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British Population in the Twentieth Century

N. L. Tranter

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TO HEATHER, RACHEL, SARAH AND ALAN

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Map 1 Britain. Counties, planning regions and major towns, 1981
Source: Edward Royle, *Modern Britain. A Social History 1750–1985* (London, Edward Arnold, 1987), p. xii

Map 2 Scotland. Civil counties and regions, 1861–1939

Source: Michael Flinn (ed.), *Scottish Population History from the Seventeenth Century to the 1930s* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. xxiii

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the twentieth century the demography of each of the countries of mainland Britain was already an intriguing blend of the old and the new. In common with the experience of the preceding hundred years or so rates of population growth remained relatively high. A substantial proportion of each country's natural excess of births over deaths continued to disappear to overseas destinations. Changes in the internal geography of residence continued to favour England at the expense of Scotland and Wales, northern rather than southern counties of England, urban rather than rural locations, and core rather than more peripheral areas. Average expectations of life and variations in rates of mortality and life expectancy by region and socio-occupational class differed only moderately from those of a century earlier. Ages at marriage and percentages married and single had remained roughly constant for over 50 years. Crude birth rates were still only marginally lower than in the early nineteenth century and regional differentials in fertility were wider than ever. In these and many other respects the demographic structure of Britain around 1900 was little different from that of 1850 or even 1800.

At the same time, even before 1900, some of the demographic forms inherited from the past were beginning to

change. In the course of the later decades of the nineteenth century the shift of population from south to north, rural to urban, and periphery to core started to slow. Regional, urban-rural and social class differentials in mortality began to narrow and average expectations of life to rise. Crude birth rates and levels of marital fertility began to decline and marital fertility replaced nuptiality as the principal demographic determinant of trends in overall fertility.

Compared with what was to happen in the twentieth century, it must be stressed, the changes which occurred in Britain's demographic structures in the decades before 1900 were modest. The late nineteenth century may have been the period in which the transition towards a modern demographic regime was initiated. But it was in the twentieth century that the bulk of the transformation was achieved.

Between 1800–9 and 1891–1900 average life expectancy at birth in England rose by about 11 years. Between 1891–1900 and the mid 1980s, chiefly in response to a decline in deaths from infectious disease and the displacement of communicable, infectious disease by non-communicable, degenerative disease as the main cause of death, it rose by over 26 years. In the half century before 1900 crude birth rates fell by just 15 per cent in England and Wales and 5 per cent in Scotland. In the course of the next 50 years they declined by 45 per cent and 39 per cent respectively. From around five among women marrying in the mid 1870s, the average number of births fell to around two among those marrying in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Accompanying this decline in fertility were marked reductions in regional and socio-occupational class fertility differentials and, in the later years of the century, unprecedented increases in the frequency of divorce, levels of extramarital cohabitation and rates of illegitimacy.

No less striking have been the changes that have taken place in patterns of migration and population growth. Between the 1930s and 1980s England and Wales together (though not Scotland), in sharp contrast to the experience of previous ages, gained far more people than they lost on balance of international migration. Despite this, rates of population

growth fell to levels lower than at any time since the late eighteenth century. By the 1970s and 1980s, under the impact of persistently low levels of fertility, rates of population growth were negligible and even negative. The trend to lower rates of population increase was accompanied by major changes in the geography of residence within Britain. Although England has continued to increase its share of Britain's population and although, within England, the ranking of regions according to their share of the total population has remained largely unaltered, in contrast to what had happened in the nineteenth century the twentieth century has seen the re-emergence of a north to south drift in the balance of population location, a movement of people from core to geographically more peripheral regions, and a shift of people away from the largest urban communities towards smaller urban communities and rural areas.

In the demography of Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century there was still a great deal that generations born a hundred years or more earlier would have recognised. In the demography of Britain at the end of the twentieth century there is very little that would be familiar to them. What follows is an attempt to chart in more detail the progress of this transformation and to unravel some of the more important causes which underlay it.