My chief interest in the Barrington registers is in the antiquarian circle behind their introduction and the reasons for the increased interest in the eighteenth century in detailed registration of information. I should be pleased to provide a full list of the detailed registers from various counties, particularly Berkshire, when this aspect of my work is completed within the next few months.

NOTES

2. Information from the National Library of Wales.
5. Information from several county archivists. I am grateful to Brigadier F.R.L. Goadby for bringing the example of Somerton, Oxfordshire, to my attention, and for informing me of Dr. Sheils' article.

Editors' Note:
From time to time books are published which we consider to be of particular importance. In such cases we invite an expert to review the book concerned.

A NOTE ON STATISTICAL STUDIES OF HISTORICAL SOCIAL STRUCTURE


Leslie Bradley

As one who has consistently criticised the use in historical demography of statistical methods too sophisticated for the imperfect material on which they were used, I am somewhat surprised to find myself wholeheartedly approving of a computer simulation of household structure! But this book describes a useful and important development. The statistical devices used are relatively simple. The computer enables us to see the results of stated sets of demographic factors operating over a long period and taking account, and this is the new and important feature, of chance elements acting on the individual. Ten per cent, say, of men never marry — but which actual individuals are they?

The initial problem to which the authors address themselves is the rarity in England of the multiple family. Was this the result of the demographic constraints; that is, did the known range of demographic factors (birth
rate, marriage rate, etc.) make the English nuclear family inevitable, or was it due to some behavioural choice? Briefly, and very superficially, the authors start with a community of 206 males and 203 females in 84 families, the choice of which they justify. They then specify fifteen sets of historically possible demographic rates operating with three sets of co-residence rules, one maximising and one minimising the incidence of stem-families, and one intermediate. They use the computer to apply the general demographic rates to specific individuals in their community, using a ‘random number’ facility. So, for any one of the fifteen sets, the development of each household can be followed year by year in a computer run. Since the allocation of demographic events, such as marriage or death, to specific individuals at a given point of time by the random factor is arbitrary and entails definite consequences for the subsequent history of the individual family and household, every run is repeated sixty-four times using different sets of random numbers, 960 runs in all. After simulation runs of 150 years the residential rule minimising stem-families produces an average of 18 per cent of complex families and the other two sets of rules produce between 37 per cent and 55 per cent, whereas most actual English listings show less than 15 per cent. This is, of course, not conclusive — the simulation, for example, does not take any account of migration — but, in the words of the authors, it does suggest that ‘behavioural rules are more potent determinants of average household proportions than are demographic rates within the context we are studying’. The study suggests, too, that the marriage rate is of predominant importance amongst the demographic factors and that the mortality rate, for example, has relatively little influence on average household structure.

One of the difficulties in theorising about the development of family structure has been to estimate whether observed differences between historical communities could be due to chance elements or whether they reflect differences in fundamental factors. This study gives us some idea of the variance about the average which we might reasonably expect from chance.

This is a first study and its results are indicative rather than definitive. The method will undoubtedly be modified and refined, but it does, I think, give us a tool, not for reconstructing historical communities, but for testing theories in a way which, so far as I am aware, has not hitherto been possible.