

Editorial

The appearance of the **Urban History Yearbook** marks an important and exciting stage in the development of its subject, not only in this country but wherever it is studied. The study of the urban past is no new thing but what has been so striking about it in the course of the last decade or so has been the almost overwhelming growth in the numbers of scholars taking part in it and the immensely wider range of topics and techniques they have been pursuing.

That has been breathtaking to watch, but such an expansion also has its dangers. One is that its momentum and sense of direction may become harder to maintain, so that what had once appeared as a distinct and defensible corpus of study could easily become smudged and discredited. This is widely recognized. The whole purpose of the **Yearbook** is, therefore, to sustain the disciplined approach to the study of urban history, to encourage the sharper definition of its objects and the pioneering of more precise analytical techniques, and to provide a thorough information service for its practitioners covering current research and publication across as wide a field as can properly be handled.

As will be clear from a glance at the contents of this first volume, the **Yearbook** is not to be another outlet for the publication of research papers as such: these must continue to find their expression in the established academic journals which have been open to them hitherto. It will concentrate instead on bibliography and the current state of research, using the findings of research primarily to illustrate new methods of conducting it or to pose new problems in the interpretation of sources, and reporting the proceedings of conferences and colloquia chiefly to the same end. The geographical scope of the **Yearbook** must of necessity be biased towards Great Britain in the first instance, but as soon as possible this will be extended more equitably to the rest of Europe, North America, and other parts of the world. It is hoped to have a number of overseas correspondents associated with the **Yearbook** by the time the next issue appears. Among the other matters that it will also try to keep in view are the pedagogic possibilities of the subject, not least the challenge it offers of interdisciplinary work.

Happily, the rise of urban history has not led to a rash of demarcation disputes between academic disciplines, despite the clearly growing sense of corporate identity among urban historians - whether they are inclined to speak of themselves as such or only to engage in their activities part-time. In a sense, the **Yearbook** is an expression of this remarkable sense of identity. It first expressed itself, of course, in the United States, where it became a clearly established field of study from the 1930s.¹ In Britain this development occurred after the war rather than before it,² but the first practical steps toward a conceptual framework and an institutional organization for urban history were taken in this country in the early 1960s, only shortly after similar initiatives in the United States.

The first thing to happen was the establishment, in 1963, of the **Urban History Newsletter**, edited (as it still is) by H. J. Dyos at the University of Leicester. Then, in 1966, came the first meeting of British urban historians, together with guests from abroad, at the University of Leicester. This conference, whose proceedings were published in 1968 under the title **The Study of Urban History**, was said by one reviewer to have "put urban history on the map", and so it seems. The 40 scholars who attended were merely the advance

guard of over 400 researchers who were already engaged on various aspects of urban history. Since 1966 meetings of the Urban History Group - a loosely-associated group of scholars and institutions held together simply by participation in these conferences and by subscription to the **Newsletter** - have become annual events. The numbers attending have swollen year by year, while the total of active researchers has risen to some 700. There is no denying it: urban history is booming, not only because it is fascinating in itself but because it offers a whole battery of new themes relevant to the study of history at large.

Looked at globally, the content of that history is heterogeneous in the extreme, and the study of it divided into such a wide variety of styles as to imply questions almost of an epistemological kind. The city biographer approaches the subject from one direction and the exponent of the 'new' urban history from another. The first does so on the assumption that the most significant elements of urban life comprise a unique combination for each place. The second does so in the belief that they are not distributed spatially in such a way as to justify even the separation of urban history from social history at large, let alone be used to explain localized urban idiosyncracies: he is inclined to think they require instead the formulation of more general statements about processes bringing about more pervasive social changes. These approaches are not perhaps as incompatible with each other as they may seem, but between them stretches a narrower range of further possibilities, the complete spectrum appearing to offer some four or five distinct genres in urban history. In the United States, where these distinctions have acquired overtones that sometimes border on the ideological, conflicting interpretations of the city and its place in the national development of the whole community have tended to become more polarized than in Britain.³ Here, there has been very little methodological discussion, and open disagreement between urban historians of different persuasions has been neither sought nor avoided.⁴

Yet urban historians do seem to be facing a quite fundamental problem. They must set due limits to their subject if they are to have one, and they must set them wide enough to allow not only for the exceptional range of disciplines that must contribute to its understanding but for the almost infinite diversity of phenomena that belong to the urban past. That is their dilemma. Numerous as they are themselves, urban historians can no longer demonstrate the extent of their field merely by referring to their own numbers. They must find for it a more convincing definition. Urban history has already been criticized for the catholicity of its approach and for its implied contention that here is a field that may properly be distinguished from the broader history of society.⁵ The very breadth of its scope, taken with the almost electrifying speed at which it has grown, have already raised some suspicions that here is something of a bandwagon - indeed, the editor of the **Urban History Newsletter** was some time ago likening its progress to a juggernaut that threatened to crush its worshippers under its load.

In the context of an urbanizing or urbanized society the interests of urban history and social history are bound to converge at obvious points. Sidney Pollard has sharpened this convergence rather more in his review of the recently-published symposium on the Victorian city. He claims that the various concerns of social historians overlap most obviously in urban history, "since the town not only concentrated most of what was new in the social life of the people of Britain but, apart from some specific aspects of rural life like agriculture, modern British social history is urban history."⁶

As yet, no fully convincing solution has been presented to the dilemma of catholicity and breadth versus specificity and definition; indeed, with urban history still in rapid evolution perhaps no conclusive answer should be sought. H. J. Dyos, however, gave some attention to this problem in his inaugural lec-

ture as the first Professor of Urban History to be appointed at a British university. As the most comprehensive statement of the current range and objectives of urban history his remarks, abstracted from a rather fuller statement, are very apposite here:

Urban history, it must be now be clear, is a field of knowledge, not a single discipline in the accepted sense. . . It can have, therefore, no absolute tests of admissibility, unless and until we can be quite clear what we mean by 'urban' and are confident that we can define it in exclusive terms. There's the rub. The very nature of the case, the varying conventions established by usage, and the materials by reference to which such a category could be upheld, all work against such a neat solution. . . .

We certainly lack a suitable lexicographer's definition of what is urban, nor perhaps do we yet want one: our best definitions are likely to remain operational ones. We still know too little about the distinctive attributes of urban communities to be able to identify them accurately in comprehensive historical terms, and indeed that is, in one sense, what urban history is all about, or should be - clarifying and defining by whatever theoretical or empirical means seem most promising the differences between the forms and behaviour of urban communities, both in themselves and over and against rural communities. . . .

But urban historians also express embarrassment on account of the considerable variety of approaches that are being made in their subject. I do not think they need do so. On the contrary, the lack of agreement as to whether to pursue the ecological approach that stems from Robert Park and Louis Wirth, as developed by Otis Duncan and Leo Schnore, and more elaborately adapted by Eric Lampard; or the more generally environmental approach anticipated by Christopher Tunnard and altogether more explicitly handled by Sam Bass Warner Jr and Roy Lubove (an approach with which my own work may be most readily associated); or the approach through the comparative study of characteristic institutions as demonstrated by Asa Briggs, Julius Rubin, John Kellett, and Brian Harrison; or the approach through imagery in the manner of Anselm Strauss or Kevin Lynch or Raymond Williams; or the approaches through locational analysis of Alan Pred, David Ward, and Richard Lawton; or even the approach through first and last things, as understood by Patrick Geddes, Lewis Mumford, Jane Jacobs - or, for that matter, Spengler or Toynbee: the lack of agreement, I say, as to which of these, or other approaches, to follow gets neither rebuke nor dogmatic guidance from me. I find their catholicity positively healthy.

Two things only need now be said. One is that the growth of cities and the phenomenon of an urbanizing world together represent one of the largest historical dimensions of modern times, and that the urban content of that history, whether expressed implicitly or explicitly, is bound to increase and add to the challenge confronting urban history still more. The other is that as this happens the identity and the role of urban history will be more closely defined through the work of urban historians themselves, especially in the degree to which they seek out the differences within and between urban societies. What is, I think, already clear is that the authentic measure of urban history is the degree to which it is concerned directly and generically with cities themselves and not with the historical events and tendencies that have been purely incidental to them; and that, whether concerned with cities as more or less isolated or systematic or universal phenomena, it is the study of the characteristically symbiotic relationships of their different characteristics, of the ways in which their components fitted together or impinged on other

things, that distinguishes urban historians from those who may be said merely to be passing through their territory.

Their subject differs from local history to the extent that it is concerned with a more pervasive historical process, and from municipal history in being occupied with vastly more than certain types of local government; it differs, on the other hand, from social history in its quite specific commitment to explaining the development of both the urban milieu and its uses, and from sociology in its dominant concern with explaining the urban past; it differs, too, from its first cousins in this country, economic history and geography, in being more interested than they can afford to be, in their different ways, in the humanistic and functional elements composing the urban scene; and it differs, incidentally, from a variety of other historical specialisms, such as agricultural, industrial, business, transport, military, or town-planning history in not being concerned with specific forms of activity....⁷

In determining the scope of this **Yearbook**, the editorial committee have followed this lead and not attempted, as a matter of policy, to impose any precise criteria. We have excluded from the bibliography, for instance, only those writings which appeared to have little historical content and those which seemed to be more general than urban. Decisions about what was to go in and what not were left to the bibliographer working within the canons of the standard library classifications that exist. We foresee that it will be possible to establish coherent principles of exclusion only to the extent that practitioners of the subject define it more concretely in their own writings. That is already beginning to happen. Indeed, we are deliberately acting in the belief that the **Yearbook** will become one of the principal means of helping urban historians to clarify and explain the distinctive attributes of their subject-matter and approach. To this end, we hope to receive contributions that raise methodological issues explicitly, not as part of some partisan dispute but in order to help a more coherent view of the nature of urban history to emerge. That, too, is what reviewers will be encouraged to observe and criticise in published work.

As a contribution to this debate we intend discussing each year both the direction in which the subject may be seen to be moving and its general content. So it is this year. In this first discussion the ground covered has already formed the basis of the preceding paragraphs, but there are two things more to be said. One is that we see nothing to be gained from attempting to mark out rigid demarcation lines between the different historical studies concerned in some way or other with the development of towns and cities. What would be more realistic would be the effort to identify and bring out the kind of extra dimension which urban historians alone might be expected to bring to these studies. One thing which they above all others should be prepared to handle, for example, is the question how the structures and elements that are most palpably urban came about or underwent change. Their commitment as analysts of the historical elements in the ground plan and superstructure, and all the physical apparatus of urban social life, is bound to be greater than that of the social historian. In that respect the urban history content of a town or city cannot be the same thing as the social history content. Similarly, we rather think that one of the differences between those urban and local historians who are concerned with the last two centuries is that the former are more likely to be dealing with processes that extend beyond the boundaries of a particular community or region to embrace the whole population - with the macrocosm of an urbanizing world no less than the microcosm of a given locality.

We cannot pretend that these distinctions are at all clear-cut in our minds,

however. For one of us local history might be defined as a study of, first, the particular community in as many aspects as possible within its local context; secondly, the hierarchical structure of community organization and networks within identifiable regions; and, thirdly, the taxonomy of diverse community structures.⁸ Given that, the most serious local historians are as much concerned in all three aspects with structure and process and with identifying types of community as any urban historian is. But the critical problem for the local historian is how to deal with the kind of situation that developed in Britain in the nineteenth century and became more marked later: when community and locality could no longer be taken as congruent, and the traditional characteristics of community structure were giving way to patterns of social networks within a more generalized social structure. Much depends on what is meant by community - there are, it is said, no less than 94 definitions of the term - but it is not without significance that with regard to cities the star of local history undeniably goes down in the nineteenth century while that of urban history then begins to rise.

If urban history is to be represented as an operational salient of social history, it may not be seriously amiss to regard that part of local history which is concerned with the study of either small towns as wholes, or particular aspects of cities, as providing one important sector of urban history for the nineteenth century and later. Before that time, it is probably unnecessary to distinguish between the two approaches insofar as both are occupied with urban matters. Indeed, such distinctions are so often nullified by the demands of research that we are inclined to think they do not count for very much. What certainly counts for more is the mutual enrichment such perspectives provide. Urban historians can expect to benefit, for instance, from developments in the techniques of local history and especially from its perception of how people have lived in communities, above all in pre-industrial society. That would, among other things, help to redress the weight of research now thrown into the urban history of the nineteenth century and into the study of the larger places. Local history could certainly help to resolve some of the problems of chronology and size order (which sometimes coincide and sometimes do not) that are implicit in our conceptions of the urban past. Is it possible, for instance, to extend our conception of the urban past so as to embrace villages in the Middle Ages having a market grant and some evidence of burghality? The local historian's answer to that is to show us what significance to attach to features that differentiated these settlements from the countryside, and to remind us that 'urban' ought to be defined quite as much in terms of how contemporaries saw its distinguishing features as how we see them now.

The other thing that still needs to be said is that we lack sufficient comparative work in urban history. By this we mean not only comparisons of different places at the same time and of the same place over time, but also comparisons between different elements, institutions and phenomena, abstracted from different types of society. The most conspicuous shortcoming of all perhaps is any extensive study of institutions common to both rural and urban society. One reason for the late arrival of comparative study in this field is the great difficulty of mounting it. There are special problems in abstracting elements from the totality of a town or city in ways that do no violence to what are so often subtle and complex changes over time. Yet the chief reason for the halting progress in comparative urban history is that it is dependent on or presupposes appropriate models of urban development, or at least some typological framework into which to fit particular cases. There have been very few attempts indeed to erect any kind of general scaffolding for historical research based on particular cities and even fewer attempts by others to use them.

An absolute prerequisite for a typology of British towns, say, in the nineteenth century, is a thorough statistical survey of their basic features. It is open to question whether this could most usefully be done in present circumstances by a cross-sectional typology based on the published population returns for one census year, or whether it were better to aim at establishing norms based on aggregating the characteristics of different places derived by sampling from the census enumerators' returns. These exercises are conceptually and technically difficult, and run the danger of encouraging the study of purely numerical orders of magnitude which, when widely applied, could become an end in itself. What we have in mind ourselves is a much simpler exercise which could provide both a stimulus and a foundation for the further historical study of the process of urbanization. It is really to do no more than extend the work pioneered by William Farr in the nineteenth century and subsequently augmented by Adna Ferrin Weber. Such a task would aim at getting a simple tabular comprehensiveness and at making some quite basic correlations. Most of the data would come from the published census tabulations but other sources, including municipal ones, might also be tapped. In giving encouragement to such an idea we recognize that such a compilation could do no more than provide a basis for some of the most fundamental questions urban historians are bound to ask, and would, of course, be no substitute for subtler questions about the feel and quality of particular places that could only be answered by altogether more sophisticated methods. Still, the basis is much needed and systematic knowledge of this kind eminently worth having.

One last matter of importance - the ambiguities surrounding the position of urban history as a teaching subject in universities and conceivably polytechnics. Where should it fit in? One possibility is that urban historians might move towards a closer working relationship with those engaged in contemporary urban studies. It is already being argued with some force that there is a real future for first degrees in urban studies, a corpus that is broad and demanding enough to provide both a good general education and a firm preparation for those working in the various departments of contemporary urban life. Clearly, such studies would be seriously deficient if they lacked an historical element, and from what is known of the teaching of urban studies at large this is inclined to be a present deficiency. Even if courses of this type were to prove impractical within existing departmental structures, the role which urban history might theoretically play in such a programme of teaching gives some indication of the kind of definition of the subject which we are seeking. In fact, the Centre for Urban Studies at London University has already made some progress here, incorporating a certain amount of urban history already in its publications. But we believe this development could be pushed further. Against this there is the strong argument that urban studies are not themselves sufficiently differentiated from other more general studies of contemporary society. There is the greater danger also of distorting historical study by too great a pre-occupation with contemporary problems. We raise it, however, as an important issue and one perhaps in which the fortunes of the history of education have some bearing: for a long time this was left to small and scattered groups of specialists working in departments of education and has only recently come to be seen as something integral to the wider study of the history of society. Urban historians in Britain have, on the contrary, seen their field of study, almost from the start, in terms of the wider perspective.

We have done no more here than touch very lightly on one or two of the problems and opportunities now confronting urban historians. Other urban historians may well have other priorities. The *Yearbook* exists as much as anything as a forum for the exchange of information and ideas on the different methods and approaches being worked out, and for discussing sources and

types of evidence. If you have anything to contribute to these transactions we hope, despite present limitations of space, you will be ready to do so, and be prepared in any case to promote the proper study of urban history by keeping us informed of the progress of your own researches and using and commenting at least as readily on the contents of the **Yearbook** as ever its subscribers did for its forerunner, the **Urban History Newsletter**.

We should perhaps add that, though there has been no hard-and-fast division of our editorial labour, the chief responsibilities have been divided in the following way: reviews, Charles Phythian-Adams; bibliography, Diana Dixon and Tony Sutcliffe; research, Penelope Corfield and H. J. Dyos.

Notes

1. The most comprehensive bibliographical account of the development of urban history in the United States down to the mid-1960s is Charles N. Glaab, 'The historian and the city: a bibliographic survey' in Philip M. Hauser and Leo F. Schnore (eds), **The Study of Urbanization** (1965), 53-80, but the leading critical commentaries on it so far have been by Eric E. Lampard, 'American historians and the study of urbanization', **American Historical Review**, lxxvii (1961), 49-61, and 'Urbanization and social change: on broadening the scope and relevance of urban history' in Oscar Handlin and John Burchard (eds), **The Historian and the City** (1963), 225-47; A. F. Davis, 'The American historian vs. the city', **Social Studies**, lvi (1965), 91-6, 127-35; Dwight W. Hoover, 'The diverging paths of American urban history', **American Quarterly**, xx (1968), 296-317.
2. For a detailed historiographical account see H. J. Dyos, 'Agenda for urban historians' in **The Study of Urban History**, ed. Dyos (1968), 1-46.
3. The most recent contribution to this debate and perhaps also the most searching is Eric E. Lampard, 'The dimensions of urban history: a footnote to the "urban crisis"', **Pacific Historical Review**, xxxix (1970), 261-78, but the following all have valuable points to make: Oscar Handlin, 'The modern city as a field of historical study' in **The Historian and the City**, ed. Handlin and Burchard (1963), 1-26; Charles Tilly, 'The stake of urbanization', **Comparative Studies in Society and History**, x (1967), 100-113; Roy Lubove, 'The urbanization process: an approach to historical research', **Journal of the American Institute of Planners**, xxxiii (1967), 33-9; Sam Bass Warner Jr, 'If all the world were Philadelphia: a scaffolding for urban history, 1774-1930', **American Historical Review**, lxxiv (1968), 26-43; Richard C. Wade, 'An agenda for urban history' in **The State of American History**, ed. Herbert J. Bass (1970), 43-69; Dana F. White, 'The underdeveloped discipline: interdisciplinary directions in American urban history', **American Studies**, ix (1971), 3-16; Stuart M. Blumin, 'In pursuit of the American city', **Journal of Interdisciplinary History**, ii (1971), 173-8; Stephan Thernstrom, 'Reflections on the new urban history', **Daedalus**, c (1971), 359-75. For other references see Michael H. Ebner, 'The new urban history: bibliography of methodology and historiography', **Council of Planning Librarians Exchange Bibliography** No. 445 (1973), and Gilbert A. Stelter, **Canadian Urban History. A Selected Bibliography** [Laurentian University Social Science Research Publication No. 2] (1972), which is a good deal wider in scope than it might appear.
4. For some characteristic British approaches, see Asa Briggs, 'Historians and the study of cities', **George Judah Cohen Memorial Lecture** (1960), 3-24, and 'Urban perspectives: a review article', **Urban Studies**, iv (1967), 165-9; S. G. Checkland, 'The British industrial city as history: the Glasgow case', **Urban Studies**, i (1964), and 'Toward a definition of urban history', in **The Study of Urban History**, ed. Dyos (1968), 342-61; Richard Lawton, 'An

age of great cities', **Town Planning Review**, xliii (1972), 200-24.

5. See, for example, Sean Glynn, 'Approaches to urban history: the case for caution', **Australian Economic History Review**, x (1970), 218-25; and E. J. Hobsbawm, 'From social history to the history of society', **Daedalus**, c (1971), 20-45.
6. 'Two visions of the city' [review of **The Victorian City: Images and Realities**, ed. H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff (1973)], **Times Higher Education Supplement**, 7 September 1973.
7. H. J. Dyos, **Urbanity and Suburbanity** (1973), 20-5.
8. The basic approach of the local historian was originally set forth by H. P. R. Finberg, **The Local Historian and his Theme** (1952), but see also his chapter on that theme in **Approaches to History**, ed. H. P. R. Finberg (1962), pp. 111-25; also, the *locus classicus* of the subject, W. G. Hoskins, **Local History in England** (1959), and a more recent statement on the application of the comparative method in a lecture by Alan Everitt, **New Avenues in English Local History** (1970).