

A Guide to Official Canadian Immigration Primary Source Materials

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Forward:

Since retiring in 2010 I have been researching the history of Canadian immigration policy and programs through my association with the Canadian Immigration Historical Society (CIHS) and for personal interest. As one of the editors and co-authors of *Running on Empty: Canada and the Indochinese Refugees 1975-1980*, I was fortunate to obtain access to files from Employment and Immigration Canada (EIC) held by Library and Archives Canada (LAC). These records were crucial in completing a serious account of Canada's response to the Indochinese refugee crisis. That said, only the surface was touched, and much scholarly work remains to be done.

In pursuing my own enquiries, I also learned that primary source materials have not been fully exploited by researchers. I appreciate that a current school of thought discounts the value of archival materials for allegedly supporting a pre-conceived narrative or interpretation. That said, official archival materials cannot be discounted; it is the researcher's responsibility to weigh these accounts in assessment and analysis. The assessment of Leopold von Ranke—a German historian writing in the 19th Century who pioneered the use of primary sources—that archival materials are crucial to an understanding of “history as it actually happened”, remains appropriate.

In my review of official primary sources, I focus on what is available online and materials that are accessible in their original paper form or on microfilm. They comprise documentation generated by government officials in reporting, policy formulation, and program delivery. Personal memoirs and media accounts are also important, but are not covered here.

Library and Archives Canada

[Library and Archives Canada \(LAC\)](#) is the primary repository of documents from Canada's federal government departments responsible for immigration from 1867 onwards. Information is included in online databases, microfilm and paper files. For access to these online and other resources, consult the LAC website.

LAC Databases: Individuals

Popular interest in genealogy has prompted LAC to digitize many of its holdings about individuals. They are found in online databases, most of which are “searchable” by key words. They include:

- Census of Canada 1871-1921. Held every 10 years. The database is searchable by name and covers all provinces and territories. LAC also holds records for censuses held prior to 1867. Records from 1931 to now remain subject to privacy legislation and are held by Statistics Canada.
- Census of the Northwestern and Prairie Provinces 1906, 1916, and 1926 were intended to track the growth of the “new provinces”—Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. These censuses were in addition to the regular Census of Canada held every ten years. The database is searchable by name.
- Naturalization and Citizenship 1915-1946 and 1947-1951. The names and places of residence of persons naturalized or granted citizenship during the above periods were published annually in the *Canada Gazette*. Entries are available in a searchable database. Naturalizations prior to 1915 were the responsibility of provincial courts. Most immigrants from outside the British Empire became naturalized, as British subject status was a prerequisite to receiving final title to a homestead. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada has a card index which contains basic biographical data of individuals naturalized prior to 1917.
- Home Children 1869-1932. Lists of names as well as records of sending organizations.
- Immigrants at Grosse Île Quarantine Station 1832-1937.
- Immigrants from China 1885-1949. Covers the period when Chinese immigration was curtailed.
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- Immigrants from the Russian Empire 1898-1922. Microfilmed index cards of Russian subjects registered at Imperial Russian consulates. Registration was a requirement for Russian subjects residing abroad.

- Immigrants to Canada: Porters and Domestic 1899-1949. Database of African-American men brought to Canada to work on passenger trains. Database includes information about women from Guadeloupe and other countries brought to Canada for domestic employment in Montreal.
- Passenger Lists and Border Entries 1925-1935: Nominal Lists.
- Border Entries: from 1908.
- Passenger Lists 1865-1922. Microfilms of the original passenger lists or manifests of individuals arriving in Canada by ship. The names of individual passengers (immigrants, visitors, returning Canadians or persons in transit to the United States) are not indexed. To find an individual name, one should have any combination of the name of the ship, port and date of arrival. This latter information is indexed. LAC notes that microfilming of the original records was not done to archival standards and many pages are difficult to read. Searching by ship can be a daunting task as some vessels made multiple voyages. Ship manifests include west coast ferry traffic from the U.S. to Victoria and Vancouver.
- Ukrainian Immigrants to Canada 1891-1930. Privately compiled lists of Ukrainian surnames.
- Western Canada Land Grants 1870-1930. A searchable database of "homesteads" filed and titles granted on Dominion lands open for settlement in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and the railway belt of British Columbia. Search parameters are: name, Quarter Section (NE, NW, SE, SW), section, township, range and meridian based on the Dominion Land Survey. Individual files may contain an image of the final title or a survey map showing location of the property. Lands open to homesteaders comprised the even-numbered sections of each 36-section township except Section 8 and the North-East Quarter of Section 26 reserved for the Hudson Bay Company. Odd numbered sections were granted to the Canadian Pacific Railway except for Sections 11 and 29 which were reserved as "school lands". Lands granted to the Hudson's Bay Company and Canadian Pacific Railroad were held for sale at market rates. Proceeds from the sale of school lands subsidized the cost of building rural schools once districts were established. The database does not continue after 1930 when Dominion lands were belatedly transferred to the provinces. Provincial archives provide more information on subsequent land grants.

LAC Databases: Documents

Collections of other federal government documents digitized and placed online, some with search capabilities. The most significant are:

- Cabinet Conclusions 1944-1979. The official record of decisions reached at meetings of Cabinet were based on notes taken by the Clerk of the Privy Council. The conclusions are not minutes or a verbatim account of proceedings but often give a sense of the discussions. Each decision usually refers to the pertinent Cabinet document circulated in advance to Cabinet members. Cabinet documents are not available online and must be accessed separately from LAC. The database includes a key word search, (e.g. entering "immigration" will provide a list of Cabinet meetings when the topic was discussed, and a decision reached or deferred). Cabinet conclusions from 1980 on are still retained by the Privy Council Office but can be accessed through the federal [Access to Information Request Service](#) upon payment of a nominal fee. Requests can be submitted online. More information can be found on the Privy Council Office [website](#).
- Orders-in-Council 1867-1924. The "key word" searchable database includes images of documents for the period 1867-1916. Subsequent entries provide only the title. Materials include items pertaining to immigration. Prior to 1909 and the establishment of the Department of External Affairs, all dispatches from the Colonial Office in London to the Government of Canada were directed to the Privy Council Office. Some of these dispatches deal with immigration, for example in the 1890s the Governor of Barbados sought to facilitate a movement of "poor whites" in "desperate circumstances" to Canada. With the formation of External Affairs in 1909, such correspondence was subsequently handled by the Secretary of State for External Affairs.
- *Canada Gazette* 1841-1997. LAC has a full run of "Canada's Newspaper" online which includes many items of immigration interest. The search tool is not user-friendly. Editions from 1998 onwards appear on a separate [website](#).

LAC: Other Holdings, Not Digitized

Examination of these holdings is essential for any serious study of immigration, refugee and citizenship policy and programs. These are departmental records preserved on microfilm or in paper files and available only by an arranged visit to LAC. Information on access can be found on its [website](#). Guidance from an archivist is recommended. The following Record Groups (RGs) contain the most significant Government of Canada holdings on immigration:

- RG17-Agriculture 1867-1893. Immigration was part of the Agriculture Department in the early years after Confederation.
- RG25-External Affairs. The Finding Guide refers to files relating to the administration of immigration posts overseas. Canadian diplomatic missions also submitted reports to Canada on matters of immigration interest.
- RG26-Citizenship and Immigration from 1865.
- RG76-Immigration. The major collection of documents.
- RG118-Employment and Immigration Administration and Policy post-1945.

Non-Library and Archives Canada Primary Sources

Library of Parliament: Canadian Parliamentary Historical Resources. A complete collection of Senate and House of Commons public records from Canada's First to Thirty Fifth Parliament (1867-1995) are available through the Library of Parliament's [website](#). It comprises debates, journals, committees, bills, votes and proceedings as well as Commons sessional papers up to the Eighth Parliament. Of interest are records of debates concerning immigration legislation in both houses as these reflect contemporary issues and concerns.

Minutes and reports of committees are also significant; the House of Commons Select Standing Committee on Agriculture and Colonization held hearings on immigration in 1928 and collected over 800 pages of testimony before producing a report. The Senate Standing Committee on Immigration and Labour held a series of hearings from 1946 which prefigured changes to Canada's immigration and refugee policies leading to the 1952 Immigration Act.

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada Annual Reports 1867-1954. An incomplete digitized collection of annual reports produced by departments responsible for immigration held by IRCC. These holdings have been made available to the author and are held in anticipation of their transfer to the CIHS website. The annual reports provide statistics, as might be expected, as well as various business lines' activities for the fiscal year under review. The 1924-1930 reports include information about overseas immigration-related activities in the United Kingdom, Ireland, the U.S. and continental Europe. Of interest are descriptions of promotional activities in areas of "preferred" immigration—the U.K., Ireland and the U.S.—including schemes relating to British farm families, harvest workers, domestics and young persons. Another section covers Chinese immigration, or rather the lack of it, with some allusions to fraudulent activities involving this movement.

These reports do not touch on admission to Canada through orders-in-council granting exemption from draconic restrictions on immigration at the onset of the Great Depression. This is unfortunate, as orders-in-council seem to have been quite widely used.

These annual reports are also available from LAC but have not been put online.

Global Affairs Canada (GAC) Documents on Canadian External Relations 1908 to 1963. Online version of 29 bound volumes of selected "diplomatic documents" in the tradition of similar collections from other foreign ministries. Volume I (1908 to 1918) appeared in 1967 and additional volumes followed over the years. The collection includes documents relating to immigration and refugee matters where the Department of External Affairs was involved. The volumes for the 1920s include correspondence concerning Mennonite migrants from the USSR. The volume for 1938 covers the European refugee crisis and Canada's participation in the Évian Conference.

Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 Includes copies of immigration legislation, regulations and supplementary analyses by staff and others. The collection also includes personal accounts of immigrants, articles on various topics related to immigration, and photo collections.

Conclusion

This information is not intended as an exclusive guide to official Canadian federal government primary source materials on immigration; rather it is an overview pointing the way to further research about the evolution of Canadian immigration policies and programs from 1867. There is a wealth of unmined material awaiting serious study.