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Recent Times

W. H. B. Court

Excerpt

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Book I

THE GROWTH OF AN INDUSTRIAL STATE

1750 TO 1837

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[More information](#)*Chapter I*

Population

THE OLD STATE OF POPULATION

The economic problems of men begin in the scarcities and inequalities of nature, although they may be sharpened beyond measure by the unwisdom and injustice of human arrangements. In approaching the economic history of modern Britain, it is natural to start by inquiring into the relations between her population and her resources about the middle of the eighteenth century, when her modern history begins.

Behind the economic problems of Great Britain in the eighteenth century lay the growth of Europe's population and of British population as a part of this. The causes which have controlled Europe's population and the fluctuations which have come over it in historic times are far from clear. It seems certain, however, that population in Western Europe, which since the late Middle Ages had been increasing only slowly, began to grow at a faster rate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Behind this increase lay many things; economic development, peaceful administration and medicine all played a part.

The new influences which were at work may perhaps best be understood from observing the older conditions which had kept numbers down in other countries as well as Great Britain. In Sweden, where official vital statistics, beginning in 1749, are the oldest in Europe, we may see how a society largely agricultural in its interests, living under conditions perhaps rather harder than in some other parts of Western Europe, was restricted in its numbers by what the eighteenth-century writer, Malthus, described concisely as 'periodical returns of severe want, and the diseases arising from it'. The rates of marriages, births and deaths among such a people varied with the crops. No great import of foodstuffs into Sweden existed or could exist under the conditions of the time. When the harvest failed, people went short; if times were exceptionally bad, they starved. When they were weakened by hunger or a poor diet, disease attacked them. Smallpox and typhoid were endemic,

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although tuberculosis, which was to flourish in the ill-built towns of the nineteenth century, was comparatively rare. All members of the population suffered together; when the death-rate among adults was highest, the children died fastest too. Following each period of dearth, perhaps because death had removed the weakest members of society, the mortality would be unusually low for some years, giving rise to an abnormally rapid increase of population. Any progress made from time to time in the production of food owing to the extension or improvement of agriculture seems to have been absorbed by a rise in numbers, so that a substantial improvement in the material standard of living was out of the question. The rise in population in eighteenth-century Sweden under these severe conditions was less slow than might perhaps have been expected. But it struggled in natural bonds, set by want and pestilence, with war as a third taskmaster, chiefly important because it gave rise to disease, brought home by soldiers whose exposure to disease was high and for whom little was done in the way of medical attention.¹

These conditions were in many respects characteristic of all Europe before the nineteenth century. The high death-rate was the main check to population increase. Its causes were the low standard of living and the absence of medicine. The rate of mortality was highest in the towns, so much so that many of the towns, could they have been isolated, would presumably have died out. The prejudice of contemporaries, who believed that the towns devoured the country, was to this extent justified only too well.

Reliable figures about British population do not go back as far as the Swedish. The device of the census, when it was first proposed in 1753, was rejected by Parliament as an invasion upon the liberties of Englishmen and a danger to the realm, since it might reveal the extent of its weakness. The first census of England and Wales, an imperfect one, was not taken until 1801, during the wars against Revolutionary France. The Registrar-General of England and Wales did not begin to register births, marriages and deaths until the passage of the Marriage Act, which established his office, in 1836. Without these modern sources, we are forced back upon the records kept by the churches and chapels and by the tax-collectors for

¹ E. F. Heckscher, 'Swedish Population Trends before the Industrial Revolution', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd series, vol. II (1950), pp. 266-77.

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their own purposes. They are often unsatisfactory for the reckoning of numbers, and they tend to become more unsatisfactory the further back we go. The bright light of central statistics only falls upon the scene when the older conditions had broken down. Great Britain was already passing through a revolution as regarded the increase of its population, as the first decennial censuses showed.

The population of Great Britain in 1801 appears to have been just over ten millions—10,501,000. It was to multiply itself by three and a half times between that year and the census of 1901, when it was 37,000,000. The rate of increase is as significant as the total. The early censuses disclosed that this rate was very high. The addition to the population of England and Wales in the first three decades of the nineteenth century was more than equal, so far as we can see, to the increase which had taken place in the period of 140 years between the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 and the first census. This high rate of increase persisted throughout the first half of the nineteenth century and longer. Between 1801 and 1821, the number of people in Great Britain rose by 34 per cent; between 1821 and 1841 by 32 per cent; between 1841 and 1861 by 25 per cent. After 1870, and especially in the present century, the rate of its growth slackened considerably,¹ and this was marked after 1910. Two generations after this slackening had begun, statisticians between the two World Wars were beginning to discuss the possibility of a stationary or falling population. The trends which they were discussing then have not proved constant. But whatever happens, it is most unlikely that anything resembling the nineteenth-century rate of population increase will ever be seen in this country again. Had it continued with its greatest force, the population which tripled itself between 1801 and 1901 must have tripled again between 1901 and 2001.

To understand how human life in Great Britain looked and felt two centuries and a half ago we have to begin therefore by removing six out of every seven persons in its present population. This is, it must be agreed, a drastic mental operation. It presents us with a type of society whose problems are in some respects hard for us to understand, saturated as we are with the experience and with the ways of thinking and feeling of the great age of population growth so recently past.

¹ See Table III in *Report of the Royal Commission on Population*, Cmd 7695 (1949), p. 8.

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Perhaps it is curious that we should feel the difficulty as gravely as we do. The demographic character of Great Britain before the great upward swing of population in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was that common to great parts of Western Europe over a long period. In this country, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, we read 'both the birth-rate and the death-rate were high, and there cannot have been a great difference between them. It is probable that fewer than half of the children born survived to adult ages... In some years—for example, when there were outbreaks of epidemic disease—deaths may have exceeded births, but this was not normally the case. In most years births exceeded deaths, and the population therefore grew, but only slowly.'¹ Great Britain of the eighteenth century broke with the long-established standards of the past in the growth of its population, as other parts of Europe were preparing to break.

THE LARGE FAMILY AND THE CONDITIONS OF ITS
SURVIVAL

What were the causes of the revolution in population, already far advanced when the first census was taken? The decennial census revealed a population growing at the rate of 10 per cent every ten years. This rate of increase could only have been attained as the result of a long series of cumulative changes in the habits and the conditions of the population concerned. Why had the barriers, whatever they may have been, which had proved so effective for centuries in preventing any rapid increase been broken down and swept away?

This is not a question which it would be easy to answer, even if the takers of the census had begun their work much earlier. An explanation depends on knowing a great deal about marriages, births and deaths at the time—not only statistics, but also information required for their interpretation—much of which cannot easily be got in any society at any time. But it happened that the great population increase at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century coincided with and also helped to stimulate the rise of scientific inquiry into problems of this kind. A considerable literature developed and theories were worked out and widely adopted.

¹ *Report of the Royal Commission on Population (1949)*, p. 6.

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[More information](#)*Thomas Robert Malthus*

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Such a theorist was T. R. Malthus.¹ Speculation on the relations between human reproduction, food supply and the happiness or misery of nations began in the mind of Malthus, a young clergyman in the Church of England, in a mood of youthful scepticism provoked by the optimistic extravagances of his father. The elder Malthus was a Godwinian and a friend of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a believer in the perfectibility of man according to the ideas of the late eighteenth century. Differences between father and son are not uncommon, but it must be rare in history for a great scientific theory to arise out of a difference of that kind. In his *Essay upon Population* (1798) and in the long series of inquiries which filled the later years of his life, Malthus considered the relations between the growth of human numbers and those forces, which he called preventive checks, which had prevented population from increasing rapidly over long periods of European history. Thinkers before Malthus had noticed the relation between population and subsistence, which formed the heart of his argument—the tendency of the one to outrun the other—and the part played by war, pestilence and famine in keeping human numbers in check. But no one had attempted to work out their relations with the acumen and learning which he brought to the task.

Malthus's speculations would hardly have had their public influence but for his political interests and his view of the immediate situation. What many contemporary Englishmen came to know of Malthus was not his theoretical and historical inquiries, on which his scientific fame rests, but his judgement that the practice of the Poor Law authorities had much to do with the increase of population in Great Britain. Malthus pointed to the public relief given to the labourer in receipt of wages, in proportion to his family and to the cost of living, measured by the price of bread. This system of relief had been adopted under the direction of the justices of the peace for Berkshire in 1795, in order to meet the distress created by the low wages of the farm labourer in face of the upward movement of prices after the outbreak of war with France in 1793.

¹ Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834) was for many years Professor of Modern History and Political Economy at the East India College at Haileybury, where he taught the cadets who went out to rule British India, then under the administration of the East India Company. He wrote widely upon economics as well as population and was, with his friend Ricardo, one of the founders of the classical political economy.

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The practice, not new among the Poor Law authorities, had been regularized in law soon after and widely adopted in the country. Introduced as a war measure, it persisted over many years of peace, until the legislative and administrative reform which the Whig Government aimed against it in 1834. Under the influence of Malthus, the so-called 'Speenhamland system'¹ of poor relief came to be regarded by educated people as a main, if not the principal, influence behind the contemporary rise of population. It was argued that it cheapened subsistence to the poor and encouraged large families. Propounded in this narrow way, the thesis never squared with the development of numbers in Scotland and Ireland, where the English system of poor relief did not prevail. It broke down completely upon the continuing increase revealed by the census long after the giving of out-relief in aid of wages had been curbed in 1834. But throughout the first half of the nineteenth century the idea was a political force and swayed powerfully the opinions of the governing classes.

Allied to what one might call the 'Poor Law theory' of the population increase was the more respectable proposition that every increase in food supply tends to be taken out in a more than proportionate growth of population. This happens because the returns to human labour provided by the land tend to diminish in the absence of any marked improvement in agricultural methods and a rising population does not adjust itself easily to this limit upon its resources. This observation had such powerful backing in old and new experience, as Malthus amply demonstrated, that it led the best English economist of the middle nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill, to take a sombre view of the economic prospects of Great Britain, for precisely this reason, as late as 1848. Events at the time when Mill was writing—the dearness of bread in England during the 1840's, the Irish famine of 1846, the struggle over the laws restricting corn imports—lent force to his argument. The habit of regarding the contemporary history of their country as a race between population and food supply did not die out among educated Englishmen until the second half of the nineteenth century, by which time their country had ceased to depend exclusively upon a home-grown food supply. Then the doctrines of Malthus and of the classical economists, of whom Mill was

¹ So called from the name of the district in Berkshire, now part of the town of Newbury, where the Berkshire justices held their meeting in 1795.

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one of the latest representatives, came to seem irrelevant, if not incorrect.

Later generations accepted other explanations of the great rise of population. In the early years of the present century, writers who saw how far industrialism had been carried and were critical of its achievements, suggested that the demand for labour in the new mills of the Industrial Revolution led to the increase. This view never had much to commend it. For one thing, the millworkers, even as late as 1830, were a small minority of the population, older and more widespread occupations such as domestic service being more important. For another, it failed to explain adequately the increase in the country districts. No county in Great Britain, whether agricultural or industrial, recorded anything but a substantial growth of population, decade by decade, between 1801 and 1851. We must look elsewhere than the factories for the key to rising numbers.

Generally speaking, a rise in population may be due to fewer people dying or to more being born; to a fall, that is, in the rate of mortality or to a rise in the rate of births, expressed as a proportion of the whole population. Or the increase may, of course, be due to simultaneous changes in both rates; the two rates are not independent of one another.

Were more persons being born, to put it in that way, during these years? The crude birth-rate, the rate of births, that is, every year for every thousand of population, was certainly, according to what information exists, high in the middle of the eighteenth century compared with earlier years. It had been rising throughout the first half of the century since about 1710, and continued to rise gently in the later decades, to fall again gently but distinctly, after 1790.¹ Changes in social convention, standards and arrangements would no doubt account for part of this increase. Behind it lay changes connected with the organization of industry and the decay or obsolescence of the system of apprenticeship in many trades, which in the past had acted as a restraint upon early marriage; the growth of new industries outside the sphere of apprenticeship altogether, such as the cotton and the coal industries; the possibility of full earnings at an early age, whether as a result of the higher

¹ Birth- and death-rates for the eighteenth and early nineteenth century are discussed in G. T. Griffith, *Population Problems of the Age of Malthus* (1926); see also his Diagram I. There is much room for disagreement on this subject; see the criticisms of T. H. Marshall, 'The Population Problem during the Industrial Revolution', *Econ. J. Supplement*, January 1929.

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productivity of machinery or the widening employment of young people in industry, about which nineteenth-century social reformers were to have much to say; and, after 1800, the immigration of Irish people, whose penchant for large families was in those days certainly not less than the British. In the country districts, changes in the organization of the land, begun at a far earlier date, may have had the effect of breaking down gradually these rules of habit by which many peasant peoples in past times, and perhaps the English among them, have deferred marriage and limited the time within which they may have children, so as to make sure of possessing the land required for the maintenance of a family. The opening of alternative occupations in industry, in an age when much industry was rural, may have worked in the same direction. All these things might and probably did alter the age at which people married and affected the fertility of their marriages, over a long period of years.

The rising fertility may also have been due in part to an increased chance of survival and the cumulative effects which this would have on the age composition of the nation. This is easily seen. If fewer children died at birth or in their very early years, or if at the other end of the scale of life more married women lived out the whole natural period within which they could have children, the size of surviving families would increase. The greater number of prospective parents and the survival of their families when they came to marry would tend to create, over a series of generations, a type of population distinguished by a large average size of family, not only born but surviving and propagating itself over the full period of human fertility. This population would be in a state of rapid increase, comparable with that revealed by the early censuses in Great Britain.

In eighteenth-century Britain we are watching the gradual rise of the large average size of family which prevailed in this country in Victorian times. Its triumph over the forces which in earlier ages had tended to limit families and population appears to have been due both to influences, such as those we have been discussing, which raised the rate of marriages and births, and to those which reduced the rate of deaths, but mostly to the latter.¹ To put the matter more exactly, the large

¹ For a recent discussion, see K. H. Connell, 'Some Unsettled Problems in English and Irish Population History, 1750-1845', *Irish Hist. Stud.* vol. VII (1951), pp. 225-34.

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surviving family was, so far as can be seen on imperfect evidence, mainly the result of forces which diminished mortality, but which had as their secondary effect the increase of fertility, meaning by fertility the number of children born to a family. The saving of children at birth or in the first years of life and the lengthening in the expectation of life among mothers may account for the greater part of the advance of population in the eighteenth century. These things formed part of a general reduction of the death-rate going on at that time, but their influence would be widely felt in an enlargement of the size of the average family. It is worth remembering that, as late as 1850, only two-thirds of the female population ever reached the age at which they would marry and only one-half of them reached the end of the child-bearing age.¹

The general fall in the death-rate was due to many things. An improvement of medical services was one of them. Medical knowledge in the eighteenth century was beginning to show what it could do, although much of the knowledge was empirical rather than scientific in the strict sense. That century was a great age in the building and establishment of hospitals, dispensaries and medical schools. The Foundling Hospital in London was started by the kind-hearted Captain Coram in 1742 to save children left to die of exposure in the streets. The oldest of the London lying-in hospitals dates from the middle of the century. Medical training was being put upon its feet, under the influence of Continental models. The medical school at Edinburgh, which owed much to the Dutch school of Leyden, began teaching about 1725. Maternity was becoming a specialized branch of medicine, and John Hunter was laying a scientific foundation for surgery. Of course, not all knowledge of the rules of health flowed directly from the trained men from the medical schools, although they were the spearhead of the movement. A man like Dr Johnson's friend William Levett, unqualified, practising in the poor parts of London among patients as poor as himself and taking his fee in the shape of a meal, may have been useful in his own way. Knowledge of the rules of health, however, could not have helped very much, if the slow improvement in the water-supply, paving and sanitation of English towns had not made it possible to apply them.

The course of events is not clear, but it appears that the death-rate in London was clearly falling after 1750, in Man-

¹ Table X in *Report of the Royal Commission on Population* (1949), p. 20.