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978-0-521-08514-4 - Population and Society in Norway 1735-1865

Michael Drake

Excerpt

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I *Problems of the population historian*

History, traditionally viewed, is a literary exercise: ‘charm and style’¹ are the hall marks of good historical scholarship. Population history, however, is more for the numerate than the literate, since numbers, not words, are the basic although, of course, not the only material. Without adequate quantitative evidence the demographic historian should not pick up his pen. If he does he will rarely be credible. He might well, of course, be more readable and this is his dilemma: the more statistics he has, the more authoritative his writing becomes and, not infrequently, the more unreadable. But to eschew statistics, to write in the traditional manner, is to contribute little or nothing to the understanding of our demographic past.

It is of course one thing to demand quantitative evidence, quite another to produce it. Population statistics are rarely, if ever, perfect and become less so the further back in time we probe. Yet it is because the success of population history depends so much on the representativeness and accuracy of the statistical material that the demographic historian must needs spend much of his time and energy in assessing its worth.

The value of any statistics depends upon the skill with which they are collected, processed and analysed. Errors are likely to be made during each of these stages and if not spotted may be compounded—possibly with horrendous results.

In the case of population statistics the primary material from which they are derived is collected in two ways: by a census or enumeration at a point in time and by a recording or registration process through time. The demographer takes a census in order to draw up a balance sheet of the various characteristics of the individuals making up the population: age, sex, marital status, occupation, place of residence

¹ Douglass C. North, ‘The state of economic history’, *American Economic Review*, 55, no. 2 (May 1965), 86.

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and so on. The registration process is used to record, as they happen, the events which bring about population change; births, marriages and deaths being the important ones for most purposes.

Censuses covering all, or almost all, a western country's population were not taken until the eighteenth century, the first being in Iceland in 1703. This was followed by Sweden in 1749, where a unique system was inaugurated which combined the registration and enumeration processes. The kingdom of Denmark-Norway carried out its first census in 1769, the United States in 1790, England and France in 1801. Most other European countries did not begin to take regular censuses until later in the nineteenth century.¹

These first censuses were a great advance. Inevitably, however, they leave much to be desired. Neither the people who planned them nor those who actually carried them out had any experience of this kind of work. They tended to ask only a limited range of questions and even these were frequently ambiguous. Enumerators were sometimes recruited and paid in ways not likely to enhance their efficiency. The Irish census of 1831, for example, probably resulted in an over-count partly because it was spread over a considerable period of time and partly because the enumerators thought that 'their payment would be in proportion to the number of people included in the returns'.² Under, rather than over-enumeration was, however, the main problem of the early census takers. The populace was often suspicious and uncooperative. Poor communications made the task of the enumerators arduous and sometimes even dangerous. Children, particularly those under five years of age, were frequently missed. When ages were asked digital preferences were often very marked. The ages commonly given ended in either a nought or some other even number.

Eight censuses were taken in Norway between 1769 and 1865; two in these years and the others in 1801, 1815, 1825, 1835, 1845,

¹ Excepting the 1665 census of New France. A. M. Carr-Saunders, *World population: past growth and present trends* (Oxford, 1936), pp. 6-8. T. Thorsteinsson, 'The census of Iceland in 1703', *Nordic Statistical Journal*, 8 (1929), 362-70; H. Palmström, 'The census of population in Norway, August 15th 1769', *Nordic Statistical Journal*, 8 (1929), 371-80; H. Gille, 'The demographic history of the northern European countries in the eighteenth century', *Population Studies*, 3 (1949-50), 3-18.

² K. H. Connell, *The population of Ireland, 1750-1845* (Oxford, 1950), p. 3.

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and 1855.¹ The best were undoubtedly those of 1801 and 1865 as they were the only ones where the enumerators had to record the *name* of each inhabitant together with his or her age, sex, marital status, occupation, position within the household and address.

For the 1801 census considerable pains were taken to see that the instructions were carried out properly, and completed sample forms were sent to each enumerator before the count was taken. The clergy acted as enumerators in the countrysides, the magistrates in the towns. On the question of marital status not only was the enumerator required to find out whether the person was single, married or widowed, but also whether he or she had been married more than once and if so how many times. People temporarily away from the household in which they normally lived, no matter if they were in some other part of the country or overseas, were to appear in the census as if they had been in their normal residence on census day, 1 February.

In the towns the magistrates, accompanied by local registrars, were to visit the heads of each household and obtain the requisite information directly from them. In the countryside the priests were not obliged to visit the different households, but were instead to announce from the pulpit a time and a place at which they would meet the heads of households. Priests were assisted in filling out the census forms by local school teachers and parish precentors.

It was obvious to the organisers of the census that not all these meetings could take place on the one day and that unless care was taken this might well spoil the census. They therefore warned the enumerators specifically to omit from the census children born after 1 February and to make sure not to omit those people who had died after that day. It was also realised that the returning of ages might easily lead to confusion. To avoid this two illustrations of how ages should be recorded were given to guide the enumerators. Thus a newborn child was to be entered as aged one year; a man in his 26th year was to appear as 26, not 25 (i.e. his last birthday).²

Despite these precautions, the general failings of census-taking

¹ For details of these see Kaare Ofstad, 'Population statistics and population registration in Norway: Part 3, Population censuses', *Population Studies*, 3 (1949-50), 66-75.

² A copy of the census schedule together with the instructions to the enumerators is in Wessel Berg, *Kongelige rescripter, resolutioner og collegial-breve for Norge i tidsrummet 1660-1813*, IV, 1797-1813 (Christiania, 1845), pp. 273-80.

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in relatively primitive societies appear, although one supposes they were less evident than they might have been. A check of some burial registers for the years immediately after 1801 reveals the deaths of people not recorded in the census.¹ One finds, too, digital preferences leading to the bunching of the population around the ages 10, 20, 30, 40, etc. A large number of men in the valley of Hallingdal chose to return themselves as 36 years of age, possibly because liability for military service ended at that age!² In spite of these shortcomings, the census of 1801 was far superior to any taken outside Scandinavia either by that date or for many years to come, and the range of detail it supplies allows us to dissect the Norwegian society of the time with considerable precision. It is a great pity that a census of this type was not to be taken again until 1865.

The remaining six censuses were much less satisfactory. None of them were nominative. The enumerators using tally sheets were merely required to return population totals broken down by age, sex, marital status, and occupation. Because no names were required the task of assessing the reliability of these censuses is very difficult. One can fairly safely assume, however, that they covered the population less completely than did the censuses of 1801 and 1865. The two least satisfactory of this non-nominative group of censuses were those of 1769 and 1815. The first of these was taken in August, a month when many people were likely to be away either on the fishing grounds or tending their animals on the high mountain pastures. There appears also to have been quite a widespread fear that the census was a prelude to higher taxation. It was, after all, the first census and it came shortly after a particularly onerous poll tax had been introduced in 1762.³ This fear, we imagine, must have led to some under-enumeration.

The census of 1815 also appears to have suffered from its timing

¹ Ivar Myklebust, 'Svartedauden, pestår og reproduksjon', *Norsk Historisk Tidsskrift*, 37 (Oslo, 1954-6), 351-2.

² Census of Norway 1801. My analysis of enumerators' returns for parishes of Nes and Ål in Hallingdal. These are now in the Riksarkiv, Oslo. For liability for military service see T. R. Malthus, *An essay on population* (Everyman edition, London, 1914), book 2, p. 155.

³ This led to a serious uprising in and around Bergen in 1765. Karen Larsen, *A history of Norway* (Princeton, 1948), pp. 322-3. About 4,000 regular soldiers were excluded from the census. For a further discussion of this census see notes in statistical appendix.

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—just after the Napoleonic wars had ended and during the early days of Norwegian independence. The instructions sent to the enumerators were much less detailed than in 1801 and were sometimes misleading.¹ No particular effort appears to have been made to ensure an accurate count.

For the censuses of 1845 and 1855 the enumerators were provided with a list of all the farms in their district. This had been drawn up for rating purposes in 1839 and obviously reduced the likelihood of entire households being overlooked. The officials in the department of the interior responsible for the publication of these two censuses used the list to check the work of the census-takers. Their comment on the census of 1845 was that the returns showed ‘care and accuracy’.² Their only comment on that of 1855 was that in the agricultural part of the census, the amount of seed sown and the number of animals on the farms appeared too low.³ This agricultural section had first been attached to the population census in 1835 and was repeated in 1845 and 1855.⁴

Despite these strictures, leading figures among those who have worked on the early Norwegian censuses have not been sparing in their praise. Eilert Sundt remarked that the more he worked on them the

¹ The schedule and the instructions used in the rural districts appear in *Den norske rigstidende for 1815*, no. 9. The enumerators were asked to place the population in eight-year age groups. A footnote to the schedule—it looks very much like an afterthought—asked that a separate note be made of the number of male and female children under four years of age. An examination of the original returns (now in the riksarkiv, Oslo) reveals that in at least the following parishes the under four-year groups was not included in the under eight-year group: Røyken (Drammens deanery), Spydeberg (Øvre Borgesyssel); Gjerdrum (Øvre Romerike); Botne and Ramnes (Jarlsberg); Solum (Bamble); Manger and Hosanger (Nordhordland); Ona (Nordmøre); Hadsel (Vesterålen); Loppa and Alta-Talvik (Vest-Finnmark). In at least two of these parishes this under four-year group was not included in the population total for the parish as a whole. This made the total for the parish of Spydeberg, 1,656 instead of 1,822 and for Gjerdrum 1,186 instead of 1,297.

² Norges officielle statistik, ottende række, *Tabeller over folkemængden i Norge den 31te December 1845 samt over de i tidsrummet 1836–1845 ægteviiede, fødte og døde* (Christiania, 1847).

³ Norges officielle statistik, sextende række, *Tabeller over folkemængden i Norge den 31te December 1855 samt over de i tidsrummet 1846–1855 ægteviiede, fødte og døde* (Christiania, 1857). Kaare Ofstad, *op. cit.* pp. 68–70.

⁴ O. Vig, ‘Nogle ord om folketælling m.m.’, *Folkevennen*, 4 (Kristiania, 1855), 306 notes that farmers in 1835 thought the agricultural part of the census was a prelude to new taxation. These fears proved groundless as in 1836 the land tax was abolished. For this reason the agricultural census of 1845 was more complete.

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stronger his impression of their reliability became.¹ When Anders Kiær, the first director of the central statistical bureau in Norway, came to revise the census totals he estimated that the most inaccurate of them all, that of 1815, was no more than 3 per cent deficient.² Gunnar Jahn, another notable director of the bureau, believes that the deficiency was probably even less than this modest figure.³

The registration of births, deaths and marriages in eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Europe was usually in the hands of the clergy. The process of registration began much earlier than the taking of censuses. In England, Thomas Cromwell ordered all parish clergy to keep registers of births, deaths and marriages as early as 1538. Quite a large number of the surviving registers do go back as far as this, which suggests that his order was effective. Registration began in France, the Netherlands and Scandinavia in the seventeenth century.⁴ Not until the eighteenth century, however, were the clergy required to make annual returns of the number of births, deaths or marriages taking place in their parishes. The first country to do so was the dual kingdom of Denmark-Norway. Here we have annual returns of births and deaths from as early as 1735 and, for some parts of the country, even earlier.⁵ No attempt was made to obtain returns in England until the nineteenth century, although then Rickman sought to obtain retrospective returns from as far back as the middle of the sixteenth century.⁶

Any registration process is inherently more subject to error than a census, because it is a continuous process requiring constant attention. Moreover, a registration system conducted by the clergy involves snags of its own owing to its usually being based upon registers of baptisms rather than births, of burials rather than deaths,

¹ Eilert Sundt, *Om dødeligheden i Norge* (Christiania, 1855), p. 23.

² Norges officielle statistik. Ældre række, C. no. 1, *Tabeller vedkommende folkemængdens bevægelse i aarene, 1856-1865* (Christiania, 1868-9), p. vii.

³ Gunnar Jahn, 'Folketellingene 1801 og 1815 og befolknings-forholdene dengang', *Statsøkonomisk Tidsskrift*, 43 (Oslo, 1929), 202.

⁴ Paul Harsin and Étienne Hélin, *Actes du colloque international de démographie historique*, Liège, 18-20 April 1963 (Paris, 1963), pp. 185-225.

⁵ Manuscript returns for the diocese of Christiania beginning in 1733 are in the statsarkiv, Oslo.

⁶ G. Talbot Griffiths, 'Rickman's second series of eighteenth century population figures', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 92 (1929), 265-8.

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and of the marriages of that part of the population belonging to the religious denomination keeping the register. Any increase of non-conformity in a population, as for example occurred in late eighteenth, or perhaps even late seventeenth-century England,¹ will tend to reduce the completeness of registration. Much, too, depends upon the personal commitment of the clergy to what they might not regard as an essential part of their work and if there is a shortage of clergy the difficulty of covering the population effectively will be increased. Such a shortage might well occur if the population increases faster than the establishment of the church, or if it redistributes itself, for example through urbanisation, without a corresponding redeployment of the clergy.²

The registration of births, deaths and marriages in Norway from the seventeenth century to the present day has been the responsibility of the clergy of the State Church.³ Some parsons began to keep registers in the early seventeenth century and all were ordered to do so by a law of 1687.⁴ Their task was not easy. Parishes often covered a vast area and as compact nucleated villages were rare, apart from some areas in the west, the population was often widely dispersed.⁵

It was common for the clergy to perform services in different parts of their parishes on different Sundays,⁶ but even then some communicants had to travel ten or fifteen miles or even, along the western and northern coasts where many scattered islands were included in the one parish, up to thirty miles.⁷ Under such circumstances, it was frequently impossible, especially in the harsh winter months, for children to be baptised soon after birth, although it

¹ For eighteenth century, J. T. Krause, 'The changing adequacy of English registration, 1790-1837', in D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (editors), *Population in history* (London, 1965), pp. 379-93; for the seventeenth century, Michael Drake, 'An elementary exercise in parish register demography', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. 14, no. 3 (April 1962), 427, note 7 and 437, note 2.

² J. T. Krause, *op. cit.* pp. 385-6.

³ For an account of the system see Julie E. Backer, 'Population statistics and population registration in Norway. Part 1. The vital statistics of Norway, an historical review', *Population Studies*, 2 (1947-8), 318-38.

⁴ Norges officielle statistik, tredje række no. 106, *Oversigt over de vigtigste resultater af de statistiske tabeller vedkommende folkemængdens bevægelse 1866-1885* (Kristiania, 1890), p. 4.

⁵ See table 1.1.

⁶ H. D. Inglis, *A personal narrative of a journey through Norway, part of Sweden and the islands and states of Denmark* (4th ed. London, 1837), p. 143.

⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 61, 144.

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[More information](#)*Population and Society in Norway 1735-1865*TABLE I.1 *Distribution of the population amongst the parishes of southern Norway in 1801**

PARISHES					
Population per sq.km.	Number	Total population	Total area (sq.km.)	Percentage of total population	Percentage of total area
20 and over	20	52,676	2,097	7.8	1.4
15-20	32	88,876	5,187	13.2	3.5
10-15	36	92,439	7,550	13.7	5.1
5-10	74	198,161	28,400	29.4	19.2
1-5	90	241,733	104,762	35.9	70.8

* Calculated from figures of parish areas and populations in Jens Kraft, *Topographisk-statistisk beskrivelse over kongeriget Norge* (Christiania, 1820-35), I-VI. Kraft does not give the areas of parishes in the counties of Nord-Trøndelag, Nordland, and Troms and Finnmark. Even for the rest of the country it is not likely that the areas of the different parishes are strictly comparable, for, on occasion, Kraft excludes from his figures those parts of a parish that were mountainous or uninhabitable. Thus the table gives only the very roughest idea of the population densities of the parishes of southern Norway.

seems every effort was made to do this. Sometimes the baptismal journey proved fatal. On one occasion, for instance, thirty children born in the west coast parish of Volda during the hard winter of 1755 were said to have died because their parents insisted on taking them to church on the day they were born.¹ The clergy were also obviously unable to conduct burial services for all the newly deceased.² Sometimes the corpse was buried and the grave filled in, except for the space occupied by a wooden plank extending from the top of the coffin up to the surface of the ground above. On the parson's next visit the traditional Christian service took place with the parson withdrawing the plank and casting into the cavity the symbolic handful of soil.³ Possibly the bulk of births and deaths were registered but that this was not always the case is indicated by complaints of clergy in the Kristiansand diocese in 1741, that

¹ Hans Strøm, *Physisk og økonomisk beskrivelse over fogderiet Søndmør* (Sorøe, 1762), part I, p. 567. The practice was still followed almost a hundred years after Strøm wrote. See Joh. Gotaas, 'Om spæde børn og om jordemødre', *Folkevennen*, 8 (Kristiania, 1859), 291.

² Ingrid Semmingsen, *Husmannsminner* (Oslo, 1960), p. 50.

³ *Ibid.*

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farmers in the more remote valleys were burying their dead without any form of religious service and without informing their priest.¹ To set against these difficulties the Norwegian clergy enjoyed certain advantages not shared, for instance, by the English clergy who were doing comparable work at this time. The Norwegian parson did not have to cope with the rapidly expanding urban populations of industrial workers that over-taxed the English parochial system in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,² for there was comparatively little urbanisation in Norway until the second half of the nineteenth century.³ Although the population of the country increased from approximately 600,000 in 1735, to 1,700,000 in 1865, 84 per cent still lived in rural areas at the latter date.⁴ What towns there were rarely held five-figure populations. Despite rapid growth during the 1840s and 1850s Oslo, the largest town, had only 57,382 inhabitants in 1865 compared with 11,923 in 1801, whilst Bergen, the second largest, had only 27,703 compared with 16,931 in 1801.⁵ Together they accounted for one-third of Norway's urban population.⁶ Of the thirty-seven other places classified as towns in 1835 only eight had populations over 3,000.⁷

The rapid population growth of the first half of the nineteenth century did, however, greatly exceed the rise in the number of clergy. In 1720 there were, on average, 1,300 people per parson.⁸ By 1800 the number had increased to 1,884 and by 1855 to 3,164;

¹ Letter from Bishop Jakob Kærup of Kristiansand to Geheime-Conferentz-Raad J. L. von Holstein, 12 May 1741. A copy of this is to be found in the Christiania Bispesarkiv, *Ministerielle forretninger. Innberetninger. Rekke 1. Biskopene 1733-1814*, box 6, now in the statsarkiv, Oslo. The same complaint was made by Niels Ribe, the vicar of Ål in Hallingdal in 1745. Letter in *Kjeldeskriftfondets manuscript No. 181*, Norsk historisk kjeldeskrift-institutt, Oslo.

² J. T. Krause, *op. cit.* pp. 385-6.

³ Of the total population, 9 per cent lived in urban areas in 1769, 10 per cent in 1815, 13 per cent in 1855, 16 per cent in 1865 and 28 per cent in 1900. Norges offisielle statistikk, 10, 178 *Statistiske oversikter*, 1948 (Oslo, 1949), table 8, p. 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ O. J. Broch, *Kongeriget Norge og det norske folk, dets sociale forhold, sundhedstilstand, næringsveie, samfærdselsmidler og økonomi* (Kristiania, 1876), tillæg 11, pp. 3-4.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Samuel Laing, *Journal of a residence in Norway during the years 1834, 1835 and 1836. Made with a view to inquire into the moral and political economy of the country and the conditions of its inhabitants* (2nd ed. London, 1851), p. 253.

⁸ Dagfinn Mannsåker, *Det norske presteskapet i det 19 hundreåret* (Oslo, 1954), tables 5 and 7, pp. 70, 72.

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Year	Akershus	Kristian- sand	Bergen	Trondheim	Tromsø	NORWAY
1800	2,081	1,804	1,875	1,825	1,426	1,884
1815	2,263	2,181	2,314	2,297	1,753	2,214
1825	2,952	2,821	3,227	3,138	2,689	2,978
1835	2,588	2,741	2,619	3,026	2,139	2,632
1845	—	—	—	—	—	2,952
1855	3,232	3,492	3,328	2,878	2,645	3,164

* Dagfinn Mannsåker, *Det norske presteskapet i det 19 hundreåret* (Oslo, 1954), pp. 70, 72.

with, as in 1800, the north having a slightly higher proportion of parsons than the south.¹ The difference between north and south was not, however, sufficient to make up for the greater distances and harsher climate encountered by the clergy in the north. On the face of it the increase in population relative to the number of clergy would suggest that the effective registration of births and deaths was becoming more difficult in the second half of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries. Yet it never became an impossible task, for even with the vital rates current in mid-nineteenth-century Norway, one would not expect a population of 3,000 to produce much above 100 births and 60 deaths each year.

In carrying out their registration duties, the Norwegian clergy were not hampered by dissenting congregations, although it is true that from the closing years of the eighteenth century an increasing number of people turned to Hans Nielsen Hauge as he inveighed against the rationalism of many of the state clergy.² By the 1830s his followers were said to number 20,000 or 30,000³ but, as a Scottish observer noted, they were not dissenters or sectarians in the English sense. They were more like 'the evangelical part of the community of the Church of England'.⁴ Unlike the English dissenters, who by

¹ Mannsåker, *op. cit.* pp. 70, 72.

² Sverre Steen, *Det norske folkes liv og historie gjennom tidene*, 7 (Oslo, 1933), 259, 261.

³ H. D. Inglis, *A personal narrative*, pp. 145-6. ⁴ Samuel Laing, *Journal*, p. 124.