
Bob Woods (1949–2011): an appreciation

Professor Robert I. (Bob) Woods died earlier this year, after a courageous battle against illness. He was one of the most influential historical demographers of his generation, making pioneering contributions to our knowledge of the population of England during the demographic transition, especially Victorian and Edwardian mortality patterns, and latterly to the previously almost uncharted territory of foetal and perinatal mortality in the past.

Bob Woods was born and raised in Birmingham, before going up to read geography at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge. He then went to St Antony's College Oxford to study for a D.Phil., before moving via the University of Kent to a permanent appointment in the Department of Geography at the University of Sheffield. It was there that his work in historical demography began to flourish, as he supervised a series of Ph.D. students working on nineteenth-century topics, most of whom have gone on to academic careers. In 1989 he was appointed to a personal chair at the University of Liverpool, and in 1996 to the John Rankin Chair, which he held until his untimely death.

Bob Woods's interests in historical demography ranged widely, though his major contributions related to the nineteenth century. Probably his most important achievement was his book *The demography of Victorian England and Wales*, which brought together almost three decades of work on this topic.¹ This work exhibited all the trademarks of Bob's research and scholarship: rigorous empirical analysis, the imaginative use of diagrams to reveal patterns in data and caution in generalising from small numbers. As he himself wrote in the book: 'our motto will be: use the available material with care, but do not build elaborate explanations in circumstances where the specific qualities of the data are unknown and unknowable'.²

Although he made notable contributions to our understanding of fertility and marriage patterns, his main interest was in the history and geography of mortality.³ This was where he began his work in historical demography, with an article on mortality in Birmingham, and was the subject of the last book he published before his death, *Death before birth: foetal health and mortality in historical perspective*.⁴ His contributions to our understanding of historical mortality patterns are of enduring importance in four areas.

1 R. Woods, *The demography of Victorian England and Wales* (Cambridge, 2000).

2 Woods, *Demography of Victorian England and Wales*, 70.

3 For his contributions to fertility and marriage patterns see, for example, R. Woods and P.R.A. Hinde, 'Nuptiality and age at marriage in nineteenth-century England', *Journal of Family History*, 10 (1985), 119–44; R. Woods and C.W. Smith, 'The decline of marital fertility in the late nineteenth century: the case of England and Wales', *Population Studies*, 37 (1983), 207–25; and R. Woods, 'Approaches to the fertility transition in Victorian England', *Population Studies*, 41 (1987), 283–311.

4 R. Woods, 'Mortality and sanitary conditions in the "best governed city in the world": Birmingham 1870–1910', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 3 (1978), 35–56; R. Woods, *Death before birth: foetal health and mortality in historical perspective* (Oxford, 2009).

First, along with Patricia Watterson and John Woodward, he charted the history and geography of infant mortality in England and Wales in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, noting that the abrupt change in the trend in 1900 was partly an artefact of a series of hot summers in the 1890s, which temporarily elevated mortality from diarrhoeal diseases.⁵ This research also emphasised the importance of environmental factors, as opposed to income and wealth, in determining both the level of infant mortality in the late nineteenth century and the timing of the decline.

Second, with Nicola Shelton he put together a comprehensive description of mortality by age, place and cause across the registration districts of England and Wales between 1851 and 1900.⁶ *An atlas of Victorian mortality*, as it was entitled, is an indispensable reference work for anyone interested in understanding and researching mortality patterns during that period. The data used in the publication of the *Atlas* have also been deposited in the UK Data Archive, where they continue to provide a vital resource for historical demographers.

Throughout his academic career Bob Woods remained a geographer, and this is evident in his third contribution to our knowledge of historical mortality patterns—the importance of local and regional disease environments and the distribution of people between them. One of his most widely cited articles is one of his shortest, in which he pointed out that in mid nineteenth-century England and Wales, a very rapid redistribution of the population from relatively healthy rural areas to relatively unhealthy urban areas was taking place.⁷ This meant that measured at the *national* level, the decline of mortality appeared to be slower than it actually was. Indeed, subsequent research has shown that this population redistribution was responsible for a substantial part of the apparent stalling in the decline of mortality between 1830 and 1870.

Bob's final contribution to our understanding of historical mortality is his pioneering work on foetal and perinatal mortality.⁸ He noted that historical trends in the stillbirth rate are important, especially during the eighteenth century, as it has been argued that a decline in the stillbirth rate during that period made a significant contribution to the rise in overall fertility.⁹ Bob showed that stillbirth rates were much lower than was previously thought, so that they probably did not contribute as much as was believed to the rise in

5 R. Woods, P.A Watterson and J.H. Woodward, 'The causes of rapid infant mortality decline in England and Wales, 1861–1921, part I', *Population Studies*, 42 (1988), 343–66; R. Woods, P.A Watterson and J.H. Woodward, 'The causes of rapid infant mortality decline in England and Wales, 1861–1921, part II', *Population Studies*, 43 (1989), 113–32.

6 R. Woods and N. Shelton, *An atlas of Victorian mortality* (Liverpool, 1997).

7 R. Woods, 'The effects of population redistribution on the level of mortality in nineteenth-century England and Wales', *Journal of Economic History*, 45 (1985), 645–51.

8 R. Woods, 'The measurement of historical trends in foetal mortality in England and Wales', *Population Studies*, 59 (2005), 147–62; Woods, *Death before birth*.

9 E.A. Wrigley, 'Explaining the rise in marital fertility in England in the "long" eighteenth century', *Economic History Review*, 51 (1998), 435–64.

fertility. His recent contribution to this journal included an attempt to estimate maternal mortality and stillbirth rates from the London Bills of Mortality, with results which were consistent with existing evidence.¹⁰

Bob's contributions to historical demography were not limited to his own research and publications, however. He was a member of the Editorial Board of the leading British journal of demography, *Population Studies*, for many years, during which time he 'flew the flag' for historical demography, ensuring that the journal published a regular stream of articles on the subject. Through his supervision of postgraduate research students, he enthused and encouraged many of those active in the discipline today, including Chris Galley, Eilidh Garrett, Violetta Hionidou, Graham Mooney, Nicola Shelton, and myself. He was a wonderful supervisor, always available for consultation, willing to discuss any problem (no matter how apparently trivial), and often suggesting interesting and productive new lines of enquiry, while at the same time cautioning against being side-tracked from the main task in hand: the completion of the thesis!

Bob bridged the gap between geography, history and demography. It is significant, I think, that almost his entire academic career was spent in departments of geography. He never lost a feeling for the importance of place and region, and it is through this that he made an enormous contribution to local population studies. Anyone making a study of local population change in Victorian England will want to consult the maps of fertility, mortality and marriage in *The demography of Victorian England and Wales* and *An atlas of Victorian mortality* to situate their study area within the national context.

Apart from his historical work, Bob also made major contributions to the analysis of migration patterns, and was almost single-handedly responsible for the incorporation of rigorous demographic analysis into population geography, the most important examples being his early textbooks *Population analysis in geography* and *Theoretical population geography*.¹¹ He served as the president of the British Society for Population Studies and in 2003 was elected to a Fellowship of the British Academy. He was a kind and gentle man, and will be sadly missed by geographers and demographers alike, as well as many in related disciplines.

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10 R. Woods, 'Mortality in eighteenth-century London: a new look at the Bills', *Local Population Studies*, 77 (2006), 12–23.

11 R. Woods, *Population analysis in geography* (London, 1979); R. Woods, *Theoretical population geography* (London, 1982).