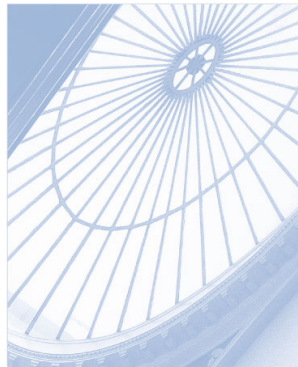


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ANDREAS EDEL, *Zwischen Pest und Feuer: John Graunt (1620–1674). Der Mensch hinter den Zahlen* (Freiburg im Breisgau: wbg Academic, 2024), 454 pp. ISBN 978 3 534 64009 6 (hardback), €68.00; 978 3 534 64079 9 (open access PDF)

One of the most important functions of modern states is to collect statistics about their populations. In many cases, complex bureaucratic systems are put in place for this purpose. One of the aims of these statistics is to understand population trends and track the impact of diseases. As Andreas Edel shows in his excellent monograph, the collection of such information has a long and complex history.

Edel, Executive Secretary of Population Europe, a Europe-wide network of demographic research institutions, provides the first modern biography of John Graunt, regarded as the founding father of demography. Graunt's most famous tract is his *Natural and Political Observations*, which was published in London in 1662 and used the city's *Bills of Mortality* to deduce population trends and the impact of diseases, amongst other things. Although there were doubts about the veracity of Graunt's study and the conclusions he drew, both in his time and later, his work was one of the earliest examples of demography in a modern sense, and also contributed to epidemiology and political arithmetic.

Edel gives an overview of Graunt's times in the introduction, starting with the existing historiography on his life and emphasizing a disparity between his contemporary and later reception. While Graunt's *Observations* were widely read and cited during his lifetime and in the eighteenth century, scholarly interest in Graunt's life only developed in the later nineteenth century—partly because many authors previously focused on Graunt's friend, the demographer William Petty (1623–87). This is followed by a general description of London and England in the seventeenth century. Edel calls this subchapter 'Time Axes [*Zeitachsen*]', without explaining the use of this particular term. It covers a wide range of topics, including significant seventeenth-century wars, the Little Ice Age, and economic and scientific developments. While interesting to read, not all of these details are necessary to understand Graunt's London and his work. Even more striking is Edel's description of the seventeenth century as

a 'Janus-headed' time (p. 22) characterized by high mortality, epidemics, war, and catastrophes on the one hand, and by courtly culture, the growth of urban centres, the early capitalist economy, and a new age of rationality on the other. This kind of portrayal seems anachronistic and operates with a dualism that is not always helpful in explaining the complexities of the seventeenth century. It risks glossing over the many grey areas, and even implying the existence of a civilized, rational, and modern seventeenth century at odds with a dirty, backward, and dangerous time.

The second chapter of Edel's monograph turns to Graunt's family and early life. He was born in London in 1620 and married Mary Scott, with whom he had three sons and five daughters, though only four of them reached adulthood. Graunt was a haberdasher and textile trader, and in 1641 he became a member of the Worshipful Drapers' Company. Edel then reconstructs Graunt's life in London – especially his living conditions and social circle, which included the famous diarist Samuel Pepys (1633–1703). Here, Edel remedies several significant gaps and oversights in Graunt's biography. For example, he shows that Graunt's membership in the Trained Bands, an urban militia, was important for his self-perception. As Edel argues, the membership gave Graunt access to an important social group, and he used the titles of general and major repeatedly and with some pride. On 26 February 1662 he became a member of the Royal Society, which at the time was still a modest association that sought to quickly increase its membership and establish its scholarly and public reputation. He also took on roles in local government and in the Drapers' Company and was a highly respected member of the urban elite. In 1672 he converted to Catholicism, and from that year until his death in 1674 he no longer held any offices. Although Graunt flaunted his status, for instance by using a family seal, no depiction of him survives. Through close analysis of archival as well as printed sources, Edel reconstructs Graunt's family background and his life in London in significant detail. Where the sources do not allow definitive conclusions to be drawn, he provides well-reasoned possibilities. He argues, for example, that Graunt's interest in urban demographics may have been inspired by the deaths of his children and his experiences of the London plague epidemic in 1625–6.

Chapter three is concerned with Graunt's business pursuits and adds more detail to some of the aspects already described in the first part. Edel considers different aspects of Graunt's economic life, starting with his activities as a haberdasher and textile salesman. He shows convincingly that this profession was not necessarily confined to the poor. He then discusses investment in joint stock companies and other ways of participating in expanding English overseas interests. Although he provides a knowledgeable overview of these possibilities, the sources do not allow for definitive conclusions in many cases. However, Edel shows that Graunt owned London real estate, likely as an investment for the future. Graunt was also responsible for managing the money of several of his colleagues. In an excursus, Edel provides significant new information on Graunt's son, John Graunt Jr, showing that he worked for the East India Company and did not die at a young age, as some other scholars have claimed. He wrote reports and audited accounts during multiple journeys with the Company and died around 1670.

The fourth chapter of Edel's monograph considers Graunt's most significant work, the *Natural and Political Observations*. By 1676, it was already in its fifth edition, including one officially endorsed by the Royal Society. The treatise is all the more remarkable because Graunt did not show any interest in demographics prior to its publication, leading to speculation that his friend and colleague Petty was the true author of the text. While it seems that Graunt really did write the *Observations*, Edel points out that Petty may have encouraged him, and certainly they were both working on early population statistics at the same time. Moreover, Graunt's focus on the *Bills of Mortality* made his *Observations* especially innovative. Graunt was mainly concerned with the practical applications of his statistics, and also had local government in mind when he published the text.

In two further subchapters, Edel provides information on London's plague epidemic of 1665–6 and the *Bills of Mortality*. He shows that the *Bills* were an important part of London's communication culture and that the city's inhabitants relied on them for information. He describes how elderly women, called searchers, gathered information on deaths and passed it on to parish clerks, who then had the *Bills* printed. Edel then moves on to a discussion of various topics mentioned in the *Observations*, beginning with mortality and fertility in seventeenth-century

London. This is followed by an analysis of a passage on promiscuity and prostitution, which Graunt addressed in relation to birth rates. Edel then turns to the *Observations* to answer a question that was also discussed by contemporaries – namely, that of London's total population, especially compared to other European cities. Moving on to the linguistic level, Edel then asks how Graunt described his findings, analysing his language and his use of tables. In another excursus, Edel provides more general remarks on longevity and death in the seventeenth century, touching on subjects ranging from the iconography of the dance of death to executions in London's Tyburn.

Chapter five carries the title 'Watershed Moments [*Lebenseinschnitte*]'. Edel first provides an analysis of the role of religion in Graunt's life, refuting the claim that Graunt was a great religious zealot, as John Aubrey (1626–97) claimed. Graunt converted to Catholicism, likely in the 1660s, which led to a degree of ostracization by his friends and colleagues when it became public knowledge in 1672. Edel follows this with an analysis of the Great Fire of 1666, the beginning of Graunt's economic decline from which he never fully recovered. After 1672, Graunt fell on hard times; William Petty had to repeatedly remind him about overdue payments, indicating significant financial problems. At the end of his life, Graunt was even prosecuted; however, he died in poverty before he could be called before the court.

The sixth chapter considers Graunt's reception and his role as the founding father of modern demographics. Edel emphasizes the practical uses of the knowledge gathered and analysed by Graunt, especially for the administration of London. Graunt's interests went far beyond an immediate concern with epidemic prevention and included aspects such as care for the poor, birth rates, and the impact on the urban population of male migration to overseas colonies. Graunt's focus on population statistics led to improvements in the *Bills of Mortality* and expanded their influence, including beyond England. For instance, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) referred to Graunt's work when tasked with improving the collection of population statistics in Brandenburg. However, as Edel also notes, it is almost impossible to ascertain whether these changes were connected directly to Graunt or his colleague Petty or, indeed, were merely the result of a greater general awareness of population statistics. Edel also

argues that Graunt's *Observations* shaped public discourse, though contrary to Edel's claims, it is hard to tell whether the *Observations* or the *Bills of Mortality* themselves had a greater influence. Finally, the *Observations* also featured in discussions of plague prevention and population patterns.

In the conclusion, Edel summarizes the main findings of his work, including Graunt's novel approach and the pitfalls of both the *Bills of Mortality* and the *Observations*. This is followed by an edition of Graunt's *Observations*. Although the text is readily accessible elsewhere online, Edel's edition is still a useful contribution to the literature because it is based on four different editions of the *Observations*, enabling comparison between the different variants. For example, while in the original version Graunt merely calls himself a 'citizen of London', in later versions he styles himself as 'Capt. John Graunt, Fellow of the Royal Society'. The text contains few explanatory footnotes besides references to the different editions. A bibliography and index of persons concludes the book.

Edel provides scholars of early modern London, historians of medicine and demography, and those interested in early scientific advances in England with a comprehensive account of John Graunt's life and his most important work. He combines archival and written primary sources with recent studies of Graunt, the *Bills*, and London to provide some genuinely new insights, especially regarding the details of Graunt's life and work. He does not fall into the trap of overestimating Graunt's impact, but rather contextualizes his achievements and points out where others contributed to Graunt's success, or where multiple interpretations are possible. The structure of the monograph results in some repetition, and some of the chapters could have been more explicitly focused on Graunt and his *Observations*. For example, Graunt's life is discussed in the second chapter, but then aspects of his biography are addressed yet again in a chapter about crucial turning points in his life and business activities. Nonetheless, the monograph provides the first detailed scholarly account of Graunt and his life, which is a significant achievement, and Edel is a skilled and knowledgeable teller of Graunt's story.

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