

Some Forgotten Men: The Registrars General of England and Wales and the History of State Demographic and Medical Statistics, 1837-1920

Edward Higgs
University of Essex

The study of the history of institutions from the perspective of their leading officers can hardly be seen as at the cutting edge of modern historical research. What then is the justification for looking at the General Register Office [GRO] via the collective biography of the Registrar Generals of Births, Marriages and Deaths for England and Wales? Partly this paper is intended to fill a gap in the existing historiography since very little attention has been paid to this body of men. Existing histories of the generation of medical and demographic statistics in England and Wales, and of the influence of the GRO on public health, have concentrated almost exclusively on the work of the Registrar Generals' subordinates, the GRO's Superintendents of Statistics - William Farr, William Ogle, John Tatham, and T H C Stevenson. Indeed, when historians have bothered to mention the Registrar Generals it has often been to disparage them, or to claim that they were in some sense subordinate to their more famous colleagues. On occasion even reputable historians have made the mistake of thinking that Farr was actually the Registrar General. But, as I want to argue today, this approach is unjust, and has led to a distorted picture of the development of the GRO. Historians' treatment of the Registrar Generals also says something about how academics see the world, and their tendency to give precedence to intellectual activity over institution building and administrative skills.

The paper will be in two parts. I will first summarise the existing historiography of the GRO, and show how the Registrar Generals have been fitted into, or rather omitted, from the history of the development of medical and demographic statistics. The main part of the paper will then consider the role of the GRO's departmental heads in its development and work.

As I've already noted, the conventional history of the GRO concentrates on the institution's medical and demographic research, and on the men who carried it out - the GRO's Superintendents of Statistics. The GRO is seen by scholars such as John Eyler and Michael Cullen as having been set up to administer a civil registration system which was established both to remove Nonconformists from the requirement to register baptisms, burials and marriages with the clergy of the Church of England, and to provide medical scientists with information on mortality rates and cause of death. The Office is then seen as flourishing because of the appointment of William Farr to the post of compiler of statistics within the GRO in 1839. Farr has been seen as the 'real' registrar general until his retirement in 1879, writing the GRO's reports, acting as a Commissioner for the Census, and taking the initiative in the development of the Office's scientific work. Historians such as Michael Flinn have tended to follow medical professionals at the time in seeing the failure to reward Farr with the nominal headship of the Office in 1879, on the retirement of the then Registrar General, as a disgrace which led to Farr's subsequent resignation and retirement from public life.

The GRO after Farr's departure is seen as an institution at bay. Szreter in his monumental work on the GRO in this period, *Fertility, Class and Gender in Britain 1860-1940*, defends William Ogle and John Tatham, the Office's superintendents of statistics in the years 1880 to 1907, as men of great intellectual talents. But their work, Szreter argues, was cramped by Treasury meanness; the bureaucratisation of the sanitary movement, with an increasing emphasis on servicing the medical officers of health; and, above all, by the rise of eugenics which appeared to undermine the rationale of the environmentalist model of health reform. T H C Stevenson is then seen by Szreter as leading an intellectual renaissance within the GRO in the Edwardian period. He sees the Office acting as part of an environmentalist counter-attack against the eugenicists. This is shown in the introduction of questions in the 1911 census relating to fertility, and Stevenson's development of the system of socio-economic groupings for analysing this data on a class specific basis.

The Registrar Generals play a very secondary role in this story, either as buffoons to highlight the genius of the men of science; as worthy bursars to Farr's academic head

of college; or as problems to be explained away. For Finer, and even John Eyler, the first Registrar General, Thomas Lister, who was appointed in 1838 and died in 1842, was a non-entity who got the job without any proper scientific qualifications because he was the brother-in-law of Lord John Russell. He is seen as a 'flatulent young novelist' and 'decorative headpiece', Farr being the real moving force within the Office. His successor, Major George Graham, who was head of the GRO until 1879, has had a better press. He is mostly seen as a decent but plodding administrator who gave Farr the resources he needed for his scientific work, and then had the good sense to let him get on with it. Royston Lambert in his biography of Sir John Simon is rather less charitable, seeing Graham as a weak character constantly having to be prodded by Simon to extend the scope of the GRO statistical output.

After Graham, the Registrar Generalship tends to fade from view. His successor, Sir Brydges Henniker is mainly remembered for depriving Farr of the post, and is only foregrounded in Szreter's work on the late Victorian GRO when he is seen as successfully defending the GRO control over the census before an interdepartmental committee on the census in 1890. Henniker's immediate successors, Sir Reginald MacLeod (1900-1902) and Sir William Dunbar (1902-1909), are shadowy figures, and mainly ignored. Similarly, Sir Bernard Mallet, the head of the GRO from 1909 to 1920, and T. H. C. Stevenson's boss, is mainly an embarrassment for Szreter to explain away. This is because Simon wants to see the GRO as a powerhouse of environmentalist research engaged in an almost Manichean struggle with eugenic demographic theories. Yet after his retirement from the Office, Mallet was to become the President of the Eugenics Society. Simon gets around this by claiming that Mallet was not interested in demographic matters whilst at the GRO, and only became an advocate of eugenics after leaving the Office. This he appears to base on the fact that Mallet's major *published* work whilst Registrar General related to British fiscal and budgetary policy.

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Let us now look at this history from the point of view of the Registrar Generals. To begin with, I think that it is unfair to criticise Thomas Lister for the manner of his

appointment. Political patronage was, after all, a typical means of appointing senior civil servants in the early nineteenth century. Nor was his lack of scientific training an impediment to him becoming the head of the GRO, since the main reason for the foundation of the institution was not scientific. The GRO was established to administer and monitor the system of civil registration of births, marriages and deaths set up in 1836 for the purposes of protecting title to property via the recording of lines of descent. This also relieved Nonconformists from the burden of depending on the Church of England for such registration via parish registers.

Indeed, if the GRO developed a medico-demographic programme this was because of the activities of administrators such as Edwin Chadwick and Lister. As I have argued elsewhere, cause of death may well have found its way into the registration system because of Chadwick's intervention, and it was Lister who insisted that the GRO should have a medical statistician despite Treasury misgivings. If William Farr got an appointment as statistician in the GRO, it was because Lister was actively seeking to fill such a post. It was again Lister who, via the Royal Colleges, enlisted the medical profession in the provision of accurate cause of death data on death certificates. It was also Lister who was approached to take over the 1841 census on the death of John Rickman, the parliamentary clerk who had organised the censuses from 1801 to 1831. Lister, not Farr, was the GRO's commissioner for taking the first Victorian census, and seems to have been responsible for the design of the survey.

The main criticism that can be made of Lister's stewardship of the Office is I think that he spent too much time on developing the GRO's scientific work, and not enough on ensuring that the Office was efficiently administered. When Lister died suddenly in 1842 there was a backlog of nearly two years in the compilation of the registers of births, marriages and deaths, whilst the Office's accounts were subsequently discovered to be in a 'very irregular and disorganised state'. Still more seriously, Lister's lax administration had tempted some members of staff to abuse their positions. No checks, for example, had been made on the accounts of the office keeper regarding postage, and Lister having made payments to the latter without any covering invoices. Inquiries at the General Post Office after Lister's death revealed that on several occasions the amounts claimed by the office keeper for postage in fact

exceeded the entire receipts for the postal 'beat' from Charing Cross to Temple Bar. The Treasury was convinced that the work of the Office was so badly managed that the department must be grossly overstaffed, and was preparing an inquiry into its workings

It was at this low point in its fortunes that the GRO was fortunate in the appointment of Major George Graham. Graham was in fact anything but the cautious, faceless administrator he has been portrayed but a man of energy, scientific curiosity, and forceful personality. Graham was born in 1801, the son of an important landed family in Cumberland, and the younger brother of Sir James Graham, the Conservative Home Secretary from 1841 to 1846. He entered the East India Company Service, and retired with the rank of Major in 1831, having been military secretary in Bombay between 1828 and 1830. Graham became private secretary to his brother on the latter's appointment as Home Secretary in the Peel Ministry, and was given the post of Registrar General on Lister's death in 1842, presumably via his kinsman's influence. Graham was thus a member of the political and landed establishment, and used to dealing with his political masters on terms of social equality.

Rather than a weak or dull man, Graham's correspondence reveals him as a determined, fiery character, almost to the point of recklessness. In this he was similar to his elder brother, Sir James, whose political career was marred, according to the *Dictionary of national biography*, by his being 'so little conciliatory in manner and so rash in utterance.' Graham was, for example, one of the few heads of departments to oppose the introduction of the distinction between 'intellectual' and 'mechanical' work, which were enshrined in the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms of the mid-Victorian Civil Service. 'Intellectual' work was to be undertaken by higher civil servants whilst 'mechanical' work was to fall to lowly clerical 'writers', who as 'peripheral' workers were to have much reduced terms of service. Graham objected to this on grounds of morale, efficiency and justice, and in 1871 wrote a blistering official letter on the subject. This concluded sarcastically

After 30 years in this office I find my duties merely mechanical and I suppose most of us permanent civil servants are in reality only mechanical; I look upon

those who on change of government come in above us and rule us as the intelligent and intellectual, not requiring experience, but instantly understanding their new duties intuitively.

This, it should be noted, was not sent to fellow civil servants at the Treasury but to Robert Lowe, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, himself. It is difficult to imagine a permanent secretary of a small Whitehall department writing to Gordon Brown in such terms today!

It should be no surprise, therefore, that many of the fiery passages of purple prose found in the *Annual reports* in this period are in fact in Graham's own reports, rather than in the statistical appendices produced by Farr. Thus, in 1862 it was Graham's report, rather than Farr's statistical Letter, which contained the GRO's classic discussion of the quality of the water supplied by the London water companies. Even such a careful scholar as John Eyler attributes sections in Graham's reports to Farr, on the assumption, presumably, that they had to have been written by the latter. But there is no proof for this, and it is not inconceivable that Graham deployed material prepared for him by his subordinate. The belief that Farr wrote Graham's reports may have originated with Major Greenwood's assertion to that effect in his work *The medical dictator*. Greenwood, however, gave no evidence for this apart from the 'fruitiness' of Graham's reports, which he felt must reflect Farr's authorship. As already noted, however, Graham was equally capable of being 'fruity' in his correspondence!

In his dealings with his staff, Graham was a Victorian paternalist. The clerks in the GRO were comparatively lowly paid, and, as a result, were constantly petitioning for an increase in salaries. These pay claims were seldom forwarded to the Treasury without Graham's ringing endorsement. Fair pay, according to Graham, was not just a matter of efficiency but of justice. Yet, despite such support, and his evident concern for his colleagues, Graham could be a ruthless manager when required to be so. He was quite prepared to put what he saw as the good of the public service, and the views of his political masters, before the interests of his staff. This can be seen clearly in the manner in which Graham saved the GRO from imminent collapse when

he became Registrar General in 1842. Graham's reaction to the Office's administrative failings under Lister was swift and decisive. The chief clerk and the office keeper were sacked, whilst the entire clerical compliment of the Office was reduced from 87 to 60 by the introduction of task work and the simple expedient of introducing printed registers with pro-forma entries with gaps for individual-level information. This radically reduced the amount of transcription required. Graham was thus able to catch up on the backlog of work in the Office whilst reducing the departmental estimates. This endeared him to the Treasury who commended him on his running of the department. Graham subsequently used his reputation for efficiency to extract greater clerical resources and higher pay from the Treasury for the various sections of the GRO, including Farr's Statistical Department. Over the period 1843 to 1864, he was able to increase the number of clerks by nearly a third, thus returning to the staffing levels of the Lister period but at much higher levels of productivity. The provision of resources for Farr's work was thus dependent upon Graham's good relations with the holders of the Whitehall purse strings.

Graham also had to maintain discipline within the GRO, and in the registration service in general. This was a difficult matter since he did not control recruitment to the Office, which was by Treasury nomination. In addition, poor pay and insecure employment in the early years of the GRO led to problems of staff discipline. Junior clerks were constantly getting into financial difficulties, and disappearing into the maws of the Bankruptcy and Insolvent Debtors' Courts. This resulted in an unusually rapid turnover of staff, and those that remained had to work so much overtime that they often injured their health. At least one transcriber of certificates is recorded as having been 'seized with mania' at his desk, and having to be removed to Bedlam. It is evidence of Graham's authority, and of his ruthlessness, that despite such problems the great registers of births, marriages and deaths continued to be kept up to date, and statistical data generated on an annual basis.

One of Graham's greatest achievements was the administration of the decennial censuses from 1851 to 1871. It has been implied that because Farr was one of the census commissioners in these years he was in some sense responsible for their organisation. It is quite evident from the extant official correspondence, however,

that the administrative and managerial ground work for the decennial enumerations was laid by Graham, whatever the intellectual input of Farr, or his role in writing the reports. Until the passing of the 1920 Census Act established permanent powers for authorising the taking of the decennial enumeration, the census-taking apparatus had to be created from scratch on every occasion. In addition, the Census Acts in the period whilst Graham was Registrar General were only passed some nine months before census night, thus leaving little time for the necessary work. In 1851, moreover, there were two additional censuses, concerning attendance and accommodation at places of religious worship and in educational institutions. The form of these surveys appears to have been Graham's work but he may have rued their introduction given the controversy that the 'religious census' generated. It was the thought of the approaching enumeration of 1881 that forced Graham into retirement in 1879 at the advanced age of 78.

I should mention in passing here that Farr's candidature for the headship of the GRO in 1879 was a non-starter. Before his own retirement Graham had already had to write to the Treasury to get Farr retired on medical grounds because of the onset of the senile dementia that dogged his final days. That Farr was persuaded by medical colleagues to put his name forward in such circumstances, at the age of 72, indicates failing judgement rather than a just claim on the arduous post of Registrar General.

Graham writ ran even in Farr's statistical domain. Thus, although William Farr advocated the registration of stillbirths for statistical purposes in the *Annual report* published in 1866, Graham blocked the proposal. As he explained to the Home Office the following year, he believed that to 'investigate every miscarriage and every abortion and the exact time of conception and the precise period of gestation appears to me an indelicate, indecent, nasty enquiry', and he feared that the inception of such a policy would undermine the willingness of parents to register births at all. On this evidence, it is something of an injustice to describe Graham as a weak man, or as the meek bursar to Farr's master of the college. As Major Greenwood argued, there is a good case for saying that 'Graham made Farr possible'. Indeed, to some extent Graham was Farr, in the sense that some of the triumphs usually ascribed to the latter were actually those of his superior.

If there was a weak figure at the head of the GRO in the Victorian period it was not George Graham but his successor, Sir Brydges Henniker. Henniker was born in 1835, son of Sir Augustus Brydges Henniker and cousin of Lord Henniker, and succeeded to his father's baronetcy in 1849. His appointment as head of the GRO in 1880 by George Sclater-Booth, President of the Local Government Board (LGB), under whom he was serving as private secretary, was widely seen by the medical community as a retrograde step given the narrow outlook of the Board. Certainly, the *Annual report of the Registrar General* immediately contracted in scope and size, and the statistical superintendent's 'Letter', Farr's vehicle for disseminating his ideas, disappeared altogether. Henniker deferred to the LGB in most matters. Indeed, the officers of the Board were exasperated by the extent to which he called upon them to interpret the legal powers of his own department. It was this subordination of the GRO to the LGB, rather than to the MOHs, that accounts for the bureaucratisation of the Office in this period.

As I have already noted, Simon Szreter credits Henniker with beating off attempts by social scientists such as Charles Booth and Alfred Marshall to take over the census in 1890. But this seems to be giving Henniker rather more credit than he is due. In fact, the GRO was forced by the LGB to introduce new questions on employment status, as favoured by its external critics, and increasingly had to involve other government departments in the design of census questions. The 1890 Treasury Committee on the Census was, in fact, an important step in the gradual subordination of the GRO to the interests of Whitehall. Henniker also failed during the deliberations of the Committee to achieve his own objective of getting the Census Office made permanent.

It was above all in his dealings with the Treasury that Henniker revealed his weakness. Although the Treasury was indeed always trying to limit the staffing and pay of departmental staff, the incompetence of Henniker made it difficult for him to fight his corner. Whereas Graham had consistently supported his staff in their demands for extra pay, and had attempted to expand the numbers of staff in the GRO, Henniker tended to pass on his staff's petitions for better pay and conditions to the Treasury without comment, or stating his disagreement with them. This exasperated

both the Treasury, which saw such behaviour as an abdication of responsibility on Henniker's part, and his own staff, who in 1885 petitioned the Treasury directly for a commission of inquiry into their remuneration. At this point the Treasury asked that in future Henniker should pass all-important staffing matters to the Treasury through the LGB, although the latter declined to take on the responsibility. This debacle may explain why in twenty years at the GRO, Henniker only appears to have asked the Treasury for extra staff on one occasion, and why the increasing workload of the Office had to be undertaken by the existing clerks working overtime. Indeed, by the end of Henniker's period of office, even the Treasury had become alarmed at the hours that the clerks in the GRO were working.

Certainly, Henniker's removal from the scene led to a sudden burst of re-organisation within the Office. In 1899 whilst he was still Registrar General, but absent through illness, the assistant registrar general, Noel Humphreys, was asking for, and obtaining additional staff. In the early years of the next decade, the two short-lived departmental heads, Sir Reginald MacLeod and Sir William Cospatrick Dunbar successfully expanded the staff of the Office, especially via the introduction of women as cheaper clerks and typists. This expansion included the establishment of the first permanent census unit within the GRO in 1904. Dunbar also reinstated the superintendent of statistics' Letter into the *Annual report* in 1903, in order to reassure medical practitioners that the cause of death data they supplied on death certificates were being analysed by a member of their own profession.

This account of the malaise of the GRO in the late nineteenth century in terms of the qualities, or lack of them, of the Registrar General, is, of course, to implicitly question Simon Szreter's explanation of the same phenomena in terms of the impact of eugenics. I think, however, that Simon plays the eugenics card once too often, in that at various times he uses it to explain both the relative problems of the GRO in the late nineteenth century, and its apparent statistical revival in the Edwardian period. Part of his problem is, I think, that he perceives eugenics as something outside the GRO, to which he ascribes a pristine environmentalist agenda. I think that Simon is probably misreading the internal history of the GRO in this respect, no more so than

in the case of the activities of the last of the Registrar Generals I want to discuss today, Sir Bernard Mallet.

To say that Mallet was not interested in eugenics because he did not publish on the subject whilst at the GRO is problematic. There are other sorts of activity that can forward a cause rather than publishing books. Certainly, Mallet saw significant aspects of the work of the GRO in terms of eugenic issues. The GRO had shown increased interest in infant mortality in the Edwardian period, starting the publication of new tables on the subject in the *Annual reports* but until Mallet became Registrar General in 1909 this was seen in terms of the pro-natalist agenda of the LGB. But when discussing the introduction of tables in the *Annual report* for 1911 which cross-tabulated infant mortality by parental occupations, Mallet noted that, 'the extent of their bearing upon the prevention of infant mortality may prove to be a controversial matter, depending upon the relative importance attributable to inheritance and environment as factors causing mortality, but at least it must be regarded as very considerable.' The following year he used his report to draw attention to Stevenson's presentation in his appended Letter of data on births by occupational and social groups, noting that, 'fertility varies greatly with social status, being with few exceptions lowest for professional and other middle-class occupations and highest as a rule for those representing unskilled labour'.

It should also be noted that Mallet's interest in fiscal and budgetary matters was not without a potential eugenic slant. In his published work of 1913 on the British budgets of the period 1887 to 1913, Mallet was concerned to establish whether the burden of taxation had increased on the middle and upper classes, in comparison to what he considered to be the relatively favourable taxation position of the working classes. The belief that the increasing burdens on the middle classes in this period was one of the reasons for their limitation of their fertility was, of course, later amplified by J A Banks in his influential *Prosperity and Parenthood*. In addition, on the basis of Simon's arguments one must also assume that Mallet's literary interest in eugenics developed very suddenly after his resignation as Registrar General at the end of 1920, since he published an essay entitled 'Is England in danger of racial decline?'

as early as February 1922. In the same year he also published, 'Registration in relation to eugenics', in the *Eugenics Review*

Similarly, whilst it was Stevenson who suggested the fertility survey in the 1911 census, and created the system of social-economic groupings in order to analyse the data on class-specific lines, it was Mallet who negotiated with the Treasury to purchase expensive state-of-the-art tabulating equipment, and hire extra staff, in order to facilitate Stevenson's work. As in the case of Graham and Farr, the GRO was at its most dynamic when a vigorous, committed administrative head was paired with an innovative intellectual superintendent of statistics. It should also be remembered that the 1911 fertility survey did actually reveal differential fertility between Stevenson's socio-economic groupings, lending support to the eugenic cause. Perhaps, the 1911 survey is best seen not as an environmental riposte to eugenics but as the product of an institutional collaboration between the two. As Greta Jones has argued, eugenics and public health environmentalism could quite happily co-exist in such twentieth-century movements as social hygiene. Such collaboration was, no doubt, cemented by the appointment of Percy Stocks, the medical officer of Karl Pearson's Eugenics Laboratory at UCL, as Stevenson's successor as medical statistician in the GRO in 1933.

III

My conclusion will be very brief. I in no way wish to denigrate the importance of medical and demographic science to the development of the GRO in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nor do I want to blacken the reputation of men such as Farr, Ogle and Stevenson. But I believe that unless we see the GRO as an administrative institution, as well as a research project, we will never understand the nature of its genesis and development.