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N. H. Lithwick

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BOOK REVIEWS

Artibise, Alan F.J. Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth, 1874-1914, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975. 382 pp., maps. illus.

Research into urban growth has followed two quite distinct paths in Canada. Social scientists have tended to concern themselves with the more general issue of the evolution of a system, including either the purely urban or the urban-regional, or a synthesis of both. This has been facilitated, and therefore encouraged, by the availability of Census data essentially at such an aggregative level. The lack of data of comparable quality at the local level has made the study of urban growth in the small less amenable to quantitative research, and thus most of our knowledge is the result of what the author chooses to call "local history".

The consequences of this wide gulf in perspective have become increasingly evident. Those rushing in to save our cities are blind to their individual histories, histories which, because of the slow evolution of the cityscape, tend to be of great consequence in delimiting the scale and direction of change. Assumptions about "average" behaviour tend to be seriously misleading when applied to a relatively small sample of highly individualistic members. Not surprisingly, urban policy based on such assumptions, whether applied locally or nationally, has been notoriously inappropriate.

Dr. Artibise is aware of this gulf, and his book represents an important step towards bridging it. He quite naturally begins from the particular, attempting to introduce a methodology that moves him part way to the general. That this effort is in the end only moderately successful ought not to deflect us from appreciating the importance of what he has tried to do, and therefore the major contribution this book makes towards dealing with an important if terribly difficult problem.

Insofar as the particular historical research is concerned, the results are most impressive. The author adds new information to key

existing sources, and brings his material together in an original and highly articulate matter. But because he is attempting to do more than write local history, it is most useful to concentrate our attention on this aspect of the book. In particular, there are several key methodological issues that should be raised.

The first problem is that the author has pursued his effort at bridging in one direction alone, namely from the particular to the general. He has missed almost entirely the consequences for Winnipeg of external events, that ultimately leads to serious distortions in his analysis. It has been well established, for example, that the origins of most cities, and their early development, is primarily the result of some locational advantage with respect to its external environment. This might entail resource availability, access to markets, transportation nodes, or the like. And Innis has demonstrated how the initial advantage and its technological imperatives go a long way in explaining subsequent events, social as well as economic.

Dr. Artibise has, by way of contrast, chosen to focus almost exclusively on the internal sources of development in Winnipeg, and among these, the prime mover is judged to be something he labels "the growth ethic" as pursued by the city's elite. It is a moot point, however, as to whether the promoters of this ethic were the cause or rather the consequence of Winnipeg's growth. It may well be that Winnipeg would have grown more or less as rapidly as it did regardless of its elite, but simply because of its enormous locational advantages. If so, the role of the elite would be seen more as accommodating to the profits created by growth, in large part triggered elsewhere, than as interpreted by the author as being responsible for most of Winnipeg's subsequent social ills.

In other words, a balanced assessment of the role of the elite and its ethic requires that the author deal at least as systematically with the external influence on the city as with the internal, one of the lessons to be learned from social science research into the urban system.

The second problem is inherent in most attempts "to bring

together explicitly a number of disciplines" (p.3). Despite the author's impressive range of interests, from the role of the elite groups and civic politics to demographic change and urban social policy, he fails, in the end, to provide the necessary "systematic, analytic approach" (p.2). What he has accomplished instead is a thorough and well-recounted exploration of a number of exceedingly important issues facing Winnipeg in this period. There is no question about the social, political, spatial and economic importance of these issues. However, the analytics is inadequate. This applies first to the use of analytical methods derived from each of these disciplines. The author's approach to data is illustrative of this criticism. He appears to be concerned primarily with the soundness of the data, apparently unaware of the rules of evidence required for using such data to "explain" social phenomena. A simple example of this is found on p. 140 where, in referring to Table 11, he states that "the Scandanavian group...rose from less than 1 per cent to almost 5 per cent of the total foreign-born". In fact, they constituted 4.7 per cent of the total population and over 10 per cent of the total foreign-born. Secular economic changes are represented by data in Table 5, p. 123, without any attempt to adjust for price changes which over this period, were significant. (See also the perplexing judgment in footnote 2, p. 351.)

But if the multi-disciplinary scholar is to be effective, in addition to being an adequate researcher with respect to the individual disciplines, the scholar must also have a logical framework for integrating these different orientations. In fact, no integrative analytical structure is provided. This is seen immediately in the topical organization of the book. While the author is wise in eschewing a purely chronological approach, the serious question as to why certain topics are chosen and how they relate to each other is not even raised. Nor are the perhaps necessary omissions, such as the constraints on the elite imposed by labour or by politicians at other levels, kept in mind when conclusions are drawn.

Our concern with these methodological difficulties ought not to be construed as an unfavourable overall assessment of this work. In his diligent accumulation of information on this key formative period, a period generally not dealt with in urban histories, in his assessment of

individual and group behaviour, in the significance attached to the spatial patterning of urban life, and in his fascinating recreation of time and place, the author has demonstrated his craftsmanship with great skill. The maps and illustrations are extremely valuable, and interesting data are developed even though they raise as many questions as they purport to answer.

Finally, a comment is required on the author's particular thesis, which seems to be incompatible with what he himself deems to be a prime function of historical research, that is, ".....to edit, refine and enrich theory by identifying and exploring important historical developments which cannot be neatly explained by existing theory" (p.3). In fact, the author imposes a current "theory", that of growth bias as the cause of social problems, on the historical evidence. This is an extraordinarily difficult theory to demonstrate analytically and empirically, however popular it may be at present. Attempts to support it with historical evidence ought to be that much more circumspect. It requires evidence of a growth bias related to some specific rational objective (population?, income?, profits?) and a careful accounting for both costs and benefits clearly attributable to that growth. Merely indicating that social problems existed in abundance is hardly adequate. The absence of any consideration of benefits, such as long-term income growth and distribution, or evidence on comparable performance in similar urban circumstances elsewhere is quite unjustifiable.

How, for example, does one explain the fact that labour, elsewhere identified as bearing the brunt of the costs of growth, aligned itself with the elite's Board of Trade in supporting the hydro project (p.97)? If ever a case were to be made for taking a wide view, it is precisely in the area of assessing costs and benefits of urban development.

So strained is the interpretation of this theory, that in an otherwise fascinating chapter on vice, the author feels compelled to juxtapose the growth ethic with morality. True, the elite may have been too busy to deal with the issue, but to imply that their ethic was a cause of this problem is hardly warranted.

Because this book ventures into new areas of scholarly importance, it must be judged on those terms. As such, it raises serious methodological difficulties that will have to be resolved if subsequent studies along the same vein are to enable us to bridge the existing void. If these difficulties are not easily resolved, then the conclusions will have to be drawn rather more modestly. Nevertheless, the effort is to be applauded, for it launches a potentially productive debate on an important issue, and too few scholarly works can claim that distinction.

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Dechêne, Louise. Habitants et marchands de Montréal au XVIIe siècle.
Paris et Montréal, Plan, 1974. 588 pp.

Louise Dechêne n'accepterait certainement pas de voir accoler l'épithète "urbaine" à l'histoire de Montréal qu'elle a écrite. Ce serait là enfermer dans des cadres trop étroits une oeuvre qui a des ambitions très vastes. En effet, le Montréal dont il est ici question embrasse l'ensemble de l'île -- la seigneurie -- tant dans sa partie rurale que dans sa partie urbaine; et la description des campagnes -- les côtes -- occupe une part substantielle de l'ouvrage. Qui plus est, Montréal n'est ici qu'un prétexte -- ou mieux, un cas-type -- permettant de comprendre l'ensemble de la société coloniale. Louise Dechêne ne s'en cache pas: "l'île de Montréal est un bon point d'observation pour saisir les articulations du développement socio-économique de l'ensemble de la colonie".

C'est une véritable histoire sociale de la Nouvelle-France au XVIIe siècle que l'auteur construit page après page. Je laisse à d'autres, plus compétents, le soin de commenter cette dimension du livre et je me contenterai de souligner l'apport de cette remarquable thèse à la connaissance du milieu urbain colonial tel qu'il se présente dans le cas de la ville de Montréal.