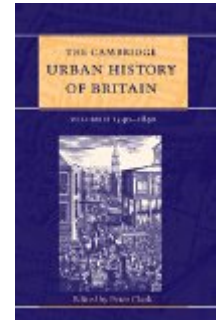


Peter Clark, ed.. *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain. Volume II 1540-1840.*
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. xxvii + 906 pp. Â£95.00, cloth, ISBN
978-0-521-43141-5.



Reviewed by Roey Sweet

Published on H-Urban (December, 2000)

The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, of which Peter Clark is the general editor, represents a major achievement of collaboration and scholarship, and will indubitably become a fundamental work of reference for all those engaged upon the study of the British town. This is the second volume of three which will span the evolution of English, Scottish and Welsh towns from a comparative perspective from the seventh to the twentieth century. The series offers an urban counterpart to that other major authoritative survey of economic and social history, the *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, edited by Joan Thirsk (and similarly priced at a level beyond the reach of most individuals). The object is to present an up-to-date view of the main research literature, issues and questions in the field, and to provide 'both a route map to past and present researches on the early modern town, and a gateway to the next generation of urban analysis.' (p. 24).

Professor Clark has co-ordinated what is effectively a roll call of the leading scholars of British urban history for the early modern period. The structure of the volume is three fold: the first

section comprises seven area surveys which encompass the entire chronological span of the volume; the second and third cover 'urban themes and types' for the periods 1540-1700 and 1700-1840. Themes include population and society, culture, government and politics, whilst the typological categories are determined primarily by economic function (ports, industrial towns, small market towns, spas and resorts). The unique status of London in this period is acknowledged in the two chapters which are allocated to the metropolis alone. Few readers will be attempting to read the entire volume from start to finish in one sitting, and will not, therefore, be struck by the inevitable overlaps or any internal inconsistency; in fact, given the way in which these volumes are likely to be used, a certain level of reiteration of major themes in the various chapters is only to be expected.

Most readers will probably find some grounds to quibble with the framework employed, and will have their own thematic and chronological preferences. The first section of regional surveys is probably the most likely to at-

tract controversy in terms of its structure. The territorial units of East Anglia, the Southeast, Southwest, Midlands, North, Wales and Scotland make sense in terms of twentieth-century conceptualisations of the regions of the UK. However, in terms of regional urban networks as they existed in the early modern period, these artificial divisions obscure the patterns of provincial development and economic regionality. Whilst the rationale for a subsection on East Anglia is entirely defensible, that for the Midlands (which for the purposes of this volume extends from the Welsh borders to the Lincolnshire coast) or the North (which, as the contributor, John Walton allows, actually encompasses a number of distinct urban networks within it) seem less so. Given that such Welsh towns as there were, were actually integrated into an economic network which transcended the Welsh border, a separate treatment can only detract from the fact that their economy, and therefore their *raison d'être* as towns, was part of a regional economy (around the southwest and Bristol, or the north west and Chester) rather than being focused upon Wales. Whilst Jonathan Barry argues for a distinctive urban variant for the Southwest, in the Southeast, what unites the towns is their relationship to London; a structure which highlighted the metropolitan hinterland as a distinct urban system, rather than one founded upon a cartographical allocation of space might have been more helpful.

The contributors were not required to toe a firm party line, and in particular there is no hard and fast ruling on precisely what constitutes a town in terms of population or function (and as the subsequent thematic chapters demonstrate these variables are regionally and historically contingent). There is considerable variation in approach and content, ranging from the somewhat workmanlike survey offered by Christopher Chalkin on towns in the south east region to the rather more imaginative and thought provoking chapters offered by Barry on the Southwest (with a particularly detailed demographic analysis) or

Walton's challenging interpretation of towns in the north of England. Thomas Devine's chapter on Scotland will provide a valuable guide for English historians who tend to be culpably ignorant on Scottish affairs, although the emphasis on industrialisation, with little on religion, politics, culture or communications offers a much narrower focus than the equivalent English surveys.

The remaining two sections of the volume, deal with England, Scotland and Wales together. Again, the chronological split at 1700 will provoke objections from some quarters; it is a date which makes much more sense for English towns, particularly those in the south east, than for example, the towns of Wales or Scotland, or even the north-west; but such discrepancies at least highlight how urban growth and development followed a different chronology and pace according to region and urban type.

1700 is not set up as some kind of a watershed, but the sense of fundamental changes within the urban system is indicated by the differences in themes and types selected for chapter headings in the two sections - headings which also reflect the current strengths in British urban historiography. One might object, however, that the choice of thematic subjects does not do justice to current research interests and is somewhat old fashioned in its formulation. For example, there is no specific chapter allocated to the gendered experience of urban life. Nor is there a chapter devoted to urban religion in the post-Reformation era; religion is demoted to being another cultural variant. Representations of the city in literature and art are referred to with some frequency, but do not merit a thematic chapter of their own, despite their obvious significance for the evaluation of the cultural impact of the town and urban growth. Interdisciplinarity is more apparent in the fields of geography, demography and economics, than literature, art history or cultural studies. Fortunately, the volume is equipped with a detailed and comprehensive index which will guide

the reader, and there is much fascinating material subsumed within rather more prosaic chapter headings. A few of the chapters, take a rather more imaginative approach, such as the section on 'Estrangement and Belonging' by Paul Griffiths, which forms part of the chapter on population and society before 1700. The chapters could, in fact, have been repackaged, reshaped and retitled to offer a rather more dynamic, shorthand statement of recent directions in the historiography of the premodern town. The balance between the different parts of the British Isles is tipped somewhat heavily towards England. This is understandable, given the greater density of urban population in England and the greater volume of published literature on English towns. (The contributors can hardly be blamed for this historiographical imbalance). But whereas English historians tackle Scottish towns, the reverse situation is never the case. Paul Slack's chapter on 'Great and Good Towns' (before 1700) stands out for treating English, Scottish and Welsh towns with an even hand. (Moreover, his appendix of services provided by towns is a highly useful aid to those interested in following up the theme of regulation and the environment in premodern urban society).

In terms of the individual chapters, some are elegant summaries of the existing historiography, others offer more in the way of new insights or research. Paul Glennie and Ian Whyte's chapter on 'Towns in and Agrarian Economy' is far more wide-ranging in its scope than the title suggests. Ian Archer effectively deconstructs the concept of oligarchy and the model of increased subordination to gentry and landowners, calling for a stronger focus on the agency of towns, rather than viewing them as pawns in a political process. Jeremy Boulton treads a judicious and careful line along the vexed issue of London's early modern stability, and Vanessa Harding's account of reformation and culture 1540-1700 argues that the social and cultural role of religion in urban society underwent significant change during this period, but questions the extent to which there was a real

change in urban sensibility after 1700, although subsequent chapters in the volume might appear to assume that such a change did take place.

Jack Langton's chapter on 'Urban growth and economic change c. 1681-1841' is probably the most provocative, not least in his radical reworking of urban population figures, which suggest that the British population was more urban than has often been supposed in the eighteenth century, and that most urban growth took place in established, rather than new, urban centres. His calculation that Wolverhampton in 1841 had a population of over 93,000, for example, is particularly challenging, given that the equivalent figure given by the census is only 36,000. Joanna Innes and Nick Rogers' co-authored chapter on government and politics synthesises research, not just into urban history narrowly defined, but embeds it in the broader historiography of the development of the British state and society. Joyce Ellis's survey of regional towns, Peter Borsay's account of health and leisure resorts and Leonard Schwarz's chapter on London similarly stand out, not simply for summarising the extant literature, with elegance and lucidity, but for challenging assumptions, raising new questions, and highlighting problems. Schwarz in particular is to be welcomed for taking issue with the concept of improvement, which is invoked with great frequency in the rest of the volume, and alerting us to the importance of deconstructing the rhetoric of the eighteenth-century improvers: 'The rich made life more difficult for the poor by building larger houses and by a tendency to drive wide roads through the middle of insalubrious slums. It was called "improvement"' (p. 663).

Despite the absence of any themed chapter which is devoted specifically to women or gender, a number of contributors make explicit efforts to address this imbalance, notably Pamela Sharpe's chapter on 'Population and society 1700-1840'. Sharpe's essay is a stimulating guide to recent and innovative research on the experience of labour,

migration and poverty in towns during the early industrial but is far less informative on the early part of the period. Peter Clark's joint effort with Rab Houston on cultural life in England and Scotland after 1700 displays a truly impressive range of primary sources and a wealth of anecdotal detail, but takes a somewhat unproblematic view of culture, which given the need for brevity in a volume of this kind is understandable to a certain extent, but the almost essentialist view of 'urban culture' deployed raises too many questions which are not answered. The essays on public and private space before and after 1700 (both by Michael Reed) similarly are informative guides to the physical appearance of towns, and impressively referenced, but the concept of space, its use and the contests surrounding, are not addressed at all; the lack of any theoretical engagement does not reflect the state of current research on space and its cultural meaning in the early modern town. This is a feature common to all the essays; they are emphatically empirical (a volume such as this is hardly the place for academic kite flying after all), and there is a tremendously rich resource to be mined in the footnotes and through use of the index.

The volume also includes thirty-one plates, ranging from maps of sixteenth-century Norwich and Bath to a view of early industrial Bradford and the arrival of the railway in Leicester. These images are a rich source, but curiously under-utilised in the essays; reference is seldom made to them even for illustrative purposes, and as mentioned earlier, the development of visual (and textual) representations of the city nowhere receives more than a passing mention. The placement of the plates, in a block between sections one and two, does nothing to facilitate their integration with the written texts.

Overall, the emphasis is on change, and the very different urban environment and network which had evolved by 1840. The early modern contributors are perhaps more alert to the conti-

nities running through the long eighteenth century than the eighteenth-century historians, whose perspective is tinged by the radical changes which had taken place by 1840. The volume as a whole re-affirms the validity of the concept of the 'industrial revolution', in terms of the transformative effect which was wrought, initially by the spread of coal fuelled manufactures facilitated by turnpikes and canals, followed by the even more dramatic developments consequent upon the application of steam power and the advent of railways. As Jack Langton puts it, 'The Industrial Revolution can disappear from national statistical series, but still be dazzlingly bright in widely scattered regional patches of massive urban growth between the seventeenth century and 1841.' (p. 489). By 1840, despite the continuities apparent in the urban system itself, and in institutions and structures of urban life, the industrial or manufacturing town had evolved into something distinctively new. Cumulatively the essays on politics and government, population and society, industrial towns, port towns and small towns, make a powerful case for seeing the period around 1840 as something of a watershed, when systems, structures, culture and society underwent fundamental change. The 'big' city and its inherent problems had come into existence, not just in demographic or economic terms, but as a culturally distinct phenomenon.

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Citation: Roey Sweet. Review of Clark, Peter, ed. *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain. Volume II 1540-1840*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. December, 2000.

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