*Birth, Death and Religious Faith in an English Dissenting Community: A Microhistory of Nailsworth and Hinterland, 1695-1837*. By Albion M. Urdank (London: Lexington Books, 2016. xiii plus 133 pp. $75.00).

The study of English historical demography between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries is based largely on data from Church of England parish registers. While historians using these registers acknowledge that there were often substantial groups who did not adhere to the established Church, their demographic behavior has been only rarely studied. Thus the analysis of a non-conformist population living alongside an Anglican population is a very promising idea: existing studies have either taken non-conformist populations on their own terms without comparing their demographic behaviour to other groups, or made comparisons only to some general or “national” population. Studies based on Church of England registers have often used the method of family reconstitution, which effectively treats non-conformists as “missing data” or as an unobserved minority. This, as Urdank writes, may lead to historians missing important associations between economy and demography which are mediated by religious affiliation. If the idea is promising, then Nailsworth is an ideal choice for a community, as it had a large and active Baptist chapel that was converting Anglicans regularly as well as a thriving Anglican church.

Unfortunately, the execution of the study fails to do justice to the promise of the idea. To illustrate this, it is convenient to take the analytical chapters of the book in order. Chapter 2 looks at the association of religious enthusiasm with fertility. A key element of the analysis is that becoming a member of the Baptism chapel proceeded in stages. There was a group of what we might term “full members” who had gone through a formal process of conversion. This group sat within a penumbra of “hearers” who had some connection with the chapel but had not (yet) undergone formal conversion. Using event history analysis, Urdank finds that converted husbands and wives had a higher risk of birth than the unconverted. Unfortunately, I found it hard to know how much weight to ascribe to this conclusion as there is sufficient confusion in his description of event history models to raise concerns in my mind about the implementation of the model. For example, we are told that the hazard rate is “the probability of individuals being at risk” (13), which is not true—the hazard rate is not even, strictly speaking, a probability.

In Chapter 3, Urdank presents a qualitative analysis of family reconstitution forms (FRFs) which takes the sequences of events recorded on them and combines this with judicious speculation to chart the biographies of the families living in Nailsworth between about 1700 and 1837. This is a novel and productive use of the FRFs. Combined with data from the Baptist church records it allows Urdank to study how the times of births and infant deaths were related to joining and leaving the Baptist community. Particularly illuminating is the clear association between bearing an illegitimate child and being suspended from the Baptist church.

Chapter 4 examines Baptist fertility. The results suggest that adherence to the Baptist church was associated with higher fertility, but that the wife's adherence mattered more than her husband's. I found the statistical analysis in this chapter difficult to follow, and its presentation very awkward (it looks as if the computer output has simply been pasted into the text). The sample size is also too small for the analysis being attempted. The result is that this chapter delivers less than it promises.

Chapter 5 performs a similar analysis, but on Anglicans. A problem here is that a key variable in Urdank’s analysis of Baptist fertility is the timing of conversion, or admission into full membership of the Baptist chapel. But there is no record in the Church of England of an analogous process. Urdank tries to solve this problem by assuming that there was a “conversion” experience for Anglicans which was comparable to that of Baptists, and, further, that the timing of this “conversion” was related to the end date of the person's marriage in the same way as it was for Baptists. Both these assumptions seem dubious to me. Because of this, I found myself having to suspend my disbelief in order to interpret the results. For what these are worth, they indicate that there was little difference between the fertility of Baptists and Anglicans, save possibly that late conversions among Baptists gave fertility a slight boost at older ages.

Chapter 6 looks at the mortality of the inhabitants of Nailsworth between 1695 and 1837. Urdank calculates age-specific mortality rates for husbands and wives and concludes that husbands enjoyed a mortality advantage over their wives, especially after 1769. He suggests that levels of mortality were modest, with Nailsworth experiencing a ‘low-pressure’ demographic regime in which the Malthusian preventive check dominated the positive check. Urdank does not compute expectations of life at birth, but I used his results to estimate the expectation of life at birth in Nailsworth for this period, obtaining a figure of around 33 years. This was encouraging, for it is close to the national average for the first half of the eighteenth century as calculated in E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541-1871: A Reconstruction* (Cambridge, 1989).

Overall, then, this book is based on a sound idea, but the way the analysis is carried out and presented is frustrating. It is very hard for readers to work out what the main findings are, still less to evaluate their significance in the context of what we know about the population history of England. There is some interesting new material here (notably in Chapter 3 and Chapter 6), but too much is speculative and based on an over-elaborate statistical analysis of small numbers.

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