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Communing with 'the laity': exceptionalism, postmodernism and the urban biography*

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For as historians are compelled to grind out their specified quota of specialized articles and inaccessible monographs, which are at best read only by a handful of professional colleagues, and are at worst almost completely ignored, this makes them less and less able to fulfil that essential public function which remains their real and abiding justification: satisfying the interest and furthering the comprehension of that broader, non-professional audience memorably described by Hugh Trevor-Roper as 'the laity' (David Cannadine, 1999).[1]

Historians have for long tried to produce work that is at once academically respectable and popular. Even the best of them have found it a difficult task. Take, for example, the comments of the distinguished Oxford medievalist, E.A. Freeman. In the late 1860s, whilst planning a major study of the Norman Conquest, he described to a friend the challenge that lay before him: 'I have to make for my text a narrative which I hope may be intelligible to girls and curates, and in an appendix to discuss the evidence for each point in a way which I hope may be satisfactory to Gneist and Stubbs.'[2] Almost a century and a half later, historians may choose to express the problem in very different terms, but for at least some the question raised by Freeman remains as pertinent as ever: is it possible to write 'cutting edge' history which has a relevance extending beyond the narrow confines of the Academy?

In significant respects, it may have become increasingly difficult to answer in the affirmative, for recent years have witnessed a number of

* John Belchem, *Merseypride: Essays in Liverpool Exceptionalism*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000. xviii + 228pp. 14 illustrations. 6 tables. Index, £27.95 hbk; £11.95 pbk.
Susan George, *Liverpool Park Estates: Their Legal Basis, Creation and Early Management*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000. xvi + 165pp. 13 illustrations. £15.95 pbk.
Charles Pam, *Edmonton in the Early Twenties*. Edmonton: Edmonton Historical Society, 1999. iii + 27pp. illustrations. £2.50.
Michael Harrison, *Bournville: Model Village to Garden Suburb*. Chichester: Phillimore, 1999. xvi + 272pp. 161 plates. Bibliography and index. £17.99.

[1] 'Making history now – an inaugural lecture', www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Whatishistory/cannadine.html (accessed March 2002).

[2] Bodl. Ms. Eng. Lett. d. 74, ff. 106–9, 24 Nov. 1867. Cited in P. Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional: Antiquarians, Historians and Archaeologists in Victorian England, 1838–1886* (Cambridge, 1986), 81.

historiographical trends that have served only to widen the gap between 'the popular' and the 'the academic'. As David Cannadine has observed, there are pressures at work which tend to problematize the relationship between professional scholars and their non-specialist audience. The Research Assessment Exercise, for instance, may have encouraged a 'culture of productivity', but, in Cannadine's view, it has done so by making it less likely that historians will produce those 'big' books which represented years of painstaking research and deep thought: books such as E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* and Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* which were so successful at embracing both academic and non-academic readerships. Meanwhile, the impact of postmodernism has placed further obstacles in the way of those authors wishing to engage with the latest theoretical debates whilst communing with 'the laity'; the 'discourse' of postmodernity, its guiding assumptions and questions, are often profoundly alienating for all but the most committed of readers. If Freeman baulked at the prospect of pleasing his mid-Victorian peers and public, how much more difficult would he have found the challenge if he had simultaneously to satisfy the followers of Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard?

Those interested in testing the vitality of the link between the popular and the scholarly could do much worse than turning to the field of urban history, for there has been a strong tradition of professional historians writing about Britain's towns and cities in an accessible fashion. If the items under review are any guide, urban biography is a genre that is still able to bring the scholar and the general reader together. In part, this is a result of postmodernism's limited impact upon British historians.[3] Notwithstanding the claims of theorists such as Keith Jenkins, even if postmodernism now has all the intellectual resources we need to make sense of the past, present and future, the majority of scholars appear content enough to operate as if it was business as usual.[4] They may well be the best placed to take their histories to the widest of audiences. However, as the books considered below demonstrate, empiricism is no guarantee of 'an easy read'. By the same token, there are signs that it may yet be possible to engage with the postmodernists in a way that can be digested by the interested non-specialist.

John Belchem's *Merseypride: Essays in Liverpool Exceptionalism* displays all the hallmarks of the author's long-standing critical engagement with the linguistic turners. As such, it is an fine example of how historians

[3] For a discussion of how one such subject area – Welsh labour history – has remained largely untouched by the challenge of postmodernism, see A. Croll, '"People's remembrancers" in a postmodern age: contemplating the non-crisis of Welsh labour history', *Llafur: The Journal of Welsh Labour History*, 8, 1 (2000), 5–17. Interestingly, there are signs that fields which have hitherto resisted the siren calls of the linguistic turners are beginning to reassess their hostility. See, for instance, C.G. Brown, 'A brief defence of postmodernism', *Scottish Labour History*, 36 (2001), 3–5.

[4] K. Jenkins, *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity* (London, 1999), 2.

can still write meaningful and lucid prose, whilst taking full notice of postmodernism. It is also an object lesson in how to avoid lapsing into antiquarianism, a sin most likely to be committed by those who become bewitched by what is different and 'special' about their chosen urban settlements.[5] Belchem resists this temptation, first, by analysing the nature of Liverpool's exceptionalism rather than simply assuming it and, second, by adopting a comparative approach where appropriate. A major world port in which the influence of the so-called 'Celtic fringe' has been particularly pronounced, the city has been notably receptive to un-English ideas (such as syndicalism and American music). In deconstructing this distinctiveness, the author ranges widely: aspects of the social history of the Liverpool-Irish take up the bulk of the book; there are cultural histories of the 'Scouse' accent and the development of a Liverpudlian historiographical tradition; the city's significance as a stronghold of popular Toryism in the early Victorian period is also considered.

The argument developed throughout is one which, in parts, would please the most ardent of postmodernists. References are often made to concepts and assumptions generated by the linguistic turn. Language, for instance, is taken seriously as a tool that creates identities. Moreover, there is an emphasis throughout on such touchstones of postmodern thought as fracture, multiplicity, otherness and dissonance. Nevertheless, John Belchem does not succumb to the sort of excesses (both of thinking and expression) that can sometimes mar the work of the most hard-line of postmodernist scholars. On the contrary, he is often rather more concerned with 'expos[ing] some limitations of the fashionable "linguistic turn" in historical studies' (p. 31). He contends that if texts are important, so too are the material contexts within which they are written. For example, in a chapter charting the history of 'Scouse', Belchem draws attention to the 'ambivalence and tension between cultural representation and socio-economic materialism' (p. 32). Liverpool had to wait a surprisingly long time before it had its own instantly recognizable accent. Unlike Cockney, which has a long pedigree, Scouse is a late arrival – yet another 'invented tradition'. Belchem sees it as a cultural response to economic decline in the twentieth century; as such it could be employed by outsiders to understand and marginalize the Liverpudlian experience (thus, 'whingeing' Scouse militants could be dismissed as un-English). Contrariwise, inhabitants of the city embraced Scouse as a means of expressing a whole thought-world defined in terms of a fatalistic sense of humour and a collective solidarity. The author detects an 'inverse pride' at work, as the stereotypically feckless Irish immigrants were accepted within Scouse culture as 'foundation character[s]' (p. 56). Generally assumed to be too lazy to articulate their words correctly, these poor inhabitants of the slums are frequently viewed as the originators both of the accent and the distinctive *mentalité*. Belchem

[5] M.J. Daunton, *Coal Metropolis: Cardiff 1870–1914* (Leicester, 1977), 147.

reveals the erroneous nature of this assumption; whilst the Irish may have contributed much to Scouse culture, they should not be seen as the sole creators of the Scouse accent. He also exposes a paradox at the heart of all things Scouse. Notwithstanding the manner in which the culture revels in its supposed lowly origins, it has been singularly unable to accommodate black Liverpudlians. In the author's words, the 'language of Scouse is not without privilege, prejudice and exclusion' (p. 64).

Belchem returns to the relationship between text and context in a chapter that considers the historiography of the city. He finds that historians have been to the fore in articulating understandings of Liverpool's exceptionalism. One such was Ramsay Muir, a lecturer (and later a professor) in modern history at Liverpool University who, in the early 1900s, set about working on a series of volumes to mark the 700th anniversary of the granting of letters patent to the borough in 1207. His histories – which managed to meet the needs of a diverse readership – encouraged Liverpudlians to revel in their city's former insignificance, for only by recognizing the unremarkable qualities of that history could the truly remarkable developments of recent years be fully appreciated. But for all Muir's success at contributing to the historiography of the port and thereby elaborating a potent version of 'Merseypride', he too failed to generate an inclusive understanding of the city's history. Belchem shows how his failure has been replicated by those historians who followed him. Thus the contribution of the Irish is often celebrated (albeit usually in unflattering terms), but the roles of West Indians, Africans and Chinese (amongst others) who have made their homes in the city for generations are frequently overlooked. The legacy of the slave trade is of especial relevance here, and Belchem reveals how a number of writers sought to incorporate that episode into their narratives. Muir, writing during the prosperity of the Edwardian era, could afford to lambaste the city's Georgian slave traders for their philistinism and their barbarity. His confidence in his city's future growth enabled him to weave historical narratives that confronted shameful episodes head on. In contrast, those writing in the troubled 1920s and 1930s – decades that saw the port's fortunes dip dramatically – looked to the past for more comforting messages. In their hands, the real lessons from the dark days of Liverpool's involvement in the slave trade were contained in the speed with which the port recovered fromthe collapse of the trade in 1807. This, they suggested, demonstrated the adaptability of the city, and the entrepreneurial spirit of its citizens – qualities that were required once again to effect a return to better days: clear examples, then, of texts being shaped by their material contexts.

The longest section of *Merseypride* is devoted to the study of aspects of the experience of the Liverpool-Irish, and here, too, exceptionalism emerges as a key concept. Whereas the idea of 'ethnic fade' is now regularly employed to comprehend the processes by which the majority of

Irish immigrants settled in Britain, those who made Liverpool their home have commonly been dismissed as an underclass that did not assimilate so easily. The author puts forward a convincing explanation of why so many of the immigrants chose the slums of Liverpool over the apparently brighter prospects offered by other urban centres. Building on the work of historical geographers, Belchem adopts a cultural approach which allows new insights to be gleaned. By studying the support networks offered by such institutions as the Irish pub and the Catholic church, he demonstrates how the decision to stay in the port could be perfectly rational and not the unthinking response of 'the dregs' of immigrant society. The Catholic parish became an important focus for charitable activities and collective mutuality, and such an institution of social security provided many of the Irish with good reasons to stay in their 'ghettos'. Belchem's contentions are all the more compelling because of the comparative framework utilized in the historiographical essays at the end of the book. Given the Liverpool-Irish are so difficult to fit into the 'mainstream' historiography of the Irish in Britain, the best comparisons are to be found abroad in ports such as Boston. This approach allows the author to situate his study of Liverpool's exceptionalism within an international context and strengthens his arguments significantly.

An altogether more limited set of issues relating to the city's history are examined in Susan George's *Liverpool Park Estates: Their Legal Basis, Creation and Early Managemen*t. The book, which began life as an M.Phil. thesis, details the role played by the restrictive covenant in the development of three Liverpool park estates – Fulwood, Grassendale and Cressington Parks – all of which were established in the middle years of the nineteenth century. As the author explains with admirable clarity, the restrictive covenant developed in the context of rapid urban growth. At a time when the built landscape of a city could change both profoundly and swiftly, potential tenants or purchasers were engaged in an inherently risky venture. Within a few years, a property situated in a formerly salubrious quarter could find itself located in a 'low' neighbourhood as a consequence of the planning decisions of others. Although renting was still far more common than purchasing, the well-to-do amongst Liverpool's citizens were beginning to think in terms of finding a home for life, and the land law of the early decades of the century could offer them few of the guarantees they sought. In particular, while the law did have something to say about obnoxious smells or objectionable noises, an inhabitant could freely offend a neighbour's 'sense of sight' (p. 30). It was against this background that the restrictive covenant evolved in the 1830s.

The first section of *Liverpool Park Estates* concerns itself with this process of evolution. Various cases and precedents are discussed, often in a detailed fashion. The second section goes on to provide an account of the rise of the three estates. The social reasons for their growth are briefly touched upon as are the various problems experienced by the entrepreneurs who were to

the fore in developing them. Nonetheless, this is primarily a work of legal history and George connects the two sections with an argument about the effectiveness of the restrictive covenant. She contends that it worked remarkably well, and it helped to secure the status of the estates throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In framing her work in such a way, she has written a book that will probably have more to offer the legal historian than those interested in the social history of suburbanization. At times, for instance, the legal technicalities can prove difficult for the non-specialist to digest. Generally, however, the author does a fine job of making the jargon comprehensible. A more ambitious study may have attempted to situate itself at the confluence of a number of historiographies; the social and cultural origins of the three estates could have been dealt with in a more comprehensive manner, as could the relationship of Liverpool's experience regarding the growth of the suburbs to other urban centres: was Merseyside once again exceptional? One suspects not, but a wider focus would at least have enabled this important question to be broached.

A settlement whose exceptional virtues have long been celebrated is Bournville. They are fully considered in Michael Harrison's *Bournville: Model Village to Garden Subur*b,another fine example of an urban biography that manages to cater for both an academic and general readership. Packed with illustrations and written in lucid prose, the book is the result of extensive research through the archival holdings of the Bournville Village Trust. The first full-length study of its sort to appear since the 1950s, its main focus may be local, but throughout the author successfully situates developments at the Bournville estate within wider regional and national contexts. The story that unfolds is a compelling one that is well told.

Work began on the Bournville model village in 1895 under the watchful eye of its author, George Cadbury – entrepreneur, Quaker and philanthropist. Acutely aware of the housing crisis that condemned large swathes of the urban population to life in the industrial slums, Cadbury initiated a great utopian experiment that has continued, albeit in constantly evolving forms, down to the present day. From the outset, the estate was an expression of the very latest thoughts in housing design, and Harrison – a historian of urban planning – is at his best when describing the numerous innovations which marked Bournville out as distinctive. He begins by considering the contribution of the early surveyors and architects – individuals such as A.P. Walker and W.A. Harvey, who were heavily influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement and who reacted strongly against what they thought was the ugliness of the industrial city. Whilst they could welcome the slow eradication of the courts and alleys that characterized the early and mid-Victorian city, they still recoiled in horror at the new by-law suburbs with their 'characterless' terraced houses that began to appear in the latter decades of the century. Such figures also deemed residential segregation by class to be unhealthy. Thus Cadbury and his architects began work on bringing to life a 'sober and disciplined

re-creation of the pre-industrial village' (p. 70), based on the development of a cottage plan which was rendered visually interesting by the use of different façades and the careful positioning of buildings. In an effort to keep the prices of these cottages down to reasonable levels, Harvey skilfully blended art with economy, although some of the trustees were concerned that he was more interested in the former than the latter and by 1904 funds were low enough to require the start of a more economical phase of the building programme. This tension between aesthetically pleasing and innovative designs on the one hand, and a need to keep costs down to levels affordable to the working class on the other, recurred throughout Bournville's history.

While much of this early history is familiar, Harrison continues his story beyond the First World War, and it is at this point that the main thrust of his argument becomes apparent. For rather than confining Bournville's significance to those early years, he suggests that the estate and its developers continued to make important contributions to a number of debates about housing and planning throughout the twentieth century. Of course, in key respects, its ability to do so was undermined as a consequence of the changing national and regional contexts. Hence, Bournville's distinctiveness was undoubtedly eroded by the general improvements in the quality of housing stock as a consequence of such policy initiatives as Addison's Housing and Town Act of 1919, the construction of increasing numbers of council houses and the experiments with garden suburbs and garden cities elsewhere. But Harrison convincingly argues that the estate's continued presence acted as a stimulus to those supporters of innovative housing schemes. In 1946, for instance, Lewis Mumford – a commentator famously contemptuous of the industrial city – thought Bournville interesting enough to merit a visit, and was highly impressed with what he found. And later, in the 1950s and 1960s, the trustees saw themselves as making key contributions to the ongoing debates about the new towns being developed throughout Britain. Even after the 1967 Leasehold Reform Act worked to eat into the trust's powers, Bournville still managed to retain its reputation as a site of innovation with projects to develop a solar village and special needs accommodation amongst its more interesting initiatives.

Nevertheless, the estate was always much more than just an experiment in the design and construction of houses; it was also an exercise in philanthropy, social reform and, at times, paternalism. In Harrison's rendering, Cadbury emerges as an enlightened entrepreneur who was motivated by a genuine concern for the working class. However, the author does recognize that power relationships were enacted from the outset. The selling of alcohol was banned on the estate, there were sustained efforts to promote the virtues of domesticity, and Elizabeth Cadbury – George's wife – would visit new residents in their home to remind them of their collective responsibilities. Furthermore, each household was issued

with 'Suggested Rules of Health': pork, alcohol and tobacco were to be avoided, single beds were recommended as 'double beds are now little used in civilized countries' (p. 78), and walking, gardening, cold baths and breathing through the nostrils with the mouth closed were all advocated. Such snippets whet the appetite of the social historian, but those interested in the philanthropic and paternalistic dimensions to the Bournville project are likely to be left wanting more. The latest insights generated by students of philanthropy go unnoticed by Harrison (indeed, even older insights, such as the tired notion of 'social control' are left out of the story).[6] Meanwhile, the residents all too rarely get to speak for themselves. Historians of planning have long been criticized for ignoring the ways in which urbanites made use of the spaces that were created for them.[7] To be fair, Harrison does make a concerted effort to include the residents' opinions on a range of issues but he usually does so by referring to what the trustees thought the residents were thinking. While there is nothing wrong with this *per se*,oral history interviews would have (literally) allowed their voices to be heard more clearly and added another dimension to this already impressive study. As it is, we are left with just a few tantalizing first-hand accounts of the resentment some (perhaps many?) could feel as a consequence of frequently being at the receiving end of the trustees' sermons. As one inhabitant remarked in the 1970s, 'it has finally been realised that we have all come of age and don't need a father figure any more' (p. 180). Future research might reveal earlier generations of Bournville residents were equally mature.

The extent to which the Bournville experiment succeeded is something of a moot question. Despite the architects' attempts to keep down costs, rents were always too high to enable the most needy of Birmingham's slum-dwellers to sample the estate's delights. Many working-class residents, after successfully making the move from their terraced houses to Bournville's cottages, shuddered at the prospect of having neighbours of a lower social status than themselves; elitism, far from being absent in this *News from Nowhere*-style model village, could be rife. Meanwhile, the trustees themselves have been criticized for not doing more to encourage non-white citizens to take up residency on the estate. But, as Michael Harrison makes clear, when judged from the point of view of the urban planner, Bournville has served as an important indication of where the cutting edge has been in the design of British social housing at any given moment in the twentieth century.

Just how successful Harrison has been at blending the academic with the popular becomes all the more apparent when it is compared with an

[6] A.J. Kidd, 'Philanthropy and the "social history paradigm"', *Social History*, 21, 2 (1996), 180–92.

[7] See M.J. Daunton, 'Public place and private space: the Victorian city and the working-class household', in D. Fraser and A. Sutcliffe (eds.), *The Pursuit of Urban History* (London, 1983), 212–13.

example of a piece of writing conceived within the antiquarian paradigm. Charles Pam's *Edmonton in the Early Twenties* is a classic example of such a work, consisting as it does of the text of two talks originally delivered to local history societies. The first (and most relevant for the purposes of this review) details the origins of a garden suburb constructed in the wake of Addison's Act of 1919. Edmonton Urban District Council's first foray into the provision of municipal housing, the Hyde estate, bore all the distinctive hallmarks of the Arts and Crafts movement. As at Bournville, the art versus economy debate was to play a decisive part in shaping the fortunes of the estate, but in this case it was a Labour-dominated council, as opposed to a group of paternalistic trustees, at the helm. The council pushed ahead with its ambitious programme, emboldened by the terms of the Act which provided for a partnership between central government and local authorities with the former footing most of the bill for any houses built. The first 24 properties were of a high quality, and all – including the smallest – had three bedrooms, bathrooms, hot water and inside WCs. They were also generously provided for in terms of surrounding land, with slightly fewer than 12 houses occupying each acre of land. However, against the backdrop of Addison's replacement by Alfred Mond, and a resultant economy drive on the part of the Ministry of Health, Edmonton councillors came under increasing pressure to reduce costs. Rather than capitulate to such demands, the Labour members 'fought obstinately for what they thought were the housing rights of the working class' (p. 11). They did this by charging even lower rents for their properties than their counterparts in Poplar; in the process, they ensured that at least a few of the most needy in Edmonton were rescued from the slums and provided with decent accommodation.

The works under review all demonstrate, in their different ways, that the urban biography is in rude health. At one extreme, Pam's paper is an example of the continued vitality of the antiquarian tradition. The exceptional nature of a settlement is unashamedly celebrated rather than problematized or analysed. Some doubt whether such work should be thought of as residing in the realm of historical scholarship at all. Certainly, *Edmonton in the Early Twenties* is as much an exercise in nostalgia as it is an historical enquiry; the narrative is peppered with references to the author's own childhood on the estate, asides to his readers pointing out local landmarks now long since gone and references back to a golden age when sweet-shop owners stood guard over a treasure trove of acid drops, humbugs and sherbet-lemons. Moreover, Pam's complete disinterest in historiographical, methodological and theoretical issues clearly separates him from the other authors under consideration here. But it also means that he is perhaps best placed to transmit his message to the non-specialist audience. Unencumbered as he is by concerns about postmodernism or the arguments of other historians, he can spend his time entertaining his readers.

Belchem, George and Harrison, in contrast, have had to wrestle with the challenge that so exercised Freeman in the 1860s: how to keep a general readership satisfied whilst simultaneously engaging with an audience of fellow professionals? For those historians unmoved by the exhortations of the postmodernists to follow them around the linguistic turn, the task is undoubtedly simplified. George and Harrison represent the great majority of British historians who have managed to practise their craft without worrying about the latest post-structuralist assault. Such scholars may feel reassured by the observations of one reviewer that postmodernism is already beginning to look a bit 'old hat'.[8] But even if one puts such issues to one side, other more workaday problems remain to be solved. Most pressing, from the point of view of the urban biographer, is the question of exceptionalism. Here Harrison scores highly. The very *raison d'être* of his book is a consideration of the exceptional nature of the Bournville experiment. The same can be said of John Belchem's work. Both historians are surely right in approaching the question of urban exceptionalism from the point of view of particularities rather than typicalities. Given the plural nature of the British urban experience, all settlements are necessarily typical in some respects, untypical in others. By identifying what is particular about a settlement and locating it within the wider local, regional, national and (in Belchem's case) international contexts, real insights into its exceptional character can be harvested. John Belchem's book is all the more impressive for the manner in which it manages to develop an argument that directly connects up with the linguistic turners, points out the errors of their ways, cultivates its own postmodern sensibilities in the process *and* manages to commune with 'the laity' at the same time. E.A. Freeman would have probably settled for that.

[8] A. Callincos, review of Keith Jenkins, *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity*, in *American Historical Review*, 106, 4 (2001), 1323–4, quotation on 1323.