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# Geography's Contribution to the Historical Study of Urban Canada

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## GEOGRAPHY'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE HISTORICAL STUDY OF URBAN CANADA

Urban geographers and historical geographers have only recently emerged from a decade of mutual isolationism. Urban geographers, or more generally urban/economic geographers, were caught up in the quantitative revolution which swept through geography beginning in the mid-fifties. The computerized techniques of this "new geography" could be exploited most effectively in studies involving large amounts of numerical data, and it is well known that such data are relatively hard to come by for the past. Small wonder that urban geographers have focussed their attention almost exclusively on the contemporary city. Historical geographers, on the other hand, have generally abstained from quantification, partly no doubt as a result of the paucity of appropriate data, but partly also as a matter of methodological conviction. It is possible to argue, in fact, that historical geography as a self-conscious sub-discipline has developed largely as a reaction to the evident successes of the quantitative urban/economic school; but I shall not pursue that argument here.

Aside from the quantitative/non-quantitative distinction, the difference between historical and urban/economic geography involves more than simply the question of whether one focusses on the present or the past. Typically, studies in urban/economic geography are analytical in the sense that they single out some particular aspect of the global man/environment system for special attention. In the geographer's jargon, "systematic" studies of individual phenomena are the result. Historical geography in contrast is generally synthetic, the objective being a holistic appreciation<sup>7</sup> of the many interrelated phenomena which have evolved over time to give a unique character to the landscape of some particular region. In the main, urban/economic geographers are thematic analysts<sup>8</sup> while historical geographers are regional synthesizers. But another and more fundamental difference lies in the modes of explanation favoured (often implicitly) by the two fields. Historical geographers prefer temporal to functional explanations, while the opposite is true of urban/economic geographers. The implied difference between an interest in process and an interest in form would probably

be repudiated by many practitioners in both camps, but it is a difference which is readily discernible in most of the relevant works produced since 1955.

There are other differences too, but the above remarks are sufficient to support two observations which are important to the purpose of this paper. First, the general divergence of interests between urban and historical geographers accounts for the fact that there are very few works one can honestly identify as urban historical geography. Secondly, however, the quantitative, analytical, form-oriented stance of urban geographers and the non-quantitative, synthetic, process-oriented approach of historical geographers are logically complementary rather than competitive, and this complementarity is increasingly being recognized by all concerned. In summary, the bibliography at the end of this paper is short, but there is reason to hope that the rate of production is now on the increase.

One final introductory note. I have deliberately ignored a moderately large number of descriptive reports which have been written by geographers about Canadian cities, even though these reports may contain a few "historical" facts. Such reports often appear when some particular town is "in the news," but they almost never contain anything in the way of scholarly insights. A representative example of the genre is a well known paper by Humphrys (1958) on Schefferville. Just as history has its indefatigable chroniclers, so geography has its earnest journeymen reporters. The relationship of such writings to history and geography is roughly the same as the relationship of the Sudbury ore to the pure metallic nickel which emerges from the Port Colborne refinery.

The earliest geographical writings worthy of our attention are those of Raoul Blanchard. Bort at Orleans, France, in 1877, Blanchard became a pupil and disciple of the great French geographer Paul Vidal de la Blache. Later, while occupying the chair of geography at Grenoble, he served as a visiting professor at both Laval University and the University of Montreal, and his influence on the development of geography in French Canada can be felt even today. Of greatest relevance in the present context are his full-length studies of Quebec

City and Montreal. These studies were initially published in Blanchard's house journal at Grenoble, the Revue de Géographie Alpine (in 1934 and 1947 respectively), and were subsequently incorporated into the first and last volumes of his great trilogy on French Canada (Blanchard, 1935, pp.157-292; 1953, pp.171-385). The middle volume of this trilogy contains shorter studies of Trois Rivières and Sherbrooke (Blanchard, 1947, pp.160-177 and 317-323).

Geographical and historical approaches run hand in hand through Blanchard's work with an artistry which eludes most later writers. Given his training under Vidal, it is no surprise that the role of the natural environment is de-emphasized, and the role of man's culture operating through time is brought to the fore. Blanchard's studies can be read with pleasure and profit by urban historians and geographers of today.

Although the Blanchard trilogy has influenced much of the later writing on the geography of French Canada, there is paradoxically little in this subsequent corpus that can properly be labelled urban historical geography. French Canada's two leading geographical journals, the Cahiers de Géographie de Québec and La Revue de Géographie de Montréal, are quite devoid of such work. Worthy of mention, however, are two papers by the English geographer William Parker (1959 and 1968). The first of these papers appeared in a Festschrift compiled in Blanchard's honour, and presented a geographical portrait of Quebec City in the 1830s. The second paper dealt with the same decade but was wider in scope, involving a survey of Montreal, Trois Rivières, La Prairie, Sorel, and St. John's in addition to Quebec. Special attention was given to the process whereby Quebec was overtaken by Montreal in size, wealth, and commercial significance.

Turning to English Canada, mention must first be made of Griffith Taylor's remarkable book, Urban Geography (Taylor, 1951). This book, written while Taylor was chairman of the geography department at the University of Toronto, was actually the first systematic textbook in urban geography to be published in English anywhere, yet as Simmons (1967, p.341) points out, "few pioneering texts in a field have had so

little impact on later work." Taylor was an environmental determinist, claiming that man's activities on the earth's surface were everywhere controlled by the characteristics of the natural environment. Such a view was decidedly obsolete even in Taylor's day, and it is one of the tragedies of Canadian academic life that non-geographers have generally regarded Taylor's simplistic but voluminous writings as the last word in geographical thinking. None the less, Urban Geography contains a description of the evolution of Toronto which can be read with profit provided allowance is made for its author's one-sided philosophy (Taylor, 1951, pp.73-81). The book also contains numerous vignettes on other Canadian towns.

A good general historical geography of Toronto has been produced by Donald Kerr and Jacob Spelt, who trace the city's development from military outpost to thriving metropolis in a style frequently reminiscent of Blanchard (Kerr and Spelt, 1965). Kerr and Spelt include an exemplary account of the various natural, political, economic, and technological forces whose interplay conditioned the first 150 years of Toronto's growth (see especially chapters 3 and 5). In this account the city is conceptualized not as an independent entity but as a component of an articulated system of cities. This notion of city systems is one to which both of these authors have made separate contributions in studies to be mentioned below.

Narrower in scope but of greater theoretical significance is a recent study by Peter Goheen (1970) of the changing internal spatial structure of Toronto during the second half of the nineteenth century. Goheen, who teaches in Chicago but is a native of Flesherton, Ontario, makes extensive use of data drawn from the city's assessment rolls, and is at pains to relate his findings to socio-spatial theories derived from the famed "Chicago school" of social ecologists and their intellectual descendants. A feature of Goheen's work is the use of factor analysis and trend surface analysis in the processing of the assessment roll data. Whether late Victorian Toronto should be expected to resemble Prohibition Chicago in its ecological structure is of course a moot point, and there is no doubt that Goheen's pioneering study will stimulate much discussion concerning the generality of urban ecological processes.

One crucial mechanism in such processes is residential mobility - the changing of one's place of residence within the same city. To the best of my knowledge, the only published geographical study of past residential mobility in Canada is an analysis of Toronto's Yorkville district by Michael Doucet (1972). Using annual city directories, Doucet traced the locations of a sample of households in the Village of Yorkville over the period from 1872 to 1899. He was able to suggest that the rate of residential mobility in late nineteenth century Toronto was at least as high as the rate today, but that the distance covered by the average move was probably shorter. It is obvious that work of this kind has important implications for explaining neighbourhood changes of the type documented by Goheen.

Broadly speaking, the studies reviewed above take cities singly or in small groups, while those described below focus on the general process of urbanization as the creator of articulated networks containing many interdependent urban centres. Occupying an intermediate position is a series of studies by the Scottish geographer Wreford Watson, founding chairman of the geography department at McMaster University and currently professor of geography at Edinburgh. In two papers (1943 and 1948) Watson traces the evolution of the larger towns of the Niagara Peninsula, paying special attention to the importance of the growth of manufacturing. In a third (1947) he examines the causes of rural depopulation in Southern Ontario and relates this trend to the expansion of cities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a fourth and somewhat whimsical paper (1959) he explores the townscape of Halifax for relict features whose presence serves as a reminder of various episodes in that city's history. Although he studied at Toronto under Griffith Taylor, Watson's work is happily free from an undue emphasis on the role played by the natural environment.

Apart from a superficial nation-wide survey of city growth by Whitaker (1937), the earliest study concerned with more than a small fragment of the Canadian urban system was the doctoral dissertation of the late Donald Kirk (1949). Kirk reconstructed in detail the development of the entire urban network of Southwestern Ontario from its

origins until 1850. He drew attention to the importance of water-power potential, productive farmland, and the alignment of transportation routes (especially navigable rivers) in "fixing" the spatial pattern of the regional urban network. Implicit in his work is the important notion that the growth potential or "viability" of any one town is dependent upon the performance of all the other towns in the same system. In this sense the growth (or stagnation) of each town is a function of the development of the system as a whole (with apologies to Chambers of Commerce and other local booster groups). This Gestalt view of an urban network is derived principally from the work of the German geographer Walter Christaller (1933), and it forms the basis of much research on the contemporary urban scene. It is also present in varying degree in all of the studies discussed in the remainder of this paper.

Similar in many respects to Kirk's work is Spelt's meticulous study of the rise of Toronto to pre-eminence within the region lying north of Lake Ontario between Kingston in the east and Hamilton in the west (Spelt, 1955, reprinted 1972). Spelt saw his own work as an urban counterpart of Carl Schott's earlier book on rural settlement in Southern Ontario (Schott, 1936), but it may be noted that Schott's work itself contains interesting historical material on the morphology of many of the smaller urban centres. What Schott omits, however, and what Spelt stresses, is the "economic content" of towns: the commercial activities which they perform. Spelt shows how Toronto has successfully exploited its comparative advantage as a location for economic activity, becoming in the process the primate city of Ontario.

A system of urban centres together with the transport routes connecting those centres may be likened to a network of nodes and alleys. The largest nodes and the most heavily travelled alleys correspond to what regional planners customarily call "growth poles" and "development axes" respectively. Despite changes in transportation technology, the spatial alignment of development axes is usually very stable over time. The main route from Montreal to Toronto, for example, has been a development axis from the days of the sailing vessel through the eras

of the steamboat and iron horse to the present super-highway period. The significance of this type of stability for the continued concentration of urban population in a system's largest cities is the subject of an important paper by Charles Whebell of the University of Western Ontario (Whebell, 1969). Whebell examines the history of development axes and growth poles in Southern Ontario, and generalizes his findings into a "corridor theory" of urban system evolution. It is to be hoped that this corridor theory will be tested against the experiences of other parts of the country.

In another paper Whebell suggests that the spatial pattern of the major growth poles has been a principal determinant of the alignment of political boundaries at the county level (Whebell, 1968). He again takes Southern Ontario as his study area, and indicates that a significant proportion of all county boundaries were drawn so as to pass through the zones of indifference between the spheres of influence of the region's chief towns.

A city's sphere of influence can of course change its size and shape with time. Andrew Burghardt of McMaster University has shown this to have been the case for Winnipeg (Burghardt, 1971). Initially the gateway city to the entire prairie region of the Canadian West, Winnipeg has seen its sphere of influence contract steadily as Regina, Saskatoon, and especially Calgary and Edmonton have risen to prominence and carved out hinterlands of their own. Burghardt suggests that more New World cities may have experienced a "gateway" phase in their early growth than geographers have generally recognized.

Given the undoubted importance of the industrial revolution as a builder of cities, mention must be made of a recent study by James Gilmour of McGill University (Gilmour, 1972). Gilmour's work focusses on the evolution of manufacturing in Southern Ontario from 1851 to 1891. He is not concerned with cities directly, but the obvious fact that manufacturing is concentrated in cities gives his work relevance for the urban historian. His well-documented analysis of the spatial effects of economies of scale and agglomeration should serve as a model for future studies in historical industrial geography.



Finally, at the national scale, Donald Kerr has examined the manner in which Canada's economy is controlled by the country's largest metropolitan centres (Kerr, 1968). Although it is concerned more with the present than the past, Kerr's paper contains echoes of the "metropolitan dominance" theme familiar to Canadian historians from the work of J.M.S. Careless (1954).

Perhaps the most obvious general feature of the studies reviewed above is their strong concentration on Southern Ontario. Hopefully this bias will be overcome as the list expands in the years ahead.

John U. Marshall

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#### NOTES AND INQUIRIES

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