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A Systematic History of European Cities and Towns

Peter Clark’s *European Cities and Towns, 400-2000* is a book with many virtues. It is broad in scope, clearly written, and reasonably priced. The book is divided into three chronological parts, with divisions at 1500 and 1800. The first part is the shortest, and the last part is the longest. Each chronological part is divided into five topical chapters: “Urban Trends,” “Economy,” “Social Life,” “Culture and Landscape,” and “Governance.” Each part ends with a useful summary. There is some cross-referencing but surprisingly little repetition in the topical chapters of each part. The book includes six maps and eight tables, most of which are in the third part of the book.

One of the strengths of *European Cities and Towns* is its broad geographical approach to European history. Clark devotes attention systematically to cities and town in four regions: western Europe, outer northern Europe, the Mediterranean, and eastern Europe. Mediterranean cities receive the most attention in the first part of the book, and those of western Europe get the most mention in the second and third parts. However, there are examples from all four regions throughout the book. In addition to dividing the cities and towns by region, Clark discusses them by function. He mentions capitals and court cities the most, but also gives attention to ports, industrial centers, and specialist urban centers, such as those with a military or leisure function. Spas and tourist centers figure prominently in the final part of the book. In discussing manufacturing in the past two centuries, Clark emphasizes the importance of small-scale, workshop industries even during temporal periods that are normally presented as having been dominated by factories and other large-scale establishments.

Clark pays attention to the ways in which the experiences of urban populations are affected by such factors as gender, age, class, and place of birth. This contextualization is particularly effective in the chapters on social life and governance. He concludes that cities that have a history of welcoming immigrants and are tolerant of diversity have fared better than those that were hostile to newcomers. A recurring theme in the book is that cities and towns have been forced periodically to innovate in order to survive challenges to their prosperity. In these crises, the innovators have often been outsiders by one measure or another.

Two other important themes in the book are the rise and fall of the authority of urban planners and the entanglement between municipal and national (and now European Union) authorities. On the whole Clark presents a positive picture of the accomplishment of urban authorities. He concludes that “[c]reativity and innovativeness... have indeed been one of the distinctive features of European cities to the present time” (p. 366). He finishes with hopeful comments about the first decade of our new millennium, and suggests that the cities of outer northern Europe (Scandinavia, Scotland, and Ireland) are faring best.

One limitation to the book is that it does not include reference notes to lead a reader directly to the sources of comments and quotations. There is, however, a gener-
ous bibliography, divided by chapter, consisting mostly of English-language sources. This organization allows readers of all academic levels to delve further into specific topics treated by Clark. This book should serve a variety of readers interested in urban history and European history well.

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