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‘Missing from parish records: Differences in the occupations of Anglican and nonconformist fathers in Wales, 1813-20’

Investigation of the adult male occupational structure of England and Wales before the 1841 census has made heavy use of parish registers. The Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure (CAMPOP)’s research program on the Occupational Structure of Britain c.1379-1911 has made available a database of adult male occupations recorded in parish baptism records for the whole of England and Wales covering the period 1813-20. This addresses a key gap between data from eighteenth-century population listings and the 1841 census, at a time of rapid economic and social change. However, in areas where nonconformity was strong, a significant proportion of baptisms were missing from parish registers. This particularly affects Wales, where the crude Church of England baptism rate of 22.9 per 1,000 population was only 75.6% of the English average (30.3).

To estimate a national male occupational distribution for the period 1813-20, it is necessary to scale up Anglican occupational data to correct for ‘missing’ nonconformist baptisms. This poses the question of whether nonconformists followed broadly similar occupations to Anglicans in the same area. Although studies of religious nonconformity which have investigated its social class structure have hinted at differences between Church of England and nonconformist fathers’ occupations, their findings were inconclusive due to methodological problems and the lack of an appropriate comparator measure of Anglican occupations.

Using the CAMPOP database of Anglican occupations and a new analysis of nonconformist records, this study assesses for six contrasting areas comprising a 12% sample of all Welsh baptisms 1813-20 whether there were significant differences between the occupations of Anglican and nonconformist fathers, or among different nonconformist denominations. Baptism records were found for 82% of nonconformist chapels in the study areas. The lack of records mainly affected Baptist chapels, as this denomination did not believe in infant baptism, although some chapels did keep birth registers. Wide variations were revealed in the proportion of nonconformists between parishes in the same area: Nonconformist baptisms already equalled Anglican in certain towns and industrial areas such as Merthyr Tydfil, while some neighbouring rural parishes remained wholly Anglican.

Significant differences between Anglican and nonconformist occupations were revealed affecting major sectors of the Welsh economy. Colliers, miners, weavers and other textile workers emerged as strongly nonconformist, while agricultural labourers and most tertiary sector workers had a significantly higher representation among Anglican fathers at this period. There were also differences between denominations, with Welsh farmers more likely to join the Calvinistic Methodists.

The implication of this study is that reliance on Anglican parish data over-estimates the size of the married adult male agricultural workforce in Wales, while under-estimating mining and industrial work, especially in the woollen manufacturing areas. But although these sectors were larger than previous studies based only on parish records might suggest, the Welsh economy overall remained largely traditional.