The issue of the status of settlements has long been contentious, particularly in Britain where the title 'city' has been fought for, and jealously guarded by central government. It is a royal honour, although the monarch has rarely rejected the advice of the relevant minister. This is not so everywhere, and in North America, for example, the term is applied to quite small settlements provided that they possess a charter of incorporation. 'In the United States every village is a "City"', as a civil servant wrote in 1888. The distinction between 'incorporated' and 'unincorporated' can be quite meaningful, especially in recent years of suburban expansion. Beckett is concerned to explore why, peculiarly in the UK, there is this odd status symbol. It is not alone, and Beckett also charts the issue of the relationship with the Anglican church ('will we have to build a cathedral?', as an office worker said in newly promoted Preston in 2002), the title of lord mayor, a quite separate honour that might be accorded to cities of some years' standing, and finally the title of 'Right Honourable' to which only some lord mayors are elevated. He says that 'these debates have seldom penetrated the public imagination' (p. 2). The book, a far more interesting read than I had envisaged, belies this.

Beckett structures his argument and examples chronologically. Following an introductory overview, dealing among other issues with the 'ancient prescriptive right' of certain places to city status – although that seems often forgotten in the case of Bangor – the first chapter and period, 1888–1914, is seen in terms of civic rivalry. This is the period of recognition of the rapid industrial growth of industrial towns such as Liverpool and, most particularly, Manchester. The link with new Anglican diocese creation was still maintained, hence the elevation of Ripon and Wakefield. This link was broken with the promotion of Birmingham and others – incidentally often having substantial Nonconformist populations, as civil servants noted – between 1888 and 1914. Such places sought the status as marks of growth, of civic governance, of public works (Chamberlain's Birmingham meets all these criteria) and some marked it with major public buildings (Cardiff's civic centre). Rivalry remained, but Beckett distinguishes civic pride as a significant feature.

The inter-war period was one of continued growth, indeed often of suburban sprawl; but the Home Office, the department responsible for such constitutional issues, refused to countenance city status indiscriminately on places having achieved the informal guideline of a population of 300,000. Further new diocesan sees were also refused city status. Yet the title became associated with national and international status and place promotion and, to allow it to be bestowed on the few places felt worthy at this time, the informal population criterion was repeatedly lowered.

Following the World War II status-seeking became more intensively politicized and allied with civic boosterism. Beckett identifies two periods, 1945–69 and 1970–2000. The example of Southampton, where a local MP drove the agenda for party political gain (the retention of his seat by his party) marks the first period. Then came the reassertion of civil service control, and the strengthening of the link between city status and royal events. This had, to some extent, been evident before, where royal connections had tipped the balance in several cases. King George V 'found reasons for making additional grants, often in defiance of Home

Office policy and sometimes even in contradiction of earlier statements of his own' (p. 75), to the frustration of civil servants clearly attempting to keep a lid on the bids for this status! But Swansea was finally elevated on Prince Charles' investiture as Prince of Wales, and he was reluctantly persuaded to present the Letters Patent in person, making the acerbic comment that the mayor had better 'look after it as well as possible. All I can say is, if he loses it, he is unlikely to get another one' (p. 115). The final two substantive chapters focus on the extension of this royal link with the Millennium competition and the Golden Jubilee competition. City status, like so much else since Thatcher, had become a matter for competition.

This neatly links many themes in city growth, management, (self-)image and promotion throughout the twentieth century. Its detailed use of national and local archives charts the rise of some places, the continual disappointment of others (particularly Croydon) and the machinations of local politicians and ministry civil servants in revealing detail. It does nothing to inspire confidence in the judgment or consistency of the Home Office, corporately or individually, throughout this period. Leicester was rejected on at least two occasions because its approach to smallpox was not favoured by government (p. 65). Boston was described as 'unimposing (bordering on sordid)' (p. 94). It is still difficult to discern why the historical city of St Asaph is no longer a city, why Rochester lost the title purely through local government reform and why certain Scottish settlements simply do their own thing. But so does Milton Keynes.

Overall, the book answers many of my questions on this strange title and the stranger reasons why it is seen as desirable and how it is granted (or not). As someone whose home town repeatedly sought this status, and saw it presented as a generic 'good thing', yet was pleased for some difficult-to-articulate reason when it was eventually granted in 2000, I found it a fascinating story. It is fluently told, supported by detailed archival research, profusely footnoted (although I felt that two were inaccurate). It is an excellent addition to the literature on civic politics, governance, place promotion, and for definitions of 'city'!

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Marcy S. Sacks' book is a welcome addition to African-American urban history. Sacks, associate professor of history at Albion College, posits that New York City's diverse African-American population established a vibrant community at the turn of the twentieth century. She focuses her study on the period of 1880 to 1915, exploring the ways in which New Yorkers – both black and white – responded to the explosion of an urban black population during that period. Through an examination of the 'internal workings of urban black populations' (p. 7), Sacks investigates the role blacks played in the formation of Harlem in the late nineteenth century and how they grappled with the increasing racism of the city's white population. This represents an effort to complicate previous studies that have focused on the creation of urban ghettoes yet assumed that blacks were not actors