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THE STUDY OF URBAN HISTORY
THEORY AND RESEARCH

At the annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association in June, 1971, a formal session in urban history under the above title was held. The session was in the form of a panel presentation with Fred Armstrong, of the University of Western Ontario as chairman of the proceedings. Participants, presenting short papers, were Gilbert A. Stelter, Laurentian University, Gerald A. Tulchinsky, Queen's University and John H. Taylor, Carleton University. A resumé of the papers follows.

Professor Stelter: Toward a Comparative Approach in Canadian History

Prof. Stelter pointed out that the various approaches to Canadian urban history can be placed into two large categories: "first, those that deal with anything that has happened in cities, and second, those which systematically analyze social patterns of urban organization." The bulk of writing in Canada has fallen into the first category, and, in addition to being vulnerable to the same criticisms levelled recently at social history, also tends to study "such broad phenomena as industrialism, capitalism, and technological change--phenomena which are certainly important in urban development, but not necessarily generic to the city alone."

"In the second major category within urban history, the city is considered as a special kind of environment with unique patterns of social organization." And in recent studies within the latter category, its three major tendencies--the physical, the ecological and the demographic--have been combined. Despite spending much effort on quantifiable data and not enough in placing the city in its broader cultural context, this approach probably holds the most promise for "a general understanding of the nature and significance of urban development."

Prof. Stelter proposed that a "scaffolding" similar to that proposed by the American urban historian Sam Bass Warner Jr. be used in the study of Canadian urban centres. Warner suggests the city be studied under the following headings: The growth and composition of the population; the stages of industrialization; the change in the social landscape as a result of industrialization; the group organization of work. "Answers in these areas would provide an essential background for a study of government and politics, reform, business organization, culture and other aspects of urban life."

In order that such a project could be carried out successfully, an historian would either have to do research in all areas to be compared, or alternatively individual

studies would have to be carried through on a comparable format... such as that proposed by Warner. To make such an approach effective, however, "we would need to break out of our provincialism and become more aware of what the social sciences have to offer in the way of concepts and techniques. Second, we would need to make increased use of neglected sources of data such as assessment rolls and city directories. Third, while we have been a notoriously individualistic lot in our research, we would have to learn to work in teams in order to handle the new types of sources necessary for this approach to urban history."

Professor Tulchinsky: Continuity and Change in the Montreal Business Community, 1837-1853.

Prof. Tulchinsky's paper embodied the results of ongoing research into the commercial activities of the Montreal business community in the nineteenth century. The years covered in his paper were ones in which outstanding changes occurred in transportation improvements and also in the dramatic expansion of industrial activity in the city. "At the same time there was a significant growth of new insurance, banking and telegraph companies, as well as capital expansion amongst the older banks, and in enterprises designed to profit from the expansion of the city's

population during this era."

"...between 1837 and 1853 the City's business community experienced not only general enlargement, consolidation in its various branches of commerce, and the addition of significant groups of manufacturers, but also witnesses the rise of a group of aggressive entrepreneurs in transportation and industrial ventures. Gaining experience in these and other local joint-stock companies, they were able to generate wealth and self-confidence for similar ventures during the later 1850's and well beyond."

Although a segment of the Montreal business community demonstrated impressive talent for mobilizing the capital resources of the community to broaden the city's economic capacity, its interest was, with few exceptions, limited mainly to endeavours which would "enhance the commercial power and extend the metropolitan reach of Montreal." Fewer men were prepared to move into industrial ventures with the same degree of alacrity and most of those who did participated in concerns the same as or similar to ones in which they were already involved. Equally those already pre-eminent in industrial activity tended not to participate in promoting railways or shipping enterprises--except for the few steamboat builders who sometimes took shares in the vessels they built.

"The portion of the Montreal business community that first took up the challenge of railways and of

ocean-going steamships was above all attempting to solve the problems created by the inadequacies of lower St. Lawrence river transportation, just as their predecessors had earlier tried to overcome similar difficulties in the upper section of the river by advocating the construction of canals." That is, the Montrealers were attempting to complete the last links in the transportation chain which they saw as vital to the city's continuity as a commercial centre.

Prof. Tulchinsky pointed out that the Montreal business community in these years was characterized by heterogeneity in racial composition, religion, and business affiliation, as well as having a constantly changing personnel. But it did have an obvious unity of purpose--the pursuit of maximum profits.

Its successes and failures were largely the result of the locational strengths of Montreal as an entrepot on a major inland waterway as opposed weaknesses in relation to alternative United States routes for interior trade. "The experiences of the city's merchant-entrepreneurs in shipping and railway enterprises would reveal both the vestiges of the old dreams and belief in the possibility of a master-stroke, along with a growing belief that limited objectives involving some continental integration were more realistic for the business interests of Montreal."

Professor Taylor: Urban Society and Canadian History

Prof. Taylor argued that the nature of the Canadian social, political, economic and cultural experience is to be found in man-made, urban institutions. "Surely we cannot accept that the Canadian experience has been determined, or pre-determined, by a multi-cultural heritage, a derivative technology or the exigencies of the environment." The alternative is that Canadians played some sort of creative role in altering their environment and establishing communities. The question is how?

A promising answer to this question lies in the study of urban institutions, that is institutions that not merely serve a city, but more important, institutions born, harbored and sustained in a city, and spread via cities. Such urban institutions comprise virtually all the major institutions which exist in Canada, and it is through these institutions that Canadians played a creative role in making their country.

Consequently study of the vehicle for institutional development, that is the city, becomes paramount for the study of Canadian history. "The city should not be studied within the context of Canadian history; Canadian history should be studied within the context of the city."

REPORT OF THE URBAN HISTORY
COMMITTEE OF THE CANADIAN
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Those of us who participated in the first session in Canadian urban history at the CHA last June were surprised by the degree of interest in the field. As a result, we presented a motion to the Association's annual meeting which gave us status as a committee of the Association. The following agreed to serve on the committee in its initial phase.

F. H. Armstrong, University of Western Ontario

J. M. S. Careless, University of Toronto

Paul-André Linteau, Université du Québec à Montréal

D. A. Muise, National Museum of Man

G. A. Stelter, Laurentian University (Chairman)

J. H. Taylor, Carleton University

G. Tulchinsky, Queen's University

We expect to add representatives from the Maritimes and the West and increase the representation from Quebec during the Montreal meetings of the Association.

With the proliferation of courses, graduate theses and publications in Canadian urban history, one of the primary functions of the committee will be to aid in the exchange of information. The publication of the newsletter is one means of fulfilling this purpose. In the same vein, the committee will attempt to produce an

inventory of those giving courses, directing theses or engaged in research directly in the field or in related areas. A questionnaire will be sent to all departments before the end of this term; the results may be published in a later issue of the newsletter.

Another function of the committee will be to organize conferences. A tentative suggestion is that we plan national or regional conferences with presentations based on research in progress. The emphasis might be on methodology and approach.

Our major activity in the area of conferences to date has been to organize sessions for the Montreal meetings of the CHA, June 6 - 9. Three sessions will be held and are outlined below although the titles of some of the papers are still tentative.

1. The Canadian Urban Experience:
Three 19th Century Case Studies.

CHAIRMAN: Norbert MacDonald,

University of British Columbia
Social and Institutional Change
in Halifax: The Revolt of the
Shopocracy in the 1830's.
David Sutherland, Dalhousie
University

The Process of Consolidation in
Toronto during the 1880's.
Stephen Spencer, University
of Western Ontario

An Urban Environment: The Process
of Growth in Winnipeg, 1874-
1914.

Alan Artibise, Cariboo College,

Kamloops.

COMMENTATOR: Gilbert A. Stelter,
Laurentian University

2. Workshop in Quantitative Urban
History

CHAIRMAN: Gilles Paquet, Carleton
University

People of a Canadian City, 1851-52

Michael Katz, Ontario

Institute for Studies in
Education

COMMENTATOR: Sam Bass Warner, Jr.,
University of Michigan

3. Urban Development in Montreal

CHAIRMAN: Gerald Tulchinsky,
Queen's University

Le développement du port de

Montréal au début du 20ième
siècle.

Paul-André Linteau,
Université du Québec à
Montréal

Railways and Industrialization
in Montreal

Brian Young, University
of Vermont

COMMENTATOR: John I. Cooper,
McGill University

We are also beginning to
plan for the 1973 CHA meetings in
Kingston. Possible sessions in-
clude; the development of Kingston,
urbanization and ethnicity,
comparative urban history, the
towns of New France, urban
government and politics. We would
appreciate suggestions for sessions
or individual papers.

Gilbert Stelter,
Chairman.