

# Introduction: Wales, a new agenda for urban history

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The publication in 2000 of the three-volume *Cambridge Urban History of Britain* presented British urban historians with an ideal opportunity to take stock of the current state of research in their discipline. For Welsh urban historians it raised a number of particularly thorny issues. Whilst it contained some important chapters focused exclusively on the history of Welsh towns, it also identified Wales as one of the most under-researched areas of urban Britain.<sup>1</sup> This special issue, dedicated specifically to Welsh urban history, has been conceived in part as a response to that finding. It also represents the collective efforts of scholars, new and established, whose research on urban Wales was presented at a conference on 'Understanding Urban Wales' at the University of Wales Swansea in September 2003. The event demonstrated the existence of a healthy 'critical mass' of scholarship, at both postgraduate and postdoctoral level, on Welsh towns and their development.

The contributors to that conference and to this volume are, of course, far from being the first generation of researchers to focus on the urban history of Wales. Neil Evans' article in this volume sets out in detail the historiographical tradition upon which the current crop of Welsh scholars has been able to draw. Nevertheless, there has been, even from some of the most significant contributors to Welsh urban history, an uncertainty about the place of towns in the country's evolution. Historical geographer Harold Carter, in his contribution to the pioneering round table conference on urban history organized by H.J. Dyos at Leicester in 1966, described Wales as 'a small country to which town life was completely alien'.<sup>2</sup> Thirty-four years later, in his survey of 'Wales' in the second volume of the *Cambridge*

<sup>1</sup> P. Clark, 'Introduction', in P. Clark (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. II: 1540–1840 (Cambridge, 2000), 20–1.

<sup>2</sup> H. Carter, 'Phases of town growth in Wales', in H.J. Dyos (ed.), *The Study of Urban History* (London, 1968), 231.

*Urban History of Britain*, Philip Jenkins suggested that 'before about 1760, the towns that mattered most were not located on Welsh soil'.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, historians of the medieval period have conducted some of the most fruitful studies of Welsh towns, revealing the eleventh and twelfth centuries to have been a period of significant development in Welsh urban life.<sup>4</sup> The problem here has been essentially one of identity. The castle towns established in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, first by Anglo-Norman colonizers, and later during the Edwardian conquests, symbolized an apparently inseparable connection between urbanization and English influence. By focusing on this period, then, it has been possible to view Welsh towns as 'expressions of the domination of English culture in Wales'.<sup>5</sup> Contemporary writers like Gerald of Wales confirmed this view of towns as an alien tradition, claiming that the Welsh preferred not to live in them. Towns, in effect, made the Welsh outsiders in their own country and gave English incomers rights and privileges which set them apart from, and elevated their status above, the Welsh. Although in some parts the Welsh adapted, compromised and co-operated with the post-conquest regime, there was also a heightened sense of racial tension in the face of growing inequality in the rights and privileges enjoyed by Welsh and English in urban Wales.<sup>6</sup> No wonder that Welsh historians have had difficulty in coming to terms with the idea of a 'Welsh' urban history.

The idea that the towns of Wales were entirely the products of English conquest and plantation has not gone unchallenged. Harold Carter's 1965 study of *The Towns of Wales* dealt specifically with origins and revealed that it was usually sites with an 'existing tradition of being local capitals' which were utilized for development by incoming settlers in post-conquest Wales.<sup>7</sup> The same theme was explored by later historians. In his study of *The Towns of Medieval Wales*, Ian Soulsby examined Roman and Celtic, as well as Norman, contributions to Welsh urban development.<sup>8</sup> The Roman connection was a feature of urbanization common throughout medieval Europe, not least in France where 'many towns grew on the sites of Roman settlements'.<sup>9</sup> Ralph Griffiths, meanwhile, has shown that there were also important examples of native Welsh urban traditions. Prior to Edward I's conquests Welsh rulers had themselves encouraged urban development, as evidenced in the growth of centres like Pwllheli, Tywyn and Caernarfon. Even apparently new creations such as Aberystwyth, the castle town established in 1277, could be linked to much earlier Welsh settlements, in this case the monastic site of Llanbadarn Fawr. Far from being excluded

<sup>3</sup> P. Jenkins, 'Wales', in Clark (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History*, vol. II, 133.

<sup>4</sup> R.A. Griffiths (ed.), *The Boroughs of Medieval Wales* (Cardiff, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> H. Swanson, *Medieval British Towns* (Basingstoke, 1999), 142.

<sup>6</sup> R.R. Davies, 'Race relations in post-conquest Wales: confrontation and compromise', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1974–5), 32–56.

<sup>7</sup> H. Carter, *The Towns of Wales. A Study in Urban Geography* (Cardiff, 1965), 20.

<sup>8</sup> I. Soulsby, *The Towns of Medieval Wales* (Chichester, 1983), 2–4.

<sup>9</sup> P.M. Hohenberg and L.H. Lees, *The Making of Urban Europe, 1000–1950* (London, 1985), 22.

from town life, Griffiths contended that 'Welsh-born burgesses were to be found in all Welsh towns and chartered boroughs' of which there were about 100 by 1300.<sup>10</sup>

The medieval papers in this volume continue very much in this new vein. Matthew Stevens' study of the Ruthin of Edward II is based on extensive use of the particularly good court records surviving for the period. Deploying two key indicators of property, wealth and juror status, Stevens shows that Welsh burgesses, though they were less wealthy than their English counterparts, were not excluded from participation in the legal administration of the borough. In fact his evidence suggests that there may have been a conscious effort to ensure that Welsh and English played an equal part in the administration of justice in Ruthin. These findings take on particular significance in the context of the post-conquest era when there was a tangible sharpening of Welsh identity,<sup>11</sup> although it remains to be seen whether these patterns at Ruthin, a town founded by a Marcher lord, were more relaxed than those of the royal plantation boroughs where restrictions on Welsh rights and privileges may have been more rigidly enforced.

Like Stevens, Spencer Dimmock's contribution utilizes an especially good set of contemporary records, this time property deeds for the town of Haverfordwest for the period 1270–1550, and a customs book for the port of Chepstow from 1535. Dimmock's focus is on function and trading patterns rather than on the 'racial' dimension but here, too, he finds scope for a significant reassessment of the dynamics of Welsh urban life in the medieval period. He suggests that the two towns enjoyed varied and extensive trading networks with neighbouring parts of Wales, the south-west of England and with parts of northern Europe. Chepstow, he argues, benefited from its position within a Marcher lordship where the custom duties charged on goods shipped in to port were only a fraction of those levied on goods landed in ports which paid their custom duties to the crown. Although 'cautious' about applying these findings more widely to other Welsh towns, Dimmock's research suggests that the wealth, functions and influence of small urban centres in late medieval Wales may have outweighed their modest population totals.

The double-genesis model (discussed later by Neil Evans) of Welsh urban history – that there were two basic phases when towns were created, the Norman Conquest and the Industrial Revolution – has particularly damning implications for the early modern period, which can emerge as a prolonged post-natal urban depression between two explosive moments of town gestation. This would particularly be the case if the view was

<sup>10</sup> R.A. Griffiths, 'Wales and the Marches', in D.M. Palliser (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. I: 600–1540 (Cambridge, 2000), 681–714.

<sup>11</sup> R.R. Davies, 'The identity of "Wales" in the thirteenth century', in R.R. Davies and G.H. Jenkins (eds.), *From Medieval to Modern Wales. Historical Essays in Honour of Kenneth O. Morgan and Ralph A. Griffiths* (Cardiff, 2004), 45–63.

taken that Norman urbanism was essentially an artificial implant upon an agricultural society not yet ready to receive it, so that in Harold Carter's words, 'the urban system created . . . was itself over-elaborate for the economic conditions which characterized the *succeeding* age. When the military prop was taken away, the economic was not yet strong enough, of itself, to sustain the whole urban pattern'.<sup>12</sup> To put it simply, it could be argued that Wales in the early modern period reverted to its essentially agricultural, sub-urbanized character, a view which is reflected in the observation by Philip Jenkins in his contribution to the *Cambridge Urban History*, 'to speak of "urban" history in Wales before the nineteenth century is perhaps to misuse the term'.<sup>13</sup> Anxiety about whether there is even a subject to be studied no doubt accounts for one of the major problems in venturing any comments on the general position of towns in Wales between 1500 and 1800, the paucity of systematic research on the subject.

Both Carter and Jenkins acknowledge that from early in the eighteenth century, but before the onset of the Industrial Revolution proper, there were important signs of urban development; Carter writes of 'interim stability' between 1700 and 1830 after two centuries of 'urban decay', and Jenkins refers to 'economic realignment and urban change' between 1720 and 1800, so that 'about 1790, there appeared the first Welsh urban network based on Welsh towns, and Welsh urban elites'.<sup>14</sup> Geraint Jenkins would push back development to an earlier point, contending that 'Welsh towns underwent a period of expansion and growth after 1660'.<sup>15</sup> But this still leaves Wales in the early modern period as a whole looking impoverished from the urban perspective. It is a perception strengthened by Philip Jenkins' contention that 'the "urban" proportion of the population of Tudor and Stuart Wales was barely 11 per cent' and that 'in Tudor Wales we find barely a dozen "real" towns with a 1,000 people or more'. John Davies expresses similar doubts about the reality of towns in the period when he suggests that although Wales 'had fifty-four centres which claimed some civic features most of them were little more than villages'.<sup>16</sup> G. Dyfnallt Owen detects a mixture of 'progress' and 'slow decline' among the country's Elizabethan towns, whereas Matthew Griffiths, adopting a distinctly more positive tone, sees Wales from the late sixteenth century enjoying 'a renaissance of town life', founded on an expanding agricultural economy, and a growth in sea-based and internal trade. However, he posits a general, though not universal, urban decline in the late medieval and early Tudor period – 'most towns . . . were smaller in 1550 than they had been two hundred years previously' – with the early sixteenth century possibly witnessing 'a period

<sup>12</sup> Carter, *Towns of Wales*, 33.

<sup>13</sup> Jenkins, 'Wales', 134.

<sup>14</sup> Carter, *Towns of Wales*, 32, 50; Jenkins, 'Wales', 140, 147.

<sup>15</sup> G.H. Jenkins, *The Foundations of Modern Wales 1642–1780* (Oxford, 1993), 119; *idem*, *Hanes Cymru yn y Cyfnod Modern Cynnar, 1530–1760* (Cardiff, 1983), 64–71.

<sup>16</sup> Jenkins, 'Wales', 134; J. Davies, *A History of Wales* (London, 1994), 268.

of urban crisis comparable to that suggested in the case of the much larger English provincial towns'.<sup>17</sup> The notion of a late medieval urban crisis in Wales has acquired plausibility from the idea of an inherently weak urban system being subjected to knock-out blows from the Black Death and the after shock of the Glyndŵr rebellion. But Ralph Griffiths in his contribution to the first volume of the *Cambridge Urban History* is at pains to play down the thesis of a late medieval urban crisis in Wales: 'there was a reordering, rather than a general decay, of urban life . . . Welsh towns were almost as populous in the early sixteenth century as they had been in the 1290s . . . There was still a thriving urban economy . . . Commerce, devolved administration, relative peace and integration of town and countryside sustained this vitality.'<sup>18</sup> Spencer Dimmock's article in this volume expresses similar scepticism about the crisis thesis. He also argues that Philip Jenkins' figure for the proportion of the population of Tudor Wales living in towns represents a 'significant underassessment', and challenges his definition of a 'real' town.

Debates about real towns and urban crises are familiar territory to historians of early modern England. It is over 30 years since the publication of *Crisis and Order in English Towns 1500–1700* (1972) signalled a remarkable surge of research on the early modern town (a subject that had previously been largely neglected in comparison to the town of the Industrial Revolution), and prompted a fierce debate over whether there was an early modern urban crisis. No consensus was ever reached on the issue, but its significance was soon overtaken by the appearance of a whole raft of other questions about the character of early modern urbanism. Out of this expanding research agenda there emerged a number of key points of relevance to the Welsh situation. First, there is no simple and universal urban story to tell. A town's experiences will vary according to factors such as size, typology, function, regional location and period. Second, despite their unique character, each town has to be understood as part of a series of urban networks.<sup>19</sup> Third, though size matters, it does not follow that biggest is best. Small, sometimes very small, places are capable of fulfilling urban functions; indeed, the resilience, success and sheer ubiquity of the small town – as late as 1800 almost three-quarters of mainland Britain's 1,000 towns had populations of under 2,500 people<sup>20</sup> – during and beyond the early modern period has been one of the most

<sup>17</sup> G.D. Owen, *Elizabethan Wales: The Social Scene* (Cardiff, 1962), 92; Matthew Griffiths, 'Country and town', in T. Herbert and G.E. Jones (eds.), *Tudor Wales* (Cardiff, 1988), 77, 80.

<sup>18</sup> Griffiths, 'Wales and the Marches', 699, 714.

<sup>19</sup> P. Borsay, "'Urban network'" as a concept in English urban history', in H.T. Gräf and K. Keller (eds.), *Städtelandschaft, Réseau Urban, Urban Network: Städte im Regionalen Kontext in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Cologne, 2004), 1–15.

<sup>20</sup> J. Langton, 'Urban growth and economic change: from the late seventeenth century to 1841', in Clark (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History*, vol. II, 471.

important discoveries of recent research.<sup>21</sup> Fourth, for many of these small towns the critical relationship was that with the surrounding countryside, highlighting the frequently close interaction between the urban and rural spheres. Fifth, the shake up in the urban system normally associated with the Industrial Revolution was already evident in England from the later seventeenth century. Sixth, between 1500 and 1800 London underwent an extraordinary cycle of growth, that saw it rise from a medium-ranking European city to one of the three largest metropolises in the world. An important event in its own right, this had enormous implications for the British urban system as a whole. Finally, a purely Anglo-centric view of urban history has severe limitations. There is a need to think in terms of urban systems and networks that stretched throughout Europe's Atlantic archipelago, and beyond.

The dearth of research into early modern urban Wales means that even the most basic building blocks, such as population history, are missing. The uncertainty is reflected in the fact that in the *Cambridge Urban History*, whereas Philip Jenkins places the urban proportion of Tudor and Stuart Wales at 'barely 11 per cent', John Langton's figures for seventeenth-century Wales as a whole are 33 per cent, comprising of about 25 per cent for north-east and south-east Wales, and 47 per cent for mid and west Wales.<sup>22</sup> Much of received wisdom as to Wales' early modern urban population is based upon a pioneering paper, not itself specifically focused on towns, by Leonard Owen, that is now almost 50 years old, and inevitably contains assumptions about matters such as conversion ratios that have been overtaken by more recent research.<sup>23</sup> In such circumstances it is not surprising that the two early modern contributions to this special issue by Nia Powell and Robert Anthony feel the need to devote much of their attention to demography, and in Powell's case to propose an important revision of Owens' estimates which points to higher levels of urbanization in seventeenth-century Wales than his figures suggest.

Population is clearly one of the most pressing issues on the research agenda for early modern urban Wales. However, it is important that this does not lead into the trap that there is an absolute demographic definition of a town, which can be applied to all places at all times. Geographical context is vital, and it is clear that in societies with low density populations and upland terrains even tiny settlements can operate very effectively individually as towns, and collectively as part of wider urban networks. It is a point Geraint Jenkins recognized when he argued that 'Welsh

<sup>21</sup> See especially P. Clark (ed.), *Small Towns in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1995); A. Dyer, 'Small market towns 1540–1700', and P. Clark, 'Small towns 1700–1840', in Clark (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History*, vol. II, 425–50, 733–73; P. Borsay and L. Proudfoot (eds.), *Provincial Towns in Early Modern England and Ireland: Change, Convergence and Divergence*, Proceedings of the British Academy 118 (Oxford, 2002), chs. 3, 5, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Clark (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History*, vol. II, 134, 463–5.

<sup>23</sup> L. Owen, 'The population of Wales in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1959), 99–113.

towns were of far greater significance to the economy than their modest size... might suggest'.<sup>24</sup> The crucial variables are not size but economic and social function, and inter-urban links. We should not expect towns, and the urban systems of which they are a part, to be the same in Scandinavia, northern Italy or south-east England, and the notion of a 'real' and 'unreal' town, in some universal sense, is misleading. That said, it is also illusory in the case of Wales to think in terms of a discrete urban system. Early modern Wales, as Philip Jenkins has pointed out, was intimately tied into a series of wider urban networks. One of these looked across the sea to Ireland, but three others – deploying coastal and road links – turned towards England: a northern network traditionally based on Chester, but also increasingly Liverpool; a central network based on Shrewsbury, and to some extent Ludlow and Hereford; and a south-west network with the provincial metropolis of Bristol at its heart.<sup>25</sup> These networks were themselves tied into a wider English and indeed international economy. Nia Powell's article highlights the centrality of connections with England to the prosperity of Wales' small towns. Significantly, she also suggests, despite the substantial presence in Wales of an upland pastoral economy, that in terms of *connectivity* its towns were far more like those of lowland England than of Europe's northern periphery. Swansea's demographic growth in the eighteenth century, charted in this volume by Robert Anthony, depended heavily upon its economic links with the west of England mining (especially copper) industry, and the infrastructure of towns that supported that industry. Moreover, the fashionable towns of Somerset and Devon also provided clientele for Swansea's business as a smart resort.<sup>26</sup>

Further research will need to establish how these regional networks operated, and the extent to which an independent Welsh network was able to emerge within this wider framework. What is important is to be aware that even if the core town in these networks was English, the networks themselves were *Anglo-Welsh*. Towns like Chester and Shrewsbury depended heavily for their prosperity and status on their Welsh connection.<sup>27</sup> They serviced the needs of both their English and Welsh customers, and it is significant that the first centre of Welsh-language

<sup>24</sup> Jenkins, *Foundations of Modern Wales*, 116.

<sup>25</sup> W.E. Minchinton, 'Bristol: metropolis of the West in the eighteenth century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 4 (1954), 69–89.

<sup>26</sup> G. Williams (ed.), *Swansea: An Illustrated History* (Swansea, 1990), 23–35; L. Miskell, 'Intelligent Town'. *An Urban History of Swansea, 1780–1855* (Cardiff, forthcoming); D. Boorman, *The Brighton of Wales* (Swansea, 1986), 3.

<sup>27</sup> W. Champion, *Every Day Life in Tudor Shrewsbury* (Shrewsbury, 1994), 25, 32–6, 74–6, 95–8; D. Defoe, *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, first pub. 1724–6, ed. G.D.H. Cole and D.C. Browning, 2 vols. (London, 1962), vol. II, 75; J. Stobart, 'County, town and country: three histories of urban development in eighteenth-century Chester', in Borsay and Proudfoot (eds.), *Provincial Towns*, 179–86; I. Mitchell, 'The development of urban retailing 1700–1815', in P. Clark (ed.), *The Transformation of English Provincial Towns 1600–1800* (London, 1984), 260–2, 276.

printing was established in early modern Shrewsbury.<sup>28</sup> It is also significant that one of the power-houses of the Welsh cultural renaissance of the eighteenth century was London and its Welsh community.<sup>29</sup> Unlike early modern Scotland or Ireland, Wales had no indigenous capital, and its access to the metropolitan network that covered the British Isles was through London.<sup>30</sup> This highlights the fact that Wales' vital urban connections stretched beyond its immediate borderlands. Wales as a cultural as well as an economic entity contributed to and benefited from its associations with the world's most dynamic metropolis. However, it should also be recognized that the success of London depended upon it being at the centre of not just an English but a *British* and global urban system.

For the post-1750 era, the second of Carter's two 'genesis' periods for Welsh towns, there is at least a substantial foundation of scholarship upon which Welsh urban historians can base their work. The explosive growth of urban settlements in the industrial areas of Wales means that the century and a half leading up to the First World War has been the focus of historical writing which has the development of urban life at its heart, even if, as Neil Evans explains, such work was not consciously defined as 'urban history'. Much of the research into the economy, labour relations, politics and society of south Wales in particular is valuable to an urban historian.<sup>31</sup> Equally, in-depth studies of crime and social unrest are in existence,<sup>32</sup> as is an expanding corpus of work on immigration, which has examined the multi-ethnic composition of Wales' expanding industrial towns and challenged the notion of Wales as a 'tolerant nation'.<sup>33</sup> Historians such as Gareth Williams have studied many aspects of the changing urban culture of Wales, including sport and music, and its implications for national identity,<sup>34</sup> while a major research project has recently shed new light on

<sup>28</sup> Jenkins, *Foundations of Modern Wales*, 215–17.

<sup>29</sup> Prys Morgan, *A New History of Wales: The Eighteenth Century Renaissance* (Llandybie, 1981), 56–62; E. Jones, 'The age of societies', in E. Jones (ed.), *The Welsh in London 1500–2000* (Cardiff, 2001), 66–83.

<sup>30</sup> P. Borsay, 'Metropolis and Enlightenment: the British Isles, 1660–1800', *Journal for the Study of British Cultures*, 10 (2003), 149–70.

<sup>31</sup> P.N. Jones, *Colliery Settlement in the South Wales Coalfield* (Hull, 1969); W. Minchinton, *Industrial South Wales, 1750–1914* (London, 1969); L.J. Williams, *Was Wales Industrialised?* (Llandysul, 1995), and see many relevant contributions to the valuable journal of Welsh social and labour history, *Llafur*.

<sup>32</sup> D.J.V. Jones, *The Last Rising: The Newport Insurrection of 1839* (Oxford, 1985); G.A. Williams, *The Merthyr Rising* (London, 1978).

<sup>33</sup> N. Evans, P. O'Leary and C. Williams (eds.), *A Tolerant Nation?* (Cardiff, 2003); P. O'Leary, *Immigration and Integration: The Irish in Wales, 1798–1922* (Cardiff, 2000); U. Henriques, *The Jews of South Wales* (Cardiff, 1992); P. O'Leary (ed.), *Irish Migrants to Modern Wales* (Liverpool, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> W.R. Lambert, *Drink and Sobriety in Victorian Wales* (Cardiff, 1983); P. Stead, 'Amateurs and professionals in the cultures of Wales', in G.H. Jenkins and J.B. Smith (eds.), *Politics and Society in Wales, 1840–1922* (Cardiff, 1988); G.W. Williams, *Valleys of Song. Music and Society in Wales, 1840–1914* (Cardiff, 1998); G.W. Williams, *1905 and All That. Essays on Rugby Football, Sport and Welsh Society* (Llandysul, 1991); M. Johns, *Soccer and Society: South Wales 1900–1939* (Cardiff, 2002).



the contentious issue of the connection between urbanization and language change.<sup>35</sup>

There exists an especially rich body of literature on the burgeoning industrial centre which exemplified the problems and dangers of urbanization in the minds of so many contemporary British commentators: Merthyr Tydfil. Scholars from various disciplines have studied such diverse topics as Merthyr's spatial geography, sanitation, class structure, social relations and popular culture, as well as the notorious rebellion of 1831.<sup>36</sup> The article by Bill Jones in this volume adds a new dimension to our understanding of this archetypal industrial town by analysing perceptions of emigration and urban decline in the late nineteenth century, particularly as articulated in the press. Far from epitomizing the typical Welsh industrial pattern of growth and expansion up until 1914, many Merthyrians perceived their town to be in decline, at least in relative terms, and expressed complex and sometimes contradictory attitudes towards an emerging trend for young people to leave Merthyr for pastures new in Wales or abroad.

Jones's contribution, however, does much more than add another layer to the rich historical writing on Merthyr. Ideas concerning the interrelationship and hierarchy of Welsh towns are also addressed, and this work has much to contribute to an emerging body of literature on the battle between various towns to be seen as the Welsh metropolis. In contrast to nations such as England and France, it was by no means clear which town would rise to pre-eminence among the growing urban centres of Victorian Wales. The ways in which the press and local politicians sought to advance the claims of their town and define the characteristics of a 'metropolis' reveals much about civic identity, its complex relationship with notions of Welshness and Britishness and the attitudes of urban elites.<sup>37</sup>

While research in some areas may be thriving, there remain large and important gaps in the historiography of modern Welsh towns. Most notably, there are substantial areas of Wales whose urban life has not

<sup>35</sup> G.H. Jenkins (ed.), *Language and Community in the Nineteenth Century* (Cardiff, 1998); D. Baines, *Migration in a Mature Economy: Emigration and Internal Migration in England and Wales, 1861–1900* (Cambridge, 1985); B. Thomas, 'A cauldron of rebirth: population and the Welsh language', *Welsh History Review*, 13, 4 (1987); I.G. Jones, 'Language and community in nineteenth-century Wales', in *Mid-Victorian Wales: The Observers and the Observed* (Cardiff, 1992), 54–79.

<sup>36</sup> Williams, *Merthyr Rising*; H. Carter and S. Wheatley, *Merthyr Tydfil in 1851. A Study of the Spatial Structure of a Welsh Industrial Town* (Cardiff 1982); C. Evans, *The Labyrinth of Flames: Work and Social Conflict in Early Industrial Merthyr Tydfil* (Cardiff, 1993); I.G. Jones, 'Merthyr Tydfil: the politics of survival', *Llafur*, 2 (1976), 18–31; A. Croll, *Civilizing the Urban. Popular Culture and Public Space in Merthyr, c. 1870–1914* (Cardiff, 2000).

<sup>37</sup> L. Miskell, 'The making of the new "Welsh Metropolis": science, leisure and industry in early nineteenth century Swansea', *History*, 88, 1 (2003), 32–52; N. Evans, 'The Welsh Victorian city: the middle class and civic and national consciousness in Cardiff, 1850–1914', *Welsh History Review*, 12, 3 (1985), 350–97; J. Wilson, '"The Chicago of Wales": Cardiff in the nineteenth century', *Planet*, 115 (1996), 14–25; H. Thomas, 'Spatial restructuring in the capital: struggles to shape Cardiff's built environment', in R. Fevre and A. Thompson (eds.), *Nation, Identity and Social Theory: Perspectives from Wales* (Cardiff, 1999), 168–88.

been subjected to any recent analysis by urban historians or scholars from related disciplines. The neglect of the interesting and diverse towns of north-east Wales, which have not been studied in detail since the work of A.H. Dodd in the 1950s, is the most glaring omission.<sup>38</sup> The slate-quarrying towns of Gwynedd should also be fruitful subjects for future research. Although some may quibble that these settlements, given their small size and the continuing connection of their inhabitants with agriculture, should not be classified as towns, Merfyn Jones has argued persuasively for the existence of distinctively 'urban' forms of culture, politics and social organization in places such as Blaenau Ffestiniog, which lay in sharp contrast to their surrounding hinterland.<sup>39</sup> The important coastal resorts of Wales await serious study comparable with that of John Walton and others on England, and even the large coastal and valley-mouth towns of the south have not been studied in as much depth as might be expected.<sup>40</sup> Some important themes have also been neglected. Welsh historians have yet to pay full attention to issues such as the urban environment, transport and commerce. Visual and literary representations of the town – in both of the languages of Wales – remain under-researched, as does urban architecture and planning in the early twentieth century.<sup>41</sup>

Neil Evans' article serves as a comprehensive critique of the existing literature on Welsh towns, and partly attributes this uneven coverage – both in terms of regions and themes – to the domination of modern Welsh urban historiography by issues of class and proletarian social organization. This focus is understandable, given the remarkable and fascinating social dynamics of the emerging urban societies of industrial southern Wales. According to historians such as Ieuan Gwynedd Jones and Gwyn A. Williams, the peculiar circumstances of industrialization in early iron towns such as Merthyr Tydfil and Ebbw Vale, and in the mining communities which developed in the mid-nineteenth century, gave rise to a distinctive type of urban community. The resulting towns were dependent on one industry, industrialists held an unusually firm grip on political and economic power, and the topography of south Wales gave rise to ribbon housing developments clustered around the place of work. As a result, it is argued, such towns developed independent working-class

<sup>38</sup> A.H. Dodd, *The Industrial Revolution in North Wales*, 2nd edn (Cardiff, 1951); A.H. Dodd, *A History of Wrexham* (Wrexham, 1957).

<sup>39</sup> R.M. Jones, *The North Wales Quarrymen: 1874–1922* (Cardiff, 1981).

<sup>40</sup> Work by Martin Daunton, Neil Evans and John Davies on Cardiff are notable exceptions, and a forthcoming monograph by Chris Williams on Newport will be an important contribution.

<sup>41</sup> Some important, but isolated, exceptions to these generalizations include E. May, 'Coal, community, town planning and the management of labour: south Wales, c. 1900–1920', *Planning Perspectives*, 11 (1996), 145–66; P. Lord, *Industrial Society* (Cardiff, 1998); P.N. Jones, 'The South Wales Regional Survey 1921: a reassessment after sixty years', *Cambria*, 8, 2 (1981), 17–32. As Neil Evans explains in his contribution to this volume, issues of post-war regeneration and urban renewal have been addressed by scholars in the fields of geography and planning, notably Huw Thomas.

types of social organization in the relative absence of a middle class, and gave rise to distinctive forms of culture and social relations. South Wales has therefore been at the centre of international discussions among historians, sociologists and anthropologists concerning the nature of 'frontier societies' ever since the work of J.L. and Barbara Hammond in the inter-war period, and more recently in the comparative research of David Gilbert.<sup>42</sup>

While Andy Croll's excellent recent work on culture and civic space in late Victorian and Edwardian Merthyr may have offered an important alternative perspective on such towns, the focus on 'frontier societies' has generally tended to obscure the fact that many towns in Wales featured more complex structures of class and power.<sup>43</sup> The concentration on the supposedly single-class industrial communities of the south Wales valleys has, for instance, led to the neglect of the important themes of elites, urban governance and civic politics. Such issues, which have formed part of the mainstream agenda for urban historians in Britain and elsewhere for many years, have only been subjected to sporadic attention by Welsh historians. In his history of modern Bangor, Peter Ellis Jones commented that 'local government has not been a particularly fruitful field for historians. This is especially noticeable at the borough and urban district level . . . Only after a number of comparative studies of small towns has been undertaken can general principles be established.'<sup>44</sup>

Julie Light's article in this volume is therefore welcome as a valuable contribution to our understanding of urban politics in Wales and the debate concerning the problematic concept of the 'Welsh middle class'. As well as being an exploration of the nature of civic elites and notions of the 'ideal councillor' or 'public man' in the tradition of the work of Richard Trainor and Peter Hennock,<sup>45</sup> Light's detailed study of local politics in late Victorian Pontypool and Bridgend also places emphasis on the role of the individual in the public life of a town. The recent research of Light and others has made comparative studies of urban elites and governance in Wales a much more feasible proposition, and such investigations can only add to an increasing corpus of historical work on the small town in Britain.<sup>46</sup> Detailed research of this type will also act as

<sup>42</sup> D. Gilbert, 'Community and municipalism: collective identity in late-Victorian and Edwardian mining towns', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 17 (1991), 257–70; D. Gilbert, *Class, Community and Collective Action: Social Change in Two British Coalfields, 1850–1926* (Oxford, 1992).

<sup>43</sup> Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*.

<sup>44</sup> P.E. Jones, *Bangor, 1883–1983: A Study in Municipal Government* (Cardiff, 1986). For further recent research on small town governance see J.W. Pritchard, 'A set of noodles not fit to be trusted', *Old Denbighshire*, 45 (1996), 41–58, on Denbigh.

<sup>45</sup> E.P. Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons: Ideal and Reality in Nineteenth Century Urban Government* (London, 1973); R.H. Trainor, *Black Country Elites: The Exercise of Authority in an Industrialized Area, 1830–1900* (Oxford, 1993).

<sup>46</sup> S.A. Royle, 'The development of small towns in Britain', in M. Daunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. III: 1840–1950 (Cambridge, 2000), 151–84.

a foundation for exploration into other aspects of civic identity and the exercise of power and authority at a local level, such as civic performance and ritual. This formed an important theme at the 'Understanding Urban Wales' conference which inspired this volume, and was one of many areas identified as promising future avenues of study.<sup>47</sup>

This volume as a whole, therefore, should be considered as a response by historians working in Wales to the weakness of Welsh urban history in recent years, and should hopefully mark the beginning of a new and productive era in the study of towns in Wales. As well as addressing directly some areas of urban development which have been wholly neglected, or in which a revision of received interpretations is long overdue, this special issue also aims to highlight several areas in which further research on Welsh towns is particularly needed. As has been argued, the crude measure of population size to determine what is to be classified as 'urban', which has perhaps deterred Welsh historians from engaging in the mainstream of urban history, is no longer valid. Future generations of historians can feel confident that greater analysis of the Welsh urban experience, in all its variety, seems set to produce both a greater understanding of Welsh society and an important contribution to urban history in Britain and beyond.

<sup>47</sup> P. O'Leary, 'Processions and urban space: Corpus Christi in Cardiff, 1872–1914', unpublished paper delivered at the 'Understanding Urban Wales' conference, Swansea, 10 Sep. 2003. A research project on the themes of urban ceremony and identity in south Wales is now being undertaken at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, under the supervision of Dr O'Leary, funded by the University of Wales Board of Celtic Studies. For comparable work on other areas of the UK, see for instance S. Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class* (Manchester, 2002).