

Book Revue

“The Butcher, the Baker, the Candlestick Maker”

by Roger Hutchinson Pub: Little, Brown £20

“*The story of Britain through its census since 1801*” is the subtitle of this newly published (2017) book and it does what it says on the tin. It explores in considerable detail and in a most interesting and sometimes witty way the conclusions that can be drawn about the development of our society revealed in the censuses taken every 10 years over some two hundred years between 1801 and 2011.

Mr Hutchinson takes a brief look at the start of his book at the long history and variety of censuses from pre-biblical and classical times onwards. Perhaps the most famous of those caught up in its bureaucracy was a certain carpenter who could find no room at the inn for his pregnant wife. He suggests also that the Romans may well have carried out a census in their province of Britannia, not because they were concerned about the social welfare of their British subjects, but because it was the most efficient way of raising taxes. Unfortunately no records of such a census exist, more's the pity. What light might it have shed on our 400 year membership of the Roman Empire?

The focus on this book is the census which all of us are familiar with and which we have now probably completed several times during our lifetime. First taken in 1801 it hoped to answer two important questions: just how many people actually lived in Great Britain at this time? Various experts made conflicting and contradictory claims, often millions apart. Secondly and probably more importantly, it wanted to establish just how many men there were who could be drawn into military service. We were in the middle of the Napoleonic wars and manpower for the army was becoming a major concern.

That this first census was such a success and would be replicated every ten years in various, but similar, forms for the next 200 years was due to the determination of one man, John Rickman, “the right man at the right time”. He published an essay: “*Thoughts on the Utility and Facility of Ascertaining the Population of England.*” It doesn't exactly roll off the tongue, but it had far-reaching consequences, for the thinking and motivation behind it was whether Britain would be able to feed itself in the future. Poor harvests had already caused from time to time considerable suffering and Rickman said we needed to know just how many mouths might need feeding and whether there was enough land with enough agricultural labour to satisfy this need.

Thus the census was born and continued to thrive and grow as successive governments realised the value of the information it provided. Over the decades the form remained much the same but the questions changed to reflect the inevitable changes in society. Mr. Hutchinson looks at and investigates in some detail the reasons for these changes and the impact that the census would then have on future generations. From the point of view, particularly of the family historian and genealogist, it was a major tragedy that all the documents of the first four censuses from 1801 to 1831 were destroyed in the early 1900s regarded as so much waste paper. Thus the first census we can explore is that from 1841. And

a century must pass after its compilation before we can explore a census in detail. The 1921 census will therefore become available in 2021.

If you are a fan of statistics, especially comparative statistics, and what they can tell us about fundamental changes in our society, then this is the book for you. This kind of thing perhaps:

The 1891 census recorded in England and Wales that 146 men and women were over 100 years old. The 2011 census records that there were some 14,450 centenarians in the UK. The Queen spends all day writing them birthday cards!

I found Mr Hutchinson's book a very rewarding and illuminating read and I am grateful for the considerable amount of research (and probable eye strain) that went towards its creation. Highly recommended.

David Cockman for HDAS June 2017