

Editorial

It is a commonplace already that the urban past is too large and complex a field of study to be left to a single academic discipline. That means that urban historians have, or should have, an exceptionally wide array of techniques at their command. And, despite the necessary connections urban history affords to historians of developed and developing societies, this also means that it is an alarmingly tentacular field of knowledge, potentially very sophisticated, perhaps even arcane and impenetrable. That may be a danger. One of the glories of the writing of history over the last thirty years has been its success in making the recent and the remoter past more accessible to non-professional historians: history, it might almost be said, has become a game for any number of players, no longer monopolized by a guild of specialized practitioners performing mystery plays for wider audiences on feast days.

That, as Sam Bass Warner's most recent book, **The Urban Wilderness** (1972), reminds us by using the urban past as a means of dispelling widely-held fears of the urban present or the urban future, is a contribution which urban history might be expected to make to a more settled and richly enjoyed urban existence. Past and present connect in so many aspects of contemporary urban life that its historians must expect their subject to be used, not only as a basis for civic policy-making (something, alas, that has barely begun to happen), but for very much larger educative purposes. They face the challenge of keeping their field open to these demands while pressing into wider use the most searching and technically demanding modes of analysis. The great historiographical achievement of this and perhaps the last generation of historians - which must largely be ascribed, in Great Britain, to local history - of making the past more generally accessible, comprehensible, and of continuing meaning, is already being eroded to some degree. The danger is that the newer techniques, or even the more developed concepts, may remain too long the property of the professionals. There are signs that urban historians - professional perhaps as well as amateur - are already experiencing something of a cultural lag. That, incidentally, is an important reason for maintaining as large a review section as we can manage in the **Yearbook** and for adding in this issue a limited survey of the periodical literature. This will be expanded as opportunity allows, for it is here as well as among the monographs that technical advances are coming.

It is easy to see that urban history has an altogether more analytical purpose than it had even ten years ago. The day of the individually-posed, idiosyncratic study of a town that has no particular analytical purpose or significance is probably now on the wane despite a certain efflorescence. Among recent writings, Jack Simmons' **Leicester Past and Present** (1974) must stand out as a masterpiece of compression and narrative power that represents that classical tradition supremely well - the place itself the only organizing principle appropriate to it, the author's richly-informed feeling for it the only analytical structure seemingly required. Such a portrait registers immediately with many people and gives it and them a sense of identity - a sense of belonging almost. Poles apart is the distribution-map approach of the new edition of H. C. Darby's **New Historical Geography of England** (1974), in which towns are treated predominantly in terms of ranking and growth across the country at large - a treatment more valuable for its quantitative revisions and systematic classification than for the elucidation of urban development as such, for the pre-industrial period at least. Alan Everitt's collection of essays, **Perspectives in Urban History** (1974), has neither Simmons' unity of place nor Darby's dominant analytical theme but it does have a common purpose. Here the aim is simply

to follow some promising new approaches to the urban past, to define more closely urban characteristics of all kinds, and to encourage a higher level of scholarship among apprentice local historians. What lies at the back of it is his implicitly comparative interest in types of urban community and varieties of urban function, especially among the smaller, older places which have more commonly been handled by historians in splendid isolation. In following such a lead, as these essays variously show, local historians have no need to fore-sake the expository skills and wider enjoyments of the classical approach. What emerges is a prospect of more explicitly analytical work and the hope of knowing more certainly the distinguishing marks of urban life right from their first appearance. What seems to be coming through wherever one looks is the urban historian's need, which he ignores at his peril, to extend his technical capacity and viewpoint beyond the purely documentary.

What is clearly also emerging is a new identification of the interests of historians and archaeologists. This shows up both in the study of standing structures - as in Michael Laithwaite's work on domestic building in early Burford in the Everitt volume, or Alan Rogers' contribution to **The Religious Foundations of Medieval Stamford** (1974) - and in the attempt to synthesize the findings of excavation and documentary research - as in Colin Platt's **Medieval Southampton** (1973). This is a tendency being made more explicit by the Council for British Archaeology through its Urban Research Committee. What began as a rescue operation in aid of archaeological sites threatened by urban renewal has culminated in a series of working parties composed of archaeologists, historians, economic historians, and geographers, looking into such things as the origins, continuity, topography, institutions, social structure, and functions of English towns before the modern period. This more open concern with archival resources and wider conceptual frameworks, along with the standing structures and buried remains, is an interesting and important pointer to future work.

Geographers' contributions to the urban history of more recent periods have also been adding to the repertoire of the subject, while illustrating at the same time their own conceptual and methodological problems in undertaking historical analysis. Brian Berry's **The Human Consequences of Urbanisation** (1973), no less than David Harvey's **Social Justice and the City** (1973) or Brian Robson's **Urban Growth: An Approach** (1973), represents a crisis in geographical thinking about urbanization which is no less acute for being in some respects personal and idiosyncratic. Berry's latest work is the logical outcome of an earlier, more spatial, preoccupation with the formal orders of magnitude of human concentrations. It is now inclined to rest, despite the emphasis on the interdependence of cities and of sub-systems of cities in the process of urban growth, on somewhat simplistic models of urbanization and social mores. These constitute, however welcome the shift of view, too narrow an historical base, too schematic a concept of the so-called pre-industrial city. Harvey's book represents perhaps a sharper change of direction from his earlier work on explanation in geography, which grappled with quantitative possibilities and the nature of scientific method; his new approach amounts to a resounding critique of his geographical colleagues, and an attempt at a structural analysis of the city at large through concepts of social class and socialism. His dilemma is clear and not un-instructive for urban analysts generally but the pictures he offers of what cities were actually like in any given setting, or even what a true socialist alternative might be, are certainly not. Robson's book begins with the common problem of how to define towns functionally but ragged contemporary data drive him back to the nineteenth century. Yet towns were no less definable by their formal boundaries than later and conclusions based on data imperfectly adjusted to such towns' actual limits must remain flawed. Despite its historical setting Robson's work is conceived a-historically, and the scrupulous measurements he makes of factors supposedly correlated

with urban growth - gasworks, building societies, telephone exchanges - do not measure it in fact. Yet such an approach to the main parameters of urban growth within a system of cities is an inherently valuable one, and it is to be hoped that more searching attempts to clarify them are already under way.

Perhaps rather surprisingly, what none of these geographical essays does is to advance any intellectual justification for relating the historical process of urbanization to the actual whereabouts of what took place. Where such things happened is less important than how they happened if urbanization produced no cities as such but only systems of overlapping urban areas. That might arguably hold for the United States more than it does for Great Britain and more for the twentieth century than it does for the nineteenth, or any earlier period. Even so, historians of American education and political life in particular are clearly becoming more conscious of the specific urban context of the developments and institutions that interest them, and in Britain the whole force of the argument in some of the most searching monographs completed recently - such as John Foster's **Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution** (1974) or A. A. MacLaren's **Religion and Social Class: The Disruption Years in Aberdeen** (1974) - depends on relating the general processes at work to the specific environment in which they materialized and were perceived. The relevance of place to such research is not a matter simply of topography but of local structures of work and routine - daily, weekly, annually - that also obtain in more transient urban communities. The choice of the unit of study depends on the analytical purpose in hand, and urban historians have not yet found convincing ways of writing about the total phenomenon of urbanization that connects the statistical aggregates with the local diversities of recognizable places on the ground; nor have they succeeded in interpreting the shapes on the ground and the conduct of life among them in ways that demonstrably relate to the broader historical processes at work. It is as difficult to discern the identity and nature of these larger forces by concentrating exclusively on the places, as it is to uncover the articulating elements that make a place work or render it human while dwelling entirely on the more general plane.

The **Yearbook**, we hope, will do something to clarify these matters, and the response to the first issue last year has been very encouraging. We now have a team of overseas correspondents, whose names appear on the title page, and we are continuing to develop the general strategy outlined last year. As then, the Editorial Board has not divided its labour in a hard-and-fast way, though the chief responsibilities have been carried as follows: reviews, David Reeder (books) and Penelope Corfield (articles); bibliography, Diana Dixon and Tony Sutcliffe; research, H. J. Dyos. Charles Phythian-Adams, who has been continuously helpful in a number of ways, is, to the regret of all of us, now having to give up his place on the Board. He will be succeeded next year by Peter Clark.