The Demography of Victorian England and Wales

The Demography of Victorian England and Wales uses the full range of nineteenth-century civil registration material to describe in detail for the first time the changing population history of England and Wales between 1837 and 1914. Its principal focus is the great demographic revolution which occurred during those years, especially the secular decline of fertility and the origins of the modern rise in life expectancy. But Robert Woods also considers the variable quality of the Victorian registration system; the changing role of what Robert Malthus termed the preventive check; variations in occupational mortality and the development of the twentieth-century class mortality gradient; and the effects of urbanisation associated with the significance of distinctive disease environments. The volume also illustrates the fundamental importance of geographical variations between urban and rural areas. This invaluable reference tool is generously illustrated with numerous tables and figures, some of the latter being in colour.

Robert Woods is John Rankin Professor of Geography at the University of Liverpool. He is the editor of the International Journal of Population Geography and a past president of the British Society for Population Studies. Among his many publications is The Population of Britain in the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge, 1995).
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The Demography of Victorian England and Wales

ROBERT WOODS

University of Liverpool
To the memory of my grandmother

Hannah Maud Nettleton (née Garner)

born Liverpool 1882 – died Birmingham 1984
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Preface

A preface should certainly apologise and acknowledge, but it must also consider expectations, both the readers’ and the author’s. This is a demographic study written by a geographer. It describes and offers some interpretations of the course of demographic change in England and Wales during the Victorian era, 1837–1901. It is especially concerned with changes and variations in nuptiality, fertility and mortality, but it has relatively little to say directly on the subject of internal migration although it does devote a chapter to the consequences of urbanisation for the pattern of national mortality trends. There is no intention to make the study a comprehensive survey in which each demographic component receives equal attention. For example, childhood mortality is given an especially prominent place not only because of its interest to contemporaries especially in the early years of the twentieth century, but also because of its contribution to variations in life chances and its possible influence on reproductive behaviour. The book is not preoccupied exclusively with one period and place. The Victorian era, whilst being remarkable for the development of new statistical sources and for its position at the origin of several secular trends, cannot be treated in isolation. Much needs to be said about the early years of the nineteenth as well as the eighteenth century and the analysis will not be halted arbitrarily in 1901 or 1911. Similarly, the borders of England and Wales will be crossed when to do so would seem to enrich the account either by allowing the experiences of other regions to be ‘borrowed’ so that gaps may be filled by analogy or where other places offer illuminating contrasts. No one theory will be tested or methodology employed, although a critique of the demographic transition concept is bound to occupy an important position and demography amounts to very little if it cannot quantify vital events, or their absence.

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The Demography of Victorian England and Wales has a clear and distinctive focus. It is concerned with space as well as time: with the ways in which nuptiality, fertility and mortality varied and changed during sixty or seventy years. It uses a common set of 614 districts based on the registration districts defined by the General Register Office, London, to chart these changes. Whilst it has been obvious for some time that a country as small as England and Wales was nonetheless far from homogeneous in economic, social or even political terms, it has taken far longer to establish the extent of demographic diversity and especially the importance of local variations. These may only be charted when districts or sub-districts are employed in preference to the 45 registration counties. Although this geographical perspective is obvious, there will be occasions on which it will need to be complemented or replaced by other approaches. For example, compared with several other European countries, the decline of marital fertility in England and Wales does not lend itself to ecological analysis since such change was not sufficiently geographically differentiated. Similarly, it will be important to show the way in which the life chances of people engaged in different occupations and the members of social groups or classes improved in the late nineteenth century regardless of where they lived. However, the spatial perspective will prove of particular value for an analysis of marriage and of the pattern of mortality, its age components and causes of death.

This book also presents powerful arguments for the consideration of joint effects in demographic studies. Nuptiality and overall fertility need to be treated together as do fertility and childhood mortality, for instance. Although it has proved necessary to deal with these themes in separate chapters, they are also brought together in the notion of demographic regimes which is defined and discussed in chapter 10.

Authors are obliged to make certain assumptions about their readers. I shall assume that those using this book have at least a basic knowledge of demographic terms and analytical concepts. If this is not the case then reference may be made to my Population Analysis in Geography (Longman, 1979) and Theoretical Population Geography (Longman, 1982). If a short, non-technical introduction to Victorian demography is required then The Population of Britain in the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge University Press, 1995) should serve the purpose.

Studies of this nature are written and assembled over a protracted period, twenty years in this case, and they require the financial support of several organisations as well as the assistance of many individuals. The Nuffield Foundation provided a Research Fellowship in the Social Sciences in 1985; the Wellcome Trust’s History of Medicine Panel supported research on infant mortality (chapter 7) and occupational
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Mortality (chapter 6); the Economic and Social Research Council funded work on mortality and cause of death (Grants R-000-23-3373 and R-000-23-4824) which led to the publication of An Atlas of Victorian Mortality (Liverpool University Press, 1997) and contributed to chapter 8 here; and, finally, a grant (F/25/BD) from the Leverhulme Trust for the period 1996–98 allowed the book to be completed. The following individuals have made their own important contributions as students, assistants, colleagues or advisors and to them I owe a special debt of gratitude: Michael Anderson, Chris Galley, Eilidh Garrett, Bill Gould, David Grigg, Michael Haines, Andy Hinde, Violetta Hionidou, Clare Holdsworth, Gerry Kearns, Dick Lawton, Paul Laxton, Sandra Mather, Graham Mooney, Bob Schofield, Sally Sheard, Nicola Shelton, David Siddle, Chris Smith, Richard Smith, Simon Szreter, Patti Watterson (now Tomlinson), Paul White, Naomi Williams, Paul Williamson, Chris Wilson, John Woodward and Tony Wrigley. Even though they will surely find aspects with which they disagree, I hope that in general they will think the job well done. Alison, Rachel and Gavin like the figures.

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