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Population and Society in Norway 1735–1865

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Michael Drake
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Population and Society in Norway 1735-1865

MICHAEL DRAKE
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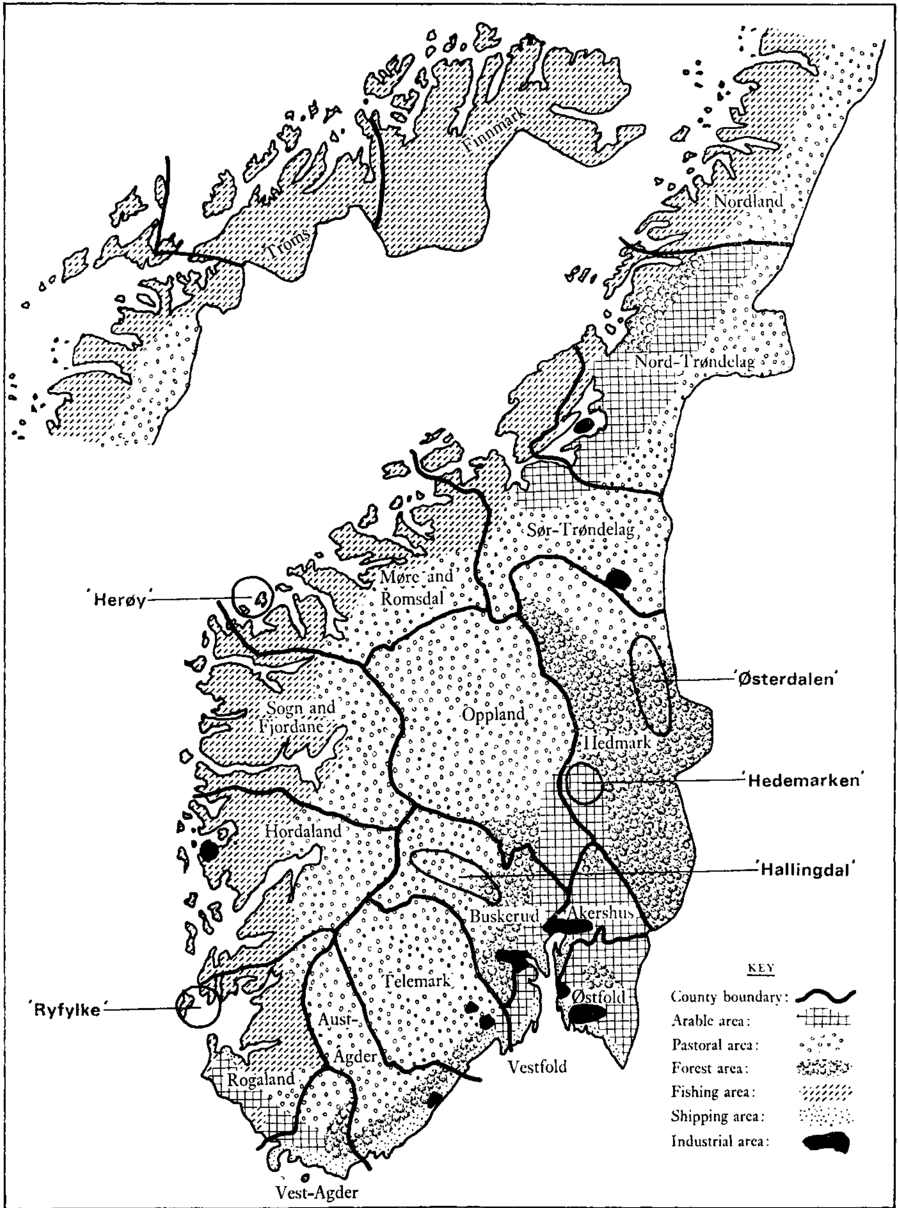

Map 1 Regional distribution of dominant occupations in Norway *c.* 1860.

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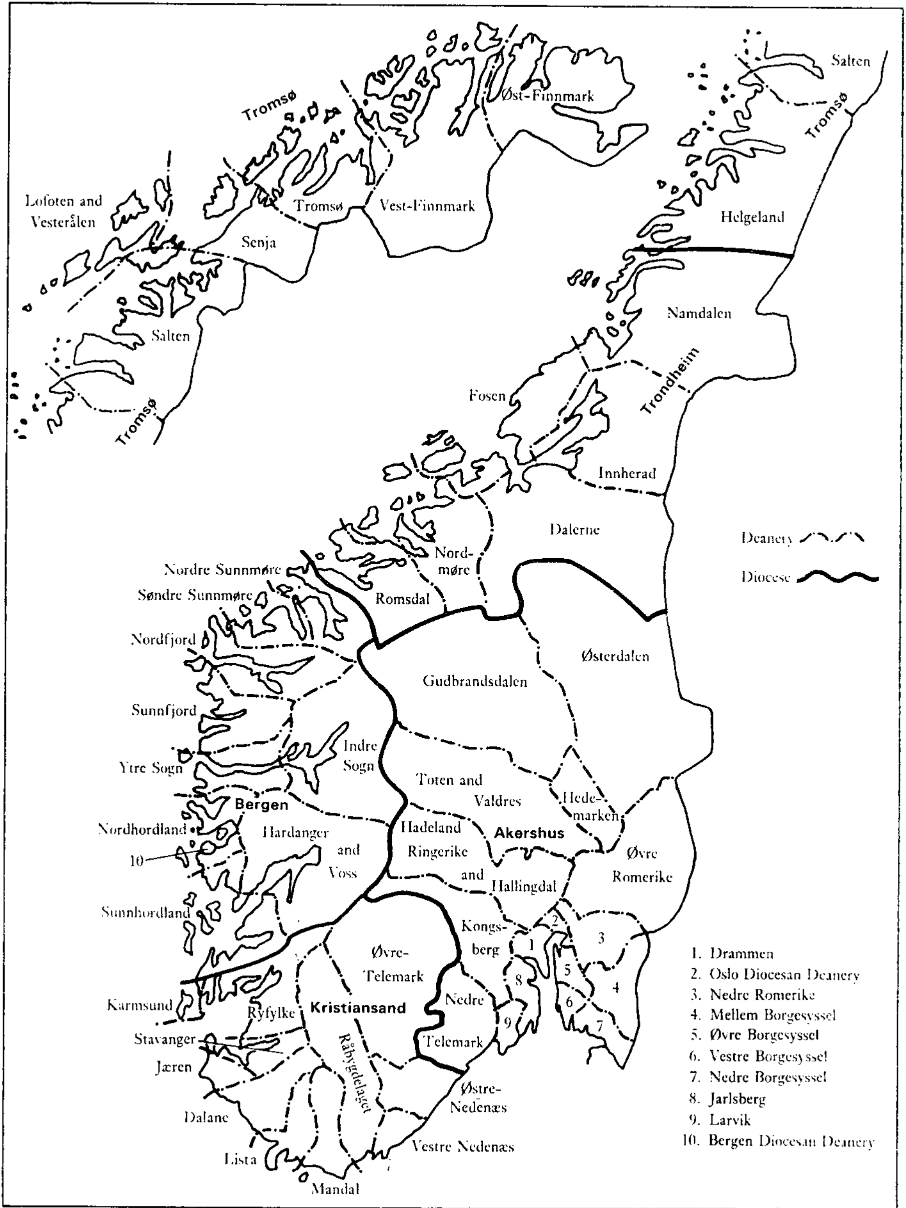

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Preface

Many of the currently underdeveloped countries have experienced a sharp population rise in recent years. In the past, high crude birth rates—of the order of 40 or more per 1,000 of the population annually—have been matched by almost equally high death rates. The widespread application of the products of western medical science has, however, brought about a dramatic fall in the death rate, especially during the last twenty years. Since birth rates have remained at their traditionally high levels, populations have grown rapidly.

It is still commonly assumed[1] that most western societies had similarly high birth and death rates until the late eighteenth century at least and that when these societies began to display a quickening rate of population growth, it too was caused by a fall in the death rate. Recently this view has been challenged. Studies of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century population developments in England[2] and Ireland[3] have suggested that *high* birth and death rates were not a universal characteristic of the pre-industrial west, if by *high* we mean 40 or so per 1,000. Indeed, to use Malthusian terminology, it seems that the 'preventive' rather than the 'positive' check may have been the greatest obstacle to population growth: in western societies fertility being limited either through the postponement of marriage or the practice of birth control within marriage,[4] in order to maintain or raise living standards; this control of the birth rate leading in turn to higher per capita incomes and lower death rates.

Such a hypothesis is of more than academic interest for the under-

[1] Carlo Cipolla, *The economic history of world population* (1962), p. 86.

[2] J. T. Krause, 'Changes in English fertility and mortality, 1781–1850', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. **11** (1958), 52–70.

[3] K. H. Connell, *The population of Ireland 1750–1845* (1950), *passim.*

[4] E. A. Wrigley, 'Family limitation in pre-industrial England', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. **19** (April 1966), 91–8.

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developed countries of today, since it suggests that the demographic characteristics of the pre-industrial west probably led to higher standards of living—associated with lighter burdens of dependency, a higher lifetime return from investment in children (since fewer died before they reached working age), and attitudes of mind more conducive to the creation of an industrial society—than do the population mechanisms of many of the countries now at the pre-industrial stage in their development. The high birth and death rates of the latter might be said to have hindered industrialisation, whereas the western demographic traits of two hundred years ago may well have favoured it.[1]

How true a reading this is of population behaviour in the pre-industrial western world *generally* has yet to be ascertained. It is difficult to do this because only occasionally do we have adequate statistical material, whilst that other main source of evidence, the impressions of contemporary observers can be misleading, as will be shown in this study. And even if the hypothesis is broadly confirmed, the details remain obscure. Little is known of the actual levels of the birth and death rate, of the relationship between them, and of their response to economic circumstances. Little is known of the more intimate domestic situations, which they reflect. Such matters as the size and composition of families and households, the age at which children left home and the fate of the aged have only occasionally been discussed in by far the most meaningful way—in quantitative terms. Surprisingly little is known too of the age at marriage, often considered to be the key mechanism determining fertility in pre-industrial western societies. To what extent this varied from region to region and between different social groups are questions that still await definitive answers. They may never be answered fully because they involve the dissection of a society in an area that is particularly hard to reach.

The concern of this present study is with these and allied questions. Norway has been chosen as the field of operations, because within this context it offers three major attractions to the demographic historian. The first lies in the considerable body of population

[1] J. T. Krause, 'Some neglected factors in the English industrial revolution', *Journal of Economic History*, **19** (1959), 528–40.

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statistics in print relating to the pre-industrial period. Norway did not begin to experience her industrial revolution until the late 1860s. Since the population statistics begin as early as 1735 we can study in unusual detail and for an unusually long period the population developments of a pre-industrial western society. The second is the large amount of unprinted material that can be employed to reveal interesting supplementary information on population conditions. Much of it is used here for the first time, in particular the exceptionally detailed returns of the 1801 census which enable us to compare age and social structure as well as nuptiality, fertility and marital age patterns in various parts of Norway. The third is the work of Eilert Sundt, a pioneer of empirical sociology. During the third quarter of the nineteenth century, Sundt made a large number of studies of Norwegian society, both of a contemporary and an historical character. These provide the historical demographer with a rich source of statistical and literary material, most of it as yet unknown outside Scandinavia.

Readers who are prepared to accept on trust my analysis of the statistical and literary sources and my presentation of the broad demographic trends, are invited to proceed immediately to the core of the work, namely chapters 3–6. Here I attempt to show the interplay of marriage, economic circumstances, social custom and fertility in the century before Norway's industrial revolution. Summary tables appear in the body of the text. The figures from which these are derived appear in the statistical appendix, which also contains a more detailed examination of their strength and weaknesses. No doubt many readers will be aware of the major changes in Norwegian orthography over the past hundred years. For the benefit of those who are not I have followed, in the text, the somewhat anachronistic practice of using the modern form for all proper names. References, however, are given in the spelling of the time when the works appeared.

A large part of this study was presented to the University of Cambridge as a doctoral thesis in 1964. I am particularly grateful for the help received from Professor M. M. Postan and Professor D. V. Glass who supervised this. I would also like to thank the many people who helped to stimulate and maintain my interest in demo-

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graphic history during and since my undergraduate days, in particular Professor J. D. Chambers, Professor K. H. Connell, Professor D. M. Joslin, Professor John Krause, Professor Oliver MacDonagh, Professor Peter Mathias, Professor Johan Vogt and Dr. E. A. Wrigley. Parts of chapter 1 and virtually the whole of chapter 3 appeared in the *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, for 1965. That part of chapter 2 covering the work of Malthus on Norway together with parts of chapters 4 and 6 appeared in *Population Studies* for 1966. I am grateful to the editors of both these journals for permission to use the same material here. My thanks too, go to the Norwegian and British governments and to the Scandinavian Studies Fund of the University of Cambridge for financial assistance over a number of years. This study was awarded the Ellen McArthur Prize in economic history by the University of Cambridge in 1967. I would like to thank the Managers of the Ellen McArthur Fund for the award and for generously subsidizing the publication of this book. For help and consideration on countless occasions I would like to express my gratitude to the staff of the riksarkiv, the statsarkiv, and the library of the statistisk sentralbyrå in Oslo; to Ingvald and Mary Sørum, Trygve and Unndis Bull, Sølvi Sogner, Ann Zammit and Helge Refsum. I am deeply indebted too to the staff of the Cambridge University Press for their care and understanding of a difficult manuscript. Finally, my thanks go to three people whose patience has been sorely tried by this study: my wife, my friend and colleague Dr J. A. Dowie, who has read the manuscript and done a great deal to improve its form and content, and my secretary, Mrs Carole Phillips, who can now add Norwegian orthography, in all its manifestations, to her many qualifications.

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