LOCAL POPULATION STUDIES: AN EDUCATIONAL ROLE?

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One cannot but be struck by the interest and enthusiasm for local studies in general, and population studies in particular. Increasing attention is being paid to such study by professional historians in universities and polytechnics, many adult education groups are busily engaged in organized study and, indeed, many members of the community in general are pursuing such interests and engaging in their own investigations. There is clearly a significant area of growth here, and perhaps most significantly of all one which transcends the narrowly academic bounds of the professional historian. Since many teachers-to-be will be both the custodians of the enthusiastic response to population studies and, perhaps in a fairly modest way, some of the chief practitioners of such study it seems pertinent to ask where in the vigorous response to the development of population studies do the institutions responsible for teacher-education stand? At first it does not seem as if the role of colleges of education is in proportion to the likely benefits to be derived by teachers from participation in population studies. For reasons set out by Dr. J. A. Johnson in a letter to an earlier issue of this journal¹ colleges have necessarily had to proceed cautiously. Although courses specifically labelled as population studies are not found all that frequently in college syllabuses there is often far more of such study going on than is immediately apparent. Consequently, general surveys of college courses do not do justice to the vigour of the response within colleges of education. It could in fact be argued that, with the exception of the adult education area, the most ambitious assaults upon the whole range of sources for population studies have been mounted in the colleges of education. Previous issues of Local Population Studies bear testimony to this². From the beginning, however, there has been an element of controversy³.

That there is still life in the question was made manifest by the inclusion of a seminar on historical demography in schools, colleges and adult groups at the weekend residential conference at Knuston Hall, and by the discussion which took place in the seminar. In order to clarify some of the issues it may in the first place be helpful to examine briefly how population studies have found a place in the curriculum of a particular college⁴. Looking in this way at a single institution serves to demonstrate very effectively the wide variety of areas in which population studies have gained a place. All main course history students, in their first year, follow a course in urban studies which has a very large element of local demographical study in it. Many main history students choose to undertake a local population study as the topic of their third-year dissertation. Still within the history subject area, subsidiary students follow, in their second year, a local history course which contains a substantial demographical element. To these areas can be added elements of demography studied in professional courses for initial trainees and students studying for the Graduate Certificate in Education. Outside the history and the professional areas of study the geography courses offer a significant element of historical geography which adds a further dimension to historical demography. Many main geography students choose a demographical topic, often historical, for their third-year dissertations. Finally, and perhaps
this more than anything else represents a direct response to the increasing interest in local studies, the history and geography departments have collaborated in the development of an inter-disciplinary course in Local Studies\(^5\). Although it has a much wider ambit than demography local population study plays a very significant part in this course. So much for a brief account of the existence of local population studies within a single institution; similar situations and circumstances exist in many colleges. The important point is, however, that bald statements of curricular structure such as are often elicited by general surveys hardly do justice to the vitality of much of this study.

There are of course many important advantages which make the use of local population studies with college of education students particularly appropriate. Much of the source material such as census material is not hard to come by; nor does it present any overwhelming palaeographical problems. The census has without doubt proved a most rewarding source of study within local population studies in general. It is recent enough not to require students to enter into an almost totally alien society and culture (although this in turn can present a most serious danger which will need to be remarked upon later in this article). Census material can be used in a wide variety of ways and lends itself to various, often enterprising methods of presentation. It has a clearly discernible human interest in that it deals with what the student sees as real people in real situations. Thus it can be used to put flesh on the bones of social and economic history, to illustrate, for example, overcrowding. At the other extreme it can serve as the stimulus for an educational process which goes far beyond the bounds of history in the school curriculum. In between it has a significant role to play in a whole variety of situations.

This is not to say that there are no hazards to be encountered in the study of nineteenth-century census material. It has become increasingly clear that something of a dichotomy exists between the role of census material in academic research and in its use as part of an educational process\(^5\). Continuing and ever more elaborate and sophisticated investigation of the nineteenth-century census material by professional historians has served to uncover the pitfalls awaiting the unwary student: the problems of statistical techniques, of social classification, of standardisation, and so on are legion. Yet at school level, and therefore by implication at college level, it can be argued that so long as a page of the census raises problems which are discussed and considered at some length and in some detail under the guidance of an informed teacher this loans is sufficient to make the census a most valuable teaching aid. One should not disregard the difficulties of census-study; but the difficulties should not be allowed to prevent use being made of the material in an appropriate way. For example, the difficulties of social classification are immense but in a school it is sufficient to raise these difficulties; it is not necessary to solve them to the satisfaction of the professional historian. It is in this area of course that danger, remarked upon earlier, inherent in any source which presents an apparently easily recognizable world becomes most marked. It is all too easy for schoolchildren to transpose the occupations of the nineteenth-century census into contemporary conceptions of class with often disastrous results. A totally misconceived view of nineteenth-
century society could so easily be the result of census-study too lightly undertaken. It is the function of the teacher to ensure that sufficient discussion takes place to prevent such misconceptions. Such discussion should prove immensely valuable to an understanding of both nineteenth-century and present day society. It is here that census-study will very rapidly broaden out to encompass far more than traditional history.

There can be little doubt that students find nineteenth-century census material a rewarding source. The very nature of its study allowing, in fact demanding, an element of original investigation often means that they are able to present an enterprising piece of work at the end of it. Census-study in particular and local population studies in general has gone much to encourage a welcome move away from the 'guide book' history which had become such a prevalent element in local history dissertations. The nature of the study must ultimately depend upon aims and objectives of the course out of which it grows. It is very easy for students to become over-ambitious. The most elaborate work can deal with such areas of study as ethnic minorities (e.g. the Irish in Newcastle upon Tyne), a particular industrial group (e.g. miners), the social structure of a settlement of manageable size (e.g. a Northumberland village), migration (e.g. into the mining areas of County Durham, into the iron works of Middlesbrough), and so on. Shorter courses would lead to more limited study such as an examination of one street in 1851, 1861, or 1871.

Much of this is based upon the study of census material which it is suggested is a particularly useful source. It is, however, essential to ensure that the census, or any other source or group of sources for local population study, is not studied in isolation either from the general social and economic background or from other source material such as maps and pictures. For any local population study to be worthwhile and meaningful it is essential for the student to have a grasp of the demographic background both regionally and nationally, and to be able to fit this into the wider social situation. Only in this way can the charge of 'parochialism' be resisted, a charge commonly brought by the protagonists of more traditional, more general history courses. The charge is not to be dismissed lightly for there is always a danger of too narrow an approach being adopted which ultimately will jeopardize local population studies as a viable component of the curriculum. Happily careful structuring of a course will do much to alleviate this and make it possible for students to derive undoubted benefits from such study, both within the history subject area and within the broader confines of the curriculum in general.

Local Population Studies provides a valuable service in making accessible a variety of approaches which are suitable for adaptation or extension, sometimes on a more modest scale, as an appropriate topic for study at student level. Some very useful reference material is available but it would be useful if a select bibliography could be produced such as already exists for other specialized teaching techniques. It seems particularly unfortunate that so much work has gone on in colleges of education without any attempt to collate it to the mutual benefit of all involved in this sort of study. The Standing Conference on Local History is at present compiling details of various courses in local history in extra-
mural departments of universities, colleges of education and further education establishments. A similar survey of courses containing an element of local population studies would be most useful. Some published information on courses operating would serve two useful purposes: first, it would make accessible to those engaged in such work a whole range of useful information; second, it would encourage anyone considering such a course. It would be a very great shame were local population studies, after a vigorous and promising start at college level, to languish for want of supportive materials. Such materials do exist, and are probably increasing in both number and range, but it is important that they are adequately publicized.

At the present moment there is perhaps an even more dangerous threat to local population studies. Other approaches and techniques in the teaching of history and its related disciplines are making increasing demands for time and commitment against a background of reorganization within higher education which often wreaks havoc with many previously established courses. In such a welter of change it is all too easy for one area or another to lose ground consolidated over previous years. Yet even here the situation is not necessarily gloomy. In this particular instance the merger of a college of education with a polytechnic has provided an opportunity for local population studies to be incorporated into a wider and more diversified area such as librarianship.

NOTES
2. For example, contributions from college of education staff appear in LPS, Nos. 6, 9, 11, 12, 13 and 14.
3. In the editorial of LPS, No. 10, pp. 9-13, the editors remarked: "There is among our readers and contributors a remarkable paucity of college lecturers and schoolteachers." In LPS, No. 13 the editors were still asking for contributions from teachers and college lecturers, following a letter from a teacher stressing the need for practical help which could be met by appropriate articles in LPS.
4. When this article was written the author was a member of the History staff at Northern Counties College of Education. Since then the college has been merged with the Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic and this has had further implications for such studies, referred to briefly at the close of the article.
5. See T. Gwynne and M. Sill, 'Courses for Sources,' Times Educational Supplement, 2.1.76, p.28.
6. LPS has always reflected this, if sometimes in a more general way, i.e. the conflict between 'amateur' and 'professional.' See, for example, No. 6, pp. 56-9 and correspondence in subsequent issues.
7. For example, John Whyman, 'Visitors to Margate in the 1841 Census returns,' LPS, No. 8, pp. 19-38.
9. Much useful material is provided by Record Office publications but it is not easy for the individual to ascertain the range of what is available. Likewise, a number of University Extra-mural departments produce very helpful material. It is not always realized, however, that there is likely to be considerable interest in such material from outside the local area in which it is produced.