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## **W.M. Frazer. A History of English Public Health, 1950 [photocopie]**

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improving the health of the people could be assessed. The purpose of the Act was two-fold : (i) to set up the General Register Office and to appoint a Registrar-General, and (ii) to require the compulsory registration of all births and deaths in due form.<sup>1</sup> At the inception of this Department, the first Registrar-General was Mr. T. H. Lister ; but he was succeeded in 1842 by Major George Graham who proved to be a capable administrator. There is little doubt, however, that the fame which this Department attained during the next forty years was mainly due to the pioneer work in vital statistics performed by Dr. William Farr who was appointed Compiler of Abstracts in 1839. Farr's appointment to this office was due, it is believed, to Chadwick, who early recognised the merits of a medical statistician who, later, came to be regarded as the father of Vital Statistics. Farr's first published vital statistics were contained in a letter attached to the first annual report of the Registrar-General for the year 1841 ; and this practice was continued in connection with succeeding reports. Many more of Farr's reports were published, including weekly returns relating to the vital statistics of the Metropolis, and special reports. One of the most important of these special reports was that submitted to the Home Secretary (Sir George Grey) by the Registrar-General on the cholera outbreak in 1848-9. This report covers 300 pages and it contains details of cases and deaths in every district in England and Wales.

Farr was never appointed Registrar-General, though he desired this office and deserved it. He received many marks of distinction, including the C.B., the Fellowship of the Royal Society, the honorary degree of M.D., of New York and the honorary degree of D.C.L. of Oxford. His retirement took place in 1879, and he died on April 14th, 1883. In 1885 some of his reports were collected and published by the Sanitary Institute of Great Britain in one volume.<sup>2</sup>

#### Medical Statistics

The debt which his own generation owed to Farr was a great one. His mortality statistics, becoming more accurate and comprehensive as the years went by, constituted the ammunition used by Simon and others in the campaigns against disease in the home and in the factory. The searchlight of statistical analysis, in his

<sup>1</sup> The Act came into operation on July 1st, 1837.

<sup>2</sup> The first known weekly bills of mortality were compiled in London in 1532. The most distinguished predecessor of Farr in this country was Captain John Graunt, described as "Citizen of London," who published in 1662 the first edition of *Natural and Political Observations Mentioned in a following Index, and made upon the Bills of Mortality*



