

POPULATION TRENDS AND STRUCTURES ON THE ISLAND OF WESTRAY, ORKNEY

James R. Coull

Rural depopulation has been the counterpart of the growing dominance of cities and towns in the life of economically advanced countries for a century past; it is related to the growth of specialised commercial functions in agriculture and other activities, and the decline of domestic food production which had involved the great majority in society having a direct stake in the land. In Scotland, as elsewhere, rural depopulation tends to be most acute in marginal areas—especially in the Western Highlands, Hebrides and Northern Isles. Of these areas, the problem tends to be least acute in the Orkneys, because of its improved and progressive agriculture which contrasts with the retarded economic development elsewhere. But although Orkney is (at least in relative terms) economically buoyant, it still has its problems of falling levels of population, and ageing population structure; and the current rate of decline in islands like North Ronaldsay and Eday (for example) is as severe as anywhere in Britain. Westray, on the other hand, has the largest community in the North Isles of Orkney, and is generally agreed to have the strongest community spirit. It could prove a useful guide to the prospects of outlying islands of retaining a viable population in modern times, against the attraction of urban life and the problem of mounting freight rates which afflicts all the outlying communities. The object of this paper is to analyse the demographic trends in Westray, and to make an estimate of the optimum population for the island at modern standards of living.

Population Trends of the Last Two Centuries

During the period of the Industrial Age of the last two centuries, the population of Westray shows the common

Highland trend of a rise from about 1750 (when it was about 1100) to a peak in the nineteenth century (Fig. 1), followed by a decline which is still unchecked. In Westray, the population rise from the mid-eighteenth century was fostered by the rise of the kelp industry in its initial phases, and in the nineteenth century by developments in commercial fishing and (more especially) improvements and reclamation in agriculture.¹ As

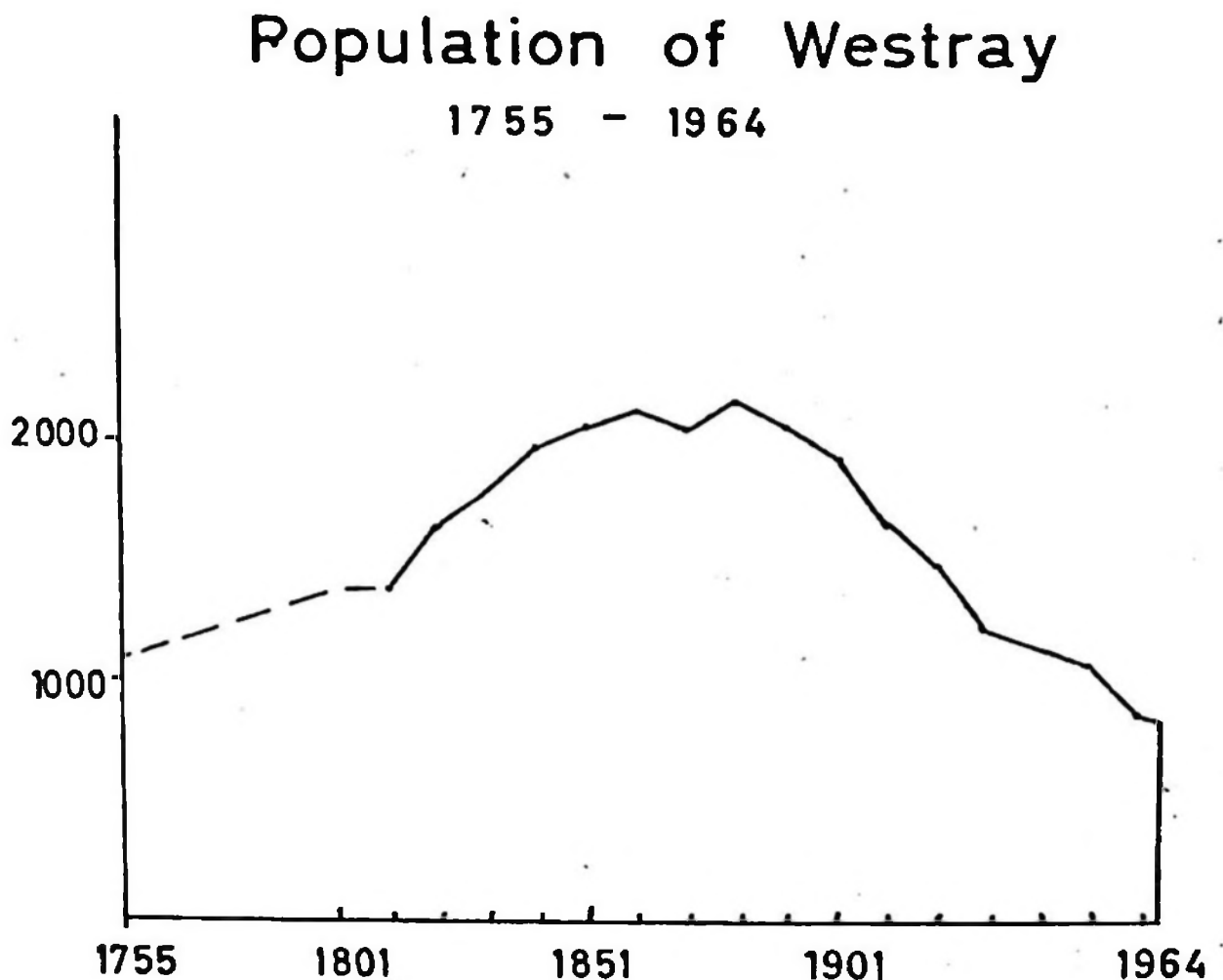


FIG. 1.

a result of the improvements in agriculture, the population rise in Westray was prolonged into the 1880's—the maximum recorded figure was 2,195 in 1881—in contrast to most of the West Highlands, where it began to fall after the catastrophe of the Potato Famine of the 1840's. In 1840 in Westray the resources were still able to support the people comfortably,² and there was little emigration, although there was some seasonal movement to the herring fishing centre of Stronsay in summer. By the later part of the century, however, increased contacts with the outside world, together with universal education was leading to a considerable emigration (of some 30 to 40 people per year) from an island tending to become over-populated. The oldest son got the family holding, but

most of the other members of the family were more or less obliged to seek their fortunes elsewhere: the tendency was for the young men to go abroad, and for the girls to go into domestic service on the mainland of Britain.

The emigration, together with the small family of modern times, led to a steep decrease in numbers from the end of last century. It was enhanced by the decline of fishing at the start of the century through the grounds being exploited by trawlers, and in the inter-war years and after through the decline in number of farm labourers through increased mechanisation of the farms.

Present Population of Westray

While the present population position in Westray is not free from anxiety, the population and employment structures are relatively healthy by the standards of the seven crofting counties. The current trend on the island is still that of depopulation, largely due to the moving out of the younger age groups: the main reason for this is scarcity of employment. Agriculture continues to require fewer hands with increasing mechanisation, and with rising living standards and present farming trends the minimum size of holding required to provide a livelihood is increasing: since 1870 the number of holdings of less than 20 acres has decreased from 132 to 39, and the total number on the island from 204 to 142. Thus the agricultural labour force is tending to decrease, and in a predominantly farming community like that of Westray there are limited employment opportunities for women. However, prosperity is increasing, and it may be possible that the population level may stabilise at a level somewhat lower than the present.

At present on Westray, the birth and death rates are approximately equal, contrasting with a natural increase of about 12 per year at the start of the century. A count of population made in August 1964 showed a population total of 827, compared with the 1961 Census total of 872; this net loss is due to emigration at the rate of about a dozen people per year. The younger adults (15-44 age group) account for most of those moving out; they are mostly single people, but there is also a loss of young couples with families. The better retention of the male population (Table I) is due to the better opportunities for them in a farming community. There is a complementary increase in the proportions of the older age groups on the island.

TABLE I
Total population, and farm-based and non-farm-based population

MALES														
Resident (total)														
Age structure			Occupations						Migration since 1946					
0-4	5-14	15-44	45-64	65 and over	Full-time farmer	Crofter with other employment	Farm labourers	Non-farming	Periodically away	Permanently away	Emigration	Immigration		
									Students	Others				
Total population	36	56	144	110	60	117	40	26	66	4	7	12	69	13
Farm-based	22	37	97	77	23	117	40	—	18	3	3	6	34	6
Non-farm-based	14	19	47	33	37	—	—	26	48	1	4	6	35	7
FEMALES														
Resident (total)														
Age structure			65 and over						Migration since 1946					
0-4	5-14	15-44	45-64	65 and over	In employment	Periodically away	Permanently away	Emigration	Immigration					
									Students	Others				
Total population	39	61	128	121	72	31	16	1	11	87	12	42	45	9
Farm-based	16	33	74	72	26	18	12	1	9	42	4	45	9	—
Non-farm-based	23	28	54	49	46	13	4	—	2	45	9	—	—	—

Since 1945, there have been 156 emigrants from Westray, although the pattern of movement has changed from the turn of the century, and most of the post-war migrants (110 of them) have remained in Orkney. The main destination was the Orkney Mainland, to farms or farm service (63 people), while 35 went to employment in Kirkwall. Immigration in this period was on a much smaller scale: 25 people came into the island—mostly immigrants from elsewhere in Orkney marrying into the island. This type of imbalance between emigration and immigration is all too typical of island communities in post-war years.

Farm-based and Non-farm-based Population

Investigation showed that there is an important distinction in Westray between the farm-based and non-farm-based population. There has been less emigration from the farming

Population Structures of Farm and Non-Farm Population in Westray

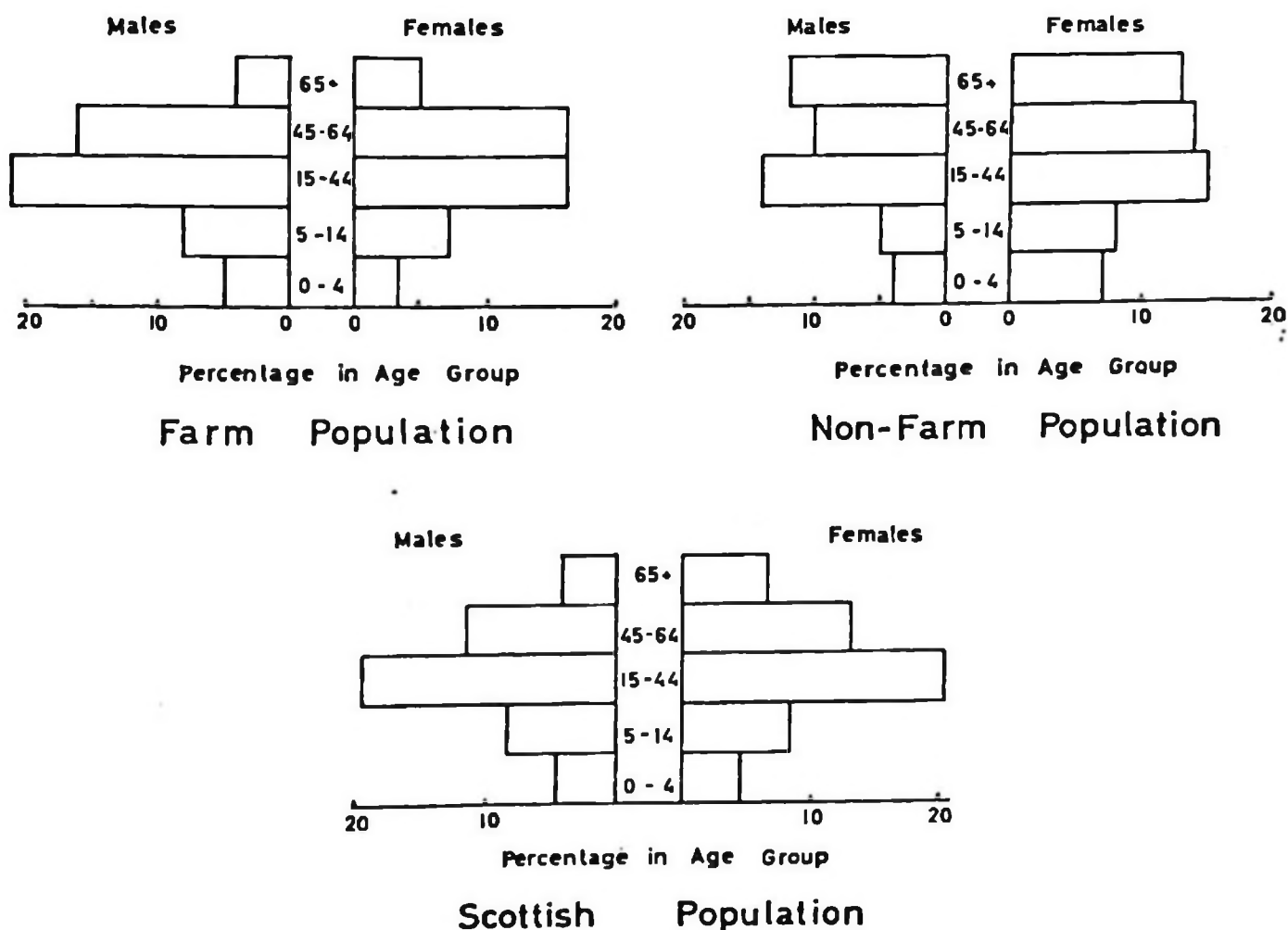


FIG. 2.

sector, and the structure of the non-farming sector is more top-heavy (Fig. 2); while the latter sector includes more retired people, this is also due to the scarcity of employment opportunities outside farming. Although the economy of Westray is so dominantly agricultural, it is noteworthy that 350 out of the 827 permanently resident (i.e. 43 per cent) are non-farm-based. This is accounted for by the large service population required by any community in modern Britain, and by the relatively high proportion of retired people. While there is a scatter of non-farm-based population throughout the island, about one-half are in Pierowall, the service centre of the island which has the steamer pier.

Occupations

A very fortunate feature of Westray in the Highlands and Islands context in modern times is the low incidence of unemployment. In recent years the number has never risen higher than 5 (i.e. 2 per cent), compared with figures of 30 per cent or more which can be reached in the crofting communities. Apart from spells of bad weather which enforce inactivity on the lobster fishermen, and occasional laying-off of casual labourers, the labour force is permanently employed.

Agriculture is by far the main occupation, and of a total male labour force of 274, 146 are engaged in it full-time and 40 part-time. There are only 26 men employed full-time as farm-servants, showing that the holdings on Westray are still predominantly family farms. This labour force has decreased over two or three decades now, and is likely to decrease still further as farms are consolidated into fewer units.

The other primary occupation of lobster-fishing engages 8 men more or less full-time, with 18 regularly involved part-time, and some other men taking part occasionally. The remainder of the labour force is engaged in service occupations of various types, and there is in all a well balanced occupation structure, although there may be times when work for tradesmen and casual labourers is slack.

An irregular source of income is the gathering of seaweed (tangles), for shipment to the factory in South Uist, the modern successor of the once much greater kelp industry. The amount gathered and the numbers of people involved vary, mainly according to the weather: a stormy year drives ashore more seaweed. Only a handful of men are regularly involved, but there have been up to 70 gatherers on the island in recent years.

By the standards of the crofting counties, it is only a low proportion of people whose homes are on Westray who go to employment outside the island (19 men). Only five of these now serve in the Merchant Navy, compared with the considerably greater numbers doing so earlier this century.

TABLE II
Occupations in Westray

	MALES		FEMALES	
	WESTRAY		WESTRAY	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
<i>Wholly resident</i>				
Farmers	117*	40	Professional	3
Farm servants	26	—	Domestic service	2
Fishermen	8	18	Shop assistants	7
Professional	5	—	Farmer or farm work	3
Business	12	—	Business	1
Tradesmen	12	—	Casual workers	—
Drivers	8	4	Others	1
Roadmen	3	1		
Postmen	2	—		
Shops	1	1		
Casual labourers	10	11		
Unemployed	1	—		
Invalid	5	—		
Others	7	—		
<i>Periodically away</i>				
Secondary school	4		Students—	
Others	7		Secondary school	12
			Higher education	4
			Others	1
<i>Permanently away</i>				
Professional	3		Professional	2
Merchant Navy	5		Nursing	2
Orkney farms	2		Others	6
Others	2			

* Including 11 men over 65 years.

Westray men have had a reputation for seafaring—a further five serve on the local shipping service.

Only 31 women are in paid employment on the island, mostly as domestic servants and shop assistants. There are also 9 women whose permanent homes are in Westray employed outside the island.

Future Population of Westray

While it is difficult to forecast population levels, it is possible

to examine present trends, and to make some estimate of the number of people which the island could support at acceptable living standards in modern times.

A disturbing fact is that of the 264 households at present on the island, nearly one-half (126) have no resident males of less than 45 years. Of the 142 farms, 46 have no males of this lower age group, and the same is true of 80 out of the 122 non-farm households. While it is possible that some of these households may in the future be occupied by women only or by retired people, it would appear certain that within the next 20 or 30 years there will be a considerable reduction in the number of households.

Also prejudicial to the future demographic stability of the island is the decline both in numbers and proportion of the younger adults. In the 15-44 age group, the number of males in Westray parish³ fell from 233 in 1951 to 159 in 1964 (37 per cent of all males in both cases), while the number of females fell from 252 in 1951 (39 per cent of all females) to 139 in 1964 (29 per cent of all females). This rapid decline of the number of women in the reproductive age group is especially dangerous to population stability. In the present decade both birth and death rates have fluctuated around 13 per year, but there is a danger of the birth rate falling below the death rate.

The present trend of the elimination of small crofts and farms is fairly certain to continue, and the island could support about 100 viable farms: these may support households of between three and four people (the average size in Scotland), and farming could support directly about 350 people. The bigger farms will continue to employ labour, and at present levels this could provide for some 30 farm workers: with their families this could account for another 100. Lobster fishing seems unlikely to expand much as a full-time occupation: 12 fishermen and their families would account for another 40 people approximately. Service occupations will probably continue to employ about 50 people, or (with their households) perhaps 170 people. A number must be added for retired people, and for those whose home is on Westray, but who find work outside it: this may account for about 100 in all. The addition of all these categories gives a population total of around 750 which the island could support in the foreseeable future, with the important proviso that the present government policy of support for agriculture continues. Only the future can tell whether this will materialise; even if emigration were to cease,

the prolongation of other present trends would in fact lead to a continued fall in population.

The case of Westray illustrates the population trends of modern times in an island where the level of prosperity has been (and is) above average. It has, however, a somewhat uncertain economic future, as its prosperity depends on national policies of support for agriculture and of subsidising un-economic transport services to the islands. The analysis of the demographic situation highlights the great problem that such islands have in maintaining viable communities in circumstances which now include a close degree of familiarity with the outside world and educational opportunities for all.

NOTES

- ¹ *New Statistical Account of Scotland XV* (1845) p. 129.
- ² See R. O. Pringle, "On the Agriculture of the Islands of Orkney", *Transactions of the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland* (1874) pp. 35-7.
- ³ Westray parish also includes the small island of Papa Westray, which had a population of 184 in 1951 and 129 in 1964.

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