

Editorial

If the basic commitment of the urban historian is to a deliberate and explicit emphasis on the urban process and the urban presence in the broader history of society,* the most fundamental difficulty for him is what to do with the outcome of that process, namely the city and the town. The place alone cannot constitute itself; its human constituents cannot hive themselves off from it. How then do they connect? Here is the essence of the urban historian's problem. Had we nothing more than the urban artifact to go on we might actually find its very habitations and workplaces and administrative agencies and their articulation on the ground more porous than we think. Had we nothing but an abstract perception of the social system by which to explain the kind of world in which we actually live we might find such things as social distance and class consciousness and group behaviour of all kinds even more impentetrable than we often do. Social space cannot be comprehended in terms of imaginary coordinates but in terms of recognizable places on the ground and their possession by identifiable people. For the urban historian there is a necessary — indeed, a vital — interconnection between process and place, between the social changes wrought and the environment to which they belong.

Yet the historical testimony to the place commonly extends to such ample archives and to such multifarious means of interpreting them that it is as much as anyone can do to fillet a morsel of the urban community that in some sense functions and belongs there. The town as a veritable entity — the place and the people taken together, the inherent structures and modes of behaviour they evince and propagate, the attitudes and institutions they throw up, the legacies they hand down — the very phenomenon in which all the urban elements collect, has as a result been inclined to be dismantled, to become something of a nonentity in historical terms. The irony of this is that there has been developing at the same time a more acute and widespread perception of urbanism as an organizing idea in the elucidation of at least the contemporary history of human society. The problem for the urban historian in this regard is therefore twofold: first, how to relate the evident fact of the town, specifically as well as generically, not only to its own encompassed mechanisms but to the more pervasive processes of social change; secondly, how to devise a means of portraying all the forces shaping the visible and invisible structures, the animus, the functions, the historical meaning of a given place or urban range.

We are told by Manuel Castells, *The Urban Question* (1977), that it is only through a strenuous theoretical reconstruction of our urban condition that we can hope to release ourselves from the ideological stranglehold that generations of writers have over our whole bearing and historical curiosity towards it. Whether such wrestling can or should ever seek to unwind the literary sinews of our culture so as to give urban historians — surely among the most relativist of the breed — some slight hope of being able to take a really confident leap at providing an objective sociometry of place is generally less important among them than declaring their assumptions and sharpening their scrutiny of the evidence. What this book certainly does nevertheless is to remind us that the legacy of the urban past is also an intellectual and conceivably a psychological one, and it challenges the urban

*See the editorial to *Urban History Yearbook 1977*.

historian to look beyond the purely tangible city for an altogether more comprehending grasp of the urban process. That responsibility is implicit in a number of recent works, above all perhaps in Trygve Tholfsen's **Working-Class Radicalism in Mid-Victorian England** (1977), which ingeniously spans a narrow spectrum of agreed social values expressed through various working and middle-class modes of public behaviour in cities. He does so by a subtle and unusual coupling of two quite different intellectual traditions, the hegemonic and the consensual, to explain how urban institutions have perpetuated certain values through individuals' behaviour — the outcome at one and the same time, he claims, of both cultural controls and shared beliefs. Unfortunately, a besetting difficulty in this book is that such ideas and beliefs appear to have been delivered by secret messenger in a somewhat intellectual wrapping direct from the Enlightenment without being handled by anyone on the way: just how such a bundle was transmitted is a mystery. None the less, the contention that these values were thereupon absorbed and thoroughly domesticated before being diffused by the city is a promising idea. Moreover, though this book is decidedly open to the old charge of selective Victorianism and offers urban historians no worked example of such a mix in any one place, it does point, as does G. J. Crossick (ed.), **The Lower-Middle Class in Britain, 1870-1914** (1977) — its penetrating introduction notwithstanding — to the urgent need they have for much more empirical knowledge about the social structure of towns. Without it, all speculation about the distribution of social space within them is likely to remain nugatory. For this reason R. Q. Gray, **The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh** (1977), is valuable for it does uncover some of the actual practices of groups of artisans in support of its argument.

This debate that is now going on about the transmission of cultural values and its political undertones more closely concerns the history of cities and towns than any other sets of institutions, and its outcome will predictably throw more light on their historic role than on anything else. It seems likely to succeed in doing so, however, only if the matter is researched more empirically, especially in relation to two aspects in particular. On the one hand, the respective roles and interrelationships of the key attributes of mutuality and individualism in their various forms in both preindustrial and industrial society, not as assumed characteristics of particular social groups but as more generalized phenomena. On the other, the manner in which these things were taken up, modified and perpetuated by the city through its institutions and in conjunction with traditions already congenial to it. Alas, the analysis of these social trends can easily fall to a partisan level, as for example in the more relentless quest for institutions bearing the mark of mutuality than for practices that were more overtly individualistic. The issues turn on a whole series of subtle relationships between and within groups. At some point such-and-such a town might be said to have become more conscious of its particular tendencies and its potential, and the struggle for command over it may even be seen as having begun to develop into a tussle between competing elites. By far the most coherent and powerful argument in support of an urban model for politics, which also points to ways in which these influences were being resisted outside the towns, right through national and urban institutions in the nineteenth century, therefore comes to hand very opportunely just now in Derek Fraser's **Urban Politics in Victorian England** (1976). This points to a more extensive political dimension and a more flawed structure of elites than cruder models have supposed, and suggests the outlines of a new political typology for urban places of every rank, ranging from the more open politics of the big city to the proprietary politics of county towns.

The historical analysis of a social process literally taking place is always prone to fly to one or other pole — either the place or the process dropping from view — and even the highly deliberate urban historian is particularly

torn when, having scrupulously obeyed every canon of comparative scholarship, he realizes that the essence of his place has not filtered through. M. J. Daunton, **Coal Metropolis: Cardiff 1870-1914** (1977), comes falteringly into this category for here, surely, is the most searching analysis of the underpinning structure of a nineteenth-century town we yet have in this country, replete as it is in its interpretation of the productive, the manipulative, and the ideological forces at work in shaping the framework of community, but what late-Victorian and Edwardian Cardiff should mean to us now or did to those that lived there then remains naggingly elusive. This need not be so. If we turn to Stuart Blumin's **The Urban Threshold** (1976), we watch the same patient, sophisticated deployment of every proper particle of data on the industrial development of Kingston, Ontario and what we see emerging withall is the remarkably cohesive impact this had on the community and the drawing up of a kind of simultaneous equation between the factors producing a change in the industrial identity of the place and those enhancing a socially conscious identification with it: the town might almost be said to have taken over and to have enunciated its own notion of itself. By contrast, in D. J. Olsen, **The Growth of Victorian London** (1976), the idiom, delightful as it is, becomes that of the essay and its grammar a set of aesthetic values urbanely, almost cosmetically, applied, rather than a dispassionate reading of the social contest for space that was written into the fabric of the city; the social process thus fails to take place; the place itself therefore tends to dwindle into a mere cynosure of educated taste.

Small towns like Kingston are, on the whole, probably more readily comprehensible historically than much larger, polymorphous places and the early modern period probably more immediately open to sustained comparison than what came after. At all events, it is good to see more periodical writing and some important new initiatives arising here. The most auspicious event is the launching of the new Open University course on English Urban History 1500-1780, including among the course materials and reprinted work — W. T. MacCaffrey's **Exeter 1540-1640** and Dorothy George's **London Life in the XVIIIth Century**, glory be, in paperback at long last — some of the most percipient writing to have been addressed to this period: Peter Clark (ed.), **The Early Modern Town** (1976), reproduces some vintage papers, too. A succinct *aperçu* of the formative elements more generally at work in Peter Clark and Paul Slack, **English Towns in Transition, 1500-1700** (1976), modifies the earlier work they edited, **Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500-1700** (1972), while alongside them all now stands one of the most searching contributions yet made towards the total history of an English region and of the fluctating fortunes and influence of the towns within it in Peter Clark's own **English Provincial Society from the Reformation to the Revolution** (1977). There are also welcome signs in the register of research included in this issue of the **Yearbook** that suggest that the early modern period is at last making ground.

Urban history is evidently burgeoning still and this issue of the **Yearbook** is more rammed down and brimming over than any of its predecessors. It can but be hoped, once more, that the pitiless inflation of book prices is not carrying it beyond the reach of all those scholars who are so actively engaged in the field, for it is their work, we like to think, that makes our annual feat of compression such a watchable field sport. Henceforth we hope to increase our appeal by including, along with the articles concerned with sources, methods and specialized bibliographies, others devoted more explicitly to the findings of research. Naturally, we look for contributions to the subject as regards research methods but hope to include along with them some of the important new discoveries being made in urban history. We expect the normal length of such papers to be between 6,000 and 8,000 words, including notes; maps and diagrams may be included. Contributions are invited.

Thanks are due to François Bédarida on his retirement from the panel

of overseas correspondents and a welcome to Jean-Claude Perrot who steps into his place. We are also happy to welcome Stuart Blumin to this company in succession to Clyde and Sally Griffen. The editorial work is as widely shared as ever and two more Leicester colleagues join the editorial team: David Reeder, now assisted by John Paterson, continues to mete out the reviews of books and Peter Clark that of articles; Joyce Ellis has updated the register of research; Derek Fraser has digested reports of conferences (and is hungry for more); Diana Dixon and Anthony Sutcliffe have continued to compose and control the bibliography. From the editor, who has closed such gaps as remained and opened others, come the warmest if remorseful thanks.

Note

Copies of the previous issues of the **Yearbook**, for 1974 to 1977, are obtainable from Leicester University Press, price £5 each.