MISCELLANY

MISSING PERSONS IN THE 1911 CENSUS

Contributed by Geoffrey Stevenson

A note of some importance to historical demographers has recently been attached to the crypt in the Palace of Westminster: not however connected to the tradition whereby 'many christenings have taken place over the years for the offspring of the privileged and aristocratic' but to the census-taking of 1911. Nor is it strictly a tale of the crypt: more specifically of the broom cupboard of the same, which Mr Tony Benn has highlighted with more than one plaque dedicated, 'with much respect and gratitude and affection', to the campaigners for popular representation to Parliament.

It is claimed that in this place, Emily Wilding Davison, the militant suffragette later killed at Epsom at the 1913 Derby, hid on the night of the 1911 census to claim equal rights with men as a resident of the House of Commons. One could, of course, speculate how many male members of that House spent a Sunday night in the Palace at any census-taking, though of course some may have been enumerated 'away from home, on trains' or in some other theatre serving their constituency interests, though that may be beside the point.

Emily Davison's entry in the Suffrage Annual and Women's Who's Who of 1913 lists three occasions when she hid in the House of Commons, in April 1910 in a hot-air shaft, in April 1911 in the crypt, and also in June 1911. However, in the tribute to her by Gertrude Colmore her motive is described as seeking to avoid enumeration:

Nineteen-hundred-and eleven was the year of the Census, and large numbers of suffragettes made it the occasion of a protest against their absence of political status by refusing to fill in the papers; so large indeed were the numbers that the threatened prosecutions were of necessity abandoned. Emily's census paper contained these characteristic words: "As I am a woman and women do not count in the State, I refuse to be counted". Then followed her chosen motto: "Rebellion against tyrants is obedience to God".2

Her method of avoiding the census was to spend the night in the House of Commons, in Guy Fawkes' cupboard. There she narrowly escaped the notice of an MP with two visitors, but being unable to get out of the crypt as its doors were locked, she was finally discovered by a cleaner. She was taken to Cannon Row Police Station, but, after being detained a few hours in the matron's room, was dismissed.
Whether the stand over the Census was one of commission or omission is perhaps of secondary importance to the fact that census-taking, a crucial activity to local population historians of St Stephens, Westminster or any other parish, is a sufficient part of the story of 'the advancement of freedom, civil liberties, social justice and democracy'\(^3\) to deserve commemoration.

NOTES

3. A phrase from Mr Tony Benn's latest plaque which joins the one to Emily Davison in the broom cupboard or closet concerned.