

(April 2021)

Numbers, Numbers and More Numbers

by Graham Brazier

According to the sixth census of Canada — the one that was conducted one hundred years ago — the population of Denman Island in 1921 was 242. The five handwritten pages of the census devoted to enumerating the essential attributes of the residents of Denman Island names all 242 people who called Denman Island home. They also reveal that, among other things, 131 were male and 111 were female and, curiously, 131 were adults (19 and older) and 111 were children.

While 88 of the 111 children (77.5%) were born in British Columbia only 34 of the 131 adults (26.0%) were born in this province. The United Kingdom was the birthplace of almost half of the adult population — England (27), Scotland (16) [plus Orkney(12)], Ireland (5) and Wales (4) — with the remainder being made up of people born in B.C. and other parts of Canada — largely Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. A mere 8 residents of Denman Island in 1921 were born in non-english speaking countries: 3 from Germany, 2 from China, 2 from Belgium and 1 from France. There were no Indigenous residents identified in the census.

As the census numbers from 2021 are not yet available, and likely won't be for another couple of years, we have to rely on those of 2016 for the most current numbers for comparison purposes. In that year — 2016 — the population of Denman Island was 1,165, which means that over the course of 95 years it grew by 923 or almost 5 times. It's interesting to note that if the population growth had been spread evenly over the course of those 95 years it would have meant an increase of 9.7 people per year. This, of course was not the case. Over the course of the 53 years following the 1921 census Denman Island's population increased at the rate of 2 people per year to a total of 350 in 1974. 2 people per year for 53 years! Then between 1974 and 1996 it grew at the rate of 22 new people per year to 1,048 in 1996 before dropping to a rate of 5 new people per year for the next 10 year period. The most recent 10 year period saw the arrival of 7 new people per year. From a population of 1,095 in 2006 it grew to 1,165 in 2016.

In addition to offering countless opportunities for statistical analysis the five pages that make up the 1921 census offer convincing evidence of L. P. Hartley's wisdom. It was in the prologue to his novel; ***The Go-Between*** that Hartley wrote: *"The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."*

The census form had 35 columns that required a response from each individual interviewed by the census taker. "Name", "Sex", "Age", "Place of Birth" and 31 more. One column was titled "Relationship to Head of Family or Household" where the oldest male was noted as "Head" others were "Wife", "Daughter", "Son" or "Lodger". As "Head of Household" is not a term likely to appear on a government document in 2021 it seems clear that they did things differently in that foreign country of 1921. They also titled column 21: "Racial or Tribal Origin". It's hard to imagine what a response in 2021 might be to such a question but in 1921 the vast majority of the population answered either "Scotch", "English", or "Irish". Even the 12 from Orkney answered "Scotch" as their "racial or tribal origin".

Nevertheless, I imagine the census will be a useful reference source for many columns yet to come. I'll close with a reference to John Millen's last column where he identified the census as

his source for the fact that 40 of Denman Island's 1921 population of 242 identified themselves as "Farmers". A calculation I couldn't resist suggests that if the same proportion of the 2016 population were farmers there would be 186 farmers on Denman Island. And, are you ready for this? If the proportion of children in the population of 1921 were the same in 2016 there would have been 535 children amongst us in 2016.

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