

DEBATES IN POPULATION HISTORY

THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE

Simon Szreter and Edward Higgs

Review by Simon Szreter of Edward Higgs, *Life, death and statistics. Civil registration, censuses and the work of the General Register Office, 1836–1952* (Local Population Studies Supplement, 2004). 258pp+xiii. ISBN 0-9541621-0-2. £12.50 (p/b).

Edward Higgs is undoubtedly our leading authority on the archival records of the General Register Office of England and Wales, having published numerous insightful articles and an excellent users' guide to the manuscript returns of the census. Furthermore, the history of the GRO should be a fascinating one for our generation. We are now obsessed both with information technology and with citizen rights. This department of government was founded by statutes passed in 1836 as *the* office of information about and for individuals. It also developed, from early on in its history, its own intriguing political programme for the use of that information, intimately related to public health issues. Historical scholarship in this field is particularly indebted to John Eyler's classic intellectual biography of William Farr, *Victorian social medicine* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979). Eyler's work has provided the most exacting standards and guidance to the history of the GRO during its first four decades of existence.

Higgs' flow of stimulating articles on the history of the GRO have indicated that he would be the scholar to complement Eyler's foundational study with a book which added the dimension of administrative and organisational history to Eyler's research on the first four decades, and which then took the story on for the next seven decades to give us an integrated intellectual, scientific, administrative and political history of the later life of this highly significant office of government. Higgs has also published in 2004 *The rise of the information state* (Palgrave), an ambitious but also accessible and refreshingly anti-Foucauldian conspectus, which sensibly argues that the information about individuals collected by the state from 1500 onwards was often less about surveillance than 'empowerment'—information required by middle-class persons to go about their property-owning and rate-paying legal lives and by working-class persons to receive various forms of income transfers and other social and health services.

The GRO should be the paradigm case for Higgs' more general interpretation. It was both the government gatekeeper of individuals' legal identities, through its supervision of the civil registration system since July 1837 and the producer of official demographic statistics—the basis for the state to exercise its Foucauldian 'biopower'. However, Higgs does not really take the opportunity in *Life, death and statistics* to connect with these interesting and ambitious theses discussed in *The rise of the information state*. Those looking for an amplification and an examination in detail of that larger agenda through an expert case study will come away rather disappointed. As Higgs tells us in the opening sentence of the Preface he has opted instead for 'a rather old-fashioned' organisational history of a government department. The result, at least for this reader, is a bit of a curate's egg.

There is much on the positive side. Indeed, the opening and the closing pairs of chapters of the book are excellent and are important new contributions to the history of the GRO. In chapter 1 Higgs is to be congratulated on finally unravelling and making complete sense of the obscure origins in 1836 of the Registration and Marriage Acts, which originally created the GRO and the civil registration system which it supervised. He convincingly shows that a sequence of eminent scholars, including John Cullen, David Glass and John Eyler have failed to place these acts in the correct context of the immediately preceding work of the Real Property Commission, 1829–33, and an associated social movement by the propertied upper and middle classes 'to establish state institutions for the recording and preservation of titles to property' (p. 9). This movement also led to the establishment of the Public Record Office, the Patent Office, the Land Registry and the Central Probate Office. Hence, like each of these offices, the alphabetical indexes of the GRO were housed conveniently near to the inns of court in Somerset House. Previous accounts which stressed the primary role of Dissenters have been misled by 'a masterly exercise in jumping-on the property-recording bandwagon' (p. 11) by John Wilks, MP, leader of the Protestant Society for the Protection of Religious Liberty.

A highlight of the latter part of the book (chapter 7) is an excellent analysis of the takeover of the GRO by the new Ministry of Health—or more precisely by Sir Robert Morant's National Health Insurance Committee—which resulted in the sidelining of Bernard Mallet, the incumbent Registrar-General, by 'Morant's little Sylvanus', as the future Registrar-General (1921–45) was unflatteringly known in Whitehall. As is well-known, the new Ministry of Health under Sir George Newman (who pipped Arthur Newsholme, the incumbent Chief Medical Officer of the Local Government Board, to the nation's new top medical post in 1919) was consistently evasive on the issue of the health implications of unemployment and class differentials in health during the interwar period. As Higgs shows, consequently the new and independent MRC surpassed the GRO as the principal scientific analyst of these important inter-war health issues. Higgs notes that under Vivian's regime Dr T.H.C. Stevenson (Farr's third successor as Medical Superintendent of Statistics from 1909) was rarely allowed to put to use the new official social classification scheme, and that Stevenson himself rapidly became disaffected

(p. 198). (Stevenson partially circumvented this muzzle placed upon him by publishing class analyses of official data in academic journals, such as the *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*).

Another benefit of Higgs' scholarship is that we now know much more about how the GRO's staffing grew (or rather failed to do so for much of the nineteenth century) and the nature of its work. Outside the peak activity census years, most of its work was in the processing of the annual inflow of civil registration and in conducting searches of these alphabetically-filed documents for probate purposes, etc. Given that the annual records of such vital events more or less doubled between 1840 and 1895 while the number of searches requested increased by a factor of 50, it is noteworthy that staffing for the whole Office appears only to have risen modestly from 70 to 78 clerks from 1855 to 1895 (Tables 3.1 and 3.2). One of the book's several strengths is in its examination of the administrative struggle of successive Registrars-Generals of varying abilities to manage efficiently these ever-expanding demands on the national registration service. Higgs confirms that the last two decades of the Victorian century were ones of particular difficulty for the Office on the administrative side. Higgs shows that at almost exactly the point around 1900 when this form of pressure on the Office began to ease, in consequence of falling fertility and mortality rates, a rapidly increasing range of new central state demands on the GRO for mass registration information on whole categories of individuals emerged. Initially this was related to the early 'welfare' legislation of the New Liberals. For instance, the old age pensions introduced in 1908 required verification of the 490,000 claimants' ages. But this was as nothing compared with the deluge of work related to World War I and its aftermath. The GRO's system of national registration was crucial to the conscription of millions of men and women into the armed forces, munitions and other industries, along with its provision of evidence of dependency triggering transfer payments for wives and children and then—all too often—for widows of the conscripted.

The principal historiographical beneficiaries of Higgs's primary focus on administrative and organisational history are, perhaps not surprisingly, the Office's administrative heads—or some of them. Higgs certainly makes a good case for the crucial importance of the long-serving second Registrar-General, George Graham (1842–1879), although he is too hasty to claim that other historians have been guilty of belittling Graham. Eyer's and my own main focus on the intellectual and scientific output of the GRO has inevitably given prime attention to the remarkable, unbroken series of gifted medical superintendents from Farr onwards but I, for instance, have always written of the 'partnership' between Farr and Graham. Although Higgs emphasises the revisionist case he makes for recognition of the at least equal significance of the administrators—the Registrar-Generals—relative to the medical statisticians in the history of the GRO, even he, himself, seems to be arguing the opposite at times, notably in chapter 7, when demonstrating how intellectually vigorous was Farr's fourth successor, Percy Stocks, who held the post after Stevenson (1933–50). Higgs convincingly shows how it was Stock—and certainly not the

long-serving Sylvanus Vivian—who successfully carved out an entirely new public health role for the GRO in the tenth and eleventh decades of existence, as provider of the nation's morbidity statistics for the new NHS. Of course, it is broadly true that the GRO only fully flourished when led by a team in which both its administrative and its scientific chiefs were each men of great ability and mutual respect, as attested both by its founding partnership (1840–80) and the period of doldrums which beset the GRO during the twenty-year tenure (1880–1900) of the office of Registrar-General by Brydges P. Henniker, an ex-Horse Guards Etonian who, as Higgs documents, was rather out of his depth.

The main reservation I have over the volume's scholarly value follows from Higgs's decision, announced at the start of the Preface, to confine himself to an 'organisational history'. This seems to me to have been a fundamental mistake. The GRO was fully involved, from the beginning of its existence, in a number of the key political, ideological and scientific matters of the day. Higgs finds that he simply cannot avoid engaging with this aspect of the GRO's history. But instead of presenting this as an integrated part of his account, he continually offers summaries of these developments in order to attempt to downplay their importance. Having set himself to write only an organisational history, he seems to have interpreted this to mean that he should write a history which asserts the primary *importance* of the administrative history of the GRO over those other aspects of its intellectual, scientific and political history which have been previously researched by other scholars. This approach traps Higgs into spending far too much of his time in the central chapters of this book arguing for his narrow and rather less interesting, reduced history of the GRO through the unsatisfactory method of cantankerously critiquing other historians' research on the GRO's intellectual and scientific history, without always paying sufficient attention to the complexities of other scholars' work (not something Higgs has been guilty of in most of his other published articles).

I ask readers' forbearance in illustrating this problem with one major example of it, related to an aspect of my own research on the history of the Registrar-General's social classification of occupations, in use at the censuses from 1911 to 1991. This official model of the nation's social classes has turned out to have great influence on the twentieth-century study of fertility decline and on the analysis of health inequalities (featuring in the Black Report in 1980 for instance). It was originally constructed by Dr T.H.C Stevenson, the third of Farr's successors as Medical Superintendent of Statistics for analysing and presenting the results of the famous 1911 'fertility census'. Higgs' critique of my work on the origins of the official classification scheme occupies large parts of chapters 4 and 5. However, it is premised on a fundamental misreading or, at best, a rather crude simplification of a range of complex arguments relating to a very specific and detailed chronology about changing scientific and political ideas during the period c.1860–1925. I required several chapters to construct this complex story in Part II of *Fertility, class and gender* (Cambridge University Press, 1996). Higgs' misreading of my interpretation is compounded by the repeated experience when reading these two chapters of *Life, death and statistics* of first encountering my own work turned into an unrecognisable caricature,

only to find a few pages later a crude version of my own interpretation reappearing as the antidote to this straw man, being presented as if it is Higgs' own, new revisionary thesis!

For instance, in chapter 4 Higgs claims of my discussion of official and unofficial work on social classification in the 1880s that 'Szreter argues ... that the creation of this [that is, the subsequent, Stevenson model of social class] reflected a long-standing interest on the part of the officers of the GRO in the subject.' (p. 134) and that Szreter 'attempts to provide a lineage for Stevenson's innovation' (p. 141). This enables Higgs to conclude that Szreter is wrong: that the GRO had no such long-standing interest and 'in the 1890's the Office continued its traditional role of analysing natality and mortality in terms of locality, settlement type, population density and occupation. ... Stevenson's work in this field [from 1909] should be credited, therefore, as an innovative break with the past rather than as the culmination of the GRO's research efforts.' (p. 144). However, the latter sentence summarises exactly the position I have argued—at rather greater length—both in 1991 (*Social History of Medicine*) and 1996. My point, in doing so, was to demonstrate that, *despite* the GRO's definite knowledge of various *other* social classification schemes and its preparedness to experiment with them in the 1880s, it deliberately never invested in the effort of constructing a social classification scheme for itself because this had insufficient pay-off for its primary goal, which was the promotion of the nation's public health. As long as this was conceived by the GRO as principally a local authority and individual responsibility, a national social class analysis was not important.

However, by the turn of the new century a range of vigorous political ideologies, from the Fabian socialists on the left, through Liberal Imperialists, to the hereditarian eugenicists on the right, were arguing for the need for truly national policies to deal with the nation's perceived social and health problems. The eugenicists focused on the issue of reputed class differentials in mortality and fertility to argue that the nation was succumbing to a deterioration in its hereditary 'stock'. Therefore the GRO, as the authoritative keeper of official statistics on these matters, was asked to examine these claims for the Inter-departmental Enquiry on Physical Deterioration, reporting in 1904. John Tatham and William Dunbar (Stevenson and Mallet's predecessors) found no support for the hereditarian view in their analysis of infant mortality patterns, finding instead an association with deficient environments (Szreter, *Fertility, class and gender*, 247). However, the eugenicists redoubled their campaign after 1904 and so the GRO continued to find itself fighting a battle over the correct interpretation of its demographic statistics, with the eugenicists also alleging that declining fertility was due to failing fecundity among the more intellectual classes in society. Furthermore, with the election of the New Liberals in 1906, a novel willingness in the national government itself to see health and social issues as a national responsibility provided another crucial impetus—by raising the policy stakes and incentives—for T.H.C Stevenson after 1909 to undertake the labour of creating a social classification scheme so that the central government would henceforth have at its disposal measures of the

social patterns of mortality and fertility divergence which its national policies would be affecting. Thus, the GRO's disposition towards a social classification scheme does have a long and complex history but it is only by understanding its long-standing reasons for not investing in something which it was well aware of, that we can understand what it was that changed in the first decade of the twentieth century in the wider context in which the GRO was operating and what the precise motives were that led to the innovation. The structure of my argument seems to have eluded Higgs, who has therefore now misled his readers about my work and about this important aspect of the history of the GRO.

Higgs also spends much space in chapter 5 disputing whether the emergence of an official social classification scheme was primarily the work of T.H.C Stevenson, in close contact with his public health mentor, Arthur Newsholme, as I have argued (Szreter, *Fertility, class and gender*, chapter 5). Higgs prefers instead to intimate to his readers that the classification scheme *may* have emanated from the putative eugenicist motivations of Sir Bernard Mallet, Stevenson's Registrar-General, but he produces no new evidence of substance to back up this claim for Mallet's primary influence. This is not a repeat of the impressive revisionist scholarship of chapters 1 and 2. Higgs wants to return us to the state of hypothetical conjecture regarding the origins and motives for the classification scheme as perhaps being 'eugenic', entertained by Soloway and Austoker before I published my arguments and evidence in full in 1996. But Higgs introduces no compelling new evidence on this issue, while seeming to ignore the salient points in the account I have offered: firstly (as Higgs does acknowledge, but in a footnote on p. 141), that it is Stevenson, not Mallet, who is clearly documented as having first raised the issue of the need for a fertility census classified by social position; secondly, Mallet himself is twice on record as having acknowledged that 'the credit for both the initiation and the organisation' of this work should go entirely to Dr Stevenson (Szreter, *Fertility, class and gender*, 268); thirdly, the fact of Stevenson's long-standing and continuing close collaboration with the leading anti-hereditarian environmentalist, Arthur Newsholme (such that it was Newsholme who first used and published in an official document the classification scheme Stevenson had developed). As I also pointed out, this was confirmed by a search of the Mallet private papers (which I conducted), which turned up nothing to support Mallet's candidature for authorship of the scheme (Szreter, *Fertility, class and gender*, 267).

Furthermore, as a result of working since 1996 on Stevenson's biography for the new *Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004) I can now add the following quotation from Sir Bernard Mallet, which would seem to clarify precisely what happened in relation to the two men's working practices when he and Stevenson took over at the GRO:

We were appointed to the General Register Office in the same year—1909, I, as Registrar-General and he as Superintendent of Statistics. We at once set to work on the preparations for the Census; and it did not take me many weeks to recognise that he had what amounted to a positive genius for extracting

from the mass of statistics on births and deaths which came into the office the most valuable and original results. I therefore gave him as free a hand and as much support as I could, and the result was a very marked improvement in our vital statistics, which soon became again what they had been in the last century under Dr Farr, a model of their kind and recognised as such all the world over (Mallet, *The Times*, 14th September 1931).

Thus, Higgs's attempt to build a case that Mallet rather than Stevenson was driving the analytical agenda of the GRO from 1909 has to rely on a couple of quotations (p. 138) from Mallet's introductory statements to the Registrar General's annual reports where he advertised to readers the significance of the ensuing analyses in Stevenson's authored 'Letter to the Registrar General'. But these were *Stevenson's* analyses! Mallet's deference to Stevenson's expertise is clear in everything Mallet wrote on the subject of their working relationship.

What could have been a masterly, new summary synthesis, which might have integrated an administrative narrative with what we know from the earlier research of David Glass, John Eyler, Richard Soloway and other scholars (including myself and Higgs) has instead been too narrowly designed and is consequently disfigured in its central chapters by a misconstrued exercise in boxing with shadows, which contests not the real interpretations of other scholars but crude simplifications of them. The other five chapters are much better than this, as I have indicated. However, a magisterial, wide-ranging and accurate interpretation of the whole history, significance and contribution of this important institution and its work, the GRO 1837–1952 (at which point it became the Office of Population Census and Survey, OPCS, and has since been again transformed into the Office of National Statistics, ONS), matching the high standards set by John Eyler's work, still remains to be published.

Simon Szreter

St John's College
University of Cambridge

Life, death and statistics: a reply to Simon Szreter

It is always nice when someone whose work you admire takes the trouble to read and comment on one's own offerings in a field. Simon Szreter has, of course, published a number of key works on the history of the General Register Office (GRO), including his magisterial *Fertility, class and gender* of 1996. In conjunction with John Eyler, Simon has rightly placed the history of the GRO at the centre of the development of the modern public health movement. I am glad that he finds most of the chapters in my book on the GRO of use. His kind words respecting my work on what one might call the non-intellectual origins of the 1836 Registration Act, and on the importance of the relationship between the GRO's administrative and scientific heads for the successful prosecution of the institution's intellectual work, are especially heartening. Alas, he does not like the two central chapters, and rather damns the whole as a 'curate's egg'.