

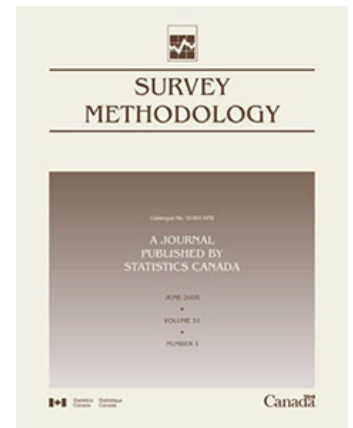
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Survey Methodology

A conversation with Geoffrey Hole

by Christian Genest

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A conversation with Geoffrey Hole

Christian Genest¹

Abstract

Geoffrey J.C. Hole (or Geoff, as he likes to be called) was born on January 24, 1940 at Shardeloes, Amersham, Buckinghamshire, England, to Charles William Hole and Sybil Winifred Hole, formerly Morge. He completed a BSc Honours in Mathematics in 1961, and a Postgraduate Diploma in Statistics at Manchester University the following year. He started his career as a mathematical statistician in London, England, working successively for the National Coal Board (1962-63), the Central Electricity Generating Board (1963-66), and the Electricity Council (1966-67), where his title was Economist. He moved to Canada in 1967 to join the Dominion Bureau of Statistics (DBS) as a survey methodologist. In 1971-72, he was Chief of Census Operations, Methodology and Quality Control Section, and Assistant Coordinator, Socio-Economic Survey Methods Section. He then took a one-year leave of absence to complete an MSc (Econ) in Statistics at the London School of Economics. In 1973, Geoff returned to the DBS, which had become Statistics Canada, as Chief, Methodology Group V, Business Survey Methods Division. In 1974, he was appointed Director, Institutions and Agriculture Survey Methods Division, and, as of 1986, Director, Business Survey Methods Division. His career culminated when he became Director, Social Survey Methods Division, in 1987. He held that position until his retirement, on September 29, 2004. In addition to his long-term involvement at Statistics Canada, including as a member of the Editorial Board of *Survey Methodology* between 1983 and 1987, Geoff was very active in the Statistical Society of Canada (SSC), serving among others as Chair of the Program Committee for the 1986 Annual Meeting at the Banff Centre, in Alberta, and President of the SSC in 1989-90. He was also Program Chair for a joint conference of the International Association of Survey Statisticians and the International Association for Official Statistics which was held in Aguascalientes, Mexico, in 1998.

Key Words: Geoff Hole; Statistical Society of Canada; Statistics Canada; Survey Methodology.



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1. Introduction

Christian: I was glad that we reconnected on the occasion of the 20th anniversary celebrations of the SSC accreditation program. It was a long time since you retired, and given how much growth and turnover there has been in the profession, it is likely that many people do not know about you, and the important role you played in Canadian statistics. So this interview is most opportune. Please start by telling us something about your youth in England.

Geoff: My father served in the Royal Navy during World War II and resumed his career as a primary school teacher after the war. My mother stayed at home until my younger brother Malcolm James Humphrey (born in Scotland in 1943) was a teenager. Then she trained as a primary school teacher and worked as one until she retired. Malcolm went as a scholar to the City of London School, then to Cambridge, St. John's College, for a double first-class honors degree in mathematics and engineering.

Between the ages of 11 and 18, I attended Hackneys Downs School, formerly known as the Grocers' Company's School, located in Lower Clapton, London. While studying there, I developed a life-long passion in literature, theatre, physics, history, and geography. My nickname at school was "Smiley".

At Grammar school, I was a very shy pupil. I was hopeless at English, but strong in Geography, taught by Albert Calland, who re-started the school's yearly production of plays. I was in four of them. The year 1956-57 was a very good one for me: aged 17, I was awarded three distinctions in four "A" level exams, I was awarded a State Scholarship, and I played Pothinus in a school play (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 Geoff as Pothinus in George Bernard Shaw's play *Caesar and Cleopatra*, in 1957



Christian: Why did you choose to study mathematics at Manchester University?

Geoff: I wanted to get away from home and Manchester University had a good reputation. I was talented and did well in examinations while only attending lectures. In the final year of my BSc (1960-61), thinking about a future career, I attended the courses given for the Diploma in Numerical Analysis and learned to program the Atlas computer. This proved to be useful because to complete the BSc Honours Mathematics degree, we had to select a mathematical project and submit it. I chose finding the maximum of a polynomial function of two variables, using a two-dimensional version of Newton's method.

While I was a good student, I think the mathematics faculty noticed that I did not associate with the 49 others taking Honours Mathematics in my year. So I was asked to take over obtaining Hallé orchestra tickets for staff and students in the Mathematics Department for one year. Sir John Barbirolli conducted the orchestra at the time. Ever since, I have attended classical concerts. I was also busy running the English Country Dance Society from 1960 to 1962!

Upon graduation, I looked around for computer-related jobs and had five or six offers but decided that I had no interest in writing programs in machine code and turned all offers down. I had noticed many advertisements for statisticians in the quality British newspapers. This seemed to be an interesting, well-paid option. So, I applied to Manchester University's Diploma in Mathematical Statistics. Great courses were given by Professor Peter Whittle (stochastic processes) and Dr. S.D. Silvey (statistical inference) which stood me in good stead for my subsequent career.

2. Career at Statistics Canada

Christian: Between 1962 and 1967, you held various positions as a junior mathematical statistician in British utility companies. What led you to move to Canada?

Geoff: For one thing, I was frustrated by how undemanding these positions were. As a possible escape, I took exams as a student of the Institute of Actuaries, from which I gained a certificate in finance and investment in 1968. One day, I saw an advertisement in the *London Times* for survey statisticians at the Dominion Bureau of Statistics (DBS). Fed up with career possibilities in England, I decided to apply and was interviewed in London by DBS representatives, including David Worton, who later wrote the history of the DBS (Worton, 1998).

Sometime later, the DBS offered me a position as a survey statistician in Ottawa. I turned it down, then thought I had made a mistake and wrote to ask if they might consider me for another position. In reply, I received a very short letter that said "Be here in a month".

In later years when asked by people why I came to Canada, I used to joke that I was an Expo'67 project. I visited this world fair in Montréal many times with friends and colleagues from DBS.

Christian: It must have been a bit of a cultural shock when you arrived in Ottawa.

Geoff: When I first arrived with only £5 (I had taken a two-week vacation in Greece), I stayed with the McCardles because my mother was teaching in a primary school in London where Mr. McCardle's sister also worked, and my mother and she were good friends. After two weeks when I had my first paycheck, I moved into an apartment next door to the DBS.

On my first day at the DBS, I was lucky to be hijacked from the job I was hired for. A tall man came up to talk to me near the cafeteria. We talked about who I was and where I was going to work. It was Alf Winkworth. Next day I started working for him. He came from the wrong side of the tracks in Winnipeg, and I from the wrong side of the tracks in London. We both had big, loud laughs and similar senses of humour. Alf was not only my first supervisor but also effectively my mentor. When he retired as a director, I was promoted to be a Survey Methods director, essentially inheriting his mantle.

Simon Goldberg had convinced Chief Statistician Walter Duffett and the Assistant Chief Statisticians (ACSs) that DBS should change from being a clerical factory to an agency producing statistics that were processed on computers with sound statistical methods. I was the first one hired overseas for this purpose as no Canadian trained people were available. In my first weeks I was invited to a meeting with the ACSs who told me their plan for the agency. The following year (in 1968), Gordon Brackstone, David Dodds, and Henry Glouchkow were hired. Tim Holt, who would later head the U.K. Office for National Statistics, joined Statistics Canada in 1976.

Christian: How large was the group that you joined?

Geoff: In those days, there were very few survey methodologists at the DBS. Ivan Fellegi was our director with three co-ordinators: Alf Winkworth, Alan Sunter, and Richard Platek. Incidentally, the latter, born Ryszard Sobieszczanski in Ostrowiec (Poland), is the founder of the journal *Survey Methodology*. Altogether, there were about thirty staff in the division, professionals and support staff. We all worked hard and had a lot of fun together. When there were bursts of laughter in our office, Alf would rush out of his office to intercept our director, Ivan Fellegi, to reassure him that in spite of our big laughs, Henry Glouchkow, Charles Patrick, and I were actually doing good work. As you know, Charles passed away in 2012; see Chen and Macdonald (2012).

Christian: What were your duties?

Geoff: As a recently recruited survey statistician, I designed and tested three simple quality control procedures for enumeration, coding, and data capture with FOSDIC (*Film Optical Sensing Device for Input to Computers*) for the 1971 Canadian Census of Population. They were successfully applied without any hitches or problems.

Christian: The US Bureau of the Census (USBC) was not so fortunate!

Geoff: Indeed, one of its quality control operations for its 1970 Census proved to be unworkable. It took more than six months to correct the problem at great additional expense. This perhaps was one of the

important areas where the DBS leaped ahead of the USBC, then widely regarded as the best statistical agency in the world.

Christian: How did you come to return to London for studies in 1972?

Geoff: I didn't want to be typecast as a quality control specialist. So I first took a graduate course in survey sampling at Carleton University. Then I took advantage of an educational leave, which was only a recent possibility at Statistics Canada. I applied without telling my wife as I thought my chances were slim. However, I was fortunate that StatCan supported my education leave for an MSc in Statistics and I went to the London School of Economics, 1972-73. So, in the fall of 1972 we rented a row house in Highams Park, London. We arrived with two children, Catherine and Rebecca, who were 2 and 1, respectively. Upon my return, after a short stint in the Business Survey Methods Division, I was promoted to be one of the youngest directors in 1974.

Christian: From 1974 to 1987, you were successively director of two Survey Methods Divisions, namely the Institutions and Agriculture Survey Methods Division until 1986, and then the Business Survey Methods Division, for one year. What can you tell us about that period?

Geoff: They were exciting halcyon years, during which I worked with an exceptionally talented staff on survey and census design, development, research, and analysis. We were keenly aware of the importance of survey methods advances, and I encouraged them. In 1985-86, I led a task force that produced a policy on informing users of data quality and methodology.

Besides, my staff and I got on well with our clients' staff, particularly with our major client, the Agriculture Division. We were always invited to their annual conferences, technical meetings, and successes they celebrated.

One year, for Christmas, I thought I would let my staff know how highly I regarded them. My wife Anna said whatever you do, don't just name a few people. Why not get chocolate medals with a ribbon attached and present everyone on your staff with a medal? It was a great success! They never forgot.

Christian: Then, in 1987, you became Director of the Social Survey Methods Division (SSMD).

Geoff: During my term as Director, which lasted over 17 years, the SSMD grew to be a staff of 130, including 105 professional statisticians, with an annual budget of approximately 9 million dollars. My staff had roughly equal numbers of women and men, francophones and anglophones. I had become proficient in French, so I chose to communicate in French with francophones and in English with anglophones.

SSMD designed and implemented statistical methodology for a range of household surveys and for the Census of Population. Surveys included the Canada Health Survey 1978, unfortunately short lived, but subsequent surveys made use of the methods devised especially to reach only a selected person to pose sensitive questions. Important theory, methods and computer systems were developed by Michael Bankier's Section for the Edit and Estimation of Census data and Census weighting of sampled households. These

systems are still used at Statistics Canada and in other countries; see, e.g., Bankier (2001), Benjamin, Janes and Bankier (2008) and Guertin, Bureau and Morel (2014). They are two jewels in the crown of any statistical office!

There was also a noteworthy initiative I championed and led when I was SSMD Director. Our annual Survey Methodology Branch recruitment campaign was facing a declining number of candidates, mostly anglophones. I arranged for staff from the three survey methods divisions to promote recruitment by giving a seminar series on survey methods at Université Laval. This initiative was then continued locally in subsequent years. Ever since, excellent francophone survey statisticians have been recruited by Statistics Canada, not only from Université Laval but also from other Québec universities.

Christian: I was impressed with the degree of sophistication in methods while serving on Statistics Canada's Advisory Committee on Statistical Methods, between 1994 and 1999.

Geoff: StatCan has certainly come a long way in the 37 years that I worked there. In the 1990s, *The Economist* ranked it as the best statistical agency in the world; see *The Economist* (1991, 1993). In effect, StatCan came to be like a research institute. We had visitors from all over the world interested in the survey methods employed in our censuses and surveys, including related research. These visitors gave presentations on their methodology and research work, too.

Christian: On a personal level, what professional achievements are you particularly proud of?

Geoff: In 1970, I applied for and was awarded the professional qualification of Fellow of the Institute of Statisticians (FIS). This institute merged with the Royal Statistical Society in 1993 and the new professional qualification of Chartered Statistician (CStat) was introduced. The FIS and CStat qualifications are equivalent and I formally transferred to Chartered Statistician status on January 1, 1993. Once the Statistical Society of Canada's Professional Accreditation PStat was established in 2004, I also applied for it and became the third member to be granted this status.

3. Involvement in the statistical community

Christian: How did you get involved in the Statistical Society of Canada (SSC)?

Geoff: It was Dan Krewski, now an Emeritus Professor and Director of the McLaughlin Centre for Population Health Risk Assessment at the University of Ottawa, who initially approached me to see if I would organize a session at the 1985 Annual Meeting of the SSC.

I eventually sat on the Board of Directors from 1984 to 1987, and I served on the very first SSC Awards Committee, as well as on the Program Committee for the 1985 Meeting in Winnipeg.

Jon Rao and I became friends at StatCan, where he was a consultant in addition to being a Statistics Professor at Carleton University (Editor's note: for a self-portrait of Jon Rao, see Rao, 2019). While we were both members of the SSC Board of Directors, we travelled together to and from the Society's annual

meetings. I also went to most of the monthly Statistics seminars organized by Jon at Carleton to keep abreast of statistical developments more generally. Once, Harvey Goldstein, a Professor of Statistics at the University of Bristol who was in the same cohort as me for an Honours BSc Mathematics degree at Manchester, came to Carleton to give a seminar. He was astonished to find me in the audience and a Director of SSMD at StatCan. Unfortunately, Harvey was an early victim of the pandemic in 2020.

Christian: How did you end up chairing the Program Committee for the 1986 Annual Meeting in Banff?

Geoff: As you may remember, Martin Wilk was the Chief Statistician of Canada from 1980 to 1985 (Editor's note: for an interview of Martin Wilk and his obituary, see Genest and Brackstone, 2010 and Brackstone and Genest, 2013, respectively). In 1986-87, he was then President of the SSC. Now in early June 1985, he and I travelled together to attend the SSC Annual Meeting in Winnipeg. On the plane, Martin chatted about some topics he was planning to cover at the meeting in his speech about "blue-collar and white-collar statisticians"; see Wilk (1985). At the meeting, the SSC President, David Andrews, told him that the Society needed someone to Chair the Program Committee for the 1986 meeting. Martin suggested my name to David, who agreed, and I later accepted his invitation!

Christian: You did a great job of it, which put you in line for the SSC Presidency!

Geoff: Little did I know! Serving on the SSC Board and on various committees was very fulfilling, but I would never have thought of running for President, were it not for you.

Christian: You give me too much credit!

Geoff: But it is true. You are the one who convinced me to run for President Elect in 1987 but as it turned out, it was Robert Cl  roux, Professor at Universit   de Montr  al, who was elected. So, I thought that was it for me, but you encouraged me to run again the following year, and this time I was elected.

Christian: You were then on the SSC Executive Committee from July 1988 to June 1991, and President in 1989-90. What were the highlights of your term?

Geoff: You could find a full report in Hole (1990a) but the two main things that happened during my term as President were the establishment of a permanent office for the SSC in Ottawa, and the creation of the Biostatistics Section. I was the first to pay my dues as a member! That year, the annual meeting was held at Memorial University, St. John's, June 3 to 6, 1990.

Christian: I have vivid memories of that meeting, where I was Master of Ceremonies for the banquet.

Geoff: Yes, you made us all laugh a lot at a time of great political tension in the country, with the imminent failure of the Meech Lake Accord.

Christian: I was also quite impressed that you convinced Janet Norwood to give the Invited Presidential Address.

Geoff: Janet was an eminent statistician. She was the first woman to be Commissioner, US Bureau of Labor Statistics. She held that position from 1979 to 1991, and accomplished a whole lot more before she died in 2015. Her husband was ill at the time of the SSC Annual Meeting, so I feared that she might renounce her participation. When she came to St. John's, she had just completed her term as President of the American Statistical Association (ASA). We took advantage of her presence to present formal greetings to the ASA on the occasion of the sesquicentennial anniversary of the ASA's foundation, on November 27, 1839; see Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1 SSC President Geoff Hole presents ASA Past President Janet Norwood formal greetings to commemorate the American Statistical Association's sesquicentennial anniversary, June 1990



Christian: You have described elsewhere (<https://ssc.ca/en/about/history/why-does-ssc-have-a-coat-arms>) how Martin Wilk's suggestion that the SSC sends such greetings eventually led to the creation of an emblem committee that came up with the SSC's coat of arms.

Geoff: The committee, which I chaired, included Peter Macdonald and George Styan. We contacted the Canadian Heraldic Authority at Rideau Hall and were fortunate to have Charles Maier, Athabaska Herald, assigned to work closely with us to come up with an appropriate design. Once we had a design, the SSC Board of Directors petitioned for a grant of Arms, Crest and Motto.

Christian: I was on the Board of Directors in those days, and I remember being particularly happy with the choice of Latin motto, “*Scientia Sapientia Consilium*”, which recalls the key features of our profession (science, wisdom, counsel) and whose initial letters are SSC!

Geoff: The Letters Patent were proclaimed at Memorial University during the 1990 Annual Meeting (see Figure 3.2) and a painting of the Arms is on permanent display there to commemorate the event. For details, see Maier (1990); for an interpretation of the SSC Coat of Arms, see also Hole (1990b).

Figure 3.2 Charles Maier, Athabaska Herald, presenting SSC President Geoff Hole with the “Letters Patent”, the legal document conferring the Society’s its Coat of Arms on June 5, 1990, during the SSC Annual Meeting held at Memorial University, June 3-6, 1990



Christian: This is also the year that you completed your BA in French at Carleton!

Geoff: Indeed, and with high honors, if I may say!

Christian: A bit later, you celebrated 25 years of service at Statistics Canada (see Figure 3.3). As for your involvement in the statistical community, it continued until the turn of the century.

Geoff: Among other things, I served as Program Chair for a joint meeting of the International Association of Survey Statisticians and the International Association for Official Statistics which was held in Aguascalientes, Mexico, September 1-4, 1998. There were over 300 participants for this event, which was both the first joint meeting of these associations and the first meeting of either of them in Latin America.

Figure 3.3 25 Years of Service Award given to Geoff by Ivan Fellegi (left), Chief Statistician of Canada, in 1992



As you can imagine, this was a real challenge, particularly as no template or guidelines existed from previous conferences of these associations. Informatics staff set up a connection to my account in Ottawa from Aguascalientes so that I could easily make last-minute changes to the conference program. This was not so frequent at the time!

Christian: What were some of the conference’s highlights?

Geoff: Carlos Jarque, President of the United Nations Statistical Commission and, in Mexico, of the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), presented the first keynote address entitled “Statistical Developments in Mexico”. Ivan Fellegi, Chief Statistician of Canada, presented the second keynote address entitled “Statistical Services – Preparing for the Future”. Before the meeting, I took Spanish 38.115, “Introductory Spanish”, at Carleton University and was made even more welcome by the local arrangements committee based at INEGI. Len Cook, who was the Government Statistician of New Zealand at the time, attended this conference.

In 1982, Len Cook visited Statistics Canada, and I organized a program of methodology briefings for him in March. Recently, I discovered that this visit was during the confirmation of Len’s appointment as the Assistant Government Statistician, Department of Statistics, New Zealand. When at Statistics Canada, Len always came to our place for one of Anna’s wonderful meals. On one occasion, he came apple picking with our family.

Over the years, I attended many conferences of the SSC and the ASA, but also of the Institute of Mathematical Statistics, the Royal Statistical Society, and the International Statistical Institute (ISI). The last one I attended was the ISI World Statistics Congress held in Ottawa in 2023. I did so primarily to meet and lunch with Len Cook, and attend the ISI Session in honor of the late Tim Holt, a longtime friend, at which Len gave his “Reflections on the Statistical Contributions of Professor Tim Holt” (Editor’s note: for an obituary of David (Tim) Holt, see Smith, 2023).

4. After retirement

Christian: I see that after retirement, in 2004, you actually went back to school!

Geoff: I registered for a BA in General Art History at Carleton, completed “with distinction” in 2007, and then an MA in Art History that I obtained in 2013.

Christian: What was the subject of your Master’s thesis?

Geoff: I was to have had a thesis but my wife needed support with a bout of cancer so my MA was by examination. What would have been my thesis became a published book on the World War I experience of Canadian architect and artist Arthur Norman Martin.

The Canadian War Museum catalogued it on March 18, 2016; see Hole (2016). Other war and art institutions that have copies are the Archives of Ontario, Library and Archives Canada, National Gallery of Canada, and internationally, the Australian War Memorial and Imperial War Museum (London).

Christian: In closing, please tell us something about your family, which you are so proud of.

Geoff: My future wife, Anna Mary Bridget Canning, arrived in Canada by boat from Liverpool on June 11, 1968; she was 24. She was a midwife and came with two colleagues of hers, Susan Griffiths and Sheena Waterson. Also on board was Henry Glouchkow, recruited by the DBS as a survey methodologist, his wife Heather, and young son, Jamie, whom the three midwives babysat on the voyage.

With three other bachelors working in the same office for Alf Winkworth, one day Henry Glouchkow and his wife invited us for a steak barbecue along with these three young midwives. We met there on September 1, 1968, and Anna later told me that it was “hate at first sight”. She said to Susan and Sheena, “I never want to meet that Geoffrey again”. However, I was attracted to Anna, asked her out many times and eventually Anna relented and did come out with me.

When she moved to Ottawa, Anna initially worked at the Civic Hospital. After our wedding, in 1970 (see Figure 4.1), she worked for a while at the Élisabeth Bruyère Hospital. We then had three children: Catherine Elizabeth (1970), Rebecca Jane (1972), and Gavin Charles Edward (1974); see Figure 4.2. Once they were teenagers, Anna returned to work to become a doctor’s nurse with Dr. Robert Birnbaum.

Figure 4.1 Anna and Geoff on their wedding day, February 27, 1970



Figure 4.2 The Hole children photographed in 1989 on the steps of their home at 668 Mansfield Avenue, in Ottawa: Catherine aged 18, Rebecca aged 17, and Gavin aged 15. Catherine studied French at Queen's and Education at the University of Ottawa. Rebecca studied Political Science and History at McGill, and later did a Master of Social Work, Policy, at McMaster. As for Gavin, he studied Engineering at McGill and Law at the University of Toronto



Anna was interested in dramatic art. She won an award for Speech in 1960 from the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, and attended a Summer School to stage a Shakespeare play under the direction of David William, who later became an Artistic Director at the Ontario Stratford Shakespeare Festival. She knew huge chunks of Shakespeare's plays by heart.

In Ottawa, from 1969 when the National Arts Centre opened, Anna and I went to practically all series, theatre, orchestra, modern dance, and ballet. On January 28, 1970, we attended the Manitoba centennial event featuring the Winnipeg Ballet. Anna was the first to recognize the actress Barbra Streisand coming down the grand staircase on the arm of Pierre Trudeau, who was then Prime Minister of Canada. Also, we often spent weeks on vacation to take in many of the shows available at the Stratford Festival and the Shaw Festival (in Niagara-on-the-Lake).

Besides theatre, both Anna and I were avid readers, and we often went to art exhibitions at the National Gallery of Canada and the Art Gallery of Ontario. She passed away on September 10, 2013, at the age of 69. I still miss her.

Christian: We can all sympathize. Thank you for granting me this interview, Geoff, and best of luck with your future endeavors.

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