

OBITUARY

Bob Morris: an appreciation

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In September 1966, a meeting in Leicester, described as a ‘round table’, was arranged by Dr H.J. Dyos. It was prompted by a groundswell of interest in cities and urban development, both historical and contemporary, and was multi-disciplinary in character. Invitations were sent to distinguished academic historians, early career lecturers and a few doctoral students, one of whom was Mr R.J. Morris. He had recently (1965) completed a BA degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics whilst at Keble College, Oxford and had embarked on a doctorate supervised jointly by two distinguished economic historians, Professor H.J. Habakkuk (Nuffield College) and medievalist, Professor Maurice Beresford (Leeds). Bob’s topic was the ‘Organization and aims of the principal secular voluntary organizations of the Leeds middle class 1830–51’ (1971).

A few years before, in 1963, Jim Dyos had initiated a series of Urban History Newsletters which informed the direction of scholarly travel, but it was the *Study of Urban History* (1968), as the subsequent book of the round table proceedings was entitled, that set out agendas for understanding the range, scope and nature of urban historical scholarship. Bob Morris was present in Leicester, therefore, at an embryonic stage in the development of urban history. Consistent with the tone of that meeting, Bob’s interdisciplinary engagement with the histories of towns and cities endured throughout his life.

Robert John Morris (always Bob) was born in wartime Sheffield, the son of Barbara Joan (née Aston) and George Ernest Morris. His father was a teacher first in Wakefield and then in Leeds (1943–54), and it was while the family lived in Guiseley (north-west Leeds) during years of post-war rationing that Bob, encouraged by his father, developed an interest in allotments. The family moved to Middlesbrough when Bob’s father was appointed headmaster at the local grammar school. Bob attended the other Middlesbrough grammar school, Acklam Hall, which he left in 1962 for Oxford to begin his undergraduate studies.

During a summer vacation in 1966 and while undertaking excavations at the deserted medieval village of Wharram Percy in North Yorkshire, Bob met Barbara McConnell from Belfast. Their shared historical, archaeological and cartographic interests were evident and the following year they undertook an intrepid journey from Aberystwyth to Athens in a mini-van studying Byzantine monasteries in former Yugoslavia *en route*. The origins of Bob’s Irish research interests are not difficult to detect. They were married in Ireland in 1967. The following year, Bob was appointed to a lectureship at Edinburgh University in the newly created

Department of Economic and Social History. The Morris household expanded with the birth of George (1969) and Helen (1971). Bob made a junior lecturer's salary go a little further by taking on duties as a Hall of Residence warden and by tending an allotment.

Bob Morris was one of the outstanding historians of his generation. From his D.Phil. thesis on the Leeds middle class, he developed a more broadly based explanation of urban class relations. This was constructed on what he subsequently termed a middle-class 'property cycle' which was just as distinctive, and as important, as the 'poverty cycle' that shaped the lives of the working classes. By means of gifting real and moveable property to family members, Bob showed that middle-class families were able to sustain their social position across the generations. By these means, and rather as E.P. Thompson had claimed for the English working classes, Bob Morris established that the middle classes achieved a measure of social cohesion and collective identity through their associational culture. These conclusions were developed in several articles and in his deeply researched books *Class, Sect and Party: The Making of the British Middle Class, Leeds, 1820–50* (1990) and *Men, Women and Property in England 1780–1870* (2004). His research also repositioned women as powerful elements in urban development more generally, and through his emphasis on relationships of gender, property and the family life cycle, Bob Morris revised our understanding of the historical development of the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of towns and cities. Ethnicity, language and sectarianism were also brought into sharper urban focus through his Irish research.

Place mattered to Bob Morris. Understanding how places functioned in the past informed an understanding of the present. So to understand the particularities of places – towns and cities – demanded a reservoir of deeply quarried historical research obtained through methodological rigour, and an awareness of its imperfections. His was an approach that encouraged comparative research based on several places, and required a conceptual framework informed, but not blinded, by a blend of social science theories. It is not difficult to understand how students responded well to such a teaching method: it allowed each to bring something to the discussion from their own local knowledge. In addition, his encouragement to students to incorporate graphs and simple statistics in their essays using early graphics software packages enriched their interest in, and a deeper understanding of, towns and cities and may even have improved their employability.

Wherever he was in the world, Bob found a sense of place through urban walks. Locally, Edinburgh's Old Town provided a rich source, and it was the coping stone to his undergraduate Social History 2 course where observation of the built environment provided prompts for possible historical interpretations. For Bob, whether with a gaggle of students, visitors, friends or conference delegates in his wake, the city was a living lab with historical issues explored *in situ*. Structures had their own stories and these were not generally written down. Accordingly, he was rarely to be seen on any urban walk without his camera. His serendipitous visual collection of thousands of images morphed into an academic interest in how antiquarians perceived their city streets and panoramas, and how that then influenced subsequent conservation strategies. His article 'The capitalist, the professor and the soldier: the re-making of Edinburgh Castle, 1850–1900' in *Planning Perspectives* (2007) showed

an awareness of how urban heritage issues were sited in historical contexts, and in *Scotland 1907: The Many Scotlands of Valentine and Sons, Photographers* (2006) Bob showed his ability to move beyond conventional historical sources to extract contemporaries' perceptions of place.

As Professor of Social History and Head of the Department of Economic and Social History, colleagues have remarked on how supportive Bob was when tenure, promotion or other professional or personal concerns arose. As a member of the Law faculty said recently: 'Bob Morris was one of those colleagues whom you were always pleased to see coming towards you...invariably cheerful, with an entertaining quip and ready to share.' He was also effective on the formal business side of the University: a serious contributor who still managed to see the humour in it all.

Several professional organizations and societies were the beneficiaries of Bob Morris' input. In some cases – the Scottish Economic and Social History Society and the Association for History and Computing – this involved the foundation of a learned society, including the heavy lifting of such responsible roles as Editor and conference organizer. In other journals, he acted in advisory roles as a member of an Editorial Board. Bob also spearheaded the Edinburgh Computers in Education Project, funded as part of the Computers in Teaching Initiative in the 1980s. He was supportive of local history societies, as Patron (Thoresby Society), and as Council member, journal Editor for several years and Vice-President (Old Edinburgh Club). Bob also served on the Committee of the European Association for Urban History and as its President and Conference Organizer when the 6th International Conference was held in Edinburgh in 2002.

Bob was especially encouraging to historians at the start of their careers, often seeking them out over a beer or coffee and offering supportive comments and kind suggestions to somewhat nervous conference speakers. 'Generous' is how many have described his attitude towards them. Nowhere was this more common than at the annual Urban History Group conferences which he had helped to reinvent in the late 1980s. As a member of the Editorial Board of *Urban History* for 30 years, he was always available to provide advice, cite precedent, review and comment. There was always a rationale for his viewpoint, and he was unfailingly inclusive, personally and professionally, as Dyos had been towards him. *The Study of Urban History* did not include a chapter from Bob Morris, but the study of urban history has benefited hugely from his energy, intellect and collegiality.