North American continent.

The participation of Canadians to the cross border population flow was so widespread as to make this migration movement truly continental in scale. Moreover, contrary to the long held view that the migrants were primarily French Canadians, Anglo Canadians were an even more important component of the movement in absolute numbers, and their out-migration followed patterns that, as we shall see below, were comparable to those of French Canadians. But despite its continental scale, Canadian migration to the U.S. makes more historical sense when observed within a regional framework. Whether departing from the western provinces, or from Central Canada, or still from the Atlantic section of the country, Canadians tended to choose nearby states and quite often U.S. border counties. Thus, with very few exceptions, Canadians departing from the Atlantic provinces headed to the New England states, as did a large majority of French Canadians leaving Quebec (a province bordering the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York). Similarly, Ontario—by far the most important donor province—contributed the vast majority of its out-migrating population (more than two out of three) to the neighboring states of Michigan and New York.

Geographic proximity largely explains the short and medium range of much of Canadian out-migration as well as the regional character it assumed. Throughout its history, the majority of Canada's population has been spread along the country's southern belt, at distances ranging within 100 miles from the Canada/U.S. boundary, leading some observers to qualify Canada as a "borderland society." Moreover, with the arrival and consolidation of the railroads, the transcontinental and regional railway networks of the two countries became increasingly integrated, making travelling to most chosen U.S. destinations a one-day affair, when not less.



Samuel Odgen Edison, Jr., father of Thomas Edison, migrated from Canada to the U.S. (Courtesy of National Park Service, Thomas Edison National Historical Park)

During much of the nineteenth century, the relative freedom of movement across the border had facilitated what historians Marcus Lee Hansen and John B. Brebner called "the mingling" of Canadians and Americans, thus providing Canadian prospective migrants with knowledge of economic conditions and opportunities existing south of the border (2). By the time U.S. industrial manufacturing penetrated these transborder regions, especially in states like Maine, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Michigan, and Washington, exerting their labor pull on the surrounding populations, for many hard-pressed Canadians who entered those new labor markets it was like perpetuating migration traditions that had survived from the previous agrarian era through generations (3). Moreover, for many other Canadians, migrating to U.S. locations was just one step to subsequent migrations that took them further south, to states like Massachusetts or Rhode Island in the East, Ohio and Illinois in the Midwest, and California, in the Pacific region.

A carpenter from Nova Scotia, Angus Crowdis was one of many Canadians who embodied this pattern. In 1922 he crossed the border in Detroit, Michigan, and after a short stint in "Motown," he headed to Buffalo, New York, in search of a better job. Eventually, he ended-up in Everett, Massachusetts, where a friend helped him find more satisfactory employment (4). During the first three decades of the twentieth century, nearly 90 percent of all migrating Anglo Canadians and nearly 92 percent of all migrating French Canadians chose locations in U.S. border states or in states immediately south of them (5).

The participation of Canadian society in the southward migration movement was so widespread that angry politicians and community leaders used the term "exodus" to denounce what they saw as a quasi-apocalyptic loss of population and human resources to the United States. Whether the term was appropriate or not, emigration did affect most sectors of Canadian society, both agrarian and urban, giving rise to virtually all patterns associated with this social phenomenon. Some Canadians sojourned temporarily in the United States and then resumed life back in their communities, in some cases repeating their sojourns several times during their lifetime. For others, migration meant a permanent move. Some left as unmarried young adults—both men and women—others did so in family units. When border immigration records became accessible to researchers, it was found that from the turn of the twentieth century until the Great Depression brought the movement to a temporary decline, Canadian outmigrants, both French and Anglo Canadians, constituted primarily a young population overwhelmingly belonging to age groups below 45 years. Moreover, the significant presence of children aged 14 and less (approximately 20 percent of the total migrating population) suggests the centrality of family migration (6).

As in most nineteenth- and twentieth-century migration movements that converged to the United States, Canadian migrants too left

The Crisscrossing Edisons

Thomas Edison may seem to provide the ultimate American success story. He grew up in the midwestern American towns of Milan, Ohio, and Port Huron, Michigan; he industriously sold candy, farm produce, and newspapers on the route from Port Huron to Detroit during the Civil War; he became a crack telegraph operator in Michigan and Kentucky; and before long, he relocated to the industrial hub of New Jersey, where the brilliant inventor soon became known as the "Wizard of Menlo Park." But Edison's family story is as much a Canadian as an American one.

Edison's great -grandfather John Edeson (pronounced Ae-di-son), arrived in New Jersey in 1730 from Holland with his mother. In 1765, he married Sarah Ogden, the daughter of a wealthy English family. During the American Revolution, John remained loyal to the Crown. Arrested in 1777, "Tory John" escaped execution only with the intervention of his wife's family, who were influential patriots. In 1784, escorted by a British ship, John and Sarah settled in Marshalltown, Nova Scotia, in the newly British colony of Canada. Their son Samuel married the daughter of another exiled loyalist and in 1804, she gave birth to Samuel, Jr. (pictured at left). Soon after, family patriarch John bought land to the west, in Ontario. In 1811, the family journeyed there, first sailing down the Atlantic coast from Nova Scotia to New York City, then traveling overland by ox train some 800 miles back into Canada at Fort Erie, near Buffalo, New York, and finally landing near Bayham, Ontario. By 1824, Samuel Ogden Edison, Jr., and wife Nancy Elliott, the daughter of a Revolutionary war hero on the patriot side, were settled in nearby Vienna, Ontario, a lumbering and shipbuilding center on the shores of Lake Erie.

But not for long, thanks to Scottish immigrant William Lyon Mackenzie, who started a reform newspaper in York (Toronto) that same year. An advocate of American-style republicanism, Mackenzie soon won a seat in the Legislative Assembly for Upper Canada, which included Ontario, and by 1834, he was Mayor of Toronto. In 1837, in the wake of a disastrous harvest and ongoing discontent with an unjust land allocation system that favored the wealthy, he led an armed revolt against British rule in Canada. One of his soldiers was Samuel Ogden Edison, Jr., descendant of American counter-revolutionaries. The revolt was short-lived. Edison escaped with his life, walked eighty miles to the U.S. border, crossed the frozen St. Clair River, and arrived in Port Huron, Michigan. Ten years later, having relocated to Milan, Ohio, his seventh son, Thomas Alva Edison, was born. As a boy, he continued the crisscrossing tradition, often traveling north to Vienna, Ontario, to visit with his grandfather, Samuel Ogden Edison, Sr.

—Carl R. Weinberg

largely agrarian districts: some were in the grips of economic stagnation, others were undergoing patterns of economic development that swelled the ranks of the landless population or made small, independent farming increasingly precarious. Not surprisingly, the first public inquiries undertaken in Canada in the 1840s and 1850s on the causes of out-migration clearly indicated that the vast majority of migrants were agricultural labourers and hard-pressed farmers. Their migration, often temporary or seasonal, took them to railroad and canal construction projects, or to join the rank of a highly mobile logging industry, or still to work as day labourers in farming enterprises. Others, often led by Catholic priests, founded agrarian colonies, especially in the Midwest. Still others moved to the U.S. to seek exile during the political turmoil of the late 1830s. One of them was Samuel Edison, Jr., who escaped to Ohio, where shortly after, the man who would become one of America's greatest inventors was born (7). (See sidebar at left.)

In time, however, many of those rural districts in Canada experienced forms of proto-industrialization and eventually witnessed the arrival of manufacturing production. Not surprisingly, the massive investigation conducted in the early twentieth century by the U.S. Senate Immigrant Commission found that, despite the persistent presence of unskilled workers, a significant proportion of Canadian immigrants employed in a variety of industrial sectors in the U.S. had performed industrial work before emigrating. It also found that in most sectors of manufacturing, Anglo Canadian immigrants in particular ranked at the top of the occupational hierarchy (8). Moreover, as the service sector of the U.S. economy underwent an unprecedented expansion—especially from the turn of the twentieth century onward—it attracted significant numbers of urban Canadians with experience as businessmen, supervisors, nurses, and in a whole range of white-collar employment. Though French Canadian migrants were less represented in these sectors of activities, they still made up a sizeable component, particularly among out-migrating women.

One of many French Canadian migrants to New England in the early twentieth century, Jo Bodeon worked at the Chace Cotton Mill in Burlington, Vermont. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

In many ways, and particularly during the twentieth century, the Canada/U.S. legal boundary separated two industrial societies whose organization of production and technological bases were at roughly equal levels of development. For many of these out-migrants, their occupational experience, their familiarity with North American production techniques, and their degree of knowledge concerning labor needs and practices in the United States conferred to their cross-border migration project a high degree of autonomy that was unequalled among other newcomers to the United States. Moreover, cultural attributes such as language skills and education had a direct bearing on one's migration prospects and no doubt raised considerably the options for accessing various sectors of the U.S. economy. The U.S. Senate Immigration Commission, for instance, also found that of all immigrant industrial workers, Anglo Canadians were at the very top of the literacy hierarchy (97 percent), with French Canadians ranking strong with a rate of 79 percent (9).

This, coupled with the similarity in the educational system between the two countries (certainly in English Canada), helps to further explain the wide variety in the occupational composition of out-migrating Canadians and— equally important—the strong incidence of occupations in the service sector of the economy. This made English Canada the leading donor of labor belonging to the service sector—including a significant number of young men and women who migrated to pursue advanced studies and eventually careers in U.S. universities, medical professions, or research centers. One of them was the Ontario-born John Kenneth Galbraith, who soon after completing a B.S. in agricultural economy in 1931, undertook graduate studies in California and Massachusetts, and later became one of the most distinguished economists and public figures (10).

Whether envisaging employment as skilled workers, white-collar employees, or day laborers in a U.S. transborder region or further south—the physical distance of their moves and the difficulty of accessing local labor markets were significantly reduced by the extensive support networks within which most of them travelled. Analyses of cross-border data have in fact revealed that two out of three Anglo Canadians and three out of four French Canadians chose U.S. destinations where spouses, kin, relatives, or friends resided already. This strongly suggests that migration to and through these transborder regions occurred within networks that provided circulation of information, knowledge of basic employment conditions, and various degrees of logistic support at arrival. Pauline Guthro, for instance, was twenty-two years old and unmarried when in 1926 she left her Quebec parish headed to Woonsocket, Rhode Island, where a brother-in-law was waiting for her. And George Marion, a young Quebecker who in 1921 moved to Fall River and eventually settled there, was the last of three generations of Marions who had been migrating back and forth to a city that had one of the largest concentrations of French Canadians (11).

Obviously, these support networks did not arise overnight. Much like the case of immigrants from Mexico, these networks were the result of long-established migration traditions that dated back well

into the nineteenth century when the borders were "unguarded" and Canadians and Mexicans—respectively—entered and exited U.S. territory relatively free in pursuit of the opportunities that the local economies offered. Owing to the variety of factors discussed above, Canadians seem to have built more easily on those traditions from one generation of migrants to the next, as the movement became widespread in the second half of the nineteenth century, reaching new heights during World War I and in the 1920s. The coming of a border control system and of restrictionist measures (literacy test in 1917 and visa requirements in 1924) had little effect in disqualifying prospective Canadian out-migrants, and it made resorting to illegal entries a rather marginal issue—even though the smuggling of non-Canadian migrants across the border was a frequent practice. In contrast to the Southwest—where the new, more restrictive and selective immigration regime made legal admission inaccessible for large numbers of Mexicans—Canadians could easily adjust those traditions to the changing legal and political order.

It is worth adding that the southward flow of population across the Canadian/U.S. border did not involve only Canadians. It included, in fact, significant numbers of remigrants, i.e., mostly Europeans who had first immigrated to Canada and who later decided to re-migrate to the United States in search of better opportunities. During much of the nineteenth century, this form of remigration had been practiced primarily by Britons who, up to the 1890s, made up the overwhelming majority of immigrants to Canada. As the sources of immigration to Canada became more varied—especially from the turn of the century onward—remigration to the United States became a generalized practice. During the first three decades of the century, in fact, European remigrants made up about twenty percent of the entire outmigrating population from Canada. And they originated from virtually all major continental European donor countries, along with important contingents of Britons (12). In comparison, remigrants from Asia were relatively few. Mainly of Chinese and Japanese origins, along with some Filipinos and East Indians, they moved primarily within the Pacific region. Still, as Yukari Takai's article in this issue illustrates, thousands of these migrants provided an important source of labor for the timber and railroad industries. In any case, remigration was a phenomenon that reveals the important role that Canada—both as a colony and then as a Dominion—played in linking transoceanic and intracontinental migrations.

The out-migration of Canadians resumed massively soon after World War II, and it rapidly made Canada the leading donor country along with Germany— a role maintained till the immigration reforms of the mid-1960s rapidly transformed the map of both hemispheric and global immigration to the United States. In many cases, Canadians re-activated kin and friends cross-border networks that had been kept alive even through the years of depression and war. In other cases, their move was based on the force that their education and skills conferred them in the rapidly expanding postwar U. S. economy. What is striking about this cross-border migration movement—beyond its mere magnitude—is its occupational composition. Canadians who headed south, in fact, comprised some of the most skilled and educated sectors of the population, including an important cross section of technicians, engineers, and intellectual workers. And as in past years, healthcare professionals (nurses, in particular) were the most important professional group among women. Moreover, a survey done in the 1950s concluded that Canada was the leading contributor of scientific and engineering talent for the United States, followed by the United Kingdom and Germany. A Canadian government statistical study was more precise: it found that during the same decade Canada had contributed 27 percent of all professional immigrants to the United States (13). The expression "brain-drain" had barely entered the public jargon, but it is likely that Canada was among the advanced industrial societies that experienced that phenomenon most acutely.

The long-established tradition of transborder migrations, the contiguity of labor markets between the two economies, the ongoing communication occurring in trade and professional channels across the border, and last but not least, Canadians' affinity with American society and its institutions, these are among the major factors that facilitated the migration project for hundreds of thousands of Canadians, turning those newcomers "from the North" into a major economic and social asset and into highly valued candidates for civic and cultural incorporation. ❑

Endnotes

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2. Marcus Lee Hansen with John B. Brebner, *The Mingling of the Canadian and American Peoples* (New Haven: Yale, 1940).
3. Bruno Ramirez, *On the Move: French-Canadian and Italian Migrants in the North Atlantic Economy, 1860-1914* (Toronto: Oxford of Canada, 1991); Randy Widdis, *With Scarcely a Ripple: Anglo-Canadian Migration into the United States and Western Canada, 1880-1920* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998).
4. Bruno Ramirez with Yves Otis, *Crossing the 49th Parallel: Migration from Canada to the United States, 1900–1930* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell, 2001), 111-12.
5. Ibid, 67, 108; computed by the authors from Soundex Index to Canadian Border Entries, U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services, Record Group 85.
6. Ibid., 81, 114. The records in questions are the forms filled out by U.S. immigration officers at the various points of entry along the border and later compiled into the Soundex Index to Canadian Border Entries, U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services, Record Group 85. For a detailed discussion of this and other border records see Randy Widdis, "Appendix: Primary Sources in Migration Studies," in John J. Bukowczyk, Nora Faires, David Smith, and Randy William Widdis, *Permeable Border: The Great Lakes Basin as Transnational Region, 1650-1990* (Pittsburgh and Calgary: University of Pittsburgh Press and University of Calgary Press, 2005), 183-85; and Appendix, in Ramirez, *Crossing*, 189-92.
7. Matthew Josephson, *Edison: A Biography* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959).
8. U.S. Senate, *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, 41 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1911), v. 19, 95; v. 14, 410.
9. Ibid., v. 19, 168.
10. Richard Parker, *John Kenneth Galbraith : his life, his politics, his economics* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005).
11. Ramirez, *Crossing*, 76-77.
12. Ibid., 142-43. Computed from Soundex Index to Canadian Border Entries, U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services, Record Group 85.
13. Department of Labour, Economics and Research Branch, *The Migration of Professional Workers Into and Out of Canada, 1946-1960* (Ottawa, 1961); *Canadian Business* 28 (March 1955): 46.

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