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978-1-107-62342-2 - George W. Roberts: The Population of Jamaica

With an Introduction by Kingsley Davis

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CHAPTER I

DEMOGRAPHIC MATERIAL AVAILABLE

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DEMOGRAPHIC
RECORDS

‘The Blue Books of Jamaica are the worst returns in the Colonial Office; there is a slovenliness . . . manifest in every document. . . . It is to be hoped that the authorities of Jamaica will in future pay more attention to the important subject of statistics.’ In these words the eminent statistician R. M. Martin summed up the data on Jamaica at his disposal just before the first census of the island was taken.¹ These strictures are no longer true. During the century since Martin wrote, a body of fairly reliable demographic data has been built up, and its steady development and its reliability are surveyed in this chapter.

The inauguration of census-taking in Jamaica and the establishment of an efficient system of civil registration throughout the island were not the result of administrative decisions taken in Jamaica as distinct from the other territories of the West Indies. In fact, both census-taking and civil registration had their origin largely in the policy of the British Government in respect of the West Indies as a whole. There was no comparable policy aimed at developing a uniform system of recording migration in general, but the central direction exercised over indenture migration still assured, through the numerous controlling laws it introduced, the development of a uniform and reliable system of recording indenture migration. Consequently the origin and expansion of the demographic records of the island are here treated in the broader context of the initiation of such records throughout the British Caribbean.

Censuses. The records of the West Indies are rich in population estimates and these have been widely quoted by historians of the region. Such is the wealth of these that E. B. Burley has been able to collect upwards of fifty estimates of the population of Barbados between the date of the first settlement and 1844 when the first

¹ R. M. Martin, *History of the Colonies of the British Empire in the West Indies* . . . , London, 1843, p. 17.

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censuses of the British West Indies were organized.¹ Numerous estimates of the population of Jamaica in the eighteenth century are also available. F. W. Pitman has collected eighteen estimates for the period 1658–1787.² But most of these early estimates are of no more than historical interest; they cannot be safely used to chart population movements in the colonies. Some cover only the free (or white) population, others cover only the slave population. It is, however, the methods employed in securing these estimates that lead one to suspect that most of them were no more than informed guesses. Indeed, if the methods adopted by Barbados in 1812 are at all representative of the procedures generally in use, then most of these estimates can be dismissed as almost worthless. Faced with the problem of presenting population estimates to the Home Government for the years 1809–11, the Governor of Barbados entrusted the work to the rectors of the several parishes. Most of these embarked on a species of ‘calculation’ based on baptisms and burials.³ One rector complained that the subjects about which information was sought ‘are so far beyond my reach that even the shadow of accuracy must be precluded from my report’. Though one priest did in fact attempt a rough enumeration of his parish, the data for the island as a whole remain useless. The Governor of Jamaica, who was also called upon to present population estimates for the same period, confessed that he knew ‘of no mode by which it [the number of white and coloured people] can be ascertained with any tolerable accuracy’.⁴

Most of the early population estimates of Jamaica are probably seriously defective. Discussing ‘the first recorded census of Jamaica, taken seven years after its capture’, Bridges, after listing the numbers of men, women and children, adds, ‘There were likewise a polinco of negroes, consisting of about 150 under one Boulo, as lancers and archers, and many private men-of-war men, besides many more comers and goers, Frenchmen and others.’⁵ This leaves little doubt as to the incompleteness of the count. The

¹ E. B. Burley, *Memorandum summarizing the Returns of a Census taken in the Island of Barbados in the year 1715*, Colonial Office Library, no date.

² F. W. Pitman, *The Development of the British West Indies, 1700–1763*, New Haven, 1917, p. 373.

³ Letter from Governor Sir George Beckwith to Earl of Liverpool, 13 January 1812, *Parliamentary Papers (P.P.)*, 1813.

⁴ Ibid. letter from Lieutenant Governor Morrison to Earl Bathurst, 28 January 1813.

⁵ G. W. Bridges, *The Annals of Jamaica*, London, 1828, vol. I, note LXII.

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reliability of the enumeration taken in 1673 is also questionable. Bridges described this as relating to 'the number of Christian men, women, children and negro slaves in the several parishes', which suggests that not all Christians are included. This description may equally well be taken to mean that the record refers only to Christians. Moreover, many of the estimates given by Long are derived by methods much less reliable than those relied on by the rectors of Barbados in 1812.¹ Even though many of the early estimates of slave populations were based on poll-tax records, they remain probably defective. There is, however, evidence that some of the early nineteenth-century estimates of population in the West Indies were the product of reasonably careful enumerations, but it is not always easy to determine which of these early records were so derived.²

Slave registration constituted the first systematic attempt at population enumeration in the West Indies. Though neither a system of civil registration nor a properly ordered series of census enumerations, it is of such historical importance and has yielded such interesting material that it cannot be ignored. Established partly to prevent the clandestine movements of slaves between the colonies and partly in the interest of securing better treatment for them, slave registration was of importance in virtue of the demographic material, admittedly very limited in extent, which it provided for the period 1816–32. Avowedly framed to ascertain 'all deductions from and additions to the former stock of slaves', the system appeared, in design at least, adequate to afford an accurate assessment of the movements of slave populations.³ The methods of obtaining numbers of slaves may in a sense be

¹ Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, London, 1774.

² This is borne out by a manuscript in the Colonial Office Library summarizing the enumerations made for a census of Port-of-Spain and its suburbs in 1834. This evidently was taken with some care, and if representative of the earlier annual estimates published for Trinidad suggests that these are at least worthy of some study.

³ Among records on slave populations of the West Indies the following are of particular interest: James Robertson, *General Summary of the Slave Population of the District of Demerara and Essequibo Colony of British Guiana, agreeably to the Registers of the Returns for the years 1817, 1820 . . .*, no. 700, 1833; *Return of the Number of Slaves in each of the West Indian Colonies*, 1833. In addition to such publications appearing in the *P.P.*, there are the publications of R. M. Martin, *Statistics of the Colonies of the British Empire*, London, 1839; and of G. R. Porter, *Tables of the Revenue, Population, Commerce, etc., of the United Kingdom and its Dependencies*, Supplement to Part III, London, 1835.

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considered rough enumerations at triennial intervals. (Two colonies, Grenada and Tobago, gave annual movements of slave populations.) The first registration for Jamaica was in 1817, and the last year for which records are available is 1829. In effect, owners of slaves were supposed to return to the registrar of slaves 'a just and true return' under oath of the slaves in their possession at the official registration date.

As has been argued elsewhere, slave registration did not provide for the continuous registration of vital events in the modern sense.¹ Such records of deaths and births as appear in the slave registers were not actually true accounts of vital processes but emerged from rough attempts to break down the differences between the numbers of slaves at the beginning of an inter-registration period and the numbers at the end of such a period into components of growth. On these terms deaths in the registers do not represent all deaths in the slave populations between two registration dates. To see why this is so it is necessary to analyse more closely the underlying aim of slave registration: to ascertain 'all deductions from or additions to the former stock of slaves'.

Now the deaths occurring in any inter-registration period, say between 1817 and 1820, may be considered in two parts. There is first the group of deaths occurring among persons alive at the time of the first registration (1817). Secondly, there are the deaths among those children born between the two registration dates. The weakness of the mortality records of slave registration is that the only account of deaths taken is of deaths of the first group. The mortality experience of those children who died in the same inter-registration period in which they were born was completely lost to the record; indeed, under the system, the existence of such children could not even be acknowledged. The result is a gross understatement of mortality; no information on infant mortality, or indeed of mortality under 3 years in general, is available.

In the same way the fertility records of slave registration are defective. Under the system births merely indicated 'additions to the former stock of slaves'. Thus the births within a given inter-registration period, say between 1817 and 1820, represent only the children under 3 years of age at the date of the 1820 registration. There was in fact no registration of births during the inter-registra-

¹ G. W. Roberts, 'A life table for a West Indian slave population', *Population Studies*, vol. v, no. 3.

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tion period. The number of 'births' were the population under 3 years of age at the end of a given registration period. The weaknesses of the slave registration records were fully realized by James Robertson.

Despite these weaknesses registration provided more reliable estimates of slave populations of the colonies than those previously in use. This improvement in the case of Jamaica is well summarized in the following words of Gardner: '... there was a far greater number of slaves in the island than had been supposed. Hitherto returns had only been given in of those for whom the poll tax was paid; but of slaves in possession of small proprietors who paid no tax, returns were never made. This simple fact disposes of the assertion once made that the discrepancy of numbers between the old poll tax and the registration lists indicated clandestine importations. Had such importations taken place the discrepancy would of course have been more marked in the great sugar parishes; the very reverse was the case.'¹

The passing of slavery brought to an end the only attempts so far witnessed to provide estimates of the populations at regular intervals. And it was not until 1844 that another general enumeration throughout the Caribbean was undertaken. This was the time when labour shortage was being acutely felt by the planters and when keen interest was shown in the possibility of inaugurating large-scale immigration of indentured workers, which, in the opinion of many contemporaries, could alone correct the situation brought about by the decline in the labour force available for work on the plantations. It was under these circumstances that the Secretary of State sent a circular letter, dated 7 February 1844, ordering that a census be taken in all colonies on 3 June 1844.² Evidently the advice of the Registrar General of England was sought on this matter. Graham states: 'On the 5th August, 1843, I transmitted for the use of the Secretary of State for the Colonies some suggestions respecting the mode of taking a census in each of our colonial possessions as requested by Lord Stanley.'³ No copy of this

¹ W. J. Gardner, *A History of Jamaica*, New York, 1909, p. 253.

² See 'Copies of the last census of the population taken in each of the British West India Islands and in British Guiana, specifying their respective dates', *P.P.*, 1846, no. 426.

³ Letter from Major Graham to Secretary of State Gray, dated 7 December 1848, *Minutes of the Barbados House of Assembly* (hereafter referred to as *M.B.H.A.*), 1849.

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communication has been located. Indeed, it is not clear what specific instructions were sent to the colonies on the method of census-taking to be adopted. All except four of the West Indian colonies complied with the instructions in the Secretary of State's circular letter. The colonies that did not take censuses on the appointed date were British Guiana, British Honduras, Virgin Islands and St Lucia. The Virgin Islands had taken a census in 1841, and instead of taking another within the space of 3 years submitted the returns of the 1841 count. Because of constitutional difficulties and the scattered nature of the population of British Honduras, the Governor of that colony contented himself with presenting a rough estimate of the population. St Lucia had taken a census in August 1843, and therefore did not take another in 1844. The Governor issued instructions 'to have births and deaths ascertained to the 3rd June next . . .'. British Guiana had also taken a census in 1841, and instead of taking another presented the 1841 returns and some rough indications of the probable movements between 1841 and 1844.

Census-taking, essentially a new feature in the Caribbean, was in many colonies greeted with strong suspicion by the inhabitants. In Nevis the Act for taking the census 'caused considerable sensation amongst the Negro population, and many absurd conjectures were hazarded and discussed by them as to the intention and objects of the Bill', but the Governor appeared confident that his efforts to allay suspicion 'through the medium of the clergy' were successful.¹ In St Vincent the census was 'misrepresented' and 'has been considered by a portion of the laboring population as a preliminary step to imposing heavy taxation on labor'.² More disturbing conditions developed in Dominica. Here many people were under the impression that the census proclaimed the intention of reintroducing slavery and the island fell into a state bordering on riot.³

Under such circumstances inadequacies in these early censuses were to be expected; there is in fact a strong possibility that under-numeration was a characteristic of most of them. Many Governors expressed doubt as to their reliability. The Governor of Jamaica reported as follows: 'As this is the first enumeration of the inhabitants of the colony which has been made during freedom, it

¹ Despatch from President Graeme to Governor Fitz Roy, 29 July 1844, P.P. 1845.

² *Trinidad Standard and West India Journal*, 13 June 1844.

³ *Ibid.*

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may be presumed that the returns are not altogether to be depended upon. Nevertheless, it may be reasonably supposed that they approximate the truth and I regret to observe that they do not furnish any very satisfactory proof of progressive increase in the population of the island.¹ But evidently grossly exaggerated estimates of the population of Jamaica were current just before the first census was taken, and probably it was the vast difference between such estimates and the enumerated population that led to criticisms of the accuracy of the 1844 enumeration. Even so careful a statistician as Martin, though admitting in 1843 that it was 'impossible to state with accuracy the actual population of Jamaica', based a calculation of density on an assumed population of half a million and described the resulting figure of 78 as 'a remarkably small proportion, particularly in comparison with Barbados, where there are 600 to the square mile'.² The less cautious Phillippo, writing in the same year, asserted that it was 'generally supposed that the aggregate population, including 30,000 whites, is now half a million, which is about 70 persons to the square mile'.³

Likewise the Governor of Barbados declared that 'in consequence of the mode of taking the census not being sufficiently searching and rigid the returns... fall short of the real number by some thousands'.⁴ There is reason to believe that under-registration was a feature of many of the first censuses, but the comments of the Governors do not help in assessing their reliability, as in no instance are their criticisms soundly developed.

In favour of the censuses of 1841-4, it should be stated that unlike most of the earlier efforts they were apparently carried out in a manner similar to that used in the English census of 1841. They were evidently based on detailed enumerations, and the results are in most cases presented by enumeration districts. Apart from considerations of accuracy, their chief weakness is the lack of uniformity of presentation adopted in the several colonies.

When in 1848 the Registrar General of England was about to publish 'the population of England and Wales as lately arranged with respect to the Districts into which the country is now divided for the purpose of registering Births and Deaths...', he addressed

¹ Despatch from Earl of Elgin to Lord Stanley, 7 November 1844, *P.P.* 1845.

² R. M. Martin, *op. cit.* p. 8.

³ J. M. Phillippo, *Jamaica, its Past and Present State*, London, 1843, p. 84.

⁴ Despatch from Governor Grey to Lord Stanley, 4 October 1844, *P.P.* 1845.

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a letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies suggesting the desirability of including returns for the colonies as well.¹ He also urged that the colonies should take a census on the same date as that proposed for England in 1851. Accompanying this letter was a memorandum on census procedure in the colonies which deserves some attention as it probably influenced the whole course of census-taking in the region. Graham admitted that the method of census-taking could not be the same throughout all colonies 'as the conditions of the respective populations and the means of ascertaining the facts differ in different parts', but urged that as much uniformity as possible should be preserved. Among his main recommendations were:

(1) The enumeration should be carried out in 'a convenient number of enumeration districts, comprehended in the established divisions of the colonies', and the areas of these districts should be given. The population of towns should be enumerated within boundaries strictly defined.

(2) Where the 'habitations' were not fixed the population might be 'enumerated in Tribes and Families'.

(3) Enumerations should be made at equal intervals of time and the process should take no more than one day. If possible it should comprise 'the persons in each district on the previous night, at a season of the year when the facts can be recorded with the most facility and when there is no great displacement of the population by festivals or by other causes'. Persons away from their home on the census night were to be described as 'visitors' or 'travellers', while those out of the colony 'should also be enumerated at home, with the word "absent" after their names', but such persons were to be omitted from the abstract 'otherwise the same persons would be counted twice'. Graham emphasized that the treatment of these groups (which he termed 'floating population') required great care.

(4) In cases where it was difficult to obtain information on aborigines the inquiry should be confined to males aged 20 and upwards, 'the fighting men'. Here, he urged, partial and imperfect information about women and children would lead to 'confusion and error'.

¹ Letter from Registrar General George Graham to Secretary of State Grey, dated 7 December 1848; enclosure in despatch from Grey to Governor of Barbados, 20 January 1849, *M.B.H.A.* 1849.

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(5) It was stressed that every individual should be enumerated by name, a procedure which, it was claimed, might prove useful for many purposes connected with police and defence. Here it seems the confidential nature of the returns was not admitted.

(6) The importance of obtaining age data was emphasized; if accurate returns of age were not available approximations should be used.

Graham also laid down rules for the preparation of census abstracts. Enumerators should not be entrusted with the preparation of abstracts. The schedules should, after collection by the enumerators, be sent to the seat of Government where abstracts were to be made 'on a uniform plan under proper supervision'. Among the tabulations suggested were those of age, sex and race, and the number of persons who entered the colony during the year immediately preceding the census.

Presumably copies of Graham's memorandum were sent to all the colonies. The fact that the series of censuses taken in 1851 had a larger measure of comparability than those taken in 1841-4 suggests that these censuses were taken in conformity with the rules outlined by him. Jamaica was one of the three colonies which did not take a census in 1851. The failure to do so was doubtless due to the severe cholera epidemic which made its appearance in October 1850, and continued throughout 1851, completely unsettling conditions in the island. It was not until 1861 that the second census was taken.

Further action to attain greater comparability of colonial censuses was taken in respect of those of 1891. 'The Secretary of State for the Colonies, by Despatch of 28 February 1889, called attention to the discussion at the Colonial Conference of 1887 on the subject of the Census, and with a view to apply uniformity of treatment in certain leading features, and so far as possible secure a homogeneous Census of the whole Empire, suggested, after consultation with the Registrar General of England, some heads of enquiry, and the extent of detail, for general application.'¹ The Registrar General of Jamaica, who from 1881 was entrusted with the supervision of censuses in the island, took these recommendations into account in preparing the 1891 Census Report.

The main features of the eight censuses of Jamaica will now be

¹ *Census of Jamaica and its Dependencies, 1891.*

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noted.¹ The first census was taken on 3 June 1844, 'in compliance with the provisions of an Act, 7 Vict., c. 30, entitled "An Act for taking the Census of the Inhabitants of this Island"'. The published results consist only of three tables accompanied by a short letter of transmittal from Governor Elgin to Lord Stanley, dated 7 November 1844. The first two tables give cross-tabulations by sex and colour, sex and country of birth, sex and 'trade or avocation', and sex and age. The following age groups are used: under 5, 5-9, 10-19, 20-39, 40-59 and over 60. The tabulations are presented in terms of five parishes. A useful class of data presented for the whole island consists of the numbers of houses on the several types of plantations. The final table compares the population of 1844 with the last slave returns of the island (1834). The document is signed by the Island Secretary.

The *Summary of Census Returns*, the results of the second census taken on 6 May 1861, is a longer document, consisting of 8 pages. It distinguishes twenty parishes and covers in more detail the same categories dealt with in 1844. The breakdown by country of birth is in great detail, giving eighty-five countries. The attempt to make an exhaustive tabulation of 'rank, profession or occupation' yields a virtually useless list of hundreds of occupations. A finer age breakdown is introduced though no cross-tabulation by sex appears. Three new types of material are included: (1) data on marital status in terms of married, widowers, widows and unmarried; (2) those able to read, those able to read and write and the numbers attending school; (3) the numbers of deaf and dumb, blind, cripples, insane, affected with yaws and affected with leprosy. The document is signed by the secretary of the executive committee.

The *Summary of Census Returns, 1871*, giving the results of the enumeration of 4 June 1871, is a more ambitious document, extending to 51 pages, but carries no text. Its chief feature is the adoption of the fourteen parishes in terms of which all subsequent census reports have been framed, thus assuring full areal comparability from 1871 to 1943. In the main, the document, which carries no signature, represents a more elaborate treatment of the categories used in 1861. One improvement is that instead of the exhaustive list of occupations given in 1861 there appears a more useful tabulation in which certain broad categories, such as agriculturists, are

¹ Further details on the various censuses of Jamaica are given in *Eighth Census of Jamaica and its Dependencies*, 1943.