

A Sense of Time and Place: Gilbert Stelter's Contribution to Urban History

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Article abstract

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Gil Stelter was the first president of the Canadian Urban Group after it was founded in 1971 at the annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association in St. John's, Newfoundland. In retirement, Gil combines his writing on urban history with the hybridizing of day lilies. He is currently president of the U.S.-based Urban History Association.

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Abstract

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Gil Stelter was the first president of the Canadian Urban Group after it was founded in 1971 at the annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association in St. John's, Newfoundland. In retirement, Gil combines his writing on urban history with the hybridizing of day lilies. He is currently president of the U.S.-based Urban History Association.

Résumé

Ces propos ont été tenus lors d'une conférence intitulée « The Urban Academic » organisée en l'honneur du départ à la retraite de M. Gil Stelter, Ph.D., le 26 septembre 1998 à la University of Guelph. La conférence était présentée par le département d'histoire de l'Université.

Gil Stelter a été le premier président du Canadian Urban Group après sa fondation en 1971 lors de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada à St. John's (Terre-Neuve). Depuis qu'il est à la retraite, M. Stelter continue d'écrire sur l'histoire urbaine et s'intéresse à l'hybridation des hémérocailles fauves. Il est président de l'Urban History Association dans les États-Unis.

A renaissance urban historian, Francesco Guicciardini wrote extensively on the history of his home city, Florence. Guicciardini is considered by some to be the first modern historian. Rather than make up history as he thought it should have or might have happened, in the manner of Thucydides, he built his history on actual documents he collected and preserved. In a sense, he is a man who gave us both systematic archives and documented history, the man, among others, who led us to the finding aid and the footnote. All this is to point out that, from Guicciardini to Gil, urban historians have been in the forefront of historical innovation. Matters of intellectual innovation inevitably lead us to historiography. Historiography generally asks two questions: What has a scholar done? And why does it matter (if indeed it does matter)? Or put another way, What do we know and understand now, that we did not know and understand before? And this lecture, like such questions, will unfold in two parts: What has been Gil's contribution to urban history? Why does it matter? Or put in counter-factual form, If Gil had become a grower of day lilies, would we be less for it as historians? Some might consider that an unfair question, given that we would be faced with making an impossible choice.

What has Gil done? Quite a lot, it turns out. So much, in fact, that this question is an unmanageable one for a one-hour talk. It would turn it into a fast reading from a long bibliography: the chronology would be great, but the plot like that of a telephone book.

As all scholars know, when faced with such a problem, categorize. Lump Gil. It is not hard to do this either, as Gil in his career has produced something of a classic grid for scholarship, a grid in itself worth emulating: bibliography and historiography; history; theory; and dissemination. Many of his activities in these areas were firsts. He would not become a target for the Oxford don once heard to remark, "I see that Professor Trevelyan has published his book again."

Gil produced perhaps the first urban bibliography in Canada, *Canadian Urban History: A Selected Bibliography*, which was a brief mimeographed (or Xeroxed) item that issued from Laurentian University in 1972, and consisted, given the state of urban history in Canada at the time, of mainly American material. The field developed very rapidly, and in 1981, he and Alan Artibise published *Canada's Urban Past: A Bibliography to 1980*. It consisted of nearly 400 pages and contained several thousand citations, mostly Canadian. And there were a number of others, including those for Guelph and Wellington counties in collaboration with Elizabeth Bloomfield, and most recently, the bibliography for his on-line course, considered to be the foundation bibliography for scholars worldwide. From mimeograph to Internet in a generation: we live in interesting times, and Gil has proven flexible enough to respond to them.

As the field developed, he and Artibise collaborated on a number of urban readers, notably *The Canadian City*, which has appeared in two editions in 1977 and 1984, and most recently a solo effort for Copp Clark in 1990, *Cities and Urbanization: Canadian Historical Perspectives*. He and Artibise separately did early historiography and on one occasion flipped a coin to see who would appear in the *Journal of Urban History* and who in the *Urban History Review*. Gil thus did one of the first interviews of urban historians in the *JUH*. The introductions to the volumes of readings done then and later, as well as special pieces for *Histoire Sociale*, *Contact: Bulletin for Environmental Studies*, *Urban History Review*, and the *British Urban History Yearbook*, and others, provided a vehicle not only for historiographical tours d'horizon, but also for the introduction of theory, or the modest general propositions that give meaning to the facts. More on this later.

Real history was also created by Gil in these volumes, as well as in articles, learned papers, and chapters in edited volumes. The range in content and geography was and is stunning. It all began in Cheyenne with his dissertation, still used in the local library, and ranged over company towns in northern Ontario to the military establishments of eastern Canada and their forebears on the European continent. And it often seemed to come home, to Sudbury, to Guelph, and to the Edmonton area. The content, too, has been wide-ranging, but often focused on the founding of towns and their expression on the landscape. These explorations have required forays into planning history, culture and form, and the idea of community, not just in Canada, but in Britain and France, as well as other parts of Europe, and an abiding interest in Latin America.

Dissemination of knowledge and its partner, corporate and collegial service, has also been an important part of Gil's career. In some ways, I like better the Marxist term of *praxis* for this part of academic life, embodying the sense, as I understand it, of theory realized in practice, of expressing in concrete terms the abstractions that are central to academic—and really to any—life. Gil's contributions to the academic enterprise, both here at Guelph, earlier at Laurentian, and more generally in the academic community, have been substantial. On the urban front, they have also been considerable.

First, there is, of course, teaching. Gil has probably introduced more students to the history of the city than anyone I can think of in this country, and by all accounts and as evidenced in his teaching awards has done it not only very well, but in a very innovative fashion, most recently on line. In some ways, the informed and enthusiastic student is the finest legacy to which anyone in academe can aspire. But what is more, the systematic cross-generational transfer of knowledge, or education, is perhaps the most important of humankind's social innovations, the views of the current government to the contrary notwithstanding. There is little doubt in my mind that our well-being, even survival depends heavily on it. Gil, I think, understood and understands the importance of that role and acts on it.

Gil's collegial role in urban history has also been critical. He was a founding member of the Urban Group, its president in the 1980s and 1990s, and was the proposer of the motion at the CHA meetings in St. John's in the early seventies that gave urban history (along with labour history) official status within the CHA. For good or ill, those two were the first of the new "tribes" that marked the beginning of contemporary historical pluralism in Canada, with the others—ethnic, women's, rural, business history, and so on—following in their wake. He was there at the birth of the *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* and an early important contributor, though getting him to do book reviews was never easy. Some are still owing. The character is not entirely unblemished.

Gil will probably be remembered forever for the two Guelph conferences he organized, one in May 1977, at which, I think Canadian urban history showed it could walk on its own. The second, in August 1982, was a Canadian-American comparative conference that was, in fact, comparative, and competitive. Urban history in Canada had come of age. Both conferences were marked by wonderful banquets, both based on nineteenth-century menus, the second one from a Toronto Board of Trade banquet. As I recall (barely) it began about 7:30 p.m. with cocktails, and was punctuated by a strange slide show involving cats by the banquet sponsor. When Alan Gowans rose to begin his banquet address at about 12:30 a.m., we were still eating. The banquet is still talked of in reverent tones among a greying generation of urban scholars.

Gil and Sally were always generous with their hospitality, and many scholars will attest to the friendly welcome at their home even under the most trying conditions, including the dinner

cooked on the barbecue after the kitchen stove failed. These informal occasions were extremely important to everyone in the field. They were where talk flowed into unorthodox channels, and plans, projects, and ideas emerged that were often only realized years later. We all owe much to them and their family.

It was at these conferences and the many others attended by Gil over the years and over the world that his work and the work of other urban scholars in this country became known. It was often through Gil that other scholars received invitations to give papers or lectures. In some ways these conference addresses have been the most important vehicle Gil used to set down his ideas and further develop them. The list is huge. And the papers are both expertly done and expertly presented. Gil, as you may know, has an international reputation as one of the best "slide" men on the international circuit. His huge slide collection, used sparingly, has become a very effective tool for lecturing. Also his humour, which was revealed in its mature form recently when he publicly and successfully slapped the Canadian ambassador to Germany on the wrist for arriving late to his conference-opening lecture.

Finally, Gil's role in community service has also been laudatory. He has served to protect Guelph's buildings from their many predators, has taught his students how to be engaged with the community, and has both prepared walking tours and been their objective. But his most important contribution, I think, is of two kinds. First, he has given academic respectability to the study of urban and especially local history. This was not an easy task, as any local or urban historian will tell you. This sort of history twenty years ago was sandbox history, but no more.

As for the second contribution to the community, I think it is to provide self-awareness or self-consciousness. When the community is studied, it understands both itself and the nature of the connection to the world around it. The community becomes meaningful to its members, and a foundation for action at all levels is established. I suspect that successful communities are the self-conscious ones, the ones that are able to reify or make concrete the abstract notions of what they are about. The unexamined community is not worth living in.

Finally, I want to spend a little time with "theory" or "ideas." Historiography, as Brian McKillop once commented, is "ideas about historical ideas," and that is mainly what I am supposed to be doing here today. Many of the most important things done by Gil revolves around his concern for the founding of new communities, and in particular his observation (that I quote often) that while American cities were built around the market, Canadian cities were built around the military parade. This observation links Gil's work to mainstream Innisian theory, but in that conservative radical way Gil has, to the part of Innisian theory that most everyone forgets about. Innis in *The Fur Trade* argued that planting new settlements in the New World was expensive. I believe that to be true, but it has not been established for a fact. At any rate, that was Innis's primary postulate, the one on which hangs all the law and the prophets. It is not the "staple." The

"staple" is merely one answer to the question of how new settlements can be sustained. The other answer is by metropolitan subsidy. Innis himself pursued the staple, and two generations of scholars from the entire ideological spectrum have pursued Innis. The subsidies have been more or less forgotten, except of course by W. J. Eccles, who in his *"The Fur Trade Revisited"* pointed out that the military in New France was as important as, or more important than, fur. This finding has pretty much been confirmed by Louise Dechêne in her study of the Montreal before the conquest. I should note the coincidence—does it have any meaning?—of Gil being a graduate student at the University of Alberta when Eccles was on faculty there.

In terms of Canadian history as well as urban, the study of cities and why they are here and how they are sustained thus becomes fundamental, as do the cultural links across the Atlantic, along with the economic and political ones. Founding and sustaining community becomes a primary force in the historical process. Out of it, perhaps, national history emerges, not the reverse.

To understand Canadian history in this way also clears up or makes sensible any number of Canadian facts that fit uncomfortably in many generalizations. Pluralism, especially, makes sense, given the fact that the founding of communities occurred over 4,000 miles and 400 years, and all the while they maintained a European connection and did not entirely extinguish pre-European communities. Those cities built around the military parade (and we probably have more fortified places per capita than any nation in the world) remind us that we were born in the violent eighteenth century, and the results of the Seven Years War were not conclusive: the French and natives were not totally defeated (witness their current recovery). That is why, I think, our violent military past and our cities that stand witness to that past are buried. Unlike most nations, we dare not glorify our military past for fear of rending beyond repair the reality of our pluralism, which is rooted in the founding of our armed communities. There is surely paradox here.

A second "Gil-ism" that I often quote is that the medieval city operated according to the logic of the building, the modern city according to the logic of the street, and perhaps now would argue it operates according to the logic of the idea. The building/street notion is most easily exemplified by comparing that medieval institution, the university, to the surrounding Canadian city. On campus we give direction by landmark; in the city by street name. Some say this is the feminine principle versus the masculine; others that it is nature versus physics. But for Gil, I think it has more to do with culture and form and the transfer of a newer version of that culture and form across the Atlantic to begin its work on a more or less blank page, but not simply end there. It has to do with one of the three or four fundamental questions in urban history, in this case, Why does the city look this way? Gil again has found some answers in our European and violent past in his pursuit of plans and buildings, and in the recognition that the urban historian brings to the city a sense of time and place, that is, a sense of roots and of context. What we have is not always what was. Out of that city understood in time

and in a spatial context, a better understanding of other kinds of history emerges, at least for me. It is, for example, a history of Canada more real than the urgent stand-alone versions that fill our textbooks. These mostly recognize our European roots and our North American situation in order to be rid of them, and hold up pluralism as characteristic of Canada but, most recently, as a kind of victory against the enemy within.

Gil is rooted, I think, more profoundly in time and place, recognizing that cities in general and Canadian ones in particular are best understood in terms of centuries if not millenia and in terms of continental if not global place as much as national. That special sense of time and place that Gil has been conveying for some decades now (and will for some decades to come) is perhaps his most profound contribution to urban history in Canada and to Canadian history in general. It is something easy to say and hard to do. And as with so much else, he was there long before most.

To end, we might well ask, as with Guicciardini: Will we see his like again?

Selected Publications of Gilbert Stelter¹

1. Books

- Cities and Urbanization: Canadian Historical Perspectives.* Toronto: Copp, Clark, Pitman, 1990 (editor).
- Guelph and Wellington County: An Annotated Bibliography of Settlement and Development.* Guelph: University of Guelph, 1988 (with Elizabeth Bloomfield and research team for Guelph Regional Project).
- Power and Place: Canadian Urban Development in the North American Context.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986 (edited with A. Artibise).
- The Canadian City: Essays in Urban and Social History.* 2nd edition. Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1984 (edited with A. Artibise).
- Shaping the Urban Landscape: Aspects of the Canadian City-Building Process.* Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1982 (edited with A. Artibise).
- Canada's Urban Past: A Bibliography to 1980 and Guide to Canadian Urban Studies.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1981 (with A. Artibise).
- Urbanization in the Americas: The Background in Historical Perspective.* Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1980 (edited with Woodrow Borah, Berkeley, and Jorge Hardoy, CEUS, Argentina).
- The Usable Urban Past: Essays on Planning and Politics in the Modern Canadian City.* Toronto: Macmillan, 1979 (edited with A. Artibise).
- The Canadian City: Essays in Urban History.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977. (edited with A. Artibise).

2. Web Materials

- "The New Cultural History and Urban History," 1998. An H-Net review essay. <<http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=4983902515265>>.
- "Reading a Community: Urban History at the Local Level." 1995–7. Fourth-year university course, Canadian Urban History. <<http://www.uoguelph.ca/history/urban.html>>.
- "The Urban Past: An International Urban History Bibliography." 1995–. <<http://www.uoguelph.ca/history/urban/citybib.html>>.

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Endnote

1. Courtesy of Gilbert Stelter