

The Demography of Victorian England and Wales

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Sally Sheard

This book seems to have been a long time coming. Its precursors were a slim volume in the popular Macmillan Studies in Economic and Social History series in 1992, and more recently the *Atlas of Victorian Mortality* (with Nicola Shelton), published in 1997. Yet one feels that at the heart of every historical demographer is the urge to publish the 'big book' - the definitive statement for the discipline. There are several ground rules for a successful 'big book': it must be both geographically and chronologically comprehensive and provide a critique of its predecessors in a statistically rigorous fashion (probably more so than in any other history-based discipline). It must also provide some pointers for future research - a map into the uncharted territory of historical demography. Of course, the ghost lurking at the back of my preamble is Thomas McKeown. Since the publication of *The Modern Rise of Population* in 1976, his model has become the yardstick by which every subsequent historical demographer has been measured, and indeed measures oneself. Woods is coy about the ongoing relevance of McKeown's work to current research. He would clearly love this book to be the one which finally lays to rest the debate on what caused the decline in mortality rates in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet McKeown, for all his well-publicised failings provides the valuable organising framework within which subsequent researchers have organised their arguments. Even Woods is adept at this game, expertly dissecting McKeown's arguments in the course of constructing his own more robust analysis.

How does this book rate on the 'big book' credentials outlined above? It certainly does well on the first count of long chronology. Thankfully Queen Victoria's own life expectancy was considerably longer than that for the average upper-class female born in 1819. Her 82 years provide a neat chronological window through

which to view a significant shift in demographic patterns. During the course of her life, demography became deeply entrenched in the philosophy of governance in England and Wales. The introduction of civil registration in 1837, together with the decennial census and increasingly more sophisticated nosologies, meant that the state now had detailed information on where and how the population was living. Such demographic information was most useful for informing debates on the quality of life, in particular the quality of health. The gradual improvement during the late nineteenth century in life expectancy and trends in particular diseases and locations was evident even to the contemporary observers. Woods does not explicitly state why he has opted for a title that uses the term 'Victorian'. In 1992 he chose to use the term 'Nineteenth Century' for the Macmillan book. Is this change in terminology significant, given roughly the same chronological period in both books? Perhaps what Woods is trying to convey in this book, although maybe not explicitly enough for my liking, is that by shifting the focus to the Victorian ethos and its people - as individuals and collectively as a population - he can place more emphasis on the relationship between demography and broader aspects of Victorian economy and society.

The chronology does usefully stray from the Victorian period when appropriate. Woods provides a concise summary of what happened to earlier demographic patterns, which substantiate his arguments for a short upswing in fertility in the late eighteenth century as the engine of the subsequent population growth. He is also prepared to extrapolate his research to provide some thoughts on twentieth century demographic regimes. How does the book rate in terms of its geographical focus? England and Wales do form a complete administrative unit in the Victorian era, with Scotland operating a distinctly separate system (in terms of collection and tabulation of information, nosologies, etc.), although an explicit explanation of this split would perhaps be helpful for students new to historical demography. Woods is conscientious in placing the English and Welsh experience in a wider European and global perspective. He provides a valuable narrative on the perils of demographic modelling and the construction of 'regimes'. The discussion on the naivety of some late twentieth century demographic modelling, which sought to transfer the British 'demographic transition' model en masse to developing countries, is particularly effective. He uses examples from twentieth century China, East Africa and Japan to illustrate the diversity of demographic experiences that can be generated from similar mortality/fertility trends.

The real beauty of this book, however, is in its construction and pace. The discussion flows naturally from the very readable critique of previous demographic analyses through to a section on the sources and quality of the data, which are used in the 'meat' of the text. Then follow clearly structured chapters that provide state-of-the-art hypotheses on preventive checks, family limitation theory, occupational and social group mortality, secular decline in childhood mortality and the effect of place on disease patterns. He is prepared to sacrifice some of the tedious preamble (or at least to consign it to footnotes) to achieve a faster pace in his arguments. This is a noticeable contrast with earlier demographic textbooks, such as E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield's *The Population History of England 1541-1871*, which laboriously describes all the data and techniques employed in the formation of their hypotheses. The net result of Woods' style is to move this book within the reach of the undergraduate student, yet retaining the level of sophisticated analysis demanded by fellow demographers.

This is a deceptive book, too. Although it has over 400 pages of text (as well as the 28 page bibliography), it manages to appear a slender volume. This is in part due to the production by Cambridge University Press, which has used a high-quality thin paper, as well as efficient page layouts. The splash of colour provided by the section of maps in the centre of the book is welcome, but I'm afraid goes little way to console my frustration with the lack of pictures. Surely, in a book which is all about people - individuals or populations - we could have had more than the token line drawing of some insanitary property which is used on the cover? Woods is so clearly a fan of William Farr, I would have at least expected a portrait of this great Victorian demographer. Perhaps also he could have used the brilliant pair of family photographs used by the Liverpool Medical Officer of Health, Dr W.E. Hope in the 1920s to show the benefits and perils of breastfeeding and bottle-feeding respectively.

The lack of illustrations is more than a niggle on my part. It highlights one of the rare weaknesses of this book, which sets out (on page 2 to be precise) to provide a truly interdisciplinary text, integrating the work

of 'statisticians, economists, sociologists, geographers and epidemiologists, as well as several branches of history'. Given that this book also comes from the Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy and Society in Past Time series, I had hoped for far more about 'economy' and 'society'. Woods does collect and synthesise all possible available demographic data for England and Wales during this period. He is a master at the slick reconfigurations and 'guesstimating' that characterise the advanced level at which demographers now work and play. But where is the exploration of the culture in which Victorian couples sought to limit their family sizes, or the analysis of the pressures on the state to provide a preventive health service in the late nineteenth century? I acknowledge that these subjects are not as amenable to quantitative analysis as demographic data - but there are ways in which these valuable perspectives can be integrated. Woods indicates continually throughout this volume that he is alert to the weaknesses in some demographic studies, in which 'hypothesis has run far ahead of description, to the detriment of interpretation' (p.112). He gains our trust through his careful approach to numbers, but at times one wishes he was a little bit more daring in his use of supplementary material.

The lack of illustrations is thus a small niggle relative to my broader concern for the gap which this volume fails to fill, but a related one all the same. This is essentially a highly accomplished demographic text, in which the integration of mortality, fertility and nuptiality themes within carefully chosen geographical and chronological parameters renders the value of the whole much greater than the sum of the individual demographic components. This volume builds on Woods' earlier mortality-focused research and complements the work of Szreter and others on the fertility side of the equation. This is certainly the current definitive statement on the demography of Victorian England and Wales, but I suggest that Woods has not yet produced a final 'map'. This volume has significantly reduced the uncharted territory, but also provided some interesting directions for new routes.

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