

Editorial

When is the history of urban society not urban history? The question of the identity and coherence of urban history is worth putting in this way because it implies not only a larger historical whole which it cannot subsume but a relationship with other branches of history to which it must in the last analysis relate. More specifically, there is the question of how it may be thought to relate to the newly-extending branches of social history. Such issues are less important in themselves perhaps than they are in pointing to the tendencies and even the shortcomings of historical research which they reveal, and it is for this reason that they are worth contemplating just now. For despite and conceivably because of the widening range of new initiatives in history - themselves the reflections of shifting contemporary attitudes of various kinds that we have no space to explore - there is some sense of confusion and, in particular, some misconception as to what urban history is or might become or had better do.

Here is an historical dimension that for all the things that are supposedly being done to extend it remains largely hidden, perhaps even smothered by them. Let the names we give to our historical preoccupations be placed aside for a moment; let us also disclaim any illusions of grandeur; but let us recognise that any historical field has a core and a periphery that are in some flux. What we have to explain are the origins and the outcome of an historical process that can be conceived on two levels: the relatively abstract level of discerning in largely aggregative terms how and why urbanization came about in a series of different societies; the more concrete but closely related level of making out where and to what effect this gathering of people into towns actually took place. The precise pitch on which to operate and how best to elucidate what happened are matters of mere tactical discretion, given the overall strategy of seeking to explain this specifically urban entity in both social and physical terms. The commitment is what matters. Urban history takes as its field both the historical process of urbanization and its outcome; it addresses these matters and their components directly and not as the incidental accompaniment or merely convenient locale of other events or movements; it constitutes a deliberate and explicit emphasis on the urban process and the urban presence in the broader history of society. As such it is bound to overlap adjoining interests just as other historical pursuits do but the contention is that it concentrates on those issues that are explicable only in distinctively urban terms.

The pursuit of urban history dissolves into larger historical issues and emerges from them, however, in ways that sometimes make exclusive formal definitions of it look decidedly chimerical. The very term urbanization is highly relative because it has only such meaning as we have given to it. The realities of such a process are made more difficult to perceive, however, by the sheer force of the city within our culture, its capacity to enable things to be seen or experienced there and nowhere else, its openness to confluences of every kind, that make it necessary to study not merely processes but perceptions. This is where so much of the excitement, both in terms of scholarly interests and of the definition of scholarly fields, really begins. For in generating impulses for innovation - for new institutions, new types of social and political organization, new theories and programmes - the city gives rise to two things. First, it creates an adrenalin of multifarious ideas about itself that course through the written record and activate people and institutions alike to such a degree that the images they embody of themselves or others become inextricable parts of the realities to which they relate: which is which

becomes problematical to an extent hitherto unknown. Secondly, it makes a lot of ground for the history of ideas, not so much about itself, but through its institutions and its experience about the changing levels and varying penetration of ideas about society in general: the historical perception of the urban world becomes subsumed by the movements of ideas themselves.

This is where urban history threatens to defeat itself. Ironically, it is at the point where the study of urban history becomes a study of the city as the independent historical variable that it becomes most vulnerable to the charge of becoming a portmanteau subject. The obverse of this is equally true: the study of the city as the dependent variable, the outcome of larger forces commonly studied more explicitly by demographers and economic historians, is not the stuff to ignite a demarcation dispute. In the other case what we see is something quite different, however, for here the very success of urban history has to be measured in terms of its contribution to a more general understanding of the period or problem to which its findings belong and which are taken up and applied, say, by social or economic historians before coming back into the hands of urban historians in the shape of further questions about the urban context concerned. What has to be accepted is that the academic disciplines impinging on the history of urbanization and the city are in a condition of multilateral trade in which the raw materials and half-finished products pass to and fro in a mutually productive way. It is scarcely surprising that it is in the study of the city that so many intellectual interests should converge nor that what characterizes their best interconnections should be a continuous feed-back between them.

Such connections are being made less often than they might be. One reason for this simply is that the full urban dimension of a given social phenomenon, especially for the nineteenth century, still tends in this country to be wrapped up in a purely institutional treatment without regard for its specifically urban formative influences. The extent, for example, to which the social problems and policies and tendencies of the Victorian city were rooted in that urban experience, and the extent moreover to which social reformers created their problems and opportunities out of it by defining their fields of operation, are not yet subject to the broader, more anthropological approach being practised more freely on the other side of the Atlantic. Michael Katz, in his superbly controlled work, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West* (1975), demonstrates this potentiality particularly well, for example, in the chapter he has written on growing up in the city, in which he shows how a concept like adolescence is a product of the transition from rural to urban society and is traceable on the ground by reference to the evidence on boarding out and the like. Though there are other things that might be said about it, Stephen Yeo's study of the organizational and inspirational devices used by an institution like the church in a place like Reading to combat apathy, *Religion and Voluntary Organisation in Crisis* (1976), must exhilarate urban historians for a similar reason because he drives paths through some very tangled undergrowth and emerges with a far wider view of the influence of urban institutions than he could possibly have obtained otherwise. How much more pertinent to both urban history and the wider history of society is this kind of exploitation of what might be deemed social history material within the context of an actual place than the fashion that has recently sprung up to sweep every social particle under the indiscriminate mat of modernization. Here, if you like, is a label masking a void that can give no direction to research into the historical development of urban society unless and until it is given a strictly formal meaning. In the meantime it merely detracts from the study of the ways in which the city has independently shaped society.

It cannot be said that either 1975 or 1976 were vintage years for urban history. James Bater's *St Petersburg: Industrialization and Change* (1976), offered us some entirely new insights into the functions and forms assumed by a city ill-adapted for industrialism and raised important questions about the

strains this imposed. Bill Williams, **The Making of Manchester Jewry, 1740-1875** (1976), likewise addressed the city directly and provided the best analysis yet of the intrusion of a whole new alien stock into modern urban society. We should also salute the unstinting completion by A. Temple Patterson of his trilogy **A History of Southampton, 1700-1914**, vol III: **Setbacks and Recoveries, 1868-1914** (1975), and relish all over again the reappearance of A. J. Youngson **The Making of Classical Edinburgh, 1745-1840** (1966), the most impeccable reconstruction of its kind, in paperback. In the pre-modern period the most important publication was the long-awaited M.D. Lobel (ed.), **The Atlas of Historic Towns**, vol. II (1975), which is notable both as a landmark for European cartographical scholarship and symptomatic of an awakening interest in topography that would do well to carry this financially hamstrung project forward, more deservedly for its maps than for its commentaries, though James Campbell's account of Norwich is singularly stimulating. Urban archaeology is still crowding on sail and Colin Platt and R. Coleman-Smith (eds), **Excavations in Medieval Southampton, 1953-1969** (1975), is a small squadron of galleons laden to the gunwales with booty of variable quality, among it all some data about living standards before and after 1200 culled from waste pits that point to the beginnings hereabouts of a truly urban economy in which many things were brought into the town from outside. Colin McWilliam, **Scottish Townscape** (1975), which suggests some interesting parallels between the built form of English and Scottish towns, particularly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, makes the urban history of Scotland available in succinct form to the student for perhaps the first time, and this must be applauded. So, too, must E. C. Papenfuss, **In Pursuit of Profit: The Annapolis Merchants in the Era of the American Revolution, 1763-1805** (1975), for a reason that should not be so exceptional: here is well-sustained analysis of a place that experienced both growth and decline. For the rest, readers must consult not only the ever-swelling reviews of books and articles and the bibliography below but the substantial survey assembled in this issue on the present condition of urban history in North America. There is an object-lesson, too, in the paradox contained in the survey we have included of amateur historical research now being conducted into the history of various parts of London. For all its purely expressive functions within the experience of authors and local communities alike, this probably now constitutes a more direct and productive approach at the very face of urban institutions than most of what is being done by the academically-trained local historians, whose interests move more naturally towards the pre-urban end of the scale. There is both more and less in what Raphael Samuel has to say about the investigation of urban communities from the inside, experientially as he would say, in his article in the first issue of **History Workshop** (Spring 1976) than we have space for here, except to hope that it may be widely read.

As promised, this issue is larger than its three predecessors and the **Yearbook** will now remain at its present size indefinitely. Inflation, along with the cost of another 32 pages, has raised the level of the subscription and we can but hope that this is still tolerable to our subscribers. We regret having to part with Penelope Corfield from this issue owing to her commitments as Assistant Editor to the **Economic History Review** and thank her for all her help but welcome Derek Fraser in her stead. Clyde and Sally Griffen have intimated that they must relinquish their role as overseas correspondents and we thank them also for what they have done. The editorial work continues to be widely shared among us but the main responsibilities for this issue have been divided as follows: reviews, David Reeder (books), Peter Clark (articles); conferences, Derek Fraser; bibliography, Diana Dixon and Anthony Sutcliffe; research, H. J. Dyos.