

The Cost of Living in Canada in 1870

by J.G. SNELL⁺

Increasingly in the last decade Canadian social historians have become concerned with the cost of a standard of living in this country. Terry Copp in *The Anatomy of Poverty* made this a central element in his history of the Montreal working class in the early twentieth century. Various works by Michael Cross, Michael Katz, Greg Kealey and others have set out to analyze the conditions of working class life in British North America during the nineteenth century. Such efforts have failed to come to grips with the specifics of the cost of living, largely because of the paucity of specific information regarding wages and prices in various localities. In contrast to Copp who was able to make good use of data provided by H.B. Ames and the Ottawa Government after the turn of the century, historians dealing with the earlier period have simply lacked the sources to deal with this issue.

However, in 1870 an American investigator examined the question of the cost of living in the Provinces and provided details for seven Canadian communities spread across the Dominion. In June of that year the Congress of the United States called for a report on trade between Canada and the United States and the task of drawing up this report was assigned to J.N. Larned, then editor of the *Buffalo Morning Express*. After several months investigation, Larned submitted an analysis of the prevailing economic conditions on the continent. He argued that close trade relations were natural between Canada and the United States, that without such trade Canada suffered in development and prosperity, and that the best legislative solution in order to effect the proper commercial relationship would be a *zollverein*, or customs union.¹

In his pursuit of the second of these arguments Larned examined the wages and the cost of living in the Dominion. The sources of his Canadian information are unclear. Since the author acknowledged the assistance of members of the Canadian government and civil service, it seems likely that these were his sources, but which individuals and where they obtained their information is unknown. The American figures came from the Bureau of Statistics in Washington. The statistics for Canada apply to the summer of 1870, while those for the United States are for 1869.

In presenting his information, Larned declared that the Canadian Government had adopted a deliberate policy of making the Dominion "a cheap country". But "cheapness", he decided, was not "a wisely-chosen object of public policy" (p. 24). While a few might benefit, most

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¹ 41st Congress, 3rd Session, *House Executive Documents*, No. 94, "State of Trade with British North American Provinces".

Canadians suffered. The cost of living in the Provinces was low but wages were even lower, thus resulting in a standard of living below that of the neighbouring States.

Taking on each side [of the border] equal quantities of the various articles quoted, in an estimate of the probable consumption of an ordinary family, I arrive at the following results: That which cost \$100 in gold in Ontario cost \$162 in currency in New York, or \$122.72 in gold; while for every \$100 of wages that the average workman received in Ontario, he was paid \$165 in currency in New York, or \$125 in gold. Excess of purchasing value in New York wages over Ontario wages, [was] 2.28 per cent, gold measurement.

That which cost \$100 in gold in New Brunswick cost \$141 in currency in Maine, or \$106.82 in gold; while for every \$100 of wages that the average workman received in New Brunswick, he received \$178 currency, or \$134.84 gold in Maine. Excess of purchasing value in Maine wages over New Brunswick wages, 28 per cent, gold measurement.

That which cost \$100 in the city of Quebec, cost \$152 currency in the State of New York, or \$115.15 in gold; while for every \$100 of wages that the average workman received in Quebec, he was paid \$238 currency, or \$180 gold, in New York. Excess of purchasing value in New York wages over wages in the city of Quebec, 64.85 per cent, gold measurement.

In other words, by the same labor and with the same living, the average workman can make and save \$2.28 (gold), out of every \$100 of earnings, more in New York than in Ontario; \$28 more in Maine than in New Brunswick, and \$64.85 more in New York than in the city of Quebec.

It is certainly plain enough that labor gains nothing, but loses very seriously, from the state of cheapness prevailing in the Dominion. [p. 29]

It should be pointed out that this analysis of Canadian society suited prevailing American images of the Dominion. Commentators in the United States frequently alluded to the Provincial aristocracy of class that subjected the colonial working class to relative poverty, to exploitation, and to inferior (even wretched) working and living conditions. Descriptions, anecdotes and analyses were plentiful in arguing that the Canadian social system was unfair to most of its members and that the average Canadian was far worse off under British monarchical government than was his American counterpart in the Republic. In short, American observers had a strong bias against Canadian society from this perspective and this should be kept in mind when using Larned's data.

Nevertheless, the information presented by Larned is important and useful. For the first time, we have substantial records of wages, prices and the cost of living in several Canadian communities for the same point in the nineteenth century. Larned would seem to have good evidence of the relatively unattractive position of Canadian workers and a solid indication as to why Dominion residents were beginning to emigrate to the United States in sizable numbers (in 1870, there were almost 500,000 British North American-born residing in the Republic).² The advantages in the American standard of living were simply too attractive, especially to the Québécois, to be ignored. Also, the information about the lower Canadian wage scales was important to Americans. United

² United States, *Ninth Census* (Washington, 1870), I, pp. 336-337.

States capitalists found the low wages and cheap production costs a valuable feature of the colonial economy in the late 1860s, and some shift in business resulted (for example, in the shipbuilding industry). Others advertised these characteristics as a good reason for investing in the Provinces and for expecting good profits; one Boston company, for example, promoted its copper mine in the Eastern Townships with the comment that there were "any number of hardy good laborers in the vicinity who will work cheap."³ The low wage scale was an important factor in the employment of Maritimes fishermen on American fishing vessels at this time. Such a perception must have made emigrant Provincial workers attractive to employers in the Republic itself. At the same time it was this sort of information and competition which was helping to stimulate American unions in their organization of various groups of Canadian workers.

With the publication of this document, hitherto unused by Canadian historians, assessment of the cost and standard of living of the colonial working class will be facilitated. The availability of Larned's information will hopefully stimulate historians to ferret out similar information elsewhere. Then we can begin to understand what was happening to Canadian workers in a crucial aspect of their lives in the nineteenth century.⁴

³ *Report of the Lyster Cooper Company, in the Township of Nelson, Canada East* (Boston, 1864), p. 7.

⁴ It should be pointed out that Larned's calculation of ratios, which appear in the following tables, are not always accurate.

Wages in Ontario, in New Brunswick, and in the City of Quebec, during the summer of 1870, compared with wages in New York and in Maine, during the year 1869.

Occupations.	Province of Ontario.					Province of New Brunswick.			United States.			Ratios.		
	Ottawa City.	Hamilton.	Brantford.	Chatham.	Average in Ontario, 1870.	St. John	Fredericton.	Average in N. Brunswick, 1870.	City of Quebec, 1870.	Average in New York 1869.	Average in Maine, 1869.	Ratio of wages in Ontario to wages in New York	Ratio to wages in New Brunswick to wages in Maine.	Ratio of wages in City of Quebec to wages in New York.
Blacksmith	\$2.00	\$1.75	\$1.50	\$1.75	\$1.75	\$1.50	\$1.37½	\$1.44	\$1.25	\$2.74	\$2.79	1 to 1.57	1 to 1.94	1 to 2.19
Bricklayers or masons	2.50	2.75	2.25	2.00	2.37½	2.50	1.37½	1.94	1.62½	3.50	3.36	1 to 1.47	1 to 1.73	1 to 2.15
Carpenters	2.00	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.81	1.75	1.50	1.62½	1.00	2.97	2.76	1 to 1.64	1 to 1.69	1 to 2.97
Painters	1.75	1.62½	1.50	1.62½	1.70	1.70	1.50	1.60	1.25	2.94	2.73	1 to 1.81	1 to 1.70	1 to 2.34
Plasterers	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.00	2.19	2.50	1.50	2.00	1.12½	3.60	3.50	1 to 1.64	1 to 1.75	1 to 3.20
Shoemakers	1.50	1.25	1.25	1.25	1.31	1.00	1.37½	1.19	.90	2.38	2.36	1 to 1.81	1 to 1.98	1 to 2.64
Tailors .....	.....	.....	1.50	1.12	1.31	1.50	1.37	1.44	1 12½	2.47	2.61	1 to 1.88	1 to 1.81	1 to 2.19
Wheelwrights	2.50	.....	2.50	1.75	2.25	1.50	1.17	1.31	1.50	2.97	2.34	1 to 1.32	1 to 1.75	1 to 1.98
Ordinary farm laborers . . . per month, with board . . .	12.00	12.00	15.00	15.00	13.50	12.00	12.50	12.25	9.00	18.34	21.00	1 to 1.36	1 to 1.71	1 to 2.04
Other commons laborers . . per day, without board . . .	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	.....	.....	.....	.90	1.90	1.61	1 to 1.90	.....	1 to 2.11
Female servants per month, with board . . .	6.00	6.00	5.00	5.00	5.50	6.00	4.50	5.25	.....	9.75	.....	1 to 1.77	.....	.....

Mean ratio of wages in Ontario to wages in New York, in employments named above 1 to 1.65

Mean ratio of wages in New Brunswick to wages in Main, in employments named above 1 to 1.78

Mean ratio of wages in city of Quebec to wages in New York, in employments named above 1 to 2.38

Prices in Ontario, in New Brunswick, and in the city of Quebec, during the summer of 1870, compared with prices in New York and in Maine during the year 1869.

Articles.	Province of Ontario.					Province of New Brunswick.				United States.		Ratios.		
	Ottawa City.	Hamilton.	Brantford.	Chatham.	Average in Ontario, 1870.	St. John	Fredericton.	Average in New Brunswick, 1870.	City of Quebec, 1870.	Average in New York 1869.	Average in Maine, 1869.	Ratio of prices in Ontario to prices in New York.	Ratio of prices in New Brunswick to prices in Maine.	Ratio of prices in City of Quebec to prices in New York.
PROVISIONS														
Flour, wheat, superfine per barrel.	\$6.12½	\$6.00	\$6.50	.....	\$6.21	\$6.50	\$6.25	\$6.37½	\$6.00	\$7.85	\$9.15	1 to 1.26	1 to 1.43	1 to 1.31
Corn meal do	4.50	.....	4.00	\$4.00	4.17	4.75	5.00	4.87½	4.50	3.65	2.38	1 to 0.87	1 to 0.49	1 to 0.81
Beef, fresh, roasting pieces per pound.	.07	.10	.10	.09	.09	.12	.10	.11	.10	.19	.14	1 to 2.14	1 to 1.27	1 to 1.90
soup pieces do . . . . .	.05	.06½	.06	.06	.06	.08	.08	.08	.06½	.09	.06	1 to 1.50	1 to 0.75	1 to 1.38
rump steaks do . . . . .	.10	.06	.....	.09	.08½	.12	.10	.11	.11	.20	.23	1 to 2.40	1 to 2.09	1 to 1.81
Corned beef do . . . . .	.07½	.08	.08	.06	.07½	.10	.10	.10	.10	.11	.13	1 to 1.87	1 to 1.30	1 to 1.40
Veal, fore-quarters do . . . . .	.05	.06	.07	.05	.06	.06	.04	.05	.08½	.13	.10	1 to 2.16	1 to 2.00	1 to 1.53
hind-quarters do . . . . .	.07	.....	.....	.06	.06½	.08	.05	.06½	.10	.16	.11	1 to 2.46	1 to 1.69	1 to 1.60
Mutton, fore-quarters do . . . . .	.05½	.06	.05	.06	.05½	.06	.05	.05½	.08	.12	.09	1 to 2.18	1 to 1.63	1 to 1.50
legs do . . . . .	.07	.07	.06	.09	.07¼	.09	.07	.08	.10	.16	.11	1 to 2.21	1 to 1.37	1 to 1.60
chops do . . . . .	.08	.10	.08	.09	.08¾	.09	.07	.08	.10	.17	.12	1 to 1.84	1 to 1.50	1 to 1.70
Pork, fresh do . . . . .	.07½	.12½	.06½	.10	.09	.07½	.12	.09¾	.11	.18	.16	1 to 2.00	1 to 1.64	1 to 1.63
corned and salted do . . . . .	.09½	.....	.11	.14	.11½	.12	.14	.13	.13	.19	.22	1 to 1.65	1 to 1.69	1 to 1.46
Bacon do . . . . .	.17	.15	.12½	.16	.15	.14	.15	.14½	.16	.22	.22	1 to 1.47	1 to 1.51	1 to 1.37
Hams, smoked do . . . . .	.17	.17	.15	.17	.16½	.14	.15	.14½	.17	.24	.21	1 to 1.45	1 to 1.45	1 to 1.41
Shoulders do . . . . .	.15	.14	.12	.12½	.13½	.12	.14	.13	.14	.19	.18	1 to 1.41	1 to 1.38	1 to 1.36
Lard do . . . . .	.13	.15	.15	.16	.15	.16	.16	.16	.20	.24	.24	1 to 1.60	1 to 1.50	1 to 1.20
Codfish, dry do . . . . .	.....	.07	.07	.07	.07	.04	.05	.04½	.06	.09	.08	1 to 1.28	1 to 1.78	1 to 1.50
Mackerel, pickled do . . . . .	.....	.12½	.08	.08	.09½	.....	.....	.....	.10	.15	.13	1 to 1.58	.....	1 to 1.50
Butter do . . . . .	.18	.20	.20	.18	.19	.24	.24	.24	.20	.42	.43	1 to 2.20	1 to 1.79	1 to 2.10
Cheese do . . . . .	.13	.15	.15	.14	.14	.18	.20	.19	.15	.20	.21	1 to 1.43	1 to 1.10	1 to 1.33
Potatoes per bushel	.35	.40	.35	.50	.40	.50	.40	.45	.20	.60	.54	1 to 1.50	1 to 1.20	1 to 3.00
Rice per pound.	.04	.05	.06	.05	.05	.06	.06	.06	.05	.13	.13	1 to 2.60	1 to 2.16	1 to 2.60
Milk per quart.	.03½	.05	.05	.05	.04½	.06	.07	.06½	.06	.08	.07	1 to 1.78	1 to 1.08	1 to 1.33
Eggs per dozen.	.12	.22	.25	.12½	.18	.20	.22	.21	.22	.31	.28	1 to 1.72	1 to 1.33	1 to 1.41

GROCERIES.														
Tea.....per pound.....	1.00	.62½	.75	.79	.50	.50	.50	.65	1.42	1.00	1 to 1.12	1 to 2.00	1 to 1.72	
Coffee, Rio, green.....do.....	.27	.30	.20	.25	.25½	.25	.27	.26	.29	.27	1 to 1.12	1 to 1.04	1 to 1.45	
roasted.....do.....	.31	.35	.25	.30	.30	.28	.27	.27½	.30	.33	1 to 1.10	1 to 1.23	1 to 1.10	
Sugar, good brown.....do.....	.07½	.11	.10	.10	.09½	.09	.10	.09½	.10	.15	1 to 1.58	1 to 1.58	1 to 1.50	
Sugar, yellow, "C.".....do.....	.08	.12½	.11	.11	.11	.11	.11	.11	.16	.15	1 to 1.45	1 to 1.36	1 to 1.45	
Coffee, "B.".....do.....	.....	.10	.12	.11	.11	.12	.13	.12½	.17	.17	1 to 1.55	1 to 1.36	1 to 1.36	
Syrup.....per gallon.....	.60	1.00	.75	.75	.77½	.95	1.00	.97¼	.75	1.18	1.00	1 to 1.52	1 to 1.02	1 to 1.57
Soap, common.....per pound.....	.04	.06	.07	.10	.07	.09	.09	.09	.07	.12	.12	1 to 1.71	1 to 1.33	1 to 1.71
Starch.....do.....	.07	.12½	.12½	.12½	.11	.16	.18	.17	.11	.13	.16	1 to 1.18	1 to 0.94	1 to 1.18
FUEL.														
Coal.....per ton.....	6.00	7.50	8.00	7.00	7.12½	5.50	6.00	5.75	8.50	8.10	11.20	1 to 1.14	1 to 1.95	1 to 0.95
Wood, hard.....per cord.....	3.50	6.00	5.00	2.50	4.25	5.25	3.50	4.37½	4.25	6.30	6.00	1 to 1.48	1 to 1.37	1 to 1.48
soft.....do.....	1.50	3.00	3.00	1.75	2.31	3.00	2.00	2.50	3.00	4.12	3.15	1 to 1.78	1 to 1.26	1 to 1.37
LIGHT.														
Oil, coal.....per gallon.....	.40	.25	.30	.30	.31	.40	.50	.45	.40	.46	.49	1 to 1.48	1 to 1.09	1 to 1.15
DOMESTIC DRY GOODS.														
Shirtings, brown, 4-4, standard quality.....per yard.....	.10	.11	.12½	.10	.11	.11	.18	.14½	.15	.18	.17	1 to 1.64	1 to 1.17	1 to 1.20
bleached, 4-4, standard quality.....do.....	.12½	.15	.12½	.12½	.13	.18	.21	.19½	.18	.20	.17	1 to 1.54	1 to 0.87	1 to 1.11
Sheetings, brown, 9-8, standard quality.....do.....	.19	.28	.....	.25	.24	.28	.....	.28	.40	.21	.16	1 to 0.87	1 to 0.57	1 to 0.52
bleached, 9-8, standard quality.....do.....	.24	.50	.....	.50	.41	.50	.50	.50	.50	.28	.21	1 to 0.68	1 to 0.42	1 to 0.56
Cotton flannel.....do.....	.17	.19	.22	.16	.18½	.22	.....	.22	.31	.28	.25	1 to 1.51	1 to 1.14	1 to 0.90
Ticking, good quality, wide.....do.....	.26	.23	.33	.20	.25½	.28	.30	.29	.26	.34	.33	1 to 1.14	1 to 1.14	1 to 1.31
Prints.....do.....	.11	.....	.....	.12½	.12	.15	.18	.16½	.....	.11	.14	1 to 0.91	1 to 0.85	.....
Satinets and tweeds, medium quality.....do.....	.....	.80	.50	.70	.67	.55	.....	.55	.....	.67	.70	1 to 1.00	1 to 1.27	.....
Boots, men's heavy.....per pair.....	2.75	.....	.....	4.00	3.37½	.....	3.75	.....	4.00	4.40	4.83	1 to 1.30	.....	1 to 1.10
HOUSE-RENT.														
Four-room tenements.....per month.....	2.50	5.00	4.00	5.00	4.12½	2.00	4.50	3.75	.....	8.40	4.45	1 to 2.04	1 to 1.19	.....
Six-room tenements.....do.....	4.00	8.00	6.00	8.00	6.50	3.00	5.50	4.25	.....	11.20	6.45	1 to 1.72	1 to 1.52	.....
BOARD.														
For men.....per week.....	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	4.00	3.25	3.62½	3.00	4.50	3.72	1 to 1.50	1 to 1.03	1 to 1.50
For women.....do.....	2.00	2.50	2.50	2.00	3.25	.....	.....	.....	.....	3.50	2.70	1 to 1.55	.....	.....

Mean ratio or prices in Ontario to prices in New York, from the list of articles named above.....1 to 1.58.
Mean ratio of prices in New Brunswick to prices in Maine, from the list of articles named above.....1 to 1.42.
Mean ratio of prices in city of Quebec to prices in New York, from the list of articles named above.....1 to 1.43.