

## **POOR-LAW SETTLEMENT CERTIFICATES AND MIGRATION TO AND FROM BIRMINGHAM 1726-57<sup>1</sup>**

**Alan Parton**

Alan Parton lectures in Historical Geography at Coventry (Lanchester) Polytechnic. He is currently engaged in research into Poor Law Records and migration to Birmingham.

The enormous structural changes which took place during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries resulted in substantial shifts in the distribution of the population of Britain. The recent work of Wrigley and Schofield and the Cambridge group for the History of Population has suggested that increases in the birthrate associated with a lowering of the age at marriage were important contributions to these changes.<sup>2</sup> Clearly the movement of population was another major factor in accounting for the changing spatial variations in the concentration of people. The pioneering work in the study of migration was undoubtedly that of E. G. Ravenstein, who published his 'Laws of migration' in 1885 and 1889.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently many studies have been carried out which have added to the body of migration theory and to the empirical evidence underpinning it. It is apparent that even before the onset of industrialisation there was a considerable degree of mobility, the scale and pace of which grew during the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries. The wealth of material associated with the nineteenth-century Census Enumerators' Schedules has produced an abundance of studies of inter- and intra-urban migration for the period 1841-81. However, the years before this are less well served by source materials, resulting in far less investigation into this aspect of population change during an important period of industrial development. Nevertheless, significant insights have been provided by using a variety of sources, largely surrogate measures, such as apprenticeship records, local censuses and parish registers.<sup>4</sup>

One of the major studies of migration to urban areas during the early stages of industrial development was Pelham's account of movement to Birmingham between 1686 and 1726, which was published in 1937.<sup>5</sup> The brief paper presented here is essentially an extension in time of this work.

The Acts of 39 and 43 Elizabeth in 1597 and 1601 established the system of Poor Relief, which in modified form remained in operation until the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. Those who became destitute were helped with money collected through

the parish Poor Rates. Settlements which were growing and attracting labour might find that they would have an excessive number of paupers to support if some of these migrants subsequently became destitute. The Settlement Act of 1662 attempted to solve this problem.

'That it shall and may be lawfull upon complaint made by the Churchwardens or Overseers of the Poore of any Parish to any Justice of the Peace within Forty dayes after any such Person or Persons coming so to settle as aforesaid in any Tenement under the yearly value of Ten pounds for any two Justices of the Peace . . . to remove and convey such persons to such Parish where he or they were last legally settled as a native Householder Sojourner Apprentice or Servant for the space of forty dayes at the least unless he or they give sufficient security for the discharge of the said Parish to bee allowed by the said Justices.<sup>6</sup>

Some migrants anticipated this situation obtaining a Settlement Certificate from their Parish of origin, effectively an undertaking to provide them with assistance should they subsequently need it. Some of these certificates have survived, but in the case of Birmingham a record was kept of those who came to the town bringing this document with them. This archive is in the form of a book in which the name, occasionally the occupation, but always the place of origin is recorded. The register provides only a partial picture on two counts. Certificates were issued to those occupying property valued at less than ten pounds a year, thus the middle class were excluded. Secondly, since there was no requirement to obtain a certificate the record is only a sample of the total number of migrants. Pelham made use of this material to establish patterns of migration into Birmingham during a period when industrial development was beginning to grow. He refers, however, to a second volume, the existence of which he was aware of, "it now appears that there were two such books, of which the newly discovered one is the earlier . . . and we must continue to hope that the other volume will yet turn up".<sup>7</sup> This second volume covering the period 1726-79 has now come to light, thus permitting an extension of the original study into a period of more rapid industrial change, as well as facilitating comparisons with Pelham's original findings. Like its predecessor this volume, entitled 'Register of Certificate Holders'<sup>8</sup> is a year by year listing of names and parish of origin. There is a total of 736 entries for the thirty years compared with 715 for the earlier period. Additionally there are 225 records of certificates granted by Birmingham Poor Law officials giving the destinations of some out-migrants between 1720 and 1757.

During the eighteenth century industrial growth was considerable, marked by a diversification of Birmingham's industrial structure. Wise considered that during this time the town developed in three ways, becoming a major industrial centre, the regional focus for South Staffordshire, and an important service centre.<sup>9</sup> These developments encouraged those seeking work to be attracted to Birmingham whose population grew from an estimated 23,000 in 1731 to 42,250 by 1778.<sup>10</sup> The period under consideration ends in 1757, just six years before the movement of Matthew Boulton's works from Snow Hill to Soho. By this time the town's industries consisted of a range of metal manufacturing which included guns, buckles, toys and brass; for Birmingham the industrial revolution was under way.

In order to facilitate comparison with Pelham's findings, his methodology has largely been adopted. The data has thus been grouped into his three zones:

- (i) The Inner Zone — persons coming from within the city boundary as it was in 1937
- (ii) The Middle Zone — persons from the remaining parts of Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Staffordshire
- (iii) The Outer Zone — persons from further afield.

Table 1 suggests that in general short distance movement within the Inner Zone was less for 1727-57 than for either of Pelham's periods. In more detail the year by year analysis (fig. 1) confirms this picture although between 1727 and 1730 the Inner Zone was still maintaining its place. The most notable contrast is for the Middle Zone, from whence 60 per cent of the recorded migrants came, thus lending support to the notion that Birmingham was increasingly becoming the centre of the West Midlands region at this time. When the numbers of in-migrants from the Middle Zone are mapped (fig. 2) it is immediately apparent that there is a distance-decay function in respect of Birmingham. It is also clear that the majority of moves were from distances up to fifteen miles from the town with a directional bias towards the north-

**Table 1. In-migration to Birmingham 1686-1757 and out-migration 1720-57**

	1686-97*		1698-1726*		1727-57**		Out-migration 1720-57**	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Inner	45	45.9	161	26.1	139	18.9	40	17.8
Middle	46	47.0	312	50.6	442	60.1	129	57.3
Outer	7	7.1	144	23.3	155	21.1	56	24.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>98</b>		<b>617</b>		<b>736</b>		<b>225</b>	

\* Pelham (1937).

\*\* Register of Certificate Holders,  
Birmingham Reference Library MS66069011.R80

west; that is including the Black Country settlements towards Walsall and Wolverhampton. This pattern may well be related to Birmingham's trade and commercial relationships with this area reflecting linkages within the coal-producing, metal-making and metal-using districts. Beyond fifteen miles the scatter of contributing settlements is more haphazard with no clear patterns of movement emerging.

Pelham noted a dramatic increase in migrants from further afield after 1697, the proportion from the Outer Zone was fairly constant through to 1757; his explanation for the patterns he depicts is deterministic, explaining the distribution of migrants from rural areas in terms of their agricultural potential. The small numbers involved make such deductions dubious. The distribution of migrants from outside the Middle Zone (fig. 3) bears little clear relationship to agricultural factors but would seem to once again accord with a distance-decay model. There is a clear concentration of

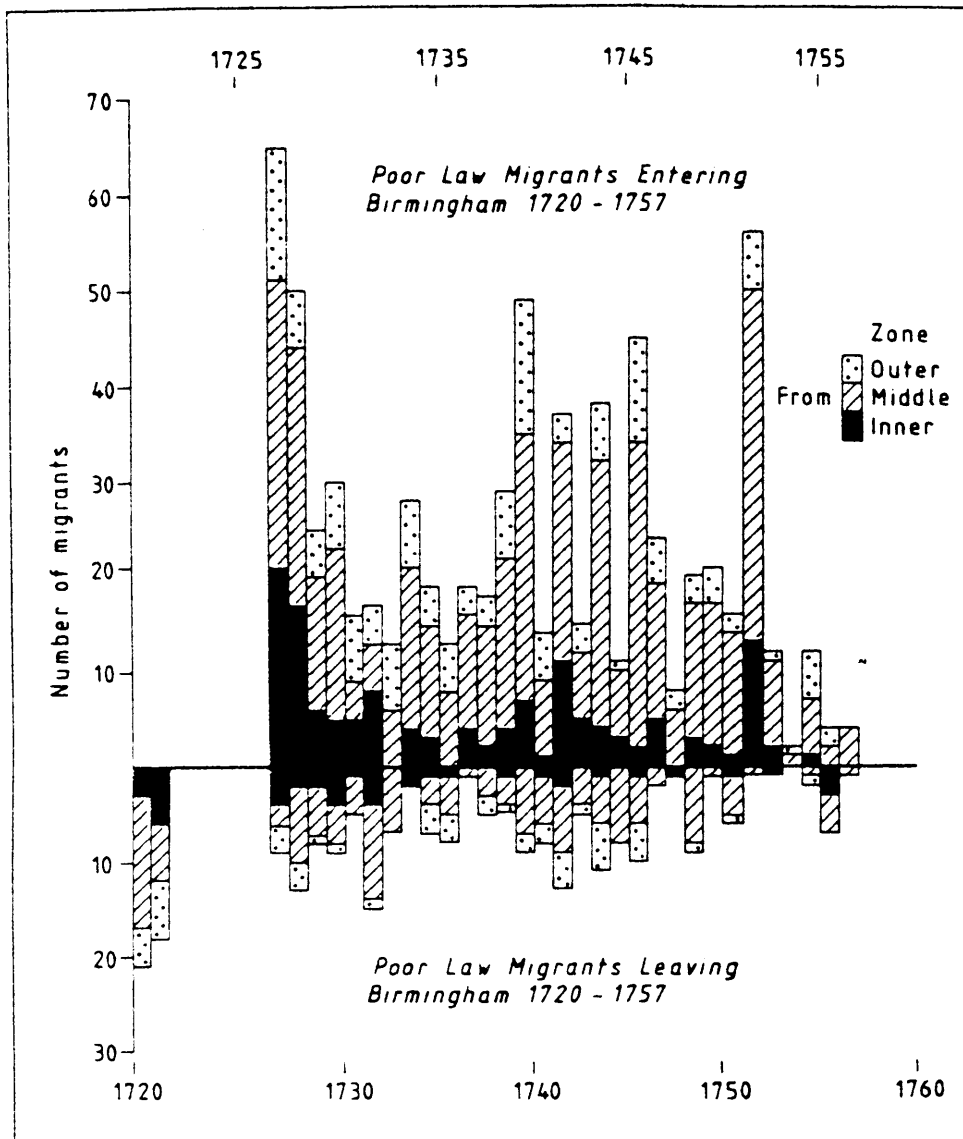


Fig. 1. Poor-law migration to and from Birmingham, 1720-57.

migrants from districts fringing the Middle Zone with London because of its size contributing a large number of people. The capital apart, few migrants came from distances in excess of sixty miles.

The data for out-migrants provides an interesting complement to that for moves into Birmingham. The pattern is remarkably similar when the percentage figures are considered (Table 1). It must be remembered that the total number of entries is only a third of those for the in-migrants. However, the direction of the moves is different. Within the Middle Zone movement is to settlements further afield, distances of up to twenty miles being quite common. Whilst the Black Country is still significant the bulk of the migrants were going to the girdle towns on the east of Birmingham from Lichfield to Stratford upon Avon. Aston, Yardley and Solihull, at no great distance attracted considerable numbers of migrants as indeed they provided large numbers of people moving into Birmingham. Very few out-migrants ventured further than sixty miles, the most significant concentrations being in the East Midlands around Leicester, possibly related to labour demands in the textile industry.

It is difficult to find much support during the period 1727-57 for Pelham's tentative conclusions for the previous period, 'that Birmingham's migrants were for the most part artisans drawn largely from the "regions of plain living and high thinking" where environmental conditions were unpropitious enough to induce the adventurously minded to seek an easier living elsewhere'.<sup>11</sup> There is rather more evidence for the existence of a migration field according approximately to the present West Midlands Planning Region. During the first half of the eighteenth century Birmingham was very much the commercial capital of this area.

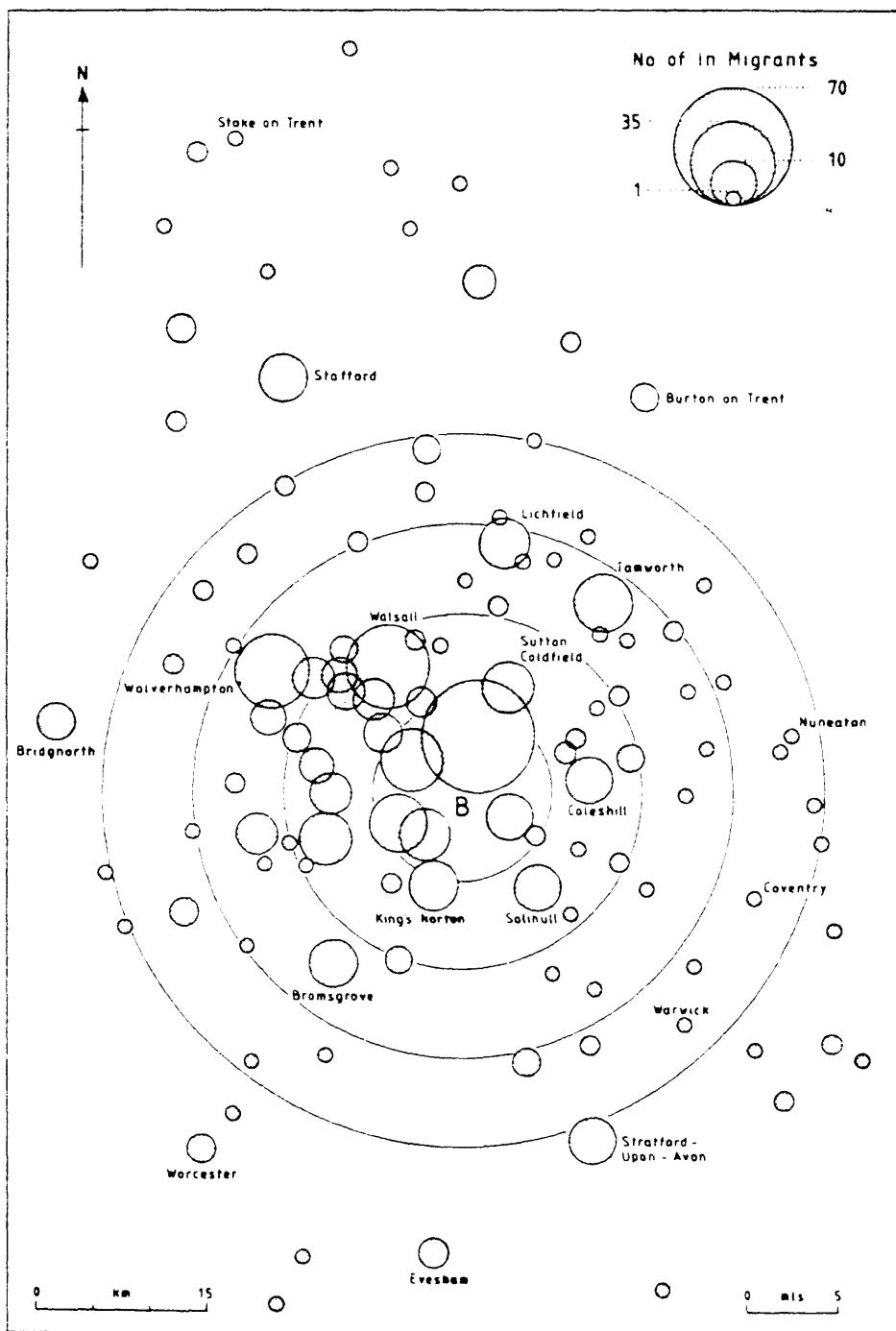


Fig. 2. Poor-Law migrants from the Middle-Zone, 1727-57.

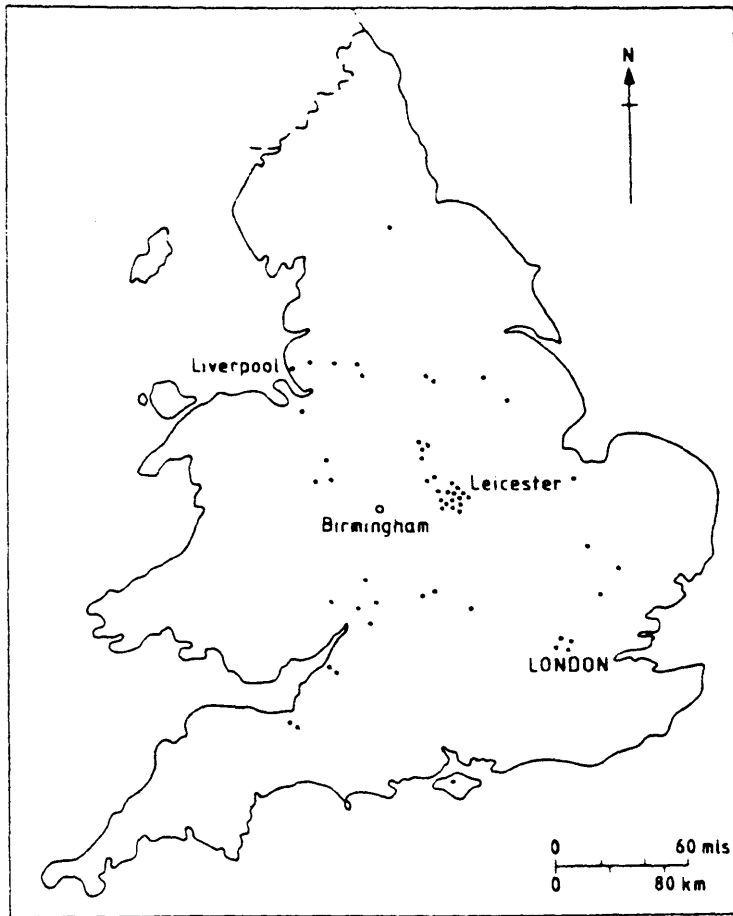


Fig. 3. Poor-Law migrants from the Outer-Zone, 1727-57.

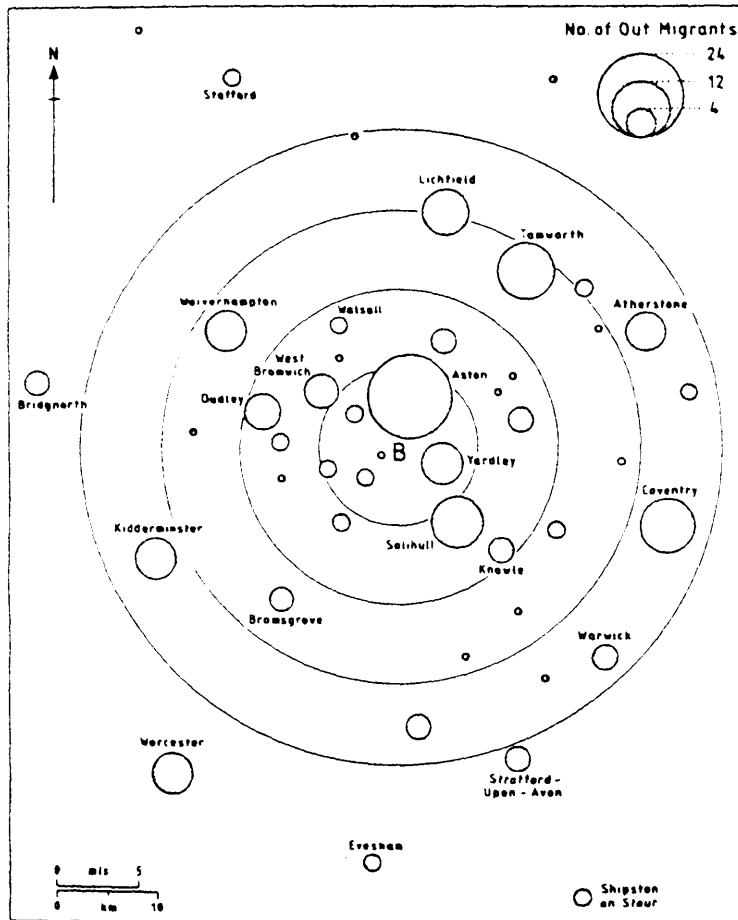


Fig. 4. Destinations within the Middle-Zone, of migrants leaving Birmingham, 1720-57.

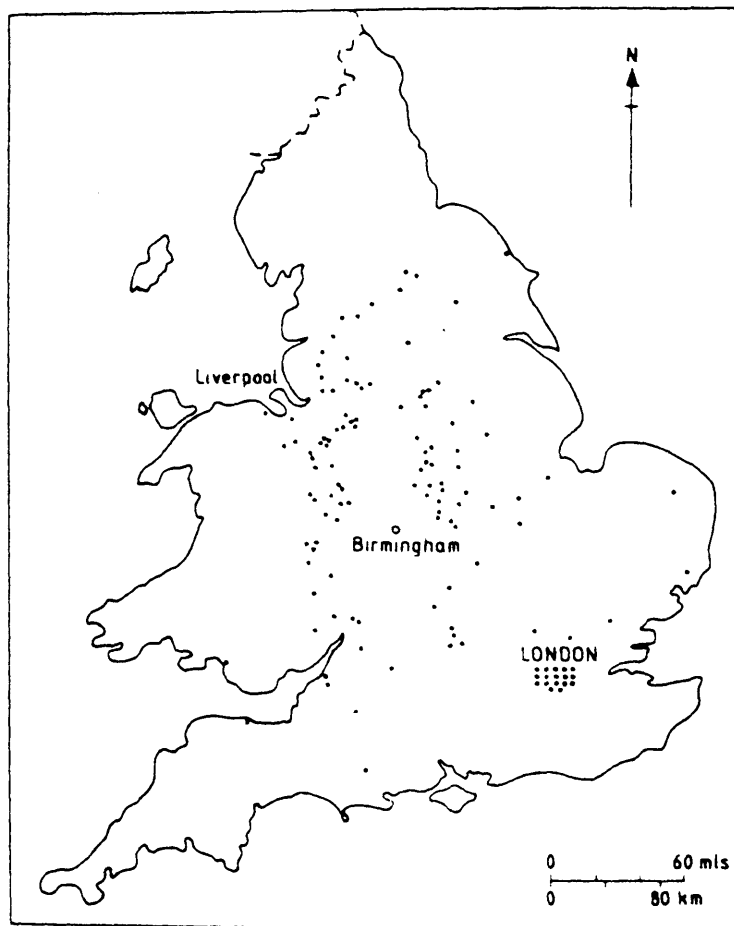


Fig. 5. Destinations within the Outer-Zone, of migrants leaving Birmingham, 1720-57.

#### NOTES

1. The author would like to thank Mr John Warner Davis, Archivist at Birmingham Reference Library for drawing to his attention the data source upon which this article is based.
2. E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, **The Population History of England 1541-1871: a reconstruction**, 1981.
3. E. G. Ravenstein, 'The Laws of Migration', **Journal of the Statistical Society**, vol. 48, 1885, pp. 167-227; 'The Laws of Migration', **Journal of the Statistical Society**, vol. 52, 1889, pp. 214-301.
4. E. J. Buczatzsch, 'Places of origin of a group of immigrants into Sheffield 1624-1799', **Economic History Review, Second Series**, vol. 1, 1949, pp. 303-6; R. A. Holderness, 'Personal mobility in some rural parishes of Yorkshire 1778-1812', **Yorkshire Archaeological Journal**, vol. 42, 1971, pp. 444-754; R. Houston, 'Geographical mobility in Scotland 1652-1811: the evidence of testimonials', **Journal of Historical Geography**, vol. 11, 1985, pp. 379-94; J. Patten, 'Patterns of migration and movement of labour to three pre-industrial East Anglian towns', **Journal of Historical Geography**, vol. 2, 1976, pp. 111-29; J. Waveing, 'Changes in the Geographical distribution of the recruitment of apprentices to the London companies 1486-1750', **Journal of Historical Geography**, vol. 6, 1980, pp. 241-9.
5. R. A. Pelham, 'The immigrant population of Birmingham 1686-1726', **Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society**, vol. 61, 1937, pp. 45-82.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. **Birmingham Reference Library, MS66069011R.80.**
9. M. J. Wise, **Birmingham and its Regional Setting**, 1950.
10. The 1731 figure is taken from William Westley's 'The East Prospect of Birmingham', Birmingham Reference Library; that of 1778 from Harrison's 'Plan of Birmingham', cited in V. Bird, **Portrait of Birmingham**, 1970.
11. M. J. Wise, *op. cit.*