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Book Notes/Notes bibliographiques

Encyclopedias and Bibliographies: Sources for Urban Historians

Urban history is a field in search of definition. One senses in the interviews Bruce Stave has conducted with distinguished urban historians that even these participants are becoming frustrated by an inability to reach a modicum of consensus on appropriate tasks, subjects, and methodologies.¹ Of course, this type of disagreement is hardly unique to urban historians: students of other relatively recent fields such as popular culture or public history are no more able to agree upon an intellectual mandate. And, wrangles and changes in direction in more traditional fields such as social or diplomatic history have led to the use of the prefix “new” in efforts to distinguish one type of practitioner from another. Moreover, although the problem of finding a definition for urban history may be vexing, the search is intellectually profitable. It forces scholars to grapple explicitly with issues such as scope and procedure instead of allowing themselves the luxury of pretending they are self-evident.

For a book review editor of a journal devoted to urban history (or probably to most topical fields), the limits of the field are not in the least self-evident. An outside perimeter can be drawn and many types of books excluded: biographies of people whose careers did not have any significant impact on or were not set in an urban environment, descriptions of agricultural or other rural changes, analyses of philosophy, political theory, or theology would not likely qualify in most minds as urban history. Similarly, a hard-core of books are at the centre of that perimeter and would qualify as urban history in almost everyone’s minds: narratives of the growth of specific cities, analyses of changing forms of municipal government, and biographies of mayors and other leaders whose careers centred on the city. Between the inner and outer perimeters, however, lie many books with no clear status relative to urban history: histories of pre-industrial towns, labour unions with important urban activities, and ethnic groups that cluster in cities all make an obvious contribution to our knowledge or urban life even though the contribution is not direct. In some instances, the indirect contributions are far more important than the direct ones. In other instances, books do not make a contribution *per se* to urban history but instead provide source material of extraordinary value that can be mined by urban historians to great profit.

An example of this rich lode can be found in the array of specialized scholarly encyclopedias now appearing in the United States. Biographical encyclopedias are not new, of course, but in the last five years there has been an explosion in their numbers and many more are about to be released or are in the process of being completed. Most of them are

topical: among them are biographical dictionaries of persons in entertainment, medicine, the military, state legislatures, science, and business. Greenwood Press, which publishes many of these, is also publishing a series entitled *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Institutions*, which will number seven volumes and include the following, each under a separate cover and editor: labour unions, social service organizations, political parties and civic action groups, research institutions and learned societies, private colleges and institutions, and government agencies.

Because personal achievement and institutional distinction tend to be an urban phenomena, many of these encyclopedias promise to be of unusual value to urban historians. Put simply, more famous people in science, business, entertainment, and so forth, tend to make their mark in an urban setting; and a preponderance of governmental agencies, social service organizations, research institutions, and the like are located in cities. Rural people do, of course, achieve greatness and rural institutions do make important contributions to culture and decision-making. Yet, the relative weighting of success and power would tip the scales heavily on the urban side of a city/countryside balance.

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Ingham, John N. *Biographical Dictionary of American Business Leaders*, 4 volumes. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983. Pp. xviii, 2,027. \$195.00.

John Ingham’s four-volume *Biographical Dictionary of American Business Leaders* is a case in point: at least 90 per cent of the persons whose biographies appear conducted their business in urban centres. For example, of 396 New Yorkers in the dictionary, 347 achieved distinction in New York City; of 77 Californians, 67 did so in Los Angeles or San Francisco; and of 42 residents in Michigan, 30 did so in Detroit. Many of the remainder in each state centred their business activities in secondary cities. These figures are hardly surprising: small-town businessmen and rural entrepreneurs are vital to American economic life, but they seldom distinguish themselves in a way sufficient to justify their inclusion in a selective who’s who. It is a little surprising, however, that the large urban centres were also disproportionately represented when the leaders were listed by birthplace. Although the dominance was not as striking, it was still substantial: of 11 leaders born in California, 7 were born in Los Angeles or San Francisco; of 193 in New York state, 79 in New York City; and, of 24 in Michigan, 12 in Detroit.

The value of these biographies as both substance and source is immense. Most obviously, in terms of substance,

the dictionary contains 835 entries that average about 750 words: a few are relatively short but several are over 3,000 words. The quality and information in each of these is less uneven than in most biographical dictionaries because Ingham is the sole author of every biography. Most similar efforts are authored by dozens of contributors whose short articles are processed by an editor or editorial team who try with varying degrees of success to put them in reasonably uniform shape. Ingham has relied on an editorial board of nine distinguished business historians for advice on the selection process and the content of each entry: but, all of the research and writing is his. It is hard to imagine anyone having the energy to begin such a project and even harder to believe that it was finished: the scholarly payoff, however, is worthy of the effort.

As a source, the dictionary furnishes a core of information that can lead to some major prosopographical analyses. Ingham's introduction is short and he does not exploit his own data to draw conclusions about the business community: his work is indeed a dictionary that makes virtually no attempt to identify changes, patterns, or trends. But, the materials contained within will permit other scholars to do so to good advantage. Ingham provides seven appendices that organize the data according to industry and company and by birthplace, principal place of activity, religion, ethnicity, and year of birth of the leaders. An additional appendix identifies important women business leaders. In one sense, it may be unfortunate for him personally that Ingham did not write a long analytical introduction that drew his material together in a coherent whole: other scholars probably will (and it is entirely proper if they do so) use his research to sustain some major statements. Of course, anyone using Ingham's data will have to be prepared to justify his selection of leaders or to adjust statistically for any biases that are perceived. Although considerable thought and consultation went into the selection of the 835 individuals, Ingham's selection process, as he implicitly acknowledges in the introduction, was based on somewhat subjective criteria. Inevitably, other scholars will question the balance among eras, geographic regions, and types of activity. For example, the dictionary seems to slight colonial business leaders: only 57 entrants are listed with birthdates before 1740. Nor are any leaders included whose principal activities occurred in New Hampshire, North Dakota, or Wyoming.

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Whitnah, Donald R., ed. *Government Agencies*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983. Pp. xxviii, 683. \$49.95.

Donald Whitnah's *Government Agencies* is, in one sense, a more traditional historical encyclopedia: the over one hundred articles are written by separate individuals and Whitnah functioned as editor not as author. In two ways,

however, it departs from tradition: (1) although professors of history predominate, a large number of the authors are drawn from among government historians, archivists, and agency specialists in business, political science, economics, social work, and law; (2) the editor encouraged authors to go beyond detail and place the agencies in an interpretive framework which stressed their political origins, disputes, accomplishments, and failures. This disparate training and background of the authors and the editor's invitation to speculate results in a lively collection of articles that go beyond the skeletal form that often characterizes encyclopedias. On the other hand, the standardization of quality and scope found in Ingham's glossary of business leaders is lacking.

Government Agencies contains essays only on the federal government: yet, in some ways it is as or more useful to urban historians than an encyclopedia on urban institutions would be. Although there are uniformities among types of municipal governments, the particular nature of each city's governing arrangements does not directly affect any other city. Many of these federal agencies, however, directly affect society and government in all American cities. The impact on urban life varies, of course, from direct and massive as in the use of the Department of Housing and Urban Affairs, to indirect and negligible on the part of the Forest Service or the Bureau of Mines. Whitnah has arranged the articles in thirteen categories, three of which contain agencies and departments of primary interest to urban historians: economy and employment, health and welfare, and transportation.

Most of the articles have material of interest to political scientists and concerned citizens as well as to historians. The background and origins of each agency is provided; and, despite the explosion in governmental services since the New Deal, about one-half of the articles are on agencies created before the 1930s and one-fourth are on ones created prior to the twentieth century. Thus, one can place each agency in its historical context. From the information provided, one can also place each agency in its present political context and at least begin to sort out what each agency does and how it differs from some of its like-sounding counterparts (or rivals). And, concerned citizens will be intrigued by the willingness of many authors to call balls and strikes and name names when assigning praise or blame.

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Briscoe, Mary Louise, comp. *A Bibliography of American Autobiography, 1945-1980*. Madison, Wis.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1983. Pp. xiv, 365. \$30.00.

Authors, too, tend to live in and write about cities in disproportionate numbers. Mary Louise Briscoe's bibliography of recently published American autobiographies provides a

convenient guide to memoirs many of which contain useful information for urban historians. Of the slightly over 5,000 entries in her volume, 1,133 are listed in the subject index under the headings of five major cities: Boston, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington. New York City leads the way; 544 of the autobiographies describe some aspect of life there. Cities of secondary importance like Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis average approximately thirty entries each. Topical entries in the index on a variety of subjects usually set in an urban environment such as journalism, professional sports, business, and theater are also numerous.

Briscoe's notation for each entry gives the requisite factual information of title, date and place of publication, and number of pages. In addition, however, each entry is described in a brief annotation. The following examples of these indicate the type of information provided:

Sarah Baker, *Fighting for Life*. Dr. Baker spent her lifetime promoting hygiene especially for children. She established the New York Bureau of Child Hygiene in 1908, the first department of its kind in the world.

Frederic C. Howe, *The Confessions of a Reformer*. The shaping of a reformer and polemicist, his involvement in municipal government (Cleveland), state and national politics, and his continuing confidence in a fight for the eventual triumph of justice over privilege.

Piri Thomas, *Down these Mean Streets*. An organizer and worker for the rehabilitation of drug addicts, Thomas writes vividly of his childhood and youth growing up in Spanish Harlem, of the sprawling, violent *barrio* life there, the fights, the pushers, the crime, and his own armed robbery attempt and resulting prison sentence.

The value of Briscoe's bibliography as a source for scholars is immeasurably increased by these annotations. Many, perhaps most, of the memoirs have cryptic titles that by themselves tell little of the book's contents. Autobiographers seldom feel the need as historians usually do, to follow the flashy eye-catching part of a title with a colon and a longer more precise sub-title. Briscoe has invested over a decade in assembling this guide which could save many serious scholars months of painful and sometimes unproductive bibliographical research.

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NOTES

1. Bruce Stave, *The Making of Urban History* (Beverly Hills, Cal. and London: Sage Publications Inc., 1977), *passim*.