

Redundancy, the 'Surplus Woman' Problem, and the British Census, 1851–1861

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In 1851, a question about marital status on the British census sparked concern about the decline of the family as the moral and reproductive basis of British society, and triggered the debate about the 'surplus woman' problem. The debate can usefully be viewed in the context of larger nineteenth-century discourses about population, surplus, nation, and empire. This article uses the background of the census in order to place the surplus woman problem in such a larger context. The census, concerned as it was with population, proportions of people, and national strength, allowed British people to view single women who were not reproducing as one among many unproductive groups within the nation.

In 1862, the British writer William Rathbone Greg published his article 'Why are Women Redundant?' in the *National Review*. Greg noted that there were 500,000 more women than men in Great Britain, but the women about whom he was really concerned were the unmarried ones. As Greg wrote:

There is an enormous and increasing number of single women in the nation, a number quite disproportionate and quite abnormal; a number which, positively and relatively, is indicative of an unwholesome social state, and is both productive and prognostic of much wretchedness and wrong.¹

Greg believed that the only real remedy to the problem was large-scale emigration from Britain. He referred to the 'deficiency' of women in Canada and Australia, contrasted it with the 'excess' of women in Britain, and praised the 'natural rectification of

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disproportions' that would ensue from emigration.² His ultimate goal was to 'transport the half-million from where they are redundant to where they are wanted'.³ Greg's emigration scheme was immense: sending 500,000 women overseas, he calculated, would require 10,000 ships.

Greg's article was a contribution to the debate over what was known as the 'surplus woman' problem, which began during the 1850s and lasted through the rest of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. The debate, over what to do with the large numbers of single women in Britain who could not support themselves, divided those who, like Greg, believed that single women should emigrate to the colonies, from those who ultimately came to believe that expanding women's educational and occupational opportunities in Britain was more important. The debate was sparked by the census of 1851, which asked for the marital status of every inhabitant of Great Britain for the first time. Greg's emphasis on healthy proportions and on the nation as a whole relied heavily on the census, for it was the census that allowed people to think about the social body in terms of numbers and depicted single women as one among many problematic populations.

The nineteenth-century British censuses played a crucial role in helping people visualize their national economy and social body during a time of dramatic change.⁴ The decennial census began in 1801 as a fairly narrow instrument of government, but it was gradually accepted and appropriated by large numbers of British people. By placing population at the center of discourse about the nation, the census allowed people to visualize groups as proportions of the whole, and I argue that it was involved in two major types of conceptual work. The census isolated some people as 'surplus', or outside the ideal society, and designated others as within that ideal society, or deserving of representation. The centrality of the census to public discourse meant that by the middle of the nineteenth century, debates about the strength of the nation revolved increasingly around what were considered healthy numerical proportions of people. It was in this context that discussions of 'superfluous' women emerged.

Historians of the surplus woman problem have focused primarily on the ways in which women dealt with being single, the attempts to increase women's options outside of marriage, and the eventual successes of the feminist movement.⁵ The 1851 census has been described as a catalyst for British feminism and as a vital moment in the history of women's changing roles. This approach has provided a much-needed corrective to years of historical blindness about women's experiences, but by looking backwards from the development of feminism rather than forwards from earlier nineteenth-century rhetoric about the nation, it leaves us with a lack of discursive context. What have not been explored in enough detail are the ways in which the debate fitted into larger Victorian discourses about population and empire, and the ways in which feminists themselves were informed by the census. Almost all the nineteenth-century writers on the subject agreed that single women were unproductive. Where they differed was on the question of whether it was possible to make those women productive or not: while some argued that women could never be useful if they remained single, others insisted that it was a lack of opportunities that forced single women to be burdens on society.

The census, concerned as it was with national strength and proportions of people, allowed British people to view single women as one among many unproductive groups, and the debate over single women appropriated the language and the theoretical frameworks of debates about other problem populations. Of all the 'redundant' populations isolated by the census, however, single women were the most articulate in the public sphere, the ones who most explicitly challenged the label of 'surplus' that was attached to them, and the ones who were ultimately the most successful in redefining the debate about nationhood and population. In this article, I will briefly survey the history of the connection between the concept of surplus and the development of the census, and I will then look more closely at how the mid-century debate over single women mobilized and transformed that connection.

Malthus, Overpopulation, and the Poor

The notion of overpopulation, articulated most famously by Robert Malthus in his *Essay on the Principle of Population*, arose simultaneously with the census.⁶ The fear of surplus was defined by Malthus in terms of the relationship between the food supply and population growth, but it was also driven by anxiety about poverty and discontent. It was evident from the moment of its origin that surplus was not only a numerical concept, but an evaluative one as well; political economists constantly made judgments about which people were 'redundant' and which were not. Those who were considered redundant were usually those seen as failing to contribute to the economy. The census, as the only technology available for describing the nation as a whole, made surplus a national concept that was understood in terms of proportions of people and national productivity.

The first census was taken in 1801 primarily for two practical reasons: to determine who could fight in the continuing wars with France, and to assess the nation's agricultural capabilities in relation to the numbers needing to eat.⁷ Fighting the war clearly required people. Yet the 1790s had seen failed harvests, food riots, a war-time dislocation of trade, and political unrest. In the midst of such scarcity the British Government was as worried about disorder at home as about the war in Europe; too many hungry bodies, the French Revolution had made clear, could easily turn to violence. In the first parliamentary debate about the census, the competing understandings of its purpose were summed up in a single sentence: 'although we may find that an increased population adds to our strength in war, it is evident that it requires a vigilant attention to the means of supporting it'.⁸ The British Government, it seemed, wanted both a large and a small population, and the census was inspired as much by questions of internal stability as of international strength. For the next half-century, the tension between a fear of having too many people and a fear of not having enough people continued to exist.

From the beginning, politicians also recognized that some kinds of population growth were better than others. While the nation needed people, it was evident that if a large fraction of the population was drawing on the nation's resources rather than contributing to its economic expansion, then growth could be dangerous. After the

1811 census one journalist argued that if the large population ‘taught us our strength’, the high numbers of paupers ‘discovered our weakness’:

When we knew that there were in Great Britain alone, more than 2,700,000 men capable of defending their country, it became apparent that we might defy the world in arms; but the fact, that nearly one person in nine of the whole population was dependent upon parochial aid, made it but too evident, that there was something rotten in our internal policy.⁹

Malthus’s theory of population was never unchallenged.¹⁰ But he did have an immense influence in creating a public understanding of the economy that relied on notions of scarcity and productivity. Malthusian political economists frightened people into a belief that the population would always grow at a faster rate than the food supply, and that the checks on that population growth would arise from disease, famine, and war. If social and economic life were to be understood as a constant struggle for limited resources, then certain elements of the population were more threatening than others. Those who were unproductive, or consuming the nation’s resources without contributing to them, came to be seen as especially problematic. The census was crucial because it was only as a proportion of the whole that statistics of productivity could be understood.

Those who worried about surplus were explicit that high rates of unemployment were a threat not only to the economy, but to social stability. It was therefore imperative to find a solution to redundancy, and in the 1820s, people began to debate the controversial solution of state-funded emigration. Emigration had long been understood as a mode of ridding Britain of criminals. Increasingly, it also came to be seen as a way to rectify the ratio between the supply and demand of labor and to relieve the country of its unemployed. Proponents understood emigration to be both ‘a blessing to the object, and a blessing to society’.¹¹ Not only would it provide a livelihood for those who could not find work, it would save Britain from high poor relief costs and social disorder.

Although it was always evident that some types of people could be described as surplus while others could not, during the 1820s and 1830s, redundancy was essentially synonymous with unemployment. ‘Surplus’ simply referred to wage laborers, usually poor and unskilled, who could not find work. But gradually, the emphasis on productivity eclipsed the emphasis on surplus as a whole, and in 1845, one journalist claimed to have disposed of the index of numbers altogether:

in ancient times, the prosperity and power of a state were estimated by the number of its people; but we, ... have learned from experience that a land is prosperous and powerful, not so much in proportion to the multitude of its inhabitants, as to their moral and physical condition.¹²

In this context, the census was only useful if it counted a great deal more than population, and beginning in 1841, the Government in fact greatly expanded the census. Instead of simply listing the numbers of men and women of different ages and occupations in each parish, the census now counted every person by name and listed specific characteristics about each. In 1851, information about the birthplace, marital status,

occupation, and disabilities of every individual in the country was gathered, censuses of education and religion were taken, and the inmates of all prisons, schools, work-houses, and insane asylums were counted. With the shift from communities to persons, it became possible to understand the nation as an aggregate of individuals, some of whom were more productive than others. The census question on occupation categorized people based on what they produced and whether they contributed to the economy, and what was considered important was the 'comparative numerical importance of each class'.¹³

If by the 1840s analysts were more interested in differentiating between the productive and unproductive than in worrying about surplus as a whole, by the 1850s overpopulation had essentially ceased to be considered a problem. The shift had to do with an improved economy, the entrance of Britain into the Crimean War, British comparisons of their own increasing population to the relatively stagnant population of France, and the devastating nature of the Irish Famine (which appeared so quintessentially Malthusian and at the same time too horrific for most people to imagine as positive). Finally, the Indian rebellion of 1857 revealed the weakness in British colonial policy and suggested that the empire could only be secure if the British themselves were present in large numbers in their colonies. Malthusian anxiety had passed along with the crisis point of industrial problems, and with the prolonged period of European peace. This did not mean, however, that the concept of surplus disappeared; it simply became more targeted. The 1851 census report noted that while population was not redundant in general, 'the idle who will not work, the unskillful who cannot work, and the criminal classes who cannot be trusted, are ... whether numerous or few, always redundant'.¹⁴ Redundancy had come to be about quality more than quantity.

The Surplus Woman Problem

In 1851, the census revealed that out of a national population of twenty million, there were 500,000 more women than men, and there were two and a half million unmarried women. The census sparked concern about the decline of the family as the moral and reproductive basis of society, and triggered the debate about the 'surplus woman' problem. At a moment when a large population had come to be seen as crucial for maintaining Britain's imperial and military strength, women's duties as wives and mothers were increasingly exalted, and women who did not fulfill these roles were viewed as especially problematic.

Since rates of marriage were directly related to rates of population growth, marriage had always been of central concern to people involved with the census. One of the few things that the census of 1801 did was to distinguish between males and females. This was an obvious distinction for the census administrators to make not only because they wished to determine who could fight in the Napoleonic Wars, but because they were interested in the ratio of men to women. Equal proportions were needed because the family was believed to be the most essential unit in society, and marriage the highest moral and social condition that one could attain. Finally, it was essential for the population to increase. In his 1796 article calling for a national census, John Rickman

spoke of marriage as ‘the sum total of human felicity and increasing population (fated eternally to accompany each other)’.¹⁵

Despite the statistical interest in marriage, the early censuses provided no information beyond the numbers of men and women. But in an 1829 article on improvements to the census, political economist J. R. McCulloch asked for information about marriage and made the optimistic claim that ‘the proportion between the sexes seems to be determined by a general law of nature; and the balance to be preserved at that precise point which is most favourable for human happiness’.¹⁶ McCulloch’s desire for data on marriage may have stemmed partly from the increasingly visible fact that many people were not marrying. The absence of marriage could be partially accounted for by a simple disproportion of the sexes, but it also resulted from men’s unwillingness to confine themselves in marriage. The growing economy encouraged extravagant living among the upper classes, and in justifying the decision to remain single, men sometimes expressed fears that supporting their wives would be too expensive.

The imbalance of the sexes was thus largely defined in terms of women’s inability to marry. Men could find wives when they wanted to, both because of the actual ratio of the sexes and because of women’s far greater dependence on marriage. The problem of single women was also labeled as a middle-class problem, because of the specific challenges that middle-class women faced in attempting to support themselves. Poor women had always worked, and they continued to do so in the industrial age. Some of the jobs that they did, particularly those in domestic service, actually made them essential in the labor market. But middle-class single women were often viewed as dangerously unproductive because of their failure to contribute to society as wives and mothers. Thanks to the work of such historians as Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, we now know that throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the English middle classes were articulating separate and carefully defined roles for men and women.¹⁷ By the beginning of the Victorian period, the ideally anticipated life course for middle-class women consisted almost entirely in marriage, child rearing, and domestic management. The wife was expected to provide physical comfort, emotional companionship, and a moral example for her husband, who was forced to spend his day in the public world of work. The woman could expect her own emotional satisfaction to come from caring for her husband, her children, and her home. Much of the writing on the subject spelled out the ‘natural’ differences between men and women, and described the duties and roles that were thought to result logically from such differences.¹⁸

The options available to a middle-class woman who did not marry were limited. Most frequently, single women were supported by their male relations. If a middle-class woman had no other source of income, she might have become a governess, a teacher, or a companion to a wealthy woman. Although respectable in theory, such work was commonly assumed to involve numerous humiliating and difficult circumstances. Furthermore, since women were often taught that their emotional lives would be satisfied by caring for others, many women feared the loneliness of spinsterhood.

The anecdotal problem of singleness was confirmed when, on the 1851 census form, every member of the household was listed as married, single, or widowed. Statisticians

had suggested for many years that such a question be included on the census, and several foreign countries had been gathering the information for some time. But it was not until the Government agreed to expand the census in general that the marital status question (suggested most immediately by census commissioner William Farr, and supported by Registrar-General George Graham) made it onto the form.¹⁹ The discussion of marriage in the 1851 Report is worth examining in detail, in part because its writers—predominantly William Farr—used the opportunity to provide one of the most clear expositions of Victorian domestic ideology existing. Farr, like so many of his contemporaries, believed that the institutions of marriage and the family were fundamental aspects of what it meant to be English.²⁰ More specifically, the institution of marriage in its peculiarly English (Protestant) form distinguished nineteenth-century English people both from their own ancestors and from people of other nations, particularly continental, Catholic nations. The census, concerned as it was with population, productivity, and surplus, provided ample opportunity for a treatise on both the moral and the demographic implications of marriage.

The report began by explaining that families were the units making up the town and ultimately the nation.²¹ Farr also insisted that 'it is so much in the order of nature that a family should live in a separate house'.²² The different customs current in France and Germany were remarked upon, and the theory proposed that these other countries enjoyed less freedom than the British precisely because of their lack of well-bounded families. An ideal family, Farr continued, had a head and dependent members, and was preferably made up of a husband, a wife, children, and servants. 'Or less perfectly, but more commonly', he admitted, 'of husband, wife and children'.²³ The report went on to detail much of what is familiar to historians of Victorian Britain about the sanctity of the home and the family, and suggested that the British had a natural love for domesticity that other nations lacked. Finally, Farr argued that the continually increasing population, and thus Britain's industrial strength, could be largely attributed to a superior system of marriage. But the satisfaction was underpinned by anxiety. Even as Britain's moral family life was so ardently praised, concern about its decline caused public consternation.

Single women were certainly not new, and the census of 1851 only confirmed what politicians, economists, and novelists had been writing about for several decades. But the census provided statistics to back up a formerly vague concern and it sparked a massive increase in the volume of opinions on the problem as a whole. Such possible solutions as female emigration, improved female education, and the opening of certain professions to women were anxiously discussed in the press. A problem that previously had been spoken of in an anecdotal and incidental manner was suddenly defined as a social problem that the country as a whole was forced to recognize. In its new form, the discussion often focused on the census itself, and nearly all of the writers on the subject used statistical figures to sharpen their arguments.

Farr himself admitted that 'celibacy ... is ... to be considered the natural state of a portion of the population; for under no circumstances that can be conceived will the whole of the population marry'.²⁴ But he argued that the current numbers of single people were alarming. A writer for the *North British Review* agreed that while single

women could be useful, at the moment there were far too many of them: 'too many for their own peace—too many for the preservation of a sound social and moral state'.²⁵ The problem, therefore, called for a national readjustment either of population or of ideologies. Finding a way to make single women productive within British society would inevitably mean altering expectations about female roles. Calls for education and career openings were heard, but as the 'Woman Question' gained publicity, it also became clear that overturning an ingrained system of cultural values was difficult. Some observers could see no alternative but to simply get rid of single women through large-scale population management, taking the form of emigration schemes.

Emigration had long been an accepted solution to overpopulation, but the census shifted the focus to women. Many people viewed single women as a threat to an already crowded male labor market, and believed that if Britain was suffering from an unemployment problem then women, who supposedly should not have been working anyway, were the ones who ought to emigrate. As a satirical reviewer wrote in 1862, when people 'inaugurate schemes of emigration for the relief of overstocked labour markets, it is always the least estimable portion of the superfluity who are selected for the operation'.²⁶ It was widely accepted that the British colonies in South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada had a shortage of women that would make emigration desirable for everyone involved. Britain's disproportion would be remedied, the unproductive population would be eliminated, and the colonies, besides gaining more equal ratios, would benefit from the arrival of educated women. The idea of a female 'civilizing mission' tied the domestic space, British society, and the empire together: the woman would serve as the moral guardian of each. Sending Britain's 'excess' of women abroad would thus benefit both the mother country and her colonies.²⁷

Furthermore, the women themselves would avoid the humiliating dependence of the single life in Britain, and would probably be able to find both work and marriage more easily in the colonies. But while earlier advocates of female emigration had focused on the single woman's problems and the happier life she would find, the activists of the 1850s created the first real emigration schemes for women. The focus on emigration had shifted from the woman herself to Britain's need to eliminate the woman, or as Rita Kranidis argues, 'the 'superfluous' woman[']s] ... removal came to be considered essential not only for her own well-being but for England's as well'.²⁸

Most women did not see emigration as the most desirable option. Besides the aversion to leaving family and friends, many women were concerned about the dangers of the ship voyage, and some worried that the colonies were lacking in respectable society and the material comforts to which they were accustomed. On the other hand, wages were better in the colonies and class distinctions were less pronounced. Whether it was more respectable to emigrate or to work at home was thus a complicated question, because the stigma attached to emigration was often counteracted by the possibility of maintaining middle-class status in the colonies. In practical terms, lower-class women with less to lose were far more likely to emigrate than middle-class women. But as we have already seen, it was the middle-class single woman who was seen as the real

problem in Britain, far more, for example, than the unmarried domestic servant. William Greg pointed out that female servants:

are in no sense redundant ... they do not follow an obligatorily independent and therefore for their sex an unnatural career; on the contrary, they are attached to others, and are connected with other existences which they embellish, facilitate, and serve ... they fulfil both essentials of woman's being; *they are supported by, and they minister to, men.*²⁹

The issue of who was actually needed in the colonies also pervaded the debate about emigration. Most people assumed that domestic servants accustomed to manual labor were more in demand in the colonies than educated governesses, yet as James Hammerton points out, 'the shift in selection criteria [from lower-class to middle-class women] illustrated how quickly social pressures in Britain, at the point of origin, came to overshadow the labour demands of the colonists'.³⁰

In his article 'Why are Women Redundant?' Greg proposed several partial solutions to the surplus woman problem, suggesting that both men and women should be willing to marry on a modest income, and that women should be permitted to work in certain jobs such as nursing, teaching, and novel-writing. Greg also made a distinction between 'natural' and 'unnatural' celibates. In all countries, he explained, there was an excess of women over men, and 'Nature' must have designed this exact percentage of women to remain single. He explained that 'the residue—the large excess over this proportion—who remain unmarried, *constitute the problem to be solved, the evil and anomaly to be cured*'.³¹ According to Greg, 'nature makes no mistakes and creates no redundancies'.³² Even for the sake of the natural celibates, however, Greg was unwilling to open professional positions to women; he believed that the move would depress wages and harm the national economy, and that making it possible for women to be productive outside of marriage was only to perpetuate the problem. For Greg, the only solution was emigration. He claimed that the disproportion of the sexes caused 'mischief', which manifested itself in the colonies as 'unmatched men', and at home as 'unprotected women' who were 'condemned to celibacy, struggle and privation'.³³ Greg, however, was at least as interested in the threat that such 'struggle' posed for society as in the threat to the individual woman's happiness. Women who worked in public, Greg believed, were contributing not only to their own problems, but to those of their country.

Although Greg was explicitly opposed to the women's rights movement, many of those who wished to open professions to women were also likely to see emigration as a partial solution. Maria Rye, for example, who ran an office for women clerks and found herself swamped with too many applications, felt strongly that women should be allowed to work, but she also admitted that there were not enough jobs available and that women who could not find work in Britain would benefit by going to the colonies. In 1862 Rye founded the Female Middle Class Emigration Society to facilitate such a plan. Most of the writers for the *English Woman's Journal* also encouraged emigration, believing that sending single women to where there were more jobs available was one of many possible ways to improve women's conditions. These feminist emigration advocates even used language that was similar to Greg's: as one wrote in 1862, the

question was ‘how to transfer [women] from the place where they are not wanted, and where they may even become injurious, to the place where they will be valued as they deserve, and benefit instead of injuring those around them’.³⁴ For this writer, as for Greg, single women were harming both themselves and their country.

Most people involved in the women’s rights movement, however, believed that social reform was more important than emigration. And during the 1860s, a split between feminism and emigration developed. Feminists began to believe that emigration, by returning women to their traditional roles of wives and moral guardians in the colonies, only discouraged activism for women’s rights, and they began to realize that the unclear distinction between emigrating to find husbands and emigrating to find work was embarrassing.³⁵ The embarrassment was caused in part by the *Saturday Review*’s 1862 article, ‘The Export Wife Trade’. The author made an explicit connection between female emigrants and other problematic members of society such as ‘paupers, penitents, or convicts’.³⁶ He or she referred to the governesses seeking work in Australia as ‘unmarketable womanhood’, and insisted that those whom Britain was exporting were ‘those whom we are most eager to be rid of here’.³⁷ The plan was faulty because the colonies ‘do not like being the outfall sewer of any community of the Old World’, and because ‘the colonists are tired of becoming customers for the goods which can find no sale in England—chipped statuettes, spoiled engravings, and old maids’.³⁸ The writer also spoke directly about spinsters’ lack of productivity: ‘when we find the garrison too numerous for the provisions, we naturally turn out the non-effectives first’.³⁹

Most feminist thinkers agreed with their opponents that under present circumstances, single women were unproductive. They came to believe, however, that the women could become productive within the context of Victorian society, and they were thus willing to rethink social values in a way that their opponents were not. Judith Worsnop rightly points out that activists in the women’s movement attempted to redefine the problem of surplus women; rather than a problem of numbers, the problem was a lack of women’s opportunities.⁴⁰ I believe that, in addition, both feminists and anti-feminists defined the problem in part as one of national inefficiency. Drawing on the language and the theoretical frameworks of already existing debates about other problematic populations, feminists, instead of refusing to talk about productivity, argued that society was not providing women with enough opportunities to be productive. The 1851 census therefore must be viewed as a moment in the history of debates over surplus population as much as a moment in the history of feminism.

Many feminist writers quoted the census figures and insisted that the problem could not be solved until society was willing to face the facts. Harriet Martineau, in her influential 1859 article about women’s work, suggested that attitudes needed to change in order to meet the current demographic and economic situation. She pointed to ‘how much good may be done, and how much misery may be saved, by a timely recognition of this simple truth [that women are working]’.⁴¹ She also insisted that it ‘ought to be practically admitted to be false;—that every woman is supported (as the law supposes her to be represented) by her father, her brother, or her husband’, and went on to explain that:

the need and the supply of female industry have gone on increasing, ... while our ideas, our language, and our arrangements have not altered in any corresponding degree. We go on talking as if it were still true that every woman is ... supported by father, brother, or husband. ... a social organization framed for a community of which half stayed at home, while the other half went out to work, cannot answer the purposes of a society, of which a quarter remains at home while three-quarters go out to work.⁴²

'With this new condition of affairs', Martineau explained, 'new duties and new views must be accepted'.⁴³

The power of Martineau's contribution came partly from her insistence, and proof using the census figures, that half the women in Great Britain were 'industrial in their mode of life'.⁴⁴ The idealized middle-class housewife simply did not exist in the numbers that ignorant readers might assume she did, and Martineau's goal was to determine 'how ... we meet the conditions which stare us in the face'.⁴⁵ Her emphasis on the practical considerations of wages, specific types of work, and the effects of that work on women's physical and mental well-being gave her credibility with the growing social scientific and statistical community, and coming as it did at the exciting feminist moment of the late 1850s, Martineau's article helped to spark the intensive interest in women's work that continued on through the following decades.⁴⁶ But as innovative as she was, Martineau was also drawing on a well-established idiom of liberal political economy that allowed her to see women's work in the context of free trade and national productivity. She believed that if 'natural' competition was permitted to operate without interference, and if women were educated as men were for practical kinds of work, then 'we would render the powers and the industry of women available to the welfare of society'.⁴⁷

Other women's rights advocates similarly saw the census results as a call to action. Frances Power Cobbe, in her article 'What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?', asserted:

that these facts call for a revision of many of our social arrangements. The old assumption that marriage was the sole destiny of woman, and that it was the business of her husband to afford her support, is brought up short by the statement that one woman in four is certain not to marry, and that three millions of women earn their own living at this moment in England.⁴⁸

Cobbe believed that emigration schemes paralleled the transportation of criminals, and by refusing to open respectable jobs to women, society was condemning old maids to 'transportation or starvation'.⁴⁹ Josephine Butler, meanwhile, explained that the 'constantly reiterated assertion that "Woman's sphere is the home"' uttered 'in the face of the great facts of society as they lie ... before us, is to a great extent wholly inapplicable, and assumes the character of a most ungentle irony'.⁵⁰ Butler insisted that single women's 'unapplied existences' and their 'demand for a place in God's order of society' could not be addressed without fundamental changes.⁵¹ Butler's explicit demand for an expansion of women's roles was inseparable from her belief that everyone ought to be a contributing member of society.

Finally, in a powerful reinterpretation of the surplus woman problem, Jessie Boucherett, in her essay 'How to Provide for Superfluous Women', argued that the real

issue was the supply and demand of certain groups of people, not their numbers. Boucherett's goal was to make single women more useful, not to simply transport them from one place where they were not wanted to another: 'let us, then, proceed to consider by what means we can provide for the superfluous women in England, since it is evident we cannot hope to get rid of them'.⁵² In her mind, improving education and opening up more careers to women 'would put an end to superfluous women altogether, by converting them into useful members of society'.⁵³ Boucherett also suggested that men should emigrate in order to do manual labor in the colonies, and leave the professional jobs in Britain open to women. If her solution were enacted, then Britain 'would at last contain a vast excess of women and a prodigious number of single women, but there would not be one superfluous woman, as every one would be valuable in the labour-market'.⁵⁴ Boucherett turned the emigration scheme on its head, challenged the entire notion that gender ratios had to be relatively even, and suggested that a large female majority in Britain was a perfectly acceptable solution to the problem of unemployment.

As this brief summary of the debate suggests, the surplus woman problem was not primarily a numerical one. In a society where women were expected to marry, it was not just any 500,000 women who were superfluous, but specifically the single women. Old maids thus became a group that was to be carefully examined by statisticians. Cobbe pointed out that bachelors were not spoken about in the way that single women were: 'Their moral condition seems to excite no alarm, their lonely old age no foreboding compassion, their action on the community no reprobation'.⁵⁵ Having a surplus of women was only a problem because women were defined in regard to their ability to marry and they were seen as unproductive when they did not marry. This was because it was not only cultural values that were at stake, but reproduction.⁵⁶

Women and the Strength of the Nation

In 1859 the *Saturday Review* published an article entitled 'Queen Bees or Working Bees'. The writer insisted that 'women labourers are a proof of a barbarous and imperfect civilization', and for a state to provide women with alternatives to marriage was simply to create more redundant women.⁵⁷ It was not 'the interest of States, and it is not therefore true social policy, to encourage the existence' of independent women, because not only was 'married life ... woman's profession', but a woman who failed to marry 'has failed in business'.⁵⁸ 'The greatest of social and political duties', claimed the writer, 'is to encourage marriage. The interest of a state is to get as many of its citizens married as possible'.⁵⁹

As a large population came to be seen as crucial to maintaining Britain's power, marriage was viewed as ever more central to the strength of the nation. During the 1850s and 1860s, British people discussing the census began to use language surrounding the reproduction of the race that was very similar to the language later used by eugenicists, and women were deeply implicated in the new understanding of national strength. Women had to be mothers so that the British race could be exported around the world, and their work as mothers would therefore be a vital contribution to both

the national and imperial economies. Single women who were not fulfilling their duties of reproduction were now among those who produced nothing of value, and were therefore the ones who ought to leave.

The census, by defining women's work, was crucial in framing the terms of this debate. The census of 1841 asked about the occupations of individuals for the first time, but the instructions on the forms advised householders that the 'profession ... of Wives, or of sons or daughters living with and assisting their parents ... need not be inserted'.⁶⁰ When the results were tabulated, wives, mothers, and children did not constitute their own occupational 'class', but were simply unclassified. The only substantial group of women that was categorized as part of the wage economy was domestic servants, whose unique role as essential female workers I have already mentioned. In 1851, however, the population was divided into seventeen occupational classes, one of which comprised 'persons engaged in the Domestic Offices, or Duties of Wives, Mothers, Mistresses of Families, Children, Relatives'.⁶¹ While the new method of classification did not solve the problem of accounting for all the wage labor that women did, it did uphold the ideology of marriage that so firmly underpinned the census and its analysis.⁶²

William Farr, who took the occupation results as another opportunity to dwell on domesticity, explained that the new class comprised 'a large number of the population that have hitherto been held to have no occupation; but it requires no argument to prove that the *wife*, the *mother*, the *mistress* of an *English Family*—fills offices and discharges duties of no ordinary importance'.⁶³ This was because 'the most important production of a country is its population'.⁶⁴ Producing a strong population, however, called for more than simple procreation. Middle-class women were required to be wives and mothers both so the population could grow and so the nation could maintain its moral superiority. Anna Davin's work on motherhood at the turn of the twentieth century has demonstrated how children's moral and physical health, and therefore the health of the nation, was considered the responsibility of mothers.⁶⁵ We in fact can see the signs of such anxiety about national health as early as the 1850s.

To marriage and the family were thus attributed both a large population and a virtuous one, and as Farr explained, 'the occupation of wife and mother and housewife is the most important in the country'.⁶⁶ He claimed that St Paul, in his instructions to women to 'marry, bear children, guide the house', 'lays down for the women ... their substantial business; which cannot be neglected without imminent peril to their children,—to the nation of the next generation'.⁶⁷ The sanctity of the mother who cared for her children was thus confirmed, and Farr noted that races that neglected their children tended to disappear: 'under such circumstances monogamic nations inevitably fall in arrear, like the races who practice polygamy'.⁶⁸ So while Farr and the other census takers always moved fluidly between statistical analysis and moral commentary, in an age so concerned with racial competition, the clearest evidence they found for the superiority of British marriage were comparative rates of population growth.

The active fear of overpopulation in Britain existed only from 1815 until 1850, the very moment when the surplus woman became a topic of debate. This period was

noticeably one of European peace. When Britain was not at war, the Government and the public could afford to worry about internal stability, the growth of the economy, and the unity of the country. The conception of general surplus population, it is worth noting, was not a European-wide phenomenon. While other countries certainly dealt with urban poverty and the possibility of working-class revolt, no other nineteenth-century census was associated with prolonged discussions of overpopulation. Fear of surplus was unique to the nation that industrialized first, grew the fastest, and was more preoccupied with class divisions than ethnic or linguistic divisions. For this relatively brief period, the British looked inwards, and concerned themselves largely with their own national unity rather than with strength on the international stage. When surplus ceased to be a problem and population came to be seen as one of the most important productions of the country, women who were not reproducing became the ones who were producing nothing of value, and were themselves therefore labeled as surplus. Both the fear of overpopulation and the fear of depopulation were motivated by similar anxieties about national strength, and the census allows us to understand the surplus woman problem in the context of discussions surrounding the economic, moral, and political health of the nation as a whole. Almost all of the participants in the surplus woman debate claimed that unproductive women were a national problem, and that solving the problem would ultimately benefit the nation. The difference lay in where the solution to the question of women's work was to be chiefly found: within metropolitan society, or in the larger empire.

Notes

- [1] W. Greg (1873) *Literary and Social Judgments* (Boston: J. R. Osgood), p. 276.
- [2] *Ibid.*, p. 285.
- [3] *Ibid.*, p. 286.
- [4] No full-length examination of the cultural and political history of the British census has been published. See my dissertation, K. Levitan (2006) *Envisioning the Multitude: the British census and the construction of the nation, 1801–1861* (PhD, University of Chicago). There have been numerous studies of British demographic change as well as aids for using the census for research. See D. V. Glass (1973) *Numbering the People: the eighteenth-century population controversy and the development of census and vital statistics in Britain* (Farnborough: D. C. Heath); E. Higgs (1996) *A Clearer Sense of the Census: the Victorian censuses and historical research* (London: HMSO); R. Lawton (Ed.) (1978) *The Census and Social Structure: an interpretive guide to nineteenth-century censuses for England and Wales* (London: Frank Cass); M. Nissel (1987) *People Count: a history of the General Register Office* (London: HMSO); and E. A. Wrigley (Ed.) (1972) *Nineteenth-Century Society: essays in the use of quantitative methods for the study of social data* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Catherine Hakim notes the importance of examining the census commentaries to gain insight into the 'subjectivity ... and cultural relativity that often lie behind the statistical facts presented in the published census reports'. C. Hakim (1980) *Census Reports as Documentary Evidence: the census commentaries, 1801–1951*, *Sociological Review*, 28(3), p. 553.
- [5] Much of this important work was done by feminist historians during the 1970s–1980s. For work on single women's responses to their situation, see M. Vicinus (1985) *Independent Women: work and community for single women 1850–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press); and J. Hammerton (1979) *Emigrant Gentlewomen: genteel poverty and female*

emigration, 1830–1914 (London: Croom Helm.). For work on the feminist movement in general, see B. Caine (1992) *Victorian Feminists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) and J. Rendall (1985) *The Origins of Modern Feminism: women in Britain, France and the United States* (London: Macmillan). For an examination of the census and the surplus woman problem, see J. Worsnop (1990) A Reevaluation of the 'the Problem of Surplus Women' in Nineteenth-Century England: the case of the 1851 census, *Women's Studies International Forum*, 13(1/2), pp. 21–31. Worsnop is more interested in feminists' responses to the census than in the census itself, and she makes several interesting points about feminists' articulations of the surplus woman problem and their success in redefining that problem. She refers generally to the census as a 'public document', however, and does not analyze it in depth. I would like to suggest that the census report should be viewed as an intervention in the debate over women's roles that needs to be taken seriously in its own right. The people who wrote the report (primarily William Farr) were individuals with their own motivations that must be examined.

- [6] See T. R. Malthus (1992) *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, ed. D. Winch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- [7] For a full background to the first census, see Glass, *Numbering the People*.
- [8] *Parliamentary History*, vol. 35, p. 601.
- [9] *Quarterly Review*, 8 (1812), p. 319.
- [10] The debate over Malthusian principles was complicated and shifting, and it did not break down along clear political lines. Anti-Malthusians included both conservatives and radicals, who were suspicious of Malthus for very different reasons. And although Malthusian political economy eventually came to be understood as the domain of liberal supporters of capitalism, those very liberals often lauded a large population as a prerequisite to industrial and capitalist expansion, and berated Malthus for his pessimistic understanding of the progress of society. Malthus himself, according to Donald Winch, 'remained a moderate Whig'. D. Winch, 'Introduction', in Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, p. xxi.
- [11] Wilson to Peel, 2 October 1822, United Kingdom National Archives (UKNA) HO 44/12, p. 273. Works on emigration include R. Garret (1973) *The Search for Prosperity: emigration from Britain, 1815–1930* (London: Wayland); C. G. Pooley & I. D. Whyte (Eds) (1991) *Migrants, Emigrants and Immigrants: a social history of migration* (London: Routledge); C. Erickson (1994) *Leaving England: essays on British emigration in the nineteenth century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press); R. F. Haines (1997) *Emigration and the Labouring Poor: Australian recruitment in Britain and Ireland, 1831–60* (London: Macmillan). On British policy see H. J. M. Johnston (1972) *British Emigration Policy, 1815–1830: 'shovelling out paupers'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). For a demographically-oriented study of emigration see D. V. Glass & P. A. M. Taylor (1976) *Population and Emigration* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press.). Those who did not accept Malthusian notions of political economy were often adamantly opposed to state-funded emigration, and sometimes described it as tantamount to the transportation of criminals.
- [12] *Quarterly Review*, 76 (1845), p. 11.
- [13] *Abstracts of the Answers and Returns ... Occupation Abstract* (1844) (London: HMSO), p. 21. For the ways in which the census-taking process changed in 1841 and 1851, see E. Higgs, *A Clearer Sense of the Census*. For the ways in which the census recorded women's work, see E. Higgs (1986) Women, Occupations and Work in the Nineteenth-Century Censuses, *History Workshop Journal*, p. 23.
- [14] *The Census of Great Britain in 1851 ... Reprinted in a Condensed Form* (1854) (London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Longmans), p. 55.
- [15] Quoted in Glass, *Numbering the People*, p. 108.
- [16] Proposals for an Improved Census of the Population (1829) *Edinburgh Review*, 49, p. 28.
- [17] See L. Davidoff & C. Hall (1987) *Family Fortunes: men and women of the English middle class, 1780–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

- [18] See moral etiquette books such as S. Ellis (1845) *The Mothers of England: their influence and responsibility* (London: Peter Jackson, Late Fisher, Son, & Co.)
- [19] The 1851 census also counted blind, deaf, and dumb people as well as the inmates of work-houses, prisons, lunatic asylums, and hospitals for the first time. William Farr was the individual who had the greatest influence over the mid-century censuses. He was an epidemiologist who had become interested in medical statistics and had been active in the Royal Statistical Society since its origin. He joined the Office of the Registrar General as the head of the Statistical Department almost immediately after it was founded, and his duties there encompassed the preparation of the Office's abstracts as well as the writing of most of the weekly, quarterly, and annual reports. Farr also spent much of his time and energy on the census. The 1851, 1861, and 1871 censuses seem to have been almost entirely under his management. For more on his social and political views and his relation to the medical, statistical, and political communities, see J. Eyler (1973) *Victorian Social Medicine: the ideas and methods of William Farr* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).
- [20] See Davidoff & Hall, *Family Fortunes*. In this case, Englishness was explicitly separated from Britishness.
- [21] *The Census of Great Britain in 1851*, p. 6.
- [22] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- [23] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- [24] *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- [25] *North British Review* (1855), p. 409.
- [26] The Export Wife-Trade, *Saturday Review*, 6 September 1862, p. 276.
- [27] Nineteenth-century female emigration has been of interest to historians of the empire and of British feminism. For a discussion of the female civilizing mission and its link to a larger imperialist discourse, see Hammerton, *Emigrant Gentlewomen*, chapter 4, and R. Kranidis (1999) *The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration: contested subjects* (New York: St Martin's Press). Also see R. Kranidis (Ed.) (1998) *Imperial Objects: essays on Victorian women's emigration and the unauthorized imperial experience* (London: Prentice Hall). The importance of women to imperialism became even more explicitly articulated later in the century. See J. Bush (1994) 'The Right Sort of Women': female emigrators and emigration to the British Empire, 1890–1910, *Women's History Review*, 3(3), pp. 385–409.
- [28] Kranidis, *The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration*, p. 3. Kranidis notices that despite the greater numbers of working-class female emigrants, the public emphasis in Britain was on the far more anxiety-inducing middle-class spinster.
- [29] Greg, *Literary and Social Judgments*, p. 296.
- [30] Hammerton, *Emigrant Gentlewomen*, p. 60. An 1850 pamphlet argued that farm and domestic servants were needed in Australia, so women who emigrated ought to be familiar with agricultural work. Pamphlet of the Colonial Land and Emigration Office, January 1850, UKNA CO 885/2/1. Letters from recent female emigrants told conflicting stories about what sorts of success different classes of women were likely to find. As one satisfied emigrant wrote, 'I love [England] as ever, but I can earn more money here and I expect always to find something to do, there are enough of us at home'. Letter from Gertrude Gooch, 17 February 1862, Women's Library, Female Middle Class Emigration Society Papers. Other women were unable to find work and regretted their decision to leave home. One emigrant wrote that 'in Sydney I can assure you the difficulty of obtaining an engagement appeared to me the same as in England'. Letter from Mary Phillips, 16 June 1862, Women's Library, Female Middle Class Emigration Society Papers.
- [31] Greg, *Literary and Social Judgments*, p. 281.
- [32] *Ibid.*, p. 306.
- [33] *Ibid.*, p. 288.
- [34] Middle-Class Female Emigration Impartially Considered (1862) *The English Woman's Journal*, X(5)6, p. 73.

- [35] This does not mean that female emigration societies ceased to operate or that all feminists disavowed emigration. See Bush, 'The Right Sort of Women', pp. 388–389, for a summary of the debate over emigration. Bush argues that the mid-Victorian connection between feminism and emigration remained present in the Edwardian period, albeit in a different form. The justifications for female emigration, however, became more varied and more complex in an era when eugenic notions of racial superiority were more explicit and the empire itself was rapidly changing.
- [36] The Export Wife-Trade, *Saturday Review*, 6 September 1862, p. 276.
- [37] Ibid.
- [38] Ibid.
- [39] Ibid.
- [40] See Worsnop, 'A Reevaluation of the "the Problem of Surplus Women"', p. 23.
- [41] Harriet Martineau (1859) *Female Industry*, *Edinburgh Review*, 109, p. 294.
- [42] Ibid., pp. 297–298.
- [43] Ibid., p. 336.
- [44] Ibid., p. 335.
- [45] Ibid.
- [46] Although people who had read the 1851 census report or excerpts from it when it appeared in 1854 would have already been aware of the 'surplus woman problem', Martineau's article was attributed with dramatically raising public awareness of the issue. See V. Sanders (1986) *Reason over Passion: Harriet Martineau and the Victorian novel* (New York: St Martin's Press), p. 179.
- [47] Martineau, 'Female Industry', p. 333.
- [48] F. P. Cobbe (1862) *What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids?* *Fraser's Magazine*, 66, p. 594.
- [49] Ibid., p. 599.
- [50] J. Butler (Ed.) (1869) *Woman's Work and Woman's Culture: a series of essays* (London: Macmillan), p. xxviii.
- [51] Ibid., p. xxvi.
- [52] J. Boucherett (1869) 'How to Provide for Superfluous Women', in *ibid.*, p. 31.
- [53] Ibid., p. 45.
- [54] Ibid., p. 33.
- [55] Cobbe, 'What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids?' p. 598.
- [56] Kranidis notes: 'We also would do well to be leery of historical accounts that accept unconditionally the notion that certain people are numerically excessive. We must ask, instead, in what sense are British subjects excessive or "surplus" except in that the nation defines them as such? Finally, "surplus" Victorian subjects may be so ideologically, materially, or both, so that their removal is not always a simple matter of adjusting figures in the expenditures and incomes columns of the national economy'. Kranidis, *The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration*, p. 26.
- [57] Queen Bees or Working Bees? *Saturday Review*, 12 November 1859, p. 576.
- [58] Ibid.
- [59] Ibid.
- [60] Quoted in Higgs, 'Women, Occupations and Work in the Nineteenth-Century Censuses', p. 63.
- [61] *The Census of Great Britain in 1851*, p. 122.
- [62] It is likely that both the 1841 and the 1851 censuses neglected to record much of the wage labor in which women were engaged. Higgs also points out that enumerators often standardized the results so by the time they arrived at the Registrar General the householders' original preferences were impossible to retrieve. Higgs 'Women, Occupations and Work in the Nineteenth-Century Censuses', p. 64.
- [63] *The Census of Great Britain in 1851*, p. 64.
- [64] Ibid.

- [65] A. Davin (1997) Imperialism and Motherhood, in F. Cooper & A. L. Stoler (Eds) *Tensions of Empire: colonial cultures in a bourgeois world* (Berkeley: University of California Press), pp. 87–151.
- [66] *Census of England and Wales for the year 1861: General Report*, vol. III (1863) (London: HMSO), p. 33.
- [67] *The Census of Great Britain in 1851*, p. 64.
- [68] Ibid. A more optimistic way of looking at unmarried people was as ‘reserves’. According to the 1851 report, ‘the perpetuity of the British race is thus secured against all contingencies’. Ibid., p. 42.