

AN APPROACH TO CENSUS RETURNS

P.M. Tillott

Formerly editor of the Victoria County History of York, Hull and the East Riding and now Deputy Director of the Department of Extra-Mural Studies, University of Sheffield. At present working on mid-nineteenth century social history from the 1851 Census Enumerators' books.

This is the first of a series of articles describing work on the 19th century censuses. It is intended primarily to be helpful to those who have no previous experience in using this source.

Material derived from the censuses of the 19th century may be found in two forms; in the Reports printed and published by the census authorities after each census; and in the mass of original material derived from the answers to census questions given by the householders at the time. Both are often loosely referred to as Census Returns, but should be distinguished as Census Reports and Census Enumerators' Books. The Census Reports are not, generally speaking, the subject of treatment here but are mentioned briefly below.

Census-taking of the period has been described by Professor M.W. Beresford in:

'The unprinted Census Returns of 1841, 1851, 1861 for England and Wales', Amateur Historian, v, (1963), 266.

and in:

The Unprinted Census Returns for 1841, 1851 and 1861, (Phillimore Handbooks No. 6) 1966.

Either article will provide an adequate preliminary description. More recently, Dr. W.A. Armstrong has included some description of the process in an account of his work on York in:

E.A. Wrigley (ed.) An Introduction to English Historical Demography (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966)

Briefly, forms known as schedules were delivered to each householder in the week before the census night requiring him to record certain personal information about himself and everyone resident in his household on census night.

These forms were collected by the enumerators and shortly afterwards copied into books, provided for the purpose by the Census Office, and reproducing the form of the householders' schedules. Each household was then copied into the book consecutively, the divisions between households being marked by conventional signs. The books were then checked by the registrars who had oversight of the enumerators and forwarded, with the schedules, to the Census Office. The schedules were subsequently destroyed. The best description of this process is in the 1851 Report itself:

Census of Great Britain 1851, Population Tables, Part 1:
vol. 1, Report, Numbers of Inhabitants etc., H.C.
1852-3 (1631) LXXXV, pp. ix-xxiv.

The enumerators' books for the English and Welsh censuses of 1841, 1851 and 1861 are kept in the Public Record Office. The books for the Scottish censuses are kept in Edinburgh under somewhat different conditions of access; those for Ireland are said to have very largely been destroyed. The present remarks will refer only to the Censuses for England and Wales.

The censuses of 1801 - 31 were not conducted in this way and the printed Reports are all that remains of the process. The new method, based on Registration Districts and using official enumerators, was first adopted in 1841. The householders' schedules for that year asked for the name and address of each person, his age (to the nearest quinquennium), his occupation and the county of his birth. From 1851 onwards the precise age, the relationship of each person to the head of the household, and the actual place of birth were also required. The censal questions are best described in:

Interdepartmental Committee on Social and Economic
Research, Guides to Official Sources, No. 2,
Census Reports of Great Britain, 1801-1931
(H.M.S.O., 1951)

This publication also described the Reports though hardly in sufficient detail for many purposes; there is as yet no detailed commentary on the Reports. A general account of census taking and of the use of the published material will be found in an articles by Professor

A.J. Taylor:

'The Taking of the Census, 1801-1951', in the
British Medical Journal, April 7 1951, pp. 715-20.

Census material as presented in the Reports has, of course, been widely used by social and economic historians; a notable example is:

A. Redford, Labour Migration in England, 1800-1850
(1st edn. 1926, revised and edited W.H. Chaloner,
Manchester University Press, 1964)

The information in the Reports is entirely anonymous; in the enumerators' books the personal particulars of every individual in the land at that date are recorded and, naturally, such information will only be supplied in confidence. The limit of confidentiality, however, is deemed to be 100 years and the enumerators' books are now available for public inspection.

The books thus enable the enquirer to re-fashion the raw material used for the Census Reports according to whatever requirements he may have. In particular, he may investigate an area smaller or differently composed from that used in the Reports (which was usually the Registration District), or he may investigate topics that the census office did not tabulate or analyse. The range of possible topics includes occupational structure, age and birthplace structure, education, the employment of children, and family and household structure. Some of these topics have been investigated in a variety of publications, some of which are listed by Armstrong in the book edited by Wrigley cited above. Further listings will be found in the footnotes to the chapters by Armstrong and Dr. H.J. Dyos in:

H.J. Dyos (ed.) The Study of Urban History (Edward Arnold, 1968) which also contains (in Dyos' chapter) references to work on American censuses.

A good deal of work is at present in hand on the enumerators' books and much has been done that has not been published. Some of this work is listed in:

P.M. Tillot (ed.) Census Newsletter, University of Sheffield, Department of Extramural Studies
(occasional typescript).

Persons working on towns in the 19th century (for which the enumerators' books are an important source) may be found listed in

H.J. Dyos (ed.) Urban History Newsletter, University of Leicester, Department of Economic History, (typescript, two issues each year).

Additionally, a book sponsored by the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure is at present in hand. This will contain chapters on many aspects of the use of census material with special reference to the enumerators' books. The book is planned as a guide to techniques rather than a report of substantive work. It is hoped that it will be published about the end of this year.

Persons who are thinking of working on the enumerators' books for the first time would be well advised to read the works cited before they begin. The way in which they may obtain copies of the census material from the Public Record Office was described in the last issue of this publication Local Population Studies No. 1. The three available methods of analysis - by computer, by punch card machine, or by hand - will be commented on in a subsequent issue but an account of each method may be found in: Armstrong's chapter in An Introduction to English Historical Demography (punch cards and computer); manual methods are described in

P.M. Tillot, 'The Analysis of Census Returns', The Local Historian, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 2-10 (National Council of Social Service, 1968).